

## >>EXHIBITION

### SWEETS

Until 21 September  
 ARCAM Architectuurcentrum,  
 Amsterdam

Review by Herbert Wright

Right: Every one of Amsterdam's 27 bridge-control houses is modelled at ARCAM, which itself is a waterside structure built for views

Below left: The Omvalbrug (1954) was the last designed by Piet Kramer in his 35 years in the city council's bridge division

Below right: From the Kortjewantsbrug bridge-house (by Dic Slebos, 1967) the bridgmaster had a 360-degree view

Sweets is an odd name for a show about the architecture of the 27 bridge-control houses along the larger waterways of Amsterdam, which until recently were manned to open bridges for vessels to pass through. But now that the bridgemasters who occupied them have been replaced by a big digital control room, and their eyes by CCTV, they are set to become 'Sweets', an ensemble of distributed hotel suites (geddit?) across the city run by the Amsterdam's trendy Lloyd Hotel – not unlike the South Bank's Room for London, but multiplied, closer to the water and each with history. Moreover, Marthijn Pool of local practice Space&Matter, which designed and curated the exhibition, describes the buildings as 'little gems tucked away in the city... [like] in a chocolate box'.

The oldest bridge-house dates from 1673, Amsterdam's Golden Age, but is little more than a plain kiosk with a pitched zinc roof. The bridge-house story really starts in the early 20th century, when Amsterdam's Publieke Werken (Public Works department) decided to weave a city-wide aesthetic in street furniture and bridge works. From then on, the mainly brick bridge-houses represent a pageant of architectural fashions, often particularly Dutch, such as the inter-war Amsterdam School with its ideal of integrating decorative craftsmanship across the city into a 'Gesamtkunstwerk'.

In the Fifties, as car usage surged, bridgemasters controlled road as well as water traffic, and bridge-houses floated upwards, often as utilitarian elevated platforms on posts rising from the water. Oddly, the show lumps them together with Dirk Sterenberg's



Corbusian Hortusbrug as 'New Objectivity', although the term usually refers to a pre-war modernist style.

Brutalism and high-tech subsequently touched bridge-house design. Haveneiland, built in 2009 and the most recent bridge-house, is actually a mission control centre for all the locks and bridges of the bleak new Amsterdam island of IJburg. It is a highly rational brick-clad, two-storey box with a glazed cantilever, designed by practice Quist Wintermans.

There are no de Stijl bridge-houses, nor any by OMA, MVRDV or Mecanoo (although Benthem Crouwel designed IJburg bridges), but major architects do pop up. Hendrik Berlage, the Utopian CIAM member who bridged Dutch traditionalism to modernism, designed a striking 1932 bridge-house tower, and Aldo van Eyck, the great structuralist and member of CIAM breakaway group Team 10, designed a super-simple modernist bridge-house in 1955.

The show's venue itself, the sculptural ARCAM building (designed by René van Zuuk, 2009), is itself rather like a bridge-house, in that it sits isolated beside the water. On its airy upper level, every bridge-house has been meticulously modelled in 1:25 scale by Kaita Shinagawa of Studio KU+ and mounted on its own plinth. What the models lose by being entirely in immaculate white is the texture of the brick, concrete or steel, but Shinagawa has offered us compensation. Each model has a black bicycle leaning against it. It's a charming and uniquely Dutch touch, and incidentally reminds us how modest some bridge-houses are.

There are two other elements

### WHEN ONE OF THE BRIDGE-HOUSES WAS THREATENED WITH REDEVELOPMENT IN THE SEVENTIES, PROTESTS FORCED THE CITY TO BACK DOWN

to the project. Space&Matter has compiled an excellent book, *Sweets Overview Insight Outlook*, packed with facts, schematics and photos, and thoughtful essays about the mystery of the bridgeman and the bridge-house's context in urban planning and contemporary trends. And then there is the bigger exhibition – the actual bridge-houses out there across the city! *Sweets* provides a map.

Some bridge-houses, such

as those in Amsterdam-Nord, are impractically remote to visit – when converted to hotel suites they'll be more like retreats. But downtown there is a good string of them along the Amstel and Nieuwe Herengracht. Amsterdammer,s themselves can be passionate about them. When the Nieuwe Amstelbrug building (van der Mey 1912), an almost blank structure so small it could be a toilet outhouse, was threatened with redevelopment in the Seventies, protests forced the city to back down.

The exhibition honours bridge-house architects, many overlooked, but it is more about the story of this unique distributed typography. Amsterdam's bridge-houses evoke the strange, solitary romance of lighthouses displaced into the urban context, as well as offering an unexpectedly fascinating narrative.

