

# Concrete Islands in Alphaville

A Photo Gallery of Responses to Two Seminal Artistic Explorations of Urban Technocracy and its Monstrous Highways



Made by  
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**SF-169-F:** I took this photo a few weeks ago. When looking at it, several things grab my attention, the sign on the top right corner being the most prominent and eye-catching one. Although not centred, and relatively small for a billboard, the advertisement is the first and most remarkable thing you see. To me, this photo is about movement and mobility: not just in the literal sense of transport, embodied in the form of vehicles, but also other things that *move*, *influence* and even *manipulate* us, such as the logo of fast food chain McDonalds, being one of the biggest icons of capitalism and commercialism. The atmosphere of the photo is defined by its speed and rapid movements: the "fast" food we eat; the tram on the left; the people who are hastily running in order to catch it; the traffic lights that decide whether we drive, pause, or stop; the cars in front of us; the drivers in these vehicles who get ready to hit the gas pedal; and the sound of the car horn when the traffic light turns green and we are a few milliseconds too late to hit this pedal – these

are all daily things that define a big and modern city such as Rotterdam, where this photo is taken. The car lightings, together with the flashy McDonalds sign and the street lights, are just as artificial as the use of lights in *Alphaville* (1965) (remember Lemmy Caution's flashlight?). Likewise, the arrows of the traffic lights made me think of the arrows in the film. Arrows indicate movement too: they tell us which direction we should go. By urging us to follow its directions, they become part of traffic control. In *Alphaville*, society is also urged to follow certain directions that fit in the totalitarian system of the city. The people in these cars, then, are not that different from the citizens of Alphaville: we all have our own *Ford Galaxy*, and in a sense, the numbers on our license plate parallel the numbered bodies of the citizens of Alphaville. Most of the time, we are not in control of our own life: sometimes, we are forced or expected to follow a path that has been laid out in front of us.



**Boundary:** At the edge of a wild expanse, where the dual carriageway splits into single lanes of traffic that crawl away from the city of Oxford like fat beetles, a barbed wire fence bends towards the sky. It marks the perimeter of the broken field, with its tufts of grass that wave in the breeze. This is a savannah, Oxford's greenbelt scorched and dried out in the sun, all burnt browns and umbers. The hot turf crunches underfoot as we make our second outing of the day, now prohibited for anyone without the right papers. Perhaps deer grazed here once. Not anymore. What would they eat? More metal bugs whirr by, their drivers not stopping to look into the enclosure. They're probably not supposed to be out here either. Perhaps they notice the radio mast that cuts the air and behind that the skeletons of trees, perhaps they don't. If they rolled down their windows they'd hear the faint hum of electricity that emanates from the metal containers at the mast's base. Hazard-yellow signs, now

cracked and faded, offer a warning: danger of death. Tell me something I don't know. The person on the sign looks like they've been struck by lightning, frozen in place by an external force that runs right through them, living inside for a moment before passing on like a pathogen. From the containers the current is squeezed through wires up, up, up through the lattice of bars, down one arm and then hits its dangling track back towards the city. Within seconds the electrical signals will be there amongst the city's squat blocks that dream of spires, trapped too, but we can't go with them. We're stuck behind the fence. The barbed boundary between nothing and something.



**Still Lives:** This is the view from my bedroom window. I used to find this view sort of medieval looking because of the typical Dutch architecture and the way the houses are built so closely next to each other, which, to me, conveys some sort of medieval-city vibe. Over time however, this view started to give me a certain alienated feeling, due to the houses preventing me from seeing the outside world. At least, for as far as it is possible to see the outside world. The word that comes to mind when I look at this photo, and when I look out of my window, is “still”. All of the houses visible on this photo are homes to people and all of these people live their lives (presumably) according to their own will. The cluster of homes visible in this photo; these lives that are sort of “stuffed” together, gives me a feeling of stillness, or, even more, a feeling of stasis. When I look out of my window, it almost feels as if time stands still and

people are not moving, whether able or unable. The irony of this photo are the birds. In contrast to this stillness and stasis are the birds flying in the air, which, to me, puts the emphasis on the freedom of movement that these organisms have, as opposed to the lives stuffed together in this cluster of homes. As opposed to the people living their “still lives”. In a sense therefore, I do think that this feeling of alienation and stasis is similar to what Robert Maitland feels in *Concrete Island*. The only difference I think, is the fact that in the end, Maitland accepts this alienation, whereas I am, unfortunately, unable to.



**Trapped Underground:** When heading towards the only road which could be said to at least resemble a highway near my village, this is the view you are confronted with when wanting to reach the other side of said road. It is affectionately called “t tunneltje”, although that sounds much nicer than it actually is. It is as if you are met with a gaping hole leading away from this reality, and indeed, when you find yourself descending into this black hole beneath the passing traffic, you feel as if, for a moment, you have left the rural village you know and have entered a reality different from any you have experienced, one which would not shy away from belonging to the uncanny. You are surrounded by concrete, there are no plants, and the only colour that you can still dimly see – the few lamps that are present are broken, painted over, or both – comes from the graffiti on your sides that covers the entirety of the walls. Whilst walking, you encounter at least one broken bicycle. All the

while, you have to keep your eyes on the ground in order to avoid broken bottles, discarded food and, sometimes, a syringe, and the sour stench of urine and marijuana that follows you when walking through it is reminder enough that this little gateway leading away from the quiet village is the perfect place for people wanting to escape that silence, yet at the same time feels trapping to those who have to cross into this different reality before returning to life as you know it. All these things combined lead to a remote hole in the ground in which reality seems to shift, and transports you to a place which could easily have replaced Ballard’s island, if only it had been somewhat bigger.



It has been twenty-one days since the government has implemented its so-called 'intelligent lockdown' to protect its citizens from the deadly virus spreading throughout the country. These citizens can exit their homes, but do so at their own risk, leaving the guarantees and promises of the government behind as they do. The parking lot in this particular neighbourhood is an important element in the lives of the people in the houses surrounding – it being the only safe, outside space the inhabitants are able to venture to without perceivable risk, apart from their gardens. The safety of these, they have increased by building their fences and walls, as if to keep not only unwanted human visitors outside, but as if the virus cannot spread over the obstructions. From above, in a presumably safe, enclosed room, a young lady, twenty-something years of age, sits at her window and observes the outside world – or as much as she can see of it. Every morning and evening, the blue car owner opens the trunk and extracts multiple objects. This seems to be compulsive, as sometimes the objects are replaced after the trunk has been opened. Sometimes in the middle of the car park, a motorcycle is placed. A middle-aged man, his hair greying, asks his daughter to turn the knob on the tap inside the house to provide him with water. She leaves her safe den in the sky to complete this task so that the man, her father, can wash the motorcycle. This is the only ritual the motorcycle is involved in, not getting dirty. One does wonder if this, too, is compulsive. The virus has turned man and woman into primitive beasts, all sense of logic vanished. The authorities on the television tell them to keep their distance, but the inhabitants talk to each other, closely, with nothing but a wall between them, as if it will protect them from the infected droplets. The young woman is perplexed, watching from behind her window, her view partially obstructed by blinds to keep the sunlight from damaging her pale skin, a makeshift cage. For her own

protection? Perhaps. Against the world, its virus? Or against the people who have frightened her long before the outbreak?





**Mr. R our leader.** The one and only. We who stand by our dedication to the present, do not crave for a future. In coalescence with our land, with the city, under the name of Mr. R; our bodies only thrive with the continuity of cohesion. My whole body is an organism of my land; but what am I without the land? My arm is a quarry of this organization; why break it? No soul wants to lose an arm and become an armless man. Because in truth, an existence without Mr. R is unalterable. It is unsustainable; he who lit our presence. Compliance does not come from agency. Nor from fear of Mr. R. Mr. R is our reality. He is the air, the soil itself. He is not an ideology, but a god. Who resists a god whose existence is material as day light? He who forms time. A purposeless, meaningless, existence is what lies ahead if we were to rebel. Mr. R's subjects; do they even exist without him? Not really, we are a whole with this city, with Mr. R who is our past, our present, and our future. The conditions are crystal clear: He who writes imaginations; gives the concept of a past – he who determines our anxieties, our stories, our language, our destiny. What you would call a destiny. Do not fear; he alters unsustainability, incompatibility. And if not alterable; he takes away the soul of the degenerate with a snap of his finger. This organization is fully functioning up to the point you start uttering “consciousness”, “agency” because those words were taken out of the dictionary. Do you see

the lights, all of over my body? Well they were warnings, damages made with a laser weapon; to sustain my words, my strive for escape. There is no escape, because life without Mr. R is death, is turning into madness. Or in more allegorical words, losing an arm embedded to the soil.



This image shows an 'island,' itself made of concrete, amidst a 'sea' of concrete (paving stones). The shape of the 'island' mirrors that of the adjacent apartment building I inhabit. The only shape in the image, and in my direct surroundings, is rectangular; everything is squared. This is also the way I perceive society at large: square and straight. These are the norms, not only in the aesthetics of Post-War Architecture but also in society at large. Like buildings, people have to be square (in their behaviour and thinking) and straight (in their sexual orientation). In popular psychology, a 'square personality' is linked to "structure and order" (Conley) and considered to be logical, sequential, analytical, and detail-oriented (Conley). Deviation from these social norms is often perceived as problematic.

The image also highlights the fact how everything in my direct living environment is artificial, a characteristic of the "technical milieu" in Jacques Ellul's description of the 'technological society' (394). This 'technological society' emerged in the 1960s, the period in which Ellul wrote his article and, coincidentally, the

period in which the residential quarter and apartment building I inhabit was built. It is perhaps no coincidence, given my previous observations about the 'squareness' of society that a residential neighbourhood is also referred to as a 'quarter,' a square form. Indeed, most housing blocks are built in squares, often around a square doubling as a children's playground. It evokes a high sense of artificiality. Despite of all this urban planning, however, nature does not allow itself to be contained, cornered, or squared. In the image you can see small patches of green moss growing around the 'concrete island' which are definitely not planned: nature resists. This idea of resistance to an oppressive 'squareness' is a central motif in the Jean-Luc Godard movie *Alphaville* (1965), particularly in the scene where the protagonist, Lemmy Caution, witnesses the execution of 'deviant' citizens in front of a swimming pool. Rectangular-shaped architecture also features highly in *Alphaville* and it is worthwhile noting that the swimming pool into which the executed men fall is also rectangular-shaped. Despite of the fact that I am living in a free and democratic European Union today, my direct surroundings are frighteningly similar to the horrors of the fictional totalitarianism depicted in *Alphaville*: square and straight. **Works Cited:** Tobin Conley. "Identify Your Team's Project Management Personality Types—and Shapes," [www.delcor.com](http://www.delcor.com); accessed 9 April 2020; Ellul, Jacques. "The Technological Order." *Technology and Culture*, vol. 3, no.4, 1962, pp. 394-421; Godard, Jean-Luc, director. *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*. Athos Films, 1965.



Radical modernization brought forth by technology has decimated our cities. There is no colour, no life, nothing. Rows upon rows upon rows of concrete monstrosities are erected around town. Dull and devoid of emotion, they stand united. Moulded by faceless robots and churned out by factories, these concrete colourless cages await their new detainees. The poor automatons are held captive in their enclosures. Perplexed by their displays, technology has lulled them into a comfortably numb existence. Although they exist, their humanity has been erased. The technocrats have free reign! They took away colour,

our culture, our way of defining and discovering reality. Our humanity is lost and it's our own fault. Our addiction to technology started with the steam machines... then the war machines came ... which made it all so much worse ...and then the final insult; the machines that looked like us. The city in which we live has become a faceless entity. Not a living or breathing thing but a state of mind. The complexities of this state lives within our minds. We dare not and cannot leave. It has no borders, no ending and no beginning. Even time seems to slip by in an erratic way. Where there once was individual artistic expression, we have now become part of a hive mind. A hive with worker bees. We all have a role to play in the hive and at the top of the pyramid sits the queen, our own Alpha 60.



**Bezárva, lezárva, elzárva**<sup>1</sup> : I don't need to look up at the black bulb to know.... He'll be looking back at me. Lucifer they called him in the old days... But nowadays, I no longer like to personify him. Like us, it (he) evolved. For better, or for worse. A conspiracy theorist, you might say. No, I am not. Just one, who refuses to believe that her God sent such havoc on Earth. There must be more to it. Who else, if not Beelzebub, would have caused all this calamity? What else, if not the greatest evil itself?

Why the spikes? Have they always been there? Why have I not noticed them before? Do they use them as torture devices? What if one attempts to climb the wall? It (he) surely thought of them being drained of their blood. I suppose that would bring some colour to this image. (I have never been comfortable with the gory.) Yet again, the spikes remind me of Christ the Saviour Himself. With Easter around I was supposed to celebrate liberation but if anything, I get to cherish the 15 minutes under the azure blue skies. Then again, not much of that is seen on this photo - an accurate representation of my inner space. It feels very black and white, exhaustingly monotone. Yet there is something horrifying about it - the thought of being observed sends chills down my spine. At night when everyone else is peacefully asleep, I seem to hear clicking sounds - of perhaps a camera capturing my anxiety driven restless nights or my frightened glimpses. (It could just be the construction pump at the end of the street, but you never know these days...) I can't help but think that my universe is under a magnifying glass of some sort and my reaction to "reality" is being carefully analysed. But am I the only lab rat in this cesspool of a situation? I sometimes wonder, listening to my partner's quiet snores, does he feel the same? It seems funny to be so egocentric in a time when the world

<sup>1</sup> Hungarian for: Locked in, locked down, locked away

is supposed to be "in it together". But let's say if this really was a set up research conducted by some sort of superior evil: they did one hell of a good job separating individuals, limiting social interaction including all expressions of affection. Love may not have yet been eliminated from our dictionaries but life as we know sure have.

I am locked in, in countries that are locked down with secrets securely locked away. What now?





**Material Madness:** Bricks, wood and concrete. This is what encompasses the materials on this picture. This is what is to be seen in my backyard. In a corner piled up against a wooden fence. Hidden away where not many will look soon. Hidden away from the public eye. Hidden from the eyes of the neighbours and residents of the house. These are the materials that were made to construct the house, the roof and the garden. All being hard materials meant to keep someone in the designated place. This does not always need to be bad. The designated place of the garden is self-made and self-determined, yet hard materials were chosen to create this own secluded space. Maybe that is why the concrete tiles were chosen, to make it a secluded space where only some would feel welcome, being the residents of the house. A place where all is cold and hard until equipped with a sunshade and chairs to the liking of the residents. Maybe the cold hard materials are to keep the outside world away of the space the residents see as their home, as their safe place. The materials could give a safe feeling as it is hard to get through concrete and residents are safe with help of these materials. Just as in Ballard's book, the main protagonist is eventually trapped on an island which encompasses a lot of concrete. There are hard materials that keep him inside and eventually he comes to the conclusion that this must be his faith, being confined on a concrete island. Just as the residents are confined in their own concrete island.

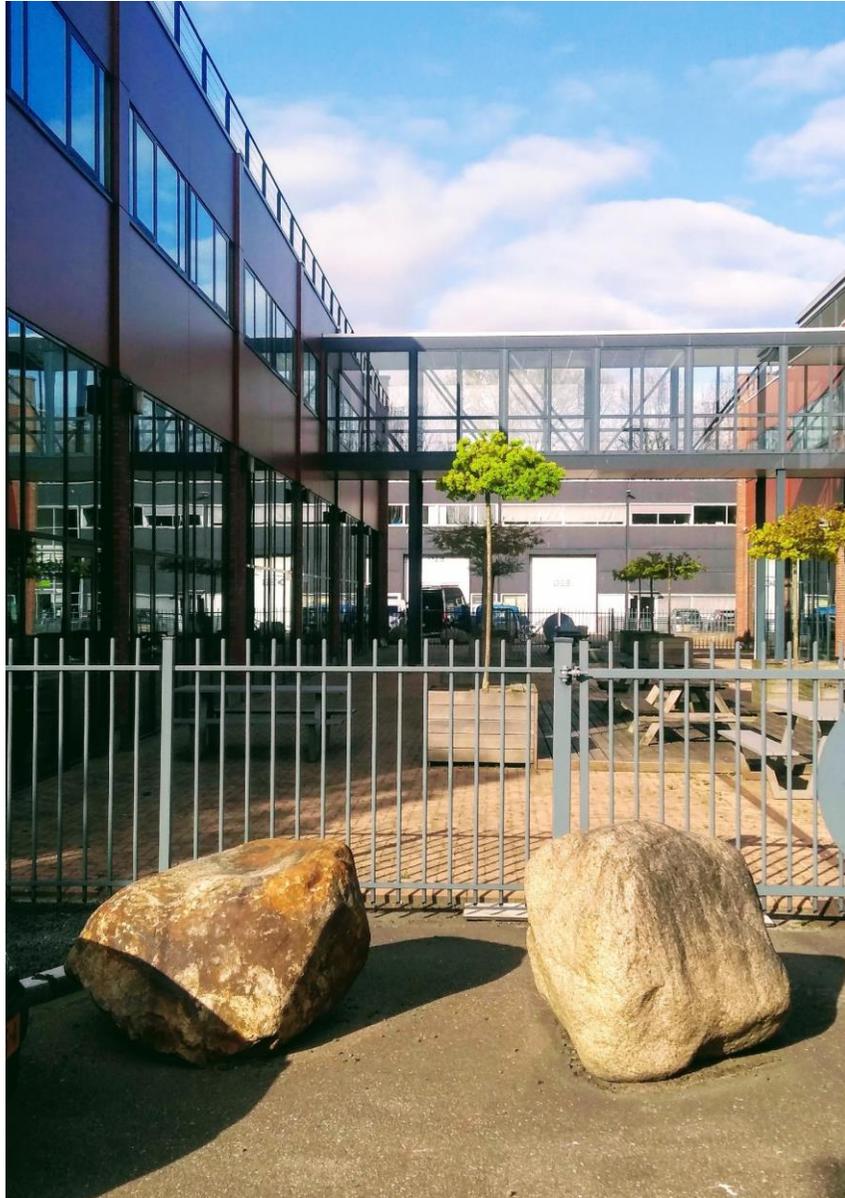


**City in a Globe:** Anyone who either lives in Rotterdam or frequently visits the city is familiar with the fact that it is a city that constantly changes and develops, probably even more so than other large cities in the Netherlands. One of the most recent additions to the list of recently arisen buildings is the above pictured Depot Boijmans van Beuningen, which will serve as an extension of the current museum. The building is reminiscent of the glass buildings of Paris that Godard employs to create a dystopian city in *Alphaville*. The Depot feels like a large building straight out of a futuristic movie: the wide-ranging reflection of the city provides an almost surreal experience when standing before this mammoth building of almost 40 meters tall, staring at the walls covered in mirrors. In *Alphaville*, the endless rows of glass and concrete buildings give the city an impersonal appearance. This compliments the idea that it is a technocratic city, led by Alpha 60, a

supercomputer which annihilates all of humanity's emotive creativity. A lack of creativity in modern urban environments is exactly what Whiny Maas, the Depot's architect criticises in contemporary architecture, which is becoming more and more copy-paste architecture in which the uniqueness appears to be disappearing. The world is now for the first time in history collectively seen as one ball, one entity, and one continuous place. People can travel more often, and large cities such as Rotterdam attract more tourists every year. The architect can create buildings such as the Depot that will both serve the locals, as well as be an "eye-catcher" for the tourists. By doing so, architects can reclaim the city instead of increasing its at times impersonal atmosphere. So, while the Depot at first glance would fit perfectly in *Alphaville*, considering the architect's vision for urban architecture suggests it might offer a more positive layout for the future than Godard's dystopian world.



This picture is inspired by Ballard's *Concrete Island* and in part also by Mumford's views in "The Highway and the City", since both revolve around the arising of concrete structures, highways and other man-made construction of the sort, in stark contrast to natural landscapes. Though the picture might not fit exactly in the world of *Concrete Island* that Maitland finds himself in, for me the picture symbolizes an important aspect of the text, which is the view on urbanisation and what it does to landscapes. The world Maitland lives in is described as being filled to the brim with motorways, cars, concrete buildings and people who live according to the rules of this concrete, urban landscape. When he crashes and has to survive in this concrete wilderness, Maitland is confronted with the fact that the structures built by people are their only focus: nobody remembers the unbuilt, unused parts of their world anymore, and thus no one can or will save him. This is in line with Mumford's strong opinions on the matter of highways, stating that "perhaps our age will be known to the future historian as the age of the bulldozer and the exterminator," that highway engineers "lapse into the brutal assaults against the landscape" and "bulldoze and blast their way across country to shorten their route by a few miles" (Mumford 2-3). Accordingly, this picture not only shows the demolition of an ever-increasing part of nature in order to create concrete constructions such as this train station and (though not visible in the picture) the highway beyond it, it also illustrates that the increase in structures like these and the subsequent decrease in natural landscapes lead to people even having to resort to bringing back nature through other means, such as painting and recreating it on a concrete wall: thereby truly creating a concrete jungle.



**An Empty Square:** This is a view of the office buildings in front of my home. Where there used to be a large, open, fallow field covered in wild grass and lush flowers and shrubs, product developers built three office buildings separated by plazas. They were initially open and connected to the streets, but they attracted the interest of children who—used to playing in the field—played on the newly created squares. Initially, the plazas became increasingly patrolled by police, until the product developer installed fences to separate the open spaces from the outside. While the field was open and natural, the plazas are paved and closed off. The wild common space the people of the neighbourhood had, has now been both closed off and turned into a very strictly regimented space, in which the boxed trees are the only remnants of what used to be a wild natural area existing and thriving in an industrial business area. When this was a field, it was wild and overgrown, and one's view was limited by obstructing plants and bushes and uneven terrain. Now, the plaza is flat and visually open, inviting the view without inviting people's presence. The plaza is monitored through cameras and security systems. Spaces such as these crop up more and more as the neighbourhood is developed from an industrial space with patches of wild and disused land to an increasingly efficient and parcelled up area. Our comings and goings are made visible and legible through the open space and security systems while our range of movement has been limited. Residents first lost a rare piece of wild nature in their neighbourhood but finally, as space use grew more efficient and regimented, lost access to the plaza entirely.



**Urban abandonment:** This is a crossroads and bus stop in front of my house. During the day you can often hear the buses driving by and the many cars of people on their way to work rushing past. Although not a full bustling city, Alphen is becoming more and more urban, clearing the green and filling them up with the brick and concrete of houses. Yet, even for all its comings and goings during the day a place like this can seem abandoned at night; the lights giving off a ghostly glow and the bus stop a home for bugs and vermin. The regular youthful rebellious occupants of the bicycle stand in the distance have vacated their spots and gone into cover beneath the tunnels that reside underneath the sloping road. In a neighbourhood shut down due to the current circumstances one might feel isolated, the youth in their tunnels have lit their blunts and stand in silence puffing away. At the same time there is the occasional resident venturing out into the desolate landscape of the night to walk their dog. A contrasting sight if ever there was one. Contemplating this scene in black and white, which is not quite dissimilar to the true colouring of the landscape, one might feel themselves to be on an island. Their own desolate island in the middle of a normally bustling environment. In a world shut down by a pandemic almost every space has become an island, with everyone living isolated like Robert Maitland in *Concrete Island*, almost forgetting about the rest of the people out there; experiencing the same.

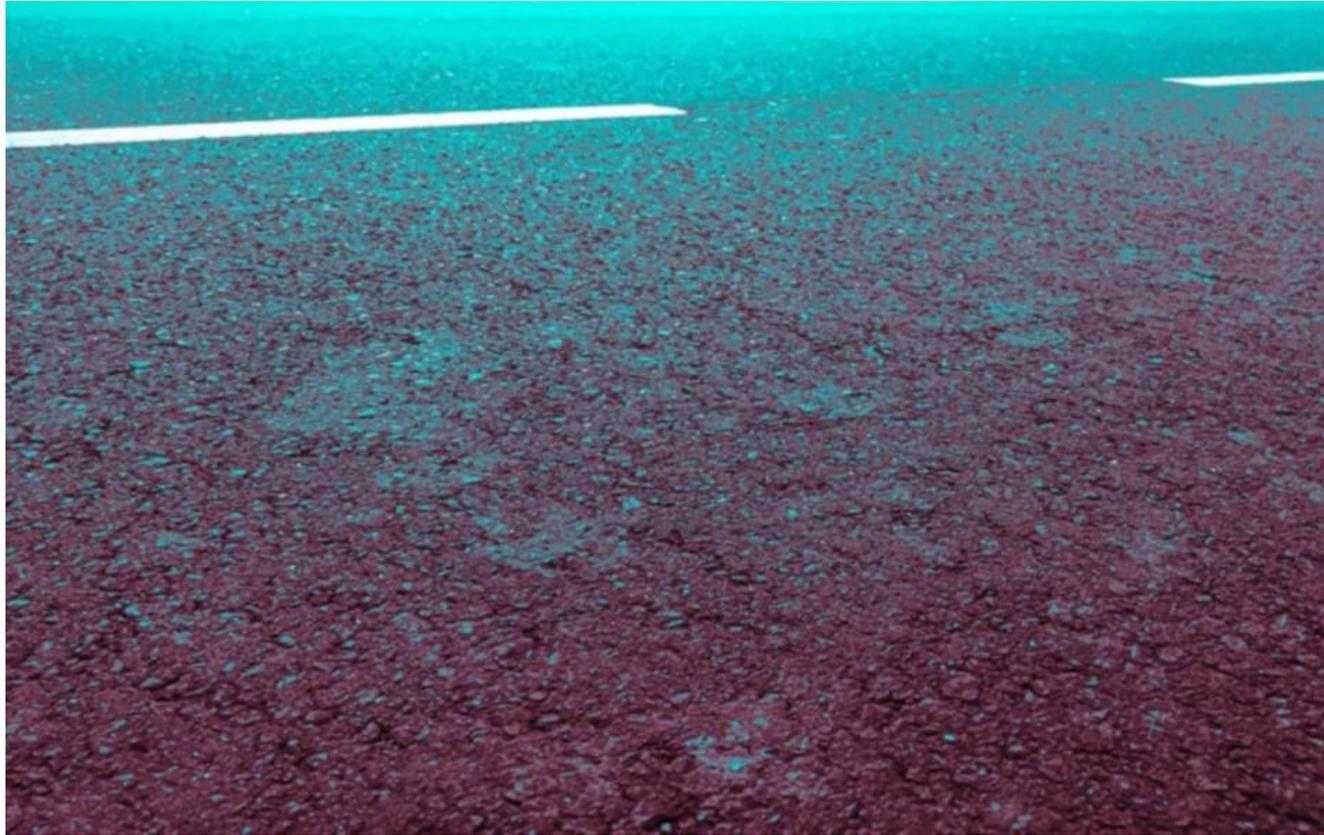


**Stationsplein:** Utrecht central station has been considering his own pedestrians at the centre of all its purposes. This is a roof that links the Central Station to the *Hoog Catherijne*, the shopping centre's non-shaped building located next to the station. This very best known eye catcher roof consists of bulbs or cushions that preserve the structure form the air overpressure which has been praised for its thoughtful and artistic construction. An enormous artificial but autonomous assembly, have all its parts mutually connected in a way that it is impossible to separate them. It obviously shines as a mirror to reflect society's current state and enthusiasm, moreover, as Mumford already mentioned, this over-concentration of ideas for modernity is rapidly destroying the city. Perhaps one of the reasons is because this construction lacks any historic insights. The fact that the high roof is, eventually, restricting the very area of freedom for the pedestrian is clearly noticeable. Individuals walking out the station, are expecting to step into the spacious area of liberty, however, an enormous new technical

ambiance has the power to increase the feeling of being trapped once more. Looking up, you can undoubtedly observe that the roof spreads casually to keep you safe from the mad sky of Utrecht but there is no clear end to this construction, and if the sky decides to share his own kindness with us, still, we cannot experience fully the very warm sunlight on our thirsty skin. I am not sure if all pedestrians are aware of this giant construction above their heads, moreover, because it is surrounded by many higher buildings, but certainly some are familiar with the feeling of being safe from the rainy days after stepping out of the station. Meanwhile, Artists try to be creative considering the comfort and security of people in the technological society, the fatal mistake of sacrificing our own freedom is distinctly evident.



**Everyday Lights and Shadows:** An internal corridor. That fixed path that takes you from home to the outside world. Designed to be purely neutral. No distinctive marks to benefit functionality. A replicated non-space, whose layout can be found in any apartment block. Without a willingness to create a sense of place, dwellers speed through this communal area. The feeling of belonging only emerges once you recognize your front door, right before vanishing inside. In a matter of seconds. Enabled by the bulbs, tenants look for the light that signals their refuge within the shadows. As if a lighthouse was, every sailor knows how far his island is. Automatized by their daily routine. An everyday experience that can be connected to the automatized road driving of *Concrete Island*. A wounded Robert Maitland wanders along the motorway while drivers pass near him. He manages to see cars thanks to their headlamps. A car light marks the presence of an individual space within the communal space of the road in the same way the bulbs signal the presence of an apartment within the communal space of the internal corridor. Paused by the accident, Robert could be wandering through this internal corridor obtaining the same answer that in the novel: silence. He tries to catch the attention of the automatized drivers who, focused on arriving home, experience the motorway as a transitional space, likewise tenants experience an internal corridor. There lies its non-place essence: a long passage from which a set of lighthouses light the multiple ends of this communal space while casting shadows on the corridor.



**Demolishing Vein:** This is the lamppost-lit road running behind my apartment. Its treacherously elegant curve is instead an obtrusively sharp cut through what was an endless green yet tranquil solitude, now blissfully ignored as a result of its manifestation as an ordinary ingredient in the environment. It has now turned grey and sombre. The cheerless, ashen-coloured and crumbly textures crush and consume the once foliage-covered ground with its pulverising weight, simultaneously toxifying the once clean air gliding unconstrainedly over the congruous countryside. The road is a sophisticated yet relentlessly elegant symmetry curving through the land, the unnatural illumination of its textures, which are both crumbled and noxious, emphasise the now critical cemented patterns, blemishing the once luscious

leaves and virtuous growth. The long-reaching arm of industrial sounds – of cars and bikes and other motorised vehicles – uncontrollably slashes its way through a citified space. The melody-lacking noises carried through the air vibrate and hum, penetrating far into woods and finding its way to brick houses. The road is more than acknowledged: it is admired, leaving the natural viridescent vegetation, dense bushes and tall trees neglected. This outlook mirrors the similar discordant template of Concrete Island, where the environment is solely seen as a place spreading weeds and other unwanted things; it is merely appropriate for outcasts and creatures seen as pests. Any hint of green is coldly eradicated by the constant trampling of tyres, or burned with a flamethrower, uncaringly operated by a common individual from the comforts of a car that pierces the night's once soothing dark with its far-reaching flashing lights. The road is victorious, rising above nature's delicate complexities. It is constantly maintained, protected, guarded. And its treacherously elegant curves remain revered.



**Stranded:** A magpie stopped to shelter from the rain on the PVC extractor pipe that sprouts from the pebbledash wall of number 24, Near the Harbour, Town of Secrets (to give the English translation). What struck me about the bird, as I spotted it through the PVC window frame in the living room, was how content it seemed with this industrial branch and canopy. It shook off its feathers and puffed out its chest as if to settle down for the evening, its view, similar to mine, was that of a fence and a weak limbed, overgrown hedge. I wondered if it realised that it was out of place, or if a tree branch was held in equal esteem to that of a smooth, perfectly cylindrical pipe.

As I rose to take a picture of the bird, I decided that I was probably wrong in my initial impression of the feathered creature. The rain had drenched him, and rather than take shelter beneath the dewy leaves of a tree, he had opted for the drier option, but by the way his chest puffed in and out, and his feet hopped along the smooth surface, I concluded that he was uncomfortable, and stranded. As I nervously snapped a picture of the bird, struggling to adjust the camera focus so as to capture his image, and not that of the raindrops on the window, I considered my own position. I, too, was seeking shelter and whilst my surroundings were much warmer and safer than those of the outside, I, too, felt a bit stranded.



**14-04-2020:** These concrete mixers seem to me like alien space-crafts, with their smooth exterior and thin, insect like legs. The hard light of the lamp creates overexposure which lends an extra air of otherworldliness. These space-ships have landed here in order to create a sterilised living environment. Their quest for the concrete world is fully underway, since the field of grass that once was is now being turned into yet another apartment complex. The building in the background looks upon the conception of its twin sibling, which will be identical to it; a tall, brick square with rows and rows of interchangeable rooms. This streamlined way of providing homes for the ever increasing city-people would not be looked down upon in Alphaville. In fact, this picture was taken in an area where the same creativity displayed in the architecture is reflected in the names of the apartment blocks: Alpha, Beta and Omega. The yet to be build structures will doubtless be granted similar clean and exact names. In this same area the architectural colossus, to quote our professor, resides. It seems that my living environment provides ample opportunity for one who is looking for scenes straight out of a 1965 French New Wave science-fiction neo-noir film.



**As Seen from The Outlands:** Logic dominates. The windows in the buildings reflect modern life is not too dissimilar from the life in Alphaville; squared, compartmentalized, an organized state. The most noticeable feature of his photograph is the modern architecture, which has almost an obtrusive presence against the horizon. The dark silhouettes of buildings tower above those of trees and suburban houses; a visual reminder of the manner in which concrete has taken over vegetation. This is the new milieu known as “the technological society”, and it has cast away and expanded over the old environment: nature. The sun is setting, but life – this modern way of life – continues. As can be seen from the number of artificial lights shining from the windows: another technological achievement. This view made me reflect how modern

society has found a way to ‘hack’ nature and keep the wheels of progress turning. Our biological clocks are no longer dependent on the natural cycles of the moon and the sun. Ours is a new age. Technology has aided us in constructing a different reality, and as a society we have all been conditioned into a different way of living. But are we truly free? Living in compartmentalized places that seem to get smaller with each new architectural development? Fitting neatly into the societal moulds presented to us by a higher power? Our higher power is not Alpha60 but are our leaders dominated by strictly technological values? Do we ever question WHY? Although ours is not a totalitarian society like that of Alphaville, there is no doubt that in prioritizing progress and technological advancement we have left some things behind. Like the dictionary in Alphaville, we have edited things out. And much like that we have forgotten, or are beginning to forget, what those are.



**“It is still there!”** I would exclaim each night while closing my blinds for several weeks on end, as the car never seemed to move. What was it doing there? Was it broken down and needed fixing? Had someone just left it there? Was someone living in that car? Or was it a diligent employee of the University of Applied Sciences that worked from the early hours of the morning until deep in the night, only to repeat that process over and over again. Even through my burning curiosity I never decided to check. The parking lot of the University of Applied Sciences, much like Robert Maitland’s island in J.G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island* is hemmed in on all 3 sides, by the University of Applied Sciences, a building sight, and a student apartment building lovingly called the “Black Boxes” (where I live) respectively. While not fully invisible from the road close by, it is mostly secluded. Looking upon the car each night I sometimes wondered if other people with a view of the same parking lot wondered about the reason that car was there as much as I did. I never found out, and one day the car was gone. It had stood there undisturbed and largely unnoticed, or ignored, much like Robert Maitland and his

crashed car, for what seemed like forever. And now it is gone, it has been gone for quite a while now, but sometimes, at night while closing the blinds, I still wonder what happened to it. The parking lot stands empty now, a desolate beach of concrete. Where ones the wave of cars washed over it in the morning, only to recede back into the sea of traffic at night, it now lies barren and open, I suppose it is only fitting that it is this way considering the times we live in, but still I wonder, as someone passing by Maitland might have done, what happened to that car...?



**The Shape, Texture and Colour of Our Slate Floor Comforts Me:** While adapting to the new reality in The Netherlands and all over the world, I catch myself staring at our slate floor and taking comfort in its shape, texture and solidness. Our floor is made of a strong natural stone flooring material, namely slate which has an inherent durability that makes it resistant to a diversity of daily accidents, and will last not only for my lifetime, but presumably also for our son's, and perhaps the generation that could come after his. Although slate is delicate during the installation process, a floor can last many generations once it is properly installed. This comforts me, knowing that some things will stay familiar to me.

All around me, the world as I have known it for fifty-six years has come to an abrupt halt. When I look outside, I notice that the streets seem almost empty of human activity. However, because of this sudden break down, I observe a huge increase in the animation of the city's wildlife. The robin delights me with its warm orange breast and cheery song. Our pair of almost domesticated house sparrows are feeding themselves on the sunflower seeds we keep in a bird feeder silo in our garden. The grey finches with their characteristic quick movements seem to enjoy the lack of human activity.

Although all these tiny birds seem frail, they show a remarkable resilience and - luckily for us - they seem able to endure the human daily efforts to dominate the world. Staring at our slate floor, I come to a sudden realisation, one tile is delicate in human hands, but once the floor is placed in skilled hands and workmanly laid, it will last for many generations to come.



**18 β □ (Inspired by *Alphaville*):** Not far into the third millennium, an architectural colossus arose out of a patch of ground along a single rail track in the ancient city of Leiden, heralding the new age of megalomania. Dwarfing the tracks symbolising a previous phase of the ever-expanding industrial revolution, the mammoth edifice imposed its clinically sleek exteriors on the retina of every half-open, sleepy eye on the platform that hugged the foot of the Leiden giant. Casting imposing shadows left and right over the passing traffic, this monumental monster exerted an invisible, yet pernicious influence over the unsuspecting young citizens of this age-old centre of scientific learning. Unbeknown to the big-headed architects, local councillors and educational governors – lost in their pipedreams of magnificently efficient learn-and-work campuses – the mountain of absinthe-green cladding developed a mind of its own with every steel girder placed in its unusual position. It was designed by technocrats with egos bigger than Lemmy Caution's penchant for silent

stares. But it harboured a will more powerful than poetry's emotive mystique. Defeating the so-called experts by proving itself, on opening day, entirely unusable as a school, the Leiden colossus enslaved the inhuman forces that had conjured it into existence through their sheer utilitarian will to streamline productivity. It dragged them down into a pit of debt they had dug simultaneously whilst laying the foundations for this triumphant symbol of their controlling powers. Blinded by the bright flashes that sparked from technocracy's alluring prophecies of an entirely organised society, they had erected an architectural Alpha 60 on 18 Bèta Square.



**Brickwork Labyrinth (inspired by *Concrete Island*):** This is the view from the front window of my home: a brick wall, followed by a smudgy higher brick wall, followed by an even higher and more smudgy cracked brick wall with grimly shaded windows, from behind which you can hear the buzzing of endless traffic crawling across the asphalt that dives the littered concrete pavements on either side of a road lined with bloated four-wheeled metal vehicles bulging from their parking spaces opposite rows of towering and toppling brick houses with shadowy windows crammed in and jostling for space. The centre of an old city like Leiden – for all its touristy beauty – is a spiral labyrinth of brickwork, concrete and asphalt that on all sides suppresses anything green and living that attempts to grow upwards towards the light. In the days of the low sun, weeds and fungi sprout vigorously from the cracks between the wet rows of bricks that make up the boundary between the foundation of the shed-rows in the back lane and the slippery street. Every season, an anonymous neighbourhood resident engulfs these stubborn

natural growths with white pellets of poison as soon as their presence becomes too prominent to his taste: eradicated like a dog-turd from a doorstep, like a rattling beer can tumbling over the stones. The alleyway is a gorge of brickwork sending echoes of all noises and voices of passers-by amplified into the stagnant city air. The many residents live almost like hermits hiding away from the wheelers and dealers across the park. We know each other's faces and the doors to each other's places, but like Robert Maitland on his *Concrete Island* we live isolated, imprisoned between walls in front of walls, in front of walls, in front of cars, in front of asphalt, in front of the brick labyrinth that is Leiden city centre.

**THE END**