08 A Loggia Facing the City

Karin Theunissen

A loggia is a sheltered space with a view. Ever since the invention of cities, Dutch dwellings have united precisely those two things: 'shelter' and 'observation' of the world.

The Dutch landscape has traditionally been linked with the water of the sea and the rivers. Control over the water sums up the Netherlands as a country of polders and reminds us of the transportation advantages of a delta, where rivers flow into the sea, which made the Netherlands a nation of traders. Control over the water developed the Dutch feeling for a democratic system of government, as keeping the polders dry depends on cooperation. Commerce strengthened the Dutch feeling for individual citizenship, which is reflected in the houses of Dutch merchants. In architectural respects, Dutch cities are notable for their proudly individualistic merchants' houses situated along the publicly-built canal networks. The Dutch city unites the two aspects of this delta country, while the individual and social aspects merge in the image of the 'loggia facing the city'.

Merchants' houses and the historical relationship with water still have a significant effect on Dutch cities. A Dutch city typically has the feel of a village about it. The twin concepts of private and public are less polarized, less mutually exclusive in the Netherlands than in any other Western European country. The uniqueness of Dutch dwelling, expressed in the metaphor of a 'loggia facing the city', can be read in the merchants' houses and the famous interiors painted by the Dutch Masters in the seventeenth century.

Dutch dwelling tends to embrace simultaneously the intimacy of the private home with the collectivity of the city. As a contrast, consider the Italian house, a bunker against the violence of nature and the city. The Italian retreats into his house, whose walls are as thick and uninterrupted as possible so as to repel heat, noise and the enemy. An Italian house reveals nothing of the private life inside. The Italian's domestic life is private and completely excludes public intrusion. To take part in city life, the Italian goes outdoors at the milder times of day. The Dutch house (*huis*, stem *hus* meaning 'to cover') is essentially a shelter against the rather mild but rainy climate, a roof over the Dutchman's head. The Italian *casa*, however, is a cognate of encasing, enclosing.

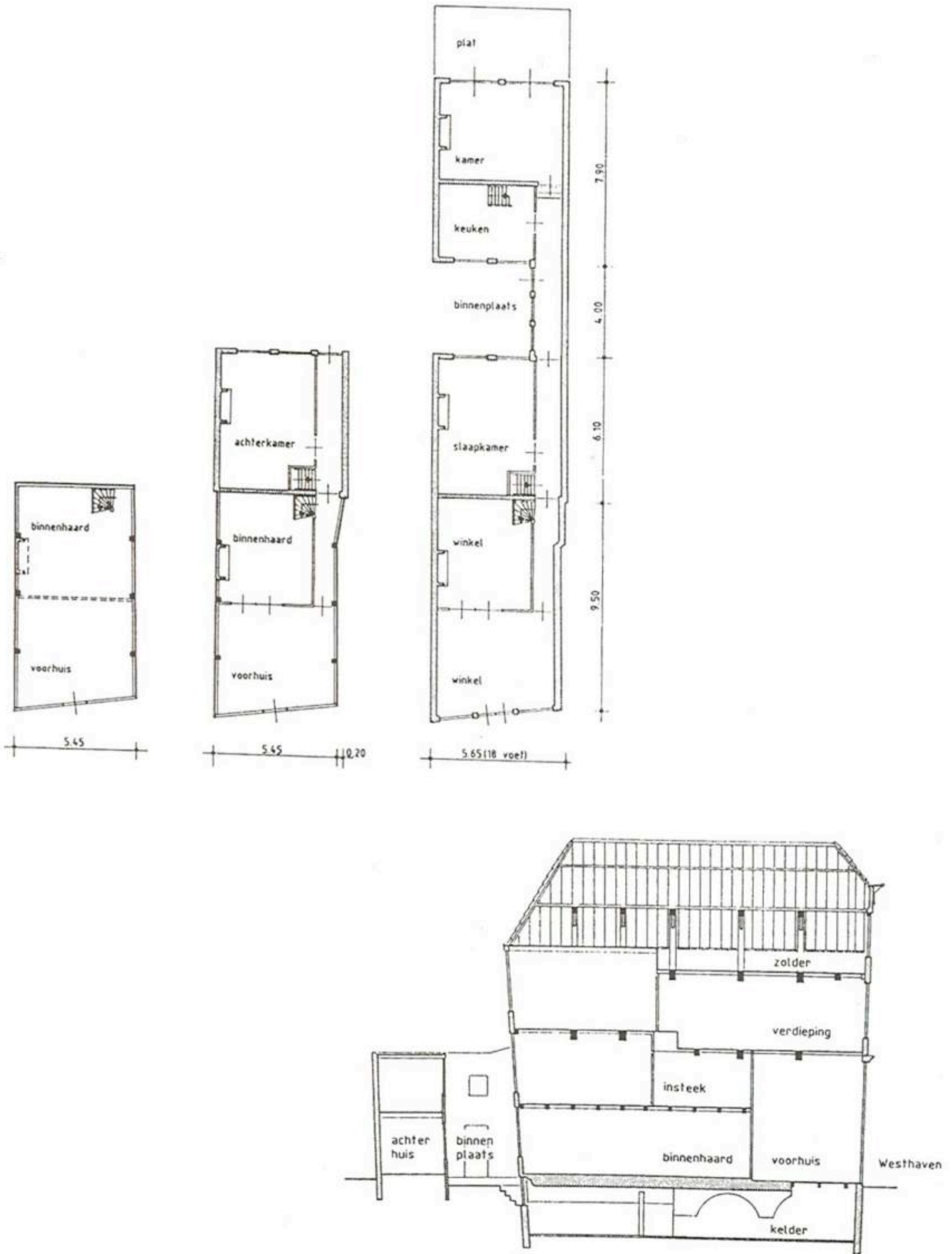
Dutch interior paintings express above all that intimacy, supported by the collective realm, in the most evocative possible way. The famous painters of this genre did not represent the interior as a closed, autonomous entity. Rather, the light is always essential, in particular the way daylight enters from outside. Daylight is often the organizational principle, as it is in Emmanuel de Witte's domestic interior *Woman at the Harpsichord* (1660). Samuel van Hoogstraten's *The Slippers* (1658) is intriguing in that the focus of the painting seems to be on a white patch of wall, just between various painted objects, whereas the subject of the painting is clearly elsewhere. The mystery of this painting lies not in what is painted, but in the tangible omnipresence of the outside world. This is

Emmanuel de Witte, *Woman at the Harpsichord*, ca. 1660

Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Slippers*, 1658

Carel Fabritius, *A View in Delft, with a Musical Instrument Seller's Stall*, 1652

Pieter de Hooch, *Motherly Care*, 1658



Floor plans and cross section, typical Gouda house

expressed by the illumination flowing in from the right, picking out the whiteness of the wall and the yellow colour of the furnishings, and setting the orange tiled floor aflame – the floor on which two slippers lie, nonchalantly discarded by someone who has just entered from outside, leaving the door open and the broom leaning against the wall ready to be taken up again. Is it the cosy domesticity of private life that makes these paintings so universally famous, or is it the ambivalence of domestic intimacy as opposed to the impersonal, wider world outside, the life of the big city, that suffuses these paintings? Carel Fabritius painted his townscape *A View in Delft, with a Musical Instrument Seller's Stall* (1652) from an imaginary stall on Oude Langendijk in Delft. Left, in the foreground, the musical instrument seller leans pensively amid the attributes of his craft, the bridge of a viola da gamba and the gleaming round soundbox of a lute; on the right, we share his view of the apse end of the Nieuwe Jan church and the houses along Vrouwengracht, framed by the opening in the framework of his stall. Thus we find ourselves as viewers of this scene in a position more or less behind the instrument seller; we take in his stall and look out at the city from this 'loggia'. It is the position in which the Dutch town dweller feels happiest; that ideal entanglement of inside and outside, of the intimate and the public, that is expressed in the metaphor of the 'loggia facing the city'.

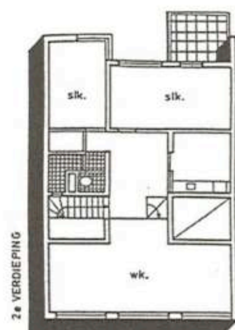
Most of the Pieter de Hooch's interiors similarly show a view of the intimate interior world that is, however, not confined within itself, as in *Motherly Care* (1658). The open doors and interior windows lead our gaze via a series of rooms to the distant outdoors. Nearly all of Pieter de Hooch's paintings show that typically Dutch invention, the 'street room'.

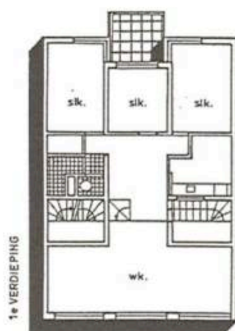
The street room, an intermediate space between the street and the private interior, is a hallmark of Dutch merchants' houses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That was when the Dutch city and the development of the Dutch house were in their heyday. If we examine this development it appears that for us the crucial moment is when the stone hearth makes its entrance into what had hitherto been a simple 'hall house' (see figure).[1] The masonry chimney implies, after all, the existence of a draught from the front door to the chimney, which interfered with the fire and caused discomfort. To counteract the draught, the hearth was placed at the back of the main room, and this section was screened off from the front room. In the back room of the house (the *binnenhaard*) a mezzanine (the *verdiep*) was built to create a smaller and warmer space. The front room retained the original height of the former hall house, as well as its tall windows and tiled floor; this is the room that communicated directly with the outside. The inner rooms offered shelter and warmth, while doors and interior windows also made a relation to the street possible. The view from inside to outside was essential. This form of Dutch house was adapted to the Dutch climate and to Dutch socialization, yet still satisfied the individualistic mercantile character.

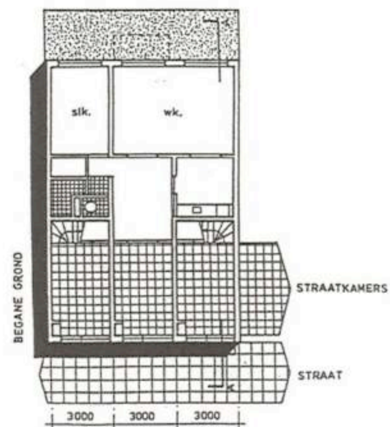
In later developments of the Dutch city, the close relationship between the house and the town persisted for a long time, although modern urban renewal has turned out to be destructive in this respect. When the first workers' housing appeared during the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, it

1. R.W.L. Bollen, 'De ruimtelijke ontwikkeling van het Goudse woonhuis in de late Middeleeuwen', in: N.D.B. Habermehl (red.), *In de stad van die Goude*. Delft 1992.

Perspective of Street Room Dwelling, Hebly Theunissen Architecten







Floor plans, Street Room Dwelling, Hebly Theunissen Architecten

was still built on a parcel-by-parcel basis. The link between house and street was still fairly strong. As far as possible, all upper-floor dwellings were given individual front doors to the street, which sometimes resulted in four or even six front doors side by side. Another outcome was the characteristic 'Hague porch', with an open stone staircase leading to a common landing on the first floor onto which four front doors might open. This is why the Netherlands lacks apartment blocks like those in Paris and Berlin, and why concierges and communal courtyards have remained foreign.

Urban renewal in the latter half of the twentieth century mainly affected the inner ring of nineteenth-century working-class housing that was described above. This renewal was strongly rooted in the functionalist principles of the Modern Movement, whose main task was to build mass housing. Although urban renewal began as a bottom-up movement ('building for the neighbourhood') and challenged the Functionalist mass demolitions, it saw its core task as functional and technical improvement: providing bathrooms and toilets, insulation, balconies and storage space, meeting demands for light and sunshine, and providing room for car parks and playgrounds. Meeting these demands, and the introduction of centrally-accessed flats, produced housing that offered greater domestic comfort but lacked the urban connection. Living in direct contact with the street, which had been the hallmark of the merchant towns, vanished. The resident's connection with the public domain, now a neglected zone, became insignificant. Causes of this included windowless façades at ground-floor level, box balconies on the street side, the lack of individual front doors, squalid shared-access entrance halls and blind-end walls.

In the 1990s, the subject of 'street-linked' housing gained currency as a reaction against the loss of direct links and a response to renewed interest in urban space. The question was this: how could town dwellings be stacked into multiple storeys without losing a direct, significant connection between each dwelling and the street? The 1989 report *Bouwen in de stad* by Hebly Theunissen Architecten, which addressed the problems of urban renewal, presented a design for the 'Street Room Dwelling' which was the first direct answer to this question (see figure).[2] In the design, three apartments are stacked on each plot. Each of them has a front door to the street and an individual 'street room' on the ground floor. The front door in the middle gives entrance to the ground floor apartment; the right-hand front door leads to a staircase to the first floor, where there is a full-width (nine meters wide) living room facing the street. The left-hand street room has a staircase to the second floor, where the living room is again full-width on the street side.

An important aspect of the design is that the passage between the street and the living quarters is as direct as possible, and is also a visual one. Moreover, the design has the advantage of individual staircases instead of a shared entrance hall. The access to the houses is indicated by a canopy over each front door and a concrete seating element next to it. Large windows give the impression of dwelling at ground floor level and on the upper floors. City dwelling is thus expressed in both the use and in the composition.

This version of urban living is uniquely

2. A. Hebly & K. Theunissen, *Bouwen in de stad*. Den Haag 1989.

Dutch. Demand for it seems to return of its own accord whenever a shortage makes itself felt, as it has during the last few decades. Recent years have seen several new projects which revive the historic Dutch tradition of a strong bond between the house and the city. The concept of building town houses as 'loggias facing the city' in a dense urban setting is far from exhausted and will most likely continue to inspire future generations of architects, for whom I hope this essay has opened yet wider views of the Netherlands' rich tradition of housing.