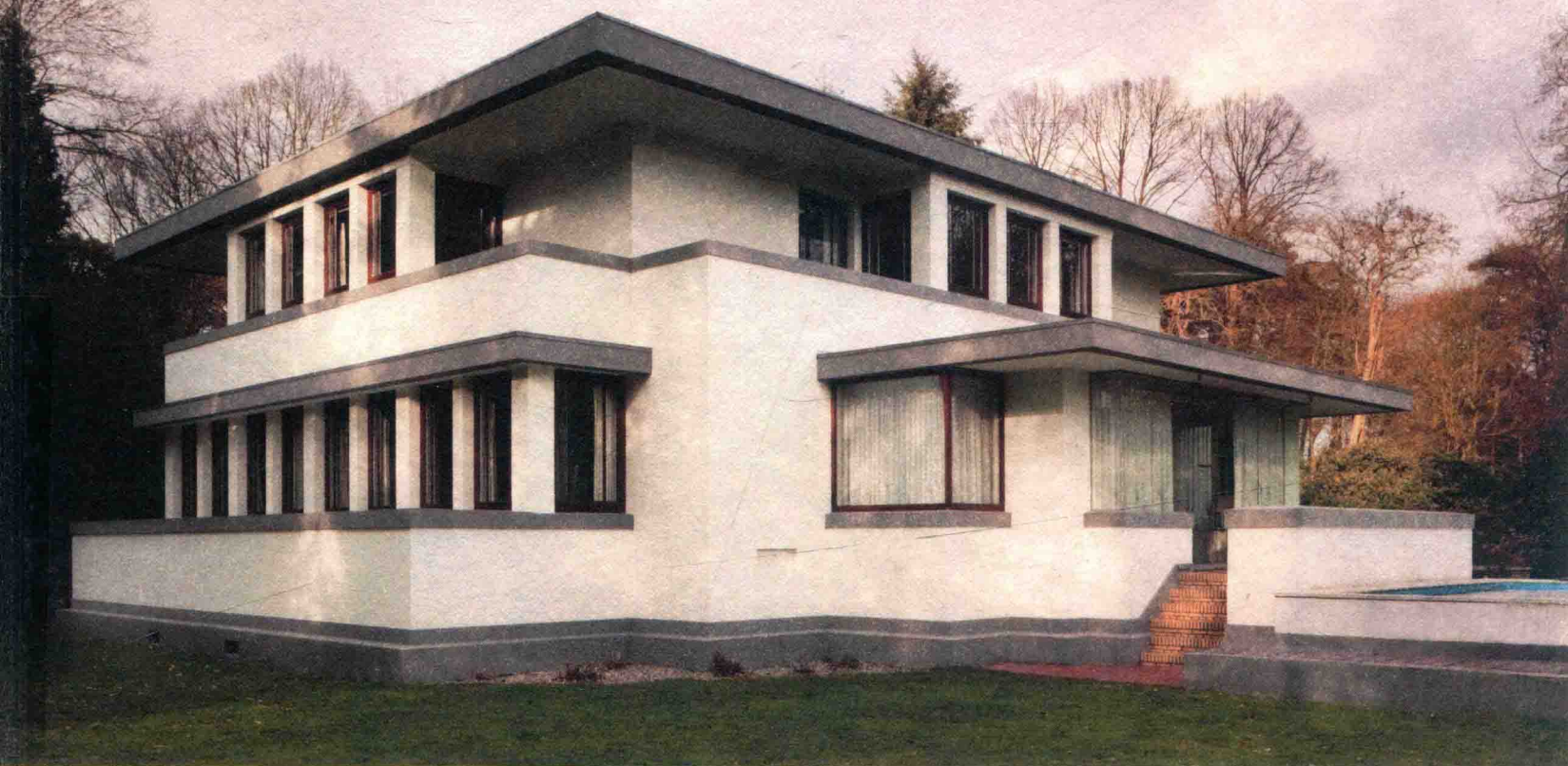


Robert van't Hoff

Architect of a New Society

Dolf Broekhuizen
Evert van Straaten
Herman van Bergeijk



Robert van 't Hoff

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Dolf Broekhuizen (editor)
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All or Nothing – Robert van 't Hoff

Architect of a New Society

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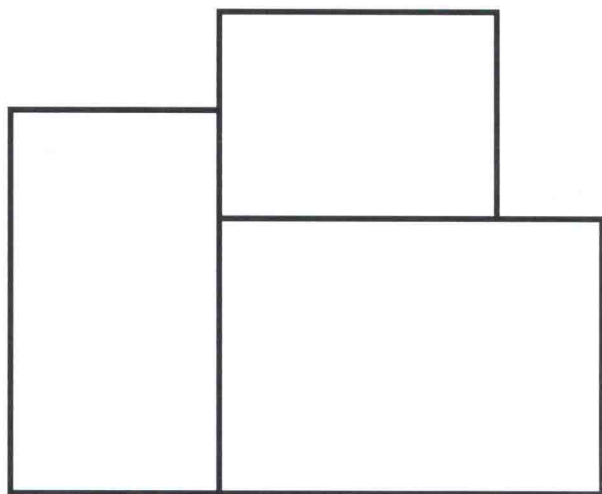
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Well-Known/Unknown

Robert van 't Hoff and the International Critics



Robert van 't Hoff

Architect of a New Society

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Preface

Robert van 't Hoff is a relatively unknown architect in the annals of the Dutch avant-garde. Most of this obscurity was of his own doing. Because he retired as a practising architect at an early age and chose to live in anonymity, his oeuvre is quite small. His completed work is limited to a few buildings in Lunteren, Huis ter Heide, Laren and London, all erected within a single decade (1910-1920). Van 't Hoff was also extremely reserved when it came to assisting with publicity, and negotiating with him was a tedious affair. From 1920 on, his body of ideas remained a closed book for many. Only a few were granted brief access to his private life, including the art historian Sigfried Giedion, who made contact with Van 't Hoff in 1931 in the context of the CIAM congresses. Architecture historian Reyner Banham interviewed him in the late 1950s for *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*.

During the last ten years of his life, Van 't Hoff kept in close touch with Jean Leering. In the early 1960s, when Leering was still studying architecture at Delft University of Technology, he sought Van 't Hoff out, and later on, as the director of the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, he devoted a retrospective to him that was organized by Nic. Tummers. Van 't Hoff was interviewed on these occasions and a list of his works was drawn up. A correspondence on his life and work also emerged, which has become an important source of information. The biographical details of the life of Robert van 't Hoff (known as Rob by his family) have been preserved in a number of manuscript and typescript versions. Most of these were compiled by Leering and Tummers in 1962 and 1967, based on information from Van 't Hoff.

In putting together the present publication, every effort was made to fill in the blanks in his oeuvre. This first monograph on Robert van 't Hoff is a revision of the earlier articles on the architect, the most important of which are that of Eveline Vermeulen in *De beginjaren van De Stijl 1918-1922* (1982) and

its sequel, written by Ed Taverne and Dolf Broekhuizen in *De vervolgjaren van De Stijl 1922-1931* (1996). This book builds on the same methodology by taking the original objects and documents as points of reference for its analysis. Van 't Hoff's work is placed within the context of his personal social network because that environment was so important to his development. His specific contribution to the Dutch and the international avant-garde is thereby brought out into the open. Up to now, no portrait photographs of Van 't Hoff have been published, the principle reason being his own aversion to the cult of personality. In this publication, however, an attempt will be made to present a picture of his personal life because it was so closely connected with his work.

The book itself is divided into three parts. The three successive chapters deal with the development of the work, the significance of the most unfamiliar work – 'the study' – and the reception of Robert van 't Hoff's designs in architecture publications. In the chronological list of works all the projects are briefly described and analysed. The last part contains the architect's most important written texts. Taken as a whole, this scheme forms a portrait of the avant-garde attitude of Robert van 't Hoff, for whom art and revolution were closely connected. He saw architecture and art as means for achieving social change. In that process of destruction and rebuilding, the architect was to play a dynamic role as visionary designer. That attitude towards design is the main theme of this book.

This overview of the complete works shows the extent to which Van 't Hoff's designs for communal living and community development constitute the focus of his oeuvre. His search for alternative forms of social organization and the related architectonic results is relevant to the attempts being made today to reformulate the task and position of the architect. This is not to suggest that his designs be directly copied as models. The strategy he chose was not effective, either. The importance that is attached to Van 't Hoff's oeuvre mainly has to do with the activist position of the architect in society, with the demand that his theories be taken seriously and that he be integrated into the social fabric. In today's construction industry and the ensuing cultural debate, the architect's contribution is often eroded bit by bit while project developers play a dominant role and occupant involvement increases. Van 't Hoff's decision within his own field of influence was to

mount a counterattack, putting an intellectual stance above submission to the market. What that stance shows is that an architect is virtually powerless without good commissioning. This historic study is important to the current debate because it draws attention to the balance that must be struck between the strong position of the architect and responsible commissioning practice.

The immediate inspiration for this book, which is being issued in conjunction with the exhibition on Robert van 't Hoff at the Kröller-Müller Museum (2 April to 29 August 2010), was the acquisition of the interior of the study that the architect had built in his home in New Milton in around 1960. This extremely personal room is a perfect summary of Van 't Hoff's ideas as expressed in his late work, in which he arrived at a number of basic principles for the alternative social organization and environmental design that he had sought so diligently. Just before the house was torn down in 2004, Megan van 't Hoff, who administered his estate, offered the interior to the museum, and it was accepted with gratitude. This interior, which until now was completely unknown, is an extraordinary work by one of the members of De Stijl who struggled to create a new kind of community art and whose search to link architecture with the other arts did catch on, if only for a short time.

Dolf Broekhuizen

Robert van 't Hoff out hiking, a year after the publication of
his manifesto *abolition*, August 1927
private collection, Van 't Hoff family, UK



All or Nothing Robert van 't Hoff's Battle for a a Better Society

Restless Seeker

By 1927 Van 't Hoff had had enough. The publication of his manifesto *abolition* the year before, with its call for a revolution, had ended in deep disillusionment. After spending years studying social-utopian writings, he had written his definitive theoretical text on a whole series of abuses that he believed should be brought to an end, including those having to do with the distribution of manufactured goods, marital relations and poor nutrition. Workers should stop kowtowing to the propertied class, he insisted, and instead should rise up in revolt. While in London, Van 't Hoff had come into contact with a few anarchist groups. But the socio-ideological position he had taken in his urgently argued manifesto produced not a single satisfying response, let alone a collective upheaval.

In a move that was typical of his radical character, Van 't Hoff responded to this failure of change to occur by drawing the obvious conclusions for himself and retreating from his social environment. As a form of catharsis he spent several months hiking through the great outdoors, pulling a cart behind him containing a tent and a few essential belongings. He left his family behind.¹ His young wife was forced to care for their two children, a daughter of five and a son of three, all on her own.² So the attempt to sort out both himself and the outside world was also a personal flight from the reality of marriage and family life. That year, Van 't Hoff referred to himself in the magazine *De Stijl* as an 'ex-architect'. But the following year he was back in the USA, designing communal housing (1928) for the philanthropist Charles Garland.

This decidedly rigorous behaviour was characteristic of Van 't Hoff, who spent his life restlessly searching for anarcho-communist ways of living and trying to apply the conclusions to his practice as an architect and to his personal life. During most of the twentieth century, in a turbulent period of industrialization, increasing urbanization and revolution as well as

gradual democratization, he continued to define his own position and was constantly being confronted with the difference between the ideal and reality. He responded to the emergence of mass humanity, mass consumption and materialism with individual austerity. Time and again he would speak out on some issue, person or publication with great enthusiasm, only to have his expectations dashed just as frequently. In a letter to architect J.J.P. Oud written a few years later, he wrote that extreme responses were in his nature: 'It may be that my basic make-up is excessive: it's all or nothing.'³

Impressions from His Youth

A great many of the convictions and ambitions of Robert van 't Hoff (1887-1979) were his by birth.⁴ He grew up in a socially engaged, highly educated, artistically minded environment in which responsible citizenship and the pursuit of social-equality for all population groups were considered normal. The Van 't Hoff's were a patrician family that traced its roots back to the manor Het Hof in Groote Lindt, where successive generations had been involved in local government since the seventeenth

¹ Communicated to the author by Megan van 't Hoff, 11 August 2008. Also see the postcard showing Robert Van 't Hoff hiking, dated August 1927 on the back. Private collection of Van 't Hoff Family, UK.

² P.C.A.W. (Ella) Hooft (1898-1979) was a daughter of the titled Hooft family of Amsterdam. In 1912, when the parents of Robert van 't Hoff moved to the stately home De Lindt/Løvdalla at 13-13a Amersfoortseweg in Huis ter Heide, Ella was living with her parents in Huis Ter Wege at 17-17a Amersfoortseweg.

³ Letter from R. van 't Hoff to J.J.P. Oud, 28 March 1931. Rotterdam NAI Oudj.

⁴ There are several manuscript and typescript versions of Robert van 't Hoff's biographical information. Most of these were drawn up by Jean Leering in 1962 and 1967, based on information provided and corrected by Van 't Hoff. The originals are in Eindhoven, van Abbemuseum exhibition on Van 't Hoff, 1967. Copies of these and of the correspondence are in Rotterdam, NAI, Leer and RKD's Jean Leering archive. For the Van 't Hoff and Hooft families, also see: Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, 1990 and 1995.

century.⁵ This was the source of Van 't Hoff's lifelong admiration for farmhouse and mill construction as regional and traditional building methods. Here he learned the principles of sound land stewardship, using progressive scientific insights but in a socially responsible way. His interest in architecture increased when he assisted Pastunink, a building contractor, in the construction of a house for an aunt in Bilthoven (1905).

In his youth Van 't Hoff became fascinated by the idea of

through the Wadden mud flats⁸ and with the young architect Piet Elling across the frozen Zuiderzee.⁹ This vitalism and the search for a healthy lifestyle can be seen again and again in the work of Elling and Van 't Hoff.¹⁰ During the 1920s Van 't Hoff became a convinced vegetarian and teetotaler, and he tried to persuade others to join him. At times his uncompromising way of life got in the way, as when he took long, solitary walks through England (1927, 1945) and his self-imposed anti-alcoholism kept



Piet Elling, *Wandelaar*, ca. 1922
boxwood, ca. 20 x 5 x 4 cm
private collection



Het Hof in Groote Lindt, the house belonging to Robert van 't Hoff's ancestors, ca. 1935
private collection, Rotterdam

common land ownership after spending a few holidays around 1900 at the utopian colony of Walden, run by the writer-doctor Frederik van Eeden, a student friend of his father's. It was at this commune and work collective that he met Ru Mauve, one of the sons of the painter Anton Mauve, with whom he would later collaborate. At the early age of 13 he was discovering firsthand what it was like to live in community, work with others on the land and survive on food you had raised yourself.⁶

Van 't Hoff gained compelling impressions of the natural world, in which nature was seen as both an anti-urban phenomenon (an idea related to the perception of nature and the conservationist principles that were popular among the elite) and as a salutary force.⁷ His own lifestyle, modelled on an ideal of sobriety, purity and physical strength, had a great deal in common with the culture of 'vitalism', the Rein Leven Beweging (Pure Life Movement) and the Tolstoyans. Van 't Hoff went on long nature walks with his friends: with Bart van der Leck

⁵ The father of Robert, H.J. van 't Hoff (1859-1939), was trained as a chemical bacteriologist as well as an educator. He was the director of the Rotterdamse Waterleidingmaatschappij. His mother, J.D.C. Titsingh (1859-1925), was of an artistic bent. His uncle, J.H. van 't Hoff (1852-1911), was the first Dutch winner of the Nobel Prize (chemistry, 1901). See: Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, 1990.

⁶ For Walden, see: J. Bank and M. van Buuren, 'Utopisten en socialisten', in: Bank en Van Buuren, *Hoogtij van burgerlijke cultuur. 1900. Nederlandse cultuur in Europese context* (The Hague, 2000), 439-484.

⁷ For health and the Modern Move-

ment, see (among others): F. Bollery, 'Innovation or "Nothing new under the sun"', in: H.J. Henket and H. Heynen (eds.), *Back from Utopia: The Challenge of the Modern Movement* (Rotterdam, 2002), 276-289.

⁸ R.D.W. Oxenaar, *Bart van der Leck tot 1920. Een primitief van de nieuwe tijd* (Utrecht, 1976), 130.

⁹ W. de Wagt, *Piet Elling 1897-1962. Een samenstemmende eenheid* (Bussum, 2008), 54.

¹⁰ The sculpture *Wandelaar* by Piet Elling is inspired by the poem 'De Wandelaar' from the collection *Zwervers verzen* (1904) by C.S. Adama van Scheltema. Communicated by E. de Jong, 4 January 2010.

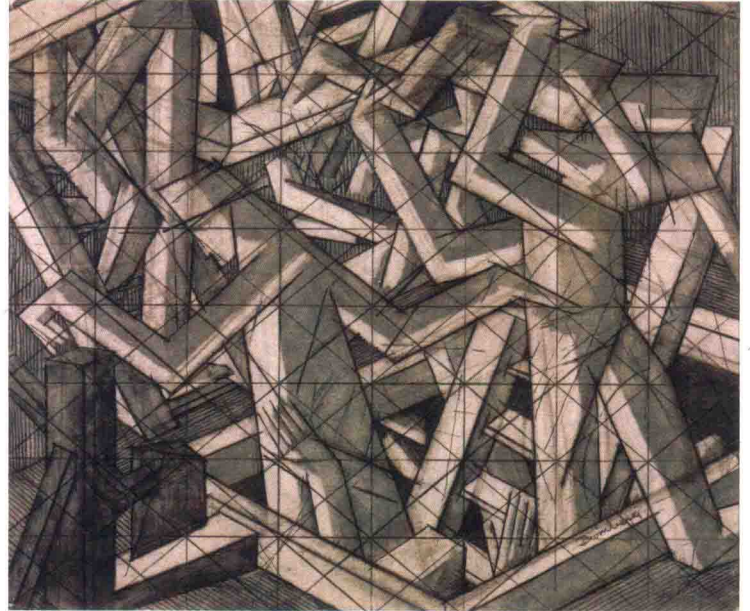
him from entering the pubs. He ended up ordering glasses of milk through the window.¹¹

Van 't Hoff studied architecture in England. At the suggestion of a family friend, the architect J.W. Hanrath, he entered the School of Art in Birmingham in 1906, which had a very good reputation at the time on account of its role in the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Pondering a new means of production was deeply rooted in English society – not only in terms of design, such as finding a new synthesis between hand-work and industrial production, but also in social terms: taking pleasure in work, elevating the status of the worker and seeing to a fair distribution of goods. At that point the labour movement was more militant in England than in the Netherlands. After five years in Birmingham, Van 't Hoff did three years of post-graduate study at the Architectural Association in Westminster. He worked as an intern with architects Herbert Tudor Buckland (1869-1951) in 1909 and H.B. Creswell (1869-1960) the following year in Rugby, where he gained experience in the building of country estates. Buckland was one of the best-known Arts and Crafts architects in Birmingham, and he also gave lessons in that industrial city. Van 't Hoff worked with him on a garden village for workers near London in the tradition of the English garden city movement (Elan Valley Reservoirs, 1909).

First Work: Private Villas

Van 't Hoff designed his first projects as an independent architect while still a student. In Hofstede De Zaaier (1911-1912), Augustus John's house (1913-1914), and in the country estate Løvdalla (1911-1912), he incorporated his fascination with traditional building methods and regional construction styles, which he interpreted in his own way. These buildings did him a great deal of credit as a beginning architect. He applied the aesthetic theories he had adopted in England, such as that of the German theoretician Hermann Muthesius on regional construction styles, the honest use of materials and the architect as artist (*Das englische Haus*, 1904). Aided by the writings of the English architect and architecture historian William Lethaby, among others, Van 't Hoff became acquainted with proportions in architecture and harmonic design. For Van 't Hoff, the composing of proportions by means of geometric forms was linked with the English units of measurement – based on feet – and thus with the sizes of the human body.

Van 't Hoff moved to London in 1911 where he became friends with the painter David Bomberg (1890-1957). In 1912 and 1913, he and Bomberg attended the London exhibition of the works of the Futurists. For both men, this introduction to such radical views on the renewal of art and life by Italian artists like Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni and Antonio Sant'Elia must have made a lasting impression. Van 't Hoff was mainly drawn by the sense of 'solidarity' even more than the appeal to



David Bomberg, *Study for 'In the Hold'*, ca. 1914
charcoal on paper, 55.6 x 66 cm, Tate,
presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery, 1967

tear down the old city and the glorification of the machine.¹² In London he also made contact with the painter Augustus John (1878-1961), who was fascinated by the pre-industrial way of life and, like Bomberg, moved in the progressive circles of the Omega Workshops, founded in 1913.¹³ In 1915 Bomberg was involved in the exhibition of the Vorticists, an avant-garde group that published the magazine *Blast* (1913-1914).¹⁴ For Bomberg it was a brief, intense period of almost total abstraction in his

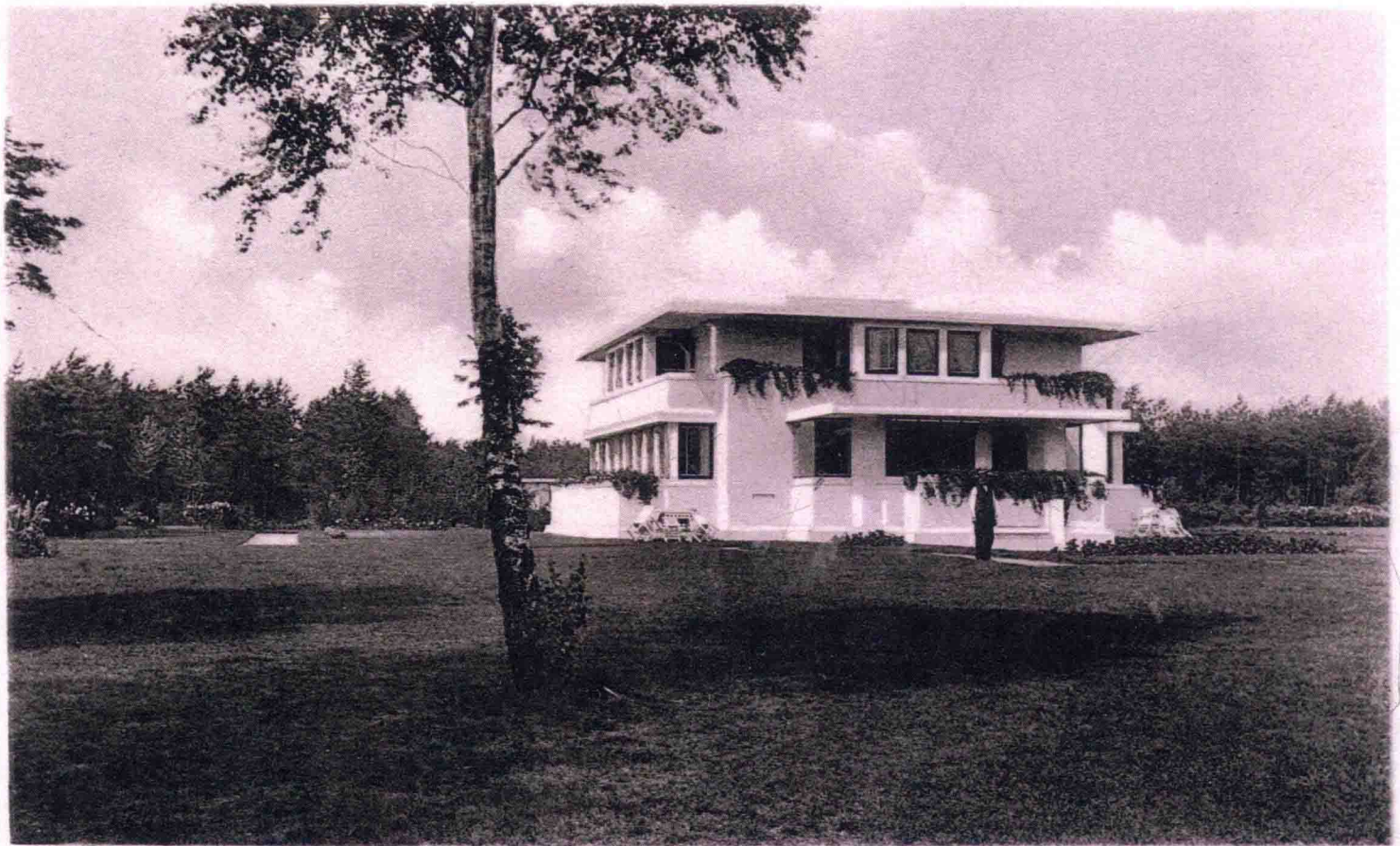
¹¹ Interview by the author with Gerrit Oorthuys, 5 June 2008.

¹² Letter from R. van 't Hoff to J. Leering, 7 August 1964. Rotterdam, NAI, Leer.

¹³ L. Campbell, 'The studios of Augustus John', *British Art Journal*, vol. 2 (2001) no. 3, 54.

¹⁴ J. Black et al., *Blasting the Future! Vorticism in Britain 1910-1920* (London, 2004).

Robert van 't Hoff, Villa A.B. Henny, Huize Nora,
Huis ter Heide, ca. 1920
postcard, ca. 9 x 14 cm
private collection, Rotterdam



HUIZE „NORA“ HUIS TER HEIDE.

work in which he tried to convey the dynamic of modern urban life, often taking his themes from his immediate surroundings in paintings such as *Ju-Jitsu en In the Hold*.¹⁵ Van 't Hoff would invite him to become a member of De Stijl in 1919, but he declined because the abstraction was too radical.¹⁶

In 1914 Van 't Hoff's fascination with change in building style and social revolution received a new impulse in the form of a book on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, the 'Picturesque Movement' and American Transcendental literary movement, this American architect was creating new forms of housing by introducing different floor plans and technical innovations (in modern conveniences such as lighting and heating) and by applying new production methods. The publication induced Van 't Hoff to visit Wright and to see his projects in Chicago as well as the buildings designed by Wright's teachers, the architects Louis Sullivan and H.H. Richardson.

After his trip to the USA, Van 't Hoff went one step further in his own designs. He began searching for more radical architectural innovation by introducing new forms of housing and integrating new experimental production methods and techniques and different models of social organization. The first results were Zomerhuis Verloop (1914-1915) and Villa Henny (1915-1918), which were unmistakably derived from the homes Wright had designed for the American upper class. In Van 't Hoff's copy of the Wasmuth book *Frank Lloyd Wright, Chicago*, which he acquired in 1914, notes in the margins show that he was particularly interested in the Oscar Steffens House (1909).¹⁷ In Villa Henny he used a concrete construction that was experimental for country houses, incorporating a vast array of technical gadgets. He himself worked on the building of the house as an architect standing side by side on the scaffolding with construction workers. His aim was to eliminate the distinction between white-collar worker and manual labourer, at least as far as his own personal behaviour was concerned. What he envisioned was a world without masters and servants, where oppression was replaced by equality.

De Stijl as a Political Movement

At the end of 1917 Robert van 't Hoff became acquainted with the artists of De Stijl, although how this happened is not known. In any case he came in contact with Theo van Doesburg, Bart van der Leek, Vilmos Huszár and Gerrit Rietveld, Piet Mondrian

and Bob Oud. Zomerhuis Verloop had been completed and Villa Henny was under construction. In De Stijl, Van 't Hoff recognized the same kind of yearning for a radical new world that he had experienced in England with the Futurists and the Vorticists. But he also expected to find opportunities to work together in order to bring about change in building style and social organization. He saw in De Stijl the beginnings of a revolution, not only aesthetic but also in terms of political power.



Vilmos Huszár (vignette design) and Theo van Doesburg (editor), cover of *De Stijl*, 1917 magazine, 26 x 19 cm Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam

The first manifesto in *De Stijl* (1918) was a more theoretical reading of its supposed collectivism. Van 't Hoff signed this statement, while others such as the architect Oud opposed De Stijl as a group and refused to endorse it.¹⁸

The projects on which he worked with artists from De Stijl in 1918 are a good indication of Van 't Hoff's desire to renew the living environment as a collective expression. He worked with Theo van Doesburg on the renovation of the De Licht house, a private home in Lage Vuursche (1918). The houseboat *De Stijl* (1917-1918) was particularly intended as a way of advancing the movement. He commissioned Huszár to devise a colour scheme, and Rietveld produced the furniture, designed by Van

¹⁵ L. Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven/London, 2000), 171-181.

¹⁶ R. Cork, *David Bomberg*, The Tate Gallery (London, 1988), 83.

¹⁷ Van 't Hoff bought the American (small) Wasmuth edition of *Frank Lloyd Wright, Chicago* (Berlin, 1911),

immediately after his arrival in Chicago on 1 July 1914. Annotations on page 61. Private collection.

¹⁸ T. van Doesburg, R. van 't Hoff, V. Huszár, A. Kok, P. Mondriaan, G. Vantongerloo and J. Wils, 'Manifest 1 van "De Stijl", 1918', *De Stijl*, vol. 2 (1918) no. 1, 2-3.