UNKNOWN HISTORY: LE CORBUSIER IN FRONT OF THE ‘ACADEMISM’ OF JAN DE RANITZ IN THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE NEW UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS AT NEW YORK (1946)

UNA HISTORIA DESCONOCIDA: LE CORBUSIER FRENTE AL ‘ACADEMICISMO’ DE JAN DE RANITZ EN LOS PREPARATIVOS PARA LA NUEVA SEDE DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS EN NUEVA YORK (1946)

Jan Molema

SUMMARY Soon after the second world war the general assembly of the United Nations decreed that the seat of the organization were to be located in the United States of America. A search commission started a research of the possibilities in this country. The commission amongst others counted three experts: the Frenchman Le Corbusier, the Soviet/Russian-Belgian and the Dutchman Jan de Ranitz. Le Corbusier worried about the composition of the commission: “I am obliged to inform you about the characteristic distressing situation here in NY in the commission for the Headquarters of the UN created by one of the members of the commission, that I am part of: Jenkheer de Ranitz (sic), who graduated from the university of Delft and tries to get a position from which he may drag down everything into the darkest academic catastrophe.”

In this article I will explain what happened in New York in 1946. A fight between big ‘frames of mind’, incapable to butch an inch where it came to principles of town planning.

KEY WORDS United Nations Headquarters; Le Corbusier; Jan de Ranitz; Van Eesteren; CIAM; Delft

RESUMEN Poco después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas decidió que la sede de la organización debía estar ubicada en los Estados Unidos de América. Una comisión para la búsqueda de un emplazamiento comenzó a investigar las posibilidades de este país. La comisión contó, entre otros, con tres expertos: el francés Le Corbusier, el soviético-ruso-belga Vasily Ipatiev y el neerlandés Jan de Ranitz. Le Corbusier estaba preocupado por la composición de la comisión: “Me veo en la obligación de informarle sobre la angustiosa situación creada aquí en Nueva York en la comisión para la Sede de las Naciones Unidas, presidida por uno de los miembros de la comisión, que de la que yo formo parte: Jenkheer de Ranitz (sic), quien se graduó de la Universidad de Delft y trata de conseguir una posición de la que puede arrastrar a todos a la más oscura catástrofe académica.”

En este artículo voy a explicar lo que sucedió en Nueva York en la comisión para la Sede de las Naciones Unidas, provista por uno de los miembros de la comisión, que de la que yo formo parte: Jenkheer de Ranitz (sic), quien se graduó de la Universidad de Delft y trata de conseguir una posición de la que puede arrastrar a todos a la más oscura catástrofe académica.

En este artículo voy a explicar lo que sucedió en Nueva York en la comisión para la Sede de las Naciones Unidas, provista por uno de los miembros de la comisión, que de la que yo formo parte: Jenkheer de Ranitz (sic), quien se graduó de la Universidad de Delft y trata de conseguir una posición de la que puede arrastrar a todos a la más oscura catástrofe académica.

I am obliged to inform you about the characteristic distressing situation here in NY in the commission for the Headquarters of the UN created by one of the members of the commission, that I am part of: Jenkheer de Ranitz (sic), who graduated from the university of Delft and tries to get a position from which he may drag down everything into the darkest academic catastrophe.”

In this article I will explain what happened in New York in 1946. A fight between big ‘frames of mind’, incapable to butch an inch where it came to principles of town planning.

EN LOS PREPARATIVOS PARA LA NUEVA SEDE DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS EN NUEVA YORK (1946)

NATIONS HEADQUARTERS AT NEW YORK (1946)

OF JAN DE RANITZ

IN THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE NEW UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS AT NEW YORK (1946)

1. This article is an adaption of a chapter of the book (published in Dutch) Molema, Jan; Leemans, Suzy: In behoudende omgiving, Heiningen: Jap Sam Books, 2010, Nederland. The book describes the activities of a group of students in the 1930’s at the department of Architecture of Delft Polytechnic (now University).

2. ‘Jonkheer’ is an honorific to show that someone does belong to the nobility, but does not possess a title. Ir. is an abbreviation of ‘ingenieur’, in this case architectural engineering. He was first president of the ‘kroegcommissie’ (which manages the use of the club building, the ‘societé’) and then of the senate of the Delftsch Studenten Corps of Delft. After graduating in 1934 he worked with ir. D. Roosenburg (grandfather of Rem Koolhaas) on different urban and landscape projects.

3. This article is an adaption of a chapter of the book (published in Dutch) Molema, Jan; Leemans, Suzy: In behoudende omgiving, Heiningen: Jap Sam Books, 2010, Nederland. The book describes the activities of a group of students in the 1930’s at the department of Architecture of Delft Polytechnic (now University).

4. Le Corbusier was a great architect, but he was even greater as a propagandist of his own doings. Jan de Ranitz, on the other hand, is practically unknown; also in his own country, though Dutch townplanners are familiar with his name and his office. But recently, when I gave a lecture in that studio, it turned out that really nobody there knew about De Ranitz’ battle with Le Corbusier in New York in 1946. In my article I try to lift the veil which covers that important episode in both the career of Le Corbusier and of Jan de Ranitz.

5. Jonkheer ir. Jan de Ranitz was born on 21 January 1909 in Breda, went to secondary school in Nijmegen, Amersfoort and Utrecht. Then he moved to Delft to study architectural engineering. He was first president of the ‘kroegcommissie’ (which manages the use of the club building, the ‘societé’) and then of the senate of the Delftsch Studenten Corps of Delft. After graduating in 1934 he worked with ir. D. Roosenburg (grandfather of Rem Koolhaas) on different urban and landscape projects. On January 1, 1938 he was nominated Inspector of Public Health (Public Housing), stationed at Middelburg. Here he stayed till 1948. During WWII, the Germans temporarily detained him with other Dutch intellectuals in a special camp, Sint-Michielsgestel. In 1948 he established an important design studio with his study friends ir. J.A. Kuiper en ir. F.J. Gouwetor. He died in Rotterdam on 4 December 1960.

6. When Franklin D. Roosevelt died, on April 12, 1945, the first act of his successor Harry S. Truman was to announce that: “The United Nations Conference on International Organization would take place as planned on 25 April, in San Francisco.” At the end of that conference a commission was installed, which had to find a definite location for the headquarters of the United Nations. Initially
the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands were against a location in the United States of America. After a lot of nubile-bubble about a vaunt of issues, it was decided however to look for a location within the USA. During the next assembly in London the Norwegian social democrat Tytge Lie became the secretary general and he installed a new entity: the Headquarters Commission, which had to find an adequate location before the end of the year. There existed a preference for two sites in New York, but also other offers were investigated. The Headquarters Commission consisted of nine members of whom three were ‘experts’: the Frenchman Le Corbusier, the Soviet–Russian Bassov and the Dutchman De Ranitz (figure 1).

On 23 March 1946 the Dutch architectural magazine BOUW announced De Ranitz’ appointment: Nederlan de UN-architectencommissie. De aanstelling van jhr ir. J. de Ranitz.

After nomination by the minister of Public Works and Reconstruction, the minister of Foreign Affairs has appointed jhr ir. J. de Ranitz Dutch representative in the internation al commission, which must prepare the building of the centre of the new organisation of the United Nations in the vicinity of New York. It will be the task of the commission to set up an investigation for the most suitable location for the UN administrative machine and make an urban sketch plan for the building in which the UN will reside. Through the appointment of jhr de Ranitz, who received his diploma of architectural engineer in Delft in 1934, the Netherlands will without any doubt be represented in this international commission by an all aspects competent man. Shortly after his graduation in Delft the architectural office Roosenburg contacted jhr De Ranitz; in that position he designed some extension plans for villages in Zeeland, such as Cloetinge. In 1938 he was nominated inspector for mass housing in Zeeland and West-Brabant. Directly after the invasion in May 1940 he made the first plans for the urban reconstruction of Middelburg (...).”

In the National Archive (Den Haag) we found letters in which De Ranitz, as Inspector of Public Health, announced his appointment in the ‘Headquarters Commission’ to the Royal Governor in the province Zeeland and to the Minister for Education, Art and Science. Both letters are dated 28 February 1946. De Ranitz wrote that the Minister of Foreign Affairs sends him to America for about 4 months from the beginning of March 1946 on as the Dutch representative in a commission, which had to make a study for the United Nations of the offered sites for the location of their headquarters in the United States of America. It stays unclear (for the time being) how De Ranitz was precisely nominated and appointed.

A WORKSHOP FOR PEACE

In A workshop for Peace, designing the United Nations Headquarters the architect George A. Dudley has extensively reported about the coming into being of the main seat of the United Nations. About the ‘Headquarters Commission’ he noted: ‘A ladder of reports produced General Assembly Resolution 8, adopted 14 February 1946: the Permanent Headquarters . . . shall be established in Westchester and/or Fairfield counties . . . Now the Assembly formed a Headquarters Commission to make an exhaustive study of that area and report back by early fall. France picked Le Corbusier as its Delegate to the Commission, to defend modern architecture and town design in a problem of world importance’. Another member was Russian structural engineer Nikolai D. Bassov, who would join Le Corbusier later on in the U.N. Board of Design for the Headquarters.

The Commission also had to help the Secretary-General arrange ‘temporary installation of the organs of the United Nations . . . the General Assembly in September . . . and housing the Delegates’ – despite a war-induced shortage. ‘Troubles of the moment were more than adequate,’ said (Tytge) Lie.

Despite the restriction to sites in the two counties adjoining New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston kept pressing the Commission, which had thirty-eight meetings, hearing from thirty added candidates, with what Site Search Committee assistant Sorenson called ‘confusing vague’. What strikes us is, that Le Corbusier and Bassov are mentioned, also elsewhere in Dudley’s book, but not De Ranitz. What to think about this? Was he present in New York or was he not?

From: Dudley (Dudley) vice-secretary general Adriaan Pelt and/or the Deft. architectural engineer ir. A.H. van Rod may have been instrumental here.

6. The (Dudley) vice-secretary general Adriaan Pelt and/or the Deft. architectural engineer ir. A.H. van Rod may have been instrumental here.
8. This letter is to be found in the archives of NLI, Rotterdam, Archief: Erv. inv nr: N. 293, UNO–gabinet. Other information from this archive is registered under the same inventory number.
9. ir. Van Eesteren’s first name was Corinna.
10. Original text in French: Monseigneur Caré Van Eesteren, Architecte Cher ami,
Je vous envole par présent courrier une documentation suffisante. Amicalement à vous,
Le Corbusier

Monsieur

Dear friend,

I send you some words to tell you that your presence here is highly desirable for taking part, as an expert from your country, in the nomination of the new commission for the site and the buildings of the UN; this commission will be responsible for the spirit that will lead the construction of the General (Head)quarters of the UN. I hope that your Government will not hesitate to send you here.

I will send you sufficient documentation with the next courier.

Friendly yours,

Le Corbusier

Handwritten

Headquarters Commission


http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/ppa.2013.i8.01

J. MOLEMA. “Unknown History: Le Corbusier in front ‘academism’ of Jan de Ranitz...”. N8_ FORMA Y CONSTRUCCIÓN EN ARQUITECTURA. Mayo 2013. Universidad de Sevilla. ISSN 2171–6887 / ISSN 2173–1616

http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/ppa.2013.i8.01
Right at that moment the Headquarters Commission was due to report its findings. In September of the same year a new commission was to be installed, whose task would be to design the headquarters’ complex. Le Corbusier worried seriously about the composition of that new commission. It is highly probable, that the ‘documentation suffisante’ he mentioned was a letter of which we find a draft in the Parisian Archive Le Corbusier11. Here we quote the draft partly, inclusive clerical errors:

My dear Van Eesteren,

I am obliged to inform you about the characteristic distressing situation here in New York in the commission for the headquarters of the UN created by one of the members of the commission I am part of: the Jenkheer de Ranitz12, who graduated from the university of Delft, eng(ineer) arch(itect) and public health inspector in Holland (worker, serious but a complete foreigner in the art) tries to get a position from which he may drag down (with the most naive conviction and innocence) into the darkest academic catastrophe13.

The definitive version of that letter, as received by Van Eesteren, is dated 5 July 1946. This we find in the Van Eesteren archive at the NAi. In this version the name of De Ranitz is not mentioned, but all other allusions about him as a person are maintained. The tenor of the letter is certainly identical to the one of the draft. De Ranitz was there, in New York (figure 2).

The same day, 5th of July, Le Corbusier sends a second letter to Van Eesteren and also to all delegates of the CIAM: “of all countries that take part in the Organisation of the United Nations. For that matter with the annotation: ‘highly confidential’.

He stated: “I agreed upon this message with personalities of the U.N.O., in perfect accord with José Luis Sert, Vice-President of the CIAM, and Pantazis, Secretary General of the CIAM in the U.S.A. This message is extremely abridged, but I hope that you will understand from it the whole value and meaning, as well as the necessity to intervene without a day of delay.”

And further ahead in the same letter: “Therefore you must, cher ami, immediately visit your Government to request to designate and send to New York, to the General Assembly of the U.N, in September 1946, the expert Mr. X, ... member of the CIAM, or a trusted representative of the CIAM (professional or non-professional) in architecture and urbanism, but capable to maintain the sublime idea of Architecture and Urbanism, at the moment of the construction of the H.Q.G. of the U.N.”

Also of this letter the Parisian archive contains a draft, which ends a follows: “There is always a possible danger: thus, for ex. Holland has had here in the site commission, of which I am a member, a very honest ilазвание Jenkheer de Ranitz...”

11. Nr.: D1 19387 T.

12. Apart from the drafts the archive contains transcriptions, drawn up by the archivists. In the transcription of the letter mentioned above we read ‘Jenkheer de Ranitz’, who graduated from the university of Delft, eng(ineer) arch(itect) and public health inspector in Holland (worker, serious but a complete foreigner in the art) tries to get a position from which he may drag down (with the most naive conviction and innocence) into the darkest academic catastrophe. The definitive version of that letter, as received by Van Eesteren, is dated 5 July 1946. This we find in the Van Eesteren archive at the NAi. In this version the name of De Ranitz is not mentioned, but all other allusions about him as a person are maintained. The tenor of the letter is certainly identical to the one of the draft. De Ranitz was there, in New York (figure 2).

13. Original text in French: "Il y a toujours danger possible: ainsi, par ex. la Hollande a possède ici dans la commission de site dont je fais partie un homme très honnête et travailleur mais capable de maintenir l'idée élevée de l'Architecture et de l'Urbanisme, au moment de la construction du H.Q.G. de l'U.N.”

14. Inv. nr.: D1 19389T.


16. Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne. 17. Telephone call with Auwe van der Weerd, Summer 2008, for which we are thankful.

18. Original text in French: Monsieur Le Corbusier,

24, rue Nungesser et Coli
Paris, France

Monsieur Le Corbusier

Your letters from New York about the future centre of the U.N. have interested me much. As the 50ste tentative of Holland has been nominated by the Council of Ministers on recommendation of the Minister of Public Works, you will understand, that it is not so easy to find an occasion to intervene with the promise of success. Recently I have not seen any possibility to act. These days Sandberg has promised me to occupy himself with it through another ministry where he has good contacts. So, again, we must wait. When you have any news about this affair, please let me know. Because of all sorts of difficulties (about trips and also finances) that the different delegates of CIAPAC have, I do not see you a possibility to fix a date for the reunion. When would you be back in Europe after your next visit to the U.S.A.? 24
THE THORN ISSUE
The question arises whether there is a direct link between both incidents. And what issues had De Ranitz brought up to upset Le Corbusier to such extreme? Once more the draft by Le Corbusier to Van Eesteren, dated 5 July ‘46:

21. Archive Le Corbusier, Paris [01 19 389]. The rest of the letter is very difficult to read and reproduce, but corresponds in content and intention with what

...the gentlemen were in dispute:... 

Morale: We must inform your government, acción contra acción...that they can not have them represented by a reactionary man. Holland has a world reputation in architecture. I trusted De Corbusier during weeks. But he represents the brakes, the anti-art and the anti-progress. Yet, the UN will be able to present to the world a dazzling building of tomorrow and I promise you that the program will make me do it! Be smart and without hatred, but firm as an iron bar!...

DUDLEY'S LOVE

22. ‘In this country’ suggests that De Ranitz wrote this whilst still in the USA.


24. States & Cities: Brotherly Love


25. Beckerman says ‘building in belgische, enkele Amerikanese offres’.

26. ‘De huisvesting van de UN. Een grootseopdracht.’

27. In this country suggests that De Ranitz wrote this whilst still in the USA.

28. De Ranitz being the only entitled member!

But in the heart of the formidable and magnificent problem of the U.N. he is an immense danger.

Be smart, Be without hatred, Be firm as an iron bar!

The question arises whether there is a direct link between both incidents. And what issues had De Ranitz brought up to upset Le Corbusier to such extreme? Once more the draft by Le Corbusier to Van Eesteren, dated 5 July ‘46:

21. Archive Le Corbusier, Paris [01 19 389]. The rest of the letter is very difficult to read and reproduce, but corresponds in content and intention with what

...the gentlemen were in dispute:...

Morale: We must inform your government, acción contra acción...that they can not have them represented by a reactionary man. Holland has a world reputation in architecture. I trusted De Corbusier during weeks. But he represents the brakes, the anti-art and the anti-progress. Yet, the UN will be able to present to the world a dazzling building of tomorrow and I promise you that the program will make me do it! Be smart and without hatred, but firm as an iron bar!...

DUDLEY'S LOVE

22. ‘In this country’ suggests that De Ranitz wrote this whilst still in the USA.


24. States & Cities: Brotherly Love


25. Beckerman says ‘building in belgische, enkele Amerikanese offres’.

26. ‘De huisvesting van de UN. Een grootseopdracht.’

27. In this country suggests that De Ranitz wrote this whilst still in the USA.

28. De Ranitz being the only entitled member!

But in the heart of the formidable and magnificent problem of the U.N. he is an immense danger.

Be smart, Be without hatred, Be firm as an iron bar!
The broker, William Zeckendorf, of the firm Webb and Knapp, boasts, that he has sold the grounds for a very modest price (only 20 dollar per ft² or 215 dollar per m²) to Rockefeller. The reason for this generosity becomes clear when we subsequently are informed, that Webb and Knapp already have purchased practically every lot on Fifth Avenue in the vicinity of the U N O site and that the value of these lots, after Rockefeller’s donation and the plans of the U N O became public, has doubled.

Zeckendorf imagines, that these parcels offer a very attractive place for new embassies, big international hotels etc. He even thinks to found a musical centre, which shall leave room for the metropolitan opera, the new york philharmonic orchestra and an airport. As a clever site speculator he has already purchased big areas and is continuously busy to extend the possessions of Webb and Knapp.

Thus it becomes clear that the plans to establish a centre for the United Nations have led to a grandiose ground speculation, that—and this is the worst, as de Ranitz writes in his article in Bouw entitled: “High rise, keep(s) you head cool.” (Het hoofd koel bij hoogbouw) 30. Is it surprising, that the United Nations, (18 p) 2783977

6 june 1946 De Ranitz, New York brief with maandrapport (1 p) aan de Minister van Buitenlandsche Zaken, Plein 23 ’s-Gravenhage

18 september 1946, Van Kiefers, Nederlands vertegenwoordiger in den Veiligheidsraad der Vereenigde Naties, brief aan de Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken, Plein 23 ’s-Gorinchem, stelt van Kamkehrke voor als Nederlandse vertegenwoordiger in de Headspraut Committee.

30 maart 1946 De Ranitz, Bolwerk 85 Bergen op Zoom brief aan Mevrouw Kluyver, Nederlands vertegenwoordigster in de Veiligheidsraad der Vereenigde Naties, Advocaat, Zandstraat 43, Den Haag. De Ranitz schrijft in zijn brief: “Meerder leden van de Headspraut Committee schijnen althans in groote lijnen te deelen, Omar M. Adel, Van Kleffens heeft het over een memorandum van De Ranitz en een ‘gedrukt rapport met 26 annexes, kaarten, enz.’ Waar is dat?”


References:

Bouw. Volumen 1, número 12, 1946.

Bouw. Volumen 6, número 2, 1951.


