

# 05 Who is afraid of anonymity?

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4th ISUU Conference  
September - 2007  
TU Delft  
The Netherlands  
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## Abstract

The relation between civic society and the 'Res Publica', is always set in a somewhat positivistic, bourgeois daylight. Planning, of both planners and politicians, becomes obscured by the ideological believe in the possibility of making 'good society' by making 'good cities'. In essence this belief is anti-urban. Urban life may better be understood as a strictly regulated battlefield of different individuals and groups. Cities are divided into innumerable territories, from neighbourhoods to individual rooms. Instead of laying the emphasis on social bonding, the essence of urban life lies in the presence of self-chosen anonymity. A freeing anonymity in which citizens can choose their own way of life, own contacts, and even their own solitude. This is what urban life distinguishes from village life.

Within this context the postwar neighbourhood of Buitenveldert in Amsterdam is worth looking at. The positioning of Buitenveldert was part of the AUP of Amsterdam of 1934. Cornelis van Eesteren (1897-1988) was together with Van Lohuizen the inspiring leader of the team that produced this highly innovative plan. The realisation of the different parts of the AUP, as Buitenveldert, had to wait until after World War Two. By this time urban planning was mainly directed by two issues. First there was the issue of solving the demand for housing. The second issue was sociologically oriented towards the making of a new, meaningful and open society. This way of thinking was for instance worked out in the 'Wijkgedachte' by the architect Willem van Tijen. In Rotterdam Lotte Stam Beese and Jaap Bakema determined this sociological presumption even to the scale of the individual block. They developed the 'Stempel', a configuration of different housing types in one housing-block. The attitude of Van Eesteren towards this kind of sociological determination was more reserved.

Cornelis van Eesteren was not only an important member of the CIAM (chairman from 1930 to 1947) but collaborated during the twenties of the previous century with the artist Theo van Doesburg of the 'De Stijl'. Significant results of this collaboration were the designs of two villa's. In the latter the designers proclaimed to have developed a new artistic procedure, the 'Elementarism'. This procedure consists out of two phases, the first of demolishing the object into its different parts, the second phase of montage of the elements into a new whole. Precisely this procedure can, many years later, be traced in Buitenveldert. The result is both highly regulated as estrange. Buitenveldert is far from the utopian or romantic tendencies of its contemporates. Its power lays in an apparent ordinariness, and the acknowledgement of anonymity as a condition to make cities into a really free space for everyone. A condition which is still, but certainly shortly after World War Two, not without meaning.

## Who is afraid of anonymity?

In urban planning and architecture the Res Publica is mostly associated with the public space of regulated human encounter. The Res Publica is connected with peaceful exchange of goods (the market), human relations (the wedding market), ideas (the university), culture (theatre and museum), justice (police station and palace of justice) and the political debate (the parliament). The question this paper arises whether in urban planning and architecture the issue of the Res Publica should be the dominant focus of today's practice, not only in the western part of the world but also elsewhere.

In the first place the meaning of de Res Publica in cities and buildings has diminished or at the same time revaluated to the image of it's self. An example of only the image of the Res Publica is the traditional Common Green in English towns. It's a space not actually to be used by people for collective use and exchange but the Common is only the image of the collective of the towns' community meant for its own civic pride and working as a symbol of this for the outsider. Another

more modern example of the imagination of the Res Publica in architecture is the abundant use of glass in modern public buildings. The motivation always says that a glass building is the architectonic translation of the open, transparent and democratic institution it houses. A belief in the possibility of making 'good society' by making 'good Res Publica' is very strong.

On the other hand cities can also be understood as strictly regulated battlefields of different individuals and groups and as a collection of innumerable territories, from neighbourhoods to individual rooms. Is therefore, in a highly pluralistic human society and its cities, the meaning of the Res Publica still that valid? Shouldn't we not also look more closely to the counterpart of the Res Publica, namely the anonymous urban space? In the anonymous space, people do not want to be recognized, the collective is not deliberately enhanced and people are free to choose their own way of live, behaviour and connections. Maybe urban life and cities must also be understood as a space of separation, which implies the possibility of free choice. And especially because of these qualities, cities can form the bases of innumerable new and unexpected human connections and because of that, new urban cultures. This is what urban life distinguishes from the boundaries of small town life. In this way urban anonymity is one of the conditions of freedom. The concept and potential of urban anonymity will be examined in the suburban areas built shortly after World War Two in Rotterdam and Amsterdam with special attention to the neighbourhood Buitenveldert in Amsterdam.

### **How to built up The Netherlands after the War**

During World War Two the urban development of The Netherlands came to a hold. Especially in the bombed city of Rotterdam this period was used by a group of sociologists, architects and urban planners for reflection and looking ahead towards the formation not only of modern Rotterdam but also of Dutch society as a whole and the kind of cities this modernized country should need.

In this respect it is important to understand how Dutch society was envisaged. According to this vision The Netherlands consists out of a set of different minorities, Liberals, Protestants, Catholics, and Left Wing Peoples such as the social democrats and communists. Within these mainstreams even different smaller fractions were apparent. How could we unify such a scattered country, was a main issue. One mean of unifying the country was a strong national symbol as represented in the Dutch queen.

In urban thinking and planning The Group Bos invented the so-called 'Wijkgedachte' (the community thought). This Wijkgedachte was based on American sociological models and has also roots in the German idea of the Gemeinschaft. The architect and urban planner Willem van Tijen (1894-1974) was a prominent member of The Group Bos. In their view new neighbourhoods were deliberately situated separate from the existing old city. The zones between the old city and the new parts were green belts, infrastructure and working areas. The new living areas became isles within a greater urban field. This way of urban layout inherited very much to the Garden City movement of Ebenezer Howard. The number of dwellings of the neighbourhood was based on the amount of pupils needed for three preliminary schools, one Public School one based on the Protestant believe and one based on the Catholic believe. The optimal amount of dwellings counted because of this reason circa 5000 to 6000 dwellings.

The structure of the neighbourhood itself was centralized around the nucleus of the home. It follows the gradual steps of occupation of space by a child. From home, to street, small neighbourhood, the greater neighbourhood with shops, schools and other urban facilities, to the city as a whole. Within the small neighbourhood, consisting of circa 800 dwellings, a feeling of urban bonding should be established.

### **Zuidwijk, a neighbourhood of communities**

The most elaborate example of the Wijkgedachte is the urban district Zuidwijk on the south side of the Maas in Rotterdam. Van Tijen added an ideal plan of this area to the publication of the group Bos 'De stad der toekomst, de toekomst der stad' ('The city of the future, the future of the city'). After World War Two Van Tijen was commissioned to design the lay out of Zuidwijk as a whole and one smaller neighbourhood, De Horsten at the northeast side of Zuidwijk. The executed plans of Zuidwijk as a whole are mainly due to the great need for dwellings not that radical as the theoretical plans of the Bos group publication. But nevertheless some intentions and its urban and architectural translations become clearly perceptible.

Zuidwijk, a neighbourhood of circa 6000 dwellings, is divided into eight different smaller neighbourhoods. Van Tijen designed together with his young employee Wim Wissing one of them, De Horsten. They designed the area as a more or less closed enclave with four and a half storey high housing blocks around a romantic and by green dominated structure of low-rise (duplex) dwellings in the middle. By making the surrounding wall-like housing blocks and an intimate inner area, De Horsten is a rather literal urban translation of the community ideal of the 'Wijkgedachte'. The structure of the neighbourhood shows an ingenious grid not with two different directions but with three directions. Within this rhythmic play of directions every housing block has its precise position in space. This ordering also created lively perspective views. The design inherited this romantic quality from the approach of another Dutch architect Marinus Jan Grandpré Molière (1883-1972), a professor at the Technical University of Delft. During the War Van Tijen attended the so called 'Doornse gesprekken' (conversations) of which Grand Pré Molière was the main spokesman of a more traditional and romantic orientated architecture and urban planning.

### **Pendrecht, the invention of the Stempel**

The adjacent living quarter of Zuidwijk is Pendrecht a neighbourhood with approximately 5000 dwellings. Pendrecht is very much related to two designers: Lotte Stam Beese (1903-1988) and Jaap Bakema (1914-1981). In a way they even set a step further than Van Tijen. These two designers determined the sociological presumption of a mixed urban layout even to the scale of the individual block. They developed the so called Stempel, a configuration of different housing types in one open housing-block. A most clear example was the Herkingenbuurt. One city block consisted out of two middle high rise blocks, one with a staircase access system and one with a gallery access system, and low rise housing in different types: for elderly people, ordinary families and middle class families. In some blocks dwellings were combined with shops. The spatial configuration of the city block, the linking together of the blocks to a larger area, the collective gardens and the system of the footpaths is widely adored. Bakema was obsessed by the spatial dynamic and depth of the Stempel as he envisaged also in the abstract paintings of Piet Mondriaan (1872-1944) and Theo Van Doesburg (1883-1931) of De Stijl movement. Especially his different design models of the Pendrecht Stempel resemble this fascination very clearly.

Worth mentioning is the fact that this typical Stempel configuration grew during the first two decades after World War Two out to a national icon of post war urban extension. All through Holland one finds these kinds of Stempel configurations. But even more surprising is the apparent vulnerability of these areas. Within the nowadays trend of renewing post war areas, Stempels are easily torn down. Maybe is the intension of mixing dwellings and people on such a low scale as the housing block too much idealistic, and thus on the long run not sustainable.

### **Amsterdam, Van Eesteren and the AUP**

At that time the situation in Amsterdam was quite different. The chief of the municipal urban planning department was Cornelis van Eesteren (1897-1988). The attitude of Van Eesteren towards this kind of sociological determination was more reserved. Before we examine the neighbourhood of Buitenveldert, and the design attitude it shows, we have to take a closer look at Van Eesteren himself.

Cornelis van Eesteren was not only an important member of the CIAM (chairman from 1930 to 1947) but collaborated during the twenties in Paris with the artist Theo van Doesburg of the De Stijl group. Significant results of this collaboration were the designs of two villa's, composition 1 and 2. In the latter the designers proclaimed to have developed a new artistic procedure, the 'Elementarisme'. This procedure consists out of two phases, the first of demolishing the object into its different parts, the second phase of montage of the elements into a new whole. Precisely this procedure of de-montage can, many years later, be traced in Buitenveldert.

The positioning of Buitenveldert at the south side of Amsterdam, together with the western and northern extensions of the city, was done in the AUP (Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan) of 1934. Van Eesteren was the inspiring leader of the team that produced this highly innovative plan. Urban planning of the AUP was no longer based on a pre-imposed urban aesthetic, as in the Berlage South district of the twenties, but based on scientific geographical and social studies. The realisation of most parts of the AUP, as the Westelijke Tuinsteden and Buitenveldert, had to wait until after World War Two.

The large area of the 'Westelijke Tuinsteden' consisting of four neighbourhoods (Slotermeer,

Geuzeveld, Osdorp and Slotervaart) with the 'Sloterplas' in the middle is the most famous and grand realizations of the AUP during the fifties and the sixties. Nevertheless Van Eesteren once mentioned in an interview in 1981 Buitenveldert the most distinguished example of the AUP. Van Eesteren himself built his own house in the neighbourhood in the street Weldam.

### **Buitenveldert a patchwork of different neighbourhoods**

In 1958 the first housing blocks of Buitenveldert were built. Buitenveldert is positioned between the southern highway A10 in the north, the Amstel in the east, the border of Amstelveen in the south and Het Nieuwe Meer in the west. It counts about 11.000 dwellings. The layout of the infrastructural grid is for the greater part rectangular and its position is exactly north, south, oriented. Although this orientation is probably totally coincidental it grants the neighbourhood also a kind of 'ideal city' status, like the ideal plan of Simon Stevin (1548-1620). A comparison of Buitenveldert and the Stevin city on the same scale reveals a more or less same size of the two districts, a resembling water structure, size of the smaller neighbourhoods and of the city blocks. The main changes of the executed Buitenveldert compared to the original plans are the cancelling of the realization of the highway the 'Rotterdamse Rijkweg' and the connection of the 'Europa Boulevard', with its majestic dimensions, to Amstelveen at the east side of the district. However these changes the overall layout is still in tact. The Gijsbrecht van Aemstelpark stretching out from west to east is the large structuring urban space. The landscape architect Wim Boer (1922-1999) designed a park also based on the rectangular angle. The park divides Buitenveldert into a south and a north part. The most worked out part of the park is located in the middle. A dramatic empty square in the middle mediates between this north and the south part of the neighbourhood. Square green rooms and beds of flowers, can be seen as doubling the urban district as a whole into the park.

The system of dividing housing types over the area can be described as: different homogeneous neighbourhoods form together a heterogeneous urban district, a patchwork of different neighbourhoods. Every neighbourhood is dominated by one housing type. Such as middle high-rise areas with a portico or gallery access system, next to low-rise areas and area's with detached and semi detached houses. This system is deliberately different from the Rotterdam approach. Neighbourhoods are solely built up with one type of housing blocks, with one height and more or less one architectonic expression. The spatial effect of this way of mixing housing types is not that dynamic as the Rotterdam examples, in a way it is monotonous.

### **Urban elementarism, balance of public, collective and private**

This monotony of Buitenveldert is nevertheless not just the result of an only on practical needs oriented way of designing but the result of a deliberate architectonic act. The ordering of Buitenveldert does not answer to the normal perception one has of an urban district and the urban form does not do what we ordinary expect from it. Before we will investigate what kind of urban life this kind of ordering implies, we investigate at first how it works. For this it is worthwhile to keep the procedure of de-montage in mind. The questions of this procedure are, how does a normal environment look like, what are the different elements of such a normal environment and how can we put these elements into a new order? To illustrate this we look closer to one particular environment, the Arent Janszoon Ernststraat itself and the two living areas at the south of this street.

It is said that Jakoba Mulder (1900-1988) was the main designer of these two neighbourhoods. But also Aldo van Eyck (1918-1997) joined at that time the urban planning department. Some of his playgrounds are realized here. The relation of the design department with Van Eesteren was very close. At the end of the day Van Eesteren picked up Aldo van Eyck to go strolling along to talk about De Stijl. In any case at that time there was an interesting mix of three talented designers of two different generations.

At first the Arent Janszoon Ernststraat is a street with on one-side shops. Normally one would orientate the side of the shops to the sun, as is beautifully done in the Slinge in Zuidwijk in Rotterdam. For the architectonic expression it is also rather 'natural' to emphasize the side of the shops, for instance with an awning or even an arcade. Both conditions are revered in this street. At first the shops are oriented to the north and secondly the architectonic focus of the street is not towards the side of the shops but towards the opposite open side with collective gardens

and crosswise placed blocks with useless arcades. Why should one make arcades were nobody walks? Nevertheless images of these arcades have almost grown out to the symbolic pictures of Buitenveldert as a whole.

Even more estrange are the two living areas at the south side of the Arent Janszoon Ernststraat. All houses are four storeys high. Within a kind of mathematical absoluteness all houses in the western area have a portico access system and the dwellings in the eastern area a gallery access system. The two areas adjoin at the south side the Gijsbrecht van Aemstelpark. From a normal designers point of view it would be very natural to make streets crosswise of the Arent Janszoon Ernststraat straight to the park. These side-streets would have beautiful perspectives into the park. The distance to the park would be about 300 meters.

But the area has not been designed that way at all. There has been played an ingenious play with the typical Amsterdam block configuration of the Post War period. This block-type consists out of two right-angel-shaped blocks with one access-street walking through and one around the block. Within the two Arent Janszoon Ernststraat living areas, the access-streets around the blocks do not form an ongoing grid, like elsewhere in Amsterdam, but they are shaped in an angled configuration. The spatial effect is that the way to the park has become obscured by three angles. Instead of 300 meters the way is prolonged to 450 meters. The perspective to the park is totally blocked. The spatial configuration becomes even more complex when we look at the footpath system through the open green squares. This system can be seen as syncopation towards the road-system.

Within these two neighbourhoods one is easily get lost and therefore the comparison with a labyrinth, a typical Van Eyck concept, becomes ahead. This association can even be worked out further more. One can argue that the constant height of the housing blocks and the monotony of the architecture work like the hedges of the labyrinth. The ground level of most housing blocks are dominated by garages and storages. These blind facades do not communicate from outside to inwards and vice versa and increase a feeling of being on your own. All green squares in the middle of the blocks are in collective use and within the footpath configuration the right-angel-shaped configuration of the whole, the mill-blade motive of Piet Mondriaan, can be recognized. Moreover the playgrounds in the middle of these green squares are mostly hidden from the street by hedges, shrubs and trees. The spatial effect of constant turning around a corner can also somehow be compared with a spatial whirl. It is notable that within the house of Van Eesteren himself in Buitenveldert one can also recognize this same whirling spatial effect of rooms around the garden.

### **Anonymity as urban condition**

Especially within these 'labyrinth-clear' two neighbourhoods in Buitenveldert the emphasize does not lay only on a pre-imposed public and collective sphere but also on the meeting with one self, the private sphere and self chosen contacts and rituals with other people in the city. The public and collective sphere is not absent but more equally put beside the private sphere. For the pluralistic cities of today this issue is still not without meaning, I should even think topical.

That this spatial system is specially developed in Amsterdam is maybe not without reason. As Rotterdam has its bombardment, Amsterdam has its deportation of many Jews during the war. In this respect it is understandable that in this city the relation between the public, the collective and the private sphere is profoundly investigated after World War Two and that these investigations also lead to the recognition of a positively understood urban anonymity.