P.H.J. Cuypers en het gotisch rationalisme: architectonisch denken, ontwerpen en uitgevoerde gebouwen 1845-1878

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Summary

This book is the result of historical research on the sources of the architectural thought, designs and implemented works of the Dutch architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus (‘Pierre’) Cuypers (1827–1921). It covers the period from the start of his study of architecture in 1845 to the submission of the two definitive designs for his two most important public buildings, both in Amsterdam: the Rijksmuseum (1878) and – in the epilogue – the Central Station (1881). The research is based on the extant sketches and drawings, the implemented designs, the correspondence, the writings, and the library of Cuypers. Much has been written about him in the 150 or so years since he began to work as an architect. His bibliography extends over almost the entire period of his activities – he graduated in 1849 and died in the harness in 1921 – down to the present. This is the first systematic and chronological study and account of his ideas and works and the relation between them on the basis of the extant archives. The research set out from the hypothesis that Cuypers’ works are more than an arbitrary series of buildings: they form an oeuvre that expresses an idea. This is best exemplified in the series of works that he designed in Amsterdam.

At the start of his studies at the Koninklijke Academie van Schone Kunsten in Antwerp (1845–1849), Cuypers was confronted via discussions of history painting that were tinged with nationalism with the fact that art – particularly the choice of a particular style – could have a topical significance and an ideological content. In the course of his studies he came into contact with the incubation period of the Neo-Gothic movement in Belgium and, as a result of reforms in the teaching of architecture, he was confronted with design after medieval models. He was introduced to the ideas of the British architect and theoretician A.W.N. Pugin, the figurehead of the Gothic Revival in Europe. The latter’s call for a return to the ‘true principles’ of Gothic architecture, which he regarded as the ideal expression of a harmonious, Christian (i.e. Catholic) society, pointed Cuypers in the direction of a socially committed notion of architecture and inspired him, after his return to the Netherlands, to campaign for the restoration of the bond between architecture, society and religion after the example of the Middle Ages.

Cuypers began his career with a rather unsuccessful position as city architect of Roermond (1850–1854). Although he had to deal with a number of elementary aspects of urban planning such as the installation of drains and sewers, the supply of water and the improvement of the infrastructure, he built very little there. In his own practice he soon came to concentrate on Catholic church architecture, which entered a flourishing period after the restoration of the episcopal hierarchy in the Netherlands in 1853. Cuypers managed to make use of this market to give the first impulse to the ideal of an artisanal production of architecture as propagated in the Neo-Gothic movement and to design and construct churches again as total works of art. The Atelier voor Religieuze Kunst [Studio for Religious Art] that he established in Roermond in 1852 brought together not only craftsmen and specialists in various fields of the applied arts, but also painters and sculptors, some of whom worked and lived together in a complex that he had himself designed. Cuypers liked to present himself as the *magister operum* and the embodiment of the restoration of the bond between art and crafts, although he
directed production by means of sketches. The Atelier was no exception in including a growing number of architectural draughtsmen – craftsmen who had already learned to work on the basis of the architect’s drawings during their training – between the stages of design and implementation. Cuypers was later to give the impression that he had appropriated the ‘true’ or ‘rational principles’ at the beginning of the 1850s and subsequently applied them without change. In fact, however, a development took place in the course of the 1850s and early 1860s. It can be seen in the shift in his work from an archaeologically pure Neo-Gothicism, via a Gothic eclecticism, to the development of his own, eclectic vocabulary based on a ‘logical’ or rational design method derived from Gothicism. Characteristic of this are the changes in his attitude to ornament, in which, partly under the influence of Owen Jones, geometry and nature came to play an increasingly important role. This shift can also be seen in the ideological progression from the ‘Catholic building plan for Limburg’ that he envisaged in the 1850s to a broader architectural programme for the city, especially for Amsterdam, in the 1860s and 1870s.

Together with his ‘brother in arms’ and, from 1859, brother-in-law the poet and critic Josef Alberdingk Thijm, Cuypers studied church symbolism in the late 1850s and propagated the restoration of the ‘sacred line’, the orientation of the church. His handling of this theme also shows evidence of a development. Thijm, who set himself up as the public champion of this symbolism, regarded it as an essential component of church architecture. A church lacking orientation was not a church in his eyes, and the reticent reactions of the clergy were a source of irritation and disillusionment for him. Cuypers, however, discovered in practice that symbolism would force church design into a corset that was untenable in the conditions of his day as well as having an undesirable effect on the development of the ground plan and elevation.

Cuypers’ earliest church designs, dating from the middle of the 1850s (St Lambertus, Veghel 1855; St Martinus, Wijck 1855; St Laurentius, Alkmaar 1857), show that he was in the first instance looking for a ‘model church’, developed after thirteenth-century models. However, a considerable number of his commissions were for inner city locations and he soon discovered that standard models could not be applied there. Like new types of building such as the railway station, post office, big hotels or office buildings, the church had to fit into the given urban structure depending on the availability of land. It was no longer automatically assigned a place at the centre of a city or district. The plots of land were often too small to allow that, while the parishes were rapidly expanding. Around 1860, Cuypers was therefore obliged to come up with his own solutions for the urban parish church or urban minster, resulting in such buildings as the Posthoornkerk in Amsterdam (1859) and the St Dominicuskerk in Alkmaar (1861). In both cases, the church was ingeniously fitted into a closed building block with a feeling for space and composition, and was furnished with galleries – a rather unusual feature for a Catholic church – to accommodate the large congregation. The crossing with dome and tower (‘crossing spire’), used to centralise the interior and to give the composition a pyramidal structure, became an important theme in these works.

These designs marked an important change in reflection on the relation between the public building and the city. Cuypers no longer treated the
monumental public building as an autonomous entity, designed on the basis of architectural laws and traditions and implanted in the city irrespective of the context, as was customary in the classical view. On the contrary, he learnt to develop his buildings step by step in a logical interplay of location, programme, budget, constructional possibilities, and available materials. This was when free, ‘picturesque’ compositions first appeared which, independently of the laws of regularity and symmetry, had arisen ‘organically’ from the programme. In his own words, the ‘external form’ should express each time the ‘inner destiny’. At the same time he tried to devise ways of optimising the ‘effect’ of the building in the cityscape or landscape. This was an important theme in the architectural theories of both Pugin and Viollet-le-Duc, the second theoretician of the Gothic Revival, to whose theoretical writings Cuypers was introduced in the late 1850s.

Viollet-le-Duc placed more emphasis than Pugin on the rational aspect, the ‘logic’ of Gothicism, and regarded the principles of this architecture as typical of the growing democratic spirit on the part of the French people. The rational principles of Gothic architecture, he believed, were the product of a lay school of free craftsmen, who had developed a new architecture in the first free urban communities in the thirteenth century. The influence of Viollet-le-Duc on Cuypers gradually increased from the middle of the 1850 simultaneously with the appearance of the ten volumes of the _Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture Française_ (1854–1868) and the twenty _Entretiens sur l’architecture_ (1857–1872). The sixth _Entretien_ in particular, in which the author distinguishes between ‘le style’ and ‘les styles’, between the application of the principle derived from a historical style, and the ‘archaeological signature’ of a building, was published at a decisive moment for Cuypers. This _Entretien_ contains Viollet-le-Duc’s solution to what he regarded as the stylistic dilemma of his time and explains that a young architect must first become thoroughly acquainted with a historical style and make it his own before using the principles found to develop a style of his own on the basis of relevant references. He does not confine himself to Gothicism and shows that Renaissance elements can also be combined with rational constructions when they are relevant to the local historical context.

Cuypers’ architectural activities took off in the course of the 1860s. He received a large number of commissions for churches, often together with presbytery-houses, schools, and convents or monasteries, not only all over the Netherlands but also in Belgium, Germany and even Norway. However, it is already clear in this period that his ambition went beyond designing the building campaign of the Catholics in the Netherlands. Under the influence of Viollet-le-Duc and stimulated by the work of the High Victorian Movement, with which he became intimately acquainted during a trip to England in 1862, he tried to find a secular public commission to enable him to show that Gothic rationalism could be deployed in the search for a universal style for his own day.

With this purpose in mind he took part in the design competition for a new national museum of art in Amsterdam that was organised in 1863 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Napoleonic era in the Netherlands. In preparation, he had sounded out the debate on style in the Netherlands and the views of the members of the jury in particular. Knowing full well that his own ideas would not meet with immediate approval, he wanted his plans to provoke a discussion of substance with the jury. His four submissions raised
two questions: that of the most appropriate type of ornament to reflect Dutch culture – Gothic or Renaissance? – and that of how to fit a building into the city so that it would become an organic part of urban life. The crucial theme for him regarding the latter question was whether the building faced the city with a monumental front, thereby behaving as an autonomous monument, or whether it had a forecourt to mediate between the exhibition areas inside the museum and the public space of the city. These plans introduced a dual notion of style into Cuypers’ work: in the terminology of Viollet-le-Duc, he distinguished between ‘style absolue’ and ‘style relatif’. It is also noteworthy that he referred to more than one type of building in a single design: the central part of the museum refers, depending on the style variant, to medieval or Renaissance public buildings, while the corner pavilions refer to the historic Amsterdam canal houses in the immediate surroundings. At the time, this was unusual for a building of the kind. A monumental public building in a hybrid style that related to the context in an organic way and was built of local brick in accordance with rational principles was a novelty in the Netherlands. It is thus hardly surprising that Cuypers’ plans provoked much debate. However, views on the national monumental architecture were changing. An analysis of the architectural debate around 1863 and the role played in it by the members of the jury who were architects confirms a change of attitude with regard to the ‘Dutch Renaissance’ and references to the local architectural tradition. This explains the – surprising – second prize for Cuypers in the competition; the prize-winning entry was a classicizing design from the school of Schinkel and Von Klenze.

This was when Cuypers moved his architectural practice to Amsterdam. Besides practical reasons – many of his commissions came from the North of the country – he hoped in this way to find a place in the gradually emerging architectural culture in the Netherlands. His failure to secure the commission for the museum was a failure in this respect, but his activities as a project developer in the Vondelstraat, where he started to build a series of villas and terraced houses and a church in 1865, were an attempt to introduce his ideal of a significant, picturesque cityscape into a new district of Amsterdam on his own initiative.

Ten years later Cuypers was given the opportunity to implement his vision of the role and significance of the public building in the city. In 1875 he won the design competition for the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, this time with a rational Gothic design elaborated in an eclectic style, and in the same year he received the commission for the Central Station in the same city. There had been a change in the communis opinio on the character and decoration of a monumental public building, which had been prepared in the Board of State Advisers for the Monuments of History and Art. This board was responsible for the assessment of state buildings and played an important role in the evaluation of the submissions for the new museum. Victor de Stuers, official principal of the museum and a supporter of Gothic rationalism, was secretary of this board, while Cuypers was a member. However, the recommendations of the board reflect a growing consensus among the leading Dutch architects on working on the basis of rational principles; references to the national architectural tradition to characterise public buildings also came to be taken as a matter of course in the course of the 1870s. All the same, the style of the ornament – that of the early pre-Reformation Renaissance or the ‘Old Dutch’
of the seventeenth century – still gave rise to heated debates, in which political and religious connotations played an important part. These debates have diverted attention – on the part of historical research on architecture too – from a number of themes that were crucial for Cuypers in the design of the Rijksmuseum: the lighting of the works of art, the circulation of the visitors through the exhibitions, the adaptation of the building to the urban situation, and the correction of the perspective for the eye of the passerby. Initially he had a very different type of building for the Rijksmuseum in mind: a building that could be expanded, following the pattern of streets and squares in its composition, that could thus become the crystallisation point of a planned city extension in a polder on the outskirts of the historic centre. However, partly thanks to the support of De Stuers, he managed to adapt the programme to his own ends so that the given standard type, on a classical, symmetrical ground plan, would still achieve an optimal effect in its urban context. By placing the staircases against the outside of the building as detached towers – which improved internal circulation and reduced the risk of fire – he achieved an eloquent silhouette. By raising the basement level – which was required for the extra exhibition areas and climatisation installations – he obtained enough height to put the entrances to the museum and the passage to the new neighbourhood on the same level as the Spiegelgracht, the visual axis from the ring of canals.

In the case of the Central Station too, the pendant to the Rijksmuseum as the new gateway to the changing city of Amsterdam, Cuypers’ main design intervention consisted in fitting a given type of building into the urban context. Once again thanks to the support of De Stuers, the addition of an extra floor ensured that the building on a man-made island in the Open Havenfront would be a match for the historic Amsterdam waterfront and would not be lost in the long perspective from the Damrak and Dam Square, the main entrance to the centre of the city. After their completion, Cuypers remained actively involved in the positioning of his two major works in the city and looked for ways to strengthen the spatial and iconographic relations between the two buildings and between building and city. A design for a square behind the Rijksmuseum to accommodate a new royal palace underlines his desire to restore to the town hall in Dam Square its former position as a ‘house of the people’ in the middle of the city. As a member of the city council, he managed to get this plan implemented as well. A design for a Beursplein in front of the Central Station with a road leading to Dam Square, although not implemented, shows how he wanted to fit the Central Station carefully into the organism of the city so that both buildings could play an active, edifying role in everyday life as gateways to the city with an iconographic message.