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Biopolis and *Hydrobiopolis*. Dwelling Hills by Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel

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Utopia, nomadism, social housing, necessity, Rotterdam
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Utopia, nomadismo, architettura sociale, necessità, Rotterdam

Abstract

Biopolis and *Hydrobiopolis*. Dwelling Hills by Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel

Reinder Blijstra's work, *We Live | Do We Live?*, published in 1967, explores urban design opportunities in the Netherlands, emphasising a nomadic housing model as a response to precarious living conditions. Through theoretical investigation and concrete projects, Blijstra places the concept of shared housing in the context of 20th century Dutch social and architectural restructuring, examining the evolution of housing needs since the end of the 19th century. The work of architects such as Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel aims to realise accessible housing solutions, addressing the growing demand for recreational spaces. Their projects, *Biopolis* and *Hydrobiopolis*, are proposed as models for integrating work and leisure, responding to socio-economic changes and automation. These utopian visions, while anchored in ideals of humanity and community, confront practical challenges and uncertainties in realisation, reflecting the tensions between theory and application in contemporary architecture.

Biopolis and *Hydrobiopolis*. Dwelling Hills by Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel

L'opera di Reinder Blijstra, *We Live | Do We Live?*, pubblicata nel 1967, esplora le opportunità di design urbano in Olanda, sottolineando un modello abitativo nomade come risposta alle condizioni di vita precarie. Attraverso un'indagine teorica e progetti concreti, Blijstra inserisce il concetto di abitazione condivisa nel contesto della ristrutturazione sociale e architettonica olandese del XX secolo, esaminando l'evoluzione delle esigenze abitative dalla fine del XIX secolo. Il lavoro di architetti come Enrico Hartsuyker e Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel mira a realizzare soluzioni abitative accessibili, affrontando la crescente domanda di spazi ricreativi. I loro progetti, *Biopolis* e *Hydrobiopolis*, si propongono come modelli di integrazione tra lavoro e svago, rispondendo ai cambiamenti socioeconomici e all'automazione. Queste visioni utopiche, pur ancorate a ideali di umanità e comunità, si confrontano con le sfide pratiche e le incertezze nella realizzazione, riflettendo le tensioni tra teoria e applicazione nell'architettura contemporanea.

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Giacomo Brunelli, *Untitled (Crow)*,
da | from *The Animals*, 2005-2010

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Quodlibet

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Vesper è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphoros*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, intervista, fundamentals – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

Vesper
Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory

Vesper is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphoros*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, interview, fundamentals. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

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Biopolis and *Hydrobiopolis*. Dwelling Hills by Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel

Giulia Conti

‘Man is originally a nomad. […] Man has become a nomad again’ (Blijstra 1967, pp. 5-6). In his 1967 work *Wij wonen / Wonen wij?* (*We live / Do we live?*), Reinder Blijstra dedicates an entire chapter to housing in an imminent future, focusing on Dutch urban-scale design opportunities. The cases explore a two-pronged investigation into theoretical experimentation and project effectiveness seen as a tangible incentive in addressing specific poor living conditions. The emphasis on a nomadic model of living highlights a paradox, leading to a modernised prototype of shared habitation. Blijstra’s observations sum up a broader national effort to improve the design of dwellings and collective housing. In the early 1950s, Dutch architecture made a quantum leap towards addressing social issues, building on efforts that began in the mid-19th century and were formalised in the 1901 *Housing Act*, the Netherlands’ first legislation aimed at improving housing conditions and solving the very real problems of unhealthy housing, especially for the working class.

Nearly fifty years later, the essay by Willem van Tijen published in 1952 in “Forum”, redefined the perimeter of collective housing design, emphasising again the need to address renewed conditions of misery concurrently with functional aims.

As former students of Siegfried Giedion at the ETH in Zürich, Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel moved to the Netherlands from Switzerland a year later, during a period of extensive reconstruction. Up until the end of 20th century, they dedicated their whole architectural practice to urban and social housing project, focusing on affordability and broad social acceptability. From healthy space to recreational space: their architectural solutions for the rapid growth of the contemporary Dutch city, aimed to create places where ‘our living, our neighbourhoods and our homes can be directed […] towards possibilities of a real activity of the body, hands and mind, in young and old. […] They can also satisfy, in the right place and time, the need for rest and reflection, for being alone, for contact with nature, land and space’ (van Tijen 1952, p. 278). While in the early years of the century the architectural project was therefore expected to solve precise lacks in a physical field, by the late 1950s the range of needs investigated by architects had expanded to include recreational desires. The scarcity of leisure spaces both inside and outside domesticity became a focal point, highlighting a condition of spatial precariousness, – in a reaction to the lack of a system of quickly reachable leisure places – and a need for areas offering freedom ‘from the slavery of work and sedentariness’ (Careri 2001, p. 5), and where ‘utility will make way for the creative activity *par excellence*, play’ (*ibid.*, p. 11). *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1938) would at long last find his home.

The immediate reference became the concept of a ‘camp for nomads on a planetary scale’ (Nieuwenhuys 1974, p. 1), envisioned in the *geographical* project *New Babylon* (1959-1964) by Constant Nieuwenhuys. This broad expandable ‘nomadic tent’ was a complex, ramified structure, where contemporary society could rediscover a different sense of *time* and *space*, thanks to automated, machine-driven production progress. A permeable well-organised place in which the *wandering* of its inhabitants would allow the reconquest of a strictly human dimension of dwelling in a general return to the creative nature of *being*, superseding the dimensional limit of the concepts of housing and the city. The utilitarian norms applied to the functional city would be channelled into a new normative model, focused on recreation. The multiform appearances of the compositional variations criss-crossed with contemporaneous architectural trends drew the urban profile of many nomadic cities.

In their search to define a new paradigm for social housing in the Netherlands, Hartsuyker-Curjel themselves tapped into the contemporary echo of needs for housing, steering it towards a theoretical-practical apparatus. This framework found a preliminary summation in the projects of *Biopolis* and *Hydrobiopolis*: a terrigenous city for The Hague with its aquigenous alternative for the Wassenaar coasts along the North Sea. A dwelling ‘mastaba’ (Hartsuyker 1970, p. 4) emerging from the ground or excavating it, a *Droomstad* (City of dreams) (Sluysmans 1967, p. 25), as defined in the newspapers of the time that often compared *Biopolis* with *New Babylon*. It invented the urban morphology of the places it visited, eventually tracing out its coastal *double*. The project was designed between 1961 and 1964, while Enrico Hartsuyker was working on the never built project of the IJ-tunnel in Amsterdam (1962-1969), in collaboration with Constant for the pylons (van Moorsel, Segaar-Höweler 2008, p. 103).

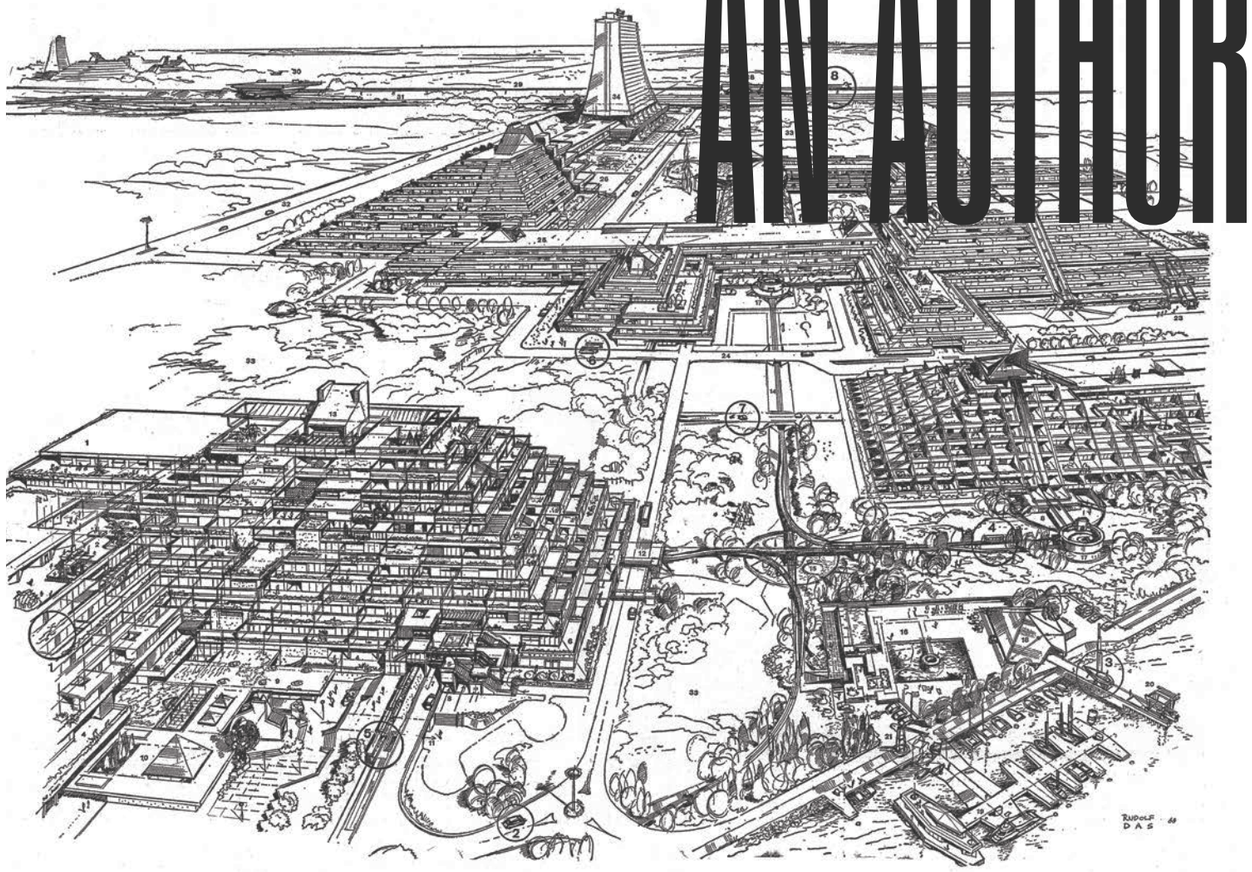
If the ‘first quality that characterizes *Biopolis* is its humanity, i.e. the possibility for the individual to develop to the utmost his personality and capacities, in a stimulating environment’ (Hartsuyker 1970, p. 62), for Hartsuyker-Curjel, the architectural project coincided with a synthetic experimentation based on a practical semiology of the city. ‘*Biopolis* is to be an adaptation to an integration of the rapidly changing factors in our society […]: automatization, rationalization, mass-production. […] The structure of this society is characterized by […] a prevailing importance of “brainwork” over muscular strength […] with an increase of time devoted to recreation, amusement, creative activities’ (*ibid.*, pp. 64-65).

To be seen as a manifesto (Hartsuyker, Hartsuyker-Curjel 1968a) following the direction public housing was taking, *Biopolis* announced its self-sufficiency in combining work needs and recreational spaces under a single ‘tent’: not mobile, but firmly tacked to the ground until becoming too rigid in its planimetric development. The architectural dimension of housing expanded on an urban scale yet remained measurable at one mile: a house-city for 20,000 inhabitants introjecting its exterior and recovering the image of a ductile system beneath which anything can happen as a *collective* opportunity. With the aim of constructing a constellation of hill-cities extending beyond the strictly geographical boundaries of the Netherlands, the structure consisted of a modular skeleton (in metal, wood, concrete or a prefabricated structure) housing the living cells. The repetition of units, on a regular rhythm, defined the plan extension of the surface of each level understood as a macrostructure – for the Hartsuyker-Curjel, ‘decks’ or ‘dwelling hills’, for Constant, ‘sectors’. Each level was set back from the lower floor to allow the individual dwelling units and their terraces to transcend the boundary between inside and outside. At ground level, as in Constant’s ‘nomadic city’, there would have been a vehicle infrastructure network from which the artificial soil of the first level would rise, releasing to its inhabitants the outdoor space, in this sub-hypogean confinement. The variable extension of each level, composed in parallel shifts, would draw and shape the profile of the city itself, oriented along three sides arranged east-west to follow the course of the sun. The necessity of *thinking* and drawing in section allows the wide interstice between the levels of the pyramidal structure to accommodate those spaces that the contemporary ‘city of misery’ (Nieuwenhuys in Careri 2001, p. 8), or the ‘dissociated city’ (Hartsuyker 1970, p. 2), tends to scatter: all-grades schools, cultural spaces for music and theatre, museums, cinemas, sport infrastructures. These would be adjacent to dwelling and working spaces, allowing free movement without interferences.

Not far off, *Hydrobiopolis* (1968-1971, Hartsuyker, Hartsuyker-Curjel 1968b; 1969), the later marine version of Biopolis, emerged from the waters closed to The Hague on a concrete pile structure. It extended one-kilometre-long arm towards the Wassenaar coast as the only infrastructural protuberance stretched to the land. An artificial island which maintains the internal spatiality almost completely unchanged from its terrestrial *doppelgänger*.

Despite the wider architectural Dutch debate of the time, the projects on which the Hartsuyker-Curjel worked during the 1960s, managed to redeem their utopian origin through the achievement of consequential constructed fallouts, moving away from many simultaneous reflections that remained only on paper. *Biopolis* thus becomes a construction capable of combining theoretical experimentation and practical synthesis: ‘A city that is there first and foremost for people […] just a little more practical than Constant’s *New Babylon*’ (de Haas 1968, p. 8). The south-eastern district of Lombardijen in Rotterdam became a post-war urban scene for the construction of the Zonnetrap (Solar Stair) project (1967-1975): a residential building for the elderly. This project addressed local vulnerabilities by housing residents ‘under a common roof’, without betraying its compositional-architectural aims (Hartsuyker, Hartsuyker-Curjel 1982). However, in their original ambiguous measurability, the gargantuan ‘dwelling hills’, once built up, struggle to represent their paper expressiveness, opening up to interpretations where the spectre of the *marginal* continues to hover compared to recreational evidence. Theoretical intentions and practical outcomes confronted each other in the Hartsuyker-Curjel urban artefact, generating plausible uncertainties about the correspondence between ideal premises and the project’s effective ability to respond concretely to the system of needs. Anyway, the building allowed Hartsuyker-Curjel to challenge *Biopolis*, both as a thesis and a project on specific contemporary. It stood as one of the few architectural endeavours of its kind in the Dutch scenario of the time where technique and practice encounter their theoretical paper ‘ancestors’.

AN AUTHOR



Rudolf Das, Overall plan of *Biopolis* by Enrico Hartsuyker and Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel, 1968, published in *Stad van de 21e eeuw*, in “Trouw”, 27/01/1968, p. 23. Ink on paper, 40 × 55 centimetres (original page size). Collection Nieuwe Instituut/HARTd156.

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