

## **Two houses in Amsterdam by Christian Rapp**

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Scheepstimmermanstraat. Is it still a street or a street name, or has it become a household word? This unprepossessing, too narrow street on Borneo (a peninsula in the eastern docklands of Amsterdam) which you don't enter unless you have a reason to, which is too straight to hold any surprises and whose only function is residential, is cropping up with increasing frequency in discussions about architecture. The name has become synonymous with a certain vision of the city and a certain type of architecture. And this despite the fact that when people talk about Scheepstimmermanstraat they are actually referring to only one side of the street; the other side is not even part of it.

The street owes its magic to an accumulation of qualities. It forms part of West 8's urban design scheme for Borneo/Sporenburg, which represents a milestone in the experiments with high-density, low-rise housing development. Within that concept, the street, or rather the southern half of it, occupies a special place, because here, West 8's original concept – a 'sea' of individual dwellings – has held up best, or rather has been accentuated. Whereas elsewhere on the two peninsulas a more large-scale, project-based approach was finally chosen for financial reasons, here each plot has become a separate building task with individual (private) clients, architects and contractors. And what transpired? These private plots in a former dockland area that was destined to remain a building site for many years, attracted a new class of resident or answered a forgotten need. Well-off dual earners were willing to pay a high price in order to build wholly unassertive dwellings in this completely nondescript living environment. Because that is one of the other qualities which gives this street its magic: everything is hidden from view. The houses are large and stupendous, but from the outside all you can see is closed facades in a narrow street. Scheepstimmermanstraat is for residents who love the city, who don't give a toss about outward show and who are in for an architectural experiment.<sup>1</sup>

It is a success that is by no means self-evident. In recent years, hasn't the emphasis in the debate about private client preferences been on matters such as 'wilde wonen' (literally 'wild living', or deregulated housing construction)? As if residents have an irrepressible creativity that will develop fully once they are released from the bonds with which the government binds them and regain their 'natural' state. Here, however, residents are satisfied with a creativity that is necessarily confined to the interiors because of the limiting conditions dictated by the narrow, deep plots. There are, roughly speaking, two approaches: many dwellings are spatial puzzles in which a maximum floor area has been realized by ingenious means, while in others, by contrast, the excess space has been used to lend a sort of generosity to living by working with large, open spaces. A good example of the latter is the house by Heren 5 on plot number 110. It is organized around a stairwell that has acquired the character of an atrium. Enormous sliding doors connect the most important spaces with this atrium. On the street, and this is typical, this spatial explosion is nowhere in evidence: a closed facade with three rows of narrow windows. An Amsterdam building, that's all.

The two most fascinating houses in the street, however, are numbers 62 and 68, designed by Christian Rapp. Rapp's presence on Borneo/Sporenburg is no surprise. Rapp began as assistant to Hans Kollhoff and ended up as co-architect of the Piraeus building on KNSM island. He is one of the initiators of the architectural success of the redevelopment of the eastern docklands (Oostelijk Havengebied). Which is why the developer, New Deal, invited Rapp to design a dozen or so dwellings within West 8's master plan at various locations on the peninsulas. This represents a less happy memory of the scheme. As already mentioned,

the original idea to construct Borneo/Sporenburg out of a large number of small projects proved to be financially infeasible. Many of the architects involved at that stage were thanked for their efforts and saw their all-too-audacious architectural concepts disappear in the wastepaper basket.<sup>2</sup> Rapp's designs suffered the same fate. However, thanks to two private clients, Rapp continued to work at this location.

Rapp had done something unusual in his designs for New Deal: between the various dwellings he had created alleyways 90 centimetres wide (and, given the long plots with back-to-back patio dwellings, some dozens of metres deep). These alleyways led to the entrances to the dwellings, which were thus not located in the front elevation. Not only did this produce freestanding houses, it was also a positive intervention with regard to the penetration of daylight in the narrow, deep dwellings prescribed in the urban design scheme. Derivatives of this original idea can be found in the two houses on Scheepstimmermanstraat.

The plot of number 68 is only 5.1 metres wide but Rapp nevertheless decided to design a detached house. On either side, between this house and the two neighbouring houses, he created a 20-centimetre-wide open strip. This one design decision subsequently determined virtually everything else. Not in the sense that all manner of spatial-architectural ideas followed from it, but rather in the sense that this decision sucked Rapp into a maelstrom of regulations and bureaucracy. For example, the fact that Rapp's house did not adjoin the neighbouring houses meant that the walls of those houses had to be accessible for any necessary maintenance. A twenty-centimetre-wide slot is not, however, an ideal working space. The solution Rapp came up with is quite sensational: the two side elevations of Rapp's house can be fully opened to give access to the exterior walls of the neighbouring houses. On the ground floor – containing the living areas – are storey-high glass sliding doors, through which, 20 centimetres further, you can see the metal corrugated sheets on the walls of the neighbouring houses. On the upper floor – containing two double height studios with skylight – the side elevations are composed of solid wooden panels in a steel skeleton. These wooden panels can be opened to give access to the walls of the neighbouring houses, while the panels in the front and rear elevations can also be opened to create additional fenestration.

The alleyway also features in the house on plot number 62. This 5.7-metre-wide plot is bisected by a publicly accessible alleyway (although it will require some temerity to actually use it) which connects the street with the water at the rear of the house. The entrance to the house is situated halfway along this alley. The house is thus cut in two. There are two half houses on the ground floor. On the first floor – containing the living areas – the two halves are reconnected, but on the second floor – containing the bedrooms – the alleyway returns in the form of an elongated roof terrace. Although vertical circulation is present in both 'halves' of the house – a stairway in one half, a lift in the other<sup>3</sup> – it is clear that convenience was not a primary consideration in the organizational form chosen. For example, in order to reach the bathroom from two of the bedrooms, you either have to take a circuitous route through the house or go outside and cross over to the other half.

The question, of course, is why Rapp chose these particular solutions. Did the clients request them? Are the residents of number 68 allergic to contact noise? Were the occupants of number 62 seeking a confrontation with the elements – something the modern city dweller all too often goes without? The answer to such questions is probably 'no'. Anyone who looks at the designs Rapp has made to date sees an architect who takes no notice of the prevailing architectural practice and who has rediscovered architecture's academic past. Given the current building practice in the Netherlands, in which an unrestrained formal frenzy often predominates, one is almost tempted to call this retrograde step innovatory. Rapp reminds us once again of a sort of archetypal purity of architecture. In the speech he gave on receiving

the 1997 Maaskant Prize for young architects, Rapp borrowed the words of Paul Schmitthenner, a traditionalist architect who rejected modernism, in order to clarify his own position: 'I'm not saying anything new, at most perhaps what has been forgotten'.<sup>4</sup>

However, this is only partly true. Rapp, who following a partnership with Stephan Höhne has now set up in practice with Birgit Scheulen, may take as his departure point a quest for the 'essential' in architecture, but he also invariably adds a measure of contemporary recalcitrance or obstinacy. In Rapp, the logic of the academic acquires a suggestion of obsession. Traditional typologies are not employed because they solve all problems. On the contrary, they are adapted in such a way that they generate tension. The projects have a self-evidence which makes them conceptually right and which ensures that all interventions can be legitimized, while absurdity, which lends life colour, is smuggled in through the back door. It is an answer to that highly pressing question every architect asks him or herself: how do I create space so as, in addition to meeting the requirements specified in the brief and respecting the wishes of the client, to include an inviolable architectural essence in the design?

A good example of the resultant working method are the ready-made, 'catalogue dwellings' Rapp presented in the book *Het kant-en-klaarhuis* that he produced in collaboration with Daan Bakker.<sup>5</sup> Here, Rapp's starting point was a number of basic types which were then extended and transformed in various ways in order to satisfy every possible demand. The series of design types this produces show the signs of an obsessive and compelling logic. Here, typology calls to mind its ugly half-sister, the caricature. Another example can be found in the book published to coincide with the presentation of the Maaskant Prize. It contains a selection of images of Rapp's projects, namely photographs of models. All of the models have the same scale and all of the photographs have been taken from the same position, so that they too, as it were, have the same scale. Because there are only one or two large projects and numerous smaller ones, many of the pages consist of a big, white expanse in the centre of which is a minuscule photograph. One cannot suppress a certain doubt about the purpose of such a project when flicking through this book, but otherwise you have to admit: it is possible, you can't fault it.

In the built houses we see what this attitude produces. Anyone who enters them is instantly aware: 'this is architecture'. The typological clarity ensures an immediate understanding of the space, while the inbuilt irrationality evokes astonishment. One could call this combination of understanding and astonishment an architectural experience.

When Rem Koolhaas won the same Maaskant Prize (albeit the 'big' prize rather than the one for 'young' architects), eleven years previously in 1986, he made an appeal which seems not to have been lost on Rapp. Koolhaas told his audience: 'It is also in your interest that the time should return when the architect, like Rumpelstiltskin, with or without stamping his foot, can say: "I want it, because I want it!"'<sup>6</sup> Rapp is unlikely to stamp his foot, but he *is* a Rumpelstiltskin. It is in our own interest.

1. Most of the dwellings are documented in Ton Jansen et al. (eds), *Bo 6,7. Wonen in een huis naar eigen ontwerp op Borneo-eiland*, City of Amsterdam, 1999.

2. Several of the projects from this phase, including fifteen dwellings by Rapp, were published in *Archis*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 46-51.

3. The decision to incorporate a lift in the house had to do with the fact that one of the two original clients had difficulty walking. They finally decided not to live there and the house is now occupied by the family of one of their children.

4. Bernard Colenbrander (ed.), *Christian Rapp*, Rotterdam, Uitgeverij 010, 1997, p. 19.

5. Daan Bakker, Christian Rapp, *Het kant-en-klaarhuis. Standaard en karakter in de woningcatalogus*, Rotterdam, NAI Uitgevers, 1998.
6. Rem Koolhaas, 'De wereld is rijp voor de architect als visionair', *Archis*, no. 8, 1986, p.47.

In: *Archis* no. 2, 2001, pp. 43-51.