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Het belang van het Binnenhof

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Cover Page



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English summery

The Binnenhof (literally the Inner Court) is a complex of government buildings in The Hague that has been the centre of Dutch politics for many centuries. It is the only centre of government in the Western world located outside the nation's capital and one of the oldest still in use today. Founded in the Middle Ages as a court of the counts of Holland, it became the location of meetings of the States-General in the late 16th century and the main residence of the stadtholders during the Republic. In the last two centuries it has been the seat of the Dutch parliament as well as several ministries and the Prime Minister's Office. This book examines the political meaning of this historical place since the early 19th century, and the way it has been used by the institutions that have had their seat there.

In order to understand the relationship between politics and architecture in general, and the development of the Binnenhof in the last two centuries in particular, the book uses three concepts: *representability*, *functionality*, and *historical heritage*. These concepts each represent different kinds of arguments used in the discussion on government buildings. Representability implies the call to create a situation in which the architectural style of the building corresponds to both the function and dignity of its inhabitant, e.g. through grand architecture or the use of specific symbols. Functionality covers all arguments regarding the utility of the buildings, for example the practical demands for office space, better facilities, and modern technology. Finally, the notion of historical heritage is used to describe the ways in which tradition, convention, and memory shaped the architectural landscape in The Hague.

Most of the international literature on political architecture has merely been interested in the representative aspects of government buildings. It has a strong focus on the vision of architects, on their impressive designs, ornaments, and decorations. Seemingly trivial aspects like the need for sufficient space and other practical urges are generally ignored. The same could be said about the way in which the historical past defines the housing of governmental bodies. Issues like memory and tradition hardly play any part in these studies.

Although this approach could tell us a lot about the nature of relatively new government buildings, it does not apply to more historically rooted political places such as the Binnenhof. As this book points out, calls to create 'more representative' government buildings were largely unsuccessful in the Netherlands. Louis Napoleon's initiative to move the centre of politics away from the old court in The Hague to the new capital of Amsterdam was reversed after the house of Orange was restored to power. Later attempts to replace the outdated and rundown buildings of the Binnenhof by more impressive and modern government buildings failed as well. Both Thorbecke's plan to build a 'parliamentary palace' and subsequent grand designs met fierce resistance, and were ultimately dismissed due to their 'un-Dutch' and expressive

nature. While in other European countries new government buildings popped up like daisies, the discussion in the Netherlands got bogged down in endlessly arguing about style, representation, and national identity.

The other side of this ongoing debate was a growing interest in the history of the existing complex of government buildings. During the 19th century multiple books on the history of the Binnenhof were written, and more and more politicians devoted themselves to a policy of preservation and renovation. By the end of the century this preoccupation with the past resulted in the decision not to replace the historic buildings, but, instead, to restore them to their former glory. This was a radical change of view. The buildings of the Binnenhof, most of which dated from the late Middle Ages or early modern period, were no longer seen as outdated or unsuitable: from now on their historic shape and style were cherished by policy makers, and became the starting point for a range of ‘restoration’ projects. At the dawn of the 20th century almost the entire complex had been renovated, and looked more ‘medieval’ than it had ever done before. Early modern office buildings had been replaced by exact replicas and the famous ‘Hall of Knights’ had been revamped into a castle-like building with turrets, stained windows, and battlements.

This past-oriented attitude towards the housing of the government has continued until today. Especially in recent years, the Binnenhof in The Hague has been cherished as a national *lieu-de-mémoire*. However, it should be said that this policy of cultivation of the past mainly concerns the appearance of the complex. Within the walls of the government buildings a major modernization has taken place. Except for the few historic halls, such as the Hall of Knights, the Trêveszaal, and the chamber of the Senate, the rooms and offices of most buildings are rather plain and modern. This is especially true for the building of the Second Chamber, which was vastly extended in the second half of the 20th century. Although incorporated within the historical complex, the interior of the new quarters of the Chamber is remarkably functional and modern.

The extension and renovation of this part of the Binnenhof only came into being after the old building of the Second Chamber had burst at the seams. By the 1960’s working conditions had become almost impossible: people were crammed into too little space, and most of the facilities were rundown and outdated. It was clear something had to be done. How it should be done, however, remained subject to debate. Initially, plans were made to create a large functional office block-like building, including a new assembly hall, a large meeting hall for the general public, and sufficient working space for members of parliament, journalists, and the ever growing number of support staff. Fearing this modern building would stand out in a stark contrast to the historic Binnenhof, the plans became the target of much criticism in the late 1970’s. In the early 1980’s a compromise was struck that satisfied most of the parties involved: both the modern assembly hall, the new meeting hall, and the working offices would be blend into the already existing setting; creating a conglomerate of different buildings from different ages.

In many ways the history of the housing of the Second Chamber is exemplary for the history of the Binnenhof in general. On the one hand it shows the problematic relation towards new architecture. In particular, the bigger ‘more representative’ building projects turned out to be real political stumbling blocks. Due to the ongoing debates about style, national identity, and the nature of Dutch politics, most of these plans were postponed, adjusted, or simply dis-

missed. On the other hand it points out the importance of historical heritage: once the plans to create a new parliament building were deadlocked, a policy of cultivation of the past and restoration presented itself as the reasonable alternative. Unlike the grand designs that were put forward by architects and politicians, a focus on the history of the Binnenhof could unite the different parties involved and clear the way for a more politically neutral policy towards the housing of parliament.

The same could be said about arguments addressing the functionality of the buildings. As the history of both the government buildings and the houses of parliament show, the call for more spacious and comfortable working conditions turned out to be a catalyst in the further development of the Binnenhof. Just like the shift in attention towards the past, functionality provided a strong and neutral argument to change the architecture of the complex. The interior of the buildings in particular underwent several transformations during the 19th and 20th century, not because of changing notions of representability or esthetics, but purely as a result of the urge to create a more functional working environment.

All in all, this book shows that it was not so much a disinterest in architecture that determined the housing of government and parliament in the Netherlands, nor was it the outcome of elaborate ideas on the relationship between architecture and politics. Instead it was quite the opposite: multiple plans were made to replace the old Binnenhof, but as there was no agreement on the style of these new buildings each draft ended up as an apple of discord. Furthermore, no party proved strong enough to put its idea into action. As a result a compromise had to be reached - and that is where the notions of historical heritage and functionality came in. They offered Dutch policy makers the tools to create a government complex that was both national, comfortable, and traditional. While in other European countries architects single-handedly drew up plans for new palaces, these two notions changed an early modern court into a modern centre of government.