

THE DUTCH APPROACH TO HOUSING

Lecture by Kees Christiaane, Master Planner and architect from the Netherlands, given at the AiH Estate of the Nation conference, 24th May 2000

This Design for Homes CPD Module should take you about half an hour to go through

The Netherlands, we Dutch are basically suburban people, like the English I just heard about. The Dutch have always considered the era of multistorey housing as a temporary necessity, as something that one should be against. The kind of state-defined architecture policy for public housing which we were doing up to the 1980s in cities like Krugén was all about building multistorey apartments on the waterfront, and the doctrine was modernist architecture, being proposed mostly by socialist urban governments.

Today there is a very strong psychological resistance against multistorey housing in the spirit of the Dutch people. Whenever the economic circumstances change to favourable, people tend to start to live on the ground again. We, as architects, are channeling this desire, this spiritualism, and in different circumstances try to deal with this issue. You can see this tendency happening in private development. One of the biggest contracting companies in the Netherlands produces private housing, using an industrial housing construction principle, in which people can, to a very far degree, define the style, colour and shape, and the plans of their own house, but without going out of the terraced principle, and with densities of more than 50 houses per hectare. The reason that this tendency is going on is that apart from the economy, in the Netherlands building is very cheap, it is very industrialised, and there are all kinds of financially favourable situations like mortgage subsidising through taxes and so on.

Housing estates are more or less being built within nine months, the same time you need to produce a child, and this is being accomplished mostly by a system of concrete tunnelling construction in which, for housing, we can almost build one storey a day. The process of fast producing the housing, also in large variants of architecture, leads again to a combination of not making basements, which is not possible in the Netherlands because of the water, and other features like a very good land use policy, which leads to an outcome that almost every worker's family can afford, within a couple of years, a market sale house. There are places in Holland where it is possible to buy a terraced home of 120 square metres for about £40 000 to £60 000, including land.

The first picture you see [below] is a housing estate we did in the middle of Amsterdam, an ecological housing estate of 100 houses per hectare, 50% social apartments and 50% market sale housing, and which every person has his own allotment, which in terms of costs to social security and maintenance on the public purse, is very favourable. I would like to show you -- maybe you will find it obsessive -- how we deal with this desire to live on the ground floor. The area was previously a waterworks. Urban villas are positioned, like you see on the right hand side, in allotments, and the access for the housing is designed in such a way that as many people have a room on the ground floor, connected with a private garden, and as many people have a connection with the earth.





This shows the apartments on the ground floor. The lower dwellings have a garden to their living room; the top apartments have roof terraces, which are roof gardens; and the middle apartments, which we call the sandwich houses, have an allotment that lies beyond the building. One section of 4.5 m comprises two dwellings. It is possible to give every house a garden, a front door, a double aspect and a roof terrace at the same time, by making one room per storey per dwelling. Of course this was quite experimental, but the hypothesis of the assumption that it works in terms of social security and in coherence between the residents, has been very much confirmed.

So, onto another example; in Holland we have, like in England, a lot of post-war multistorey housing, and these are getting slowly obsolete because of the movement of many people to suburban areas. That means that these become very decayed, I suppose like it happens here in England. At this time it is economically possible to tear them down and make new buildings on the original footprints, or tear the whole neighbourhood down and change it into a lower rise residential area with 50 to 70 dwellings per hectare. This is an apartment building built on the footprint of an existing building in a 1950s-built neighbourhood. As it is social housing, and we are only allowed one elevator, you only make access decks. We conceived of the principle where the access deck is connected to the balcony, and the balcony is connected to a room behind the front door, which is not a corridor. So you get a kind of multi-layered succession between public and private. You see the plan of the dwelling below, where you go from your access deck onto your balcony, where you sit like in an allotment in the area. Everything is made out of wood so you can make nails into it to hang your plants on, and you have a successive transition through a front door, which is a double glass door into the dwelling. So we can make very high quality social housing for a price that is the same as with what you have to pay for renovating the original housing that have plans that are much worse.



You may have heard of the Bylmermeer in Amsterdam. I can remember in 1989 we were still working for the city of Amsterdam on a renewal plan in which almost 90% of the apartments would be renovated. Some would be taken away, and between some of the apartments would be put in that new row of housing and usual facilities. The roads, elevated to a pedestrian level, would be circuit, and that would be it. At this moment about 40% of this area has been turned into low-rise housing, and the avenues that go through the area look now like the drawing, but four storey apartment avenues that connect different parts of town.

This principle has been proved so successful, it has also been proved so economically feasible, that they have decided to tear the whole area down except for two of these apartment buildings, which they want to maintain as a kind of monument in which the residual junkies of this Amsterdam neighbourhood will have to live.

In the periphery of the Dutch cities we are still building like hell, which is quite hair-raising because we have not so much land. The land is being eaten up quite fast, so that instead of a city network where there is a rural landscape in between, it is now a kind of culture landscape, in which about 50% build-up and 50% landscape, is being generated. And if you look at the settlement plan for Rotterdam, you will see all the future building sites including building sites in the sea, which is one of our advantages that we can easily gain land from the sea to use for our developments.

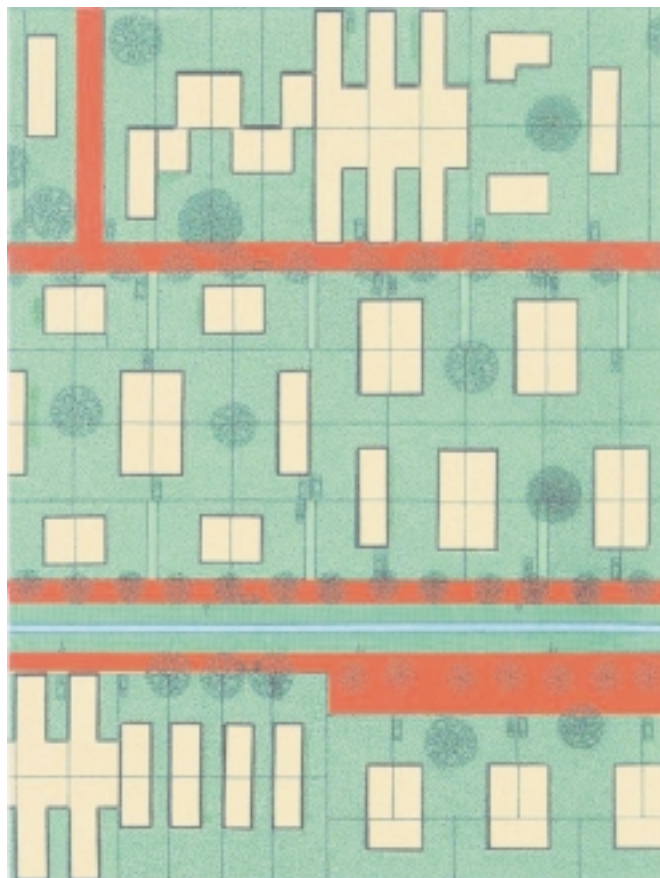
What we try to do when masterplanning is what you see in the diagram [below] for the city of Arnheim. The area is called Schuytgraaf, which is a city extension, which is going to have 7000 houses in the density of about 40 per hectare. What we are trying to do is first of all to plan it on the railway station. Like the previous speaker already advocated, that is absolutely necessary. So we are designing this new area on the railway station, and instead of spreading like peanut butter the houses in the density of 30 dwellings per hectare over the land, we are concentrating the dwellings in a higher density in kind of terraces -- the red spots you see there -- and leaving the rural landscape with the traditional ditches, dykes and tree rows intact. The density of the housing then increases to 50 to 60 dwellings per hectare. We do that by throwing out all the dog shit-covered green strips and children's playgrounds etc., and we move them to the landscape which lies directly around these little villages: maximum 60 dwellings per village with a central four. You can see we do different type policies and completely different configurations. We have developed computer programmes to make English garden landscape parcellations wherever that fits exactly with the economic demands. So if you see this kind of romantic road with houses on top of it, every parcel in relation to the rest, in relation to the surface of infrastructure, in relation to the surface of the village, is exactly according to a given programme, given to us by housing corporations and investors. This is one such neighbourhood that is currently almost realised.

You see that we do not define exactly the kind of building blocks or housing row we get. The design is the top diagram. We define the access road -- this covering road at the top. We define a kind of strip between the bands of farms and rivers that can accommodate train stations schools etc., in order to create a kind of organically developing row, like in the old days. There is sound insulation built into the walls. Then we design roofs for the housing. The housing is being built in bands of what were previously meadows. So we replace cows with houses, but notice the meadows are alternately being left open. And also farms or children's farms or horse riding clubs that use these meadows, so that the rural aspect stays intact.

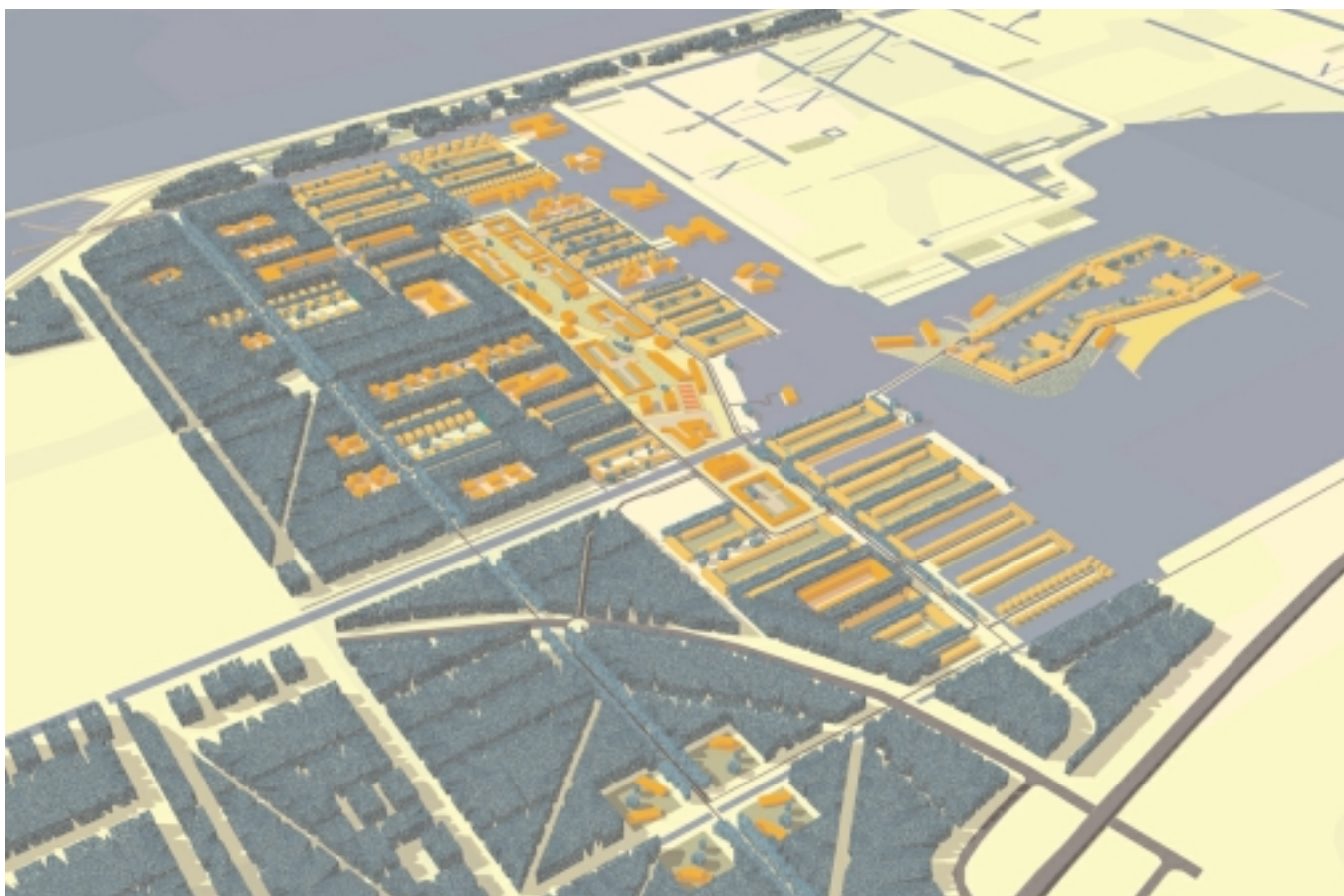


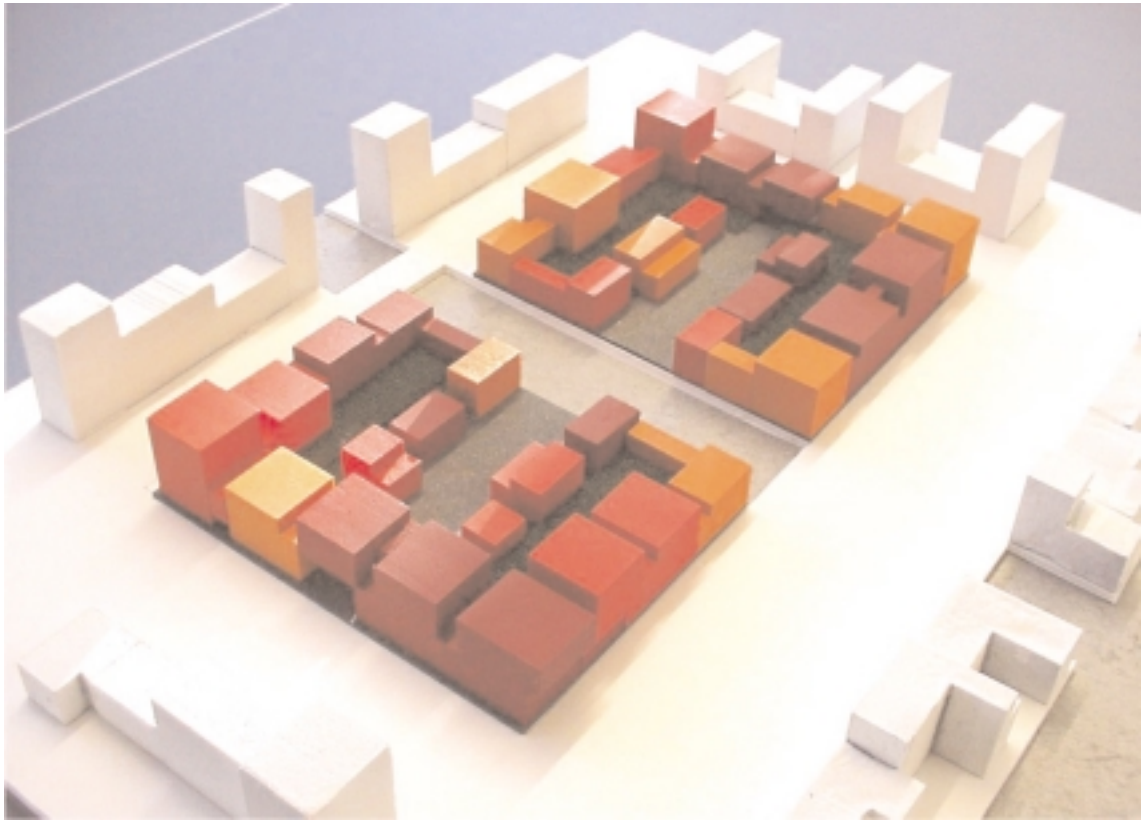
Then we define rows for the housing. The map [right] shows a parcellation. This parcellation is made by respective architects according to these rules, so we do not predict exactly what the parcellation and configuration looks like. That leaves us facing surprises but because we are experienced in defining these rules, we know the quality is guaranteed. You see the whole area and construction, and on the lower part you see this access road that we create, really like a kind of old road, for instance between Birmingham and Manchester, where gradually farms are being replaced by garden centres, and in which urban functions in our hypothesis will automatically settle, instead of being planned in an artificial mould. This slide shows the first urban development in that area of a non-residential building, which is a dogs' clinic for the pets of the people in the area. It is kind of low level achievement but it is one of the first signs that this principle works.

There we are also experimenting with other architects with other models, such as near the city of Den Bosch, in which the architect takes the landscape, which is varied -- it is a kind of nice landscape with a lot of forest -- he concentrates all the housing in so called castles. It is a very post modernist principle, but concentrate on the organisational level of these schemes. So we see some "castles" that basically consist of a row of houses and apartment buildings in which there are also a kind of osmosis between these types. So it is possible, for instance, to let grandmother live next to you in your house, so there is a kind of mixture of groups possible. These estates are having a communal garden, and lay in a collective landscape that has been exploited collectively by different organisations. This kind of collective maintenance -- like in the Amsterdam allotment project -- is becoming popular.



We are now also creating a suburb in Almere [below] one of the new areas, in which people buy water as a garden. They buy simply 150 square metres of garden, but they get water for it, or they get forest for it, and it is not divided between properties. They have a clause in their contract that forbids separating it with fences and that they are forced to make collective maintenance, and so it is public accessible. We can create better public places for these areas, which I think is very important for a new kind of suburb.





We are gradually going more urban because, of course, we have not only the possibility to gain new land, like we are doing at the moment near Amsterdam, near the city centre of Amsterdam in the Ymeer. This is the new town of Yburg, where construction is starting, and this is the first phase [above]. The first phase of this plan shows an increasing tendency, also appearing to be very successful, to infiltrate very dense low-rise housing into the core of a city. We can now make terraces houses that are large enough, like up to 250 square metres, so they are really like noble terraces from London, for example, with their own parking place, invisible from the street, maybe two parking places or one for a sail boat, in blocks in a kind of urban area, where there is also a mixture of working facilities. This becomes increasingly popular; especially with the higher educated people in the Netherlands, as a way of living that is increasingly attractive.

You see the design. First, preliminary design of architects that are designing blocks. Blocks are designed by one architect, and then he chooses three or four architects that do parts of that block in co-ordination with him, so the maximum variety of architecture is generated. One project before this was the Insyaborpark, directly in the city centre of Amsterdam, which consists of 100 dwellings per hectare, of which partly some are built in apartment houses but the rest, about 60 to 70, is being realised in very dense "patio housing", which means there are terraces where the garden is taken away, being replaced by parking, invisible from the street, and the garden is being replaced by a garden on the roof of the row of housing.

I must say it reminds me a little bit of English social terraced housing of the 1970s in some parts of London. I see tendency among Dutch architects who make these streetscapes to go to London to see older schemes. I think that in the history of English suburban history, not only the examples we just saw, which are extremely interesting, but also there is a kind of period between the 1960s and early 1970s that produced very interesting types that are almost forgotten by everybody.

One of the last projects I show you is the Mullerpiers in Rotterdam [below], which we are now building, which is a kind of hectic mixture of extreme low-rise and extreme high-rise, and mixed uses between working and living. We have designed this area with the hypothesis that the attractive harbour area is made up largely by the effect of collage and extreme material, texture, colour and scale differences. We exploit these differences in this scheme. You see we have very low-rise housing with gardens, in the middle of the city, combined with very idiosyncratic buildings with apartments. The scheme is designed in such a way that the buildings are more like a kind of in-lay work laying on a platform of pavement like harbour objects, which leads to a kind of effect of paintings, where there is tension between the space and the object. Sometimes you don't know if you are between objects or if you are in space that is cut out of them, which is a very attractive tension, to implement this scheme.

You see some of the designs of the architects. You see clearly references to harbour like buildings with extreme high storeys behind which are two residential storeys. You see crane like apartment buildings, all with a kind of human footprint to make the ground floor area very attractive. You see this leads to a kind of pretty attractive chaos, in which the density provides both room for low-rise housing as for high-rise housing, in a mix that will be very well working.

