

THE NETHERLANDS

Post-war Housing Schemes

Internationally the Netherlands has gained fame for its social housing schemes of the 20th century. The Dutch Housing Act of 1901 formed the background to a lively discussion between architects, not only on architecture and new techniques, but also on the social role of the profession. World-famous pre-war housing schemes such as Vreewijk (by M.J. Granpré Molière, 1916), Betondorp in Amsterdam (by J.B. van Lochem and others, 1923) and De Kiefhoek in Rotterdam (by J.J.P. Oud, 1926–28) aimed at creating an attractive neighbourhood while ‘uplifting’ the worker population by providing a decent and healthy living environment.

The Neighbourhood Concept

After World War II, the development of neighbourhoods was provided on a larger scale and was organised centrally by the government. The central idea that characterised the post-war housing scheme was the ‘neighbourhood concept’. Neighbourhoods were developed with a spatial and functional dimension and also with an explicit community focus. Neighbourhoods were constructed, as it were, to reflect the structure of society. The neighbourhood concept was developed during the 1920s by Clarence Perry as a response to the social and psychological problems that arose from the uncontrolled sprawling growth of cities. In large cities the individual vanished in the masses and the amorphous agglomeration of districts defied the development of any sense of community. In the face of these conditions, it was felt that the growth of towns and districts had to be halted. However, prior to developing a new design solution, a new theoretical framework was needed to understand the societal dynamics and structure. For this purpose research was undertaken to determine the number of residences, schools, churches, shops and so on, in accordance with the expected growth and nature of the population. The intention was to create an authentic community. During the 1930s and 1940s the theme of the neighbourhood was elaborated by Dutch architectural groups such as De 8 (‘The 8’), Opbouw (‘Development/reconstruction’) and internationally during the CIAM congresses.

Post-War districts normally consisted of several neighbourhoods. Social and community services (schools, churches, community centres and medical services) were clustered in spacious public green areas. Shops were located in streets or at squares. Elongated residential blocks were alternated with public or semi-public green areas, expressing the idea of ‘light and air’. Ideally there was such a wide range of residence design that people could live in a specific neighbourhood their whole life. For each phase of life a suitable house was available.

Inevitably the massive building operation and a shortage of building materials and qualified personnel promoted the use of prefabricated building units. Various architects, from both a more traditional and a more functional orientation, successfully employed prefabrication and adopted overseas systems for the Dutch market. Prefabrication consisted of either the delivery of large ready-to-use building components to the building site, or of pouring the components on site. The method of construction supported the building of strip-like residential blocks. Increasingly, and stimulated by subsidy advantages, the building crane deter-

mined the size of the sites: the length of the strips and the distance between them depended on the effective distance capacity of the crane.

Housing Scheme Management and Urban Reconstruction

Housing schemes were commissioned and run by housing corporations and town and city councils. After World War II such corporations became the largest owners of housing stock. For new schemes and services they depended (partially) on government subsidies until the middle of the 1990s. Financial shortfalls were carried by central government. From this date corporations became independent – and risk-taking – with local councils guarding the social responsibilities. The latter largely entailed providing housing for the target groups prescribed by central government and the management and maintenance of the houses. Corporations were allowed to sell part of the housing stock to current occupants and to develop new stock aimed at higher income brackets in order to generate new revenue.

Although central government continually provided subsidies for urban reconstruction and improvement from the 1960s, in 1992 policy makers accepted (nota Beleid voor stadsvernieuwing in de toekomst – ‘Policy Document on Urban Reconstruction in the Future’) that the renewal operation would have to be terminated at some stage. Funds were henceforth only provided for pre-war housing stock, historical city centres and for the relocation and cleaning of environmentally hazardous industries. Post-war neighbourhoods were explicitly excluded from urban renewal funding, because it was thought that corporations would maintain such neighbourhoods themselves, sufficiently funded by revenue from rent. When this policy was reviewed in 1997, it was found that the general quality of life was really poor in these areas: there were huge maintenance backlogs, deteriorated public spaces, lack of a sense of personal safety and a predominance of low-income households. A new policy of Urban Renewal was introduced to improve these post-war neighbourhoods through a restructuring programme.

‘Reconstruction’ consisted of taking measurements to change the composition of housing stock in an area in such a manner that its socio-economic structure would be strengthened. It meant that the one-sidedness of residential buildings would be replaced by a qualitatively high and varied housing offer. This approach was aimed at retaining or attracting higher income groups in the areas and to prevent the concentration of groups with low socio-economic horizons. The government stimulates corporations to sell houses to the actual inhabitants, counting on better maintenance and, by result, a positive image of the neighbourhood. However, when supply exceeded the demand (for example in the north of the country) uniformity and deprivation resulted in structural vacancy. Adaptation and dilution of the housing stock could possibly provide solutions to this problem. On the contrary, in the western part of the country, demand exceeds the supply, which leads to intensifying built areas while sacrificing the green space. The Ministry of Spatial Development (VROM) states that 1.7 million houses in

515 neighbourhoods are to be renovated. The annual targets for the period 2002–2010 are as follows, proving that local communities are far behind these objectives:

- demolition 20,000
- new buildings 90,000
- sell 50,000
- join 8000.

Threats

Even though the restructuring programme aims at quality and the improvement of quality, existing features are only marginally acknowledged or used. Often the current cliché that the post-war neighbourhoods are monotonous, uniform and have outdated layouts and finishings is easily adopted. This cliché is extremely difficult to eradicate in everyday practice. Furthermore, little research has so far been done on the origins, theories and development of this movement. Often, later additions or the partial completion of a scheme causes a lack of appreciation of the original qualities.

Another cause for concern is the current fragmentary approach to the restructuring process, which defies an integral plan. Replacing houses is inadequate. In addition, the poor condition of the houses and the depreciation period (50 years) may easily lead to demolition. But generally the physical town planning and architectural interventions in the neighbourhoods are justified by the argument of solving socio-economic issues such as threats of segregation, lack of security and poverty.

One of the criteria of the subsidy arrangement *Investeringsbudget Stedelijke Vernieuwing* ('Investment Budget Urban Renewal') for local government restructuring programmes is *cultural history*. Furthermore, since 2000 the arrangement requires a coherent development vision of the local authority. Central and local government increasingly are aware of the town planning and architectural qualities of post-war neighbourhoods. The housing corporations do not have this awareness yet. They consider their houses in a purely economic way: when houses are structurally or financially depreciated, they have to be replaced. The privatisation of the corporations did not encourage a sensibility for the cultural aspect. Central government would do well to increase public awareness and support and by providing instruments to local authority to more adequately include cultural history when urban restructuring plans are compiled.

At this stage it would be premature to put any buildings on the monuments list or to designate protected townscapes. The Dutch law on monuments still has its limit of 50 years for listing a monument. Although the financial depreciation period tends to get shorter and shorter, the government is still convinced that a certain distance in time is needed to give a (scientific) valuation of the cultural significance of a building. The departure point in the planning document of the National Service for the Conservation of Monuments is to investigate the various categories of building types before evaluations and choices are made. A methodology has been developed on the basis of a historical town planning analysis to assist local authorities to make responsible choices with regard to a redevelopment plan. Currently the departments of Culture and Spatial Development are considering ways to integrate cultural history into restructuring programmes as from 2005.