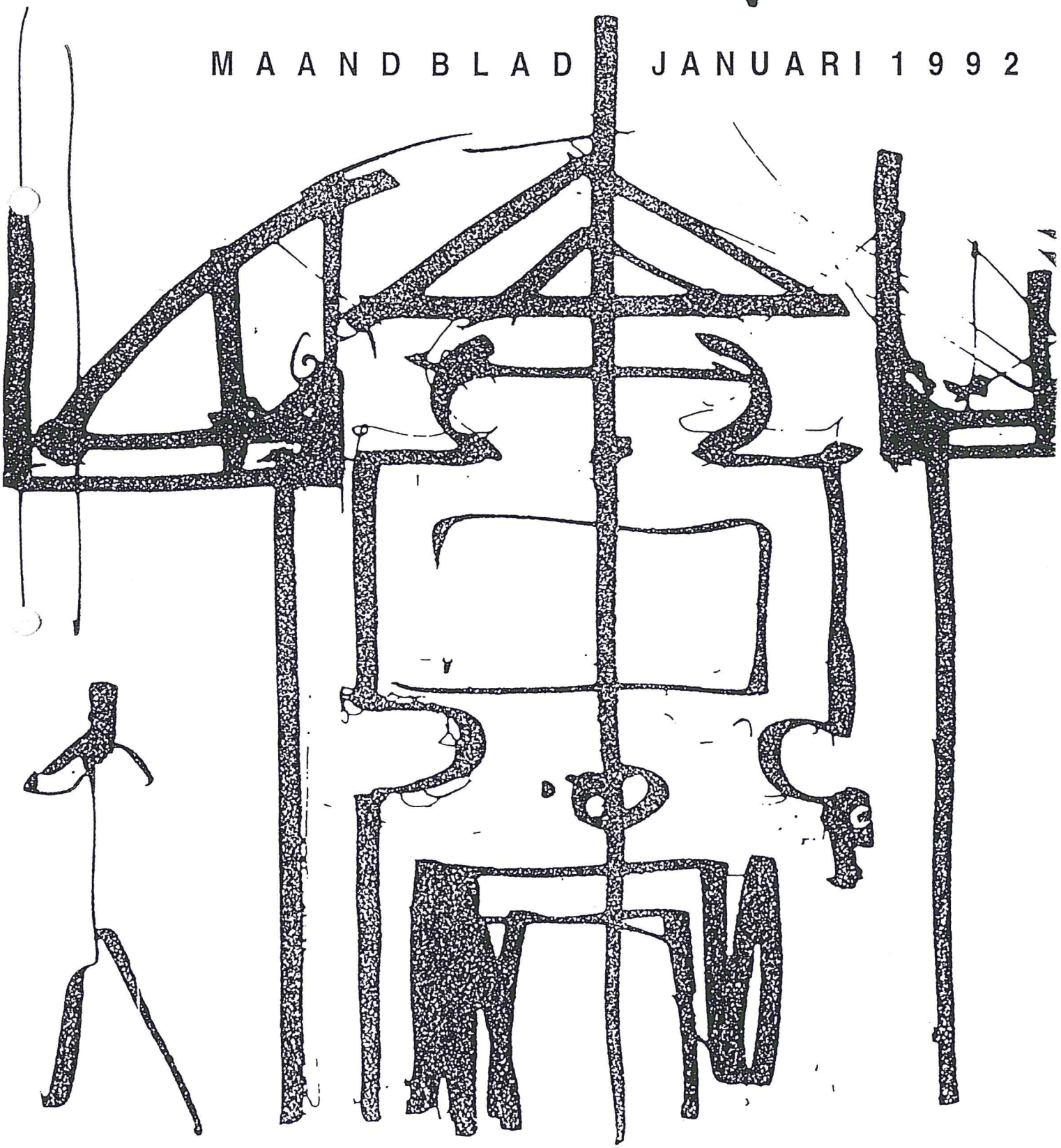
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archipel

MAANDBLAD JANUARI 1992



vrijdag 17 januari om 20u.30

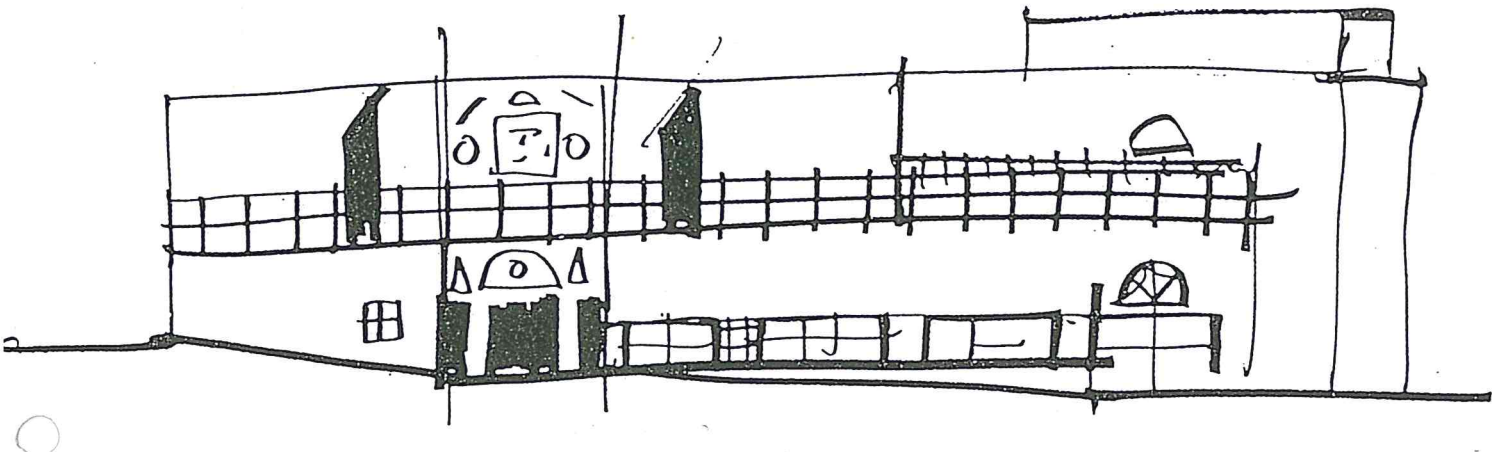
VENTURI

voordracht door **Pascal Cottenier**
't Leerhuys, Groeninghe 35 te Brugge

Pascal Cottenier, is architect sedert 1966. In datzelfde jaar nam hij deel aan het seminarie 'Städtebauliche Architektur' bij J. Bakema aan de Sommerakademie für bildende Kunst te Salzburg. Na zijn stage bij Bernard en Jan Christiaens te Oostende zette hij een bureau op met Paul Monteyne.
Samen maakten zij deel uit van de groep 'Gent Morgen' die in 1971 de gelijknamige Internationale Ideeënwedstrijd won.
Zij waren met Luc Vandenbroeck uit Aalst ook laureaat van 'Kortrijk Centrum-Oost' in 1973 en mede-auteurs van het 'Voorontwerp van struktuurplan voor Harelbeke'.
In 1980 was hij met Walter Barthier en William Lievens stichtend voorzitter van ARCHIPEL.
In 1987 behaalde hij het speciaal Diploma voor Sociale en Culterele Antropologie aan de K.U.L., waar hij ook in 1989 promoveerde tot Licenciaat in de Architectuurwetenschap en Baccalaureaat in de Wijsbegeerte.
In 1988 verscheen van zijn hand het 'Voorontwerp van structuurplan Harelbeke, deel 2'.
In 1990-1991 was hij gelast met een half-time interim assistentenopdracht aan het Hoger Architectuurinstituut Sint Lucas Gent.
Hij is Transactioneel Analyst -in opleiding-, en sedert twee jaar voorzitter van het Vlaams Instituut voor Transactionele Analyse.
Pascal Cottenier woont in Antwerpen, waar hij ook vanaf 1992 zijn kantoor heeft.

archipel
VZW

voorzitter Marc FELIX Koningstraat 43a - 8400 Oostende 059/70 01 58 bur.059/70 21 80
sekretaris Philip CARDINAEL Veldstraat 65, 8200 Brugge-2 050/38 65 01



vrijdag 17 januari om 20u.30
't Leerhuys, Groeninge 35 te Brugge
Venturi voordracht door **Pascal Cottenier**

vrijdag 14 februari om 20u.30
't Leerhuys, Groeninge 35 te Brugge
Claude Nicolas Ledoux, voordracht door **Johan Baele.**

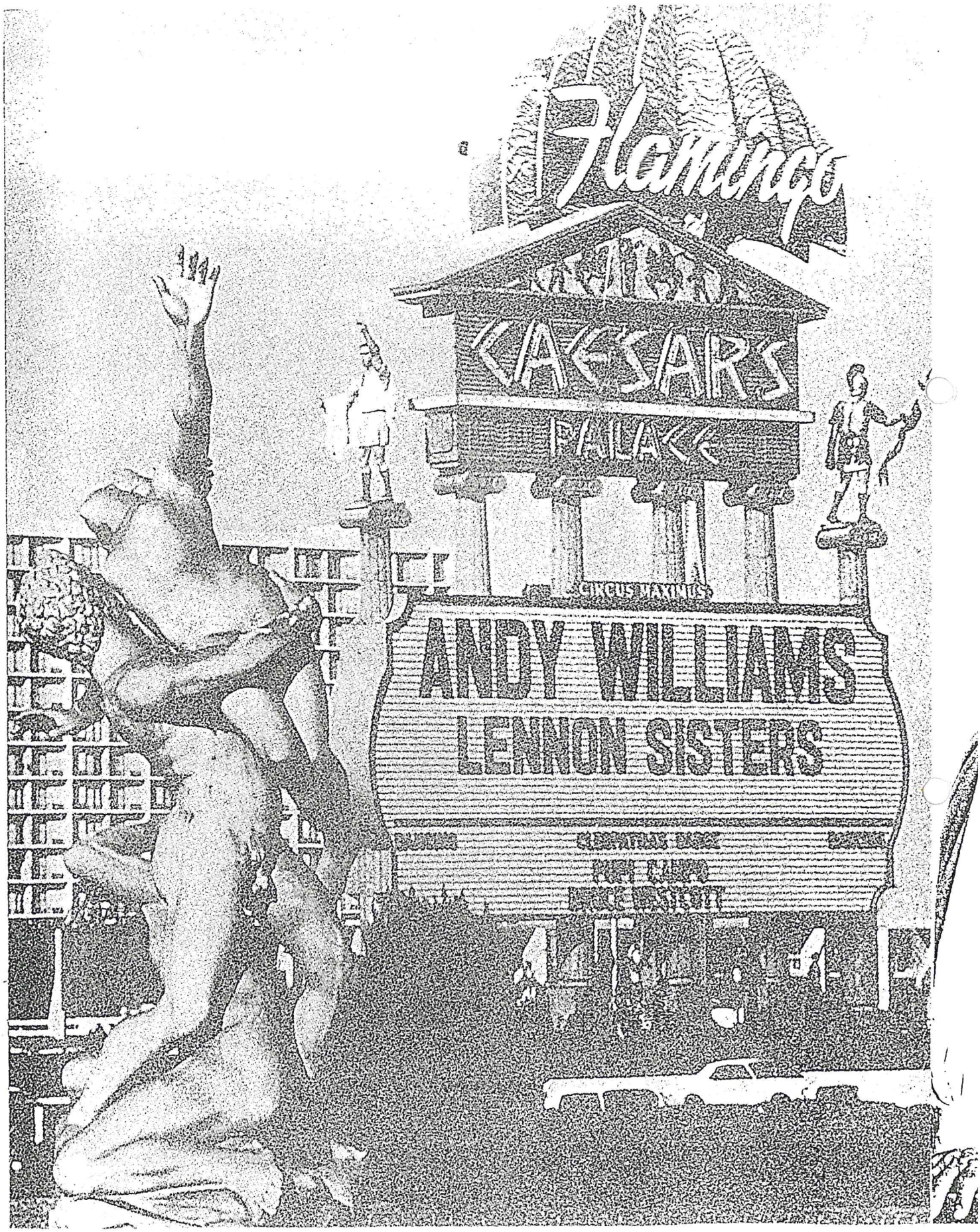
vrijdag 13 maart om 20u.30
't Leerhuys, Groeninge 35 te Brugge
Helmut Jahn voordracht door **Johan Thielemans** (BRT presentator Eiland).

in de loop van **april** (nog onder voorbehoud)
ééndagstrip naar Parijs
bezoek tentoonstelling Louis Kahn (nav 100e geboortedag)
bezoek cité de la musique Chr. De Portzamparc.

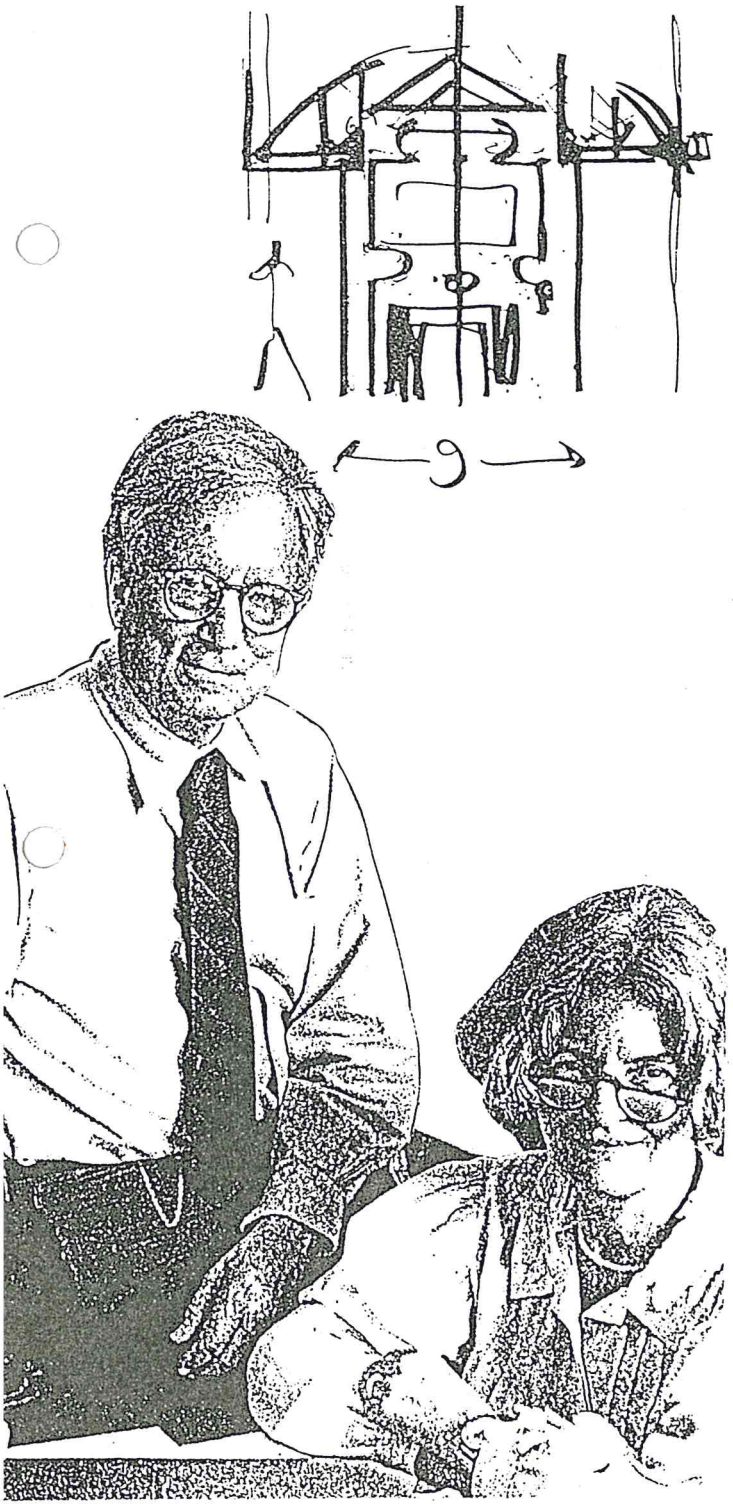
vrijdag 24 april om 20u.30
't Leerhuys, Groeninge 35 te Brugge - nog in te vullen
Een uitnodiging voor een belangrijke buitenlandse gast in het voorjaar kan het programmaschema nog wijzigen.

27 mei tot 31 mei
Archipel architektuurreis naar Sevilla.

vrijdag 12 juni om 20u.30
't Leerhuys, Groeninge 35 te Brugge
videoreportage "Archipel in Sevilla".


Flamingo
CAESARS
PALACE
CIRCUS MAXIMUS
ANDY WILLIAMS
LENNON SISTERS

VENTURI et al are Almost all Right



CHARLES JENCKS reviews *Learning From Las Vegas*, Revised edition, 1977, by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour. MIT Press, £12.25, 196 pages, 146 photos.

Well no one's perfect; and any attempt to weigh the good and bad in the work of Team Venturi is bound to be contradictory and rather complex. A lot has now been written on the subject – and this new edition of their 1972 book gives most of the sources in a bibliography – leading one to suppose the time is right for a balanced assessment. Not here, however, in a book review. Mine is going to be imbalanced on the negative side, not because I believe Team Venturi's architecture and writing are negative or deleterious, but for reasons of space and polemic. Let me declare categorically that Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown (and their group) are the most engaging architect/polemicists of the last 30 years and very unboring architects (in spite of their efforts) – I state this at first so that all the following disputation is put in a general context of accord.

First of all the methods and style of the book: it's composed rather haphazardly of very short, even breathless, dashes across wonderfully rich terrain, as if one could argue adequately about 'Nineteenth-Century Eclecticism' in two small paragraphs. Clearly the book is made up in the Modernist/Heroic style of Le Corbusier's quick-shot polemics, and it results from slide lectures rather than continual, sequential cogitation. As Kenneth Clark has remarked, this form of writing, where you can almost hear 'next slide please', is a well-known form of literary suicide (and although I've committed it on occasion, *that* doesn't excuse Team Venturi). Where there should be step-by-step reasoned theory, there are instead endless examples often confirming the same point in favour of decorated sheds or ugly and ordinary architecture ('U+O'); where there might have been more abstract and theoretical statements, coming from semiotics and elsewhere, they consciously eschew this in favour of the empirical and concrete. This leads them occasionally into erroneous theory and repetitive practice, where the highly unaverage Las Vegas Strip or their own buildings are falsely generalised as average and typical. Briefly, they hope to build a new poetics on a rarefied selection of artifacts, or esoteric code – but more of that later.

There is a story (I don't know how true) that one night, while Venturi and Scott Brown were visiting Los Angeles, their host Tim Vreeland slipped a copy of Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Etc* onto the bedside table. The next morning with a vroom-vroom the team was off to Las Vegas to do some learning, Wolfe's amusing essay 'Las Vegas (what?) etc' had produced its hypnotic effect. Now if you compare the two approaches to LV (this damn style is catching) the obvious shortcomings of each are exposed: Mr Wolfe is all content analysis and novelistic writing and Our Team is all formalistic analysis and deadpan prose. To get an adequate idea of LV delirium and promise you'd have to read *both* essays, and while Our Team is always eschewing moralistic judgement and most content analysis, these constant disclaimers don't entirely convince. Las Vegas is richer, more humorous, tactile and sinful than their description and the disclaimers tend to provoke a memory of that notorious definition of camp: 'going to see blue movies without lust'. One can, of course, talk about pornographic films for their formalistic languages, camera angles, inflections, hair styles, deep shots, that sort of thing, but . . .

Anyway I once asked RV after he gave a lecture at the AA in 1972 why he didn't try to capture the delirium of LV in his prose; and why his architecture was not more like the neon artists, more like Charles Moore? 'Moore's too hot and sexy; the Pop artist we admire is Ed Ruscha.' So, there *was* a classical disjunction between theory and sensibility, abstract principle and concrete taste. Venturi was telling me that although he could learn lessons from and consume Pop architecture, he couldn't bring himself to practise exactly its vulgarity, its heat and voluptuousness. There is a basic contradiction (and complexity) in all the Team's work on this score: trained in the High Art tradition of Palladio, Mannerism, Louis Kahn and cardboard architecture, they can't quite (yet) bring themselves to practise full-frontal Low Art. Hence, the disparities between theory and practice which

they point out concerning Gropius and gang also apply to themselves.

This contradiction would not be upsetting were it not partially turned into a principle of attack: they elevate taste, their admittedly anti-professional opinions, into *obiter dicta*, universal laws, and then pronounce on them with all the assurance of a Le Corbusier (or should I say Helena Rubinstein?). One has the dogmatism of anti-dogmatism, the Heroic and Original ('H+O') architecture simply inverted and stood on its head in as exclusive a way as the exclusive architecture they attack. Then, and this is the most damaging part of their theory, they justify their preferences in terms of a *Zeitgeist:*

> Why do we uphold the symbolism of the ordinary via the decorated shed over the symbolism of the heroic via the sculptural duck? Because this is not the time and ours is not the environment for heroic communication through pure architecture. Each medium has its day, . . . (p.130)

Oh dear, oh dear. Instead of a broad theory of communication, which would allow heroic and pure architecture where that was appropriate, we must expunge it from our consciousness, avert our eyes, avoid piazzas, detour the Parthenon, Le Corbusier and other salacious purists – why? Because more purely 'symbolic' media such as electric signs have taken their place.

Does it sound strangely familiar, like McLuhanism and Modernism by another name? If so it is not surprising, because the Venturi Team *partially* share the modernist commitment to exclusion, inversion, even revolution. They say, without real explanation, that Modern architects of the 20s 'proclaimed the right revolution' (p.xiii). 'The relevant revolution today is the current electronic one' (p. 151, and for tomorrow?) '. . . the Flamingo sign will be the model to shock our sensibilities towards a new architecture' (p.161). In short, we are back with the Tradition of the New and our old friend the Marquis de Sade ('man likes nothing so much as a shock to the nervous system', or something like that). At the outset of the book, they state their way of 'being revolutionary' by looking at things in a new way, as if being revolutionary were exemplary in itself, or a sufficient base for a reformed poetics. But is this not precisely one of the theoretical errors at the basis of the Modernism they dislike?

Rather than wrestle with that complex issue, I'd like to concentrate on the basic theoretical lacuna which is evident in the whole argument: the notion of the *code*, or the way architecture is experienced through different ideologies and taste cultures. Were the Venturi Team to take over this notion from semiotics and apply it to their studies in symbolism, they would become more acute and pluralistic, instead of displaying their taste every time they attack or defend a building.

Basically they analyse meanings in architecture as if these were straightforward, and simply *in* the building, not coded for certain groups.[1] They speak about the A+P parking lot as a *'parterre'*, as if the general public, or even profession, might see it as a bit of Versailles flat greenery. They admire an Avis sign bisecting a reproduction Venus, as if the gamblers at Caesar's Palace could decode such ironies ('Rent-a-Venus'?). They analyse their own Guild House for its 'giant order', for being broken into three basic parts (in six storeys), as if many people could perceive these subtle visual cues and associations (1). The gold TV aerial is supposedly like a Lippold sculpture, the two little slits of space near the top indicate, apparently, a billboard facade.

> . . . the sign saying GUILD HOUSE *denotes* meaning through its words. . . The character of the graphics, however, *connotes* institutional dignity, while, contradictorily, the size of the graphics *connotes* commercialism. The position of the sign perhaps also *connotes* entering. The white-glazed brick *denotes* decoration as a unique and rich appliqué in the normal red brick. (p.101)

Or does it perhaps *connote* bathrooms and abattoirs?

The problem with all this reading of meanings is that it assumes a naive straightforwardness, as if meanings were just 'out there' for anyone to grasp. But, inevitably, one class of person will read the signs one way, another ethnic group another way, and the well-trained elite, the Venturi Team, in a third way, etc. That is the 'inclusivist' truth of the matter.

The basic semiotic question – to *whom* is a sign addressed? – is not put in a general way.

Secondly, the fundamental semiotic point that the difference between denotation and connotation is a matter of coding is not made. Instead the normal view is expressed: 'Denotation indicates specific meaning; connotation suggests general meanings'.

Perhaps in a popular book addressed to architects such simplifications don't matter, as long as the general drift of the argument is clear; and yet every time I found myself taking exception to the argument, the notion of coding was at stake: *viz.* 'the automobile-oriented commercial architecture of urban sprawl [is] our source for a civic and residential architecture of meaning. . .' (p.90). Under what conditions, for how long, and for exactly what cultures or subcultures is not clarified. We are receiving a generalised polemic, in a way as supposedly 'universalist' and crude as the dreaded Modern architecture.

Or again, in their attack on this beast, the wholesale slaughter is a bit too bloody, too exclusivist, too unwilling to accept taste cultures which aren't their own:

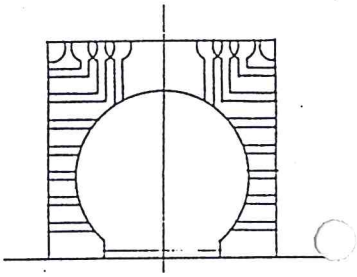
> The Boston City Hall and its urban complex are the archetype of enlightened urban renewal. The profusion of symbolic forms, which recall the extravagances of the General Grant period, and the revival of the medieval piazza and its *palazzo publico* are in the end a bore. It is too architectural. A conventional loft would accommodate a bureaucracy better, perhaps with a blinking sign on top saying I AM A MONUMENT. (p.149)

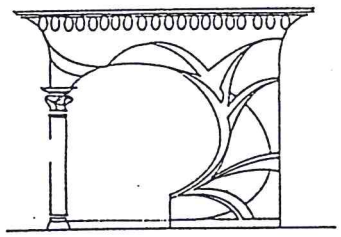
They're kidding of course, and quite to the point, but still without enough irony and the appreciation of various codes. For the point of semiotics is, I take it, to have your interpretive cakes and eat them too, which means allowing for, even inviting, various readings, opposite tastes, disjunctive cultures. What? No more Second Empire and Neo-Queen Anne? There is a place in Post-Modernism even for the Boston City Hall, and the extravagancies of General Grant.

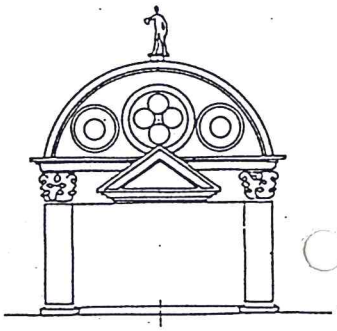
At this stage in the argument it would be tempting to marshall the forces of E.H. Gombrich and others who've shown the typical simplistic dialectic of modern art politics, where one position follows another by the tactic of exclusive inversion – excluding and inverting all that is bad (the preceding movement) as if this headstand would guarantee all that is good (rather than the next oversimplification). Gombrich contrasts these relatively recent polemics with the traditions of the Renaissance, where a more inclusivist approach was adopted, and no value was lightly discarded even if it was that of the enemy, the competitor.

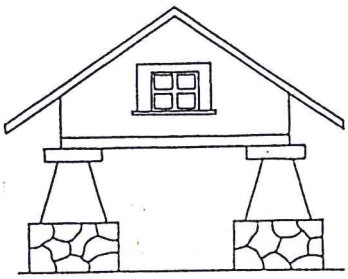
But the general question of inclusion leads me, inevitably, to praise the Venturi Team for their overall effect on architectural thought, while damning their particular modernist hang-overs. I should, by rights, applaud their discussion of Renaissance symbolism, their insights into the cathedral as a duck and decorated shed, their witty put-downs of 'technological voodooism' and space fetishism, and above all their introducing subjects like Las Vegas and Levittown into the debate. With their philosophies of inclusivism and the 'difficult whole', they have, theoretically at least, opened more doors than they've shut. Probably 95 per cent of what they've written in this book is beneficent (and corresponds to my own opinion).

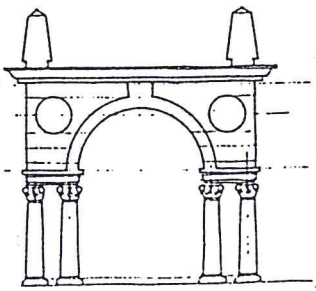
But there is that troubling five per cent, the sneaking doubt of the critics who brand Our Team as 'Nixonites', 'Reaganites' or justifiers

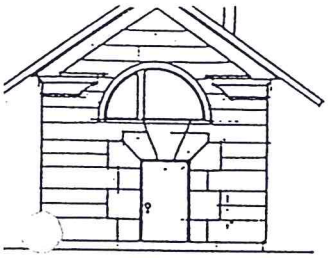


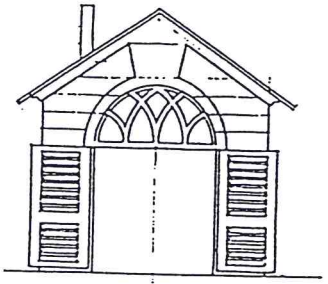


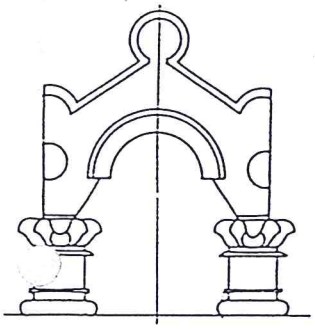


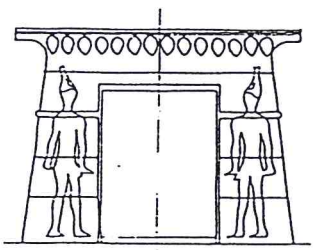


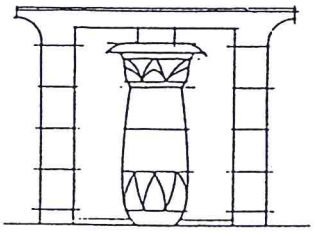












of the smug values of middle-middle-America (p.153). While Venturi and Scott Brown make clear their dislike of unadulterated commercialism and snobbism, it still makes sense to connect them, like the Pop artists, with forces behind Madison Avenue and Corporate America, and admit that part of the pleasure in experiencing their work is responding to the frisson of terror involved in this new-found content. A lot of disingenuous criticism has been written on both sides of this argument: the 'haters' of Venturi exaggerate the extent to which the content of commercialism is tied to the form of billboards. Whereas Team Venturi exaggerate the extent to which form and content can be dissociated, and the form treated in a 'non-judgemental' manner. It's no accident that the billboard, or even 'bill-ding-board', has evolved towards the greatest dissociation of form and content, signifier and signified, under commercial pressures, much further than propaganda ever pushed the dissociation in, say, the church facade or Main Street; and thus it is somewhat perverse to take this extreme dissociation as an exemplary model for public buildings, as Team Venturi sometimes does. To learn the lesson of Las Vegas this literally seems to be what Whitehead once termed, with that typical Cambridge academicism, 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Besides, if one follows the logic of commerce or LV then architecture turns into billboards plus sheds – ie something made by billboard and neon artists plus engineers and cost-benefit analysts (2). There is no room for the architect here, and he can't quite compete with these other specialists at their game – as so much wooden, good taste commercial design in the Venturi idiom has shown.

That architects are done out of work by these market forces may not matter, but a general impoverishment of environmental form could become important. So much of traditional and modern architecture is concerned with signifying content through an articulation of form: indeed the art of architecture is precisely in the merging and divisions of these two planes, the expressive and the meaningful. When one cuts away the signification act by introducing billboards or signboards of course the building is cheaper in cost, but also more boring as architecture.

Now it is precisely this boredom that is momentarily brought forward into the argument and played with in several different ways. 'Is Boring Architecture Interesting?' asks one subsection in a coy way, and the answer is only implied – 'Yes, *our* boring architecture is interesting because it is slightly distorted', 'the familiar that is a little off has a strange and revealing power' (p.130); whereas the boring modern architecture of, say, Paul Rudolph is really deathly because it has rejected ornament, iconography and has instead promoted 'a dry repressionism, empty and boring – and in the end irresponsible' (p.103).

The antithesis almost convinces us until we again stop to ask 'boring for whom?' For what people, trained in what codes, would the more significant architecture of Team Venturi signify in the way intended? For private clients, for users of their old-age home? Has any market research been done to see if the elderly in the Guild House really perceive the meanings they talk about – the inflections, the tripartite division of the facade, the slits and string course? What about the overall massive institutional appearance and sober, even *sachlich*, detailing? What metaphors do the elderly see in this this?

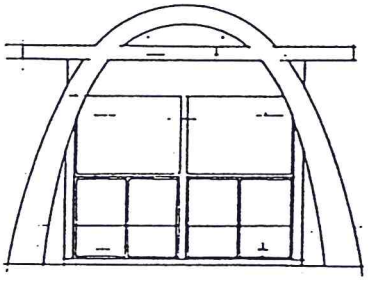
I would guess that there are the basic schizophrenic interpretations of this building, as with most modern architecture: it is designed in and for one esoteric code and experienced to a certain extent in another traditional and popular one. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown are *soi disant* elitists and would not claim to always design with understandable codes, and yet the force of their argument always tends towards populism of one sort or another. Thus another complexity and a contradiction not quite intended.

In summary, I believe various directions will result from these contradictions being faced. I'm willing to bet Team Venturi approaches straight, no-ironies revivalism in the next year in their continuing attempt to get closer to popular codes, and yet this revivalism will always be distorted for the enjoyment of those who care to see it (ie: other architects, their friends). Thus a schizophrenic architecture, disjunctive and at least doubly coded with 'high and low' readings, will evolve.

Secondly, I would guess but not wager that their work will wrestle with the nagging but now fruitful issues of content. After analysing the issue of symbolism and how architecture communicates, they will be led to the pressing question – communicate *what*? Because ultimately it is the hesitation and agnosticism on this score which is undermining the language of architecture. If architects have nothing important to say, if society has no credible ideology to communicate through its buildings, then building language is going to deteriorate even further. So finally one has to ask Team Venturi to give a non-non-judgemental answer, in their writings and buildings, of what they do, positively, believe.

Note

1. A code, for our purposes, is a system of linked meanings plus an attitude towards them (eg: Second Empire style associated with power and bombast, by historical linkage with town halls, failed Caesarism, *pompierism*, and experienced by turns as repressive or impressive). Any code is bound to be partly class-based, and experienced as somewhat ambiguous since it is always in the process of formation and dissolution. Modernism, since at least the Impressionists, has self-consciously tried to substitute uncontaminated, new, or distant codes for hackneyed ones – this the Venturi Team does with their taste for uncontaminated schlock (not tainted yet by the establishment). Post-Modernism, by contrast, looks at the abstract notion of coding itself and takes up a situational position (ie: no codes are better than others in the abstract; therefore identify the subculture concerned before opting for one or another).

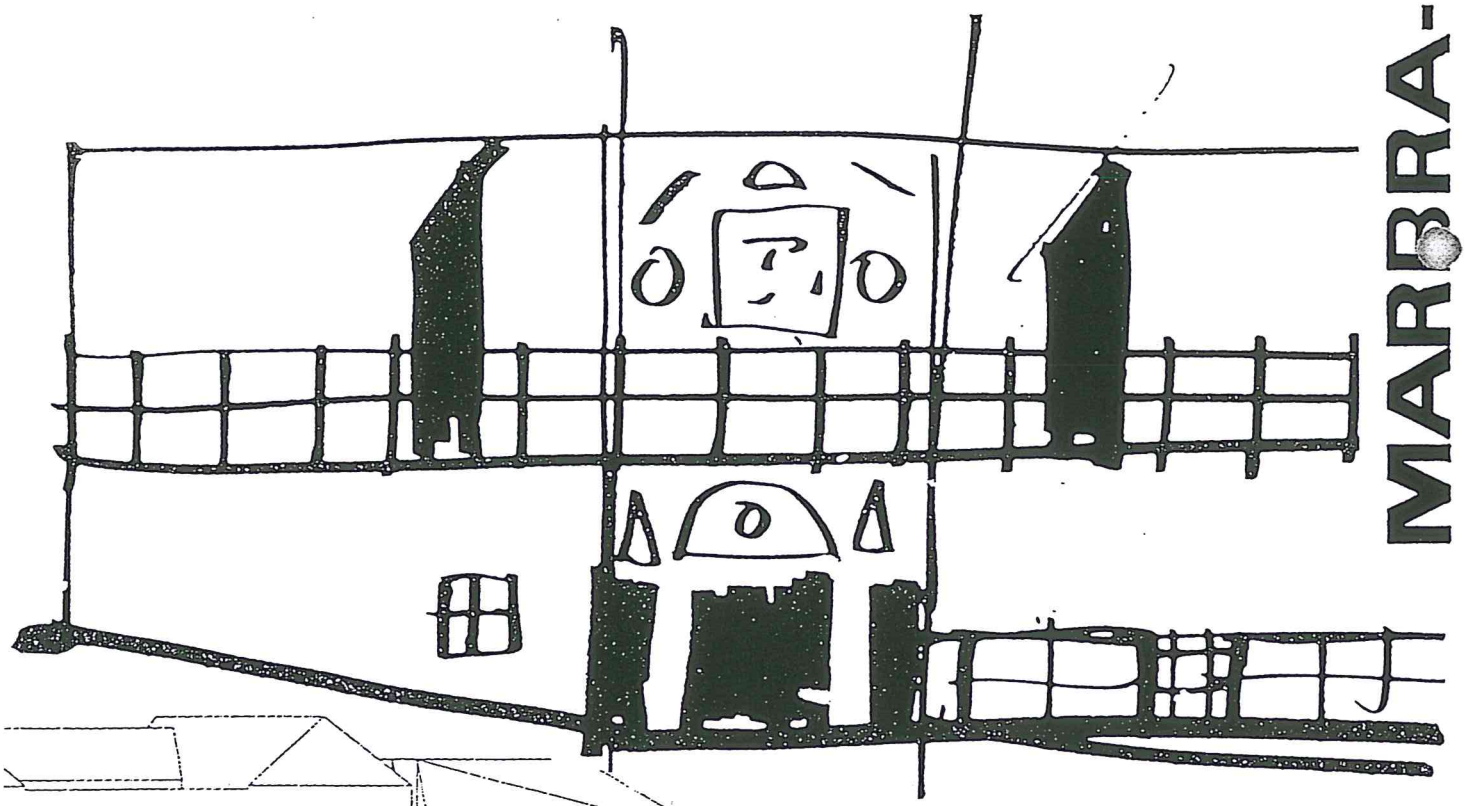


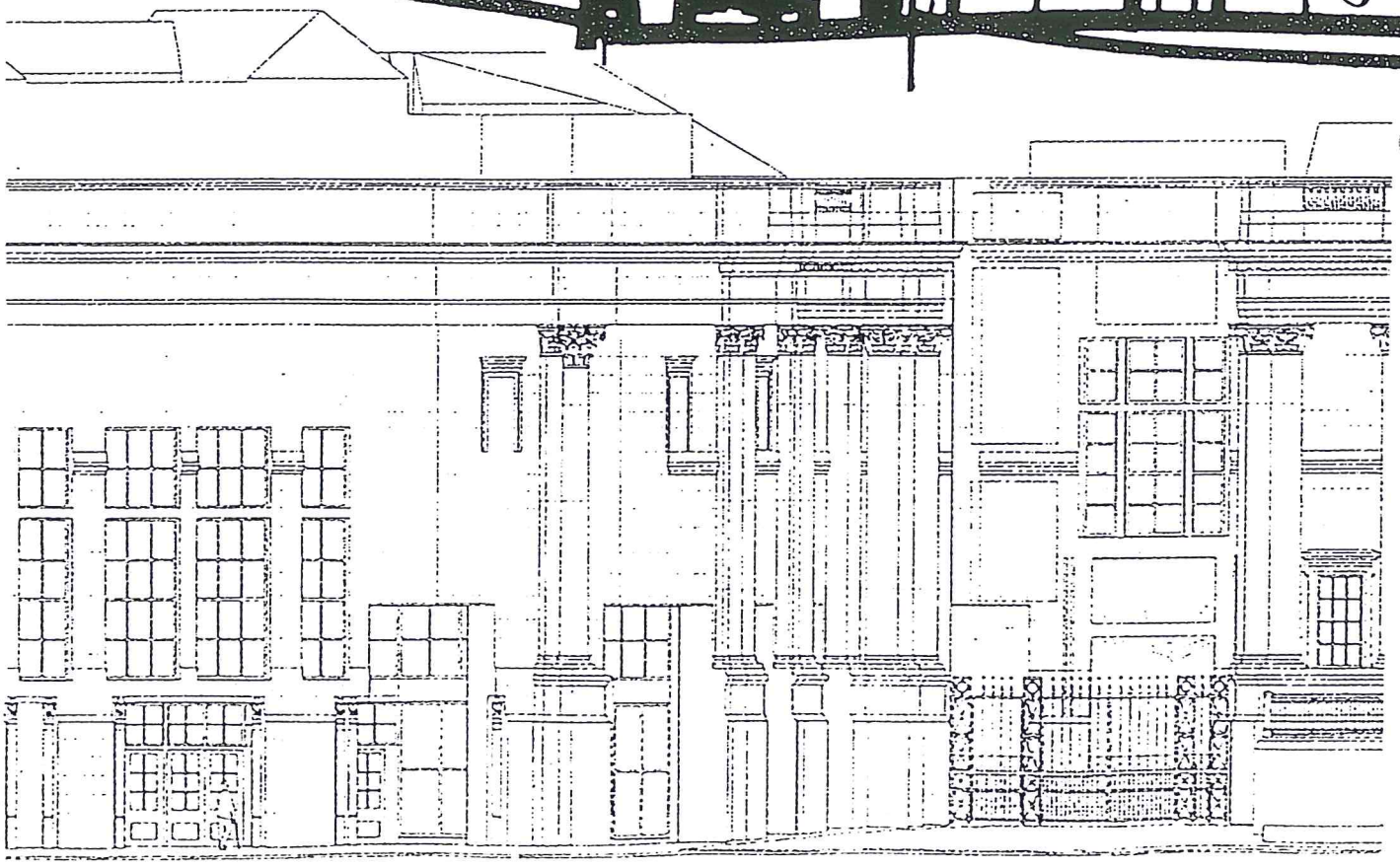
vrijdag 17 januari om 20u.30

VENTURI

voordracht door **Pascal Cottenier**

't Leerhuys, Groeninghe 35 te Brugge





DESPRIET MARBRA-LYS

MARBRA-LYS

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