

PIERRE CUYPERS AND DUTCH ARCHITECTURE: THREE EXHIBITIONS AND THREE BOOKS

Cuypers / Architectuur met een missie / Architecture with a Mission

Curator: Linda Vlassenrood

Nederlands Architectuurinstituut (NAi), Rotterdam

22 September 2007 to 6 February 2008

Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) Maastricht, Wiebenga Hall

23 September 2007 to 6 February 2008

Architect Pierre Cuypers (1827 – 1921) vernieuwer vanuit het verleden

Stedelijk Museum Roermond

16 September 2007 to 17 February 2008

Hetty Berens, editor

P.J.H. Cuypers (1827 – 1921). Het complete werk

Contributions by Jan Bank, Hetty Berens, Loes van Harrevelt, Ida Jager, Barbara

Laan, Wilfred van Leeuwen, Jan de Maeyer, David Mulder, Mariet Willinge

Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007, 400 pp., many color + b/w illus., € 59.50

ISBN: 9789056625733, also available in English translation ISBN: 9789056625740

A.J.C. van Leeuwen

Pierre Cuypers, architect 1827 – 1921

Zwolle: Waanders and Rijksdienst voor archeologie, cultuurlandschap en

monumenten, Amersfoort: Zeist, 2007, 344 pp., 149 color + 113 b/w illus., €39.95

ISBN: 9789040084010

Ileen Montijn

Pierre Cuypers. Schoonheid als hartstocht

Roermond: Inmerc and Stedelijk Museum Roermond, 2007, 120 pp., richly illustrated

in color, € 17.95, ISBN: 9789066116368



Pierre Cuypers,
Great Hall of Royal Waiting Room,
Centraal Station, Amsterdam, 1889.
Cuypers's design included details
such as the parquet floor and carpets
Photograph: RACM, Amersfoort,
from Van Leeuwen, p.160

Pierre Cuypers was born 181 years ago but he died only 87 years ago. During his long life Cuypers shaped the Dutch skyline by designing numerous Catholic churches throughout the Netherlands. While many of his them have already been demolished and any number were never erected, nonetheless his designs dominate Dutch landscapes both urban and rural. Cuypers's work and personality towered over Dutch architectural culture for more than fifty years. His fame and notoriety grew after he moved to Amsterdam in 1865 where he designed an entire Catholic enclave including his own house and a church, then garnered the most attention for his Rijksmuseum and Central Station. Almost from the start of his career Cuypers succeeded in becoming the first and most important Dutch Catholic master builder, casting himself as the reborn medieval master (*[Dom]baumeister*) of the guild (*bouwloods, Bauhütte*). At the end of his life he was generally considered to be the grandfather of Dutch architectural modernism. His archive in the Netherlands Architecture Institute is probably the largest of any single architect in the world. This inventory of this vast collection of artifacts and documents was finally completed in 2007, making it available for restoration and research.

Exhibiting architecture is always difficult, but in the case of Cuypers even more so because he himself always tried to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* using a plethora of available techniques and crafts. It mattered little if the work in question was his own invention or was based on what he considered restoration, that is, a construction of how he imagined a building had been or should have been in the past. People react with either appreciation or approbation to the total control he exacted at every point, the adjustment of form and color to scale, and the resultant creation of rhythm in the composition. Much of this is still visible in the buildings that have survived, but much has been destroyed or altered, especially in churches that have been re-used or whitewashed. Documentation of every phase of design, including correspondence with contractors and clients, has often survived. For the Rijksmuseum and the reconstruction of Castle De Haar in Haarzuilens we have particularly rich sources that reveal innumerable designs, redesigns, models and sketches. This poses a challenge to the exhibition curator: how to provide an overview of Cuypers's oeuvre and at the same time be selective? The two NAI exhibitions each picked a single year that could be used as a touchstone for the power, influence and position of this architect in his long life.

The exhibition in Rotterdam focused on the year 1877, when Cuypers moved to his new house in Amsterdam and was reshaping large parts of the Dutch capital. One could say he was at the summit of his power. He was at the same time overseeing two of the largest building projects in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum (1875 – 1889) and the Central Station (1875 – 1885). He was also being consulted on nearly every restoration in the Netherlands while still finding time to participate internationally in many important organizations. These activities elicited envy and even hatred. In many influential papers and magazines people talked about what they called the 'towering madness' (*toren dolheid*) of the many towers on Cuypers's churches. The Neo-Gothic forms he often chose were regarded as visual signs of a conspiracy to transform Holland back into a Roman Catholic nation (*verroomsching*). In the exhibition, the words of praise from his Catholic friends and the critical phrases of his opponents were printed on large banners placed throughout the installation. But the exhibition itself did not really focus on the discussions. Indeed, it was hard to find any focus at all since the full range of Cuypers's activities and media were used to show off the rich material of the archives. The good thing about the show in Rotterdam was that the organizers abstained from attempting complete reconstructions of environments. The bad thing was that the criteria for selection were not clear. Although the Central Station and Rijksmuseum were massive undertakings, requiring the circulation of many plans, elevations, and other drawings, the display gave no indication of Cuypers's challenge in controlling the building process. Cuypers's new home in Amsterdam in a complex eclectic style was not put into any relation to his work, his life, or his marriage. Given the lack of context provided in the exhibition, it could have been a design for any client. To understand how the four different houses Cuypers built for himself and his family expressed different meanings, situations and positions in relation to other architects and architectural theories, one has to read the article by David Mulder in the exhibition catalogue.

The show at Maastricht takes 1897 as the point of departure and considers the festivities at the time of Cuypers's 70th birthday and the discussions it engendered about his contributions to Dutch culture. Cuypers's position in Dutch architectural culture seems to have shifted dramatically. In 1897 he is seen as the first rationalist and the master builder who preserved the position of the architect as

the individual who controls all aspects of design and construction. It is true that many architects who played a role in revolutionizing Dutch architecture either worked for Cuypers or studied with him or people from his firm. But as in Rotterdam one can only guess this by reading the banners.

The exhibition displays a project at the heart of the final years of his career, one that met with a good deal of criticism as well as praise. Between 1892 – 1915 Cuypers and his son Joseph transformed the age-old ruins of Castle De Haar into one of the most luxurious living machines ever built in the Netherlands. Restoring and reconstructing the medieval castle and church for the Baron Etienne Van Zuylen van Nyevelt, who married the very rich baroness Helène Rotschildt in 1887, was as much about installing modern facilities and using the most modern construction techniques as it was about recreating a feudal atmosphere. An entire village near the ruins was demolished and a new village was built. Fake old farmhouses were used to house cars and horses. Documentation from sketches to models, from stencils to contemporary photographs are shown. The photographs are of special interest in the Cuypers collection, as Loes van Harreveld demonstrates in her chapter in the catalogue. An article by Barbara Laan devoted almost solely to the dining room in Castle De Haar demonstrates in detail how every aspect of the design of the castle was discussed by the Cuypers, father and son, and the baron.

In both exhibitions the original material, which is for the most part colorful and decorative, was presented around sub-themes in a clean and simple design of tables and room space-dividers without ceilings. This worked better in the central and spacious exhibition hall in Rotterdam than in the space of the Wiebenga Hall in Maastricht, which was not very well-lighted and has a considerably lower ceiling.

The relation between exhibition and building was far more complex in Roermond. Roermond is Cuypers's birthplace and the city where he started and ended his career. The museum, one of the first projects by Cuypers after his training at the Beaux Arts School in Antwerp, is partly modernized and partly restored. It was both home and workplace (1853) of Pierre Cuypers and the firm Cuypers & Georges

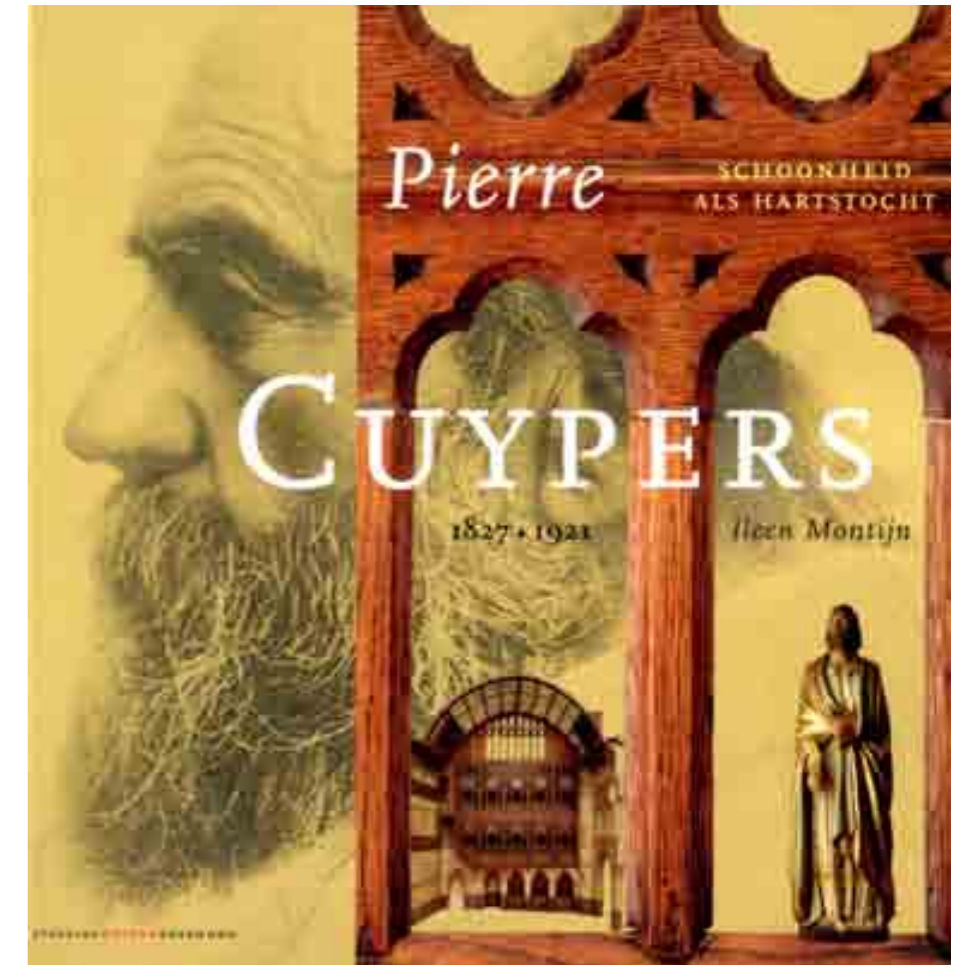


Pierre and Joseph Cuypers,
Castle De Haar, Haarzuilens, 1892-1915
Photograph: Deltaphot for Immerc,
from Montijn, pp. 82-83

en Stoltzenberg, which furnished and refurnished more than a hundred churches and other buildings. Production was organized according to the model of a building guild combining training with the production of sculpture, furniture and all the other elements that are part of a building. Copies of medieval examples were made but increasingly free inventions were also produced. The exhibition was based on results of the research by the cultural historical research firm Res nova on the house itself and the way Cuypers lived and worked there. This research also led to digital reconstructions produced by Maurer Architects United, which still can be viewed in Roermond and on the exhibition website; the latter also includes a Cuypers game.

Among the books that appeared during the 2007 “Year of Cuypers,” Ileen Montijn has written a sketch of Pierre Cuypers’s impassioned life, which was devoted to constructing a society and environment that would develop into as beautiful and as social a place as the Middle Ages had been, following the visions of both Pugin and Viollet-le-Duc. Montijn based her book on the research of Wies van Leeuwen and the team working on the catalogue accompanying the NAI exhibitions. She tries to show people who have never heard about Cuypers the importance of his architecture and the vision behind it.

At the other end of the scale is the work of Wilfred (Wies) van Leeuwen, who in 1995 published a widely praised dissertation about Cuypers and the construction of the past. One could interpret his new book as the scholarly counterpart to his position as president of the Cuypers Society (Cuypers Genootschap), which has tried to prevent twentieth-century visions of the past from destroying nineteenth-century visions in the name of restoration. More than four years of intensive research have gone into Van Leeuwen’s attempt to integrate Cuypers’s activities as restoration architect and restoration consultant into the story of Cuypers’s life. The book is not chronological; it is structured around themes that play a major role in the life of every architect from early modern times onwards. It starts with the personality of the architect, his family, friends and his operations as head of a business. It moves on to discuss “space” and shows how the architect found and created increasingly greater niches in Dutch society to produce his vision of architecture, town, and landscape. The theme “time” develops the argument presented



Photograph: Rob Dettingmeijer

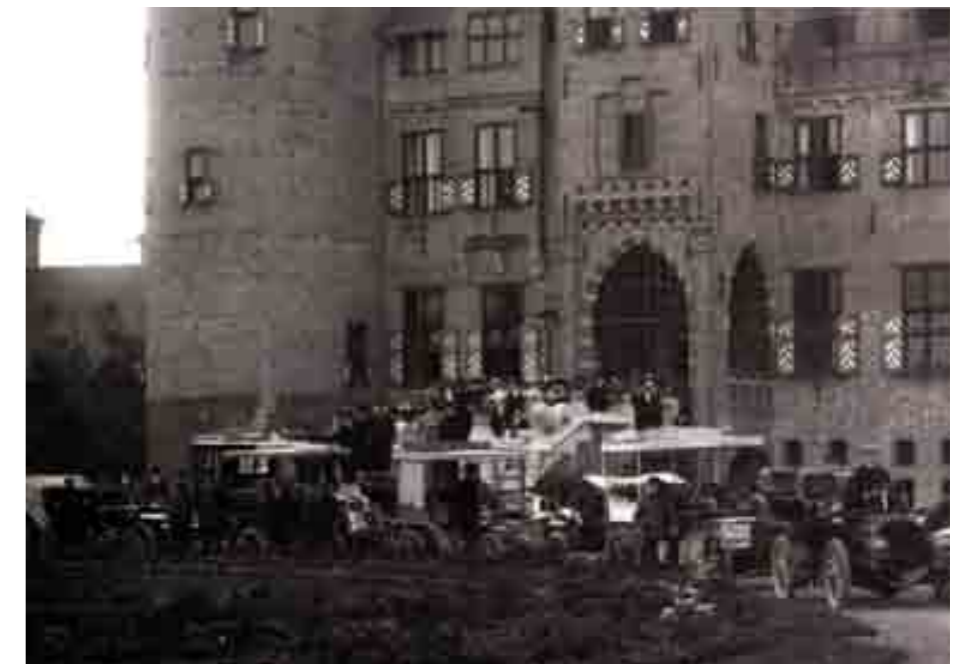
in Van Leeuwen's dissertation further but also shows how the "architect doctus" tried to use history, philosophy and a strong belief to create a future. This leads to the last theme "heritage." In this part Cuypers's point of view, as well as the myth around his person and his buildings, is evaluated.

If Van Leeuwen's book is the result of almost a lifetime of research centered on one person, the book produced by the NAI tries to open up new fields of research and presents at times conflicting views on the place of Cuypers in Dutch and European architectural history. In the NAI book the chapter by Van Leeuwen claims that Cuypers may be compared with other great Neo-Gothic architects who considered him an important colleague such as Augustus Welby Pugin, George Gilbert Scott, William Burges, Jean Baptiste Lassus, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Georg Gottlob Ungewitter, Conrad Hase, Jan Béthune, Friedrich von Schmidt, and his Belgian friend Joris Helleputte. But the main focus of the chapter is Cuypers's failure to win the style war with the government, clients and architects who considered the Neo-Renaissance to be the Dutch national style, in spite of his rationalist arguments. This very failure made Cuypers a hero in the eyes of the next generation, who wanted to reject historic styles and develop rationalism further. For the past fifteen years or more, Auke van der Woud has opposed this view of Cuypers as the knot in the "Tree of Jesse" of Dutch Modernism, leading to Berlage and then Oud. In an international context, he considers Cuypers to be no more than a footnote to the story of Catholic Neo-Gothicism. It is a pity that his contribution to this book did not materialize as announced. Certainly the Cuypers, father and son, Berlage and probably even Oud firmly believed in the story. Hetty Berens's contribution about the history of the Cuypers archive collection begins to suggest how Cuypers grew into a giant compared to his contemporaries.

Cuypers enjoyed being honored as 'master of the guild or masterbuilder,' as [*Dom*] *Baumeister* or *bouwmeester*, a term he preferred to that of architect. Ida Jager explains in her chapter that Cuypers, like the master masons practicing in the Middle Ages, traveled extensively in order to become acquainted with his sources



Pierre Cuypers,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1885
Photograph: Archief Cuypers NAI,
from Van Leeuwen, p. 154



Pierre and Joseph Cuypers,
Castle De Haar, Haarzuilens, 1892-1915,
detail of entrance with Baron Etienne
Van Zuylen van Nyevelt and members
of the Automobile Club which he
founded
Photograph: Archief Cuypers NAI,
from Berens, p. 86

which he considered to be European. He believed travel essential to knowing his roots (“le voyage pour connaître ma source”). Jan de Mayer takes the story one step further by claiming that the nineteenth century was far more a century of internationalization than is generally recognized. In this international field Cuypers was connected with all the main figures in architectural culture. He both knew them personally and read them. So it is understandable that even during his lifetime people called Cuypers the “Dutch Viollet-Le-Duc.” De Mayer goes further and sees him as a man who combined the best of Pugin and Viollet-Le-Duc. Jan Bank tells the complex story of the official equality of religion in the Netherlands when the king and the majority of the inhabitants of the Netherlands, especially in Holland, considered Protestantism the core of Dutch identity. Restoring the hierarchy of bishoprics and the subsequent increase in church building was therefore debated as much and as violently in Cuypers’s time as the building of monumental mosques is debated in the Netherlands nowadays. The emancipation of the Dutch Roman Catholics can be demonstrated perfectly by showing how Cuypers and his network came into ever more powerful positions. Cuypers was a politician; he was a member of the city council in Amsterdam and later also in Roermond.

The debate over Cuypers’s significance will continue and maybe become even more lively once Aart Oxenaar’s book on Cuypers is published this spring. Perhaps the Cuypers year signifies not so much a conclusion as much as an invitation to further research now that the full panorama of this architect’s work has been displayed so completely in the NAI catalogue. It should soon be possible to compare the position of Cuypers with his contemporaries. And it would be challenging to compare the current restoration and restructuring of Amsterdam Central Station, the Rijksmuseum and Castle De Haar at Haarzuilens with restorations where there are hardly any archival sources and where study of the physical building itself is almost all that can guide the designs.

Rob Dettingmeijer
Universiteit Utrecht