

Amsterdam as Palimpsest

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A useful way of understanding cities is through the lens of the palimpsest, a concept that is derived from the Ancient Greek word for ‘scraped again’ (*παλίμψηστος*). Medieval writers re-used parchment made out of animal skin by scraping off the previous text. Because the former writing would often re-appear at a later date, numerous layers of text and meaning would merge into each other. For the past several decades, writers, architects and scholars have likewise understood cities as palimpsests. Much like literary works, cities, too, can be seen as composite images, patchworks of buildings, texts and memories that are superimposed on previous constructions.

In his famous book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Sigmund Freud already argued that cities (he used the example of Rome), just as our psyche, contain multiple layers of memory: ‘Rome is not [only] a human habitation but a psychological entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.’ While wandering about the Eternal City contemporaries of Freud could encounter a wide range of historical periods, from the Ancient Roman Republic to its Fascist present in the 1930s, exemplified in its current monumental buildings and its memories of vanished ones.

The chaotic modern city of today is, maybe even more than ever, a palimpsestic amalgam of lasting and fleeting stories. The streets are made up of older and newer façades (shopping malls next to seventeenth-century monuments), graffiti and shop signs, cars and bikes, traffic lights and trees, sounds and smells of all kinds. The various stories that people tell about the city might come in to conflict with each other. When the Amsterdam municipality decided to move the giant touristic iAmsterdam letters, for purposes of city marketing, from the urban center to the northern district in 2019, anonymous local residents voiced their discontent by setting the letters on fire. This shows that commercial and personal stories about the city can collide.

Despite the usefulness of the concept, there is the danger that reading the city as a palimpsest remains the territory of the intellectual. The multiple layers of the city are often hidden to the everyday city-dweller. Most traces of the urban past, such as the Romantic memorials of the nineteenth century or historic engravings on buildings, are difficult to decode and for that reason only visible to the expert’s eye. What’s more, private developers and municipal administrators have always, and in recent times increasingly, gone to great lengths to enclose public parts of the city to outsiders. Modern cities are not only determined by what is visible, but also by what is concealed behind an ever expanding web of fences and walls.

Suat Ögüt’s work invites us to uncover the hidden, silent and forgotten places of palimpsestic Amsterdam. *The Future of the Me-nemen-Mory* brings into focus four local schools that are difficult to see at first sight. The First Open Air School for the

Healthy Child is one these buildings. Open Air Schools were predicated on the hygiene theory that light, fresh air and outside activities would benefit children's health. Located in the city's southern district, part of a huge expansion of the city in the interwar years, it was constructed between 1929 and 1930.

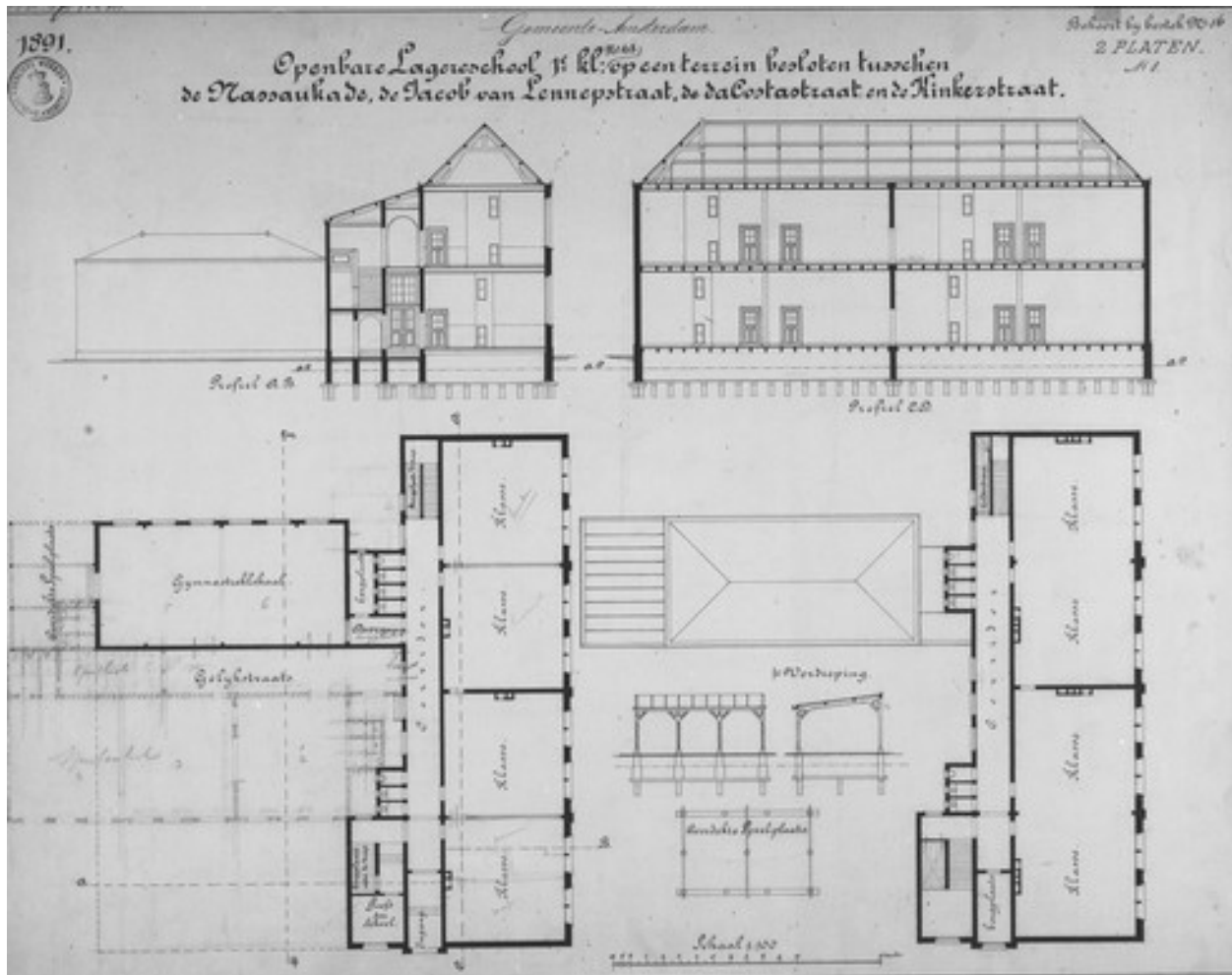
The Open Air School is hidden in plain sight, because the ideas of the architect were not in agreement with the official architectural ideology of the time. Even before its construction, architect Jan Duiker's design plans offended the municipal planning and aesthetics board. The radical modernist construction of concrete and steel supposedly did not harmonize well with the surrounding buildings of the, still rather traditionalist, Amsterdam School. The board therefore decided that the First Open Air School were to be moved to an enclosed inner court, only its gateway were to be visible from the street level. In later years the building underwent several drastic restorations. Currently, the school is still in function and is located in one of the wealthier areas of the city.



The First Open Air School (ca. 1930). The surrounding buildings are not yet visible.

The Leonardo Da Vinci School was originally built in 1891, in later years the building was enlarged several times. The school cannot be viewed from the street level, and can be entered through a gate on the Nassaukade. Until the second half

of the nineteenth century, this area, usually called the Da Costa District, belonged to the geographical and social fringe zone of the city. The Lijnbaansgracht, which basically demarcates the area on the east, still belonged to 'the' official city, on the other side of the canal one encountered a vague and semi-rural no-man's-land of industries and unofficial working-class housing. Due to the general deterioration of the inner city the town council adopted an extension plan, which turned the outer fringes around the present-day Kinkerstraat into newly built, rather cheap and small houses. The school became part of this district.

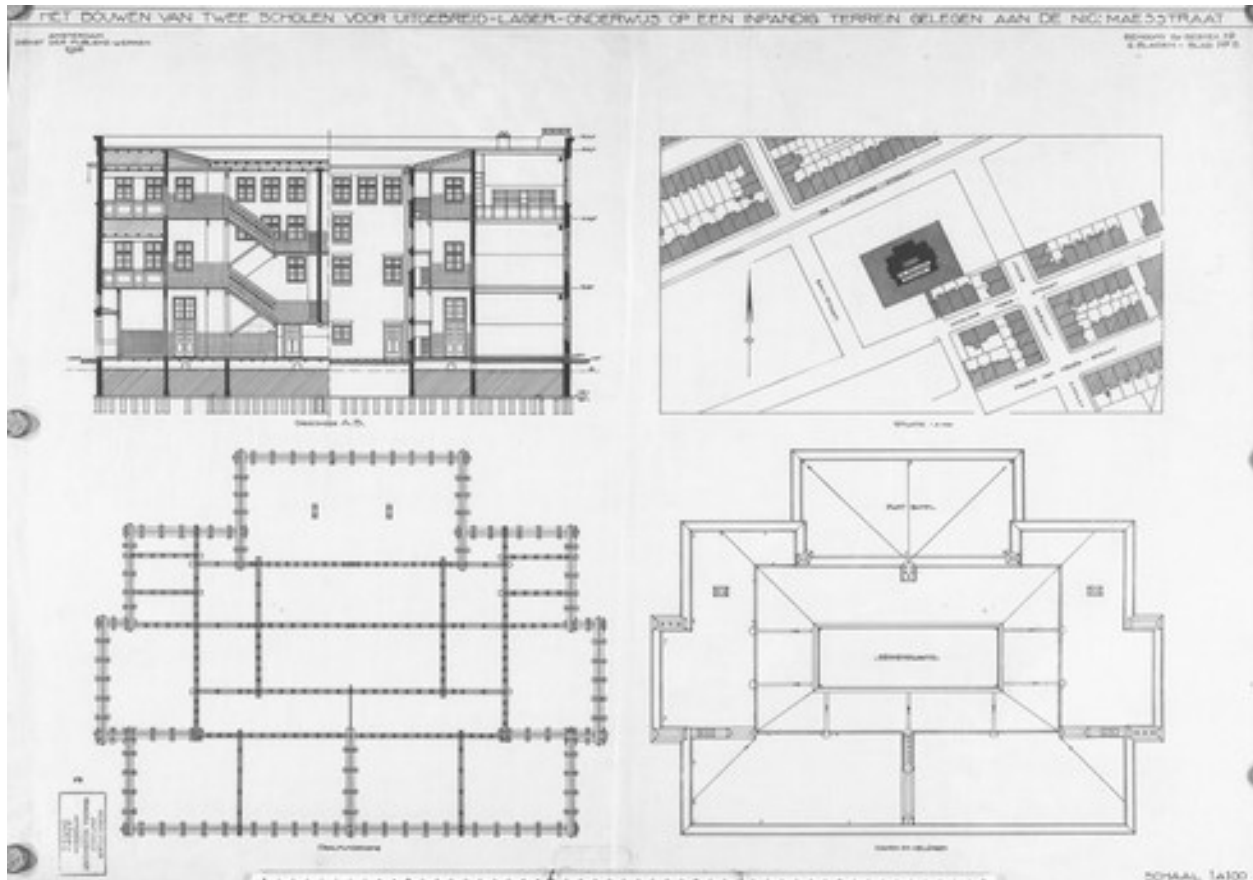


The original buildings plans for the Leonardo Da Vinci School in 1891.

The two last schools are also difficult to discover from the outside. The British School of Amsterdam, in the Jan van Eyckstraat in the southern district, was originally built in 1930. After the German occupation of the Netherlands in 1940, the school was seized by the Nazi regime and turned into a 'Jewish' school. The hidden building suited the regime's anti-Semitic conviction that the inferior Jewish race were to be placed outside the confines of national society. Many school children were deported during the war. During the last war year, the school was turned into a soup kitchen. In the postwar era, the building was used by schools

that underwent restorations elsewhere in the city. From the 1980s onward, the British School, a institution for British expats, took over.

The Nicolaes Maes School is located in the vicinity of the British School, which, remarkably, occupied a floor in the Nicolaes Meas building during the early 1980s. It was constructed in 1916, but in 1999 the municipality replaced it with a large white building. This second school building can be found on the same location as its predecessor, and is also surrounded by houses.



The building plans of the Nicolaes Maes School in 1916. In the top right hand corner the location of the school in the neighborhood is shown. The surrounding buildings were only constructed in the following years.

The everyday city-dweller would usually not encounter these four hidden buildings. Together they evoke a tale of the city's continuing expansion and development in the last century. Limited space and ideological considerations incited the construction of places that were somehow hidden from street life. *The Future of the Me-nemen-Mory* uncovers these histories and memories, and thus sheds light on the multiple layers of palimpsestic Amsterdam.