

# Rebels with a modernist cause

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**In the 1930s, a group of left-wing students rebelled against the traditionalists of the Delft School. Feelings ran high within the department of architecture.**

*Frans Godfroy*

The clash of ideologies which so typified the period between the two world wars did not spare Technische Hogeschool Delft (TH Delft - the forerunner of today's TU Delft). The central figure was Professor Marinus Jan (Rien) Granpré Molière, the 'godfather' of the Delft School, which regarded Traditionalism as superior to all other architectural styles. Soon after his appointment as professor in 1924, he converted to Catholicism. Granpré Molière preached a 'true art' which must bear witness to God's plan. He dismissed modern art forms as 'passing heresy'. He pointed to mediaeval society, which he held up as the ideal Christian community. In his view, the degeneration of the arts had begun with the Renaissance, when attention turned to people and humanism. His condemnation applied not only to contemporary movements such as the Neue Sachlichkeit ('New Objectivity') in architecture, which he saw as only concerned with physical materials, but even to the Gothic style. Architecture, Granpré Molière contended, must return to the mediaeval harmony between God and the pious community which formed the basis of Romanesque architecture.

## Following

Granpré Molière was a persuasive speaker. He also demonstrated a personal interest in his students, something which could not be taken for granted in his day. As a result, he enjoyed considerable popularity. The General Catholic Artists Society (AKKV), within which he systematically propounded his views, referred to him as 'the Leader'. He quickly gained an enormous following among Catholic architects. But there was also opposition. A group of dissidents led by Delft graduate Frits Peutz defended the standpoint that Christian principles should not dictate or exclude any style of art. That Granpré Molière should attract support in the Catholic south was only to be expected. Far more remarkable was his influence on the national Technische Hogeschool in Delft. For many years, his ideas dominated the educational programmes of the department of architecture. According to Professor Jan Molema and Suzy Leemans, who have comprehensively researched this exceptional episode in our institution's history, the situation was exacerbated by the general atmosphere of conservatism which pervaded TH Delft at the time. A key role was played by the Bouwkundige Studiekring (Architectural Study Society; BSK), an elite club to which only religious believers – of various denominations – were admitted. It was symbolic that the society limited itself to twelve members, the number of Christ's apostles. Granpré Molière was its president.

But the new Catholic fundamentalism within the department of architecture also attracted opposition. A group of students with socialist leanings began to make their views heard. The Delfts Studenten Corps (DSC) was now in its second 'leftist' period. The first wave of socialist sympathies had been seen around the turn of the century, when members of the national SDAP (Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij, or in English: Social Democratic Workers' Party) had visited the society and one Professor. Peekelharing had introduced students to the principles of Marxism. In the late 1920s, a second wave of social engagement took hold. For its eightieth anniversary in 1928, the DSC organised a spectacular theatrical performance in Delft's city centre. Trees were removed to allow the colossal moving scenery, centring on a 9-metre wooden wheel, to be erected. The show was entitled *Mensch en Machine* (Man and Machine), written by the avant garde film director Mannus Franken. It had a cast of hundreds of Delft students. Various prominent figures in the arts, including cinematographer Joris Ivens, composer Leo Smit and actor Albert van Dalsum, also contributed. Technology as a cultural problem was a particularly topical issue at the time, feeding both pessimistic and idealistic visions. The 1926 book *Mensch und Machine* by the Swiss socialist Eduard Weckerlé presented the socialist perspective as the solution. Franken's stage spectacular was directly inspired by that book, Molema and Leemans contend. They point to the opening chapter of the book, which recounts the story of how Prometheus audaciously stole fire from the gods and was chained to the rocks as punishment. They remind us that, at the time, Prometheus was one of the symbols associated with TH Delft.

## Censorship

One of the youngest participants was student-to-be Jan Horatius Albarda, the son of Johan Albarda, then an SDAP alderman in The Hague and later Minister of Public Works. Albarda senior had played a prominent part in the DSC's first 'leftist' period. From a very early age, Albarda junior wanted to become an architect. He had inherited his mother's talent for drawing and as a child had met many architects who visited the home of Alderman Albarda. They included Hendrik Berlage, who had been commissioned to design the Haags Gemeentemuseum. But it was Bernard Bijvoet and Jan Duiker who had the greatest influence on the young Jan. Their

offices were next door but one to the Albarda home and it was here that they worked on their designs for the Academy of Arts in Amsterdam and the Karenhuizen in Alkmaar. It was perhaps inevitable that Jan Albarda would become a member of the DSC, which by this time was almost as left-wing as Albarda senior. Indeed, Jan was an active member from the outset and during his time at Delft probably devoted more time to the society's activities than to the formal curriculum. It took him nine years to graduate! He was a particularly active member of the debating society *Vrije Studie*. This group would preface its meetings with screenings of films which had been refused general release. The screenings in the Highways and Waterways building were organised by the *Filmiga* (Film Society), of which the writer and cultural critic Menno ter Braak was an active member. In 1929, there was a major political row when Professor Steger, a Catholic member of the Dutch upper house of parliament, attempted to ban the use of a government-owned building to show films which allegedly undermined the government. This was pure censorship, claimed *Vrije Studie* and its supporters. The situation led to running battles with the police on the streets of Delft, the expulsion of a DSC member from the university, and the film society being banned from all TH Delft buildings. The conflict typified the ideological battle between the political and religious factions of the day.

### **Boycott**

In 1930, Jan Albarda and several friends from another study society, the *Gezelschap Practische Studie*, launched yet another controversial activity: the 'international study programme in new architecture'. The coinitiators included Henk Jan Brusse, son of the progressive Rotterdam publisher Wim Brusse, and Joost Boks, who would go on to design several prominent buildings, such as the *Bouwcentrum* in Rotterdam. With their programme, Albarda and his friends wanted to confront the official line of the architecture programme at TH Delft with the new movements in architecture. In December 1930, they organised a three-day meeting in the Highways and Waterways building to which they invited the leading names in modern architecture: Adolf Behne, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Gerrit Rietveld, Willem van Tijen, Jan Buijs, Cor van Eesteren, Han van Loghem and André Lurçat, all leading lights of the recent third *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)* in Brussels. They proved more than willing to share their ideas with TH Delft's students.

However, official representatives of the architecture department were conspicuous by their absence. On the instructions of Granpré Molière, the department boycotted the international programme altogether, although a number of professors did attend in a private capacity. No reports of the meeting exist, and neither is there any group photo of the participants. However, an article by CIAM member Piet Zwart which was prompted by the meeting and which appeared in *Het Vaderland* on 7 December 1930 does give an impression of the prevailing atmosphere. Zwart fulminates about the 'one-sided' nature of the Delft curriculum and stresses that the meeting should be seen as a demonstration against "the nature of the lectures and the leadership provided by the professors." Nevertheless, the powers-that-be within the department saw no reason to deviate from their God-given course. Before long, the students once again voiced their protests. Just over a year after the international meeting, on 3 April 1932, Henk Jan Brusse gave a lecture to the *Gezelschap Practische Studie* on behalf of 'The Group'. According to Molema and Leemans, who have researched the episode in great depth, 'The Group' revolved around the three initiators of the international meeting and had approximately ten other members. The text of Brusse's lecture, entitled 'What we want', has been preserved. It is in the nature of a forceful manifesto which defends the right to modernity.

Brusse once again examined the topic of 'man and machine', and in the tradition of the social democrats called for a middle road between the 'machine worshippers' and the 'machine haters'. He concluded that contemporary architecture should reflect the resulting new social relationships. His closing remarks were, "The young do not hate the old but the false pathos. They have inherited a world which has claimed, cherished and lauded all sorts of ideals, wisdom and aesthetics... and which has left them chaos."

### **War**

It is these final, rather prophetic words which form the legacy of the DSC rebels. Soon, the dark clouds of national socialism would form over Europe. The Second World War turned the lives of the Group's founders in entirely different directions. Henk Brusse joined the resistance, was captured and perished in Groß-Rosen concentration camp on 29 November 1944. After the war, the priority was reconstruction. The stark contrasts between the modernist and traditionalist ideals threatened to stand in the way of this essential process. Conciliatory conferences were held, which were successful in as much as a workable division of assignments between the 'modern' and 'traditional' architects was agreed. Jan Albarda was still trying to find his niche. There was no shortage of work, but he did not feel comfortable with what he was being asked to do. In 1951, he and his family emigrated to Canada, where he established himself as an independent architect and harpsichord builder. Joost Boks enjoyed some success as a modernist Dutch architect.

More information:

Jan Molema and Suzy Leemans, *Moderniteit in een behoudende omgeving. Jan Albarda en de Groep van Delft*, [Modernism in a conservative environment: Jan Albarda and the Delft Group], Heijningen 2010.

Jos Pouls, *De kunstenaarsdagen van de Algemene Katholieke Kunstenaarsvereniging in Huijbergen (1932-1940)*. Bakermat van de

Delftse School', [The artists' days of the Catholic Artists Society in Huijbergen, 1932 – 1940: birthplace of the Delft School], in: *Trajecta*, Vol. 2001 nos. 1 and 2, Leuven 2001.

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