Opening up the Perimeter Block

Karin Theunissen

Introduction

An interesting development in some recent Dutch projects is the tendency to achieve a more open organisation of elements within the old perimeter block. This 'opening up', as a compositional issue and as an effect of metropolitan life patterns, is the theme of this paper. The perimeter block, which during the long period of Modernist experimentation had almost disappeared, is now generally accepted again as the basic tool for urban design. But today compositions that challenge the rigidity of the closed, exclusive perimeter block are topical. These compositions offer solutions for new urban renewal sites, as well as for new patterns of urban living.

The Site and the Size

In the last decade, urban renewal has moved away from the rings of 19th-Century working-class housing districts to urban centres and peripheries. In the Netherlands, these rings of working-class housing blocks were mostly developed after the introduction of the Housing Act (the *Woningwet*) of 1901. Since this act came into effect, Dutch housing blocks have tended to be no more than 40 metres wide, the distance needed to accommodate the depth of one house, two gardens and another house. Before the Housing Act came into effect, deeper blocks had been built, allowing a multitude of inner-block functions to develop, such as workshops, schools, churches and housing courts. The Housing Act was introduced also to make an end to these housing courts, stating that every house should have its front door on the public street.
What is significant about the two recent projects discussed here is that the block size of both of them exceeds 40 metres. The 'Mariaplaats' is a block in the old centre of Utrecht, constructed prior to the Housing Act; it used to be the property of the Immunity, which had a strong influence on the design. The other block, 'Rietlanden', is located in one of Amsterdam's old harbour districts.

The sheer size of these blocks made it difficult to maintain a traditional design using only perimeter buildings. The design history of both is interesting in that external facts became important factors in transforming the traditional composition of the block. The resulting compositions allow a looser, more open and more multifocused organisation of the perimeter block. They provide a response to new patterns of social life and to the urban situations in which they are situated. In new housing developments in the Netherlands, experiments with deeper block organisations have become frequent. In Ijburg, for example, a new housing development in Amsterdam, situated on newly made land in the waters of the IJ, blocks 60 metres in depth were designed to accommodate multi-functional developments. At the Shell location in Amsterdam, a former industrial site in Amsterdam North, a 'campus model' has been researched, in which urban fields will house several apartment buildings.

The Urban Experience

The tendency to give perimeter blocks a more open design results not just from the dimensions of these blocks. If the perimeter block is viewed as an urban tool, then inevitably questions of public and private ground use and identification must be taken into account. The perimeter block, as we generally know it, is an example of an excluding territory layout, where privately owned blocks and public streets mutually exclude each other. The inner space of the block is private, possibly collective, space used by residents, and the street is public.

With industrialisation, streets became congested with crowds of people, traffic, noise and dirt, and this model, which had worked well for centuries, began to be questioned. Le Corbusier stated that 'the street is dead', yet the Modernists did not search for a new domain of public life. They were primarily concerned with offering comfortable housing. The Modern House was a refuge from public life. In that sense, Modernism was anti-urban, so it was left to the post-war generation of modern architects to rediscover street life as a positive force. One of these architects, extensively cited by Koolhaas in his *S,M,L,XL*,[1] was Fuhimiko Maki, who describes urban society as 'a coexistence and conflict of amazingly heterogeneous institutions and individuals'.

This acceptance of conflict and heterogeneity also underlies the interpretation of public life expressed in the book *In search of a new public domain* by Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp[2]. Although Maki (and others) had formulated such observations much earlier, they are again

topical today. The design of the public domain as a place for social encounter has become suspect. When Koolhaas called for 'an amnesty for the city'[3] he was reacting against urban design projects of the 1970s and 1980s with public spaces burdened with high social aspirations of well-meant community life. In contrast, in *Generic City*[4], Koolhaas opted for a rather hygienic scenario, with continuous detached surroundings of flowing space, devoid of time and place. Yet, despite Koolhaas's implication in repeating that quote about the dead streets, Hajer and Reijndorp's book amply demonstrates the apparent existing desire of many city dwellers to be part of, or at least witness to, public life. Despite many persons' preoccupation with safety, public spaces in all European cities are crowded with people, from the new beaches along the Seine in Paris to the constantly busy Lijnbaan in Rotterdam. One of the reasons for this seeming contradiction may be the growing mobility and freedom of choice enjoyed by city dwellers.

Melvin Webber described urbanity as a 'non-place urban realm'[5]. He noted that in modern life, citizens are not always based in one place alone. He also pointed out the need for interaction, for the flow of goods and information between people. Hajer and Reijndorp in consequence describe urbanity as an experience rather than a physical fact: 'the urban experience is the cultural exchange between different social groups'. This urban experience can be facilitated in those places 'that are dominated by a different group and where different codes are being demonstrated'. This perception returns the initiative to the citizen: it is not about demands by municipalities for good neighbourhoods, but about the citizen asking for exchange, experience and information.

In this view a possible conflict or friction in the public domain is accepted, or even desired within certain limits. It allows a kind of parochialisation, an appropriation of public space by different groups or 'tribes', as Sola Morales calls them, and even for the recent thematising of public spaces. It also provides an answer for Koolhaas's 'amnesty for the city': not all public places necessarily have the same user-value to everyone in every respect. This new public domain for urban areas in general, as described by Hajer and Reijndorp, is researched in this paper within the context of housing ensembles. These, in particular, generate spaces that, although appropriated to a greater or lesser extent by the inhabitants, might still open up possibilities for other 'tribes' and other uses.

A Diversification of Public Space

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were among the second generation of Modernist architects who, in researching the city as it actually is, tried to pin down Modernist concepts. In an analysis made for a project in Austin in 1984, Venturi Scott Brown and Associates (VSBA) analysed the American urban grid in use at that time.[6] They produced a series of diagrams to show the different phases in the development of the grid and the perimeter block. Traditionally, the block was divided into private lots along the street side of the block, each lot with its front door giving access to the street. The service alley at the back of the lots facilitated multi-functional use with secondary access. It is interesting that the existence of service alleys was partly responsible for creating a non-homogeneous tissue of horizontal and vertical lines with differing status and function in the course of time, thus transforming the grid into a 'plaid'.
As the city grew, so did the lots. For a long time, the block organisation could accommodate the growth. However, this ceased to be the case when single lots began to encroach on an entire block. At that point, the organisation of the block changed radically: the back alley as a clear device to articulate the front and the rear side disappeared, and the whole block became accessible from one side only, often raised on a deck to accommodate parking facilities underneath. This configuration disrupted the relationship between the building plots and the public space. Together with the increasing traffic, it dramatically weakened the quality of the street as a public space.

The main conclusion drawn by VSBA, based on this analysis, was to introduce diversification in public spaces. In their design for Austin they planned a so-called Rambla: a widened street carefully designed as a high-quality public space, with a broad pedestrian sidewalk, shops, street furniture and guidelines for facades. Then they coupled this with a new design for the perimeter block, organising it as one entity,

but with secondary public spaces within that block. Together, the lower floors of the blocks form a secondary pedestrian network, with interior public spaces appropriate to each block. The blocks themselves were designed according to the 'pancake model', whereby the foot of the block is built out to the maximum area, in fact the perimeter, with as many storeys as the surrounding blocks, and upper levels that can be organised freely on a larger scale.

ODHAM WALK
LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM / 1981.
Architect:
Donald Ball, London County Council

At about the same time in the heart of London, a housing block was built that was based on the same approach, 'design by research', that was so essential to the post-war phase of Modernism. Using existing urban elements as their base, the aim of these designs was to transform the traditional block to meet modern housing demands. Ironically, the Odham Walk Project was severely criticised at the time, due its so-called 'casbah' look that appeared to be a complete negation (in the eyes of the critics) of the surrounding traditional London typology of gallery-accessed apartment blocks. Certainly in England, in reaction to the large-scale Modernist post-war developments, the climate for urban housing experiments became unfavourable. Odham Walk was realised in 1981 and designed by Donald Ball of the London County Council. The project had little influence. If one looks at the original black-and-white pictures, one can understand the doubts at the time.[7] Nowadays however, this urban yet green oasis in the city centre, adjacent to Leicester Square, is certainly a great success. The property is owned by a corporation that maintains the building and the collective spaces. There are 102 apartments in the project, of which more than half are two-room apartments for elderly people. The density of the project is very high: 472 persons per hectare, plus commercial and service spaces.

The perimeter block fits in with the surrounding tissue of closed city blocks with ground-level shops and housing on the higher levels, and yet the way the lots are arranged within the block is completely different. Because it was developed as one entity, it was possible to build underground parking and service facilities; the apartments on the upper floors are accessed from the collective deck on the first floor. The layout of stacked apartments in a seemingly loose cubic composition, together with the abundant green from the overhanging gardens, creates an overwhelming, and beautiful, interior.

The collective deck on the first floor can be accessed from four entrances at the sidewalk by means of stairs, ramps or lifts in between the ground-level lots. Though access is direct and easy, it is not accentuated from the street: one might say that the city is not invited into the block; rather, the block and the houses are connected to the city. The deck can be fenced off – at night, for example. Although the deck is a collective space, it is not specifically designed as a meeting place. As one moves through the inner space, its shape constantly changes; there is no single central space, but rather a chain of spaces. The apartments are linked and stacked in a complicated, though logical, pattern, in such a way that the mass of the apartments decreases and recesses vertically. Besides increasing the light in the inner space, this arrangement also allows large balconies to be constructed on the 'terraces', as well as stairs and short galleries. The effect on the inner space is indeed that of a casbah. The complicated spatial patterns lead to diverse and multiform orientations, and thus to multiple and ambiguous relationships between the space and the apartments. Maneo attained the same effect with his surprising roof landscape at Sporenburg in Amsterdam. His design marked a departure from the closed block, where the four rear facades face each other.

Important for the specific quality of this inner space is also the detached relationship between the apartments and that space. The architecture consists of closed facades with relatively small window openings. The living spaces are mostly distanced from the collective space: the entrance hall gives access to the smaller rooms first and to the sanitary spaces, and only then to the largest room, which is adjacent to the terrace.

From the outside, the block appears to be strongly uniform and sober - red-brown brick surfaces with minimal openings. Only at ground-floor level are there ample openings for

shop windows, such as the huge glass facade of the Swatch Shop. The sculptural quality of the block, enhanced by cubic forms receding or projecting from the perimeter surfaces, brings the block amazingly close in style to modern architecture, such as that of Neutelings and Riedijk.

MARIAPLAATS
UTRECHT, THE NETHERLANDS / 1995.
Architect:
Bob van Reeth, AWG Antwerp

When the firm of Bob van Reeth/AWG Antwerp was asked to make a design for the Mariaplaats, the motivation was a wish to depart from the existing social housing design that provided for perimeter apartment buildings above extensive parking facilities. The new policy for the Mariaplaats corresponded with changes in the political and economic situation, which involved a switch from social housing to more expensive private urban housing. Protests by neighbouring inhabitants and by the historical society of Utrecht provided a further stimulus. The latter provided the 'Immunity Model' based on historical research, and this was included in the architect's brief. The Mariaplaats used to be the site of the canons, a Catholic Immunity, that had a considerable independant status within the city. Within their own territory, the canons had their own rules and organisation. This was expressed in how they organised their premises: the houses and workshops of the canons' servants were laid out along the perimeter of the block, facing inside; larger mansions for the canons themselves were situated in the middle, dominating the domain.

In AWG's design, the typology of this historical composition is adapted in an ingenious way. Two apartment buildings are situated in the middle of the block, partly on the slightly raised parking deck, thus bringing the focus of the composition to the centre. The edges of the block are furnished with single-family houses, now facing outwards towards the public space. Because the edges are lower, the orientation of the central space is outwards towards the city, giving a view of the towers of the Maria Church. Smaller buildings are grouped around the big housing blocks, with one apartment on each floor. Using these three elements, the architects created a composition with a sequence of urban spaces, all of them different and carefully elaborated. These spaces are not informal; they are strictly defined by the neutral, mostly red-brown brick facades of the buildings. Thus a semi-public route has been created within the block. The entrances to the inner block space between the houses on the northern side and on the southern side of the block are open, though inconspicuous, as in Odham Walk. The status of this semi-public space is much the same as that in Odham Walk: the intention is to make a quiet, pleasant, living environment for the residents (in this case, a collective of private owners), while simultaneously giving the public the opportunity to enjoy this secluded semi-public space.

RIETLANDEN
AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS / 2001.
Urban designer:
Ton Schaap, dro Amsterdam;
Architect:
Ton Venhoeven/Venhoeven et al.

In the Rietlanden Project, there is an explicit mix of users. The mix also applies to the ownership: it is divided between the municipality, which owns the deck and parking area, private owners, and the corporation. The domain defined by the apartment blocks is the raised deck, where the entrances to two of the towers are also situated. Open and accessible to everyone, this domain is public space. The four buildings around the deck are handsomely presented, though distant. The deck is detailed in an efficient, clean-cut fashion, rather like an underground station: steel ramps and stairways lead from the public path up to the deck, on top of which is a basketball court (!). The contrasts within the whole are intriguing. On the south side, the towers face the harsh context of infrastructural elements, such as the Piet Hein Tunnel, highways and tramways. Here the towers have a metropolitan look: alien and stout. On the northern side, where they constitute the background for the deck, they are carefully attuned to the ground level. The foot of the towers is clad with the same steel grate panels that cover the facade between the parking area and the public path. The earthbound foot, with commercial floor spaces, and the anonymous silvery towers are intertwined by a play of aluminium, steel grate and glass panels. The intrigue emanating from this project originated perhaps not only from the 'alien' association that the architect had in mind, but also from the

contrast between the flashy buildings, suggestive of the Amsterdam yuppy scene and the brutality of the deck that seems more fitting for mountain bikers and basketball players. The public domain that has been created is clearly open to groups other than the inhabitants themselves. No attempt has been made to evade the often hidden conflict and anxiety felt in public spaces. Yet the ambiguity of the space, that might occasion restlessness, also provides relief from the restricted involvements of the closed block.

This intriguing design was not made in a day. In fact, residents in the adjoining row of housing greatly influenced the design process, which lasted for several years. At first, the urban design suggested a perimeter block, with the existing row of housing on one side, to the north. At the residents' insistence, the southern edge was opened up, thus producing the row of freestanding towers. Yet the design was not a compromise between neighbours and designers: despite strong opposition, the designers succeeded in retaining their autonomy. The resulting design, though complex, has a strong identity, which is nontheless still open to interpretation.

NOTES

1.
Koolhaas on Maki, *S,M,L,XL*. Rotterdam 1995, p. 1043.

2.
M. Hajer, Arnold Reijndorp, *Op zoek naar nieuw publiek domein.* (Searching for a new public domain). Rotterdam (NAI) 2001.

3.
R. Koolhaas, 'Amnesty for today's metropolis', In: *De Architekt,* Vol. 2 1996 / *S,M,L,XL*. p. 1253.

4.
R. Koolhaas, 'The Generic City', in: *S,M,L,XL*. (see note 1).

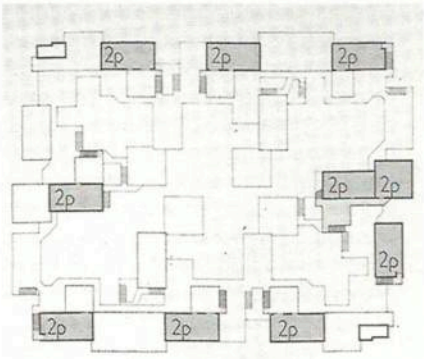
5.
M. Webber, 'The Non-Place Urban Realm', in: *Explorations into Urban Structures*. Chicago 1962.

6.
The Urban Renewal Plan for Austin is extensively researched by Karin Theunissen in: 'The difficult whole', in: L. van Duin e.a.(eds), *Hybrides, De Architectonische Interventie,* (Hybrides, Architectonic Intervention). Delft (DUP) 2000.

7.
C. Woodward, 'Two perspectives on Odhams', in: *Architectural Journey*. London February 1982.

FIGURES

1.
Odham Walk, London 1981
2.
Odham Walk, interior
3.
Odham Walk, plans
4.
Mariaplaats, Utrecht 1995 – plan
5.
Mariaplaats, interior view
6.
Mariaplaats, interior view
7.
Rietlanden, Amsterdam 2001 – plan
8.
Rietlanden, view towers and deck



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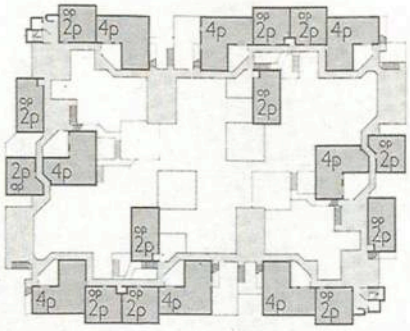
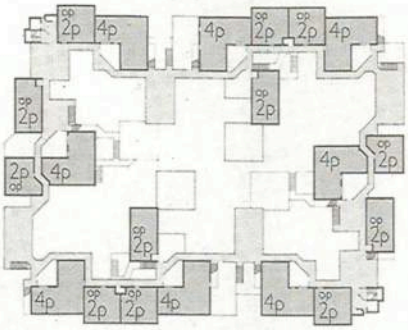


third floor



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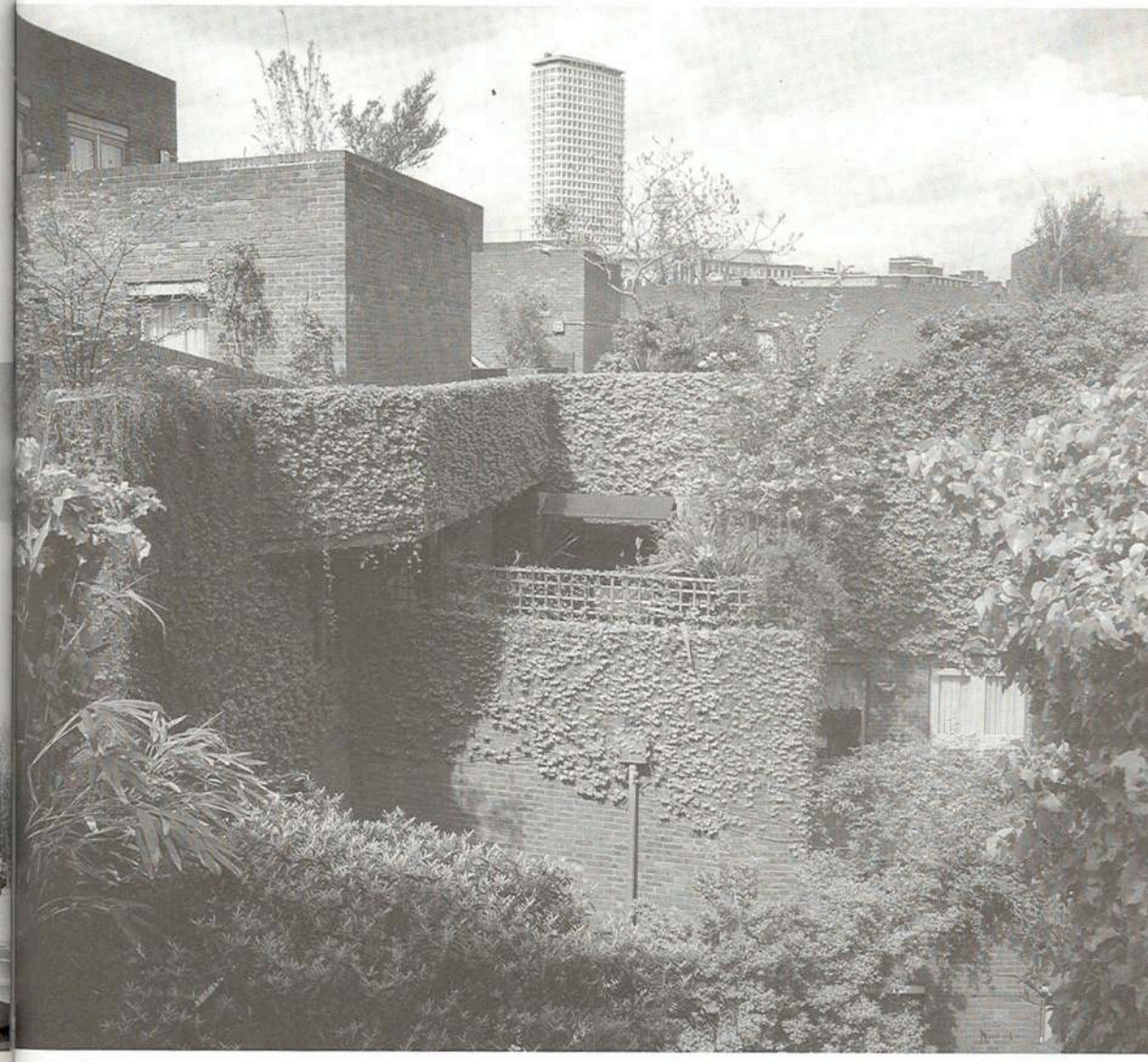

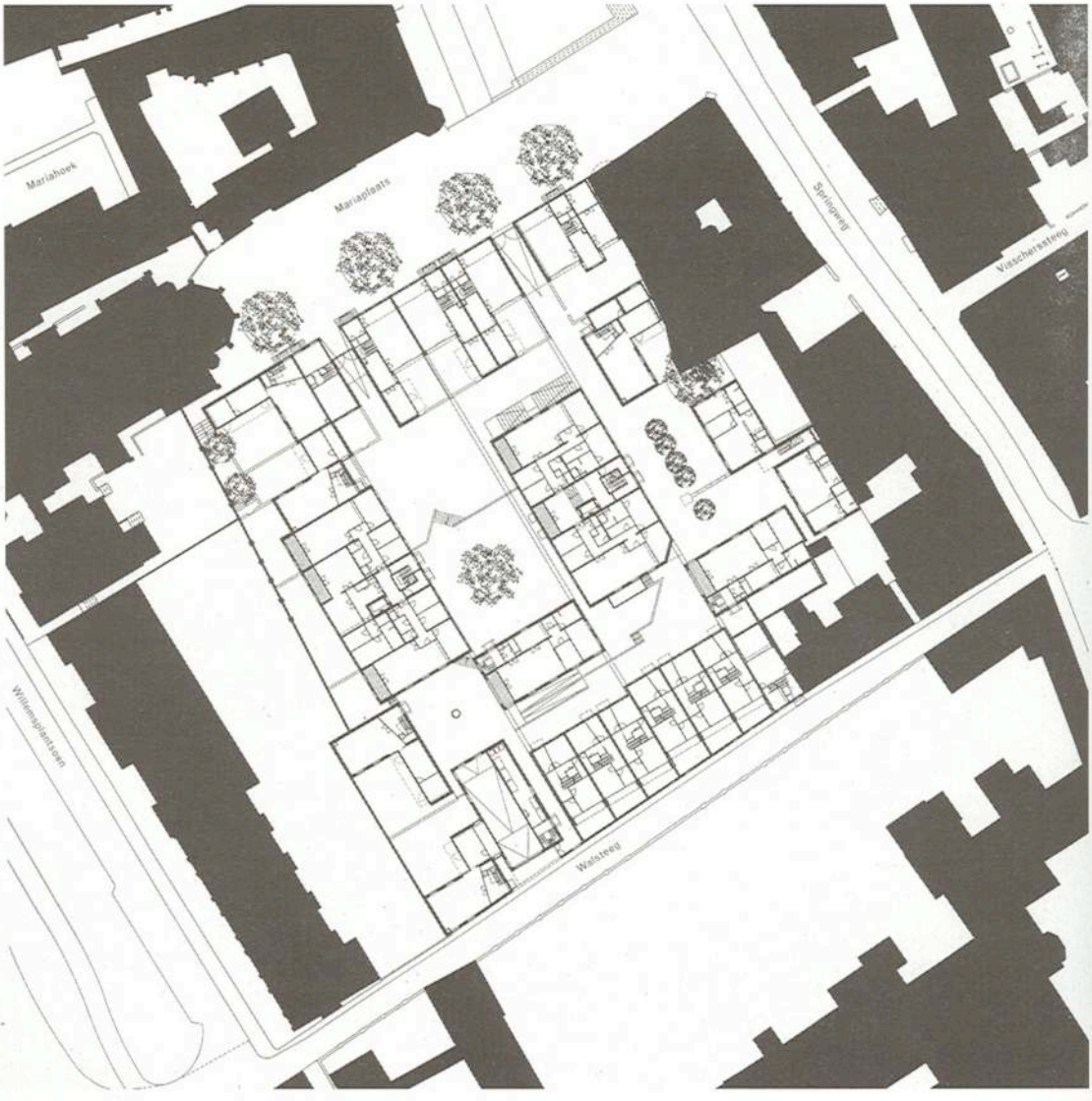
Mariahoek
Mariaplaats
Springweg
Visschersteeg
Willemsplantsoen
Walsteeg

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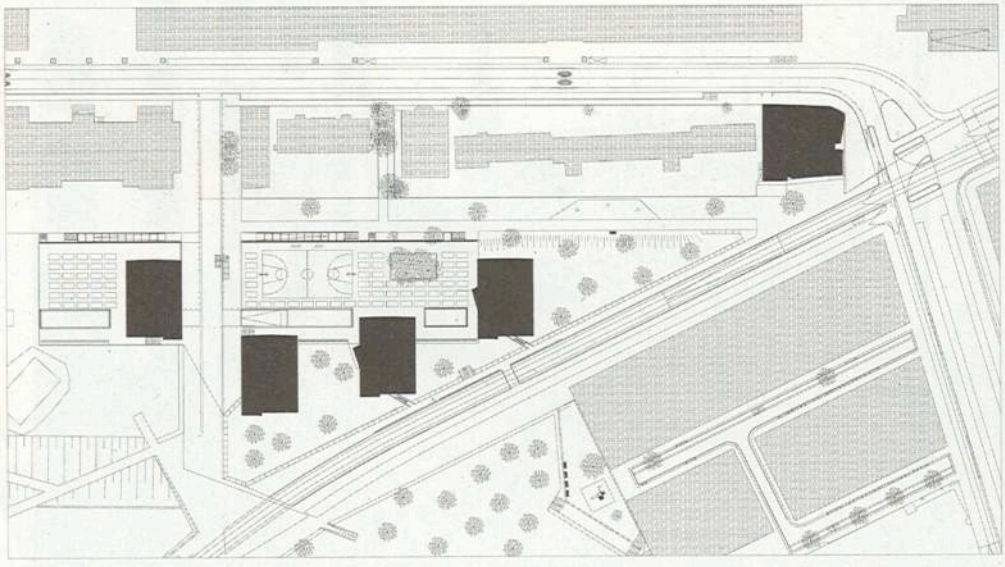

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