

THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF MUSIC?

– THE CONCEPT OF PROGRAMMATIC ARCHITECTURE BY HENRY VAN DE VELDE

International Symposium
“The Role of the Humanities in Design Creativity”
EMMTEC, University of Lincoln, UK

Ole W. Fischer, Dipl. Arch. ETH/SIA

Architectural Theory (Junior Faculty)
Institute for History and Theory of Architecture (gta)
Department of Architecture (DARCH)
Eidgenössisch Technische Hochschule Zürich (ETH), CH

Key Theme 5: The Humanities in Design and Artistic Practice
The Birth of Modernity out of the Spirit of Music?
– *The Concept of Programmatic Architecture by Henry van de Velde (Abstract)*

Reading Friedrich Nietzsche's work was the starting point for Henry van de Velde in his artistic work in the 1880s. His change-over to the applied arts and architecture in the 1890s and subsequent appointment to the Court of Weimar in 1901 coincided with a substantial series of works dedicated to Nietzsche, which van de Velde continued in Holland during the period between the wars and which were one of his most important works until the memoirs written in post-war Switzerland. The focus of my research is the correlation of radical philosophy, aesthetic thought and artistic production. By confronting the aesthetic concepts of Friedrich Nietzsche with the artistic and theoretic work of Henry van de Velde my *recherché* exemplifies the process of acquiring philosophic concepts and positions to produce meaning and significance in art, design and architecture as a strategy of the avant-gardes of the 20th century.

The focus of this conference paper is put on the translational process from philosophical text to abstract image design, with a constant reference to the contemporary situation of a historical turn in the episteme – from linguistic to iconic. The analysis and interpretation of a historic point of a crisis of language and traditional art in early modernity, where the distrust against language, moral and convention was put forward by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and was answered by his reader Henry van de Velde with the artistic concept of “transcription ornamentale”, which opened the field for formal experimentation of an abstract as well as a philosophical informed design process, can inform the evaluation of the complex relationship of philosophic concepts and design interventions of today. A cross reading of van de Velde own writings with the philosophic notions from Nietzsche on art and architecture and the interpretation of one of van de Velde's mayor works dedicated to Nietzsche – the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar (1902-03) – give an exemplification of the concept of programmatic architecture, adapted by van de Velde from late-romantic music theory of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner.

Ole W. Fischer (*1974) teaches theory of architecture at ETH Zurich since 2002. He studied architecture at the Bauhaus University Weimar and ETH. In his PhD he analyzed the artistic and theoretic work of Henry van de Velde dedicated to Friedrich Nietzsche as an example of philosophical informed design. In 2005 he was fellow researcher at the GSD Harvard, in 2004 and 2005 fellow researcher at the Weimar Classic Foundation. Ole W. Fischer is founder of the discussion platform „MittelBau“ at ETH, and he published internationally to questions of contemporary architectural theory (*Werk; JSAH; Thresholds; Archplus, GAM*).

The Birth of Modernity out of the Spirit of Music?
– *The Concept of Programmatic Architecture by Henry van de Velde (Draft)*

In early January 1889, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a professor of philology of the University Basel in early retirement, sent several obscure letters to his friends and colleagues from Torino signed “Dionysos”, “Nietzsche Caesar” or “The Crucified.”ⁱ When his alarmed friend Franz Overbeck arrived in Torino from Basel on January 8th he found Nietzsche already unaware of himself, so that he decided to take Nietzsche back with him to Basel’s asylum, the first station of an eleven and a half year twilight in madness. After Nietzsche’s breakdown his manuscripts as well as his letters and parts of his library remained in Torino and scattered at other places of his unsteady life between cheap tenancy in Italian cities, alpine villages, friends in Basel and family in Naumburg. With the ebbing hope for Nietzsche’s mental recovery, the question arose of what to do with his literary remains, especially since the last months of his conscious life were extraordinary productive.

Nietzsche’s mother was overburdened with Nietzsche’s home care and, as a pastor’s widow, she was repelled by the radical writings of her son, but she gave her acknowledgement to Franz Overbeck and Heinrich Köselitz (alias Peter Gast), Nietzsche’s former student and secretary, to act as literary executors. In 1893, after her final return from a failed anti-Semitic colony experiment in Paraguay, where she lost her husband, wealth and mission, Friedrich Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth Förster immediately took over the self-declared legacy as representative of Nietzsche’s interests and seized his literary remains.ⁱⁱ She carried together his manuscripts, struggled with the publisher for the proof sheets with his annotations, asked all his correspondence partners for a return or copy of his letters and collected his library and private papers. In 1894 Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, the name she used from then on, was able to open the “Nietzsche-Archive” on the first floor of her mother’s house in the small city of Naumburg – with the dooming philosopher upstairs. Soon her literary circles, afternoon teas, piano soirées and other social activities interfered with the care for the sick brother, and Elisabeth chose to move to Weimar, to participate in the social life of the Grand Duke’s court and profit from the glorious heritage of Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe – the emblems of German Classic literature and poetry. In spring of 1896 a grant by Meta von Salis, a writer friend of Nietzsche, provided Elisabeth with a villa on top of the hills overlooking Weimar, because the death of their mother made it necessary to re-unify archive and care for the mad philosopher-brother under the same roof: Nietzsche himself was transported in a special train cabin from Naumburg to Weimar at night. In the meantime Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche had started twice an edition of Nietzsche’s works: although she was in charge of copy rights of the published works and had managed to collect almost all the literary remains, she disassociated several times from the editors she had engaged: first she fired Köselitz, who had been working as an editor since 1893. Then she hired and fired Fritz Kögel, Rudolf Steiner – the later founder of Anthroposophy – as well as Ernst and August Honeffer within a few years. Finally, in 1898, it was Heinrich Köselitz again, the only one able to read Nietzsche’s cryptic handwriting, who came back and helped her to start the edition project of the 20 volumes “Complete Works”, which was not finished before 1913.ⁱⁱⁱ This “Großoktaveausgabe” together with the following soft cover edition, Nietzsche’s choices and collected letters were a big success, translated soon into French, English and many other languages, and were the basis of “Nietzsche” as the cultural phenomenon we are still infected with today.^{iv} However, the Nietzsche-Archive remained a private institution, or more precisely: a one-woman-property, which brought unfortunate side effects to the publishing policy: Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche held back Nietzsche’s finished, but unpublished

autobiographical book *ecce homo*,^v manipulated several of his letters, and compiled his so called master piece “Will to Power” from fragments of various sketchbooks of Nietzsche – with the uncritical help of her editors. In addition she vindicated her own image of her brother with a series of biographies.^{vi} This met criticism right from the beginning by former friends of Nietzsche like Overbeck, by former editors and employees of Förster-Nietzsche as well as other Nietzsche experts, but Elisabeth recognized a strong leap of faith by almost all public intellectuals of her time. And she still held hand on her brother, the “fallen eagle” and most important “piece” in her collection, whom she used to show to “special guests” of the archive. With the example of Cosima Wagner as high priestess of the Wagner cult in Bayreuth in mind, she cultivated her role of devoted sister, wise woman and hostess of a cultural circle in Weimar, and with the help of the patron Count Harry Kessler the archive soon turned into a center of early modern avant-gardes.

Elisabeth understood the importance of art and media in modern society (as well as the new laws on copyright) and so she monopolized the production of Nietzsche portraits, sculptures and photographs by various artists. In fact, she made only use of photographs of her brother from the time before his breakdown, whereas she preferred paintings, etchings and sculptures of the sick philosopher with a prophetic notion, and finally, with the help of Kessler, she succeeded in finding with Hans Olde and Max Klinger the corresponding artists who were able to fulfill her claim and represent Nietzsche between intimate martyr and heroic prophet. Elisabeth handed out pieces and fragments of Nietzsche’s writings to several of the new art and literature magazines, which were emerging around the turn of the century in Berlin, Vienna, Darmstadt, Frankfurt, Munich and Leipzig. These publications helped to connect the philosophy of Nietzsche with the new aesthetic movement, and to raise the demand for Nietzsche’s works. The increase of income through donations and royalties made it possible for Elisabeth not only to pay for transcribing, correcting and editing Nietzsche’s works, but also to enjoy bourgeois comfort. Already in 1898 she started to make alterations of the villa “Silberblick” (gleam of silver), which de facto still belonged to Meta von Salis, and Elisabeth’s actions led directly to a break of this friendship. After the death of Nietzsche in August 1900, it became obvious, that she was in need of a new attraction for her archive: an interior design by the style reformer Henry van de Velde!

The Flemish painter, autodidactic designer and architect van de Velde was recognized as an early enthusiastic follower of the “philosopher with the hammer” and, after he had his breakthrough as “inventor” in Germany of art nouveau at the exhibition of Dresden in 1896, his star began to shine over the same circles that were interested in Nietzsche’s “New Man.” In spring 1901 he gave a lecture series about the theoretic foundation of the “New Style” in the famous salon of Cornelia Richter in Berlin, and Count Kessler introduced him at one of his *soupées* to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. She in turn invited van de Velde and Kessler on a *pèlerinage* to Nietzsche’s tomb in the small village of Röcken on August 25th 1901 – the first anniversary of his death. Van de Velde, who was in search for a new field of activity, after he had left behind the idea of a new guild society with the bankruptcy of his arts-and-crafts workshops in Berlin and Brussels in 1900, became immediately interested in the plan to reform the applied arts production in the grand duchy of Weimar. Förster-Nietzsche had in mind to re-animate the idea of a cultural Weimar movement: after the “golden age” with the poets Schiller and Goethe, the “silver age” with the composer and virtuoso Franz Liszt, she imagined a “New Weimar” of arts, architecture and life reform with the help of van de Velde under the banner of Nietzsche’s philosophy. To reinforce her diplomatic maneuvers for his appointment at court, in fall 1901, she charged van de Velde with the modification and alteration of the villa “Silberblick”. At the same time this building transformation was an expression of the new autonomy Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche had gained by taking over the ownership of the

archival villa that year. Van de Velde on the other hand, who had found in Nietzsche's writings in the early 1890s a fundamental critique to expose bourgeois culture and reject academic artistic production, which led finally to his "mission" of renewing applied arts and architecture, welcomed the commission to remodel the archive as a chance to combine his interests in aesthetic reform and the New Style with an homage to "his" philosopher.

Furthermore, the design of the Nietzsche-Archive became an exemplary case study of van de Velde's concept of "ornamental transcription" or, with other words, a piece of programmatic art. Van de Velde was aware of this concept of referring to external thoughts of philosophy or literature with internal means of the discipline formulated in late romantic music theory by Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt. He applied those ideas on applied art, architecture, furniture and book design. Programmatic art was meant to disarm the latent intellectual distrust put forward against music (and architecture) by the aesthetic systems of German idealistic philosophy of Kant, Hegel or Schelling, who preferred the conceptualized artwork of poetry and philosophy. They disregarded music (and architecture) as meaningless entertainment or emotional expression, and therefore as inferior arts. According to Wagner, music is able to refer to an external "program" by the title of the work, an explanatory theoretic text of the composer (where the name "program" is taken from), and a significant way of structuring the abstract material into themes or so-called leitmotifs. Wagner goes on to explain, that Beethoven consciously transgressed the canonic symphonic form with the vocal finale of his Symphony No. 9 in order to transcend and express highest emotion: the celebration of joy of a liberated mankind. Beethoven's finale was for Wagner the rebirth of the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" (synthesis of arts) of ancient Greek tragedy. Van de Velde adopted this idea of synthesis of arts interpenetrating all aspects of life. But even more relevant for van de Velde's aesthetic thought was the rejection of mimicry and imitation in the concept of programmatic art, providing a possibility to inform an abstract object with philosophic meaning beyond application of symbolic ornament or classical tectonic language. Nietzsche, who had reflected on Wagner, Schopenhauer and the metaphysics of music in his early writings, proposed yet another important motive of non-figural representation: he suggested the identity of internal and external worlds, a resemblance of character and whole of the post-Christian thinker with his built environment, which reformulates the pre-Socratic idea of *physis* as an organic unity of spirit and matter, of surface and content, of inside and outside, or what Nietzsche called the "architecture for the perceptive":

*„Architecture for the perceptive. – There is and probably will be a need to perceive what our great cities lack above all: still, wide extensive places for reflection; places with tall, spacious, lengthy colonnades for inclement or unduly sunny weather where no traffic noise or street cries are able to penetrate, and where a refined sensibility would forbid even a priest to pray aloud: buildings and locations that express as a whole the sublimity of stepping aside to take thought for oneself. The time has passed when the Church possessed the monopoly for reflection; when the *vita contemplativa* primarily had to be a *vita religiosa*; and yet that is the idea expressed in everything the Church has built. I do not know how we could ever content ourselves with Her buildings, even stripped of their ecclesiastical function; they speak far too emotive and too constrained a language, as the houses of God and as the showplaces of an intercourse with another world, for us as godless people to think our own thoughts in them. We want to have ourselves translated into stones and plants; we want to have ourselves to stroll in, when we take a turn into those porticoes and gardens.”^{vii}*

For the "Nietzsche-Archive" van de Velde operated with a series of artistic manipulations that can be read as "programmatic:" he improved the unsatisfactory entrance of the house by adding a street-facing portico to the simple cubic building. To mark its status as a public

institution, he labeled the new entrance with the inscription “Nietzsche-Archive” carved in stone in broad roman letters. This gesture did not quite correspond to the status of a private villa, but had to be understood in the context of programmatic art as the “title” of this work. For building the new portico van de Velde continued to use the materiality of brick and stucco of the existing structure, but rather than resembling the logic of wall and opening of the original’s Neo-Renaissance, the new street façade is a compositional play of surfaces and proportions. This anthropomorphic positioning of openings can be directly connected to Nietzsche’s idea of physiognomic expression, as in the “architecture for the perceptive.” The excessive height of the entrance door in dark oak serves as part of this geometric frame, but for the approaching guest it offers another enigma: instead of a door handle there is a set of sculptural brazen handholds with labyrinth ornamentation. This might reflect on the unclear status of the house between shrine and villa, between literary archive and last domicile of the philosopher, but at the same time it structured the proportion of power of inside and outside: the arriving guest had to request for access. In addition, van de Velde noted in an earlier version of his memoirs to the chapter of “The Nietzsche-Archive and the New Weimar”, that he had intended to give the archive an appearance “more solemn and monumental like a »Schatzkammer« [treasure chamber]”^{viii} – the leitmotif of this work.

Once inside, after a flight of stairs, there is a dark entrance hall. A crystalline lamp^{ix} over the doorway illuminates cloakrooms with a series of brass coat hooks, which work as joint between capitalist chaos outside and synthesis of art inside, constructing a new society of “Nietzscheans”. A few steps to the right a double door opened to the “treasure” of the archive: the library with “His” books and manuscripts. This oblong room, a merging of two smaller rooms, has a rather low ceiling for its size. Since van de Velde could not easily change the height within an existing house, he chose a repetitive vertical structure as “organic ribs” to arrange the walls and virtually elevate and carry the white plafond. These planks hold the shelves for books, but integrated openings – with movable window grilles to prohibit unwanted visitors – as well as other furniture, even a chamber piano. The color palette of this room ranges from natural red beech [*blood-beech*], to fraise-colored plush and intensive red curtains, heightened by white stucco and brass details, only contrasted by grayish-blue carpet – the room as a whole was meant to invoke the atmosphere of an alpenglow^x of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. Van de Velde put another “title” reference inside his work, this time in form of the initial of the philosopher’s name: a brass *N* in a circle is embedded above the tiled stove. Nietzsche himself, apart from his books on the shelves and his manuscripts in the cupboards, is “present” in a life-size marble *stele* by Max Klinger. The only object in the room not designed by van de Velde is this *stele*, which rests on a platform against a surface of colored glass illuminated by evening light.

But why did van de Velde deliberately blur the status of the main room between private salon and sacred temple, literary archive and intimate library? – The answer might be found in the program of the “New Weimar” and its direct rivalry with the cult of Goethe, manifest in the conversion of Goethe’s house in Weimar to a national museum in 1885 as well as the new Goethe-Schiller-Archives, built in 1896. The Nietzsche-Archive had to stand against the comparison with the palazzo of the thinker, poet and minister with its exquisite classical interiors and artwork. Goethe had brought back the idea of the humanist *studiolo* from his Italian Journey (1786-87) and remodeled his house into a personal microcosm: the succession of salons, dining hall, study chamber, scientific collection, garden and library were read as an ideal portrait of the educated bourgeois. Van de Velde’s strategy of staging a mood of authenticity, a plausible, but retroactive *studiolo* for the dead philosopher was extraordinary successful. For Nietzsche, who had never consciously understood that he had vegetated four years in Weimar, van de Velde created a physiologic resemblance of architecture and

philosophy and constructing an organic atmosphere for “the perceptive” with a synthetic work of art in his new style: the interiors of the Nietzsche-Archive (and van de Velde’s book illustrations) soon became synonymous with “Nietzsche design”, providing evidence of the modernity and superiority of “his” philosopher.

Epilogue:

After WWII the Nietzsche-Archive was closed down, because of its associations with the Nazi regime, manifest in an unfinished neoclassicist “Nietzsche memorial hall” next to the archival villa from 1938. Nietzsche’s manuscripts and books were confiscated by the East German authorities, together with the literary remains of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and transferred to the socialist predecessor of the Weimar Classics Foundation, the *Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätte (der Deutschen Klassik)* Weimar. Since Georg Lukás had denounced Nietzsche’s philosophy as proto-fascism,^{xi} there was almost no opportunity for serious research on archival stocks of Nietzsche in East Germany. The building of the archival building was “hidden” by the new owners, the inscription destroyed, the villa modified and reused as a seminar building and guesthouse of the socialist “National Research and Memorial Place in Weimar.”^{xii}

In the 1960s, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Colli and the Italian philologist Mazzino Montinari started their project of a new critical edition of Nietzsche’s works. An ideological re-evaluation of art nouveau and early modernism in 1960s and 70s opened the frame for a renovation of the archive building as well as its interior, which was begun in 1984, already five years before the fall of the wall, and remained unfinished until 1991 in the re-united Germany.

Today the Nietzsche-Archive is a museum of the national Weimar Classics Foundation and therefore it is open to the public, but the manuscripts are stored in the Goethe-Schiller-Archives. Friedrich Nietzsche’s as well as his sister’s books belong to the Anna Amalia Library of the same Weimar Classics Foundation in Weimar, and only accessible for institutional research. After all and with the irony of history, the private archive of the philosopher’s sister was united with its national rival and Nietzsche’s original writings became even part of the world’s cultural heritage,^{xiii} but not in the sense imagined: the Nietzsche-Archive is an archive with empty shelves.

ⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe. Band 8*, Giorgi Colli/Mazzino Montinari (eds.), Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986; 2003, p. 567-579.

ⁱⁱ For a detailed biography confer to: H. F. Peters, *Zarathustra’s sister. The case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche*, New York: Crown, 1977; Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche’s sister and The will to power. A biography of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche’s Werke [Großoktav-Ausgabe]*, Leipzig: Naumann [1899-1909]; Leipzig: Kröner [1909ff]; in fact as late as 1926 the last volume – an index of the previous 19 volumes of works and fragments – was published; for the first English edition confer to: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The complete works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by Dr. Oscar Levy, Edinburgh and London: T. N. Foulis, 1909-.

^{iv} the *Weimarer Nietzsche Bibliography* of 2002 counted over 22’000 publications that deal with Nietzsche (deadline in 1998)!

^v *Ecce homo*, finished by Nietzsche in 1888, but remained unpublished until 1908, since Elisabeth was worried about several offensive paragraphs, that would strengthen voices that interpreted Nietzsche’s work altogether as “sick”; in addition there were several paragraphs where Nietzsche explicit criticized his sister and mother.

^{vi} Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Das Leben Friedrich Nietzsche’s. 2 Bände*, Leipzig: Naumann, [1. Band; 1. Abteilung] 1895, [1. Band; 2. Abteilung] 1897, [2. Band] 1904; Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Der junge Nietzsche*, Leipzig: Kröner, 1912; Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Der einsame Nietzsche*, Leipzig: Kröner, 1914;

Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Wagner und Nietzsche zur Zeit ihrer Freundschaft*, München: Müller, 1915; Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Frauen seiner Zeit*, München: C. H. Beck, 1935; the inaccuracy of the edition of the Nietzsche-Archive was obvious, but there was no better edition until 1967 with: *Friedrich Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, by Giorgi Colli andazzino Montinari; still, the final transcription and edition of the handwritten fragments remained unfinished up to today – 107 years after the death of Nietzsche.

^{vii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, Buch 4, § 280, Kritische Studienausgabe [KSA]. Band 3*, Giorgi Colli/Mazzino Montinari (eds.), Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988, p. 524-525.

^{viii} Henry van de Velde, *manuscript* in: Bibliothèque Royal, Brussels, *Archives Henry van de Velde, FS X 1-2*, p. 414: „solennel et monumental d’une »Schatzkammer«“, citation after: Henry van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie. II*, Anne van Loo/Fabrice van de Kerckhove (eds.), Brussels/Paris: Versa/Flammarion, 1995, p. 155, annotation 1.

^{ix} This essay is not the place to go into a detailed analysis of the crystal as metaphoric motive in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and its effects on expressionist architects like Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut.

^x a reddish glow seen near sunset or sunrise on the summits of mountains

^{xi} Georg Lukács, *Der deutsche Faschismus und Nietzsche*, Paris: C.A.L.P.O. 1945; Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1954.

^{xii} affected by this alteration was the second floor of the Nietzsche-Archive with the „private“ chambers of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and the death room of Friedrich Nietzsche, which were destroyed at that time, but which were not touched by van de Velde’s alteration in 1902-03; some of the furniture remained in the depot of the Goethe National Museum in Weimar.

^{xiii} The Goethe-Schiller-Archives in Weimar are part of the UNESCO program “Memory of the World” since 2001.