

DEVELOPING THE EXISTING

Urban renewal in post-war districts

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The work-field of *Van Schagen architecten* is the existing city. Huge parts of the Dutch cities are built after the second world war. During the city-renewal of the '70 and '80, the districts from the 19th century were renewed. Nowadays we face the renewal of the post-war (modernistic) neighbourhoods. These districts have deteriorated within the last 20 years due to the urban renewal of the inner cities and the development of large suburban areas.

The image of the post-war districts is a bad one: too much of the same small dwellings; a concentration of social housing; too many foreigners; bad quality of public space; unclear boundaries between public and private; too much collective space turned into no-mans-land; a functionalist architecture not very popular: dull blocks in a dull environment.

Renewal strategies

Housing associations own almost all the housing estate in this areas. Logically they play an important role in the renewal. This role is not yet defined. In former days these associations were public institutions. Since 1995 they are privatised and often more market-orientated. They are often looking for short term profits; forgetting their role as provider of good social housing.

Almost all space around the housing-blocks is owned and maintained by the local government. An expensive job they would like to reduce.

In the renewal of the post-war city three different strategies are possible:

1. *building maintenance*: This strategy focuses on maintaining the present situation and is not future-focused. Just maintaining the existing housing estates is not enough. The dwellings stay too small and in a too poor condition.
2. *adapting*: This strategy focuses on consolidation of the market-position of the district. The misfits between housing-estate and targeted-groups are 'repaired'. Renovation is used as a means to create affordable housing for target-groups. This is financially almost impossible in the case of restructuring and building anew.
The existing housing supply is transformed for existing (or new) groups of inhabitants: large low-income families (often foreign); elderly people; starter groups with small budgets. The goals of the project are continuity, step-by-step renewal, balance between old and new, between low- and average income.
This strategy of consolidation is often not strong enough. When other parts of the city are restructured, tenants will move to the consolidated neighbourhood because of the affordable housing. The careful, step-by-step renewal will easily be frustrated.

3. *restructuring*: This strategy focuses on improving the market-position of the area. The accent is on renewal by demolition. Demolish completely and built anew; a new urban design, different functions, different types of dwelling, different architecture. Only in this way it seems possible to create a completely new district with a new position on the housing-market. Not only the housing-stock (types and households) is changed, also the urban layout.

On the long term, building maintenance or adapting won't be enough. Restructuring seems to be an easy and possible solution. The housing associations own the complete housing supply and can decide what to maintain, and what to demolish.

But time seems to change. Nowadays it is quite hard to sell large quantities of new and rather expensive apartments. Housing corporations are downsizing their targets and cancelling projects. Moreover, cities need the supply of affordable housing for economic reasons. They need to attract young working class (hand- and headworkers), students, the creative class. Above this, inhabitants of the demolished buildings do have to live somewhere. The affordable post-war housing supply is too important to destroy completely.

Transformation: an alternative strategy

But the method of *tabula rasa* is not renewal. It is just starting over again. The method ignores the history of the city and inhabitants. It ignores qualities and possibilities. Restructuring means wiping out existing human urban patterns and social structure. It implies demolition of everything: quality and beauty together with problems and ugliness. Last but not least it is very resource intensive and not environmentally friendly.

In our way of working, demolition is a mean, not a goal or a solution. The existing city should not be destroyed by new buildings. They should support the ever changing city. We try to design projects to make the city adapt. We design plans to transform the existing as a step to a new and richer setting, fitting the new urban life and needs.

The designer should not just design new buildings, he has to play a different role. He should look for hidden qualities in the existing city, take them up and make them flourish.

To find these qualities and chances we work in a way that is open for all kinds of information and communication. We use open design strategies; we interact with the people living in the district; we search for the meaning of the original plans. We are looking for the keys to transform the district, without destroying qualities and ignoring history.

My opinion is that post-war neighbourhoods do have enough qualities and chances to make a second life possible. The key qualities are: the favourable position in the growing urban network; the spacious lay-out and mature greenery; and the modest and careful architecture.

Our topics of transformation

In all our research and plans we often face the same items for transformation¹. We often focus on:

1. *housing supply*: can we re-use the existing dwellings (the casco) by reorganizing the floor-plan or putting dwellings together? Is it possible to realize new, extra dwellings?
For example:
 - Complex 50 and Enschedelaan: mixture of re-using the existing apartments and making maisonettes. In Complex 50 new, extra dwellings on the roof
 - Florijn: renewing the context, maintaining the existing dwellings and – partly – selling them.

There is a difference between the housing-stock of the '50/'60 and the more industrialized large scale housing blocks of the '60/'70. The early post-war housing estate (often porticoes) contains small dwellings (40-70 m²), with very small kitchens and bathrooms.

The apartments of the seventies (Florijn) are of a better quality (larger 75-100 m², good

¹ Three projects as an example: 1. Den Haag Zuidwest – Enschedelaan. 2. Amsterdam Osdorp – Complex 50 & 117. 3. Amsterdam Zuid-Oost – Florijn. For more information see also www.vanschagenarchitekten.com

kitchens and bathrooms, often an elevator). Here we face the malfunctioning collective parts around the block: dead facades on the ground floor (storage), badly designed public space (parking, garbage collection), and bad connection to urban routes.

2. organisation of the block: combination of different types of households in one block: large families, elderly people and small starting households. We try to reorganize a block in a way that these groups don't give hindrance to one another: entrances on the street for the large families, all elderly connected to an elevator, and all starters on porticos. By doing this, we transform the mass-housing-block into a collective building for living and working.
3. public space: redefining public/collective space around the block, making possible social control and a better use. For example: in Complex 50 the green space is re-defined as collective gardens. These playing grounds are directly connected with the gardens of the family houses, and accessible via the stairwells. In the project Enschedelaan we defined the space between the blocks as collective playing ground – a huge quality compared to newly built suburban districts.
In the project Florijn the surroundings are completely transformed: streets instead of badly controlled green. Still the original spacious layout gives quality: existing trees, green parks, compound, water.
4. the role of the inhabitants: taking both inhabitants and our role as an architect seriously. Inhabitants are a necessary source of information. Often they return to the project after renovation. The designer has to take them seriously, but also stay focused on the whole of the project; the goals of the renewal and the crucial problems. The architect has to take care of the whole of the project on the short and long term. Often the collective parts of the project are more important than the dwellings as such.
Complex 50: open spacious porticoes instead of balconies. Florijn: huge part of the budget went to the problematic parts of the complex: elevator hall, facades, floor 1+2 and the end parts of the complex. Difficult for the inhabitants of the existing flats.
5. sustainability: looking for technical, sustainable improvement – taking it to the same level as new buildings: insulation of existing facades (Enschedelaan), or completely new facades (Complex 50); use of low-temperature central heating (Florijn); using solar-energy (projects: Huize Patrimonium, Die Delfgaauwse Weye).
6. architecture: looking for an architecture that fits the goals of the renewal and fits in a logical way in the ever changing city. As a result every project has its own architectural language, so we don't have a standard office-style:
 - Complex 50: a completely renewed facades, referring to the former look of repetition and industrialization. Referring to that, the façade gives no expression to the new contents of family houses, apartments.
 - Enchedelaan: maintaining the original brick-look, combined with a layer of new balconies and galleries.
 - Florijn: complete new, changed look by using glass railings, and by splitting up the long slab in different parts (compartments). At the same time the old honey-comb structure is still to be recognized. The old inner street – the most hated part of the old structure – is still there, transformed into the livings of the ateliers.

Architecture in this case can use three concepts:

- conversion: changing the old, bad image into something completely new and modern (Florijn)
- rehabilitation: bringing life into the old, worn-out image (Complex 50)
- restoration: In some we have to deal with 'monuments' of the fifties. In that case we look for a way to restore the building in its architecture (project: Vissekommen).

Private and public values

In the case of Enschedelaan, Florijn and Complex 50 is chosen for transformation instead of restructuring. This is due to the market-view of the clients, and to the design-proces. In this 'open-plan-proces' more aspects than only market-value play a role. Public aspects – quality of surroundings, position of inhabitants, importance of affordable housing, re-use instead of demolition – are as important as the private interest of the client.

In restructuring, these public aspects are often not taken into account. The process is dominated by the market. It reflects the changed position of the housing association and local government. The housing association is privatised; the local government is looking to diminish public task.

In the renewal of the post-war city there is a lack of balance between public and private interest. Good, sustainable city-forms were often a result of strong ideas on public and private. For example: the Italian cities of the renaissance, the Amsterdam canals of the 'Golden age' or the American cities of the 19th century (grids and parks).

There were also strong ideas about the *public* during the post-war period. Although the ideas were too optimistic (about collectivism), and too static (about life-styles), the result were new, unique urban compositions. The specific qualities and aspect broadened the repertoire of types of city-layout in Europe and are still meaningful. Every era has made its own contributions to this repertoire. The qualities are recognized later on – and often too late.²

Due to the lack of balance between public and private, these unique urban compositions are under threat. The dominance of market-thinking is reflecting this misbalance. The value of the existing blocks depends only on the value of the location. The lower the value of the blocks related to the value of the location, the bigger the chance of restructuring.

The designer should show the client the complete value of the post-war areas, in all aspects and scales. He should be trained to see the hidden treasures of the living city, and deal with them. Renewal of the city needs the designer in a different role. He should be an *engineer* to know the technical possibilities of existing structures. He should be a *communicator* to make use of information of tenants and inhabitants. He should be *visionary* to visualize the possible future. Together with this, he should be able to discuss his plans with different groups: housing association, inhabitants, city-government, etc.

The new role of the designer:

1. design as search for qualities, problems and possibilities on different scales

Research on the possibilities of existing structures: the dwellings (casco), the block and surroundings and the position of the neighbourhood in the city.

What kinds of dwelling-types can be realized, and how difficult (or easy) is that? On what scale are the possibilities of transformation located? The research is looking for the possibilities, the extra value.

What to change and what to embrace?

2. a new way of analysing the city

We lack a language to discuss the specific qualities of the post-war city. To prevent the demolition of inner cities, different ways of analysing were developed during the '80. The drawings show the complexity and richness of this traditional city. Doing this, they offer a language to discuss them.

Because of the complete different set-up it is impossible to analysing the post-war city in the same way. Talking about *streets* and *blocks* is not fruitful. Using the 'glasses' of the traditionalistic city, we only see floating housing blocks in indifferent surroundings. But the composition of the districts is about balance between open space and masses, between public and private domain. Often there is a very subtle composition of dwelling types, types of public space, green-design and sort of trees. We have to develop a method of analysis in which *this* richness is made public.

² Van Pendrecht tot Ommoord, *geschiedenis en toekomst van de naoorlogse wijken in Rotterdam*, p. 19, essay Han Meyer. Toth, Bussum 2005

3. making plans open to discussion: feeding the process

Apart from the technical building-plans the designer should be able to make another kind of plan: a vision which shows the possible future of a district. The quality and value of new dwellings or new district everyone can easily imagine: new is always better. But what will be the effect of transformation?

In the drawing of such a visionary plan, the designer is forced to deal with the whole complexity of city renewal. Everything comes together: the different scales, groups (owners, tenants, government) and interests. The plan, in this way, is also a vehicle for the process: people discuss not only the plan itself, but also their own interests, position, future. Different aspects and initiatives can get there place. For the client, this open-plan process means complexity and taking a risk. City renewal is often focused on avoiding risks and reducing complexity. Difficult processes are cut into small pieces. Different functions (shops, dwellings, offices) are positioned in different buildings. The project-boundaries are as narrow as possible. Due to that, there is no room for transformation, discussion or change.

4. ability to speak different architectural languages

Instead of using an own office-style, the architect has to develop a modest architectural language. The architecture has to fit on the goals of the projects and to fit into the surroundings. The green environment is as important as the architecture of the buildings. An egoist architecture will not fit in. The newly built (or renovated complexes) should fit into the existing and new neighbourhoods. No contrast or unique piece, but careful architecture; in which the 'rules' of surrounding architecture are respected and renewed. In this way old, forbidden, dull architecture (ready to erase) is changed into an object that still reflects a certain – and in its way unique – period of our cities.

Concluding

Our projects show transformation as an alternative approach to renew the post-war city. The districts develop, adapt and change while existing qualities and values are preserved. It is possible to reposition a district by transformation, without restructure it completely.

Research, analysis and an open plan process is necessary to know where the key to transformation can be found. What aspects have to be changed, what points are strong enough to maintain and what parts are important to embrace.

In this process, there is an important role for the architect; as visionary, researcher and engineer. He is able to show the existing strengths and possibilities. He can develop a language to discuss the future of the post-war city. He is offering the material to make the redevelopment of these districts suitable for a public discussion, instead of a narrow housing-market topic. In this way, the city physically and socially can develop, adapt, change, grow. In short *enrich* instead of starting all over again every 30 years.