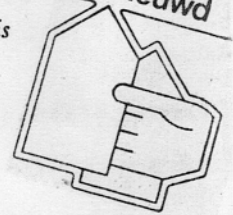


# Netherlands' neighbourhood architects

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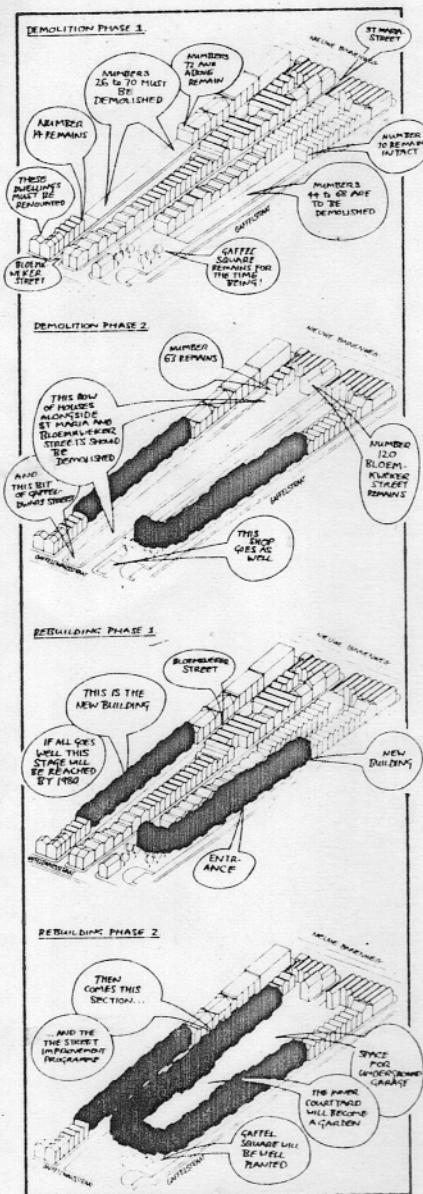


Right: Window poster 'This flat to be renovated'.

In the Netherlands many architects working on low income housing projects for the inner city are effectively appointed and controlled by the communities for which they are designing. At a time when the RIBA's Community Architecture Working Group (CAWG) is attempting to formulate a new system for funding community projects in Britain (AJ 23.8.78 p356), the recent experience in the Netherlands has particular significance. It could well provide a pointer for the future here. NICK WATES reports.

'Neighbourhood groups choose their own architects' asserted one young Netherlands architect, and although oversimplified, this statement is not far from the truth. The Dutch have developed a form of architectural practice which gives ordinary citizens in inner cities a great deal more direct control over their architects, and it is already producing very interesting results. The most sophisticated system has developed in Rotterdam. Eleven areas have special project teams in which half the members are officials and half are citizens appointed by neighbourhood groups. The officials come from the Departments of Town Development, Housing, Building and Housing Inspection, Traffic and Transport and Social Affairs. Project groups have their own budget, and buildings located in the area concerned. They are responsible for drawing up plans for neighbourhoods and then implementing them. Proposals and finance have of course to be ratified by the municipal council and central government, but within certain financial

limits the project groups effectively determine development. Architects are appointed by project groups, usually after intensive interview sessions at which previous work is shown and working methods described. Project groups then write briefs and act as clients throughout the building process. Usually a number of architects are employed on different schemes in any area, and altogether some 20 practices of varying sizes are doing this kind of work in Rotterdam. Most architects are from private practices (the private sector contains a higher proportion of the profession than in England), although it is possible for architects from the public sector to be seconded, returning to their former posts on completion of a project. Official members of the project team are paid civil servants, though each team also has an 'external expert', appointed and controlled by the neighbourhood group, but whose salary is paid by the municipality. In addition there is a local ombudsman service team (LOS), which consists of seven professionals subsidised by the government but giving independent advice to action groups and neighbourhood groups which want it. This kind of neighbourhood controlled client body has had a marked effect on the architects. 'We try to work with the people' said architect Piet Bennehey who has designed buildings for several projects. 'You have to explain how you do things.' The first thing he does when appointed for a scheme is to hire a bus and take neighbourhood inhabitants



2 Series of drawings published in the Oude Westen project team's broadsheet to show phased development in the area.



1 Twenty-eight new dwellings in Cool project area, central Rotterdam.



3 Low income housing on site of a former ship-building yard, Simmonsterrein, Rotterdam. Neighbourhood organisation, BOF; architect, Henk van Schagen.





8 Low income housing in Nieuwmarkt by Van Eyck & Bosch, job architect, Bosch.

by which neighbourhood planning has become a reality. In the late 1960s neighbourhood groups sprang up all over the city in protest against the rationalist schemes of planners and developers to demolish large areas for road schemes and commercial developments; a familiar theme but all the more grotesquely apparent in the 'Venice of the North'. University students, including many architects, were instrumental in these neighbourhood groups which attempted to stop removal of low income housing from the inner city, demanding that planning should be done by people in the neighbourhoods themselves.

Through massive political campaigning and direct action these groups succeeded in forcing major policy reversals, and in establishing the principle that neighbourhood groups and future inhabitants have a right to determine how their neighbourhoods should be reshaped. This principle is enshrined in an urban renewal bill drawn up by the centre-left government of the past four years. If it succeeds in getting through parliament it will require all development proposals to have neighbourhood group support. If no groups exist, municipalities must try and encourage their establishment. When a tract is designated as a renewal area, £120 per house is allocated by central government to allow employment of a co-ordinator to work in the community. Construction is expected to start within a year of initial meetings to keep groups enthusiastic. 'What we're saying' explains Patries Haberer, head of the Centre for Co-ordination of Urban Renewal Initiatives at the Ministry of Housing, 'is that it's not the architect or the civil servant who's important, it's the neighbourhood group. . . . People know how to live, let them do it. They are the best architects'. What is interesting is that few architects appear to disagree.



9 Internal court of housing in 8. Overlooked deck access on small scale works.



10 Unobtrusive new housing in central Amsterdam by Van Eyck & Bosch.



11 Sensitive infill at Bickerseiland. Architect, Paul de Ley.

The reaction, so frequently found in England from local authorities, that neighbourhoods are not democratic or accountable does not seem to be of concern. It is considered that they are unlikely to be less representative than local or central government, and in any case as soon as they start being given responsibility they are more likely to become representative as people find it worthwhile to take an interest. Municipal law allows power and money to be delegated to neighbourhood groups unlike the British system.

#### It came from the bottom up

It is perhaps significant that this involvement of architects in neighbourhood work has emerged from the bottom up rather than as a result of being fostered by the architects' own professional institutions. The majority of architects doing neighbourhood work are in their early 30s. They were the students of the 1960s, and few are members of the BNA, the Bond van Nederlandse Architecten, which with 1800 of the 3000 architects in the Netherlands is the closest parallel to the RIBA.

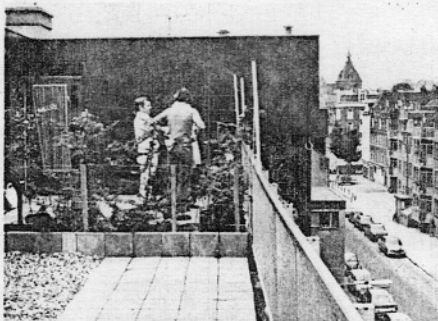
'We do not have a policy on neighbourhood architects' explains J. J. Salamony, an official of the BNA, 'people can do what they like.' But several architects feel that the BNA is positively opposed to such work as its members are interested in more lucrative commercial work. It is perhaps significant that the term 'architect' is not restricted in Holland (though a bill currently going through parliament will make it so), consequently there is no mandatory fee scale, the cause of so much difficulty for architects attempting to work for community groups in Britain. The BNA, however, publishes a complex fee table for different types of building which is obligatory for its own members. The fees for 'social housing' are sufficient to enable architects to make a reasonable living although commercial work is still more lucrative.

Not all the problems have been solved. There are still low income people being forced out of the inner city. There are still complaints by neighbourhood groups about high rent levels and small space standards. Some historic areas are still threatened by grotesque commercial development and, while there is commitment to build low income housing in the inner cities, economic decline is proving more difficult to halt. Yet in many areas architects are working in direct contact with communities and indeed are partially under their direct control. Where this has happened results have been an increasing emancipation of people involved and some very good quality buildings which the occupants themselves are proud of.



to see other schemes both in Rotterdam and in other cities. 'They get an idea of what is possible and what is not possible' he explained. 'Otherwise people don't know what you are talking about. We also learn what they like and what they don't like.'

The end product of such a process of direct democracy seems to be far more sensitive developments. For instance the Oude Westen district close to the centre of Rotterdam, which contains about 5000 low income residents of mixed nationality, was first destined for office and commercial development. Active neighbourhood groups stopped those plans and a combined programme of rehabilitation and rebuild is now well under way. New schemes maintain old street patterns, and shops and workshops and community buildings are incorporated into new buildings. Building work is carefully programmed so that there is always somewhere for people to move to when houses are demolished or renovated, 2.



4 Communal roof terrace, Dapperbuurt, Amsterdam. Architect, Hans Borkent. All flats also have private balconies.

Inevitably the population in these high density areas is reduced but this has not proved to be a problem for there are always some people who want to move out of the area altogether. In any case neighbourhood groups invariably want higher densities than planners.

Of course the community cannot totally control the development. Investment and subsidies are restricted and controlled in much the same way as in England. But within these parameters, project groups can adjust levels of quality thereby influencing rent levels. Indeed rent levels are a major concern for neighbourhood groups, and on one occasion, an architect was sacked by a group for refusing to lower the quality of his design and hence future rents. Architects have an interest in working for active neighbourhood groups because the strength of the group is crucial in forcing extra subsidy money out of the government, through political campaigning.

#### Amsterdam more improvised

The political strength of the neighbourhood groups is of even more crucial im-



5 Erected on a half-completed dual carriageway, this new low income housing signifies the victory of a neighbourhood group's vision of the future over that of the city planners. Van Eyck & Bosch.



6 Private and semi-private gardens of 4.



7 Architect Hans Borkent (taking notes in the centre) showing future inhabitants round a full scale mock-up of a new flat for the Dapperbuurt scheme.

portance in other cities, where the system is much more *ad hoc*.

In Amsterdam for instance some neighbourhood groups are able to choose their architects—not because there is any recognised procedure but because the city authority has discovered that it is the only way to avoid conflicts which have in the past resulted in large scale physical confrontations between citizens and armed police with many injuries, arrests and much political embarrassment. As architect Hans Borkent pointed out 'It is not by accident that the most active neighbourhoods have the best architects'.

He himself was selected by a neighbourhood group in Dapperbuurt, a nineteenth century area of Amsterdam, originally to be torn down under a grandiose redevelopment plan. He holds meetings in the neighbourhood every three weeks to which everyone in the area is invited although inevitably only a small proportion actually attend. Unlike England, the housing authorities, whether municipalities or housing associations, appear to be capable of designating tenants (both from the neighbourhood and from outside) for new schemes before design work starts. (Borkent admits that it was quite a battle to get them to do so.)

A full scale mock up of one flat was constructed in an old synagogue and everyone visited it and discussed it. Separate meetings were held with tradesmen, to discuss how to incorporate them in the new scheme, and temporary buildings were provided if there was any time gap between the old buildings being demolished and new ones constructed. Once again the result has been a phased sensitive new development which above all is well liked and cared for by the new inhabitants, 4, 6.

Amsterdam is illustrative of the process