



Euro Color Cards. (1978). Babylon.

BABYLON

Was the City of Confusion Destined to Fall out of Grace?

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Abstract

The motive for this thesis lies with public buildings that were designed for a specific purpose and seemed to meet the wishes of their time and place, but the popularity of which declined, leading to demolishing or large renovations. The building that is being studied is the Babylon building in the Hague, a multi-functional building built in 1978. After initial popularity, the building quickly lost its visitors and underwent a large renovation in 2007, only 30 years after its opening. The research question is therefore *'What were the ideas behind Babylon and the way it was designed and how did this influence the functionality and popularity of the building?'*. To answer this question, the building and its design process are studied at different scales through literary and archival research. Through this research, it becomes apparent that, while Babylon is viewed both positively and negatively, the negative critiques have the upper hand in every scale. Location and both exterior and interior design choices have led to the fall of Babylon.

What's the matter with Babylon?

The subject for this thesis focusses on public buildings that were designed for a specific purpose and seemed to meet the wishes of their time and place, but the popularity of which declined, leading to demolishing or large renovations. In the Netherlands, there are many public buildings that are demolished or undergo huge renovations because they don't seem to attract enough visitors. When looking for an example of this, I stumbled upon the Babylon building in The Hague, designed by MAB and Lucas & Niemeijer. Built in 1978, this building is still relatively young. However, only 30 years later in 2007, the building was renovated and underwent huge transformations. The question of why this happened quickly comes up, leading to more research on the building and its surroundings.

Babylon had not been planned to be built on its own but was part of a larger plan for the area due to destruction by bombing during World War II. This new district, which is located next to the city centre, would come to house many office buildings, government buildings, and the central station. Babylon would come to sit on one of the last free plots of the area, to the north of the central station. For this building, however, the government wanted something different. Just like many of its surrounding buildings, Babylon would also have office spaces, but it was to house a hotel and shopping spaces as well. MAB and well-known architects in the Hague Lucas & Niemeijer quickly started on the first designs. Out of fear of critiques that could slow down the design process, the design was kept secret to the public, and for a while even to the municipality. When the design was finished, however, to their surprise it was quickly approved, and building could begin.

Babylon was designed to be the new shopping centre of the city. Many aspects of the building, like the location and interior design, were expected to secure the buildings success. However, after initial positive reviews and a good first year the building started receiving negative reviews from critics and the number of visitors started decreasing

over the years. Since critics have been both highly enthusiastic and deeply negative, the discussion that has emerged around Babylon is a driving factor for this research. Thus, the question that will be researched in this thesis is *'What were the ideas behind Babylon and the way it was designed and how did this influence the functionality and popularity of the building?'* To be able to understand the ideas behind the design of Babylon, the different actors in the design process – the municipality, the client, and the architect – and their influence on the design must be researched. Since they are the ones that designed and approved the building, it is important to wonder what, if anything, they might have misjudged about the design. This will mostly be done through archival research. To test the functionality and popularity of Babylon, literary research will be done on the different design aspects of the building.

This thesis will be structured by starting with a contextual analysis of Dutch city centres during the time of construction, since Babylon is located within the city centre of The Hague. Next, the design of the building will be analysed in three different scales – an urban scale, a building exterior scale and a building interior scale. Finally, all the findings will be compared and analysed to answer the research question.



Figure 1. Scheers, R. (1983). *Babylon*.

A change in city centres

Since the end of World War II, cities have undergone many changes over the years, and Dutch cities are no exception. Most cities in the Netherlands have what is called an Anglo-Saxon pattern. In this pattern, early suburbanisation took place after the war due to a growing city population in need of more space. The elite were the first to leave the city centre. The city functions that are economically strongest started to take up the best spaces in the cities, leading to more separation between living and working. Thus, city formation started to occur (Brand, 2002). This is when the working functions start to replace the living functions in the cities and take up the better, more central areas, in most cases being the city centres (Brand, 2017). Between the 1960s and 1980s, city forming continued to grow in Dutch cities at a fast rate. Due to this, more households, this time including the middle class, moved out of the centre for more space and green. This led to a regional sorting of households depending on income and phase of life. Impoverishment started to occur in the weaker areas of the city centre, causing renewal and reconstruction of these areas later on. The deconcentrating of the city led to more and stronger local and regional centres outside the city centre (Brand, 2002).

Apart from economical causes, another reason why city forming was able to take place was the possibility of new and faster modes of transportation. "Shortly after the war, people still went to work by bike, but with the growing welfare, this transportation medium was exchanged with a car more and more often" (Provoost, 1991).

To relate this to the topic of this thesis, this city pattern must be projected onto the city of the Hague, the city centre in which the Babylon building is situated. Just like most other cities in the Netherlands after World War II, the Hague was entering a period of enormous growth. Due to the fast-growing population, there was a definite concern about space in the city and developers felt in a rush to expand and reorganize the city. In 1957, an ambitious design that would reorganize the structure of

the city was proposed and executions quickly started. The working and living functions were separated and the historic city centre was transformed into a work district. Due to this, the residents were driven to the suburbs.

For these plans, the municipality wanted a compact city centre with clear borders. The Hague's city centre didn't have a clear border like the ring of canals in Amsterdam, so a network of ring roads was designed to serve this purpose. For execution of these ring roads, canals had to be filled up and multiple low-income neighbourhoods were demolished. In addition, impoverished neighbourhoods at the edge of the city centre were knocked down with the purpose of creating better housing. Thus, for the most part, only the historic centre was really respected. Other than that, "characteristic structures, identity, and city scape were sacrificed without scruples to traffic, businesses, and the ideas of modern living" (Provoost, 1991).

Due to a lack of financing, however, not the entire plan was realised. Only two parts of the planned ring road system could be executed at the time. Some plots were bought, and buildings were demolished in preparation, but most of the roads were never built. Lack of financing also turned out to be a problem for the reconstruction of the impoverished neighbourhoods, many of which had already been completely knocked down. This left many areas in the city completely empty for years. Yet another problem for the project lay with economic interest. Near the 1970s, businesses lost interest in the city centre, because outside the city, there was more space and land was cheaper.

Because of all these plans, there was a shortage of homes and prices were high, driving people out of the city into the countryside. The number of residents in the Hague was decreasing. Current city plans did not focus on keeping people in the city, so something really had to change. In 1970, many cities in the Netherlands abruptly changed their views on urban development. Instead of focussing on cars and offices, focus lay on environment, liveability, and housing construction. In the Hague, there was no longer one grand plan for

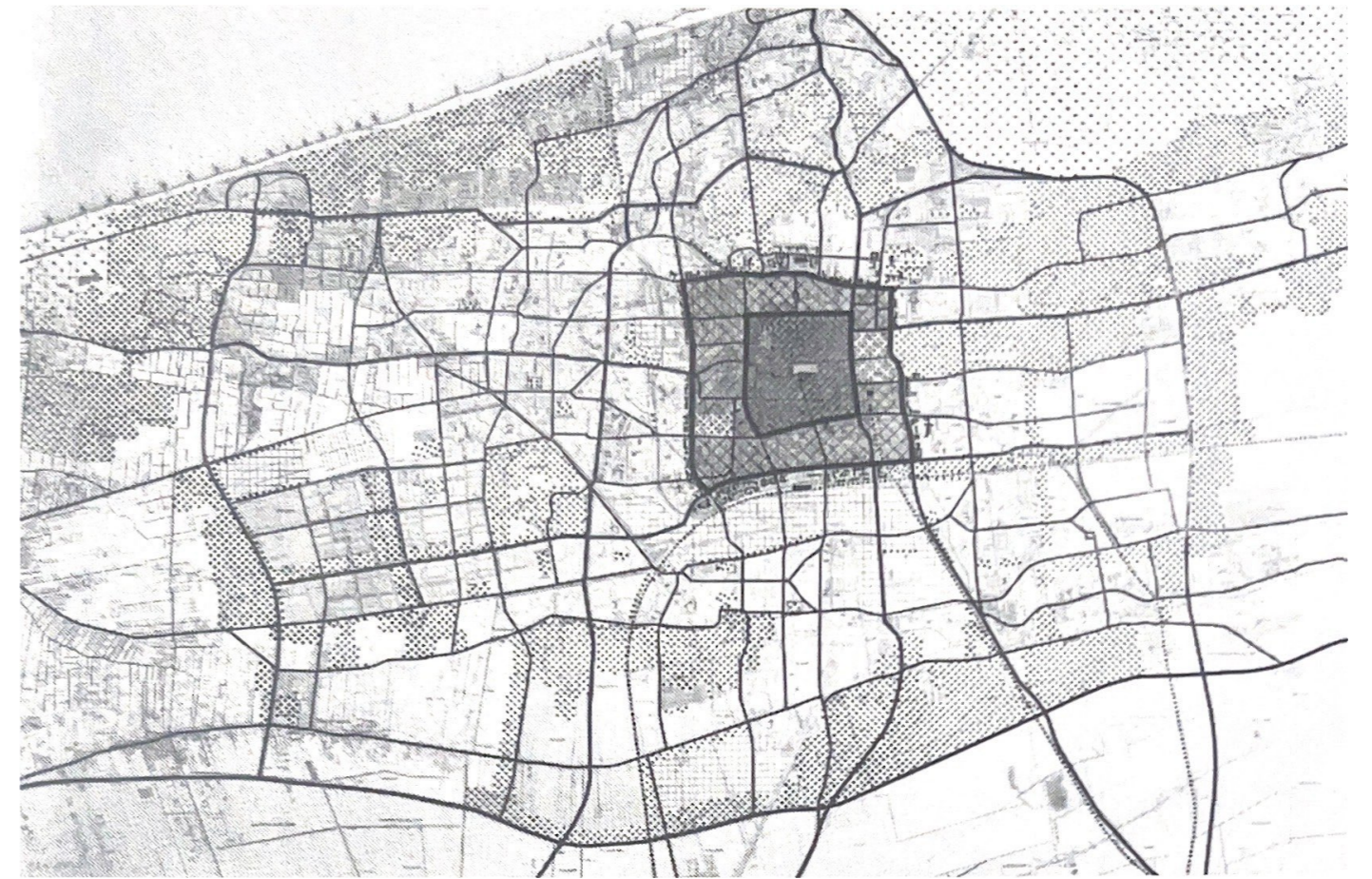


Figure 2. Dienst voor Stadsontwikkeling. (1959). *Plan for the city centre of The Hague.*

the entire city, but working in a smaller scale with more participation was the new way of designing (Provoost, 1991).

Thus, the Hague was reorganized per neighbourhood or district, one of which being the Bezuidenhoutkwartier, later housing the Babylon building.

Babylon vs The Hague

In the 1970's the municipality of The Hague predicted trends like a large increase in car traffic, a small increase in public transportation, and a decrease in use of bicycles. The plan for the ring roads was kept to relieve the city centre of traffic and new plans were developed for large parking garages to increase the accessibility for cars. Protests promoting a different vision on traffic in the city (figure 4) demanded the municipality to change its point of view (Kleinegris, 1991). New goals were formulated by political parties, like less traffic in the city centre, more mixed functions, and good connections for pedestrians (Architectenbureau L&N te Rijswijk, 1979).

In the 1953 reconstruction plan for Bezuidenhout-C, an office neighbourhood had been planned around a new central station. While the city forming had once been designed for the existing city centre, the plans around the central station caused a shift in this placement. "In the eyes of many, the heart of the city centre had already moved significantly towards the Central Station" (Kleinegris, 1991). For contractors, one plot in particular was in high demand. This was the plot in between the Central Station and the Koekamp. While high numbers were offered by mostly international companies, in 1972, the Hague company MAB

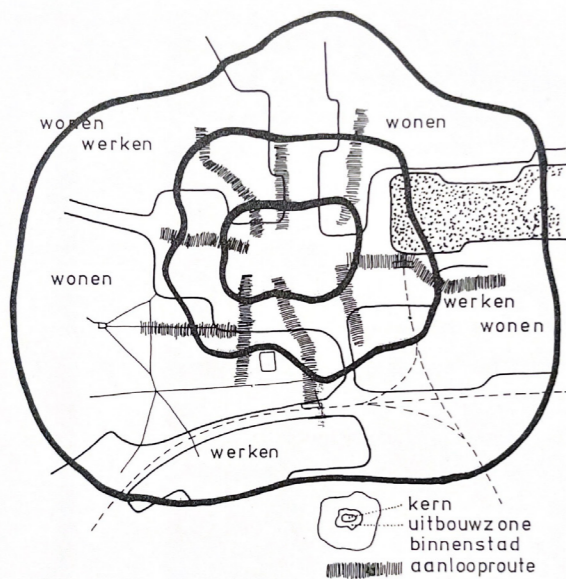


Figure 3. Dienst voor Stadsontwikkeling. (1976). *The walkable city.*



Figure 4. Architecture group Dooievaar. (1974). *Critical cartoons on the new city plans.*

was chosen as a contractor for the project (Kleinegris, 1991).

The main goal for the empty lot was: "to close the hole – that had come about by bombing and demolition in the city centre of The Hague – in such a way that it [would become] part of the city both functionally as well as spatially-visually. The accessibility for the pedestrian traffic should become optimal" (Architectenbureau L&N te Rijswijk, 1979). The area was surrounded by multiple different traffic routes that were in construction, like the railway station, tram- and bus lines, a large entrance and exit road for the city, and an important biking route (figure 5). The building that would stand in this lot would have to enhance all these connections, especially the pedestrian connection. Thus, architects Lucas & Niemeijer designed a multi-functional building, calling it 'Babylon', with stores, a cinema, a bar, and a restaurant situated on the ground and first floors, a parking garage in the basement, and a hotel and offices on the upper floors (Architectenbureau L&N te Rijswijk, 1979).

The project was kept secret from the municipal council until 1974, when most of the design was finished, since the multi-functionality of the building did not fully correspond with the reconstruction plan of 1953 (Kleinegris, 1991). Because it did not correspond, it was not possible to start building without permission from the council. Due to fears of rejection for the idea, alderman for urban development, Mr. Nuij from the PvdA, who within the municipal government was responsible for the project, decided to show the plans during the summer, when most councillors were away on vacation. Therefore, there were no objections for the plan and construction could start (Municipal council The Hague, 1975). It was not until February 17th, 1975, that the council finally actually discussed the building plans. During this meeting, most of the council was "uncritical in its appreciation of the plan Babylon" (Kleinegris, 1991).

As mentioned before, most of the parties in

the council at that time wanted to achieve less traffic and a mix of functions in the city centre. Babylon, being a multi-functional building – housing offices, a hotel, stores, and a cinema – right at a junction of different traffic types would contribute well to the council's goals. The building would attract both people from the city centre and through central station travellers from elsewhere. According to a majority of the council, Babylon would be "a good filler, which will allow the new centre to come to life" (Municipal council The Hague, 1975). In addition, Babylon was also expected to create around 1500 jobs (Municipal council The Hague, 1975).

During the meeting in February 1975, however, one councillor, Mr. Verduyn Lunel from the PPR, was not as appreciative. Apart from the fact that the council was left out of the entire preparation of Babylon, Verduyn Lunel was also negative about multiple aspects of the design in relation to the city. One main issue was that housing was not included in the building, even



Figure 5. *Situation Babylon*

though this was a large issue at the time. He pointed out that despite the fact that most political parties wanted to mix functions in the city centre, and thus also wanted to create more housing, with Babylon “the city centre remains an office building zone” (Municipal council The Hague, 1975). Another discussion formed around the stores in Babylon. It was feared that these would compete with the stores in the city centre, so it was decided that there would only be traveller-targeting stores. According to Verduyn Lunel, however, these types of stores were also already situated in the centre. In addition, The Hague’s population was declining, so the stores at Babylon would not bring additional new customers. Verduyn Lunel and his party “believe[d] that the plan [was] contrary to good quality of life. It [would cause] even further damage to the area around the Malieveld” (Municipal council The Hague, 1975).

Opinions about Babylon did not just differ in the municipal council, but the discussion on how Babylon fits in the city can also be seen in the press at the time. A disagreement for the building’s location can be read in the papers. A 1978 article in *Algemeen Dagblad* mentions that Babylon is situated between the shopping/residential area of Bezuidenhout and the city centre of The Hague and forms a link between the two areas (Van Bungen, 1978). According to an article in magazine *De Architect* however, there were hardly any neighbouring residential areas, and the immediate vicinity of Babylon was built up with offices (Den Hollander, 1978). In addition, since the rent for storekeepers in Babylon was very high and neighbouring residential area Bezuidenhout was not particularly a high-income neighbourhood, the focus of stores had to lie somewhere else. The revenue would not solely depend on visitors from nearby neighbourhoods, but as mentioned before, was largely focused on travellers (Ten Cate, 1979).

The papers also mentioned that “the municipality of The Hague, which wants to develop the area around the central station as a kind of entrance to the city, has hit the bull’s eye with Babylon” (Van Bungen, 1978). Den Hollander (1978) argues, however, that Babylon has an inefficient location for this

purpose. “Standing with your back to the central station means choosing either left to the city centre or right to Babylon” (Den Hollander, 1978). In addition, he states that the mixing of functions inside a building makes it “an independent area that is self-sufficient, just like a city centre, which also has its clear boundaries and is therefore difficult to connect to” (Den Hollander, 1978).

Despite the different opinions on how Babylon positioned itself in relation to the city of The Hague, most of the municipal council supported the construction of the building. The design itself played a minor role during the meeting and the focus lay mainly on the functional and financial aspects of the building. Once the drawings were finally public, the press started to shift its focus to more specific design aspects of the building as well.

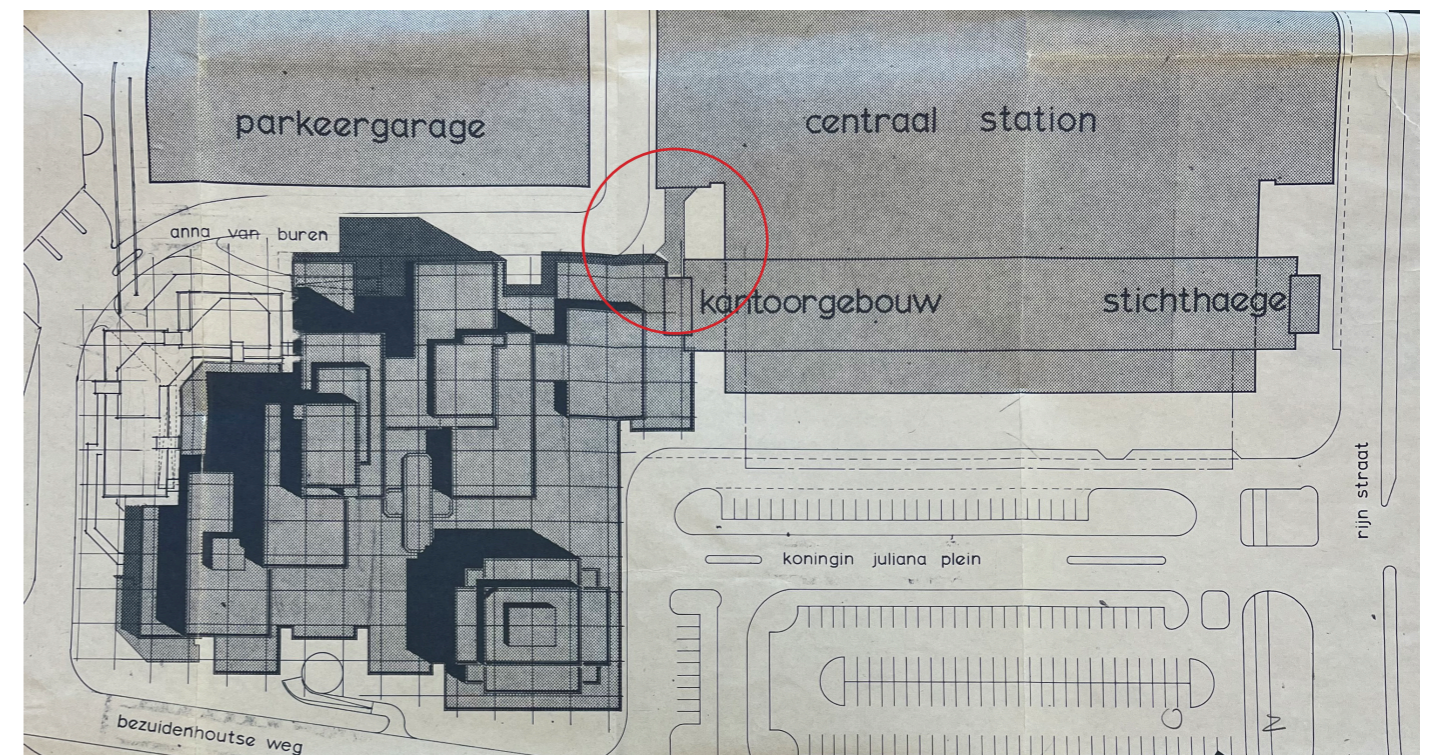


Figure 6. Architectenbureau Lucas & Niemeijer. *Connection to Central Station*

Cold reception

In any public building design, accessibility to a building’s surroundings is a key aspect. When designing Babylon, Lucas & Niemeijer tried to incorporate this into the building in different ways. One way was to directly connect the building to the central station with a pedestrian bridge on the first floor. At the central station, multiple modes of transportation crossed, bringing many travellers, and thus potential Babylon visitors with it. Throughout the design process, there was some discussion on where exactly this bridge would take place. Initially, it was placed over the Koningin Juliana square in front of the central station. However, this proposal was turned down by the railway company NS, that owned the station. Among other reasons, this was due to the station’s ground floor and main entrance being too covered and hidden, and the fact that this connection would only lead to the station’s main hall and not the tram and bus lines (Sporweg Opbouw B.B. – Ing. – en Architectenbureau & Architectenbureau Lucas en Niemeijer, 1973). After many discussions, the final design included a pedestrian bridge from the south-western side of Babylon to the eastern side of the central station (figure 6). The bridge connected the shops to the half level of the station’s main hall, from

which “both the tram and bus platform and the station hall are accessible via stairs and escalators” (Sporweg Opbouw B.B. – Ing. – en Architectenbureau & Architectenbureau Lucas en Niemeijer, 1973).

When looking further into the bridge, however, one can question whether this connection really adds to the design and accessibility of Babylon. In figure 7, a fairly large sign of Babylon can be seen in the central station’s hall. However, the visitors coming from the main hall would have to go up the escalator before going through the bridge, which could act as a barrier. The connection seems more direct from the tram and bus lines, but not from the main part of the station. In addition, when looking at the floor plans (figure 8), the entrance to Babylon from the bridge seems



Figure 7. Van Pelt, C. L. (1980). *Station hall The Hague Central*.

more like a back entrance. This is because the entrance is relatively narrow and it takes a longer walk before the space opens up. This becomes even more apparent when looking at figures 9 and 10.

Another way Lucas & Niemeijer attempted to make Babylon more accessible was to integrate a parking garage. When looking into the archives of the design process, it becomes apparent that a lot of the discussions are focused on the parking garage and its entrances. This is not surprising, as the use of cars was very popular at the time and cars were a large part of many urban designs. In a discussion in 1974 about Babylon it is even mentioned that “the largest pedestrian flow comes from the direction of the parking garage, but [the] entrance [on the west side] must also remain accessible from the Koningin Juliana square side” (Sporweg Opbouw B.B. – Ing. – en Architectenbureau & Architectenbureau Lucas en Niemeijer, 1973). Thus, the entrance from the parking garage was seen as one of

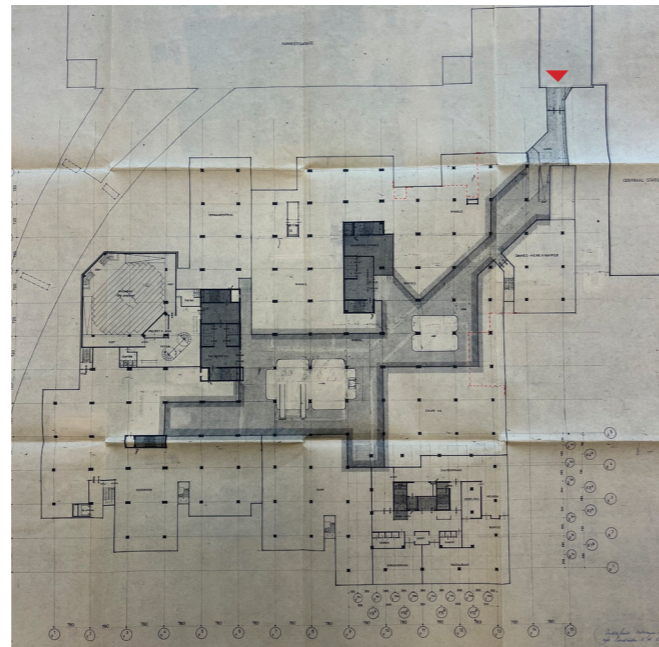


Figure 8. Architectenbureau Lucas & Niemeijer. Floor plan highlighting entrance from central station and walkways.

the more important entrances. This becomes visible when looking at the floor plans (figure 11). The escalators from the parking garage come out at the large open space in the middle of the shopping mall, which is a main attraction in the interior of Babylon (discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 5).

Not only is the accessibility of a building to its surroundings an important aspect of design, but the approachability of a building plays a large role as well. Mixed opinions about the approachability of Babylon can be found in papers and magazines around the time Babylon was built. According to some, the seemingly random stacking of volumes lead to a dynamic building that answers to a human scale and blends in with its surroundings, even though it is a high-rise building (Municipal council The Hague, 1975). “It seems as if the building mass has grown organically, as if it has taken years before it took this shape” (Den Hollander, 1978). Lucas & Niemeijer have also tried to soften the barrier between inside and outside by making a see-through glass façade and by creating a pedestrian route through the building that connects in- and outside functions.

However, according to multiple articles the architects failed in making an approachable building that connects well to its surroundings. The building’s shape and appearance are seen as cold, neutral (Ten Cate, 1979), and

expressionless (Den Hollander, 1978). About the scale in comparison to its surroundings, before-mentioned councillor Verduyn Lunell criticizes that “it is just a few blocks that differ slightly in height and still end up in high-rise buildings” (Municipal council The Hague, 1975). Inside the shopping mall, the glass façade that is supposed to act as a smooth transition is barely visible. “The citizen locks himself in a brown glass box, inside which a make-believe world has been created that has no other purpose than to urge people to spend” (Ten Cate, 1979).

Accessibility and approachability were both considered by the architects during the design process of Babylon. While there are some positive comments on the way this has been applied in the design, it is mostly questioned whether the architects’ intentions have worked in their favour.



Figure 9. Dienst voor de Stadsontwikkeling. (1987). Entrance to Babylon from The Hague Central.



Figure 10. Scheers, R. (1978). Bridge to The Hague Central.

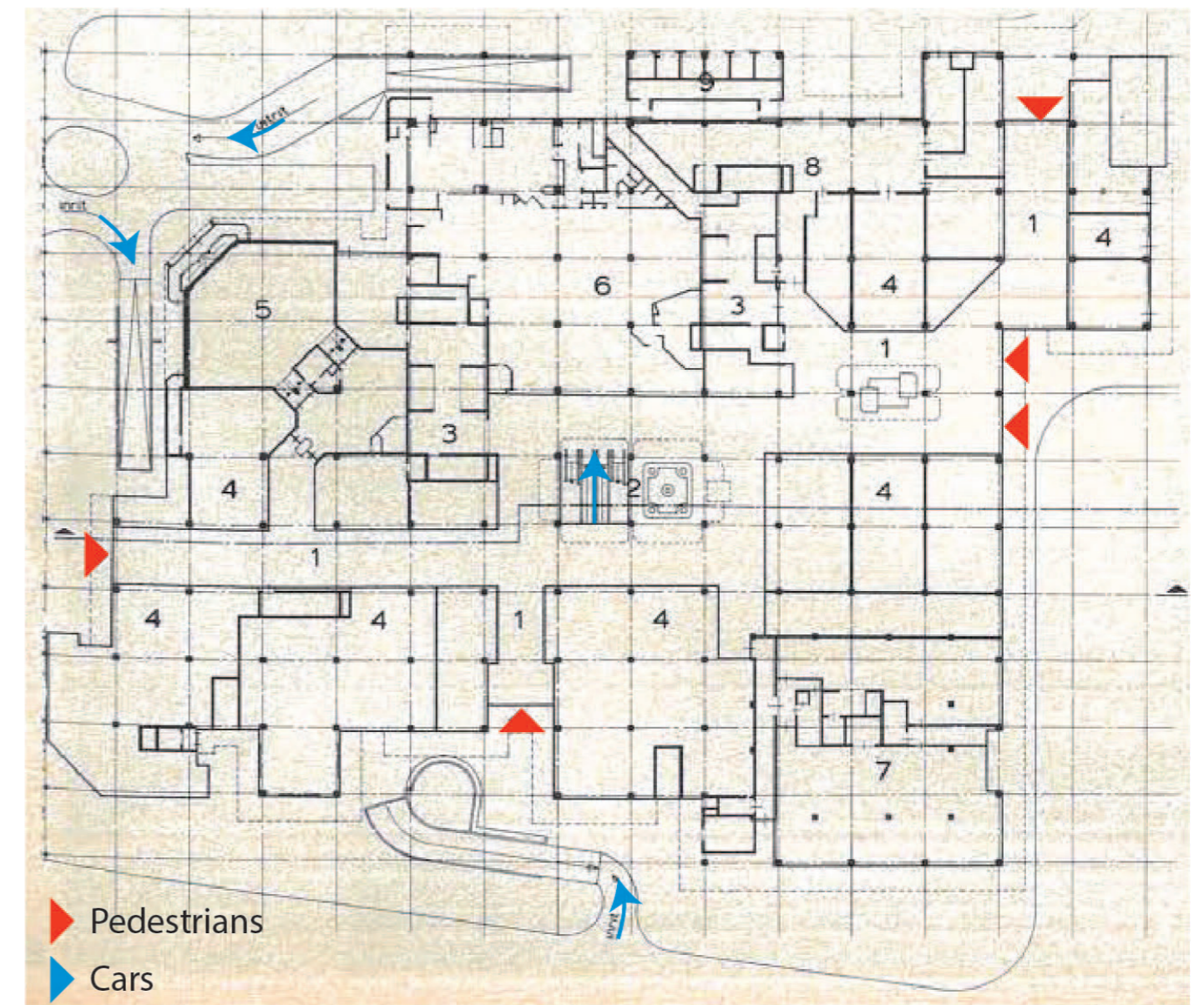


Figure 11. Architectenbureau Lucas & Niemeijer. (1979). Floor plan with entrances.

Embarrassment of riches

Not only did Babylon's accessibility and approachability evoke discussions, the interior of the shopping centre was also a large topic of conversation in the press. Where the building's exterior received mostly critiques on its simplicity and dullness, the interior was anything but. The two lower floors that held the shopping centre were designed by French architect Janos Bartok, who had previous experience with multiple shopping centres in Paris and Rome (Van Bungen, 1978). The style he had opted for has clear influences from the Baroque style, with lots of ornaments and colours. "Two stories, escalators, glass elevators, water features in the central hall and sculptures here and there [were] part of his design." (Van Bungen, 1978).

Many different types of stores had found their way into Babylon, the most notable one being the Parisian style drugstore that took up 1700 square meters (Van Bungen, 1978). This was not your typical drugstore, as it was a combination of restaurants, a bar, a café, and shops that were spread out over a couple floors and all had a different appearance (Ten Cate, 1979) (figure 12).

Multiple walkways, led by a red-and-brown trail, ran from the different entrances of the building, passing all the stores, and coming together at the two-story high central hall, "where [the addition of] plants and water features give you a Mediterranean atmosphere" (Van Bungen, 1978) (figure 13).

While some were positive about the interior design, it was mostly negatively addressed by the press. The enormous amounts of ornaments were seen as kitsch and fake. "The crazy baroque, silver-plated window frames of the hairdresser's shop, from which one looks down on the cafe de la Haie, the rosettes and curls, the wrought-iron pedestal at the stairs, all this must be regarded as a joke" (Ten Cate, 1979). The whole interior screamed of commercialism and was experienced as forced (Ten Cate, 1979).

With all these ornaments, but also because of



Figure 13. Dienst Stedelijke Ontwikkeling. (1990). *Central hall Babylon.*



Figure 14. Van Pelt, C. L. (1980). *Walkway interior Babylon.*

a relatively low ceiling height in most of the shopping centre (around 3,5 metres), it's not surprising that a forced and cramped feeling arises. According to a study on spaciousness, "the layout of [a] plan and its level of openness and transparency increase the perceived spaciousness" (Al-Zamil & Interior Design Department, College of Basic Education, The Public Authority Of Applied Education And Training, 2017). Also, people are more likely to perceive open spaces as beautiful than closed spaces, and they are more likely to decide to avoid closed spaces rather than open ones (Vartanian et al, 2015). The low ceiling height at the pedestrian entrances of the shopping mall and the lack of transparency of the building (mentioned in the previous chapter) can thus increase the chance of avoidance from visitors.

While the architecture of the building's interior can be criticized, the interior design also plays

a large role in experiencing space. Apart from physical volume, the way a space is perceived can be influenced by different factors, such as colour, light, and furniture. In Babylon's walkways, brownish and reddish colours dominate the spaces (figure 14). These dark and warm colour types absorb light, making a space look smaller. The brown tiles on the ceiling of Babylon's walkways have this effect as well. A dark ceiling makes a space appear lower than it is (Al-Zamil & Interior Design Department, College of Basic Education, The Public Authority Of Applied Education And Training, 2017). This can contribute to the cramped feeling inside the building.

The size of furniture can also influence how a space is perceived. According to Al-Zamil (2017), furniture should be proportional to the space "so that the room does not appear cluttered or overly crowded." Not only the amount of furniture and ornaments in Babylon have this effect, but for example the size of some of the shop stands appears very large



Figure 15. *Interior Babylon.* (1978).



Figure 16. Mellink, B. & Dienst Stedelijke Ontwikkeling. (1990). *Central hall Babylon.*

within the space (figure 15).

However, spaciousness in the shopping centre is achieved at the two-story high central hall (figure 16). "Designers often resort to the creation of double height spaces in order to enhance connection, utilize the available volume and create a sense of spaciousness" (Al-Zamil & Interior Design Department, College of Basic Education, The Public Authority Of Applied Education And Training, 2017). This explains why this central hall was the centre of attention of Babylon. Interesting, though, is the contrast to the low-ceilinged pedestrian entrances and walkways visitors must walk through before arriving at this central hall. As mentioned before, the entrance from the parking garage comes out right in the middle of this hall, which again shows that more emphasis has been put on the visitors coming by car.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the idea behind the walkways was to connect the building's interior to the city. However, Den Hollander (1978) critiques that "it is as if the idea needs to be made that the passage is a continuation of a walking route through the city centre. However, even with the elements of a traditional city centre, such as offices, hotels, theatres, and shops, a completely new [and different] environment has emerged."

Even though the interior and exterior of Babylon are complete opposites, it is striking that both raise extensive discussions in the press. There are some positive remarks on both the interior and exterior, but the negative reviews seemed to take the upper hand.

Conclusion

Babylon has undergone a huge renovation in 2007, only 30 years after it was initially built. This striking fact was the initial motive for conducting this research. In the previous chapters, research has been done on the discussions about Babylon in different scales – urban, building exterior, and building interior. When relating all this information back to the research question, ‘What were the ideas behind Babylon and the way it was designed and how did this influence the functionality and popularity of the building?’, it becomes clear that many design aspects have influenced the way the building is perceived. While the critics were positive at times, the discussions often leaned more towards the negative side.

First, the combination of the building’s location and its functions did not seem to correspond with what the city needed at the time. The inclusion of offices – of which there was already a large amount in the centre – and the exclusion of housing – which there was a shortage of – may not have been the right attempt when trying to connect the neighbouring residential area with the city centre. The same can be said for placing stores in this area. Even though the stores were said to be traveller-oriented, these types of stores still compete with similar stores in the city centre. This, in combination with the building being placed on the other side of the central station compared to the centre, forces the consumer coming from the station to decide between the two. Perhaps it could even be said that Babylon was built on the wrong side of the central station.

The architects might have felt this disconnection to the city as well, as they made an attempt at connecting the building to the central station through a bridge, in order to attract more visitors. However, as explained in previous chapters, the attempt seems to fall short. In addition, the design seems to be focused more on travellers coming by car, which did not end up being a future-proof focus. The consumers coming by car would enter in the two-floor high ceiling main hall of the building, whereas consumers coming by any other means had to enter through smaller entrances and walk

through relatively low and narrow corridors before arriving at the same spot. This makes the building less attractive for pedestrian visitors. Since the car’s popularity is declining, the decision to focus more on visitors coming by car has unfortunately not aged well. Apart from this, the building’s interior was extremely commercialized, which, in combination with a cold and expressionless exterior gave Babylon an unwelcoming effect.

It can be concluded that a combination of all these negative aspects on different scales is what has led Babylon to lose its initial popularity, and with this, its visitors. Architects Meyer & Van Schooten have made an attempt at regaining Babylon’s popularity with the renovation in 2007. Unfortunately, when visiting the building nowadays, the situation does not seem to be much different. So, to sum up, Babylon, the city of confusion, was destined to fall out of grace.



Figure 17. New Babylon. (2019)



Figure 18. Dienst voor de Stadsontwikkeling. (1978). Babylon.

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