

The life within the threshold

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1. Introduction

'PREVI Lima' was a design competition for affordable and incremental housing in the early Seventies. Besides a group of Peruvian architects there was a group of international architects invited to take part in this competition. One of these architects was Aldo van Eyck who was, and still is, internationally known because of his involvement in the modernist movements CIAM and Team X. His design for the PREVI de Lima showed an urban plan with typical organically shaped housing blocks. These housing blocks have a quality within them that can serve the city as a whole, the community within the block and the individual dwelling. The design strategy that van Eyck used to achieve this quality from the urban plan to the dwelling, and the other way around, brings forth a gradual transition from public to private. This gradual transition causes diversity in types of open spaces. Providing these types of open spaces within the city give the city dwellers the choice which type of open space they want to be in or relate to. To fully understand the way of thinking behind this strategy it is important to understand van Eyck's text *Steps towards a configurative discipline* that was published in the magazine *Forum* in 1962.

Neil Leach describes in his article the dark side of the domus (1998) that in a village - or as discussed 'community' - difference is absorbed and therefore it is denied. This system causes "certain intolerance" towards that what is different. The city on the other hand is described as a cosmopolitan place where difference is tolerated and even celebrated.

This black and white comparison of village and city calls for a more subtle approach that can be based on the work of Aldo van Eyck. In his article *steps towards a configurative discipline* (1962) he talks about the 'in-between' world. This idea of 'in-between' can be seen in the gradual change of spaces between the public and private. The question that is discussed in this essay is the following: Can the 'in-between' world of Aldo van Eyck serve as a mediator between the community and the cosmopolis?

2. The 'configurative discipline'

One of Aldo van Eyck's ideas elaborated in his text *steps towards a configurative discipline* is the importance of how twin phenomena connect with each other. This is shown in his saying: "As abstract antonyms the halves [of a twin phenomenon] are rendered meaningless."¹ He is concerned of the fact that architects and planners don't see that people "breathe both in and out into built form."² Urbanism and architecture should not be seen as two separate and individual professions but Van Eyck calls for a more integrated profession where both planners and architects work on all scales.

¹ Aldo van Eyck, "steps towards a configurative discipline," *Forum No.3* (1962): 81.

² Ibid.

A critical concept that is brought forward by Van Eyck is the concept of 'right-size'. He states that in places where twin phenomena are degraded to 'abstract antonyms' everything becomes too large and too small. Questioning the size and scale of an object is the way to get to the 'right-size'.

“There is no question of right-size (by right-size I mean the right effect of size) and hence no question of human scale.”³

Here the idea of the 'human scale' is mentioned that can be seen as the starting point of the 'right-size'. Van Eyck states that when something has the 'right-size' it refers to both parts of a twin phenomenon. More important, following this idea, is that when an object has the 'right-size' it can become “both part and whole and embrace both unity and diversity.”⁴

One of the fundamental understandings of the 'configurative discipline' has to do with the multiplication of parts. A risk of multiplication lies in losing the identity of the individual unit. Hence, each individual unit must have the potential to be clustered in a group without losing it's own identity. And not only that, Van Eyck mentions that the identity of the individual unit must be able to be extended in a relevant way for the next 'stage'.

To illustrate his ideas Van Eyck uses two housing projects designed by Piet Blom (ill. 1) that were published in the magazine Forum.⁵ Both projects were study projects for Blom's study at the academy of architecture in Amsterdam where he graduated in 1962. These projects gained the attention of Van Eyck because they cross the borders of the usual housing types and thinking about architecture and urbanism at that time. He says the following about these projects:

“Nor do these projects depend on the current narrow views of what inside and outside, individual and public space mean; nor for that matter on the frozen quartet of functions and the foolish severing of urbanism from architecture into two conflicting disciplines.”⁶

Here the essence of the 'configurative discipline' is exposed. Within Blom's projects the configuration of the dwellings within the cluster gives a quality to each individual dwelling as well as the cluster as a whole. In the next 'stage' of multiplication, where the clusters are configured on the project site, the configuration of the clusters brings forth qualities for the whole without losing the clusters identity.

³ Eyck, “configurative discipline,” 81.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In Forum no.7 (1959) Piet Blom's project “de steden zullen dorpsgewijs bewoond worden” was published and later in Forum no.5 (1960/61) his project “praktische oefening stedenbouw” was published.

⁶ Eyck, “configurative discipline,” 83.

3. The Cosmopolitan utopia

In his article the dark side of the domus Neil Leach extensively discusses Heidegger's ideas from his essay 'building, dwelling, thinking'. Leach focuses on Heidegger's thinking on 'the soil'. By being build in a particular place an abstract building gains its 'sense of presence', which Leach describes with the word '*Dasein*'.⁷ "This evocation of the soil, this call for a 'situated' architecture, can be read as an evocation for the *Heimat*, for the homeland."⁸

Leach describes how Heidegger's ideas about 'the soil' are connected to fascist ideology. The work of Klaus Theweleit is used by Leach to describe how pre-war German fascism is based on the idea of 'identifying with a larger body'.⁹ This system causes that identity becomes framed into the soil of a place. To conclude this idea Leach says: "In this dissolving into nature, difference is suppressed and a new identity is forged with mother earth."¹⁰ It can be argued that this idea or system creates a homely atmosphere for the people that live in a particular place. But a problem within this system is addressed by Leach with the case of the 'wanderer' or people without a fixed place to live. For these people the homely atmosphere created by the identity of 'the soil' or the homeland can be experienced as uncanny. The writing of Freud is used by Leach to uncover this: "For Freud the *heimlich* contained the *unheimlich* repressed within it."¹¹

Two types of living are compared by Leach, the village life and the city life. Living in a village is described as living within a stable and traditional community. Opposite to this is the city life, which is a life with more freedom and flow of people. A life where the 'wanderer' can feel at home, which by Leach is described as: "..., the 'wanderer' is the archetypal creature of our contemporary condition, a creature whose existence reflects the very transience of the city."¹² Further more Leach states that people in the city have created anonymity for themselves to be able to deal with the 'overstimulation of life in the metropolis'. This anonymity provides a culture that accepts difference. Opposite to this the village or community life absorbs difference and because of that it denies the existence of difference. This denial of difference can bring forth intolerance towards that what is different.

Leach is clearly a supporter of the modern day city life that he calls the 'cosmopolis', a place where different people live together and accept each other for what they are. A Critical note on how the city is planned to grow is stated by leach: "It is only when the city mimics the village, when it

⁷ Neil Leach, "The dark side of the domus," *The Journal of Architecture* 3:1 (1998): 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 33.

¹⁰ Ibid. 33.

¹¹ Ibid. 35.

¹² Ibid. 39.

fragments into ‘neighbourhoods’ that constitute autonomous individual units, that this model begins to break down.”¹³ To me the question arises if this fragmentation into neighbourhoods can be done in a way that the model of the cosmopolis with its acceptance of difference can be maintained.

4. How configurative is the PREVI design?

From the 1950’s onwards the Peruvian people found their own way of dealing with the housing problem in the cities, mainly in Lima. Lack of government control caused the growth of informal settlements around the city that were called ‘barriadas’. In these settlements young workers started building their own houses and communities. In 1969 the Peruvian government together with the UNDP¹⁴ organised a design competition to find new ways to deal with this housing problem. All Peruvian architects could join the competition and a group of international architects were invited to join the competition. Aldo van Eyck was one of them.

Aldo van Eyck’s design for PREVI Lima (ill. 3) is a reaction on how the communities and houses were built in the barriadas.¹⁵ These self build communities and houses had a lot of value to Van Eyck that should be considered to bring into the new design. He says: “The needs and aspirations of the people are revealed in barriadas like Comas, San Martin de Porres and Ciudad de Dios as well as in partially preconstructed settlements like Ventinilla and Pamplona.”¹⁶ Another important aspect that Van Eyck carefully considered was the climate in Lima. A cool breeze is very much wanted when walking in the sunshine with a humidity of 80%.

Within Van Eyck’s design the houses are configured in a way that fresh air can easily enter the house. On two sides of the house there is a courtyard to provide the house with daylight and the aforementioned fresh air. These courtyards are closed from the public realm by a wall made out of the same bricks that are used to build the house. By making triangular shaped courtyards van Eyck wanted to discourage the homeowners to extend their houses within the courtyards, because this would take away the supply of fresh air and daylight.

To configure a cluster (ill. 3) of houses the basic unit of one house with two triangular shaped courtyards is copied next to each other. These two units are copied upwards to form a row of six units high and two units wide. This strip is copied four times next to each other but with a space in between that is filled with groups of four units, two units high and two units wide. This way of configuring brings forth cul-de-sac streets within the clusters and entrances to the courtyards around the whole

¹³ Leach, “dark side of the domus,” 40.

¹⁴ United Nations Development Programme

¹⁵ Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. Relativiteit en verbeelding* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1994), 554.

¹⁶ Aldo van Eyck, “previ/lima. low cost housing project,” *Architectural Design*, 70/4 (1970): 189.

cluster. Another aspect that comes forth out of the clustering principle is that a cool breeze gets deep into the cluster and hence into the houses.

On the scale of the urban plan the clusters are placed within a neighbourhood that is surrounded by main streets that serve the city. In the neighbourhood there are secondary streets that provide accessibility for cars. The clusters are configured and placed within this network of streets to form different types of open space that provide spaces for communal buildings like schools.

Although the described steps show the principle of a configurative design it is Francis Strauven who states that the PREVI design was not an integral configurative design but has some parts of the configurative discipline.¹⁷ The shape of the courtyard walls serves the individual units as well as the configuration of the cluster. And the paths in and around the clusters are formed by the shape of the courtyard walls.

5. The in-between (threshold)

For Neal Leach the cosmopolis is the place where everybody is accepted, a utopic view on the city life I would say. And when the city breaks down into neighbourhoods this utopian city life breaks down with it. That means that when the people that are living within a cosmopolis live in the centre of the city they accept difference but when the same people start living in neighbourhoods they become less tolerant to difference. Can it be that a person lives in the cosmopolis and fully accepts difference but on the other hand this person lives in certain communities where difference is less tolerated. These communities are not necessarily build up structures but can be sports clubs, students associations, political parties, etc.

The question that arises to me is: Can a physical space be the bridge between the living conditions of the cosmopolis and those of a community? And what will this physical space look like? Going back to the PREVI design of van Eyck there is a hint of this physical space. When we look at the clusters in the urban plan the odd shape of dwellings courtyard wall gives it a shape where the individual dwelling is still recognized. The cluster doesn't become a big solid mega structure but it is the opposite, a structure where each individual dwelling is recognized and surrounded by entrances to the individual courtyards. Going into the cluster and in-between them there is the same principle of individual recognition and the idea of the whole. The opportunity to develop their house in their own way, that was one of the guide lines for the design competition, gives the people the possibility to show their difference.

¹⁷ Strauven, *Relativiteit en verbeelding*, 557.

Coming back to the polarities, cosmopolis and community, that Leach describes it is important to understand the following quote from van Eyck:

“When I say, therefore, make a welcome of each door and a countenance of each window: make of each a place, because man’s home-realm is the in-between realm - the realm architecture sets out to articulate, - the intention is again to unmask false meaning and to load the meaning of size with what right-size implies”¹⁸

What can be distilled from this quote is that van Eyck states that the in-between is the place where a home is created. More practical, this in-between can be formed around doors and windows because these are the elements where the boundary between the inside and outside world is narrowed. That is why these elements might be the answer to the problem of the polarities, cosmopolis and community, that Leach brings forth.

When a cluster or building block within a neighbourhood of the cosmopolis is designed with the ‘right-size’ and idea of ‘in-between’ in mind it could help people to show their difference. This could be done by considering the design of the doorways and window openings. When these elements are designed in a way that people can articulate their difference in this space this might help to show their difference. When it is possible to show this difference it might help to accept the difference of other people within their neighbourhood.

6. Where the difference is shown

Accepting each other’s difference is what Leach states as the fundamental quality of the cosmopolis. This is possible because the people living in the cosmopolis have provided them selves with a certain anonymity and a cocoon against the over stimulating city life. When reflecting this to physical architecture an architecture of anonymity might be the outcome. Opposite to this stands the architecture of Aldo van Eyck. In his architecture he is looking for and questioning the ‘right-size’. This is defined by Van Eyck as the human scale. Along with questioning the human scale he clearly states in his text ‘steps towards a configurative discipline’ that the ‘inbetween’ realm is the home realm. To refine this I would say that this ‘inbetween’ space is the place where people can articulate their difference and show this in a safe place to the outside world. By being able to show your own difference and seeing other peoples difference it might be easier to accept these differences. Making this ‘inbetween’ space is not enough to provide people a place to show their difference. This ‘inbetween’ space should give people the confidence to show their difference and this is where the ‘right-size’ or better, the human scale plays a role.

¹⁸ Eyck, “configurative discipline,” 82.

To give a physical touch to my conclusion I want to discuss two housing projects that were designed by Herman Hertzberger. He was an architect that was part of the configurative group. The two projects I want to show are the Haarlemmer houttuinen in Amsterdam (ill. 4) and the Wohnhof LiMa in Berlin (ill. 5). Both projects show balconies that are half inside and half outside the house. In this space the inside world of the house and the outside world of the city are reflected. This, to me, shows how an inbetween space can be formed and designed in a way that the people that live there can show who they are.

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Illustration 1

Above: “de steden zullen dorps gewijs bewoond worden.” [“the cities will be lived in like villages.”]

Study project by Piet Blom

Source: Forum 7 (1959)

Under: “Praktische oefening stedenbouw.” [“Practical exercise for urban design.”] Study project by

Piet Blom

Source: Forum 5 (1960/61)

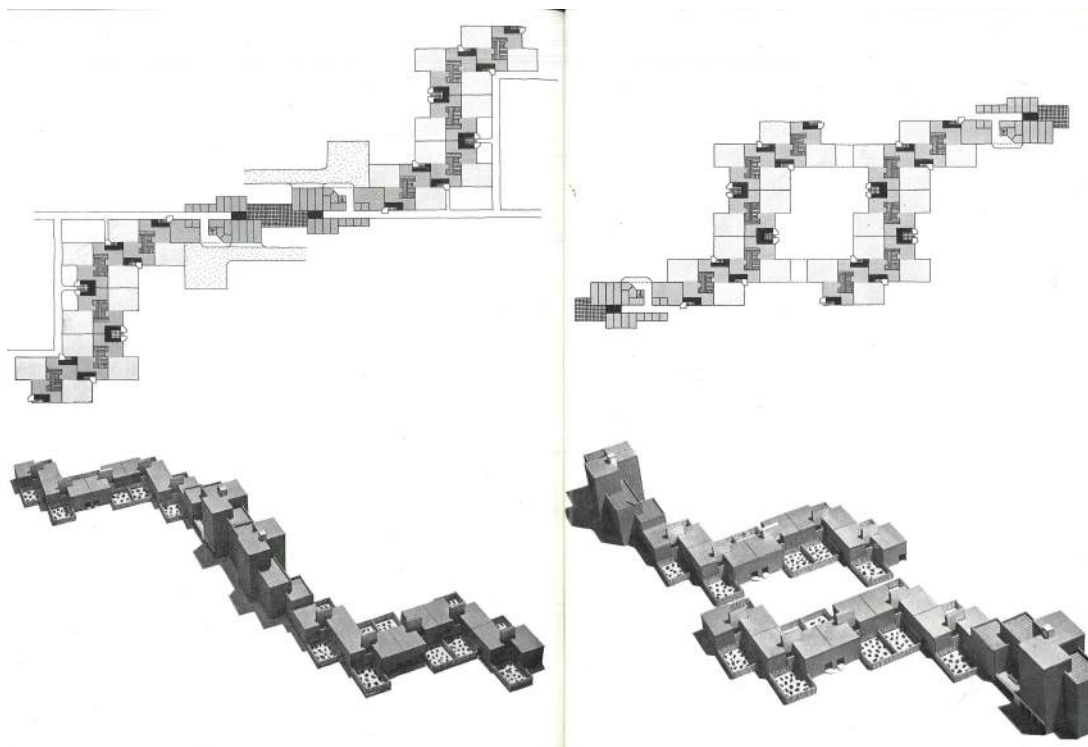
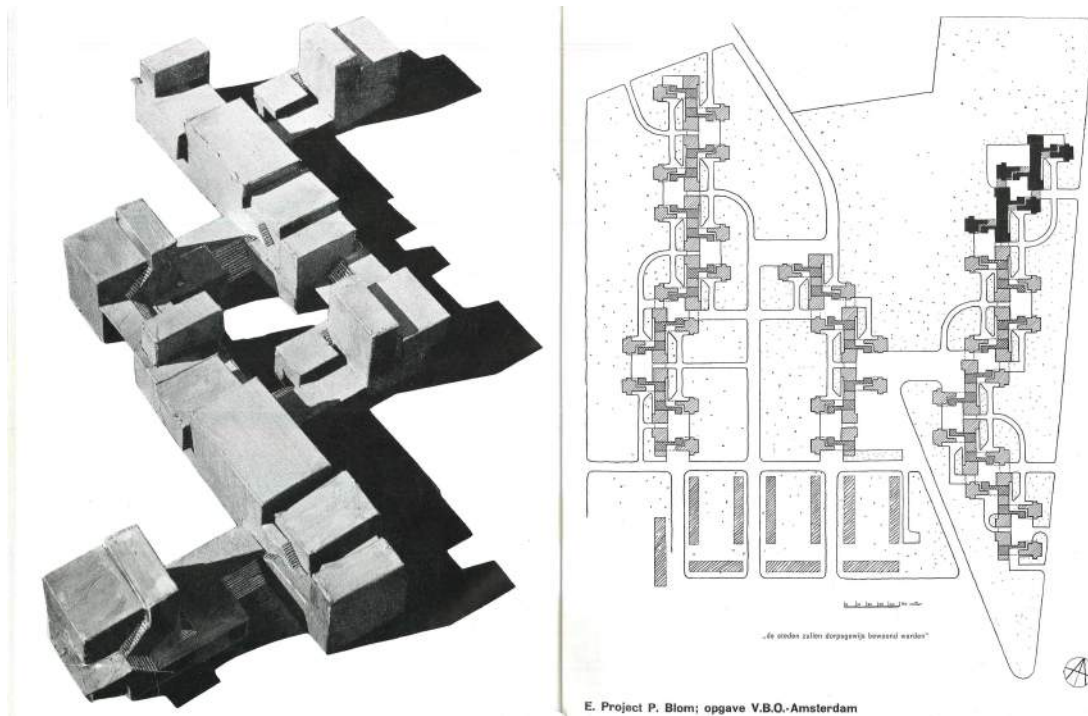


Illustration 2

Above: The urban plan of Aldo van Eyck's design for the PREVI Lima

Source: own illustration

Under: View of the clusters edge

Source: Eyck, Aldo van. *werken*. Bussum: Thoth, 1999.

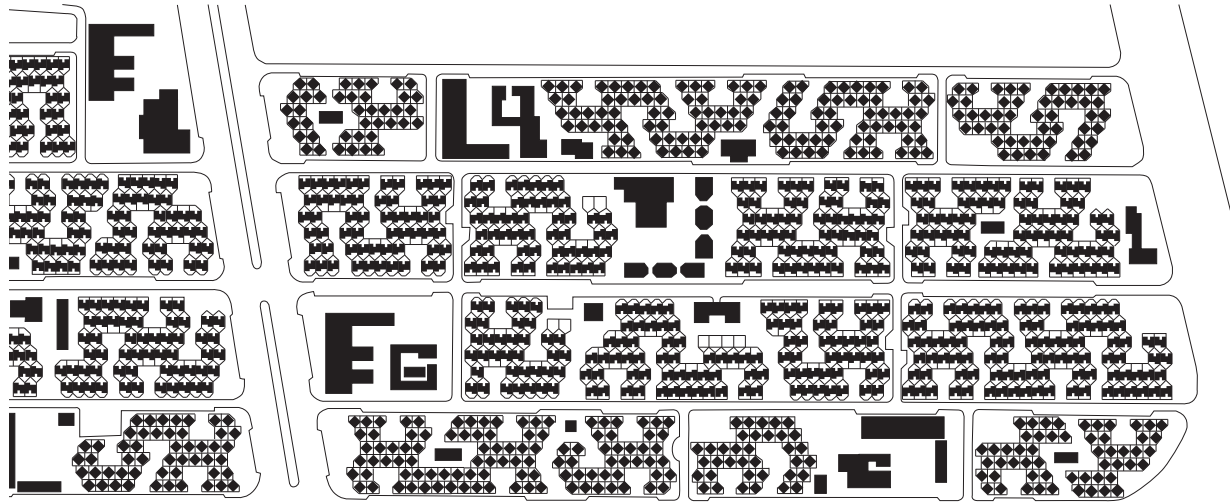


Illustration 3

The configuration of the cluster designed by Aldo van Eyck for the PREVI Lima

Source: own illustration

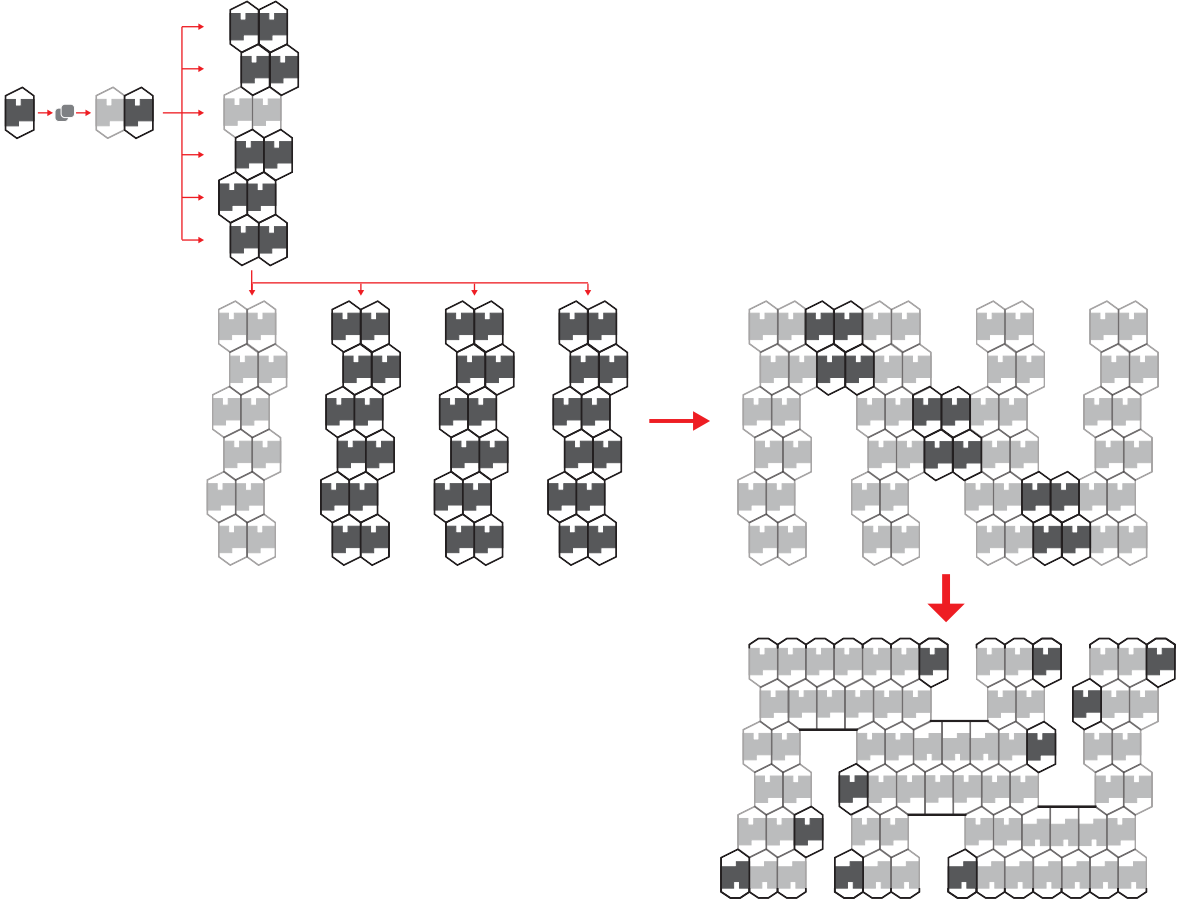


Illustration 4

Haarlemmer houttuinen in Amsterdam designed by Herman Hetzberger

Source: <http://www.hanswagner.nl/projecten/restauratie/renovatie-75-woningen-aan-de-nieuwe-houttuinen-te-amsterdam/>

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Illustration 5

Wohnhof LiMa in Berlin designed by Herman Hetzberger

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/8258976@N03/4057912594> (June 2014)

