

The blessings of housing differentiation

Three projects by Neutelings Riedijk Architecten

Arthur Wortmann

There is a tendency, when referring to housing projects by Willem Jan Neutelings and Michiel Riedijk, to mention the dwelling type as well as the place-name: the panorama dwellings in Huizen, the back-to-back dwellings in IJsselstein, the stair dwellings in Amsterdam. The urge to resort to such terms is an indication that these dwellings are a class apart, that they are not your run-of-the-mill housing construction.

A dwelling by Neutelings/Riedijk¹ is more than just a dwelling. Like many other architects, Neutelings and Riedijk have responded positively to a trend which began in the 1980s and which has gradually resulted in an enormous differentiation in housing. Demographic, social and cultural changes led to increasing dissatisfaction with the standard family dwelling that had until then dominated Dutch housing production. First in student projects and then on the fringes of professional practice, experiments were carried out with new housing types that reflected changing domestic requirements. The squatters' movement put the spatial qualities of the home back on the agenda; youth housing became a laboratory for all kinds of communal living arrangements; an ageing population led to more concern for the housing needs of the elderly; the growing number of broken families called for smaller and more flexible dwellings.

The traditional, conservative building industry was slow to react but after a few less timid housing corporations and developers had shown the way, and with increasing pressure from political circles, the industry finally discovered the new market. Housing differentiation became a policy spearhead. Suddenly it was found to have other advantages, too. For instance, differentiation was an antidote against monotony and surely monotony was one of the causes of social insecurity? Thus the differentiation of housing types had a sequel: a variety of access strategies was tried out, building volume were angled, bent and articulated. One need look no further than the success of the Mecanoo architectural office for a perfect illustration of this important, and for the Dutch housing industry visually definitive, development.

Nor is it over yet. The partners in the construction process are all so thoroughly persuaded of the need for differentiation that it has become automatic. Indeed, differentiation has spread to areas that could well do without it. Variety is not restricted to floor plans, access systems and the living environment; nowadays colour and materials are also deployed to the same end. This front door is painted red, the next one yellow, the third green. And, last but not least, there is differentiation of architects: four dwellings by architect A, next to five dwellings by architect B, opposite six by architect C.

Research into housing needs has prospered likewise. Now that the traditional householder has lost ground, sociologists and planners are trying to identify the new types of householder in order to adjust the housing supply to meet their needs. Housing

associations and developers no longer think in terms of 2-, 3- or 4-room dwellings but try instead to cater to all lifestyles. A good illustration of this is *Leefstijlen – Wonen in de 21e eeuw* (Lifestyles - Living in the 21st Century), a volume of essays published at the instigation of the Rotterdam Urban Planning and Public Housing Agency,² that examines various 'potential or actual, conceivable or traceable' lifestyles. The essays distinguish among home-seekers in search of an existence that is respectively 'uncertain', 'rootless', 'regulated', 'self-willed', 'shared' or 'recreational'. A precursor of this study, of course, was the famous *Housing Atlas*, published in 1991 by the Amsterdam Building and Housing Agency. It, too, listed a variety of housing concepts (e.g. the 'hobby home', the 'duo home and the 'super hat') for use in responding to the transition from a seller's to a buyer's market.

Although many of the current housing schemes are directly related to such lifestyle surveys, this does not apply to the Neutelings/Riedijk projects documented here. These projects were, however, made possible by the developments I have just outlined. For the present consensus about the need for housing differentiation has a fortunate side-effect: it has made it possible to conduct architectural experiments that have nothing to do with lifestyles but which also result in new housing types. Well-known examples are Kollhoff & Rapp's block on KNSM Island, Liesbeth van der Pol's 'drum houses' in Twiske-West and Kas Oosterhuis's 'roofs' in Groningen. But whereas 'alternative' projects like these often derive from formal concepts, the Neutelings/Riedijk projects are the result of lucid analyses of the building tasks. They reveal a familiarity with architectural history and an ability to handle conventions and regulations in unexpected ways.

The brief in Huizen was to realize 152 dwellings on the southern shore of Gooi Lake. In the first phase, completed last year, 32 'panorama dwellings' were built. Although living along Gooi Lake is in itself an attractive proposition, this project really makes the most of the superb location. By giving the dwellings a 'bayonet' section, whereby the living rooms slide over the lot of the neighbouring house and so acquire double width, the architects give double prominence to the incorporation of the view into the interior. The housing type is, as it were, a derivative of the horizon.

Now that the houses are built, the solution looks obvious. Initially, however, the client, project developer Bouwfonds, was not that happy with this solution. The trouble was that because of the multi-storey title that resulted from the bayonet section, the dwellings were officially classified as 'apartments', which are quite simply harder to sell. It was the council that won Bouwfonds over by awarding the design first prize in its limited competition.

In IJsselstein, Neutelings/Riedijk is busy realizing 146 owner-occupied dwellings, some of which are already finished and occupied. It is possible to object to this assignment on moral grounds. The project is part of the Zenderpark development plan around the Lopik radio/TV tower located in the once inviolable Green Heart zone. The overall plan is for 3500 dwellings at a density of 30 per hectare, but in order to ensure the scheme's overall economic viability – and as a foretaste of a possible future urbanization of the Green

Heart – pockets of higher density were requested. Neutelings/Riedijk were required to build at double density: 60 dwellings per hectare.

Their design is intended to conjure up the atmosphere of the old garden villages designed by architects like Granpré Molière and Verhagen. The dwellings are consequently grouped around small courtyards. This produces a clear spatial identity, a cosy scale and a sense of security. There is, however, a snake in the grass; Riedijk calls the project a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'. The fact is that these dwellings are back-to-backs. The choice of typology stems not from a secret desire on the part of a devotee of architectural history to revive an out-of-favour type but from the required housing density. The high density is achieved by keeping the public (traffic) space to a minimum and locating car parking within property lines. However, to avoid a situation where the occupant's car dominates the view from the living room, the houses are twice the standard width. And half the standard depth, of course. Hence the back-to-back type.

Neutelings/Riedijk are also building on the site of the former Municipal Water Board (GWL) in Amsterdam.³ Within Kees Christiaanse's master plan for 600 dwellings, Neutelings/Riedijk are responsible for two five-storey blocks of 16 dwellings each and for part of a tall superblock. The estate as a whole is founded on strict ecological principles which affect parking, landscaping, land division and materials. For example, parking spaces (at a deliberately low norm of 0.3) are confined to the perimeters, leaving the rest of the estate free of cars.

The master plan's requirement that the small blocks contain as many ground-accessed dwellings as possible has been taken seriously by Neutelings/Riedijk. Very seriously. The result is two highly unusual buildings with numerous stairs and hilarious front elevations that present the viewer with a row of doors. The corollary of ground-accessed dwellings over five floors is that the various rooms that make up the individual dwellings are located relatively far apart on different floors. As such, the stairs become the focal point of the dwelling. The residents of these split-level homes will be for ever going up or down them at least half a storey. A pity, therefore, that the staircases in these 'stair dwellings' are so very ordinary. The additional investment entailed by individualized staircases precluded any attempt to invest this dominant feature with more than utilitarian value. Not that the dwellings are any less remarkable for this. The apotheosis is reached in the communal dwelling included in one of the blocks. Three dwellings have been joined together here by the simple expedient of breaking through in a few places. The result is a labyrinthine dwelling with three stairways linked together at strategic points. The first floor contains a single mind-boggling room: the communal area. The back wall of this room contains three doors, each opening onto a different staircase. Here domestic life becomes a drawing-room quiz: which door leads to the stair to which rooms?

The new dwelling types devised by Neutelings/Riedijk will not appeal to every home-seeker. This much they have in common with the dwellings developed to suit specific lifestyles. Where they differ is that Neutelings/Riedijk do not attempt to imagine what a future occupant might want, but proceed from what interests *them*. And thanks to the doctrine of housing differentiation they are free to do so.

1. On 1 January 1997, Willem Jan Neutelings entered into partnership with Michiel Riedijk who had in fact worked for the firm of W.J. Neutelings since 1989.
2. Arnold Reijndorp, Vincent Kompier, Luit de Haas (eds.), *Leefstijlen – Wonen in de 21e eeuw*, Rotterdam (NAI Publishers) 1997.
3. See John Westrik, 'Building to last. Kees Christiaane's eco-estate in Amsterdam', *Archis* no. 5, 1996, pp. 32-41. The article also documents one of Neutelings/Riedijk's blocks (block 15, pp. 40-41).

In: *Archis* no. 8, 1997, pp. 8-17.