# Forbidden circles

Hans Steketee

A man with a moustache is walking across the parade ground, the sleeves of his camouflage suit are rolled up. The gravel is crunching beneath his grip soles. In his hand he is holding an attaché-case. What could be in it? Top secret code messages, or a banana and a ring binder with the course logistic quality improvement? And, of course, a GSM-telephone to call his wife from the train to tell her he will be a little later because training lasted longer than he expected.

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There is no better place than the Utrecht Kromhout barracks to observe the warm reorganization of the Dutch army. Nowhere else, compulsory military service and the old enemy have been so abolished as here on these couple of fenced-off acres on the eastern outskirts of the city, jammed in between a motorway, a football stadium and a small residential area. But you are mistaken if you just associate the new-fashioned army with *abseiling* Red Berets. The olive green middle manager, the dynamic post-cold war version of the former office soldier, is omnipresent.

Middle management in combat boots - emerging as a type, but at ‘the Kromhout’ it will eventually disappear because in a few years time the barracks will inevitably be

closed down. There will be no role for it within the ‘market-oriented philosophy’ of a ‘flexible army.’ The dented trucks from all the stages of the Bosnian war are still there - UN, IFOR and SFOR on the white or green sides - in line for the panel beater and the sprayer. And still the military mechanics learn to recondition the diesel engine of a shovel truck. But innumerable offices, sheds and huts are already empty. And on the assault course there is not a breath of wind.

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In the heart of the barracks there is a dilapidated red brick building. “1850”, it says in granite numbers above the bare entrance door. Indoors there is a smell of old water. This is the last thing that reminds of Fort Vossegat, one of the forts of the inner defence line round Utrecht. It was supposed to be a bombproof guardhouse. In reality, together with the rest of the *Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie* (a strip of land flooded as a defence line), it was already out-of-date before the cement had dried. Because brick vaults with an earth covering would have been no match for Krupp’s rifled artillery and long-range high-explosive shells.

It never came to this, although generations have cherished the illusion that the Netherlands managed to remain neutral thanks to this wet version of the Maginot philosophy. In May 1940 Dutch soldiers garrisoned the last forts for the last time. No tanks appeared before the walls, the enemy simply flew over them to bomb Rotterdam. The Netherlands capitulated without a shot having been fired from the *Waterlinie*. The bastions, the “crescent-shaped bulwarks” and the “paved roads” of Fort Vossegat had already been swallowed up for the greater part by the unstoppably growing Kromhout.

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The barracks must have been a strange isle of activity in the relative emptiness to the east of the city. Empty, because on the basis of a law passed in 1853, virtually no building was allowed within a radius of one kilometre around the Utrecht forts. A sports park, maybe. Or a small airfield, as the town architect H.P. Berlage wanted in 1920, but that never happened. Only when that "Law of Forbidden Circles" was annulled in the early fifties, the city's expansion to the east got a move on it. Today, motorways and office towers still arise in the forbidden circles around the Kromhout barracks and Fort Rhijnauwen.

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It is hard to see them from the roof of the bombproof guardhouse because of the bramble jungle. The view over the barracks' terrain is all the better from there. The army may be going through a period of change now, but if you look across the Kromhout, at a single glance you see that it has never been any different. The fort's garrisons with their gaiters, the praised riflemen who marched against the Belgians with peat in their backpacks, the military engineers who trained themselves in anti-aircraft defence with searchlights and listening devices during the interbellum, the technicians who exchanged the Kromhout for Korea and the medical examiners who examined innumerable conscripts here - they have all left their own buildings, like annual rings. Some of these buildings have never cherished any pretensions. Take, for example, the temporary quarters where one of the Kromhout's highest ranked military man Fons van Loon, major, but above all "general manager", is lodged. Other buildings were obviously intended to be beautiful, like the concrete box from the seventies where a kitchen and a canteen are located. The window sections, the patterns in the concrete and the small steps have been given much thought, but today it rather reminds of  a Yugoslav tax office or an East German hospital. Or take the garages and assembly halls from the fifties. People who love our industrial heritage may get enthusiastic about it but it takes more than some paint and partitioning walls to turn it into an upscale hotel or an apartment complex.

No, municipal planning authorities will not have had much influence on the terrains of the Ministry of Defence, you might think. Still, there are some surprises from the time when military use could go hand in hand with aestheticism. One of them lies in the green eastern corner of the terrain, behind trees - invisible from outside the fences and you have to search for it within the fences. It is the *Brug met Twaalf Gaten* (Bridge with Twelve Holes). The bridge had to be crossed to reach Rhijnauwen. Through the holes underneath it, the forecourt of Fort Vossegat could be flooded with water from the Kromme Rijn (Bent Rhine), too shallow to sail across, too deep to wade through. The fort is gone, the canal to the river has been filled in and on the inundated plain there are bungalows. The bridge is still there, however. From the terrace of the deserted officers' hotel "Het Ravelijn" you have the best view of it: twelve identical brick arches, separated by identical piers with a battleship grey stone bow, that are reflected in a pond. It is not surprising that the Kromhout occurs in few art-historical handbooks. And the list of military monuments is more appropriate for the real defences.
Nevertheless, this potpourri is a whole - nowhere in the Netherlands there is such a diversity of military building from so many periods together in one place.

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The question is whether that unity can or should be preserved. Maybe not - as open-air museum of the new old army it probably has too little potency. In any case, with this CD-ROM everybody can pay a virtual visit to the Kromhout barracks, every building separately or in the intriguing and ingenious interrelation that the photographer Theo Bos has given them. This is possibly an interesting intermediate form between giving up and preserving.

It is still not allowed to have look around on the Kromhout. The barracks is the last of the forbidden circles. Even when the Utrecht University establishes its new prestigious college in the grand square by the parade ground ("a top location halfway between the historical city centre and the modern university centre De

Uithof"), the guard post with barrier, on the side of the complex where the stadium is, will probably be there for a while. Meanwhile, with this CD-ROM you can virtually climb over the fence.

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Hans Steketee (Middelburg, 1959) became a freelance journalist after finishing his studies Dutch language and literature and published among other things about history, photography and military architecture. In 1988 he published a collection of travel stories under the title of "*Landschap achter het Oog*" ("Landscape behind the Eye") (publishing house Veen). Since 1989 he works as editor for the NRC Handelsblad.