

## HILVERSUM TOWN HALL, NETHERLANDS

Designed by Willem Marinus Dudok, completed 1931  
Hilversum, the Netherlands

Hilversum Town Hall, in Hilversum, the Netherlands, was constructed between 1924 and 1931 by Willem Marinus Dudok (1884–1974). Known internationally as one of the most influential buildings of its date, the design is reminiscent of early Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) design, specifically the Larkin Building (1903) in Buffalo, New York, and Unity Temple (1904) in Oak Park, Illinois.

Located approximately 15 miles southeast of Amsterdam, Hilversum is a small modern town with tree-shaded, brick-paved roads and well-kept properties and is well known to have had one of the Netherlands' premier 20th-century architects. Willem Marinus Dudok, an Amsterdam-born Dutch military engineer, became one of the most influential architects working in the Netherlands between the two world wars and was credited with more than 240 buildings. In 1915, he became the director of public works for Hilversum, where he produced a town development plan based on the English Garden City movement promoted by Briton Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928). For nearly 40 years, Dudok was in the service of the municipality.

Heavily influenced by the work of Wright, as depicted in the Amsterdam School publication *Wendingen* (Trends), Dudok is also thought to have garnered some minor influence from Amsterdam School expressionism, De Stijl functionalism, Delft School traditionalism, Cubism, and simply the Dutch vernacular. This enigmatic way of nonconformity has caused some critics to erroneously refer to his “style” as a hybrid of some or all of these rather than as a creation of an independent character of apparent individualism. One self-proclaimed influence was the music of his childhood. Born to musicians, he felt that the great composers influenced him more than all the great architects. He believed that the rhythm, mood, and character of music were easily transferred to architecture through the use of their commonality: proportions.

Dudok's oeuvre, known colloquially as “going Dudokey,” formed the model for many later architects. International examples emerged throughout Europe and the United States. The 1935 Brussels Exhibition and the 1937 Paris Exhibition contained many buildings that reflected Dudok's existing work, specifically Hilversum Town Hall, which also inspired clones in Cachan, France, and Lausanne, Switzerland. The irony was that as his once personal style was mimicked ad nauseam and as the fluidity of his design style developed, taking further cues from the modernist, its earlier individuality was eroded into apparent anonymity. As a result, Hilversum Town Hall has been hailed



Hilversum Town Hall, the Netherlands (1931)



Hilversum Town Hall clock tower  
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a seminal building that set an architectural tone and marked a pinnacle in Dudok's career.

Surrounded by a neighborhood of semidense, medium- to dark-colored brick and stucco residences, the imposing buff-colored Hilversum Town Hall rises up from the water in the midst of a wide-open space, bounded by large trees. Dudok's use of cantilevered eaves, an unusual feature for the Netherlands, and a simple asymmetrical three-dimensional geometry arranged around a square inner courtyard provides a modern structure while still reflecting the historicism of the medieval town halls by use of a large hall and a tower. The verticality of the looming tower breaks up the Wright-inspired horizontality, producing a sense of balance and harmony between the two axes. Also, a hierarchical use of light through varied fenestration adds yet another dimension of equilibrium. Dudok's euphonic design seems to reconcile the apparent discordant use of solids and voids, the horizontal and vertical, and light and dark.

Slightly askew of the tower, the main entrance is defined by a hovering canopy that extends toward the lake. Instead of an axial approach, one enters along a low wing or covered colonnade perpendicular to the main entrance into a low vestibule with a contrasting large marble staircase that leads up to a space more than 20 meters high. The overall cubic volumetric massing of advancing solids and retreating voids held together by the unifying glazed yellow-brick skin enfolds the components to a whole

body. Bands of glass, subdivided into small panes, running parallel between the clean, flat roofline and the horizontal ground plane, are juxtaposed to similar panes that rise as a group from the entry colonnade parallel to the clock tower mass and its elongated windows.

The sequence of spaces within produces a series of interlocking solids and voids that the functional hierarchy of fenestration augments. For example, natural light enters from clerestory windows; reflects on the ceiling; is filtered by way of translucent, decorated glass panels; and then glows through the glass canopy high above the public main stairs. The private council chamber, however, is naturally lit by only three high, narrow, vertical slits of windows. Horizontal windows above the galleries and bright light accented with chromatic variations in the reception hall round out the diverse styles of illumination.

When finished in 1931, the public embraced this example of modern architecture because of its balance of form and function and because it still seemed traditional through its composition, fine craftsmanship, and high-quality materials. Most of all, it was praised for its monumentality. As Dudok once stated, "Monumentality is the most pure expression of the human sense of harmony and order" (Holzbauer 1981). Some critics, however, felt that the building was a nonstructural, proportionally irresponsible arrangement of its shapes and accused Dudok of diluting modernist forms or of being a middle-of-the-road modernist who produced yet another contemporary style rather than creating a formal language of his own. By insisting that his architecture be of a specific stylistic mode, critics suggested that his designs lacked fluidity, thereby confining it to a strict formula that must be applied to all architecture. Nevertheless, the final product becomes a sculptural expression of a compositional theme. It is a testimony of the harmonious consonance of form, function, art, and human necessity. Hilversum Town Hall is not only the magnum opus in the work of Dudok but also one of the most successful buildings in the history of the Modern movement.

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*See also* **Amsterdam School; City Hall; Cubism; De Stijl; Dudok, Willem Marinus (the Netherlands); Garden City Movement; Larkin Building, Buffalo, New York; Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois; Wright, Frank Lloyd (United States)**

### Further Reading

An exhaustive list of available material can be found in Langmead 1996.

- Groenendijk, Paul, and Piet Vollaard, *Gids Voor Moderne Architectuur in Nederland (Guide to Modern Architecture in the Netherlands)* Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Uitgeverij 010 Publishers, 1987; 4th edition, 1992
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