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More than a Social Housing Project

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Social Housing in the Netherlands

heren 5 architecten creates living environments where dreams can take flight, where sustainability and durability are key factors, where residents and users feel safe and that we are proud to call ours. Each project we take on is different in terms of design, location and programme. But the underlying theme in all of our work is the desire to understand the minds, requirements and needs of the users. heren 5 is an architectural firm with a wealth of experience in the private and social housing sector. Approximately a third of our current client base is made up of housing associations, and most of these projects are located in Amsterdam. In this chapter, we briefly describe the history and development of social housing in the Netherlands and talk about our study into the living preferences of various target groups. Then we illustrate how these ideas are implemented in designs of social housing projects.

Amsterdam has been characterised as the “Mecca of Social Housing” since the beginning of the last century. Since *1901 the Housing Act*, the construction of social rented housing has been a main policy target of Amsterdam municipality, which owns most of the land within its boundaries and leases it to real estate owners. After the Second World War, the size of the social rental housing increased rapidly in Amsterdam, from 18% in 1950 to 58% in 1995, replacing the private-rented as the dominant sector. Like in several European countries, the restructuring of the welfare state in the Netherlands has led to a decline of the social rented housing sector and a change from a broadly accessible system to a means-tested system. But of all member states in the European Union, the Netherlands still has the highest percentage of social housing of 30%. It is owned by independent housing associations, not by local governments. Middle-income groups also live in social housing; however, we seem to be in a new era now. At the national level, the Dutch government is trying to reduce the social rented housing sector in favour of the market sector. Housing associations, so the idea goes, should confine themselves to their core task of providing housing for people with low incomes. In Amsterdam, social housing has declined to 44%, while homeownership (24%) and private rental (32%) have increased in the last decade (Van der Veer, 2019).

Since May 2018, Amsterdam has had a local government consisting of the Green Left, D66 (Liberal Democrats), Socialist Party and PvdA (Social Democrats). The affordability of new housing is now a central theme. The local government strives to build 7,500 new housing units

annually, of which 2,500 are social housing units constructed by housing associations and 1,670 are medium-rent dwellings. In 2017, Amsterdam housing associations acquired six municipal buildings including former schools, health care centres and office buildings, with the intention of transforming them into more than 200 social housing units. These are also intended primarily for young households and refugees with a residence status. They are housed in a mixed manner to facilitate integration in the immediate environment. The housing associations and the municipality inform and involve residents in the surrounding neighbourhoods during development of the transformation plans through meetings between the current and new residents, creation of common meeting spaces and programming activities (Van der Veer, 2019).

For Whom?

“For whom do we build?” is a question we continually ask ourselves.

Since we do not work for private clients but for housing associations and private developers, we have little or no contact with the future residents of our projects. Future residents have first-hand experience and assess the quality of the dwelling differently than housing associations. Besides, no two residents are alike, and what works for one might not work for another.

At Home

Residential architects play a large role in shaping people’s lives and sense of home. Therefore, it is important to develop an understanding of what “home” means to people (heren 5 architecten, 2005).

In 2005, we issued a publication titled *Thuis, At Home*, which explores what home means to future residents as an attempt to bundle the range of different meanings that could be found. In this book, the residents of heren 5’s housing projects are the main characters. It is a personal story of seven residents, portrayed in a unique and intimate way. The residents talk about their housing experiences and aspirations, and comment on our ideas and plans. In turn, we explain how we analyse the emotion of “feeling at home” and how it serves as a source of inspiration in the design process. The striking portraits in *Thuis, At Home* provide an easy, almost casual insight into the capabilities and incapacities of architecture (refer to Figures 17.1 and 17.2).

Families and City Life

In 2011, we discovered that many young families living in the city are not satisfied with their home and living environment. As a result, young families are leaving or considering to leave the city. This is a huge problem. First, because young families have a huge influence on urban economy through their use of services, their departure impacts this negatively. Second, as a result of the departure of young families, the population diversity in cities is decreasing. Families are important because they often belong to tight-knit communities and social networks. You could say that families are the glue that holds the city together.

The publication *Het alledaagse gezin in de stad* [*Everyday Families in the City*] is a report of our study on the ideal family apartment for middle-income families. heren 5 architecten, together with BNA Onderzoek (2013), the research group of the Dutch Architecture Association, fellow architects, municipalities, project developers and housing corporations, initiated a collaborative study into the preconditions for designing attractive family apartments in the city. Our study showed that the traditional Dutch apartment does not meet the housing requirements of Dutch families. The main obstacle is the open-plan layout: a spacious living room that incorporates a

FIGURE 17.1 Residents at Home.

Source: heren 5 architects by Kees Hummel.

**Question from the residents' survey for Thuis, At Home:* "How do you describe your house to someone who hasn't seen it?" Answer: "I say that I live in a house that's just like a holiday park".

FIGURE 17.2 Resident's Perception about Home.

Source: heren 5 architects by Kees Hummel.

**Question from the residents' survey for Thuis, At Home:* "What is it about the surroundings of your house that makes you proud?" Captain Schouten in his old and new home: "A new neighbourhood that feels like home".

kitchen, dining and living space. We discovered that family members need a space, a bedroom or separate living area, where they can retreat when they want to get away from hectic family life. The width of the traditional Dutch apartment (7.50 metres) is based on the space required to park three cars. In other words, the rules for parking dimensions determine the size of the home. But does this make for a good layout?

Unlike cities like Paris, London and New York, the cultural “norm” in the Netherlands towards raising children is in houses rather than apartment buildings. In our search for good design solutions for family apartments, we came up with the idea to draw inspiration from floor plans in other countries. So, we approached our non-native, former trainees. Francesca, who is originally from Genoa in Italy, was delighted to contribute and sent us a mental map of the apartment she grew up in. Unlike the traditional Dutch apartment, her parental home had many small rooms where each member of the family could find some peace and quiet. We also noticed that the entrance hall was big enough to serve as a small room. This space was used by Francesca to do her make-up or have a drink with friends before going out on the weekends.

We also learned a great deal from talking to city-minded families closer to home, such as the Bora family in Amsterdam. The Bora family is not particularly happy with their rented social housing apartment in Amsterdam. Besides the small size of the entrance hall, which makes it impossible for the whole family to welcome or say goodbye to friends, they are most dissatisfied with the layout of the apartment. The living room and kitchen are located adjacent to the bedrooms and bathroom, which leads to a lack of privacy when visitors are present. According to the family, their apartment in Turkey has a better, much smarter layout because the night zone, the bedrooms and bathroom, is spatially separated from the day zone, the living room and kitchen. Thanks to our conversations with the Bora family and many other families, we now have a fuller understanding of the living preferences of families in cities (Atteveld and Liesker, 2010).

Investigating the living preferences of foreign families has resulted in various design solutions for the layout of family apartments, circulation spaces, outdoor spaces and various other aspects that can make life more comfortable for urban families in compact homes. The results of the study have been compiled in a book titled *Nestelen in de stad – Appartementen voor gezinnen* [Nesting in the city – Apartments for families]. (Refer to Figure 17.3).

City Veterans

Our most recent study, conducted in 2016, is *Stadsveteranen* [City veterans], a collection of stories on growing old happily in the city. The last few years, the number of nursing homes in Dutch cities has been steadily decreasing. This is not necessarily a problem, as the current generation of city veterans would rather not live in nursing homes anyway. This generation wants to have control over how they live and grow old. For this study, here 5 architecten interviewed city veterans about what they expect and need from their neighbourhoods and homes to grow old in the city. The study involved five workshops held in various locations in Amsterdam. During these workshops, groups of city veterans were interviewed about what they expect from their neighbourhood, street, apartment building and home. The “veterans” stories were then translated into trends and represented as illustrations in a book. Nine locations that came out on top were visited and documented. The study was conducted in cooperation with seven co-financiers, including a housing association, a demographer, Jan Latten, and a philosopher, Dort Spierings. We identified three important design strategies for elderly residents:

Spontaneous Interactions: “Having an obligatory coffee in the communal living room is not for me. I might be old, but I’m not dead yet”. This was the response we got from a city veteran

FIGURE 17.3 Creating Family Apartments.

1. Create as many rooms as possible. 2. A hallway is also a room and can double as a study, office, playroom and so forth. 3. Create separate spaces where residents can escape to. 4. Make it easy to go outside. 5. Create a safe and child-friendly living environment. 6. Incorporate sufficient storage spaces into the design (e.g. for strollers and children's bicycles).

Source: Atteveld and Liesker, 2010.

when we asked her about meeting other seniors. City veterans prefer to meet each other spontaneously while collecting their mail, on the spacious corridor on their way home or while tending the vegetable garden in the courtyard. This inspired us to include in our recent project in *Zeeheldenbuurt*, a working class neighbourhood in Leiden, a building that has street-facing living rooms, an inner court with gardens and galleries wide enough for benches where residents can socialise, wave to friends or simply sit and enjoy people strolling by.

Grey Economy: Seniors today are more active and independent than ever before – nothing like Statler and Waldorf, the pair of characters known for their grumbling on the Muppet Show balcony. In fact, the city veterans we have met are living the third half of their lives to the fullest. Start-ups from strong, sassy seniors doing what they do best are shooting up like mushrooms. Take, for instance, social catering company and commissary kitchen “Tante Tosti”, or Auntie Toast providing home-cooked food and her specialties to local residents. This is what we call the “grey economy”. Where possible, we incorporate spaces in our designs that provide opportunities for stimulating the grey economy.

Active Ageing: A striking finding of our study was that seniors prefer walking to cycling, and that they often opt for the “scenic route” rather than the shortest route. Wide footpaths, ample space for passing each other and safe and clear crossing points are some of the issues and amenities that seniors find important. For seniors, getting from one destination to the other has become a leisure pursuit (Figure 17.4). Another finding was that they attach particular importance to cultural activities and the availability of sufficient sports facilities.

FIGURE 17.4 Olga in Her Walkable City.

Source: heren 5 architects by Herman Stukker.

Our study identifies eight opportunities for successful ageing in the city:

1. City veterans make extensive use of the city's amenities, so it is important to create walkable cities.
2. No other target group is more active than city veterans. Therefore, cities should offer ample cultural activities.
3. In terms of safety, there are many spatial improvement opportunities that can be seized. For example, courtyards provide an intimate and safe place for seniors to sit and socialise.
4. The power of the grey social economy: most city veterans like to share their knowledge and experience with younger people.
5. Designs of buildings should include spaces that encourage people to gather and interact.
6. City veterans like living in mixed-age settings.
7. City veterans like living in apartments with a street view, preferably not located on the ground floor.
8. Senior apartments can be compact. Sweeping views are more important than floor space.

(Delisse and Liesker, 2016)

Recent Work

A number of social housing projects that we designed incorporate the findings from our studies. At heren 5, we very much like to work in multidisciplinary teams. We view each project as multilayered, and this approach enables us to contribute to the identity of the living environment

and to incorporate art. These aspects are important in creating dwellings and living environments that people love and value. Four projects discussed below were realised in cooperation with a landscape architect and various artists.

Kolenkithuis, 37 Dwellings in Amsterdam

The *Nestelen in de stad - Appartementen voor gezinnen* [Nestling in the city - Apartments for families] study served as the basis for designing the *Kolenkithuis*. The design is a mix of apartments, maisonettes and raised homes for large families in one social housing block. Family wishes and requirements, as reflected in the study's findings, have been taken into consideration in designing the dwellings. We focused on creating multiroom spaces, spacious entrance halls, living rooms with annexes and a nice flow between areas for private use and areas for entertaining friends and family.

A daycare and out-of-school centre are located at each end of the *Kolenkithuis*. Both are important facilities for the community. Car-free residential streets have been incorporated into the design, allowing children the necessary space to play. The outdoor spaces provide a safe, child-friendly environment. For parents, the large windows offer clear views of the streets and the playing children. The smallest of children can safely crawl around and play in the raised residential street (Refer to Figure 17.5). Brick garden beds soften the border between private property and public space. Just as each family is unique, so is each apartment in the *Kolenkithuis*. The walls are composed of a patchwork of different brick patterns, forming a decorative collage of texture and colour.

FIGURE 17.5 Car-Free Living for Children in Kolenkithuis.

Source: heren 5 architects.

Dieselbuurt, 178 Dwellings in Amsterdam

In our endeavour to design houses for the future with a focus on social sustainability and compact living, boosted by our studies on this subject, we joined forces with housing association Ymere, building company Era Contour to develop 178 rented social dwellings divided over two buildings, creating a positive environment for tenants of all ages. First-time renters, families with children and city veterans will be the residents of this future-proof residential area, where sharing and socialising will be a natural part of everyday life.

There is an increasing demand for smaller and more economical units by increasingly smaller households, and this trend will only pick up in the coming years. Housing association Ymere can only keep the price of housing in popular districts affordable if units are smaller and residents share the use of various facilities. These two residential buildings will house apartments that are smaller than traditional social rented dwellings, by combining smaller private living spaces with shared communal facilities. For example, significant floor space is saved by creating units without a washing machine connection and investing in a communal laundry room. High-density compact housing becomes an amazing collective experience through sharing. Residents can relax in the lobby after their day at work, celebrate birthdays in the lounge area and do their DIY tasks in the bike storage area. Collectivity is the key word in this project.

A lot of attention is paid to the interior of the communal spaces and to the circulation routes, connecting the communal spaces and facilities to the living spaces (Figure 17.6). The design stimulates a sense of community, encourages residents to take care of the building and promotes

FIGURE 17.6 Two Buildings Where Several Target Groups Live Side by Side.

Source: heren 5 architects. Dieselbuurt. Amsterdam.

FIGURE 17.7 Living in the Heart of the City in a Green, Car-Free Environment.

Source: heren 5 architects.

social interaction and trust between neighbours. The compact dwellings allow users to make optimal use of the environment. All new residents will have a view of the street, and each apartment, however small, will have a private outdoor area. The *Dieselbuurt* is being developed as a place where neighbours live in close harmony along child-friendly, car-free roads dotted with family homes. A place where children can frolic and play in the streets while their parents watch (Figure 17.7). Raised houses around open courtyards provide city veterans with a comfortable, safe place to live. Also, routes encourage first-time renters to traverse through the building to their homes with a view and a private balcony.

Polderweg, 72 Dwellings in Amsterdam

The unique location of the *Polderweg* inspired us to design a residential block with two faces. The building is strongly connected to the hustle and bustle of the railway, and yet the residents are worlds away within the peace and quiet of the courtyard on the other side. The *Polderweg* housing complex features 72 social rented apartments spread over a total of six floors, a central hall and covered parking. By dividing the block to look like six buildings, the complex was designed to be fitted within the scale and character of the Oostpoort neighbourhood. The building folds outwards on both sides and is ornamented with fronton. The façades of the building created an undulating rhythm and accentuate the divided blocks by different reliefs and figures. Our design is an ode to and an interpretation of Isaac Gosschalk's work, an Amsterdam architect who invested heavily in beautiful brickwork. Two stained glass façades by artist Stefan Glerum, spanning all six floors of the complex, are incorporated into the entrance halls to the front and rear of the building (Figures 17.8). The two colossal compositions depict the colourful history of the Oostpoort area. Residents and visitors are welcomed into the complex with a richly adorned entrance – an entrance to be proud of.

FIGURE 17.8 Polderweg Artwork and Design.

Source: heren 5 architects by Luuk Kramer.

The *Polderweg* complex features two types of apartments: south-facing units situated over the width of the building, and see-through units that extend from the railway side to the south side of the building. On each floor, the apartments can be accessed by folded corridors offering varied views of the surrounding area. The parlour-floor apartments have a stoop and steps leading up to a private front door. This mixture makes for lively street life and ensures a good transition between private and public spaces.

Huis van Hendrik, 106 Dwellings in Haarlem

The *Huis van Hendrik* complex is a mix of social housing, private-sector rented housing and owner-occupied homes. The project was designed in cooperation with landscape architect Buro Mien Ruys and artist Boris Tellegen. The *House of Hendrik* forms the entrance to the redevelopment district of Parkwijk in Haarlem. The curve in the street and the neighbouring block gave rise to the folded form that the plan is based on. On the spacious Prins-Bernhardlaan, this shape is folded into three large houses. On Berlagelaan, a smaller residential street on the other side, the building volume is reduced to five smaller houses. The apartments and houses are intertwined into one residential building on the upper floors and corners. This scales the building according to the different levels of the city. The residential building encloses the introverted garden, designed by Buro Mien Ruys, which occupies a central position in the plan (Figure 17.9).

FIGURE 17.9 Huis van Hendrik, Haarlem.

Source: heren 5 architects by B. Uterwijk.

The building manifests itself as a unified whole with a mix of masonry façades of yellow, grey and blue-green bricks, reinforcing the character of both the apartments as the complex. The artwork on the façades of surrounding buildings dating from the period of reconstruction following the Second World War inspired us to work with fine artist Boris Tellegen. On the street side, on the folded entrance, jagged brick artwork extends over the façade across all seven floors (Figure 17.10).

FIGURE 17.10 Brick Artwork by Boris Tellegen on Façade.

Source: heren 5 architects by B. Uterwijk.

Concluding Comments

heren 5 architecten sees as our mission to improve neighbourhoods, build healthier environments and create spaces that people can identify with and want to relate to. At the same time, we want our living environments to provide answers to issues relating to mobility, demographics, inclusiveness, energy conservation and climate change. Creating designs that make complexity manageable, with the human dimension as a benchmark, is what heren 5 architecten excels at. Turning dreams into tangible realities makes our hearts beat faster. Every project represents a story. But it is people who tell that story, who live that story. Each story is made up of different layers. We listen to residents and users, we analyse trends and developments, we closely examine the location and design challenges, we uncover motivations and dreams. Integrating all these elements in a single design provides a baseline that guides the design process forward and allows us to breathe life into the environments we design. We dream along with people, in search of emotions, excitement, meaning. This is how we translate stories into compelling architecture. heren 5 was founded based on the conviction that designing urban environments comes with a great social responsibility. We design buildings and public spaces, but, more importantly, we create a context for healthy and enjoyable daily living. To us, the link between architectural and social challenges presents beautiful opportunities.

Acknowledgement

Jeroen van der Veer from de Amsterdamse Federatie van Woning Corporaties contributed to our chapter, sharing his article on social housing, published in Baumeister 2019, and providing

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