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Abrahamse, Jaap Evert; Rutte, R.J.

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THE DWELLING AS MASS PRODUCT

AUTHENTICITY IN POST-WAR HOUSING ESTATES

JAAP EVERT ABRAHAMSE
AND REINOUT RUTTE

1. The Vinex development of Brandevoort in Helmond was based on the image of a seventeenth-century canal town, complete with appropriately historicizing architecture (photo Rosa Tigges)

From the early 1960s Dutch mass housing was dominated by a modernism in which the neighbourhood concept held sway.[1] Amsterdam's 1935 General Extension Plan served as a source of inspiration in many cities.[2] Urban extensions were carried out within a hierarchical set-up whereby each neighbourhood was conceived as a self-contained entity with its own amenities and a strict separation of functions. Rectilinear infrastructure and wide green belts separated housing estates from their surroundings. *Tabula rasa* was the basic principle.

2. Almere Haven acquired little canals and an architecture that in scale, materiality and form was intended to evoke the historical towns along the shores of the Zuiderzee (photo Rosa Tigges)

Neighbourhoods took shape on the drawing board and were designed according to a regular, repetitive pattern made up of residential units (*stempels*), within which different types of dwellings were combined. Each neighbourhood consisted of a repetition of such units, the only variety being provided by schools, shopping centres and other amenities. New neighbourhoods were erected in record time, after a metres-thick layer of sand had been laid over the existing cultural landscape, effectively erasing the history of the place. The scaling-up of urban development and the construction industry, and the use of industrial prefab and modular construction resulted in uniformity in housing construction. On top of that, continuity with historical models was deliberately minimized; architecture was no more than the expression of function by means of material and engineering. Both the existing identity of the place and any new identity that might stem from the meaning of the architecture was avoided as far as possible. So if authenticity is seen as the expression of identity, meaning or character, it could be argued that modernist housing can *consequently* not be authentic. That is not how we see it; in this case authenticity does not derive from any deeper meaning, but from the very absence of such meaning as dictated by functionalism.

The lack of identity in new housing developments was already regarded as a problem in the 1960s. It was said that living in dull, placeless, meaningless and soulless new housing eventually led to rootlessness, depression, alcoholism, 'flat neurosis' and other afflictions. In the 1970s, this prompted a new approach to the design of housing estates. In this article we discuss three examples that were built in quick succession in reaction to modernism: Almere Haven, Kattenbroek in Amersfoort and Brandevoort in Helmond. They are not representative of Dutch urban design – they are far too distinctive for that – but they do offer insight into attempts to confer identity on a housing estate. Designers wanted to create a 'sense of place' that would enable residents to identify with their living environment. How did designers go about achieving that, what was the result, and finally, to what extent did this differ from modernist housing?

ZUIDERZEE TOWN ON THE GOOIMEER

Almere Haven is the oldest part of the new town of Almere in the Flevopolder, construction of which commenced in 1976. Small-scale development and a sense of place were the key design considerations.[3] To get away from the atmosphere of the bare, windswept polder, it was decided to model this district on the old Zuiderzee harbour towns. Consequently, it had canals and a lakeside waterfront lined with shops, cafés and restaurants, and a marina (fig. 1). Along the waterside, which was paved with clinker bricks and stone pavers, there was a varied streetscape featuring two round towers, brick facades, tiled roofs and vertical windows. A cursory glance suggests a pastiche of an old town, yet the architecture is in fact a derivative of modernism. In the empty, amorphous landscape of the IJsselmeer polders, the importation of familiar town and village tableaus was nothing new. In the 1950s, all the villages in the Noordoostpolder, with the exception of Nagele, were modelled on historical examples.

In Almere Haven there was an attempt to create identity and a sense of place in a design world still dominated by modernists. The result was new townscapes with organic street plans or pedestrian-friendly 'home zones', which were promptly dismissed as 'Nieuwe Truttigheid' (new insipidity): the 1970s housing estates strove to avoid the uniformity of the post-war reconstruction period but ended up all looking alike.[4]

AMERSFOORT'S KATTENBROEK THEME PARK

Upon taking up office as an alderman in Amersfoort in 1978, Fons Asselbergs characterized housing construction practice as 'colourless, anonymous, monotonous, characterless, insipid, deplorable, banal, lazy, clever, agile and slick, nondescript, indifferent, cavalier, dull, virtuous, *horreur locale*, tiresome, mediocre and more and more of the same.'[5] One reaction to this was Kattenbroek, built on his watch from 1988 onwards. Ashok Bhalotra, the coordinating urban designer and supervisor, was the first to employ a form of

3. The basic layout of the Kattenbroek housing estate in Amersfoort was based on an abstract painting by the Russian avant-garde artist Wassily Kandinsky. This illustration shows how that composition was applied to the peat landscape (Archief Eemland)

'theming' in housing construction. Until then it had only been used to give shopping centres and amusement parks a veneer of variation, identity and character. The themes dreamt up by Bhalotra were intended to stimulate the architects' imagination so that every part of the district would have its own distinctive character. For the spatial master plan, Bhalotra drew on the work of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky. Kattenbroek consists of a combination of geometric elements. In the centre is De Ring (fig. 2). One of the housing complexes in this circle, the Nieuwe Muurhuizen, was inspired by the *muurhuizen* (wall houses) in the centre of Amersfoort. De Ring was bisected by the Laan der Hoven (Almhouse Avenue) and surrounded by evocatively named areas: the Verborgen Zone (Hidden Zone), Het Masker (the Mask) and De Kreek (the Creek). The Laan der Hoven runs through Kattenbroek from the north-west to the south-east. It is lined by thousands of dwellings and also serves as the main access road. The Verborgen Zone cuts diagonally through the district. Scattered among the hundred-and-fifty dwellings in De Kreek, were a few retained farmsteads. Het Masker curves around an oval lake.

The themed neighbourhoods were fleshed out in workshops, resulting in Kattenbroek becoming a showcase of idiosyncratic, sometimes extravagant architecture – there are, for example, 'ruin' and 'bridge' dwellings. There is certainly more variation than in modernist housing estates or in Almere Haven, but the Amersfoort extension has almost as little to do with the local landscape as modernist districts, despite the retention of the odd existing building and landscape elements, which now look like museological relics in the clinical new-build setting. There is even a similar separation of functions. Moreover, the concepts on which Kattenbroek is based are at least as abstract as those informing the modernist districts. The themes and geometric elements imposed by Bhalotra have resulted in a district where you quickly lose your way; a sense of place is nowhere to be found.

HOLLAND-STYLE CANAL CITY IN HELMOND

The southern Netherlands industrial city of Helmond, which suffered a sharp decline in employment opportunities as a result of de-industrialization in the 1970s, was allocated two government-designated (Vinex) development locations in the 1990s: Dierdonk and Brandevoort. Construction of Brandevoort, on the south-western side of Helmond, commenced in 1996 in accordance with a master plan by the Luxemburg architect Rob Krier, who had designed the new district as a canal city modelled on those in North and South Holland.[6] Brandevoort appears to have been conceived as a self-contained world that has nothing to do with the surrounding landscape or the city of Helmond. Like Almere Haven, Kattenbroek and the modernist districts, it seems to have appeared out of nowhere, like a UFO that has landed in the landscape. Once again, the familiar functional separation is very similar. The core consists of a quasi-fortified town with canal houses (fig. 3). This is encircled by areas of predominantly free-standing and attached houses, often featuring classical elements. The execution of the architecture and the outdoor space is immaculate; every detail has been designed. In this it paradoxically conforms to the modernist ideal in which every level of scale in a city – from city park to doorknob – is a product of the drawing board. As such, Brandevoort also appears to be a repudiation, or at any rate a criticism, of the deregulation that has taken root in urban design.

Identity and authenticity are sought here in housing that is vaguely inspired by the seventeenth-century architecture of Dutch classicism, and in town planning seeking to reference the Golden Age. In reality, Brabant profited little from that Golden Age, but perhaps that was the whole point of choosing this form: by importing an image of prosperity the poor industrial city is able to emulate Holland under the Republic. Brandevoort could well be a product of the underdog position the southern Netherlands still feels obliged to adopt: the periphery is fond of emulating the centre.[7]

CONCLUSION

In past decades, the quest for meaning and identity in mass housing has resulted in a wide range of neighbourhood types. However, the layout and architecture of new housing developments have rarely, if ever, borne any relationship to the typical features of the city or the landscape in which they are built. To the extent that it is possible to invest a new housing estate with identity by seeking inspiration in the local cultural landscape or in long-term urban development, it is clear that thus far little attempt has been made to do so.[8] This is undoubtedly not just due to ignorance, inexperience or lack of interest (justified or not) on the part of clients, but also to the fact that on the one hand many architects are alert to the latest trends and on the other regulations, developers and contractors determine the image far more than designers would like to admit. It is highly doubtful whether an architect can have much influence at all on something like identity, and thus authenticity, through the design of housing estates. Clients and designers of housing estates seem to prefer to look for identity in the abstract or the unorthodox. It is clear that a lot of new-build districts do not actually want to be new-build districts, but rather a Zuiderzee township, a collage of contrived themes, or a Golden Age canal city. There can be no question of

authenticity when such an identity is applied arbitrarily.

Bestowing identity on housing estates has been an ambition of designers since the 1970s. Yet however much the appearance of housing estates may have changed, the urban design concepts and principles employed do not appear to have changed much since the Amsterdam General Extension Plan was launched in 1935. In addition, regulations affecting spatial planning and housing construction are relatively slow to change and that also contributes to the uniformity of housing estates. Perhaps we must conclude that only those housing estates that do not aspire to be anything other than what they are – housing estates – are authentic: the estates dating from the era of hardcore modernism. So the question is whether the term authenticity in this context has any meaning at all after that period. But that is not necessarily a problem, because on another point at least the modernists have been proven right: a new-build dwelling is an interchangeable mass product, even in postmodernist times.

NOTES

1 J. Nycolaas, *Volkshuisvesting. Een bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van woningbouw en woningbouwbeleid*, Nijmegen 1974; P. de Ruijter, *Voor volkshuisvesting en stedebouw*, Utrecht 1987; H. van der Cammen and L. de Klerk, *The selfmade land. Culture and evolution of urban and regional planning in the Netherlands*, Houten/Antwerp 2012; C. Wagenaar, *Town planning in the Netherlands since 1800. Responses to Enlightenment Ideas and Geopolitical Realities*, Rotterdam 2011.

2 See for example: A. Blom (ed.), *Atlas van de wederopbouw, Nederland 1940-1965. Ontwerpen aan stad en land*, Rotterdam 2013; N.A. de Boer and D. Lambert, *Woonwijken. Nederlandse stedebouw 1945-1985*, Rotterdam 1987; V. van Rossem, *Het Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan van Amsterdam. Geschiedenis en ontwerp*, Rotterdam 1993.

3 J. Berg, S. Franke and A. Reijndorp (eds.), *Adolescent Almere. Hoe een stad wordt gemaakt*, Rotterdam 2007; R. Steenhorst, *Almere. Een stad zonder verleden*, Zaltbommel 1981.

4 C. Weeber, 'Formele objectiviteit in stedebouw en architectuur als rationele planning', *Plan 10* (1979) 11, 26-35; U. Barbieri, 'De nieuwe truttigheid is dood, wat nu?' *Plan* 10 (1979) 11, 40-47; M. Ubink and T. van der Steeg, *Bloemkoolwijken. Analyse en perspectief*, Amsterdam 2011.

5 H. Hekkema, *Kattenbroek. Een woonwijk in Amersfoort*, Amersfoort 1996, 7: 'kleurloos, anoniem, eentonig, karakterloos, slap, treurig, platvloers, gemakzuchtig, slim, vlug en handig, nietszeggend, onverschillig, onzorgvuldig, saai, braaf, horreur locale, vervelend, middelmatig en steeds meer van hetzelfde'; N. de Vreeze, *Lange lijnen in de stadsontwikkeling. De ontwikkeling van Amersfoort 1945-2010*, Bussum 2012.

6 G. van Hooff and L. van Lieshout, *Helmond. Doorsneden in tijd en ruimte*, Utrecht 2006; U. Ozdemir et al., *Brandevoort 2006-2010*, Helmond 2010.

7 G. de Bruin, 'Den Haag versus Staats-Brabant. IJzeren vuist of fluwelen handschoen?', *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 111 (1996) 4, 449-463.

8 See: J.E. Abrahamse, Y. van Mil and R. Rutte, '1950-2010 – Explosive growth: the welfare state, motorways, and the rapid expansion of the built-up area', in: R. Rutte and J.E. Abrahamse (eds.), *Atlas of the Dutch urban landscape. A millennium of spatial development*, Bussum 2016, 238-259 including the works cited.

DR. J.E. ABRAHAMSE is an architectural historian and senior researcher of urban history at the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands).

DR. R.J. RUTTE is an architectural historian and lecturer in the Chair History of Architecture and Urban Planning in the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology.

THE HOUSE AS A MASS PRODUCT
AUTHENTICITY IN POST-WAR HOUSING ESTATES

JAAP EVERT ABRAHAMSE AND REINOUT RUTTE

From the 1960s, Dutch mass housing construction was for a while dominated by modernism. Housing developments shot up in double quick time – after the existing cultural landscape had first been totally erased. In both typology and architecture, planners and architects strove to avoid any sense of continuity between these new estates and their predecessors: architecture was no more than the expression of function by means of material and technology. The following period saw the construction of housing estates that didn't really want to be housing estates, aspiring instead to be a Zuiderzee town (Almere Haven), a collage of contrived themes (Kattenbroek in Amersfoort), or a Dutch canal city (Brandevoort in Helmond). Clearly, there can be no question of authenticity when such identities are arbitrarily pasted on. Perhaps we should conclude that only those housing developments that do not aspire to be anything other than what they are – housing developments – are authentic: which is to say, the hardcore modernist housing estates of the 1960s. So one may well ask whether, in this context, the term authenticity has any meaning at all after the modernist period. But that need not be a problem because on another point the modernists have been proved right: a new-build dwelling is an interchangeable mass product, even in postmodern times.