What if Buildings Dream?

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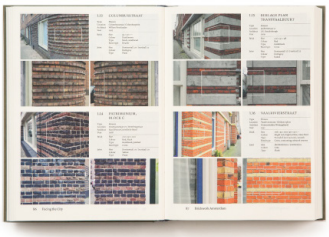










Excerpt from a photo-essay exploring how brick buildings in Amsterdam turn the corner, by Baukje Trenning, from Brick: An Exacting Material.

1. What if a Brick got what it wants?

In a well-known discussion at the height, and near the end, of his storied career, the American architect Louis Kahn offered the following parable, as transcribed in his son Nathaniel Kahn's documentary:[1]

> "If you think of Brick, you say to Brick: 'What do you want, Brick?' and Brick says to you, 'I like an Arch.' And if you say to Brick, 'Look, arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over you. What do you think of that, Brick?' Brick says, 'I like an Arch.' And it's important, you see, that you honor the materials that you use... You can only do it if you honor the brick and glorify the brick instead of shortchanging it."

While much could be said of Kahn's anthropomorphization of this familiar building material, I'll focus briefly on two central aspects. First, the discussion involves a seemingly basic, everyday material. Kahn is not discussing gold foil, or even glass, concrete, or steel – expensive, carbon-heavy, corporate-industrially produced materials that an architect can only engage as product, without access to anything approaching the essence that Kahn invokes. Brick appears to operate at some distance from these other materials, perhaps slightly less alienated by capital: it remains a journeyman's material, an accumulation of manual labor and raw extraction, a small, flexible unit of embodied carbon that feels, in the architectural imaginary, somehow closer to home. A brick building, even now, is usually assembled by hand, in many cases according to careful traditions and generations of craftsperson knowledge. Brick is eternal, ahistoric; arguably it even existed before capitalism, and may exist after, if anything does.

Thus does Brick help us consider how buildings contain and express, regulate and reimagine, a relationship to the future. Such an inquiry is not really about brick, certainly not about Louis Kahn – or, if so, only as a dream or a chimera, a dream of what Kahn might have wanted. We relate to our built world through a mediated cloud – a miasma of materials and technologies that is also a specter of aspiration, haunting our dreams and the prospects of species continuation.

Second, what Brick wants, per Kahn, and what it means to honor and glorify Brick rather than "shortchange" it, could be seen as a stand in for the laborer – not only, in the early 1970s, exploited in the everyday workings of capital, but also increasingly marginalized as the building industry was becoming what we now refer to as AEC (Architecture, Engineering, and Construction). The corporatization and capitalization of building production not only had the effect of marginalizing Brick, and by extension the laborer, but also, by further extension,

1 Louis Kahn, from a master class at the University of Pennsylvania, 1971, as transcribed from Nathaniel Kahn's 2003 documentary "My Architect: A Son's Journey."

the architect.[2] Architects – now less familiar with the material constitution and properties of bricks, or any other material, and more focused instead on the specification of products – found themselves increasingly in a position of simply adorning financial development models, parlaying cost-benefit analyses into design value, increased profit margins or rentable square footage. In the sprawling US in particular, from the 1970s to now, suburban housing and urban office buildings emerged as the primary postmodern building types, with the architect generally offering slight variations on a template that was pre-configured in terms of materials, mechanical systems, spatial affect, and presence in the urban or suburban sphere – not to mention a crushing development logic that, put simply, placed quantity over quality.

Voila: a stage for inevitability, an operational approach to the home as an asset and a material supply chain optimized for speed and space, less concerned with maintenance, conditioning, or even systems and operational energy. Architecture, unwittingly, has found itself to be a techno-cultural obstacle, a concrete wall of carbon determinacy embedded in building practices, not only emitting carbon at will but also pushing back against Brick and all that it can do, all that it has represented.

So, Brick – for Kahn, as we have seen, a proper noun – is posed as fully anthropomorphic, a being, an individual, or at least an entity, with habits, desires, and an uncompromising yearning for self-realization. Brick could also be a category, a species, much as "Man" was used extensively in the period, in architectural and other literature, as a stand in for society, or an abstraction of the client. What "Brick" wants is also what "Man [sic]" wants, or some men and women, laborers and architects alike, compromised and marginalized by a global growth imperative run amok.[3]

Is Brick thus on some level autonomous, or at least self-determinant? Does it contain, within it, an essence to be propagated, or is it just a shaped pile of fused clay and water? Kahn's ascription of desire seems an over-extension, yet resonates as a material-cultural-ecological attempt to reshape building processes and living patterns. Kahn provides a specific pathway for the realization of a material's embedded aspiration (from Brick to Arch), suggesting that Brick can represent all of the things we want to think and could think, despite the seeming inevitabilities that surround us. Brick cannot think, but we can think with it. Brick solicits a specific set of ideas, methods, concepts, materials, spaces, lifestyles, opportunities, limitations, aspirations, dreams,

2 See Aaron Cayer, Incorporating Architects: *How American Architecture Became a Practice of Empire* (University of California Press, 2025).

3 See Christopher F. Jones, *The Invention of Infinite Growth: How Economists Came to Believe a Dangerous Delusion* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

and nightmares. Brick decays, it heats and cools, it stands and falls. It turns a corner.

Thus Kahn's dream of medium specificity. Brick has a typical dimension, a centuries-long tradition of use, known material properties; these all conspire to make it look as if Brick has a refined and focused sense of purpose, has a claim on what it means to be architecture and the possibilities of the future. If Brick does not want, its material properties and cultural heritage nonetheless tend towards Kahn's prescribed state of self-realization – in Arch, an aspiration towards glory, boldness, purpose, delicately and effectively realized.

Brick didn't get what it wanted, despite Kahn's attempted reconciliation with Brick's essence in a number of contexts. The opening quote above, about Brick "liking an Arch," is from a design studio course at the University of Pennsylvania in 1971. Orthodoxies of the modernist design framework were then on the way out. Postmodernism, in its many guises, was even less concerned, contra Kahn, with the essence of a material, or the glorification of customary building practices, opting instead for a game of internal symbology and abstract reference that seemed to aggressively, intentionally, leave society behind.

Not only was this postmodern turn self-consciously towards referential symbology, it was equally determined to resist the emergent issues of 'the environment' and a host of social pressures. Geopolitically engineered oil crises were only the most obvious of the new kinds of awareness that trickled through global consciousness as Kahn was celebrating Brick – awareness of limits, costs and benefits, of resources and sinks.[4] Environmentalism emerged as a primary space of social contestation, and despite all of the latent opportunities architects generally found themselves without the tools, skills, or ambitions to be a part of this discussion.

There were numerous important exceptions, however. For example, in the solar houses that proliferated, briefly, in the heat of the 1970s political and energy system turmoil (dubbed "oil crises"), other aspirations were evident. Attempts were made to reimagine design and material configurations of the building in order to dramatically reduce energy demand. The characteristic solar angles that emerged, from Arizona to Antwerp to Ahmedabad, suggested a formal characteristic that cared little for tradition or history, and focused instead on the

4 See Daniel A. Barber, "'Modes of Concealment': Architecture and the Oil Encounter" in Kim Foerster et al., eds., *Environmental Histories of Architecture* (Canadian Center for Architecture, 2022).

capacity for social transformation, for a new kind of life under the sun.[5]

It was a brief moment of environmental design creativity, before the "crises" resolved and the oil flowed, faster and stronger than ever. The early 1970s was also, as Hardt and Negri argued in 2000, the moment of "real subsumption," a historical hinge point at which moment the forces of capital accumulation had colonized life at a planetary scale and in absolute terms.[6] Societies and ecosystems alike were subject to the growth imperative. There was nowhere left to hide.

Brick's yearning for respect and glory was already nostalgic, a retrograde impulse at a time of unexpected change – Kahn's yearning to build a wall that kept the forces of material change at bay was also, let's assume unwittingly, an attempt to frustrate the forces of over-exploitation that had been irreparably transforming lives, livelihoods, and lifestyles for decades, indeed centuries. Forces that were now accelerating, again per Hardt and Negri, and cycling back to the metropoles. Kahn's quasi-spiritualism saw in Brick an opportunity for peace and stability amidst a world increasingly organized around state- and capital-sponsored violence, pollution, and toxicity – violence that rewarded, and still rewards, those in power with a life of leisure, on the backs of the global majority subject to endless extraction.

So this is not about Brick, but about how buildings express values and offer future imaginaries, for better or worse. Brick was a set-up, a staging, to understand how a way of approaching materials and systems, their design and use, their realization in arches or buildings, can produce a new world, of distinct experience and harboring unexpected possibilities for a future. We are far from this 1970s moment, not only in years (55) and atmospheric instability (1.8 degrees Celsius) but also in the stark accumulation of materials and of pollution, in the slow creep towards accepting a life based on extraction and exploitation. The way we build and the way we understand the built environment have also transformed, as has the means we have to reconsider the relationship between economies, cultures, buildings, and the future. Many entities – people, animals, materials – now want something else. Not precisely what Brick wanted, but along those lines: a built world that reflects our highest aspirations.

5 See Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini, eds. *Sorry, Out of Gas: Architecture's Response to the 1973 Oil Crisis* (Canadian Centre for Architecture; Corraini Edizioni, 2007) and, for example, United Nations Conference on New Sources of Energy, *New Sources of Energy and Economic Development: Report on the United Nations Conference on New Sources of Energy – Solar Energy, Wind Power, and Geothermal Energy, Rome, 21–31 August 1961* (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1962).

6 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Still from Dream 3, 01:17/15:17:56, produced at the Fondation d’entreprise Martell, Cognac, France. March 24, 2025

2. What if dreams mattered?

Buildings are time travelers: they live in the future. Or better: buildings exist in the present tense as a means to construct future realities. They are active, determining agents; perhaps not alive or sentient, likely lacking in feelings or aspiration themselves, but nonetheless, and forcefully, co-producers of life on the planet. They contain futures within them. As one opens a thermally sealed door, or draws a blind over a window, causes and effects are initiated, path dependencies roll out. As products of human practices, patterns, and ambitions, buildings construct the material, cultural, and ecological conditions of that future, five minutes or five thousand years from now. Buildings shelter us and provide services today; in so doing, in their manner of operation, they produce specific, modeled, verifiable future conditions for life.

This is evident, in a negative and frighteningly naïve form, in the words of another material essentialist, the architect Peter Zumthor. His recent design for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is built with little concern for the environmental impacts of concrete and the steel needed to support it, focused

instead on the spatial effects these materials allow. In the Guardian, critic Oliver Wainwright writes: "I put the carbon question to Zumthor. Do the ends justify the means? Was it worth the extraordinary environmental impact to create this audacious structure, which ultimately has less gallery floor space than the buildings it replaces? 'The horizon of concrete uses too much carbon,' he says, putting on a whiny complaining voice, 'this is a very small horizon. This building will still be there when people are talking about other things.[7]" The future is embedded, embodied in this concrete; by all accounts except Zumthor's, such a material strategy compromises the future and makes it less likely that there will be people around in 500 years to talk about other things.

So this is how buildings dream, for better or worse: they translate, carry through, our interactive relationship with design methods, supply chains, industry standards, construction practices, regulatory regimes, and force all of these factors into geo-climatic conditions and socio-cultural life possibility for the near and far future. The tether (from today to a distant tomorrow) is one of simultaneity: once you turn on the air conditioner, ignite the coal-fired plant, and burn the carbon for the concrete and steel, you can't put it back. The future world is now a different world, struggling to manage the pressures the present has placed upon it. We struggle to describe this relationship. Is it a 1:1 ratio of pleasure and pain? Is it a complex chain of unintended consequences? As buildings transmit the intricate relationship between energy, carbon, and climate in the present – into interactions with future people, future ecosystems, future possibilities – they project, they premediate, they overdetermine. What we do today, how we live today, matters tomorrow. Buildings are the medium of this transference, they are both making us insufferably hot and shimmering in the prospects of hope for a different future.

To suggest that buildings dream is not to claim that they possess consciousness. It is to ask how their materials and systems – elevators, plumbing, ventilation, energy models – accumulate to produce the future. When an architect specifies, she solicits a supply chain and specific materials, space, and infrastructural disposition, she facilitates a given future condition. How can we dream with buildings, in order to allow other possible futures to emerge?

A wall section built today is only rarely composed of a single layer (or 'course') of brick. In many of the buildings that architecture dreams with – and that we are all stuck with – perimeter walls contain wallboard, a structural frame, insulation, and they are treated to resist water and other penetration; ducts and wires course through these frames, bringing services to the current inhabitants (again, too often at the expense of future people). Many of these walls are, technically, hollow, and thus able to be filled up with a non-uniform substance; they

7 Oliver Wainwright, "LACMA's David Geffen Galleries: Peter Zumthor's audacious concrete arc," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2026.

are indeed full. The capacity for a building to perform its social function (present and future) is directly correlated to these layers and their entanglements: the exterior membrane treated to resist the elements; insulation to mitigate seasonal reliance on mechanical heating and cooling; the structural elements, often thinly optimized aluminum sections to hold the whole thing up; and the electric system, plumbing, and air ducts that allow the building to provide the 'services' that people rely on, without which a building would be simply a pavilion, only seasonally accessible. The layered wall cavity is a palimpsest, overdetermined, overdetermining.

A stark recognition that many buildings constructed over the past century or so are not fit for purpose for the present (this is not the future they anticipated) has led to a push for increased insulation in many regions. Techniques have emerged for how to improve the performance of cavity walls and also of brick walls – adding layers of structure, insulation, vapor control, plaster, and finishes. Such interventions may improve energy performance, but they can also introduce new risks. Materials begin to delaminate, decay, and become toxic. Retrofit is a first step, solving some problems and producing others.

Still from Dream 2, 1:26/17:01:22, produced at the Fondation d'entreprise Martell, Cognac, France. March 23, 2025.

A window panel is also often expertly layered, if more deceptively so. One looks at a window often to see through it, a visual bridge to the interior world. Windows tend towards highly managed stasis in the interior, oftentimes even sealed shut, unopenable, amid the constant atmospheric uncertainty and burgeoning social unrest outside. Windows are not meant to be seen per se, that is, but seen through. If the window becomes a visual barrier, that indicates a problem – it needs cleaning, or repair, or at least open it up so you can see what's going on outside. Many contemporary windows are intensely engineered in this layered fashion – assembled as two or more layers of thin glass, with inert gas in between each layer in order to provide, somewhat magically, thermal and acoustic insulation without obstructing the light or the view. The package is sealed together in a tight metal frame. Glass is not a material, but a product, marketed according to its relative efficiency and use. Again, a sort of hollow object, where the cavity is filled with a substance that allows its performance to be in almost absolute contradiction to how it appears: it is invisible, but also a barrier.

Poor insulation, construction mishaps, and failed seals often lead to window panels generating internal condensation, as in the video above – as the seals fail, moisture gets trapped in between these layers, difficult if not impossible to extract. This condensation changes the dynamic: now you see the window rather than see through it.

If even a window can fail, what happens when the stakes are civilizational rather than simply architectural? If I am ascribing dreams to buildings, to what end and with what collective aspiration? A more potent question than "Do Buildings Dream," is "Do Dreams Matter?" Or: what is the epistemological, ontological, and operational status of dreamwork, in a world in which the violent fantasies of fascism and fanatics are being realized, virtually and materially? Freud of course had much to say about dreamwork. One bit in particular is relevant to this shift from built environments to cultural aspirations, relative to how architects imagine future collective life: the principle of Condensation. For Freud, a dream is made of/has a number of elements, stories, people, and desires that are conflated or overlapped into a beguiling scene. Multiple fears, anxieties, and impulses are condensed into a barely relatable image. The interpretive work of psychoanalysis is thus one of de-laminating and unpeeling, in order to provide clarity to these layers of unconscious projection.

Buildings don't dream as humans or animals do (obviously); perhaps instead, the building is a dream, or can be seen as one. When we start to delaminate these embedded and entangled layers, we can understand not so much what it is as what it can be. As the reader may have expected from the start: the question

‘do buildings dream?’ is really: ‘what do we want from buildings’; or: ‘how can buildings better express cultural desires?’ At the limit (and the real point): can a building help a collective to realize aspirations towards carbon neutrality? Still better: can we treat buildings as if we are dependent on them for a viable future? Can we (people, collectives, society) dream with and through the built environment? If we can, in so doing we will also treat buildings differently – ontologically, epistemologically, operationally.

The schema here is not precisely the building as dream, and thus the architect, critic, or bricklayer as psychoanalytic interpreter, but close enough. We can easily look into the manifest condition of a building, its entangled layers; we can extract latent properties, and understand those properties as evidence of social commitments. This is not de Botton’s Architecture of Happiness – not how buildings shape us and we shape them. It is more of a spectral approach, as we are collectively haunted by the dreams of previous architects, and collectively compromised by the failures of our building systems as the world heats up. What is hiding behind the walls, in the floors and ceiling, in the inert gas of the insulated window panel? Knowledge of building systems and their consequences can help us see ourselves, and the climate-changing crisis we are in, more clearly. It’s not pretty. It is often a poorly working mess; and too often today when a building works it does so through excessive carbon extraction emissions, working for some while threatening the most vulnerable.

The point of asking ‘do buildings dream’ is first to insist that they have played a substantive role in contributing to our collective nightmare of climate destruction and climate disinformation. Buildings still appear, too often, to be innocent. It is also to insist that some of us now want something new from our built environment, a life radically different from what the built world is currently configured to offer.

Buildings – as species here, much like Brick; or from an infrastructural, categorical perspective – are manifestations of social, cultural, and economic investment. They are the dreams of society, too often uninterpreted; or they are hallucinations, emergent from the gathering and processing of everything that came before, substantiated as an unavoidable present, masking other possible futures. They are condensations, often literally, flattened and fused together, difficult to delaminate and thereby see clearly what went wrong, what we can do next, how to avoid the same problem in the future. Considering buildings as our dreams, as condensed representations, as evidence of social aspiration, we can read them as both opportunity and obstacle for realizing collective desire.

If a building can dream (it can’t), then society can transform (can it?). Or – trying

again – buildings as physical and social infrastructure often reaffirm an eco-modernist techno-solutionism that aggressively reinscribes the status quo, against all logic – take a close look at most of what is referred to as 'sustainable architecture'. Yet if a building can dream, if its layers can be picked apart and analyzed for how they express desire and aspiration, then, perhaps, we can reimagine and re-enact these dreams now. By caring for them, we are also caring for ourselves, or even others. Buildings, impressive in their apparent solidity, are in fact a process, changing over time, living and breathing, respiring and aspiring. Aiming to survive, programmed to fail.

If buildings dream, they have nightmares, and we have to sit by their side, calming them down, holding their hand, promising that everything will be alright. Every leak, collapse, or unwanted odor is an opportunity for a transition or transformation. Again, buildings are time travelers: they occupy the future, they exist in both the present tense and construct future realities.

3. What if we could Maintain?

> "The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don't."
> Douglas Adams, A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (1979)

Europe faces a crippling crisis of housing affordability, as the mansions, townhouses, and condos of the super-rich tower above the inadequate but still-too-expensive housing options for everyone else. Optimistically, maintenance as method offers to replace the premise of creative destruction, in real terms: rather than tear down an existing building, find a way to creatively reuse it – transformation from a factory to a food hall; from a church to condos; or, a poorly maintained social housing bloc realizing its potential as a site of dignified housing through thoughtful design interventions, as in the celebrated Transformation de 530 Logements, Grand Park, Bourdeaux by Lacaton and Vassal (2017, image above).[8] A primary benefit to this 'never demolish' approach is the savings in what is referred to in the field as 'embodied energy': when a building is torn down, the carbon invested in it (through materials, construction, and use) is largely wasted, and then a new building requires excessive carbon for the production and transportation of materials, labor, etc., as well as for the building itself (recall Zumthor's LACMA project and the energy now embodied in the concrete, the emissions now locked in to the institution and the atmosphere). Life Cycle Analysis, taking embodied energy into account, often indicates

8 See lacatonvassal.com and Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal (eds.), *It's Nice Today: On Climate, Comfort, and Pleasure* (Ruby Press, 2024).

that the costs of destruction are no longer worth it, even if the replacement building is beautifully designed. What Brick wants, to its credit, is to stay put: its glory is its longevity, the creative imagination of the arch as a medium of species continuity.

The focus today, unevenly distributed across the global architecture discourse on maintenance and reuse, suggests a wide range of approaches, tools, skills, and design methods. The task of architecture is now away from the computational production of novel form, or even the thrill of affective space, and towards the careful, laborious, sometimes boring, decarbonization of the existing built environment. Insulation, thermal inertia, and passive ventilation are the cornerstones of practice. Occasionally a new building, for housing or a hospital, can be justified – but carefully, with intense scrutiny as to the carbon deployed, ideally as part of a circular building economy where even this new building emerges from older, reused materials.

Thus the third question: can we maintain? The pedagogy, practice, and culture of architecture continue to transform in order to focus collective work on maintenance and reuse, as means to save carbon and honor cultural heritage. Reuse is increasingly the subject of architecture school design studios, and increasingly an aspect of a design practice's projects, even the stated mission of many emergent firms and practices.

Can we hold it together? Even as global environmental governance agencies have for decades documented the increase in carbon emissions from the building industry, and even as sustainable design benchmarks have encouraged some changes in approach, carbon emissions from the sector continue to rise. As the heat waves and floods of this summer have confirmed, the general public doesn't really understand what is going on with the climate, and even experts are scrambling to keep up. We have models and metrics, but we are not in control. The consequences are mounting, and it is more difficult to maintain the illusion that the status quo will serve the present and the future. In this sense, "can we maintain?" suggests a mutually dissociative state, a collective hallucination, between the individual and society, society and the environment, society and itself, etc.

What kind of a dream is that? The premise of much theory and method in architecture is intended precisely to maintain this state of disassociation, or derangement, in order, as a first layer, to maintain the legacy ambition of a (Kahnian) form-giver. A second layer: is not sustainability, in architecture and elsewhere, simply a permission structure to continue doing more or less the same thing, provide more or less the same products and services, with marginal

savings, if all goes well, in carbon emissions? Popular discourse still frames the architect as a genius creator, now more so because the building is not only aesthetically or affectively compelling but also makes claims to care for society and the environment. Sustainable architecture, as a mode of professional ambition active since the mid-1980s, can best be characterized as a collective derangement, desperate to ensure that business-as-usual, in the sense used in the climate discourse, persists. The arrow of emissions continues upwards, despite architects' efforts. People need housing, climate migration is increasing. Can we maintain? Either the delusion (for how long?), or the prospect of maintenance, care, and reshaping the built environment with different tools and on different terms.

A building doesn't dream, but collective aspirations are embodied in its materials and structure. Embodied carbon, corporeal suffering, a deep systemic interconnection between life possibility and the contours of the built environment. To suggest that a building can dream is some species of polemic, or its own delusion: a too-simplistic framing of the built environment as an infrastructure of oppression, and an aggressively naïve attempt to consider how that oppression can be overcome. Desperate for a new way of life. So here is a different delusion: the dizzying potential of collective desire. A desire to work with buildings, to live with buildings in order to make a more equitable, healthy world. A dream of multi-species conviviality.

The premise and the promise of the reuse of buildings suggests this sliver of resistance: wondering, hoping, that transformations to the built environment can also be, to now invoke Guattari, transversal transformations, a line of flight from the psyche, to the society, to the planet.[9] As reusers, repair café-goers, maker-space enthusiasts, flea market scanners: what do people want? Buildings reflect and encourage new desires, if we let them. Whether or not Brick can aspire, whether or not buildings can dream, the prospects of socio-ecological transformation rest in larger part on embracing and engaging the material processes of the built world around us.

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9 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (Athlone Press, 2000 [1989]).

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