

THEME HOUSING IN THE NEW DUTCH SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT: Dutch suburban housing areas were usually characterised by the repetition of the same kind of housing types. However, a new typology of suburban housing has emerged in the past few years. This new typology comprises residential projects that are designed according to certain themes and is therefore called 'Theme Housing'. Ecological questions, such as water management and the use of renewable energy sources often play an important role in the design of Theme housing projects. Moreover, Theme Housing projects show interesting variations of collective spaces that can strengthen the neighbourhood and can help to create family friendly environments. This paper gives an overview of the most recent Theme housing types in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it examines to what extent these projects contribute to a sustainable Dutch suburban landscape.

KEYWORDS: suburban housing, green urbanism, local identity, urban design, compact cities.

INTRODUCTION

In the Netherlands, suburbia is shaped by a high degree of planning. In general, the residential suburban areas are characterised by the repetition of the same kind of housing types, mostly terraced houses and apartment blocks. However, over the past two decades the design and urban layout of residential areas have become increasingly divers and there is a significant growth of the number of residential neighbourhoods that are designed according to specific themes. In this paper, we call this new typology 'Theme housing'.

Examples of Theme housing include, among others: new courtyard houses, villa parks, apartment blocks in the shape of castles or country houses, ecological neighbourhoods, and residential areas that are combined with recreational functions. Quite often, post-modern, neo-classical, neo-traditional or vernacular architectural styles are applied creating specific atmospheres [1]. Most of the theme-based projects are planned and developed by commercial developers who want to attract groups with specific life-styles. Moreover, an increasing number of projects are privately owned and show new forms of private-collective management [2].

In the first part of this text we will talk about the context and the history of suburban residential areas in the Netherlands. Subsequently, we will introduce a typology of Theme Housing and give an overview of its general spatial characteristics. In the final part we will conclude how far Theme housing enriches the Dutch Suburban Landscape.

CONTEXT OF SUBURBAN LIVING IN THE NETHERLANDS

Suburban living is popular in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that central city areas have recently gained in popularity, the majority of the Dutch inhabitants (between 60 and 80 percent) share the preference for a house with a garden in a green neighbourhood [3]. There are various reasons why residents chose for a suburban location, such as a family-friendly neighbourhood, more space, peaceful and green surrounding and social contact with neighbours. Furthermore, aspects as security and real estate value have grown more important in recent years. The suburban house is not only favoured by native Dutch families, but also has become very popular for ethnic minorities and double income households without children [4].

Traditionally, suburban residential areas in the Netherlands by a repetitive implementation of standardized dwelling types. Flats and duplex houses in the functionalist neighbourhoods of the 1950's and 1960's, terraced houses and small scale courtyard types in the growth centres and new towns of the 1970's and 1980's and more terraced houses, semi detached houses and apartment blocks in the recently built suburban VINEX neighbourhoods (1995-2005).

Since the number of detached houses on a private plot is very low in the Netherlands (according to the restrictive land use policy), the terraced house can be called the 'standard housing type' that clearly dominates the suburban residential areas in the Netherlands. In most of the cases, the terraced houses are arranged in a rather regular and rigid urban layout, the so-called 'stripe pattern'.

However, there is a growing demand to offer more choice in the housing market in the last twenty years. Private and public parties pay more attention on differentiation in lifestyle and identity among housing projects. A recently published study of socio-cultural trends in the Netherlands has concluded that a growing number of inhabitants want to live in environments with like-minded neighbours [5]. In times of globalization, homogenization and spatially fragmented social networks, collective neighbourhoods with a strong local identity have become very popular. This eventually has led to the emergence of Theme housing.

Today Theme housing can be mostly found inside and outside of the suburban VINEX neighbourhoods. Although they also can be located inner city areas, they are much more prominent in the suburban zone.

HISTORY OF SUBURBAN LIVING IN THE NETHERLANDS

Before we have a closer look at the theme-based housing types, the following passage gives a brief overview of the historical development of the Dutch residential suburban areas. Until 1920 the cities in the Netherlands were still very compact. New neighbourhoods with rather high densities were added to the existing urban structure. In the 1920s the first suburban developments started. Little neighbourhoods with terraced and semi-detached houses in a green setting were built inspired by the concept of the garden city by Ebenezer Howard. However, the big wave of suburbanization started after the Second World War with the rise of mobility and growing welfare. Since that period, the residential suburban areas have been growing continuously. Roughly, five suburban movements can be distinguished:

- 1920-1940: garden city neighbourhoods
- 1940-70: functionalism
- 1960-1980: growth centres and new towns
- 1980-2000: neo-rationalism
- 1995-2005: VINEX-developments

1920-1940: garden city neighbourhoods

Garden city neighbourhoods have a village-like character and were built at the edges of existing cities. In these neighbourhoods groups of terraced houses and semi-detached houses are placed in a green setting. The number and scale of garden city neighbourhoods is limited in the Netherlands but they have been a strong inspiration for some Theme housing types (e.g. Villa Parks). Well-known examples of garden city neighbourhoods are Het Lansink in Hengelo and Vreewijk in Rotterdam.

1940-70: functionalism

After the Second World War there was a dramatic demand for new houses. This demand led to an enormous production of houses in the post-war neighbourhoods that were planned according to the principles of functionalism, in the tradition of the modern movement in architecture and urban design. The main planning principles of functionalist neighbourhoods were space, light and air. Moreover, a strict separation of functions (housing areas, working areas, recreational areas and traffic) was introduced in the new neighbourhoods. Also from a morphological point of view, the new functionalist neighbourhoods brought a dramatic change. In place of closed housing blocks, free standing slabs were arranged around green open spaces. Within the functionalist post-war neighbourhoods we can distinguish early post-war projects (1945-1960) and late post-war projects (1960-1970). Early post-war projects mostly consist of 4 to 5 storey high slab buildings and duplex houses. An example is the neighbourhood Sloterveer in Amsterdam. In late post-war projects the scale of the buildings and the open spaces became larger. An example for a post-war functionalist neighbourhood is Poptahof in Delft. Many of functionalist neighbourhoods have faced big social problems and have been subject to substantial urban renewal programmes recently. The main problems have been the poor quality of the buildings, too small apartments and the undefined character of the open spaces.

1960-1980: growth centres and new towns (concept of clustered dispersal)

The Second and Third National Policy Document on Spatial Planning (1966 and 1976-1978) created the base for the policy concerning growth centres and new towns (in Dutch language: groeikernenbeleid). The main idea was to limit urban sprawl and to organize new urban areas in compact satellites in the vicinity of the big cities. The centres of the new towns were to be well connected to the neighbouring cities by public transport (train or metro). This planning concept was named clustered dispersal (in Dutch language: gebundelde concentratie). Growth centres and new towns predominantly consist of terraced houses and courtyard types (in Dutch language: woonerven). The scale of the neighbourhoods is more adjusted to the scale of humans than the rigid modern neighbourhoods of the 1950's and 1960's. The dwellings are arranged around small roads and courtyards in a more or less green surrounding. The residential neighbourhoods in the growth centres and new towns are predominantly inhabited by families and have a monofunctional character. Like in the functionalist concept the different functions, and even different means of transport (streets, bus lanes, bicycle tracks and footpaths) were strictly separated from each other. Examples for growth centres are Spijkenisse (next to Rotterdam), Zoetermeer (next to The Hague) and Houten (next to Utrecht). Examples for new towns are Almere and Lelystad as there were no historic village centres before.

1980-2000: neo-rationalism (compact city concept)

In the beginning of the 1980's the negative effects of the growth centre policy became noticeable. Firstly, the new centres caused a lot of (auto)mobility, because of the lack of sufficient jobs in the growth centres. Secondly, a large fraction of the high and middle class had left the existing cities. These developments lead to a change of planning policy that resulted in the concept of the compact city as introduced in the Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning (1988). Instead of the development of decentralized locations the focus was back on the city, including urban renewal and new compact suburban neighbourhoods at the urban fringe. The residential suburban neighbourhoods are characterized by a neo-rationalist design concept. Mostly terraced houses are arranged in closed blocks (with private gardens

inside the blocks) in a hierarchical grid or network structure. These neighbourhoods are less green than those of the growth centres and the character can be somewhat monotonous. Typical examples of neighbourhoods according to the principles of neo-rationalism are the neighbourhoods Nieuw Sloten in Amsterdam and Kattenbroek in Amersfoort.

1990-2015: VINEX

In the beginning of the 1990s there was a strong demand for private houses with a garden. The VINEX planning document (as supplement to the 4th national planning document) was worked out to provide new neighbourhoods with these types of houses. According to the concept of the compact city that was introduced in the Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning, the general goals of the document were to avoid uncontrolled urban sprawl and to limit the growth of (auto)mobility. Therefore the new neighbourhoods should be located as close as possible to the existing cities. Furthermore, they should have a relatively high density (30 dwellings per hectare) and have good access to public transport. Additionally, a certain percentage (usually between 20 and 30 percent) of the dwellings had to be social housing projects. The VINEX programme provided public subsidies for the new residential areas and at the same time the housing market was liberalized giving more possibilities to private developers.

In the period between 1995 and 2005 about 450.000 new houses have been planned according the VINEX planning document [6]. More than 60 percent have been realized in suburban locations and about 40 percent inside existing built-up areas. Studies by the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research have shown that the general goals concerning the location and accessibility of the new suburban VINEX neighbourhoods have been successfully achieved. In general, the new residential locations are located close to the existing cities and are well connected to public transport. The urban design is rather compact and the density relatively high. However, limiting (auto)mobility has been slightly less successful. Although suburban VINEX locations show less (auto)mobility compared to other new suburban locations, the suburban VINEX locations have actually lead to additional traffic congestion around the cities (Snellen et al. 2005). But in general the new suburban VINEX neighbourhoods show more variation than earlier residential suburban areas [6] and surveys show that the inhabitants are rather content with their new surrounding.

Nevertheless, there has been a lot of critique that the recent suburban VINEX developments lack identity by being too dense to have suburban qualities and not being dense (and not mixed) enough to be truly urban. Especially planners and urban designer complain that the programme is very limited (almost only housing). Therefore, the atmosphere is monotonous in many of the new neighbourhoods. Every single square meter is planned and there is little or no space for spontaneous neighbourhood activities, such as a neighbourhood café or a sports club.

TYOLOGY OF THEME HOUSING

This chapter focuses on studying Theme housing projects that have been built recently. The theme can be created by the architectural style, the spatial layout of the project area and the combination with other facilities. Depending on their theme, many housing projects show similarities with each other. After having visited and studied many examples of Theme Housing in the Netherlands, we have selected a typology consisting of twelve types of Theme Housing:

1. Villa Park
2. Resort Housing
3. Cohousing
4. Courtyard Housing
5. Ecologic Neighbourhood

6. Castle Housing
7. Country House Estate
8. Retro Village Housing
9. Island Housing
10. Private Plot
11. Tower Housing
12. Floating Housing

Most of these theme-based housing types are developed by commercial developers and many are pitched at the affluent. Only the types *Ecologic Neighbourhood* (see Fig.1) and *Private Plot* differ considerably from the other types. The *Ecologic Neighbourhood* is usually initiated by a group of people in a bottom-up process and, therefore, the residents are very involved in the design and the maintenance of the neighbourhood.



Figure 1 Ecologic Neighbourhood. Project example: Buitenkans, Almere

The type *Private Plot* gives also more individual possibilities to the home owners. Whereas in most types the developer only offers a limited amount of dwelling types from a catalogue, the houses in the *Private Plot* type can be designed and built according to the personal wishes of the residents. Furthermore, a number of types are not completely new but refer to historic building types. This is the case in the types *Retro Village Housing*, *Courtyard Housing*, *Castle Housing* (see Fig. 2) and *Country House Estate*. These types are new interpretations of historic building types in a different context and sometimes with a different function.



Figure 2 Castle Housing. Project example: Kasteel Holterveste, s'Hertogenbosch.

Many types have a rather generic character and cannot be called developments which are 'typically Dutch'. The types *Villa Park* and *Resort Housing*, for example, are highly influenced by suburban developments in the United States. Examples of the types *Cohousing* and *Ecologic Neighbourhood* can predominantly be found in the northern part of Europe, but recently they are also quite successful in the United States. However, there are some types which developed from the specific conditions of the Dutch Landscape or refer to regional building styles. The types *Island Housing* (see Fig.3) and *Floating Housing* owe their existence to the watery (polder) landscape and the strong tradition of water-related housing. Also, types like the *Country House Estate* (see Fig.4), *Retro Village* and *Courtyard Housing* are influenced by traditional Dutch architecture.



Figure 3 Island Housing. Project example: De Eilanden, Rotterdam.



Figure 4 Country House Estate. Project example: Hooge Duyn, Veere.

Most of the types can be found all over the Netherlands. However, they are more concentrated in (and around) the more densely populated Randstad area in the west of the country. Only the type *Resort Housing* can predominantly be found in more touristy regions and in areas where more space is available.

SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THEME HOUSING

The following list indicates characteristics that are specific for these types of housing:

- Exclusive identities: the architectural styles and the urban layout of theme-based housing projects create unique and exclusive identities that set them apart from traditional suburban residential types. Next to the physical features of the projects, fancy internet presentations and glossy catalogues play an important role in creating an exclusive identity.
- Collective domains: in many cases the theme-based housing projects include collective spaces, such as shared streets, parking lots, courtyards, gardens and stretches of water. Furthermore, in an increasing number of cases, the residential function is combined with a (collective) recreational function. Examples for recreational functions comprise collective green park areas and even harbour areas and golf courses.
- Privatization: in most cases the collective spaces of the theme-based housing types are in private ownership of the inhabitants of the project and the collective areas are managed and maintained by home owners associations. In many examples the private collective spaces have a semi-private character.
- Enclosed spatial layout: in addition to the exclusive identity of Theme Housing types, the spatial layout creates an enclosed character in many examples. Fences and gates are rather uncommon in suburban areas in the Netherlands, but an increasing number of residential projects are demarcated by ‘soft edges’, such as stretches of water, green zones, a single access road, defensive architectural styles, differences in material and ground level, symbolic gates and boards indicating the borders of the project.
- Limited choice for inhabitants: in most examples of theme-based housing projects the (future) home owners can choose a dwelling type out of a catalogue with a limited number of pre-designed dwelling types. Also the (collective) exterior spaces are pre-designed.

- Pitched to the rich: the prices of the theme-based housing show a lot of variation, also depending on the regional location of the project. However, houses in general theme-based projects are more expensive than regular housing types and the projects predominantly are pitched at the affluent.

- Homogeneous neighbourhoods: Socially, Theme Housing projects are relatively homogeneous neighbourhoods. Firstly, specific themes attract people with similar life-style patterns. Secondly, the high price level limits the variety in home owners.

CONCLUSIONS

Liberalisation and decentralisation of Dutch spatial planning together with a growing demand to offer more choice in the housing market have led to a higher differentiation in lifestyle and identity among housing projects. In this context, Theme housing projects have aroused in the Dutch suburban residential areas in the last two decades.

Theme housing can be seen as a counter reaction to the standard housing types, which still dominate the Dutch suburban landscape. Moreover, they are a physical manifestation of a growing demand for homogeneous neighbourhoods with outstanding identities.

In general, Theme Housing shows a wide of range different types and surely creates more variation in new suburban residential neighbourhoods compared to older suburban residential neighbourhoods. Since Theme housing projects are conceived as homogeneous ensembles, the design is rather consistent and well organized. However, many projects resemble each other and their uniqueness is sometimes rather a marketing strategy than a physical manifestation.

In general, the emerging trend of designing housing projects referring to traditional styles and types (as can be seen in the types *Retro Village Housing*, *Courtyard Housing*, *Castle Housing* and *Country house Estate*) is very strong in the Netherlands. This is rather surprising for a country that is internationally famous for modern architecture and urban planning.

From a social view, Theme Housing shows interesting variations of collective spaces that can strengthen the neighbourhood and can help to create family friendly environments. Many of the projects include green zones or stretches of water and thereby create attractive living areas that are well integrated in the surrounding landscape. These green environments are in many cases designed by ecological principles, such as sustainable water management. This is especially true for the types *Island Housing* and *Floating Housing* that are strongly influenced by the specific demands of the Dutch landscape.

Critical notes can be made on the enclosed and homogeneous character of Theme Housing projects. After all, most of the projects are only affordable by a relatively small group of people. And, although not gated or fenced, many theme-based housing projects have an enclosed and exclusive character created by the architectural style, the spatial layout and the location. Furthermore, the possibilities for participation and individual wishes are rather limited in most theme-based housing projects. Only the types *Private Plot*, *Cohousing* and *Ecologic Neighbourhoods* show more possibilities in that respect. In examples of the other types the design choices concerning dwelling types and the collective spaces are very much in the hands of commercial developers.

Theme Housing projects are one of the most noticeable developments in the current Dutch Housing market and it is expected that their number will grow in the future. On a large scale, their contribution to a sustainable urban space is questionable. After all, Theme Housing projects are mostly suburban

developments that lead to urban sprawl. However, Theme housing projects show innovative designs in compactness and environmental compatibility on the scale of suburban neighbourhoods. Some types, such as *Ecologic Neighbourhoods*, *Island Housing* and *Floating housing* can even be called pioneers in sustainable planning with water and the use of ecological building methods. Others, such as *Tower Housing* and *Castle Housing* show that compact, inner-city housing types can be successfully implemented in a suburban setting.

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