

Housing or revolution

The new shortage of housing

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The figures are frankly dramatic, no doubt about it. For decades an annual building production of 100,000 new dwellings was a sacred target in the Netherlands. First in order to alleviate the housing shortage, thereafter to keep pace with demand. The magical figure was first achieved in 1964 and, with the odd exception, maintained until 1990. In the 1990s, production fluctuated between 80,000 and 90,000. The last few years, however, have seen a spectacular drop. In 1999, according to Statistics Netherlands (CBS), 79,000 new dwellings were built, in 2000 only 71,000 and in 2001 no more than 65,000. In its five-year building forecast published in November 2001, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM) expected the decline to continue and estimated that at most 60,000 new dwellings would be built in 2002. At the same time, the 'National Agreement on Housing 2001-2005' (a result of the *Mensen wensen wonen* memorandum), which was drawn up and signed by the state secretary of VROM, the association of housing corporations (Aedes), the Union of Local Authorities, provincial authorities, the national tenants' association, the association of home owners, representatives of property owners and investors, and the Federation of Dutch Contractors' Organization, reaffirmed the ambition of building 100,000 new dwellings a year. Vinex, the government's urban expansion blueprint that was supposed to guarantee this level of construction, appears to be failing right across the board.¹

The decrease in the number of new homes would not be such a problem if it were the result of declining demand. The reverse is the case, however. The demand for new homes continues to rise due to factors such as the ever-increasing population, the steady dilution of the family, the growth in the number of households, the increase in the number of affluent dual earners and persistently low mortgage interest rates. Whereas at the end of the 1980s officials were able to announce with a sigh of relief that the 'quantitative housing shortage' had finally been conquered and that the 'qualitative housing shortage' could now be tackled, in 2002 we find ourselves back where we started. The problem is most acute in the Randstad conurbation. The title of the memorandum published by the Amsterdam Housing Agency in December 2001 says it all: *De nieuwe woningnood* (The New Housing Shortage). It goes without saying that the kind of life-threatening housing situations that existed when the Housing Act was introduced in 1901 are unknown in present-day Holland. Neither is the housing shortage dubbed 'public enemy number one' as it was during the period of post-war reconstruction. And nor is housing any longer a battleground between rich and poor as it was during the squatters' riots around 1980. But common sense and our sense of justice rebel: surely this should not be possible; is it result of incompetence or of villainy? Or is this new housing shortage no more than a disease of affluence, a sign of a decadent society in decline?

Opinions as to the reasons for the free fall in housing construction vary. The real estate sector – which takes an even gloomier view than that sketched above and talks of only 55,000 new dwellings in 2002 – identifies the main reason as vocal citizens who hold up proceedings by mounting legal challenges to development plans, a shortage of personnel among local authorities and construction firms and ever-rising land prices.² The Hypothekers Associatie (mortgage lenders' association), which predicts a fall to 50,000-55,000 for 2002, attributes the decline mainly to the 'forest of procedures' hampering contractors and developers.

Kolpron, a research consultancy, which analysed the Amsterdam housing market in late 2001 on behalf of the city council, mentions in addition to high land prices – which now often account for 50 to 60 per cent of the sale price – ‘high ambitions’ and ‘complex plans’ (by which they mean architectural and urbanist ambitions relating to variation and mixed use and the compliance with environmental and parking constraints) and rising construction costs.³

The developers lay the blame squarely at the government’s door. The chairman of their association (the NVB), H.J. van Harssel, let no opportunity pass in 2001 to denounce the ‘interminable procedures’ and the maze of municipal regulations. In his annual address last November, Van Harssel claimed that because of these obstructions ‘the entire construction process, including the social sector, is in danger of toppling over as in a game of dominoes’. He stated that production figures of ‘barely 40,000 dwellings a year or even less’ were not fanciful. He also provided an interesting glimpse behind the scenes when he remarked that distrust between local authorities and the private sector has never been greater. Earlier in 2001 Van Harssel had already vented his spleen about attempts by local authorities to prevent extreme price rises by way of price capping and anti-speculation clauses: ‘this will only serve to unsettle the market still further because residential mobility will be blocked and the wrong type of houses will be built’.⁴

This disarray in housing construction, which directly affects the lives of nearly every Dutch inhabitant, did not appear out of nowhere, of course; it is the consequence of a radical change of course in house-building policy. Ironically enough, this U-turn coincided with the celebration in 2001 of the centenary of the famous Housing Act. It was this act that put the Netherlands on the international architectural map. It inaugurated a tradition of encouraging good housing for the entire population which, for a whole century, on and off, succeeded in spurring architects and town planners to remarkable achievements. Without the Housing Act there would have been no Witte Dorp, no Bergpolder Flats, no Betondorp, no Pendrecht and so on. Without the Housing Act there would have been no typological attention paid to alternative dwelling types, to student and pensioner housing, to newcomers to the housing market. Without the Housing Act all those projects featured in the notional architecture yearbooks prior to 1988 (the year in which the first yearbook was published) would probably never have been built. Without the Housing Act, the Netherlands would never have played the pioneering role that it has in city building and urban development, where the fact that the bulk of housing construction was government-directed made possible the coherent planning of neighbourhoods, districts and even entire cities. In retrospect it could perhaps be argued that all the international interest accorded to Dutch architecture was generated not only by the buildings themselves, but also by amazement at the fact that it had actually been built, that the organization involved in the realization of all those dwellings clearly worked.

The year 2001 was marked not only by the review of that century of housing construction, but also by the abolition of the Housing Act as an instrument of policy management. This was manifested in two ways: the first concrete results of the ‘wild women’ phenomenon, which sees deregulation of the housing construction as the main goal, and the increasing visibility of a paradox that has gained a grip on Vinex development schemes.

Vinex

Despite the current mutterings about the plethora of ‘procedures’ and ‘regulations’, the government’s withdrawal from housing construction was tackled energetically, to say the least. We only have to look at the figures. In 1985 government agencies and housing

corporations (which had previously built with the help of state loans but which were made independent in the 1990s) still accounted for 40 % of new dwellings; in 1999, according to the CBS, this had fallen to 22 % and in 2000 it was around 15 %. In absolute numbers the decline was even steeper given the overall decrease in the number of new houses. Construction was indeed being left to the private sector.

But if there was ever any notion that this would unlock a beatific self-regulating mechanism, that is now open to doubt. The worsening housing shortage is attended by huge price increases for home buyers. Whereas in 1990 net expenditure on housing in the own-your-own sector accounted for 12.4 % of disposable income, in 1999 that had risen to 17.6 % (the average mortgage payment of a home owner was 406 euros a month in 1999).⁵ And these figures date from before prices really started to take off. The average price of a single-family dwelling in the Netherlands was 250,000 guilders (113,445 euros) in January 1998 and 465,000 guilders (211,008 euros) in November 2001 – prices rose so rapidly that it became standard practice to calculate the figures anew every month. In an article in *Het Financiële Dagblad* in 1999 it was suggested that at least 100,000 guilders (45,378 euros) could be seen as a ‘scarcity surcharge’ on the price of a dwelling. In other words, buyers are not getting value for money. Another conclusion: the trade in new homes has become an extremely lucrative business.

Developers stand to profit from scarcity, that much is clear. Which in turn puts the criticism of the ‘procedures’ and ‘regulations’ in a different light. Has the role of the ‘slum landlords’, who made a fortune out of the housing shortage in the early days of the Housing Act, now been assumed by the developers? Is it only a matter of time before a modern Henriëtte Roland Holst writes, ‘especially notorious were the Vinex districts where hundreds of thousands languished in dumb acquiescence’?⁶ As long ago as 1926, the Amsterdam alderman and social housing champion S.R. de Miranda noted that ‘the private builder builds not in order to satisfy demand as efficiently as possible, he builds in order to make a profit. That is the sole motive.’⁷ Conjuring up unworkable situations provides good excuses for not meeting deadlines. And as Adri Duivesteijn pointed out in the 1999 Yearbook, with the advent of Vinex, land speculation became interesting for the first time in a hundred years. ‘Land has become a production factor. Owning land determines access to the market,’ he quoted the director of Heijmans Bouw, a property developer, as saying.⁸ But even for local government the current high prices are not without their advantages. As an article in the *NRC Handelsblad* pointed out, the increased income from the six per cent conveyance duty is a welcome addition to the municipal coffers.⁹

What impact do these developments have on architecture? The Vinex exercise is a prime example of the shift in patronage from the government to the private sector. It was launched in a period of relative economic malaise; the first plans date from the early 1990s. The aim at that time was to guarantee acceptable housing, but of a rather frugal kind: relatively high densities, few amenities (which residents were supposed to find in the neighbouring cities) and few concessions to car owners in view of the promised link-ups with existing public transport networks.

That was not how it turned out. The Netherlands entered a period of economic prosperity. Unemployment plummeted, purchasing power rose, interest rates fell. It was all grist to the mill of the anti-state interference and deregulation lobby and a government that was already busy withdrawing from all but its ‘core tasks’. The whole country was investing in the stock market, the whole country wanted to own their own home. In 1971, 35 per cent of the

population lived in a privately owned home, in 1990 the figure was 45 per cent and in 1997 the turning point was reached: for the first time in history over half the Dutch population was living in a privately owned home. But the houses that have become available in recent years for the newly affluent middle classes are those rather run-of-the-mill Vinex dwellings. For lack of better they change hands for huge sums of money, but worth it they are not.

There is little scope for architecture. Quality is irrelevant in a scarcity market. In *The city in extremes. Reconnoitring Vinex country*, Hans van Rossum, Frank van Wijk and Lodewijk Baljon report, in relation to an analysis of the Getsewoud Vinex development in Nieuw-Vennep, a comment by the city architect: 'Everything sells. From a market perspective, quality is not all that necessary.' And they themselves conclude that 'according to the city council the developers skim on quality ... but sometimes sell for hundreds of thousands of guilders more than the original asking price'.¹⁰

But architects, it seems, have difficulty accepting their reduced role. Even when their opportunities are marginal, many of them are nonetheless determined to exploit those opportunities. Any latitude granted to them is generally confined to the exterior. Typological experiments are no longer possible. Behind the ingenious and extravagant facades one finds the same old standard houses. But no, the word 'facade' is passé in this context. It's the entire 'skin' of the dwellings that is involved here. In many cases, facade and roof have merged into one, big architectural statement. The most striking example of this are the 119 dwellings designed by MVRDV on Hageneiland in Ypenburg, which grace the cover of this Yearbook. Anyone seeing these archetypical little houses for the first time (they look as if they've been drawn by the firm's youngest sprig armed with a good basic set of coloured pencils) thinks they are looking at a not unwitty social housing scheme. In reality the selling price of the houses was around 500,000 guilders (226,890 euros). Half a million to go 'back to basics'.

From their principals, architects hear that they must remain within strict budgets, local authorities insist on 'quality' and the architects themselves would rather make something special. These are the ingredients that are increasingly resulting in a blaze of outward show on the Vinex sites. Rem Koolhaas's remark that the architect is the hostage with a gun to his head who has to phone home to say that all is well, has never been more apposite. Spatial design has been reduced to the accumulation of 'reference images' and it is left to architecture to interpret and materialize those images. The result is facade architecture and material fetishism. You take a standard terraced house. You crown it with battlements and voilà, you have a castle house. Cap it with a funny-looking roof and you've got a hay-loft house. Add a cornice and it becomes a Palladian house. Throw some wooden verandas around the lot and lo and behold, you have an American neighbourhood.

The way people speak about designing is changing, too. Where architecture was once characterized by concepts, now it is all about slogans. Each project must have an 'identity' that is also capable of being propagated in the new market situation. We are all busy persuading one another that we are dealing with a 'buyers market' – which is precisely what is lacking due to the scarcity factor – and behaving accordingly. There is no project without a sales pitch worthy of an advertising brochure. They range from quite banal – 'A stunner of a house', of which more elsewhere in this yearbook – to slightly less banal. Very occasionally the architects succeed in drawing inspiration from the new fashion for thinking in terms of 'unique selling points', as evidenced by Claus en Kaan's master stroke in Almere. Because research has supposedly shown that most people would prefer to live at the top of bottom of a tower while the middle is less in demand, the architects designed a tower with scarcely any

middle.

Wild wonen

The surfeit of titivated mediocrity on Vinex sites has given rise to a counter movement: *Wilde Wonen* or consumer-led housing. After Carel Weeber had launched the concept in 1997 as an attack on state interference in individual domestic bliss (but even more as an expression of his personal penchant for engaging in controversy),¹¹ it became part of actual government policy in 2001. It can be understood as a corrective to the operation of the market. First the government retreats in order to allow the market a free run but now – under the guise of ‘updating’ Vinex – it steps forward once again to tell the market that it must serve the consumer better. And it does that by advocating something that was conceived as a weapon against ‘state architecture’! How many ironies are tumbling over one another here?

Designing the Netherlands, a four-ministry memorandum issued in 2001, signals the intention to encourage people to build their own homes. It explains that there is a ‘continuum of forms of architectural patronage’ whereby individual citizens exercise varying degrees of influence on the building programme and the design of their home. One effect of this policy is the earmarking of ever larger portions of housing development sites for private patronage (the ‘golden rims’ as they are known), but it finds its apotheosis in *Wilde Wonen* where aesthetic requirements and other regulations are supposed to be eased and where the residents are allowed to decide for themselves what to build or have built. Many people are enthusiastic about the new possibilities this offers. Henk Hofland, a commentator on Dutch affairs, even goes so far as to call it a ‘revolution’.¹²

In 2001, the first housing estate dedicated to testing the feasibility and exploring the potential of this idea was completed as part of a Building Expo in Almere. At the very beginning there was a shift of accent whereby ‘wild wonen’ (untrammelled housing) became ‘gewild wonen’ (sought-after housing). The emphasis was no longer on anarchy but on consumer-friendliness. In addition, the whole ‘continuum of forms of architectural patronage’ was tried out, notwithstanding the project-style approach. This Yearbook features examples of consumer-oriented project development that offer prospective buyers a choice of options at the time of purchase (Marlies Rohmer), a house that anticipates future extensions (Laura Weeber), shells they must finish building themselves (Verheijen|Verkoren|De Haan) and catalogue homes (Carel Weeber). While the merits of the first three types are clear for all to see, this is much less obvious in the case of the catalogue dwellings. Which is all the more surprising given the fact that they sprang from the brain of the spiritual father of *wilde wonen*.

In 1998 Weeber published a book entitled *Het Wilde Wonen*. That ode to informal living arrangements such as mobile homes, holiday bungalows and houseboats laid the ground for the presentation of an alternative: the concept of ‘Personal Housing’ that Weeber has developed in collaboration with ERA Bouw, a construction company. ‘Personal Housing’ in Weeber’s words ‘gives occupants a great degree of freedom in determining their own home’.¹³ Thanks to modern technology you can see how this works in practice by surfing to www.personalhousing.nl where a standard house awaits you. You then have a choice of four types of roof (flat roof, low pitched roof, high pitched roof, high pitched roof with dormer), four kinds of extension (veranda, bay, conservatory, balcony), four materials (brick – choice of three colours, wood – choice of four colours, metal – aluminium colour only, stucco – choice of three colours) and five colours for the framework (dark blue, dark green, ivory, grey and white). Finally you can view a ‘photo-realistic’ picture of your ‘design’. What you

see looks exactly like the row of seven houses built in Almere. The project demonstrates convincingly that the only thing this kind of 'pick and choose' house design is good for is for exercising the laughter muscles. Although every developer now has a similar system at the ready, housing has more to gain from further development of the other experiments on the building expo site. The project stands there on a corner of the site as a warning: this, at any rate, is how not to do it.

The individual's freedom of choice is limited even under *Wilde* (or *gewild*) *Wonen*. In the Netherlands, the Buildings Decree, development plans and aesthetic controls all conspire to thwart this new philosophy. In Almere the solution was sought – as so often in the Netherlands – in compromise. The Buildings Decree was 'broadly' adhered to, a rough development plan was drawn up in which a maximum building height (three storeys) and a maximum building percentage (70 per cent) for each plot was laid down and the design review board took a 'low-key approach'.¹⁴ With such ad hoc solutions *Wilde Wonen* is destined for the time being to remain marginal and tame. But the greatest obstacle to individual patronage, anarchic or otherwise, lies elsewhere and was beautifully illustrated at the well-attended 'housing market' organized by the NAI in Rotterdam in September 2001. Drove of eager-to-build clients descended on the stands of keen-to-design architects. There was only one problem: no one had a plot of land! Building land in the Netherlands is all in the hands of property developers...

Without land it is impossible to build and if nothing is built, people will not have a place to live. These are two of the major problems plaguing Dutch housing construction. 'The most important driving force behind growing consumer influence is undoubtedly the easing of the housing market', was one of the conclusions of the aforementioned study *The city in extremes*.¹⁵ Regrettably, there is no question of any easing and that is also precisely the aspect on which the consumer has absolutely no influence. What *can* the consumer do? Dream of a revolution?

1. The government, too, is starting to be panicked by the figures. A special housing production task force hastily called into being by the state secretary of VROM produced a list of thirty measures at the end of January 2002. Since they all depend on good intentions their chances of success do not seem assured.
2. According to the 'independent housing site' at www.digimmo.nl.
3. Mijntje Klipp, 'Woningbouwproductie lijdt onder strenge eisen stad', *Het Parool*, 23 November 2001.
4. *Cobouw*, 1 March 2001.
5. Comparable percentages in the rental sector are 19.7 % in 1990 and 23.8 % in 1999. The average monthly expenditure on housing was NLG 900 (EUR 408) in 1998. Source: CBS.
6. 'In Amsterdam the Jordaan was notorious for its rookeries where thousands languished in dumb acquiescence': Henriëtte Roland Holst quoted in *Wonen. Woning. Wet. Wij wonen - 100 jaar Woningwet*, Stedelijke Woningdienst Amsterdam, 2001, p.18.
7. Quoted in *Wonen. Woning. Wet* (see note 6), p. 123.
8. Adri Duivesteijn, 'Vinex, architectuur van het aanbod', in: Hans Ibelings et al., *Architecture in the Netherlands, Yearbook 1998-1999*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 1999, pp. 24-32.
9. Eveline C.C. Blitz, 'Rijk misbruikt hoge huizenprijzen', *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 November 2001.
10. Hans van Rossum, Frank van Wijk and Lodewijk Baljon, *De stad in uitersten. Verkenningstocht naar Vinex-land*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2001, pp. 52-53.

11. See the analysis by Hans van Dijk, 'De wilde woonconsument', in: Hans Ibelings et al., *Architectuur in the Netherlands, Yearbook 1998-1999*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 1999, pp. 14-23.
12. Henk Hofland, 'Het laatste taboe', in: Jacqueline Tellinga, *Heilige huisjes. Bewoners als opdrachtgevers*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2001, p. 27.
13. Carel Weeber, *Het Wilde Wonen*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 1998, p. 59. Also very informative is the web site initiated by Weeber: www.hetwildewonen.nl.
14. Hans Laumanns, Freek Riem, 'De voorlopige resultaten', in: *Gewild wonen. Bouwexpo Almere 2001*, Almere City Council, 2001, pp. 15-18.
15. Op. cit. note 10, p. 188.

In: Anne Hoogewoning, Roemer van Toorn, Piet Vollaard, Arthur Wortmann (eds.), *Architecture in the Netherlands, Yearbook 2001-2002*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2002, pp. 45-52 (translation Robyn de Jong-Dalziel).