

Creating conditions : a conversation with Hermann Hertzberger

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A photograph of children playing with large wooden blocks and sand in a Montessori classroom. The image is in a muted, olive-green color palette. In the background, several children are standing on a high wall made of large wooden blocks. In the foreground, two children are lying on their stomachs on a sandy surface, also surrounded by the large wooden blocks. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

CREATING CONDITIONS

A Conversation with
Herman Hertzberger

Sven Högger

Herman Hertzberger, Montessori School, Delft, 1960 – 1966, several extensions until 2010. Image: Herman Hertzberger

The basis for this article was laid a while before the topic «Comfort» was announced. It started out as a profound interest in livable city-scapes and a fascination for Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds in vacant lots of postwar Amsterdam. Raw objects that speak the language of lamp posts and parking bollards in the street but have the power to create an inspiring place of enjoyment for kids.

They were very far from today's designed playgrounds that assume a need for bright colours and deny children's capacity to creatively adapt to urban environments and learn about safety and responsibility through play.

Herman Hertzberger has developed a body of work that continues this approach and extends it into every possible corner of his projects. A design method that quite naturally uses architectural means—not furniture design—to engage with the human body and encourage play, joy and community. Having designed over 30 school buildings, he has perfected the small moments that make up everyday life for children and students. Although he started his career more than 60 years ago, he is still active and his ambitions remain valid and important until this day.

SH Mr. Hertzberger, your work offers a special kind of comfort, celebrating the accommodating effect of corners and edges, of stairs and columns. Is it your intention to design a comfortable architecture?

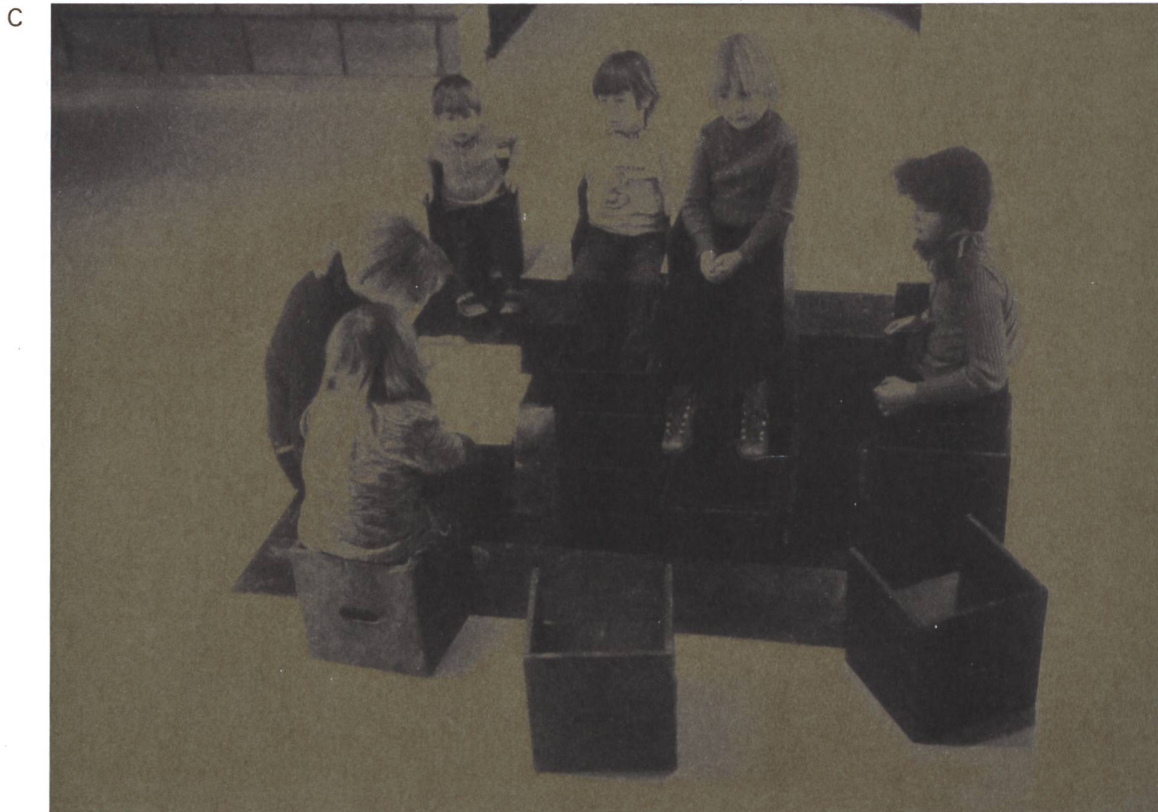
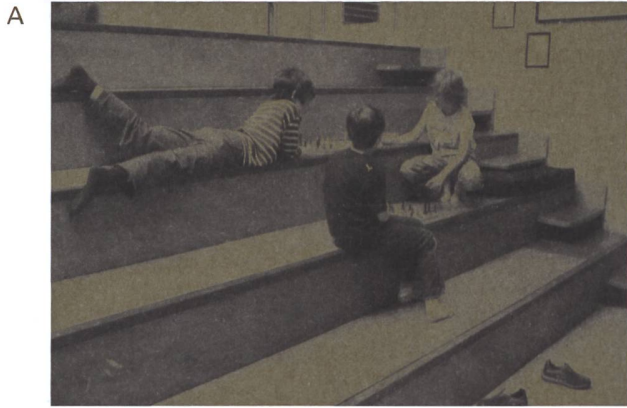
HH I am critical of the word «comfort». It is too inactive. It makes me think of a chair in which you fall asleep with a good glass of wine and an open fire. A sort of passive state of consumption. I think that, in life, you should have an active attitude. In my works you always find invitations to activities. You know, Gerrit Rietveld made chairs on which it is difficult to sit, because they are not comfortable. And he said this: «to sit is a verb, a word of action, you have to work for it.» You see? It's not just to lie down but you have to be active. People have to find their comfort. «Accommodation» is indeed the right word to use for what I try to do. I try to accommodate people and to domesticate the environment. By that, you could say, the architecture wants to make people feel at home. What an architect does is to activate the environment in such a way that it incites people to come to their full capacity. To help people be what they want to be and feel how they want to feel.

SH So it has to do with a certain degree of appropriation. How do you provide such an environment?

HH I do not design what people might do in the spaces. But they feel at home, they feel accommodated, and it works. Because it's intriguing, because it's inviting. What will happen with a place remains open. I generally have some feelings but in fact I do not know—some things don't work and others work quite well. You see, when you make steps on the floor it's a fantastic condition. And I emphasize the word «condition». A condition to sit and to feel at home. That is the best way to say it.^(B) I made these large stairs in the Apollo Schools in Amsterdam. I never imagined people sitting there playing chess. But this is what happens because there is a condition that works for it. It stimulates people to do something. So, of course you can sit on it and watch a school performance, but you can also use it in an unofficial way. It's not me who thought of people playing chess, but this is what happens. The most interesting detail in this image is what you see on the bottom right corner: the fact that they take their shoes off proves for me that they feel at home. They feel comfortable, you could say. In that sense, the word «comfort» works.^(C) In the Montessori School in Delft, I introduced a new element. A block with a wooden top surface was placed in the middle of the space. At that moment, I didn't know what would happen with it. Within this block, they store wooden elements to build a stage. But you only need a stage from time to time. Meanwhile, on a regular school day, people just use and interpret it spontaneously. And that is the word: interpretation. They interpret it as the tool they need at that moment.^(D) When I saw that this was successful, I tried to make the opposite. A hole in the floor with the same dimensions. And you see these stools which you can use in two ways, you can sit in them or on them. They work both for small children and for adults. And when you put all the stools in the hole, it is filled up and you can walk over it.

SH How does the specific design of architectural elements help people feel at home? How do you generate places from elements?

HH Let me show you a few examples.^(E) In this balustrade, there is an intermediate part,

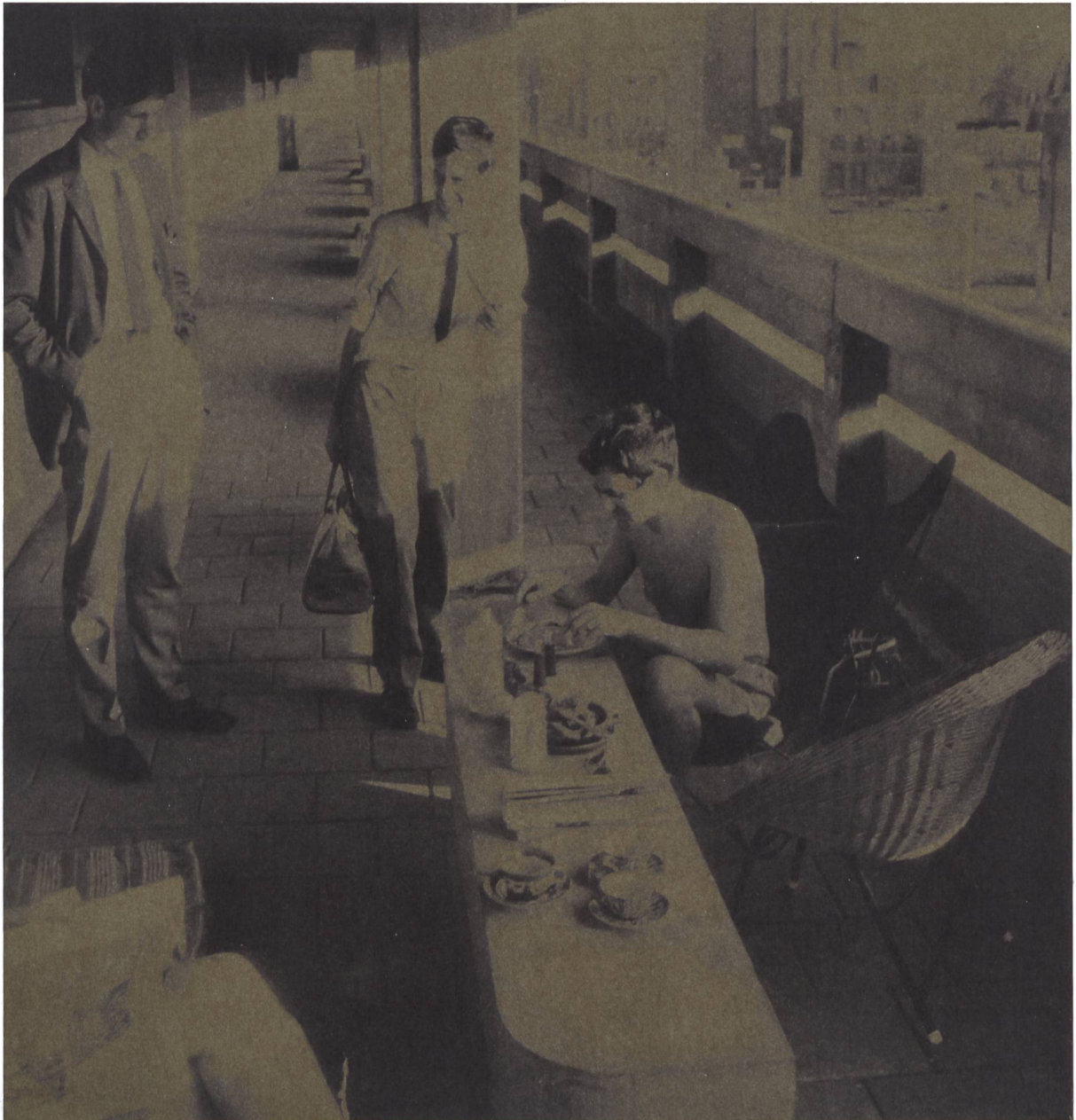


A E Herman Hertzberger, Apollo Schools, Amsterdam, 1980–1983. Image: Herman Hertzberger
 B C Herman Hertzberger, Montessori School, Delft, 1960–1966, several extensions until 2010. Image: Herman Hertzberger
 D Herman Hertzberger, De Evenaar School, Amsterdam, 1986. Image: Herman Hertzberger

F



G



F Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Piazza San Pietro, Rome, 1657–1667. Image: Herman Hertzberger

G Herman Hertzberger, Student Housing at Weesperstraat, Amsterdam, 1959–1966. Image: Herman Hertzberger

a curved wall with a small bench. It is a small but protected place. Sometimes, cats and dogs find their spot there. And of course the children discover it quickly—they interpret and reimagine the place. I try to make all these conditions in such a way that people can discover something.^(F) Also, why shouldn't you make a base to a column? The first persons who did that were Renaissance and Baroque architects. Just look at Bernini's columns for Piazza San Pietro in Rome. I have photographs where all sorts of people were sitting on this base. So, usually when I make free standing columns, I create this condition to sit or play some games, which the kids use as their home base. And they put their bags and things on it because they feel that it's safer than if you put them on the floor.^(G) These reflections have been with me since my first projects. In the gallery street of the student housing on Weesperstraat, I created specific lighting tables. They are concrete objects with the lighting underneath them because I did not want the light to over-radiate in the adjacent sleeping rooms. So I made these low lighting fixtures such that they can be used for something else: you can sit on them. But people are not only sitting on them, they have meals and everything there. This was in a way unexpected, but basically the idea that you can use it was there from the beginning.

SH How do you transfer this knowledge from one project to another?

HH You have to learn every day. I cannot say that every project is an improvement but I learn more about the behavior of people with every building I design. It's a question of experience to know what might work and what might not. Because I also have examples where it did not work the way I expected it to. And I have maybe a hundred pictures—not of my own

designs, but from places I visited—that document how people use space. I have an eye for this sort of things. In Italy, for example, it is particularly interesting that there is a base on all serious buildings where you see people sitting. It has to do with the fact that you come closer to the architecture and the architecture becomes tangible. So I keep my eyes open every place I go, to see what people do. For good places but also for negative places where people want to feel at home and architects and city planners failed to provide the right conditions for that.

SH Are these conditions always of a geometric nature? Or is there a broader understanding of accommodation?

HH It has to do with all your senses. If there is light glaring in your eyes, it's not good. You should not design a corridor with a window in the end where the sun comes in and destroys the whole space by over-radiating. Also, acoustics are of course very important, they have a strong influence on social living. We did not talk about conditions for social life, which is the other thing that I emphasize in my work. It's very important that the acoustics give you a feeling of being at home and not lost in an endless space. I was mentioning the fact that you should be able to feel that you are close to a building before. So maybe smelling is important as well, whether you confront a wooden chalet or a brick wall. In the end it all has to do with care. It seems to be a side topic for many, but it is not! For me it is the main task of the architect. Architects should have a completely different vision on their work, which is to accommodate. And to accommodate is a good word because it also means coming home. The whole story is in that word: to make it easy for you. «Sit down.» Finally you say: «be comfortable.»

Herman Hertzberger, born 1932, is a Dutch architect and professor emeritus at TU Delft. He has been awarded multiple times by international institutions and has published a number of books like «Lessons for Students in Architecture 1–4» and «Accommodating the unexpected».

Sven Högger, born 1992, studied architecture at ETH Zurich. His diploma project «Generosity» investigated the potentials of a tangible architecture that encourages physical contact with buildings. Based in Geneva since 2019, he has taught interior architecture at HEAD–Genève and currently works as an architect. In 2020, he co-founded the Swiss collective la-clique.