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## THE ATMOSPHERE IS BENIGN, AS IF IT WERE SOME OLD ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

*By Andrew Mead. Photography by Christine Sullivan*

In 010 Publishers' new *Architectural Guide to the Netherlands* (AJ 14.12.06), there's an intriguing entry on a 1950s scheme called De Lichtenberg, which reads as follows: 'Its architecture, a mix of Corbusian Modernism and Modern classicism, must be unique in the Netherlands. A large part of the ensemble has fallen into disrepair but the remainder was recently rediscovered, which may yet save it from being demolished.'

De Lichtenberg – a cultural and recreational complex which includes an open-air theatre seating 2,200 people – was absent from earlier editions of the guide, so it really is a rediscovery. It was only in 2003 that a group of enthusiasts, Behoud de Lichtenberg (BdL, Save the Lichtenberg), began campaigning to secure its future. But today De Lichtenberg is a locally listed monument, the Dutch chapter of Docomomo is involved, and students from Delft University have been drawing up potential schemes for its reuse. So is this complex just a curiosity or something more? How did it come to be forgotten? What happens to it now?

The story begins with the post-war expansion plans of a Catholic school, Bisschoppelijk College, then situated in the centre of the town of Weert in the very south of the Netherlands. With no room to grow there, it found another site on the south-west edge of Weert, where construction of new school premises began to designs by Architectenbureau Boosten of Maastricht. In tandem with this came the development of an adjacent site for the De Lichtenberg complex – the name means 'mountain of light', and echoes that of

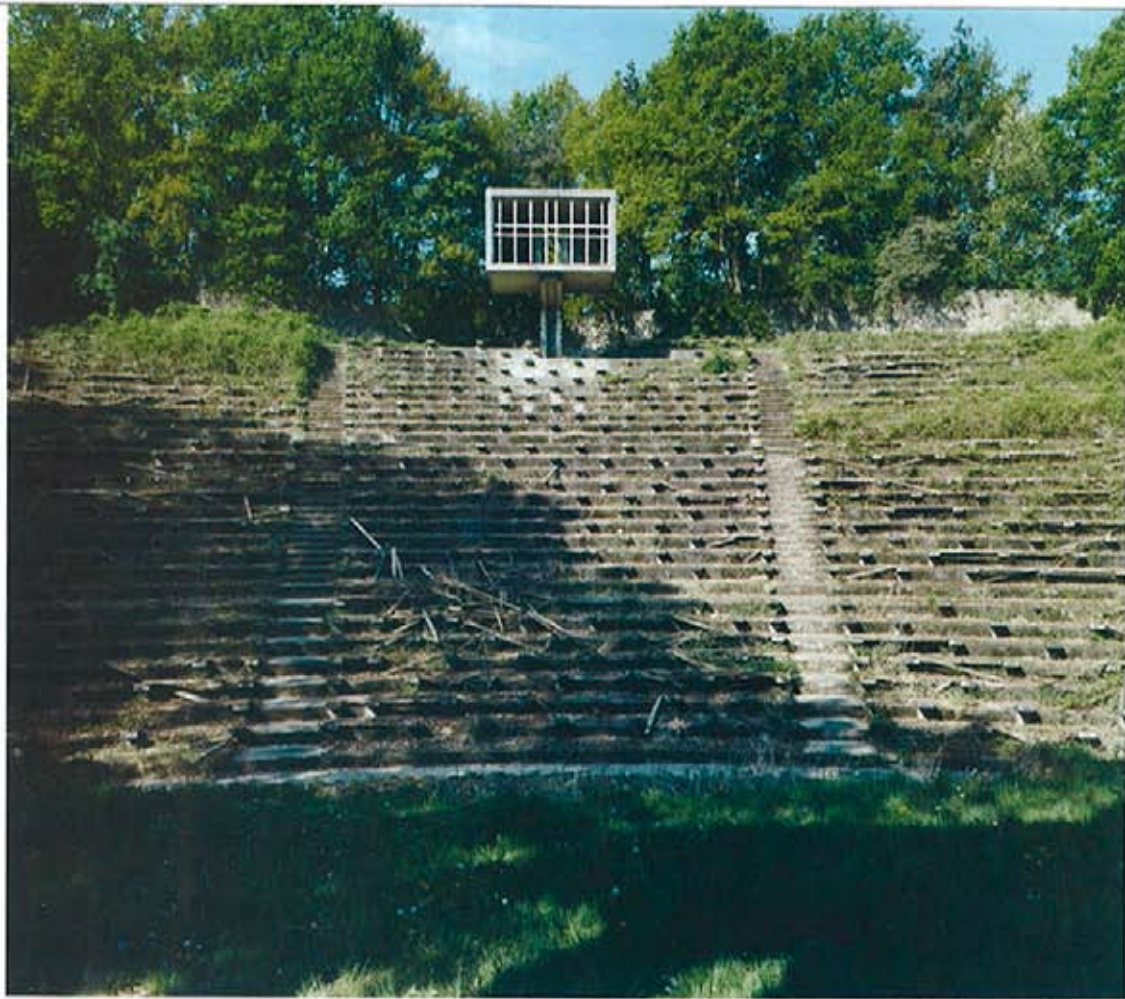
a farm there, though its origins are obscure. The architect for the theatre (1961), chapel (1957) and peripheral buildings at De Lichtenberg was a local man, Pierre Weegels (1904–66), active in and around Weert since the late 1920s, though apparently not elsewhere.

But the school's expansion plans foundered with only part of the new scheme realised, and by the late 1960s much of De Lichtenberg was already in decline. Though the theatre was deemed important enough to be opened by Queen Juliana of the Netherlands in 1962, it was never published in any architectural magazine, and simply slipped from view.

'We knew there was something there but we always thought it was private. It was like a secret garden for animals and nature,' says Rita Grichnik, long-time resident of Weert and a BdL member. Particularly instrumental in bringing the complex back into view was architect Rob Langeslag, who went to Bisschoppelijk College as a boy but later left Weert to practise elsewhere in the Netherlands. Returning to the town a few years ago, he was 'angry to see this beautiful architecture in decay'. He wrote a letter to the local newspaper and so the campaign to save De Lichtenberg began.

As Grichnik says, there's no knowing from the nearby road just what lies beyond the embankments and canal that mark the boundary of De Lichtenberg – it was conceived as an enclave. There's a significant landscape dimension to this project, with earth excavated for the tennis courts making a mound against which the





1. Tiers of ruinous seating in the theatre at De Lichtenberg

theatre was constructed, and part of the auditorium lying below existing ground level, so its scale wasn't instantly apparent.

An open-air theatre of this size might not be out of place by the Mediterranean, with the scent of thyme on the breeze, but it seems slightly optimistic to build it in the Netherlands, given the local climate. It was meant for community as well as school use, but even so there can have been few occasions when all its seats were full.

Today those seats are mostly gone, though a few of their timbers still rot away in situ, and the concrete fixtures that supported them jut out starkly. Meanwhile, weeds and mosses thrive amid the mulch of last year's leaves.

The backdrop to any performance here was Weegels' permanent stage building – the source then and now of the most striking images of De Lichtenberg. Its portico of elongated concrete columns is stripped Classicism at its most laconic: lucid, spare and sober. There's more than a hint of 1930s Italy, Rationalist or Fascist: perhaps the portico of Marcello Piacentini's main building for the Città Universitaria in Rome, or the colonnade of Gaetano Minucci's Palazzo degli Uffici dell'Ente Autonomo at EUR. But instantly apparent too is a resemblance to a much more recent work – David Chipperfield's Literature Museum at Marbach am Neckar (AJ 16.02.06).

At close quarters, subtleties of detail emerge – the oblong-section columns are slightly chamfered at each corner – but you see too that the portico is endangered, with patches of exposed

reinforcement and spalling concrete. On the wall behind are sgraffito decorations by Harrie Martens (artist-architect collaboration is another theme here), but then a surprise is in store as you circle the building and find that it's more hybrid than the portico leads you to believe. The side walls combine concrete-framed windows with coloured glazed brick, while the gently concave rear wall is of blank sandstone rubble.

Overlooking the amphitheatre, and focused on this stage building, is an abruptly cantilevered concrete 'box', from which performances were directed. There's a strongly aerial sensation when you look out from it, like being on the flight deck of a plane as it comes in to land, but if what you see has an air of dereliction, the overall effect is different from that of another Catholic property in disrepair, St Peter's Seminary, Cardross (AJ 14.09.06).

Certainly there are plenty of graffiti, from exuberant tags to plaintive messages ('I've much problems but no-one cares what I say'), but there hasn't been the same delight in destruction that makes Cardross disturbing. The atmosphere of De Lichtenberg is more benign, as if it were some old archaeological site. And it's easy to imagine how magical a production would have been here, with birdsong not traffic the only accompaniment.

Of the other constituents of De Lichtenberg, the most notable architecturally is the small chapel, meant for the school's staff, near the eastern boundary. An approximate half-oval in plan, with rubblestone walls, an overhanging roof, and a far-projecting canopy, it has an organic feel; the most conscious artistry comes in





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- 2. Staircase in the stage building
- 3. The stage building's portico





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Martens' mosaic panels that chequer its front. Inside, up the shallowest of steps, the altar is toplit.

So what are the alternatives to continuing decay? The members of BdL believe that it will take 1.5 million euros (£1 million) to repair and stabilise the complex, considerably more to ensure a viable new use. 'We want to give this back to the public,' says Grichnik. At the same time, the solution should not be too commercially driven: 'We want people to enjoy the nature and the silence – to be able to recuperate here,' she adds.

Langeslag has sketched some possibilities to stimulate discussion. On the assumption that there's no future for so big a theatre, he suggests that just a portion of it be enclosed temporarily by demountable structures, so it's still a place for performances (including cinema). An area beneath the stage building could be excavated to create a small all-year-round auditorium, while the rooms within might host workshops, concerts, and the like.

Shedding more illumination on the possibilities and problems are the recent projects by Delft University students, with Rotterdam-based architect Lucas van Zuijlen as their tutor. Less outlandish than it might seem at first, one scheme sees De Lichtenberg becoming a cemetery (perhaps prompted by thoughts of Asplund's Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm). Others pick up on the original mix of culture and recreation to propose a sports centre, a music centre, or a sauna complex.

What emerges from these is the importance of keeping the theatre intact, especially the connection between the tiers of seats

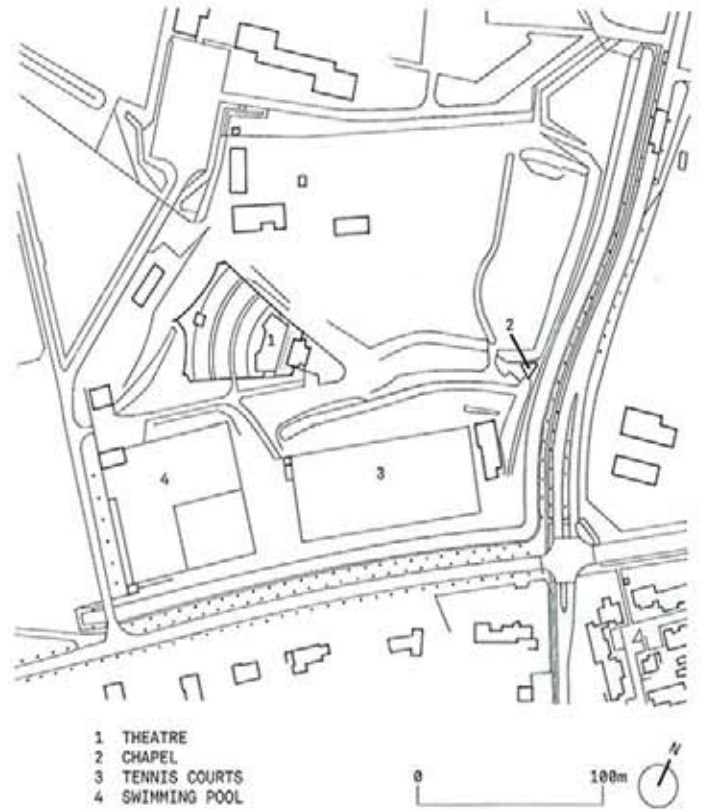
and the stage building. At present that connection is reinforced by the converging stone walls either side of the auditorium and the tall trees that surround it: if De Lichtenberg as a whole is distinctly an enclave, this is a further enclave within it. But as soon as the walls are broken, as they are in some of the student projects, that sense is lost, and it's arguably the key to the site's appeal.

In this respect, one image that comes to mind is of the Roman amphitheatre at Spoleto in 1962, when works by the sculptor David Smith were placed at intervals on its seats and stage – a different kind of performance. There's considerable scope for such installations here, which could sporadically complement more conventional stagings (assuming questions of security could be dealt with satisfactorily).

De Lichtenberg's architect Weegels remains a somewhat shadowy figure – his personal archive is lost – but BdL is steadily piecing together his career and identifying his buildings. He specialised in houses and churches, at first in a quite conservative brick idiom, but with individual touches in the handling of windows, eaves and framing devices. After the war Weegels made increasing use of concrete in his buildings – in the vaults and lantern of the O LVrouw van Fatima church, for instance – before employing it liberally at De Lichtenberg, where he does appear to have raised his game. With its fan-like nave penetrating a circular chancel, the Fatima church has some formal similarities to the theatre at De Lichtenberg, while its toplit altar anticipates the one in the chapel there.



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4. House by Weegels at 14 Sint Paulusstraat, Weert
5. House by Weegels at 440 Jan van der Croonstraat, Weert. Note the accentuated frame around the larger of the ground-floor windows
6. Preliminary design for De Lichtenberg
7. The De Lichtenberg complex as built

Whether Weegels was much influenced by Le Corbusier, as the O10 guide suggests, is open to question. The combination of concrete and 'rustic' rubblestone – encapsulated in the concrete staircase cantilevered from the stage building's inner rear wall – may hark back to the Pavillon Suisse, but this mixed palette of materials had become quite pervasive in mid-century Modernism. Not in doubt is Weegels' thoughtful eclecticism; he drew from disparate sources and can't be neatly typecast.

The rediscovery of De Lichtenberg makes one wonder what else still lies concealed in other parts of Europe; the full story of 20th century architecture is yet to be told. De Lichtenberg is more than a footnote to it. Though today the complex is moribund – the theatre and chapel derelict, the swimming pool filled with contaminated earth, the surrounding canal stagnant – it differs once again from Cardoss Seminary, because the challenge to find a reuse is not so great. De Lichtenberg is a place that still has a purpose, an enclave that can enrich lives to come.

*For further information on the campaign to find a new use for De Lichtenberg, visit [www.behouddelichtenberg.nl](http://www.behouddelichtenberg.nl)*





8. The rubblestone wall at the back of the stage building





9. Stone walls and tall trees surround the theatre





10. The cantilevered 'box' from which performances in the theatre were directed





11. A place for future performances – or for what alternative?





12. Interior of the small chapel for use by staff of the adjacent school





13. The chapel's exterior includes mosaic panels by artist Harrie Martens





14. The former swimming pool is now full of contaminated earth





15. The tennis courts are still in use