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English

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Translation: Michael Robinson

Sensual Density

New meaning for an old building type

Free-standing apartment buildings have reappeared, under various names: town house, urban villa, park house, point building... And as well as this type of building dating from the 19th century, people are also taking a new look at the open development methods it calls for, though in different forms and for different reasons than the ones that used to apply: the town house, as the author intends to call it here, has two main advantages: it makes it possible to increase the density of openly developed quarters without fundamentally changing their character, but to develop a landscape that is open and yet has a certain degree of density as well. This density is not just architectural. It is also the density of sensual experiences.

This new density combines qualities of the city and the countryside, social institutions and natural spaces. (It should be said at least in brackets that there are political reasons as well. It is about creating conditions in the city that offer an alternative to the “house in the country” and keep high-earning residents in the city, or bring them back to the city.)

The buildings discussed in this article are not necessarily in urban districts. But their type emerged in a way that does have something to do with towns, or more precisely with the districts that were attached to the medieval town in the 19th century. Blocks with two or three storeys and the same number of dwellings were built on parcels of 500 or 600 m². This is the oldest form of rented accommodation, built by the owner to create a small income for himself. He would often live in the bottom flat, with access to the garden. The mansards in the attic could be let additionally.

Town houses are free-standing, the windows in the flats face in all directions. They made their original occupants feel that they lived outside the town, even though the gardens were small, unlike the gardens of the country houses that were built outside the fortifications in the 18th century. This made them into an alternative to the houses in the medieval town, which had gradually been converted into flats. These flats were often deep and dark, while the flats in the new, free-standing town houses made a more welcoming impression.

The idea of a house

If Gaston Bachelard is right, if the house you grew up in, “la première maison”, determines your idea of a house¹, this would explain the fascination that this type of building has for me. I grew up in a house like that. It was not in a smart street –

the Zürcherstrasse with its villas was smart. Our street, which contained some town houses, had been built in the late 19th century. But there were other buildings as well: a cement goods factory and the grey-green painted armoury. There was another house like ours next to our garden: two floors and two flats.

The street was full of cyclists for a few minutes twice a day. These were the “Weidmann” workers going home at midday and in the evenings, talking loudly to each other. Cars were a rarity in the 40s, and not just for workers. – That was “my world”, and you could see a different side of it from every window in the flat. Life around the house changed with the time of day and with it the way we saw things. The noise of the roller that the workers used to shift the Heraklit slabs along in the outdoor storage area and the smell of cement from these slabs is for ever etched on my memory.

Why do I sum up memories of this world that no longer exists? I do it because I want to describe the density of the sensual experiences it was possible to have when moving around the flat. They were also experiences of nearby buildings and the deep spaces between them, of green gardens and grey storage areas. The attic and the cellar were part of this density. Bachelard describes these special places in the house very impressively – but they no longer exist in today’s town houses.

So there are various reasons for concerning oneself with this type of house. They also include the permeability of the open spaces that happens if gardens are not divided by walls or hedges as was formerly the case, as in our house. This compensates for the proximity of the buildings and contributes to the richness of the perceptions. The space between the new town houses is not allotted to individual dwellings like the flats on the ground floor, as it used to be. It is common land, and it is looked after by contractors.

Up to the minute in the 30s...

Here we come across one of the reasons why homes like this are in demand. Many people who have moved into a house in a suburb because of the children move back into the city after the children have left home. Or more accurately, they would like to go back if there were flats in the city that combine the advantages of city and “country”. They would like to use the facilities of the city in their daily lives and yet live surrounded by greenery without having to look after a garden. All they need in order to spend time in the open air is a large terrace (on which they then assemble roses, hydrangeas and oleander to form a container garden). Even Le Corbusier spoke disparagingly about gardening and advised gymnastics on the terrace to keep in shape instead – and he practised what he preached.

In the 30s the town house was “a particularly up to the minute task”, as Arthur Rüegg wrote in his book about the Doldertal houses.² It was all about testing out the ideas of Neues Bauen on homes for the enlightened middle classes, who

were the supporters of these ideas. This statement should be made in the subjunctive, as there were very few examples of this house type at the time, including these very ones, built for Sigfried Giedion in 1936.

Rüegg’s description of them identifies some essential reasons for the attention that is being paid to the town house – again: linking interior and exterior spaces. Alfred Roth, one of the architects, writes about living undisturbed both inside and outside; he says that it liberates people from the “unpleasant” idea of living in a block of rented flats.³ Words like “free” and “liberate” crop up all the time in contemporary reports, and one is reminded of Giedion’s little book “Befreites Wohnen” (Liberated Living), which refers to this kind of middle-class living – without identifying it expressly.

The photograph on the cover of the book shows a room by Max Ernst Haefeli, with the words light, air, open space printed on it... It also shows something that Roth also wrote about the Doldertal houses: that they permit “high-quality, free living”. This also leads to the interlinking of inside and outside through the changing moods of the surroundings, which colour the rooms to a certain extent: the stream, the trees, and far below the town and the lake.

Unlike the 19th century town house, the Doldertal houses are not separated from each other by hedges. The unity of the parcels derives from a uniform expanse of lawn. They thus show a new relationship with open space: this is common space, it is a “park”, not a garden, it is space that separates the houses and that is not appropriated by the individual occupants. Criticism expressed about estates in the 20s or 50s talks about areas intended to keep the buildings apart. – From the point of view of urban development it is the – tricky – relationship between interior and exterior spaces that concerns us when thinking about the town house. In the 19th century it is regulated by the fact that the flats at the bottom of the building are higher than the gardens. This also applies to the Doldertal houses, where the parts of the bottom flats are a whole floor above ground level because of the sloping plots. So you look out at the park from them as if looking at a stage from a box. The play that is being put on is called “Nature”.

... as in the 70s

While historical development forms were being analysed, their opposite number as a reform, open development, came back into play in the 70s alongside perimeter block development. Oswald Matthias Ungers, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska commissioned work on the “urban villa” at a seminar in Berlin in 1977.³ The theoretical bases of this study were not very clear, however; ultimately the concept was extended to cover things as different as the homes built by an architect like Ludwig Otte in Zehlendorf, Berlin in 1905, to which it does apply, but also to the dwellings built together in fours in the 1853 “cité ouvrière” in Mulhouse.

Nine such town house were subsequently built by several architects in Rauchstrasse in 1984, as part of the IBA International Building Exhibition. They were labelled "urban villas", which could be seen as labelling fraud, as the homes comply with the requirements for normal social housing. The most interesting design is by Giorgio Grassi. It is in the formal tradition of the "palazzina", the kind of town house that is familiar from Italian cities. The design was a criticism at the same time! Grassi writes that he felt as if he were using his "little block" to get the so-called urban villa into difficulties.

The palazzina is familiar as a building form for the middle classes, with rooms to meet their requirements, which frequently includes accommodation for servants, a servants' staircase and other additional rooms. I am thinking of examples in Rome like Luigi Moretti's town house on the Viale Buozi, 1947–50, the "Girasole", which is probably the best-known palazzina for architectural reasons, or of Ludovico Quaroni's beautiful town house in Via Innocenzo X, 1951–54.⁷ In all these examples the living or reception rooms in the two flats form a single street façade on the same floor. Adjacent to them are side wings housing the bedrooms, which form an open or – in Moretti's case – closed courtyard. At the back of this are the stairs, the lift and the kitchen. (This ground plan can be found in Berlin town houses as early as the turn of the century, in the above-mentioned designs by Otte, for example.)

Grassi takes this building type over in his design. But the five flats on one floor move away from the spatial structure that formed the basis for the type in the palazzina: it is as though a town house of this kind had later been divided up into smaller and less prestigious housing units. But this represents a violent attack on the building type, intentionally, if we believe Grassi when he says that it is being changed so much that the conditions that are bringing about the change have to be met with a new type. This would involve positioning the rooms without any kind of hierarchy, either inside or outside. The various rooms in the dwellings do not then relate to a street, a park, a courtyard any more – and so consequently they do not derive their special character from this relationship. They relate to uniform surroundings whose qualities have still to be discussed.

Who owns the open space?

In 1990, Isa Stürm and Urs Wolf drew the urban consequences from this new type of town house in their design for the Röntgenareal in Zurich. This site at the edge of the tracks was used for storage purposes until it was developed. The architects took this character into account with nine blocks of flats with the space between them experienced as open and complete. The seven-storey blocks are staggered in relation to each other. This gives the space between them a tension to which the dwellings relate as a result of their orientation: by occupying the four corners and faces two ways they eliminate all ideas of "front and back", of "street and courtyard" or of

"montré and caché". The continuous balconies – they are twisted slightly to create natural boundaries – reinforce the equal value of the sides.⁸

The ground floor of these town houses is occupied by flats. This makes the open space ambiguous. On the one hand it belongs to everyone, and so it is public, but it also belongs to the tenants in these flats. And so this mixture of qualities has been described as urban: you are said not to feel that you are invading someone else's privacy.⁹ But I do feel that, and for me it contaminates the whole space between the buildings. The tenants try to wring a little privacy out of it with skimpy hedges. It is as permeable as the balconies with their perforated sheet metal parapets. It makes life on these balconies into a performance in which the tenants act and see others acting at the same time.

The 1994 design by Daniele Marques and Bruno Zurkirchen for the development of stone factory site in Pfäffikon draws conclusions from this conflict.¹⁰ Their poetic design, which is important for the analysis of a dense, open mode of development, occupies this extraordinary lakeside site with long buildings slightly staggered in relation to each other. The open space between the buildings, which are used for work as well as housing, is covered with gravel and can be walked or driven on in all directions. It is articulated only by trenches with water in them and the hedges that accompany them. They underline the fact that the development relates to the water.

Imagine that this had been built: the ground floors of the buildings are reserved for commercial and communal rooms and covered parking spaces. The dwellings are in the three upper storeys. The open space is planted with trees that grow well in gravelly places, birches for example; they create the atmosphere appropriate to such locations. The site is articulated by their trunks, the supports and the rooms built into the ground floor. They create alternating sensual experiences of confinements and openness, light and shade, of colours – the blue or grey of the lake, the brown of the reeds – or the green of the meadowland. The cars' many different colours... Here urban development concepts do not apply to the space between the buildings, it is not a square, it is not urban, it is not a park either, despite the trees. The architects thus logically describe the estate as order "of the kind we are familiar with from campsites".

Research ...

Certainly the most interesting examination of the town house or in this case the park house as a type was provided by work on an estate in Wallisellen in 1997. The site, which has an area of a good 15,000 m², was to be developed with large dwellings, to fill a gap in the market. To this end the general contractor commissioned seven architects to develop a housing estate pattern jointly. It consists of buildings arranged on a checker-board design, with open space extending evenly between them on all sides. This space was to be planted as a generally accessible park. It

was to make it possible to create park houses as a suburban framework for the town houses, but containing larger dwellings that in some cases occupy a whole floor – a good 200 m². The rooms in these dwellings were to open on all sides on to surroundings in which perceptions are structured by the buildings and the trees in different constellations.¹¹

Most of these buildings, which the invited architects then designed, have two studios each and are compact bodies above an area that is very little short of square. The differences are determined by the ground plans and lead to fine deviations in the relationships with the building sections. The buildings can be divided into two types in terms of their ground plans, addressing the qualities of the park house in different ways. In one case the staircase forms an inner core, with the spaces in the flat – the corridors and the rooms – arranged like the skins of an onion. Here the rooms very definitely face outwards, towards the park. Several architects chose to design buildings where one floor takes two dwellings, like the palazzina. Here I find the ground plan created by Meinrad Morger and Heinrich Degelo particularly attractive: the rooms form a kind of glacial drift, with exciting spatial relationships. But the possibility of linking the two flats fails to convince in all of these buildings because the spaces are mirror images.

In the other type the staircase and the "installed" spaces form peripheral, lit cores that articulate the dwelling. This produces a continuous space that spreads out like water between stones. This space can be subdivided into the usual rooms by means of sliding doors. And when you walk around the flat you finally get a sense of the park as a whole, in rapid, cinematic clips. – This type was developed in Wallisellen by Marianne Burkhalter and Christiani Sumi, and also Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer. It is closest to being an up-to-date version of the town house at the turn of the century, where the rooms were linked together, appropriately to the order imposed by middle-class life. Today the sliding doors make it possible to do the opposite and create a new order from case to case. It is not surprising that homes in old town houses like these are particularly sought after.

... and realization

Gigon Guyer continued their typological investigations in a competition for housing on the Zürichberg in 1998.¹² They suggested accommodating the dwellings in three urban villas, which really did deserve the name this time, because of their position. The design has since been built, and forms an important reference point for examining the building type that is being discussed under various names here. Here it is based on the order of the quarter, which contains houses and villas, and in its attempt to use the relatively large parcels better than formerly without disturbing this order. This was, in brackets, at the time also the reason for the open development in the Doldertal: the municipal building department

refused to give permission for the terrace-style development that the architects originally proposed because it was “alien to the quarter”.

The dwellings, which open out on all sides, are differently accentuated because of the different arrangement of the loggias. They are all above ground level: the ground floor contains only work-rooms and – partially underground – cellars. The space between the buildings is laid with coarse pebbles. This means that it has no clear purpose: the courtyard is not a courtyard and the park is not a park. Such qualities are eliminated in the “space without qualities” that surrounds the buildings.

The housing estate in Wallisellen, to return to it again, could have placed itself in the tradition of examining housing construction on a scale of 1:1, as achieved by the Werkbund housing estates in the 1920s, for example. Nothing came of it. Instead the main contractors decided to build all the houses on the basis of plans by Sabine Hubacher and Christoph Haerle. The residents moved into the estate in 2000. What remains, as Andreas Janser writes, is a remarkable process and the collective efforts made by the architects involved.¹³ But these efforts are currently being repeated in the planning of a housing estate in Vienna. This estate on the western periphery of the city is intended on the one hand to examine the typological possibilities afforded by free-standing, three-storey buildings and on the other and the use of concrete for such houses – the planning initiative was prompted by the cement industry. It is part of the city of Vienna’s efforts to confront people leaving for the surrounding communities by offering a new form of living that can be called “green”. “From the point of view of promoting residential building “red Vienna” is carefully changing its ideological spots, as a house in the leafy suburbs is seen as the epitome of middle-class living,” as Christian Kühn said in his description of the estate.¹⁴

A housing estate on the outskirts of Vienna

Nine architectural practices from the three German-speaking countries designed 12 buildings, which explains the name “9=12”. The urban development plan is by Adolf Krischanitz: he placed the long sections on the two edges of the site, which slopes diagonally to the west, thus leaving an open space in the middle. The buildings are slightly staggered as they face each other. The contours reinforce this staggered effect and break up the order of the estate. The open space is given an “all-over” treatment: it will be planted in a patchy pattern of the kind familiar from camouflage, brown-green-beige: “nature camouflaging itself as nature”.¹⁵ The buildings behave quite neutrally in relation to it, which means that the dwellings face all sides – to differing extents.

With the exception of the plots in the corners of the site, the architects had an area of about 11.5 x 23 m at their disposal. The buildings deviate from this area to a greater or lesser extent appropriately to the ground plans. They are set one behind the other a small distance apart, a factor that puts the

open space in an even greater state of crisis than the cases of town and park houses discussed above. Some of the dwellings are single-storey, some extend over two or three floors, and sometimes both types are to be found in the same building. Of the two-storey flats, the design by Diener & Diener seems particularly complex. The bedrooms and workrooms are 2.5 m high as usual, but the “living” rooms are 3.75 m high. These rooms eat away at the perception of living in a block of flats; they create another kind of sensual density.

This estate, which is named after the Mauerbach, a stream whose channel it borders. It will be presented at the Architekturzentrum Wien in the autumn, and later at the Architekturmuseum Basel. So I can restrict myself to a design that I feel is particularly appropriate to the park house. It is by Peter Märkli, and contains three flats on three storeys, their floors rather thicker than usual. Perhaps the building can be described as being various pieces cut out of the edges of the plain body, so that the body and the space surrounding it are linked up. In four places the floor-high windows form protruding corners, so that the rooms appear as bodies externally. In this way internal and external spaces are combined or even clamped together, ultimately eliminating the border between them.

This statement also applies to the relationship between the rooms. Sections of their walls are in the form of folding screens. The simple, clear form of the bedrooms or workrooms or whatever occupants decide they should be protects them from simply being absorbed into the complex “living” space. These dwellings have nothing at all in common with Gerrit Rietveld’s 1924 building in Utrecht, in which it was possible to push the walls between the rooms back completely and thus dissolve the internal order altogether. This order is maintained in Märkli’s building: it is the standard against which infringement of this standard is measured. The space in the dwellings expands from the porch in a large, broad gesture – like water, to use this image once again – towards the boundaries, in a new kind of continuous space. Thus this design continues the recherche architecturale that Märkli started with the house in Azmoos in 2001 and even earlier, in 1998, with the house on the Zürichberg (in the competition won by Gigon Guyer with their three urban villas). It addresses in its own way the “liberated living” that the park house makes possible.

Apart from such key examinations of the town or park house, a large number of designs for this building type, built and unbuilt, could be mentioned. I am thinking of the three town houses – and that really is what they are – by Burkhardt, Meyer in Baden in 1998–99, or the five park houses that Burkhalter & Sumi built in Altendorf in 2001. But I am also thinking of cases where the possibilities the type offers are examined in an individual building like Büsser & Hürliemann’s town house in Thalwil in 2001. Here the individual flats are staggered by half a floor, and each give the impression of living in a single house. In contrast with the 19th century ap-

proach, the owner’s flat is shifted to the top floor, where a completely private garden can be laid out on the roof. Dettli & Nussbaumer’s 1997–98 park house in Emmenbrücke is also one of these cases; it is featured in the “werk-Material” section of this issue.

As stated at the beginning of this article, there are a variety of reasons for this new examination of an old building type, socio-political and socio-cultural reasons, in other words reasons relating to the changing values reflecting social changes in the housing field. This examination has only just begun. *To be continued.*

Notes: See German text p. 10

Frank-Bertolt Raith, Rob van Gool (pages 26–31)
Translation: Michael Robinson

Strategies of the Special

Dutch housing construction after Sporenburg Borneo

“The loners and the village idiots, the oddballs and the weirdoes have been replaced by your average deviationist who is no longer conspicuous at all among the millions of people who are like him,” wrote Hans Magnus Enzensberger about our current “everyday exoticism”.¹ Developers no longer build to meet an abstract need, but address a concrete demand.² In Holland the Borneo and Sporenburg housing developments with their symbiosis of urban density and the advantages of a detached house have triggered an enormous surge of innovation. This is greatly influenced by the increasing subjectivity of all aspects of life. Experiments are made with different room heights, complex encapsulations or open ground plans, looking for atmospheric diversity and individual experiences. The Dutch construction industry is making an effort to keep up.

The new housing consumer is an individual personality who cannot be reduced to the characteristics of a statistical or sociological group. The standard “3 bedroom flat” is being replaced by specific products designed for individual lifestyles or phases of life: the little family-friendly house with a garden, the comfortable newly built flat in town, the stylish old building with stucco ceilings and exposed floorboards, the loft in a converted commercial building. Occupants want to be able to recognize themselves in the product, they expect support in their self-realization projects. Homes are not just financial exchange products, but, according to cultural historian John Fiske on the subject of consumer goods in general. “Objects that we think with, that we speak with.”³ It is all a matter of stylish, individual living.

Housing as a situation

A more individual approach to housing and living is first and foremost something achieved by the consumer. The democratization of luxury – with

an average dwelling size of three to four bedrooms or 519 cubic metres⁴ – is opening up new freedoms and putting an end to the traditional ground plan patterns. Only a large dwelling can be a flexible dwelling. Additional space, “superfluous” from the point of view of fulfilling functions, removes the connections between those functions that used to be seen as written in stone. People are taking an interest in the atmospheric quality of individually differentiated rooms and groups of rooms whose difference is not on a functional basis, thus permitting a range of treatments and codings. What used to be a dismal corridor becomes a lavish enfilade, and as used to be the case only in splendid villas, even in terraced houses today you can find a conservatory, a “beletage” or a studio with roof terrace – rather than living room, master and children’s bedroom. The home offers a lavish range from which “consumers” put a set of temporary surroundings together according to their situation and how they are feeling.

Consumers live for situations that cannot be characterized as standard and functional: the bed as a place for sleeping, reading, making love and watching television; the sofa as a place for working on a laptop or as somewhere the children can play. “Our main idea is to construct situations – i.e. the concrete construction of short-term life environments that we can then transform so that they acquire a higher level of passion,”⁵ wrote the French artist-philosopher Guy Debord as early as the late 50s. He said that architecture should not play with lines and forms, “but much more with the atmospheric effect made by rooms, corridors, streets etc., and that atmosphere is linked with the gestures that are contained in it.” Architecture will progress in future by creating architectural situations, he continues.

These situationist demands for atmospherically intense architecture seem to be met almost literally in the residential complex by Duinker & Van der Torre that won a prize even before building started. There are currently under construction in Sloterpas in west Amsterdam. The buildings are grouped around a common inner courtyard and contain a jigsaw puzzle of dwellings, all of them different. The individual sections have a flexible load-bearing and access structure, so that different dwelling typologies and sizes can be combined. Loft dwellings, that can be divided up temporarily with a very few mobile elements, alternate with vertically organized maisonnettes with a larger numbers of closed rooms that are also suitable for families. A striking feature is that they have said goodbye to the corridor ground plan as the only possible organizational principle. Dwellings emerge at least partially as a matrix of connected spaces:⁶ the access corridor, the element providing social and moral hygiene for the Modernists, is not necessary for every room in a dwelling that is now only sparsely occupied. What happens instead is that mixing separately accessible rooms and through rooms, together with doubling up the access points to the dwelling, and possibly also the stairs, produces highly indi-

vidual groups of rooms that allow the occupant-consumers to distribute the uses freely according to their individual requirements: as a living area, for example, incorporating a home office, a sleeping area with dressing-room and studio, a children’s bedroom and playroom – or as an entirely superfluous space as dreamed up by Georges Perec.⁷

Het Funen

A workroom at home as a place for professional self-realization is attracting an increasing amount of attention. But if you only see a home office as a decentralized office space shifted into your house, and feel you need to protect your domestic life from the disruption that could cause, then it would be scarcely possible to understand all this euphoria about a private office of one’s own, which extends beyond the circle of actual teleworkers. Its deeper meaning can be plumbed only in the context of home life – and thus a reflection on the increasingly subjective nature of all spheres of life, which has extended to professional orientation for a long time now: a profession “is no longer the prescribed order that you fit into and integrate yourself with, but a self-chosen life concept that you have to make an effort about yourself.”⁸ A study is not least a technically equipped hobby room for professional use.

The integration of home and work has become an identity card for a modern lifestyle, as can be seen from the ten terraced dwellings by Van Sambeek & Van Veen that are being built in the Het Funen district of Amsterdam. The dwellings are unusually large at 180 square metres, and extend through the full depth of a building volume that is itself 27 metres: as such, an impossible ground plan that can only be used at all in view of the excess size. Here luxury does not lead to a greater number of rooms, but enhances the intensity of the living experience. Exclusivity results literally from shutting out what is pleasant by deliberately emphasizing very undesirable aspects. In the past, an extreme building depth of this kind used to be brought about by the enormous pressure on exploitation, but here it is sought above all for the new experience of space, which is also staged appropriately because of the doubling of the staircases. The changing width of the buildings, supported by skilful handling of light, draws attention to individual situations along this incredible enfilade through the building: with a living kitchen on the ground floor, various living and working areas and a sleeping-bath-studio with a roof terrace on the top floor.

Van Sambeek & Van Veen consistently activate the functions that Modernism wrote off as servant functions. Making the dwelling larger liberates the kitchen from its functional dependency: the living kitchen becomes an independent place alongside the traditional living area. Cooking has lost its overtones of forced labour and is becoming a leisure activity – how else can one explain all the TV shows about cooking? “I expect”, wrote the American kitchen designer Johnny Grey about the new “Sociable Kitchen” a

few years ago, “to see study kitchens, kitchens with a work-bench, kitchens without hobs, kitchens in which less than twenty per cent of the space is intended for cooking.”⁹ The kitchen is emancipating itself to be an extroverted living room at the interface with the street – a kind of private pub for sociable togetherness in the family and with friends and acquaintances. In contrast with this, the bathroom is developing as the centre of a new and lavish intimate area. If the bathroom used to be just a place for necessary physical hygiene for the mass housing of Modernism, the enemy of the body and the senses, in these days of wellness and anti-ageing it is expanding into a place for private well-being. Equipped with fitness machines or a whirlpool, with an added sauna or conservatory, the bathroom becomes a high-value living area in its own right. The bathroom fuses with the bedroom – thus producing an intimate area for retreat with a large picture window and direct access to the roof terrace that no one can look into from the outside: a luxury that was familiar in the past only from exceptional fun objects like Le Corbusier’s La Savoye weekend villa near Paris. And so the use of the name “villas” in Het Funen is not entirely unjustified.

The architects von Geurst & Schulze and NL-Architects are building comparably individual dwellings in Het Funen. Both practices play up the contrast between an abstract envelope and a heterogeneous internal structure. The former are wedded to differently tailored patio apartments, though these cannot be made out behind the uniformly green skin, the latter build on an expressively distorted overall figure consisting of maisonnettes with several storeys inside. With the exception of an uniform cubature of about 630 cubic metres, there seem to be no binding rules for the dwellings in Het Funen. So NL-Architects throw themselves into a kind of pleasurable model-making game with individual, specific situations: sometimes there is a living kitchen on the ground floor, sometimes cooking and living come together on the xth floor; sometimes living winds its way up as high as the fourth floor, sometimes there is a little patio even on the first floor. None of the dwellings has through vertical access; what happens is that individual flights of steps link individual spatial situations. Occupants are trusted to take possession of their average 150 square metres of living space in some individual way. NL-Architects’ somewhat uncouth approach to the usual requirements of housing construction confirms that we have said goodbye to the “humanitarian generation”¹⁰ that in fact deprived occupants of their right of decision because they were so empathetic, well-meaning and considerate.

Living beyond the standard

Certainly the buildings in Het Funen are advanced architecturally, and thus to be seen as extreme examples. But they nevertheless show the broad direction that housing construction is taking in Amsterdam (and also in Holland as a whole) after the innovative thrust associated with

the names Borneo and Sporenburg. Experiments are being made with different room heights, maisonettes with several storeys, complex encapsulations or open, loft-like floor plans.

Here strategies addressing special cases are generally important: as a programmatic adaptation to the specifics of a situation, demonstrated not least in Borneo Sporenburg with resounding financial success. The new development on these two long peninsulas accepts the obvious downsides of the site with its ragged geometry prescribed by the arrangement of the quays – the unique atmosphere in the port has to be set against the normal standard of living: with very little greenery and an access network that scarcely functions at all. But even more important than the urban context is fitting in with a specific market segment. Housing is no longer built for faceless social groups defined by abstract needs, like families, singles or the elderly, but for occupants who are as concrete as possible: “Their excellent condition,” wrote Adriaan Geuze of the target group at a very early stage, “makes it possible for city-dwellers to run marathons and to go skiing and surfing. They are self-confident and well informed, find their own freedom and choose their own subcultures.”¹¹ The symbols of home life are no longer the living-room couch with the family all sitting on it together, but objects that suggest individual experience: enjoying the contemplative peace of the inner courtyard, sensing the excitement of the nearby city, getting a kick from sport. The architectural concept of a carpet-like patio house development reads like a consistent implementation of the marketing strategy: “Eigen domein in de Stad” – with your own front door in the street, a yard for the bikes, bulky toys or other leisure items, and also an intimate terrace above the roofs of the town. Until then Amsterdam had never seen a comparable symbiosis of urban density with the advantages of a detached house.

Overall the Borneo Sporenburg development is largely homogeneous, but in the new districts in the West Port special cases are raised to the status of a general principle, for example at Block II in the West Dock, designed by DKV as master planners and also partially as the architects responsible. DKV are not looking for a structure that is as

neutral and archetypal as possible, but are a developing a complex, unique building in iterative working stages by introducing individual parameters. Each situation has its own subject, its own typology, its own architect. Based on a regular block structure prescribed by the urban figure, they achieve an atmospheric variety that seemed possible hitherto only as the result of small-scale “growth” – but not in the case of a coherently executed project by developers that still contains about 200 dwellings, of which about a quarter will be rented social housing. The accommodation consists of a three-storey terraces house between the green and stone-paved courtyard, in a flat with a wonderful view over the IJ or a “normal” flat on the street. The architects seem to want to seduce the consumers again with every dwelling.

The fact that the strategy of individualized living has met the consumers’ wishes is shown not least by the market reaction. Thinking about housing production, even on an industrial scale, has been trying to make the process more flexible for some time, so that it can increasingly do justice to the consumers’ individual ideas. A new research field has come into being here, largely unnoticed by the architects. We have heard from the building promoter Amstelland Ontwikkeling Women that it has only recently become clear that in future in any given fictitious building commission for 100 buildings they will no longer be dealing with one client, but with 100 different ones.¹²

Contacts with clients, taking into account the possibilities of the new media, need to be better organized if the advantages of large building sites with their carefully devised construction schedules and a high level of prefabrication are not to be lost. Data management acquires a great deal of significance here: ultimately individualization, which according to the manufacturer can extend from selecting a few details of decoration and equipment via the organization of the floor plan to the individual arrangement of sections of the building, leads in large projects to an explosion in the amount of information that has to be processed. The motor car industry with its platform strategy is a model for handling diversity. According to HBG Woningbouw, a new project is not developed as completely new, but examined in terms of deviation from a reference

building. A fundamental distinction is made between shell construction and the finishing process: in the case of the shell, only a few variations and deviations are permitted on the basis of an economy of large unit numbers, but in the finishing process deviations in detailing like for example various eaves forms, diverse window arrangements or a different division of the rooms affect the price very little in terms of the craftsmen working on the spot.

But while at present this kind of management by exception works only with a lot of units that all deviate in the same way, the development aims pursued by the large building producers for the future are clearly defined: so far the programs offer customers help above all in visualizing or checking the possible interior variations. But automatization, as in the case of Patrick Adema of Bouwfonds Women, for example, thrives on the quality of the process as a whole. Priority is given to work at interfaces linking construction and calculation, working on a central data base containing all the financial and technical arrangements for the building process.¹³ Ultimately end users will put their individual homes together, and the program will check on-line what is available, what building regulations will allow and the price of the individual dream. After the order is placed, the system generates detailed plans and the delivery and service calls on the general agreements that the building promoter has set up with the individual providers in advance, relating to the anticipated annual production. In future, as is already customary in other industries, building will be on demand: meeting deadlines and cost estimates, and without additional sales costs.

Today exclusivity is not so much a matter of money (or of nobility, race or gender), but based on a conscious decision – and thus on the voluntary exclusion of other options that are equally open to selection. This is true in terms of both lifestyle and one’s own home. The dense and complex collage in the Westerdock is no longer achieved under duress as result of urban development requirements, but makes it possible to achieve an exclusive urban atmosphere. Any location thrives on exaggeration of its special potential.

Notes: See German text p. 31



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