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Facing Value

Radical
perspectives
from the arts

Valiz

1. Be unproductive
2. Hesitate and question
3. Share
4. Improvise
5. Invite and participate
6. Embrace the void
7. Play!
8. Support
9. Unite

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THE BIGGEST LIVING ROOM IN THE NETHERLANDS: FRANK VAN KLINGEREN'S KARREGAT IN EINDHOVEN, 1970–1973

Marina van den Bergen
& Piet Vollaard



Frank van Klingereren, De Meerpaal, Dronten 1968

In the Netherlands we are building for tomorrow but still have yesterday's image of society in mind. We are building small Lijnbaans that are pointless, separate shopping centres, separate schools, separate theatres and separate universities. We draw our conclusions from the past, do a little multiplication and make predictions for the future. But trees do not grow up to the sky. What we need is a different pattern of thinking.¹

The Karregat, Frank van Klingereren's multifunctional neighbourhood centre in Eindhoven, is undoubtedly one of the most controversial Dutch buildings of the seventies. It was initially applauded but later mainly reviled. Now when it is not simply forgotten it is remembered mainly as a product, doomed from the start, of a social and architectural idealism run riot. Anyone who visits the Karregat in its present state can hardly imagine the enthusiasm of the time. The open landscape has been filled up with buildings and the heart of the

community house—the meeting pit—looks deserted. The critics were obviously right.

But was the Karregat such a terrible failure? Several things did indeed go wrong, but contrary to what later critics would have us believe, a lot succeeded too. The collapse of the Karregat experiment coincided with, and was partly due to, the collapse of the social ideal that it so explicitly materialised. But as a blueprint for this lost ideal and as a catalyst for community feeling, the Karregat was in fact a successful project.

The development of the concept for the Karregat design was closely linked to the ideas underlying Herzenbroeken, the new residential district of which the Karregat is the amenity centre. For the development of this district, Eindhoven council sought alternatives to the large-scale residential estates, experienced as dull and monotonous, that had been built in the period of post-war reconstruction. Herzenbroeken was intended to be experimental; they wanted to create new forms of living and

¹ F. van Klingereren quoted in 'Vernieuwende Nederlandse architectuur', *Wonen*, 1, 1970, p. 10.

working environment and at the same time revive the notion of the neighbourhood. This district was also an experiment in community structure: the inhabitants were to be given far-reaching participation in their district and look after their common interests themselves. The housing would be largely low-rise. Greenery would extend from the centre of the district into the residential neighbourhoods and provide space for footpaths and playing fields. In the early seventies Herzenbroek was isolated from the central amenities in Eindhoven. For this reason the council wanted to develop certain district amenities together with the housing. They contacted the newly established Amro-Westland/Utrecht project development agency. We can no longer find out whose brilliant idea it was, but during the initial talks between the council and the project developer the idea came up of housing various sorts of amenities, commercial and social, in a single building. It was later decided that schools too should be given the opportunity to be incorporated into the integrated centre. The council hoped that by integrating the local amenities and activities and bringing them out of their isolation, they could make contact between the residents easier, which would give rise to communal activities and the development of true neighbourhood life. At that time there was only one architect in the Netherlands with experience of such buildings, and that was Frank van Klingerén.

Van Klingerén (1919–1999) was first and foremost a conceptual architect, a man of ideas. His gift was to inspire people with enthusiasm. His training and experience as a civil engineer meant he was accustomed to translating ideas as directly and plainly into materials and space as possible. It was all about realising the concept as

well and as cheaply as possible. These concepts—certainly in the case of community buildings—were usually based on Van Klingerén's ideals concerning a new and open society. He wanted to focus on social matters and at the same time fought against anything privatised and conditioned. Two notions frequently recur in his expositions: inconvenience and integration, or as he himself said: nuisance and declotting.

According to Van Klingerén, nuisance encourages social contact: where people are so close to each other that inconvenience is possible, a form of understanding arises naturally. This may result in friendship or hostility, or any of the variations between the two. So agreements have to be reached, taking account of each other on the basis of knowing the other. There is the risk of massive failure, but according to Van Klingerén it can also work, with every chance of gaining understanding, respect and friendship.²

Van Klingerén defines a clot as an established order with its own, often poorly comprehensible mores: old people's homes where the elderly sit day and night, student homes where only students live, the lunatics who are locked up in psychiatric hospitals and, not to be forgotten, the social divisions, which only started to be undermined in the sixties. Declotting means breaking down this system with the intention of bringing different sorts of people back into contact with each other. In this light, Van Klingerén sees his buildings as tools for encounters and social integration.

Van Klingerén was given the first opportunity to realise his ideas in 1965, with a commission for a community centre in Dronten, called the Meerpaal.³ At the heart of this pioneers' village he

2 K. Wiekart, 't Karregat in Eindhoven, een voorbarig experiment', *NRC Handelsblad*, February 8, 1974.

3 The design of the Meerpaal is almost an exact copy of a community centre Van Klingerén designed for De Bilt in 1963, but which was never built.

designed an agora, a covered square where anything could happen: theatre, a market, sports competitions, TV recordings, or just hanging about drinking a beer. The Meerpaal was a great success. Even before the building was completed Van Klingerén was asked to design an agora for the new Lelystad.⁴ In the first plan, the idea behind the Meerpaal was developed to a greater extreme. Virtually all the activities the average Dutchman might pursue outdoors were accommodated here: eating and drinking, sport and recreation, going out and having a party, shopping and going to church.

The Meerpaal can be seen as an 'urban design' building: a covered square partly enclosed by 'buildings' (functions) such as the restaurant and the bowling alley, with an open amphitheatre in the middle of the square. The first design for the agora in Lelystad has more the character of a landscape. Amenities and 'buildings' are scattered more or less randomly over a covered 'landscape' and are much more intermingled than in the Meerpaal. The recognisable form of the rectangular square as in the Meerpaal has here given way to an informal system of residual spaces. Nuisance and declotting are a more explicit theme here than in the Meerpaal. When Van Klingerén was approached for the Karregat in 1970, he was to develop this landscape concept even further.

The overall programme of requirements for the Karregat had been known at an early stage. There were talks with possible candidates and potential interested parties in spring 1970. The client wanted the investment in the neighbourhood centre to be limited in order to make the whole centre viable, on the pretext that 'one can't earn a bean in a shop with a rent of 200 guilders per square metre'. The

client found Van Klingerén willing in this respect too, since he had several times said that low budgets were no problem. 'More with less' was one of his grand statements.

One of the first proposals for the Karregat concerned the building of a roof construction. There would have to be a roof on pillars, and nothing else. Van Klingerén called them artificial plane trees, sculptures you could stand under. Umbrellas overlapping so that larger spaces are formed underneath them. 'I can even see them appearing all over Eindhoven as symbols of a more humane world.'⁵ The open space under the roof would be filled in by the residents. The objections to this idea were primarily a question of the climate.

The Karregat is at the end of an elongated stretch of greenery that winds through the district. The centre is located on a hill. As Van Klingerén said,

We dreamed that this whole district would have a different pattern of behaviour and that the green zone would become a sort of living room for the district. The trolleys in the supermarket would be a sort of 'white trolley' which the mothers would roll down full after shopping and their children would push back up again, empty. The children would then leave them at the turning point.

This inspired De Weyer [employee of Van Klingerén] to name this station and white trolley depot 'the Karregat' [the trolley hole].⁶ The design as built is a steel roof construction and a facade. The roof is formed by steel umbrellas in a grid 14.4 metres square. The umbrellas themselves cover a floor area of 7.2 metres square and consist of an openwork construction that

4 Van Klingerén was not involved in the definitive design and building. The agora in Lelystad is in the name of a former member of his staff, J.A.M. Mulder.

5 'Bois de Boulogne in plan Geestenberg', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, June 15, 1971.

6 'En hoe nu verder? Een interview met Frank van Klingerén', *Bouw*, 52, 1973, p. 1601.

derives its stability from a column clamped in at its base.⁷ Between the umbrellas are latticed joists supporting a layer of wooden beams. All the utilities, including sprinkler system, are suspended from this layer of beams. Skylights have been inserted into the pyramidal roof surfaces of the umbrellas so that sufficient day light falls on the landscape. At the top is a ventilation cap. Light fittings and radiation panels for the heating are attached to the joists, so that the floor remains free of installations. The flexibility of the installations was taken to extremes. For example, the drainpipes and outlet pipes for the mechanical ventilation were replaced by flexible tubes.

To achieve maximum adaptability the facades and walls were made to be entirely independent of the roof construction. The facade elements consist of rectangular steel cylinders with galvanised glazing bars that could be filled with a variety of materials: glass, plywood and sandwich boards. Inside, the space was at first filled by an informal system of simple, mostly wooden walls and screens and—only where strictly necessary—enclosed volumes. The principle was that umbrellas could be added on and that the constructions against and under the umbrellas could be built and demolished. All that remains of the idea of spreading the umbrellas over the whole district are a few loosely positioned elements close to the entrance. Van Klingereren wanted to create a centre that was a combination of

maximum openness and also maximum flexibility, of the ensemble with regard to the residential district; of the various organisations with regard to each other, and of the distinct activities in each organisation.⁸

7 Van Klingereren had previously employed the umbrella construction for a sports canteen in Amsterdam.

8 't Karregat Eindhoven [1973]. Streekarchief Eindhoven.

In his first design he positioned several amenities apparently at random inside the building: the creche was next to the cafe and the music school, for example. Ribbon-like objects of medium height mark the transition between the various amenities. In the middle of the complex a square was designed which could be used as a sports hall, market square or neighbourhood centre. On one side of the square is the shopping area, on the other the school landscape, the first Dutch school without walls.

In the end it turned out that less shop space was needed and in the western section space was reserved for the social-medical centre, the library, the community centre and the cafe. The heart of the Karregat, literally and figuratively, was formed by the community meeting centre called 'de Kuil' [the pit]. Around this lie the schools and a gym.⁹ There is some notion of a certain spatial distinction between the denominational and state schools, but there is none between the nursery and primary education.

The Karregat was festively opened for use at the start of the new school year in 1973. Herzenbroeken gained 40,000 m³ of air-conditioned space for four million guilders. No more and no less. The fact that the building was not experienced as a huge empty box is partly due to the curved forms Van Klingereren used on the interior for such things as the library and the bar, and to the artistic additions by Pierre van Soest, the artist with whom Van Klingereren always closely worked. Van Soest designed the colour scheme for the umbrellas, laid and painted the cobbles—placed randomly over the floor and forming a 'nuisance'—and designed the acoustic panels in the form of sausages entwined in the steel construction. Although it had first been

9 The Karregat housed a Catholic nursery school (4 classes), a Catholic primary school (13 classes), a state nursery school (2 classes) and a state primary school (7 classes).

conceived as a shopping centre in which space would also be made for social amenities, in the end more than half was used for schools and only 18% for shops.

The expectations of the new neighbourhood centre were high. In 1971 Eindhoven council was already announcing:

The centre will be an example of the way modern developments in the commercial, socio-cultural and educational fields can be materialised in an urban development and architectural design.¹⁰

In the Karregat everything was openly connected to everything else, and only in the evening, after closing time, were the shops and library closed off by a gate. Organisations and companies made use of each other's facilities. For instance, the bar opened at 8 o'clock in the morning because it was also the doctor's waiting room. Outside the library was a large reading table and a magazine rack so that visitors to the doctor and cafe could also read the paper outside library hours. The library was also a school library and the arithmetic lessons were put into practice in the supermarket.

The Karregat is intended to interweave all the activities of the district and thereby act as an exceptionally lively and everyday meeting point for the residents; a centre where all manner of things can be enjoyed, not only during the day but also in the evenings and at weekends. In short, a 'festive' neighbourhood centre where people come naturally,

according to C. van Zwet, Eindhoven's alderman for public works shortly after the opening.¹¹ And it worked. The Karregat

10 'Ook Eindhoven krijgt zijn "experimentele" Woonwijk', *Cobouw*, March 3, 1971, p. 57.

11 C.J. van Zwet, 't Karregat in de Eindhovense Gemeenschap', *Bouw*, 52, 1973, pp. 1581-1582.

12 Ibid.

sparkled and swung. The Karreknarren carnival club held its festivities in 'de Kuil', the annual Jazznight Eindhoven and the country & western festivals drew more than 1500 visitors, coffee-time concerts were given and films shown. The communal spaces were managed by the residents themselves. They also ran the bar, whose revenue went into the organisation of the various events—drinking for a good cause.

The Karregat was a building that was deliberately intended not to be finished, with which the residents could carry on tinkering; the communal living room of Herzenbroek, alive everyday and at all times.

A few months after the Karregat was handed over for use the magazine *Bouw* devoted no less than 27 pages to it. This phenomenon was discussed from the points of view of maintenance and management, education, social aspects, and also regarding construction and acoustics.¹²

Despite all the optimistic noises, dark clouds soon appeared on the horizon. The first problems were due to the concept of the 'school without walls'. This was intended to increase parent involvement, expand the possibilities of integrating nursery and primary education, encourage cooperation between schools in different systems and the integration of the school building with other amenities. In addition, new developments in education required a school building that was possible to divide up in a flexible way.¹³ During the design stages of the Karregat there had been conflicts about the feasibility of a school without walls. Some feared the plans would be rejected by the education inspector, among other things because they could not comply with the building regulations for schools. After Van Klin-

13 With the introduction of the Mammoet law in 1968, it was hoped that it would be possible to give the pupils a choice of curriculum. A new type of school building would be needed to implement this educational renewal in optimum conditions.

beaverable linkings or safeguards?

geren had himself visited the Ministries of Welfare, Health & Cultural Affairs and Public Works to explain his plan, Public Works agreed to regard the Herzenbroeken schools plan as experimental, so that the schools no longer had to comply with the building regulations.¹⁴ The real problems arose shortly after the opening, when it turned out that there was a great lack of clarity among the teachers and heads about the educational methods to be applied, and that proper teaching materials were also missing. This, added to the physical conditions: dry, stuffy and noisy, soon became too much for many teachers.

Four years after the Karregat was opened it was decided to carry out a large-scale conversion. This signalled a definitive end to the school landscape. Walls were built and lessons in the classical sense could be given again. These walls were in fact largely in glass, so the visual openness was retained. Even with walls, the Karregat schools were much more open and transparent than any other school at that time.

Does the failure of the totally open school landscape mean that the Karregat as a whole was a failure? On the occasion of the reopening of the schools, *Het Eindhovens Dagblad* wrote that the Karregat was a success on every front because it was exemplary of a centre that genuinely forms the heart of a district. A community centre of the best sort, of which only the schools did not work.¹⁵ The same conclusions had been reached in an assessment made several years previously.¹⁶ The building was said to be a success in combining several functions in one building and the participation of the inhabitants, so that a true neighbourhood community was able to take shape in a short time. It was precisely

because of this active participation by the inhabitants, with more than 300 volunteers actively involved, that *de Volkskrant* considered it a dangerous building.

The fact that lots of women take part in the activities (...) sometimes leads to problems in families because no answer is found to the question of who has to look after the children,

M. Ruyter wrote in 1974.

In addition, an abundance of activities, which the Karregat encourages, has led to a great many informal contacts whereby the family structure has come under pressure.¹⁷

Shopkeepers and cafe staff all think that the combination of the various functions serves to increase turnover, according to the library staff people read more and the social-medical centre thinks it lowers thresholds.

In the late eighties the continued existence of the Karregat was in danger for economic reasons. The supermarket wanted to rent more floor area and threatened to move elsewhere. People started to doubt the value of the events held there, because venues were being built elsewhere in Eindhoven. In short, the question arose whether the Karregat should be demolished or not. It was decided to radically renovate the building once more. In the new plan each part could be used separately. New solid facades were installed, walls were built all around the interior, and the various amenities can only be reached by their own individual entrances in the outer facade. The Karregat was

some truth: the Herzenbroek district was faced with divorces and new relationships between the residents of the district. Some people thought that the social interaction that the Karregat catalysed was likely to be one of the causes. The story goes that one day two coaches full of residents of Herzenbroek left the Karregat for the law courts in Den Bosch to have their divorces pronounced collectively.

originally a transparent and open building, where the boundary between indoors and outdoors had been removed, but where one only really discovered everything that happened inside once one had entered it. After this conversion it became a closed bastion and everything was divided into clots. There is no longer any nuisance, no more space for unexpected encounters.¹⁸

The Karregat was in every respect an experiment: socially, and regarding building type and owners hip structure—developed by and the property of the local authority and a project developer. A multifunctionally-conceived building that was used to achieve a social ideal. In this respect the Karregat is the Netherlands' most concrete example of architecture as a political instrument. Reality turned out to be wilful. Society changed, but differently than had been hoped. The 'we-feeling' of the seventies was not shared by the 'I-generation' of the eighties. The building

turned out not to be able to absorb the changing circumstances, perhaps did not *want* to absorb them.

The bankruptcy of the Karregat does not automatically signify that Van Klingereren's ideas are no longer relevant today. In our present society one can again observe tendencies towards spatial and social segregation. Even though there are regular calls for more tolerance, Nuisance and declogging are at times still relevant topics.

The present debate on condensed building and combination of functions are in fact close to the basic principles of the Karregat. You may wonder who is the more naive: Van Klingereren, who thought he could change society by his architecture, or the present generation of architects who think they can practise architecture without having or being able to take account of the social consequences of their actions.

Translation Dutch-English: Gregory Ball
OASE 57 (November 2001), pp. 62-73

Marina van den Bergen (1964) is a Dutch historian of architecture who undertook extensive research into the work of John Habraken and – together with architect and architectural critic Piet Vollaard – Frank van Klingereren. She is editor in chief at ArchiNed, a critical, independent platform for debate on urban planning and architecture. Piet Vollaard (1955) is one of the founders of ArchiNed and currently works as founding member of The Natural City, a collaborative group of designers, ecologists and biologists working on city ecology.

¹⁴ Memo from C. Notten to MW dept. dated February 3, 1971 (archives of BDI, Gemeente Eindhoven).

¹⁵ K. Kertsen, 'Scholen vieren einde mislukt Experiment', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, April 21, 1980, p. 4.

¹⁶ N.M. Spek, *Herzenbroeken, Karregat; evaluatie en toekomst*, Eindhoven, 1976 (Eindhoven area archives).

¹⁷ Ruyter, 'Karregat is een gevaarlijk gebouw', *de Volkskrant*, 9-3-1974, p. 13. The remark about the permanent breakdown of the family structure holds

¹⁸ In 2001 the question has again arisen whether it is economically feasible to restructure the Karregat again or should be demolished. One of the options being studied is a plan for preservation whereby, after conversion, there will be greater visual openness inside the Karregat itself, and there is also an investigation into ways the schools and the community centre can use each other's facilities.