



# THE WILD, MILD WEST

*Revealing disparities in Rotterdam's streetscape*

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# Abstract

This research examines the urban disparities within Rotterdam West, focusing on how policies and socio-economic factors have shaped street-level differences from around 1850 to 2025. The main question guiding this study is: Which key urban, political, and socio-economic developments have contributed to the disparities found between Rotterdam West's streetscapes?

Through historical analysis, field observations, and policy review, the research explores the evolution of "livability" in the area, including the impact of urban renewal projects and policies such as the Rotterdamwet and Krachtwijkenbeleid. The findings show that while some streets benefited from selective renovations, others remained neglected, leading to significant contrasts in spatial structure, safety and social cohesion. Gentrification and superdiversity also played pivotal roles in shaping the neighbourhood's development. Initiatives like Stichting Boulevard highlight how diverse communities can collaborate to improve local spaces.

The study concludes that a long-term, street-level, and context-aware approach to urban planning is needed to address the inequalities in West. Further research is required to understand the true impact of these interventions and to devise more inclusive, sustainable urban strategies.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

A short walk through Rotterdam can reveal dramatic contrasts: one moment you might be strolling down a wide, tree-lined avenue with modern, well-maintained façades and generous green spaces; the next, you are in a narrow, densely built street that appears neglected. In parts of Rotterdam West, an area that throughout time has earned the evocative nickname “The Wild West”, disparities can be found as well, but not because of the bombing that might explain them in the city centre. The rough, unpolished character of some streets stands in huge opposition to the more refined, orderly appearance of others, and raises a simple question: ***What happened?***

While it is tempting to attribute the contrasts to urban decay or gentrification, this thesis takes a step back and considers the broader dynamics that have shaped these streets over time. For the purposes of this study, “West” refers specifically to selected parts of the neighbourhoods Nieuwe Westen and Middelland. It provides a compelling case study since it’s emblematic for tensions many urban neighbourhoods face: between investment and neglect, diversity and division, centrality and marginality. Unlike the city centre or newly built suburbs, West reflects a layered history of post-war reconstruction, political experimentation, and recent socio-

spatial restructuring. As such, it offers a unique lens to explore how policies, economic forces, and cultural values leave their mark on the built environment and in the street.

In tackling problems regarding the ‘Wild West’, the concept of livability has played a central role in Rotterdam’s urban policies as well and its evolving definition might also help understand the origin of certain disparities in West (Leidelseijer, 2020).

This research aims to remain objective, however the questions explored are shaped by personal observations. To structure these observations, the thesis applies the concept of Leefomgevingskwaliteit (environmental quality), which provides a framework for analyzing urban spaces. Unlike psychological theories of emotional responses to streets or the evolving definition of livability, this framework focuses on more measurable factors such as spatial structure, safety, social cohesion, prosperity, and mobility. These elements significantly influence how people interact and experience environments, thus disparities.

This resulted in the main research question being as follows:

***‘Which key urban, political and social-economic developments have contributed to the disparities found between streetscapes in West?’***

To address this overarching enquiry, the study is guided by two key sub-questions.

**1: ‘What specific, visible differences can be observed between adjacent streets?’**

For example, how do street width, building design, and the presence of green space vary across these streets?

**2: Which key events, processes and decisions have contributed to these tangible differences?’**

For example, what impact did infrastructural investments, post-war reconstruction, the shifting notion of livability and urban renewal policies have on the physical form of these streets?

This investigation adopts a mixed-methods approach. By combining literature studies, historical analysis, policy research, interviews and visual observations, this study aims to uncover the underlying processes that influenced its urban development. The first part documents visible differences and notables after a walk through the area, where the second part chronologically examines the decisions and events that might have shaped these.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rotterdam is widely recognized as the Netherlands' architectural capital, a city that embraces modernist ambition through its bold skyline and innovative urban projects. Architectural guides, such as *Rotterdam, Architectuurstad: De 100 beste gebouwen* (Groenendijk, 2022), highlight the city's best-designed structures, reinforcing its reputation as a hub for experimental and large-scale architecture. Iconic landmarks, including the Erasmus Bridge, the Kunsthall, De Rotterdam by Rem Koolhaas, and the Markthal by MVRDV, are celebrated as defining symbols of Rotterdam's urban identity. This focus on modernity has shaped architectural discourse, with much of the literature emphasizing post-war reconstruction and large-scale renewal projects, while comparatively little attention has been given to the transformation of pre-war neighbourhoods.

Kees Christiaanse's *Rotterdam* (2012) examined how the city shifted toward market-driven, flexible urbanism from the 1980s onward, focusing on large-scale renewal projects such as the Wijnhavenkwartier and emphasizing adaptive zoning and metropolitan expansion. However, his analysis primarily dealt with city-wide planning strategies, while this study focuses more on earlier policy decisions that shaped fragmentation, specifically within pre-war neighbourhoods, prioritizing localized transformations over broad urban frameworks.

To examine how governance and planning decisions shaped these disparities, historical planning documents from the 1970s provide some valuable insight. The *Structuurplan Rotterdam binnen de Ruit* (Gemeente Rotterdam, 1977) offers a municipal perspective on post-war urban development, outlining the city's large-scale zoning priorities and redevelopment efforts. Although helpful in understanding wider governance frameworks, it does not account for street-level neighbourhood differences either. In contrast, *Stadsvernieuwing in Rotterdam* (De Klerk, 1982) focuses on urban renewal efforts, including those in pre-war neighbourhoods, examining how policies led to renovation, selective demolition, and reinvestment in certain areas. This report provides a more detailed view of neighbourhood- and street-level governance, which is relevant for understanding how policy-driven renewal shaped disparities in Rotterdam West.

Research on Rotterdam's urban development has largely centered on

its post-war reconstruction, while the evolution of its pre-war neighbourhoods has received less attention. The city's modernist renewal often dominates discourse, making it harder to trace how historical governance, economic policies, and social changes shaped intra-neighbourhood differences over time. This is further complicated by gaps in archival documentation.

The Stadsarchief Rotterdam reports that many municipal records were lost, poorly maintained, or deliberately discarded, particularly under city secretary Lambertus van Oyen in the late 18th century, who burned extensive historical records (Stadsarchief Rotterdam, n.d.).

However, there is some literature shedding light on how the built environment developed before WWII. *Rotterdam: Praktijk van Stedebouw* (J. Nycolaas, 1988) explores pre-war urban planning and municipal decision-making, using Rotterdam as a case study. Originally written as a guide for students, it introduces zoning policies, planning strategies, and governance structures, supplemented by a historical map of the Oude Westen that illustrates parcel division and spatial organization. This book also introduced Rotterdam's early urban renewal policies, particularly in how some streets were seen as potentially important, which may explain persistent disparities between them. However, its broad scope does not delve deeply into historical events and urban development of West, which this study will explore further.

*Rotterdam en hoe het bouwde* (Wattjes & Ten Bosch, 1941) provides a nostalgic

yet critical reflection on the city's pre-war architecture, documenting how its 19th- and early 20th-century urban fabric was already shifting toward modernization. While much attention has been given to how the bombing of 1940 reshaped the city, this book suggests that some transformations were already underway before WWII, like the closing off of canals and planning of large highways through the city, due to changing economic, political conditions and livability concerns. Its visual documentation of lost buildings offers an important reference for understanding what pre-war Rotterdam looked like and how those structures shaped the city's identity in that period.

A more narrative-driven historical analysis is found in *Rotterdam, Een ode aan inefficiëntie* by journalist Arjen van Veelen (2022). Van Veelen critically examines Rotterdam's urban evolution and its harbour, reflecting on planning decisions of the past centuries. Though a secondary source, his work synthesizes historical records, municipal reports, and personal observations, offering a valuable starting point for identifying key moments in the city's development. His book covers Rotterdam as a whole, but relevant insights can be extracted on West and its disparities.

While governance and planning play a major role in shaping neighbourhoods, this research initially sought to understand why some streets feel more inviting than others, exploring psychological and emotional responses to urban space. Urban experience is shaped by spatial coherence, materiality and social interaction, making perception-based research a valuable lens

for analyzing the built environment. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, explained in his *A Theory of human motivation*(1943) provides a foundational framework for human comfort, by which stability, social belonging, and self-actualization could be linked to the built environment's role in fostering or hindering a sense of safety and fulfillment. However, its rigid, linear structure is less applicable to urban contexts, where elements like visual appeal can enhance belonging even in spaces perceived as unsafe. Additionally, Maslow's theory alone does not clarify how urban design can reinforce or mitigate social inequalities. These limitations prompted a shift towards finding literature that explicitly examines the relationship between architecture and emotion.

Alain de Botton's *The Architecture of Happiness*(2006) explores how materiality and aesthetics shape emotional responses to space, while *Prettige Plekken- Handboek Mens & Openbare Ruimte*(Maas & Kuitert, 2016) investigates how urban design fosters well-being by identifying spatial qualities that create pleasant environments. These studies do highlight the role of experience in urban perception, showing that built environments evoke strong emotional and psychological reactions.

However, as this research progressed, it became evident that perception alone does not explain why some streets developed in ways that resulted in higher or lower perceived quality. While perception-based research captures how people react to the built environment, it doesn't account for the historical forces that produced these disparities. Governance, urban planning, and economic policy hold the most power

to shape, maintain, and reverse spatial fragmentation; which neighbourhoods receive investment, which streets undergo renewal, and which areas decline. Therefore and because of limited time for conducting this research, its focus shifted to the political and socio-economic processes behind Rotterdam's urban fragmentation, investigating how governance helped shape these disparities between streets over time.

The goal of this research is not to determine how specific elements, like waste, green spaces, or street width, influence street perception anymore, but rather why particular streets evolved in ways that resulted in higher or lower perceived quality. This transition in focus is reinforced by the framework of *Bouwen aan Leefomgevingskwaliteit* (Vereniging Deltametropool, 2022); Building environmental quality, a concept widely used in Dutch urban policy discussions, for which a catalog with 36 goals and guidelines is developed as a tool to assess urban conditions. 'Leefomgevingskwaliteit' is however a political made-up term, which is very broad and can be subjective, leading to alternative interpretations. In response, Van den Bosch's *25 Bouwstenen voor Leefomgevingskwaliteit*(2023) refines these goals into more tangible, spatial and experiential qualities, such as human-scale development, active ground floors, and public space integration. While based on the 36 goals, this framework incorporates different urban planning literature, citizen preferences, and field observations, making it more applicable to street-level analysis. Interestingly, it bears similarities to *Prettige Plekken*, as both explore how specific spatial elements contribute to

positive urban experiences. However, *Prettige Plekken* focuses on individual perception, while Van den Bosch's work is a systematic attempt to bridge experiential and governance perspectives.

This research does not strictly apply either framework but uses them as reference points to analyze how governance and the (shifting) notion of livability shaped Rotterdam's urban fragmentation, specifically within pre-war neighbourhood West. Additionally, it remains critical of how environmental quality is measured, acknowledging that both frameworks emphasize different priorities; governance vs. design, without fully integrating them.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Strategy and Scope

The aim of this study is to investigate how particular developments and interventions led to observable spatial disparities between streets. Due to the vast range of influencing factors, spanning fields like psychology, economics, and anthropology, this research adopts an exploratory character. It focuses on identifying several key factors that may explain some of the differences observed, while also pointing to areas that merit further investigation. As such, it serves as a form of introductory or foundational research that may help define avenues for more targeted future studies.

The research is guided by a multi-scalar perspective: linking broader urban policies and governance trends to small-scale, street-level manifestations. This approach is also mirrored in the structure of the thesis, which moves chronologically and scales down from national and city-wide developments to

the local area and individual street observations. While not all observations allow definitive causal claims, this layered method does allow the study to explore how governance and social change are spatially expressed. The conclusions aim to reveal connections that can inform future research, rather than offer a comprehensive explanatory model.

To ensure depth and feasibility, the research is limited to a well-defined section of Rotterdam West. This area, referred to as “West” throughout the thesis, comprises parts of the Nieuwe Westen and Middelland neighbourhoods. Its exact boundaries are indicated in chapter 4. The selection was informed by personal familiarity, preliminary fieldwork and insights from stakeholders such as Stichting Boulevard.

### 3.2 Visual Observation and Street Selection

Fieldwork was a central part of the methodology. Several adjacent streets were selected for photographic documentation, focusing on those with pronounced contrasts. Criteria included differences in street width, greenery, building architecture, public infrastructure, and visible signs of maintenance or investment.

Rather than compiling a complete inventory of every street, the analysis is limited to a few representative comparisons. The aim is to illustrate disparities clearly and to provoke questions that can be linked back to broader historical or policy trends. Historical and contemporary maps helped to identify orientation shifts, block formations, parcel layouts, and other spatial characteristics.

This structured yet flexible approach enabled a form of visual documentation that is both selective and illustrative. In this way, the methodology balances open-ended exploration with focused inquiry.

### 3.3 Conceptual Framing

This thesis is not just about what makes a neighbourhood “nice” or “livable.” It aims to understand why some streets look and feel the way they do—physically, spatially, and atmospherically—by identifying key developments that have shaped those differences over time. This approach requires both a conceptual lens and a structured way to assess the street-level variations we observe today.

One such lens is the notion of “leefbaarheid”, often translated as livability, but with important local nuances. In the Dutch

context, particularly in Rotterdam, the term *Leefbaarheid* has evolved into a politically charged and rhetorically flexible tool, invoked to justify social housing investments to exclusionary housing policies; it can mean cleanliness and order, but also community cohesion, or simply the absence of “problem groups.” This vagueness makes it a useful but slippery concept. Rather than providing a strict definition, this thesis treats *Leefbaarheid* as a historically contingent framework that reflects the dominant values of urban governance in different periods. It helps understand how certain policies were legitimised, how data like the Leefbarometer and Wijkprofiel shaped perceptions of decline or progress, and how these perceptions influenced physical interventions in the city. At the same time, the concept of *Leefomgevingskwaliteit* offers more tangible reference points (Vereniging Deltametropool, 2022). While the term also has its ambiguities, it allows to group relevant factors into four recurring dimensions that are often used in Dutch planning documents, scientific literature and local discourse:

*Spatial Structure* - such as the layout of buildings, public spaces, and green elements

*Social Cohesion and Safety* - like community networks or the presence of conflict

*Economic and Housing Factors* - including affordability, ownership types, and tenure

*Mobility and Connectivity* - the accessibility and traffic quality of a street or neighbourhood

Although these dimensions are not applied as strict measurement tools in this thesis, they serve as guiding themes when documenting the contrasts between streets and neighbourhoods (see chapter 4).

### 3.4 Local Knowledge and Stakeholder Input

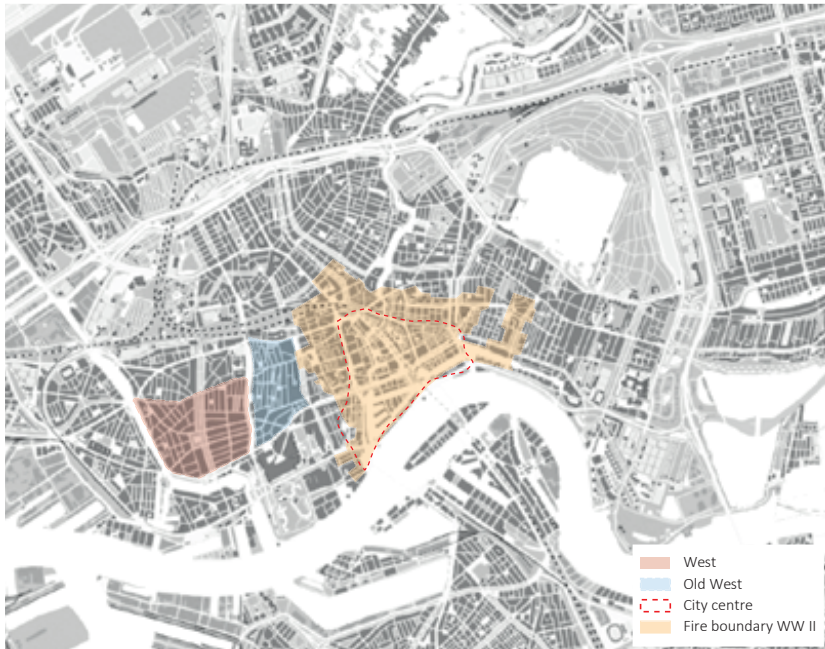
A key component of this research involves stakeholder perspectives and participatory urban governance, particularly within the social cohesion and safety dimension of *Leefomgevingskwaliteit*. In this context, Stichting Boulevard, founded in 1990, an organization dedicated to

improving the livability of Rotterdam West, plays a crucial role. With over 400 donors and advocacy for approximately 30,000 addresses, the foundation operates along the Mathenesserlaan and Heemraadssingel axis, actively engaging with municipal policymakers, district councils, and social organizations. As a well-established neighbourhood advocate, Stichting Boulevard has played a significant role in shaping the district’s development through participatory governance efforts, lobbying for better public spaces, social housing policies and infrastructure improvements. For this research, three conversations have been held with Hans Siertsema, former board member of Stichting Boulevard who lives on the Mathenesserlaan for nearly 30 years already, which provided valuable insight. Conversations have also taken place with residents of Pupillenstraat, such as Kuin Heuff and Henk Meijer, who live in social housing across the Opzoomer buurthuis and mentioned what had changed in their neighbourhood the past years.

### 3.5 Structure

The thesis follows a chronological and thematic structure. Chapter 4 provides documentation through field work observations, while chapter 5-8 provide historical and policy context, moving from national and municipal developments to their influence on neighbourhood and street-level planning. In the conclusion, these developments will be linked to the observations that help explain the existing contrasts.





Map 1, Context of West  
Iris Meijer (2025)



Map 2, Boundaries of West  
Iris Meijer (2025)

## 4. OBSERVING WEST

### 4.1 Why West?

As Rotterdam expanded westward toward Schiedam, the neighbourhood that is now known as the Oude Westen (Old West), marked in blue in map 1, got its name to distinguish it from newer developments, like Middelland and Nieuwe Westen (New West). While Rotterdam West is a large and diverse area, this study concentrates on a smaller area where differences in the built environment are particularly evident and concentrated, referred to simply as ‘West.’ West, marked in red in map 1, is framed by the Heemraadssingel and Mathenesserlaan as its central axis and bordered by s’-Gravendijkwal (east), Rochussenstraat (south), Aelbrechtskade (west), and Vierambachtsstraat/2e Middellandstraat as the northern border instead of the Beukelsdijk at the end of the Heemraadssingel. The reason for excluding this area, recognizable by the diagonal Graaf de Florisstraat, is because it seems not to express the same level of diapair as found in the area below. The explanation for this became more clear during the historical research(see chapter 5).

### 4.2 Initial observations and mapping

West is characterized by a blend of pre-war housing, post-war interventions, and ongoing redevelopment. Even at this early stage, a quick look at a map of the area reveals clear contrasts within just a few blocks. Significant differences in street orientation, plot structure, and parcel sizes are visible, providing early indications of the underlying inequalities that deserve further exploration.





1 Aelbrechtsekade



2 Mathenesserplein



3 Van Heusdenstraat



4 Davidsstraat



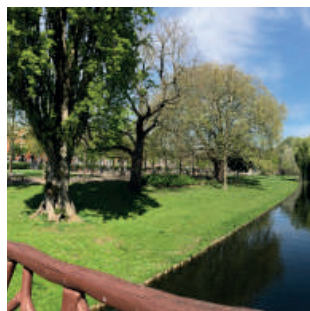
5 Gerrit Jan Mulderstraat



6 Nozemanstraat



7 Heemraadssingel



8 Heemraadspark



8 Heemraadspark



9 Heemraadssingel



10 Van der Poelstraat



11 Hendrick Sorchstraat



12 Joost van Geelstraat



13 Claes de Vrieselaan



14 Jan porcellisstraat



15 Jan Sonjéstraat



16 Bellevoysstraat



17 's-Gravendijkwal



18 Schietbaanlaan



19 Mathenesserlaan



20 Volmarijnstraat



21 Nieuwe Binnenweg



22 Zwaerdecroonstraat



23 Snellinckstraat



## Spatial



24



25



26



27



28

## Social



29



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32



33

## Economic



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## Mobility



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### 4.4 Photographic documentation and comparison

By creating two conceptually large cross-sections throughout West, photographs of adjacent streets have been positioned side by side and numbered in map 2. These visual comparisons show significant disparities, some of which are highlighted and categorized on the left within one of the four dimensions of Leefomgevingskwaliteit (Vereniging Deltametropool, 2022). While not every street is included, this method allows for a comprehensive overview of the neighbourhood's diversity and provides a semi-structured approach to the disparities in urban quality.

#### *Spatial Structure*

The spatial structure of West varies significantly. The width of streets, the number of tree lines, building heights, and the presence of open spaces all contribute to the area's distinct character. Mathenesserlaan, for example, features a broad, tree-lined layout with monumental buildings, while side streets are narrower and more fragmented, with irregular plots and inconsistent building heights. These variations reflect how different parts of the neighbourhood serve diverse functions, catering to both residential and social needs.

#### *Social Cohesion and Safety*

The level of social cohesion in West is mixed. On the positive side, there are community-oriented initiatives like local community centres and addiction services. Informal green spaces, like those created by residents working on local greening projects, also foster

community engagement. Heemraadsplein and Nieuwe Binnenweg stand out as key areas where these efforts are most visible, with interactions between various groups facilitated by shared spaces and facilities. However, street signs indicating the need for further safety improvements highlight the fragility of cohesion in certain areas. Despite the positive social initiatives, there remains a need for ongoing efforts to strengthen community ties and improve safety.

#### *Economic and Housing Factors*

Economic conditions in West are varied. Some areas are seeing investments in new developments, while others still display signs of neglect. Numerous "for sale" signs and vacant properties, often boarded up, indicate challenges in the housing market. The condition of buildings differs greatly; well-maintained properties sit next to deteriorating structures. The mix of housing types, ranging from renovated buildings to standard social housing and abandoned units, points to the ongoing struggle in this socio-economically diverse area.

#### *Mobility and Connectivity*

Public transport in West is well-served, with trams and buses providing good access to key locations. However, narrow streets, double parking and heavy traffic on roads like Nieuwe Binnenweg hinder mobility. The introduction of one-way streets and electric vehicle stations aims to alleviate congestion, though cycling remains challenging. The proximity of highways and tunnels also affects the integration of pedestrian and cyclist movement within the area.

### 4.5 Conclusion

The observations reveal a complex landscape in West, with significant contrasts between streets. The differences in spatial structure, social cohesion, economic conditions, and mobility reflect both the achievements and the ongoing challenges in the area. These observations raise more questions and help steer in which direction to look for answers, particularly about how these dynamics evolved. Weather and climate conditions also impact the street-level experience, with better weather encouraging more social interaction and street life, and less homogen looking facades. For this, further research should implement multiple field work trips to help form a more complete understanding of the actual situation.



## 5. THE BIRTH OF WEST



Figure 1. Rotterdam Heemraadsplein, 1907  
HC42049 – House of Cards. (n.d.). <https://www.house-of-cards.nl/product/rotterdam-heemraadssingel-nieuwe-binnenweg-1907-hc42049/>

### 5.1 Before West: Rotterdam's evolution

To understand the differences between streets in West, it's helpful to examine the city's development from its origins as a settlement in a wetland to a thriving port city shaped by trade and engineering.

Rotterdam's origins go back to around 800, when a community settled where the Rotte meets the Maas. In 1270, a dam was built in the Rotte to protect the land from flooding, giving the city its name and starting its tradition of water management. This dam, located near the Markthal, became the centre of the city's expansion (@StadsarchiefRotterdam, n.d.).

In 1340, Rotterdam was granted city rights, allowing for increased autonomy. The city expanded its harbour, built defensive walls and dug canals. Despite this, Rotterdam remained small compared to nearby cities like Delft and Gouda.

The city's growth accelerated however in the 16th and 17th centuries. After siding with the Dutch revolt in the Eighty Years' War, Rotterdam expanded its defences and harbour. The fall of Antwerp in 1585 brought Flemish merchants boosting trade and the city dismantled Dordrecht's staple rights, allowing independent trade. Rotterdam's favourable political climate, along with its

strategic location, attracted trade from England, France and the Americas. By the late 17th century, Rotterdam's population had grown from 1,300 in 1600 to over 50,000 by 1700.

However, by the 18th century, the Netherlands was overtaken by England in global trade, leading to stagnation. Three-quarters of Rotterdam's population lived in poverty. In 1795, Napoleon's decision to reopen the Scheldt River to Antwerp intensified competition, marking the period of decline even more (Historisch Genootschap Roterodamum, n.d.).

Around 1800, industrialisation improved Rotterdam's economy again, bringing steamships, transatlantic trade and innovations like prefabricated buildings. Yet, the Brielse Maas, the main maritime route, was silting up, threatening the port. Therefore, hydraulic engineer Pieter Caland proposed the digging of a new canal, the Nieuwe Waterweg, which was completed in 187. Napoleon's reforms, including the Kadaster (land registry) in 1811, set the stage for urban planning. The opening of the Nieuwe Waterweg sparked an economic revival, attracting rural migrants and shaping Rotterdam's growth (Schoots, 2023).

### 5.2 National awareness: from disease to reform

In the late 19th century, growing concerns about poor living conditions in urban areas across the Netherlands became widespread. Many workers lived in overcrowded, damp homes with inadequate ventilation, no running water and no sewage systems. These conditions led to the spread of diseases like cholera and tuberculosis, threatening public health and productivity. It became increasingly clear that housing and health could no longer be left solely to market forces.

This awareness led to the introduction of the *Woningwet* (Housing Act) in 1901. The act set minimum housing standards and granted municipalities the power to demolish slums, regulate construction, and build social housing. This law marked a shift towards public responsibility for spatial planning, moving beyond the unchecked growth that had defined earlier urbanisation (Van Der Lans, 2013).

### 5.3 Lessons from Oude Westen

In Rotterdam, the need for reform was already critical. The city's population had surged from around 70,000 in 1840 to 300,000 by 1900, making expansion beyond the city's core inevitable. The area outside the city walls, part of the independent municipality of Delfshaven, developed into Oude Westen (Old West). Delfshaven, initially a key satellite port of Delft, fell into economic decline due to siltation of its harbour. In 1841, Delfshaven's request to join Rotterdam was denied, and large parts of the Cool and Beukelsdijk polders were sold to private developers. Without regulation, speculative construction dominated, leading to overcrowded, unsanitary streets. The lack of infrastructure, poor hygiene, and overcrowding in Oude Westen became a cautionary tale for Rotterdam, highlighting the need for more structured urban planning (Gemeente Rotterdam, n.d.).

### 5.4 Municipal direction: Rose

The challenges in Oude Westen prompted the municipal government to take action. In 1855, the Municipal Public Works Department (Dienst Gemeentewerken) was founded, tasked with overseeing all spatial and technical interventions in the city. Under the leadership of Willem Nicolaas Rose, Rotterdam began to rethink its approach to urban space. In 1854, Rose introduced the Singel Plan, which sought to replace the unsanitary canals with broad boulevards fed by fresh water from the Maas River. These new singels improved water circulation, promoted public health and created space for greenery and recreation. The plan reflected a new vision of livability, one that extended beyond simple infrastructure, to create a healthy, well-organised urban environment. This concept would later influence West and particularly the Heemraadssingel (Noordhoek, 2019).

Rose's 1858 plan for the Coolpolder (future West) featured a geometric layout of harbours, canals, streets, and squares. However, due to high land acquisition costs, the plan was not realised. A simpler version, focusing solely on infrastructure, was presented in 1866 but was delayed due to competing financial priorities.



Figure 2. Plattegrond van de gemeente Rotterdam, 1881  
P.Th. v.d. Laar e.a., *Historische plattegronden Rotterdam* (facs. uitg. 2008), RTD 079-IV, p. 128; 2) A. Gordijn & P. Ratsma, *Catalogus kaartenverzameling* (1984), 124.



Figure 3. Different plans for the Coolpolder. Above left the first plan by Rose, right the second plan by Rose and van der Tak. Below left is De Jongh's first plan, right is De Jongh's final outline plan.  
*Middelland - het Nieuwe Westen: toelichting.* (n.d.). [https://www.planviewer.nl/imro/files/NL.IMRO.0599.BP1081MidNwWesten-on01/t\\_NL.IMRO.0599.BP1081MidNwWesten-on01.html](https://www.planviewer.nl/imro/files/NL.IMRO.0599.BP1081MidNwWesten-on01/t_NL.IMRO.0599.BP1081MidNwWesten-on01.html)

In 1880, the Coolpolder project was revived under G.J. de Jongh. The new plan included a road network and inner harbours, though only the Coolhaven and Parkhaven were eventually realised. After the annexation of Delfshaven in 1886, the plan was revised again so the new street layout would connect with the existing networks of both Rotterdam and Delfshaven. Old polder roads such as the Binnenweg (C.P. Tielestraat), the Geldelooze Pad (Schonebergweg) and Middelland polder (Middellandstraat) formed the foundation for the urban street layout, making their routes still recognizable today. The Heemraadssingel and Mathenesserlaan are already clearly present in this version of the plan as well. In 1891, the plan was slightly modified again and included the current Coolhaven, Sint-Jobshaven, and Schiehaven. The Heemraadssingel was widened and a square, the Heemraadplein and today's heart of West, was added at the intersection with the Nieuwe Binnenweg (Gemeente Rotterdam, n.d.)

The Nieuwe Binnenweg and Middellandstraat, key trade routes between Rotterdam and Delfshaven, were already in use before the formal urban plans. These streets were critical for transportation and commerce and were already showing early signs of development, as seen in maps from 1900 (Kadaster, n.d.). Their roles as main arteries connecting Rotterdam and Delfshaven shaped the layout of the plan. Up until this day, they still function as the two main shopping streets of West.

### 5.5 Urban growth and contrasts 1900-1914

The major streets were all part of carefully thought-out plans that aimed to improve the city's livability. However, no clear plan had yet been made for the smaller streets behind them.

The municipality of Rotterdam controlled the planning of the Coolpolder, though construction was largely entrusted to private developers. Developers had to adhere to the 1887 *Bouwverordening* (building regulations), which stipulated requirements for sewage systems, street layouts and hygiene standards. However, developers focused on maximising housing on small plots, leading to intensive negotiations. To facilitate De Jongh's vision of broad boulevards, the municipality compensated for land losses, but this was offset by constructing narrow streets filled with workers' housing behind these prestigious avenues. This resulted in large contrasts between the spacious boulevards and densely built, irregular streets. The lack of central coordination led to the development of socially stratified areas, evident in the varying street widths and housing typologies (Gemeente Rotterdam, n.d.).

The large widths of streets like 's Gravendijkwal also had negative effects: it was later adapted for the infamous tunnel traversé. Nowadays



its officially the most polluted street in the netherlands, illustrating that wider streets were not always beneficial for the livability of these areas(Beeldbank Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed, n.d.).

## 5.6 Socially mixed West

West was developed as a neighbourhood with clear social stratification, both in its layout and housing typologies. Yet behind this diversity lay a certain intent: the idea was that different social classes could live near one another, and all close to the harbor. This was a remarkably modern concept for its time. While the largest houses lay on the axis of the Heemraadssingel and Mathenesserlaan, their domestic staff or dockworkers lived in the streets right behind them. This resulted in an interesting mix of social classes, architectural styles, housing sizes, building materials and (partially) explain a lot of the disparities that can be seen today(Hooykaas, 2024).

### 5.6.1. Upper class; Heemraadssingel

Construction along the Heemraadssingel was largely carried out by private developers, although the municipality did own a significant amount of land north of the Nieuwe Binnenweg. Development took place in phases over a period of thirty years, resulting in a street with no uniform appearance. Houses were typically built in small clusters of two to six units, which was a more economical approach, usually developed by real estate entrepreneurs and sometimes commissioned by future residents which sometimes even hired prestigious architects. Not only did the architecture vary, the street itself differed in width per block as well. Its final dimensions were the result of negotiations between the municipality and landowners, who were reluctant to give up too much land. Ultimately, an average width of approximately 85 meters was achieved, making the Heemraadssingel the widest in Rotterdam.

Although the street was partially intended for the upper class, it also accommodated middle class. Upper and lower duplex homes accounted for about 42% of all residences, though this proportion declined as construction progressed(Laar, 2000).

### 5.6.2 workers class

Behind these major boulevards, there was virtually no municipal plan and relatively little has been documented about their construction and development. Between 1893 and 1899 the first area, adjacent to Oude Westen and around the Nieuwe Binnenweg and Mathenesserlaan, seemed to have been developed rapidly by several parties at once. The existing polder parceling was adopted into most street plans, seen in figure 4, explaining the varying orientation. Streets were laid out on the filled-in polders, but to prevent subsidence, constructing directly on them was avoided as much as possible. Most houses were cheap back-to-back workers' homes of poor quality. Although the building code prohibited "alcove" rooms due to poor ventilation, developers were often granted exemptions because of the urgent housing shortage. A lack of coordination between developers is evident in the misaligned streets flanking the Claes de Vrieselaan(see figure 4).

### 5.6.3. middle class

Street widths are not all the same behind the main axis: some streets featured two rows of trees, others only one, and some none at all. Not all of these were purely worker-oriented, some were designed for the middle class as well. In the Schonebergerweg, for example, landowners imposed deed restrictions to make the area more attractive to the middle class, requiring that only houses with a minimum rental value of 250 guilders per year could be built, which was too high for typical workers' homes. Streets like Schietbaanlaan, Hooidrft and C.P. Tielestraat appear to have followed a similar development pattern.

## 5.7 The Evolution of West: 1910 and beyond

In 1910, West was almost finished, except for certain parts of the Heemraadssingel and the northwest around Gerrit Jan Mulderstraat. On the map from that time, variety in street widths, blocks and orientation due to the old polder structures, are very noticable. However, the development of Nieuwe Westen and Middelland north of the Middellandstraat, outside our case area, continued after 1914, which was shaped by Pieter Verhagen's Uitbreidingsplan Beukelsdijk, the successor of

the Jongh. This plan was more systematically designed from the outset and displays less architectural and spatial variety: the street layout is more consistent, the building types more uniform, and the majority of housing was constructed over a shorter period and targeted primarily at the middle class, reflecting a more controlled and homogeneous urban character. For that reason, it falls outside the scope of this research, which focuses on the complexity and contrasts within the original core of West(Dettingmeijer, 1990).

## 5. THE BIRTH OF WEST



Figure 4. West in 1900 and around 1910. Streets don't align around the Snellinkstraat (in yellow)  
 Topotijdreis: 200 jaar topografische kaarten. (n.d.). Topotijdreis. <https://www.topotijdreis.nl/kaart/1909/@93498,436924,8.9>

### 5.8 Conclusion

#### Visible differences

- Street width variation between major boulevards (e.g., Heemraadssingel, Mathenesserlaan) and narrow, densely built streets behind them.
- Orientation differences in streets, caused by phased development and the use of old polder grids in some parts, while others followed more systematic planning.
- Housing typologies differed between villas on the wide boulevards for the wealthier classes and cramped workers' homes behind them.

#### Historical events and urban planning decisions

- The Bouwverordening of 1887 set minimum construction standards but led to speculative development that resulted in chaotic, uncoordinated growth, especially in areas like Oude Westen.
- The introduction of Woningwet of 1901 and the establishment of Rose's reforms improved urban design, focusing on livability through singels and green spaces.
- Deliberate integration of social classes: upper classes lived along the boulevards, while the working class was housed behind them, aiming for a mix of social classes, fitting to the broader context of Rotterdam as a harbor city.
- The lack of coordination between developers, resulting in misaligned streets and irregular plots contributed to the contrasts in development within the neighbourhood. It developed over a long period, with different sections built at different times and also caused inconsistency in layout and building types.
- Livability concerns were central, as evidenced by the introduction of green spaces, boulevards, and improvements to infrastructure (sewage, water systems).

The development of West, with its marked differences between adjacent streets, reflects a complex interplay of historical events, urban planning decisions and socio-economic factors; a balance between ambition and constraints. Today, this provides a lens through which the neighbourhood's development and the challenges of creating a cohesive urban environment can still be understood.



### From blueprint to reality — Tracing the layers of change

The previous chapter explored the foundational planning and development of West, highlighting the intentions and designs that shaped its early 20th-century urban fabric. However, its current state reflects a complex history of transformations that extend beyond its original blueprint. The following part of this paper initiates exploration into how West has evolved over the past century, focusing on the interplay between urban planning, societal shifts and policy developments.

## 6. WEST AFTER WAR

### 6.1 Before the bombs 1916-1940

In 1916, the Housing Act led to the creation of the Municipal Housing Service (Gemeentelijke Woningdienst), with architect J.J.P. Oud playing a key role. The *Nieuwe Bouwen* movement, focused on functionality and affordability, introduced modern materials like concrete, steel and glass, alongside concepts such as high-rise buildings and linear housing blocks. Progressive entrepreneurs also developed garden suburbs, like Heijlplaas and Vreewijk, aiming to improve workers' living conditions. Rotterdam's chief city planner, W.G. Witteveen, favoured monumental urban designs with closed building blocks for an orderly cityscape.

Despite these efforts, overcrowding and poor sanitation persisted, especially in working-class areas. Poorly ventilated rooms (alkoven) continued to be built until the 1930s due to housing shortages. By the end of World War I, the population had grown to approximately 500,000.

However, in the decades leading up to World War II, the city flourished, expanding rapidly and incorporating surrounding villages like Kralingen, Spangen, and Feijenoord into its urban fabric. This period of growth also saw significant changes to the inner city. Many canals were filled in and buildings destroyed to make way for trams and auto-

mobiles, reflecting modern ideas about hygiene and urban efficiency for that time. These canals often functioned as open sewers, so their removal was seen as a practical solution to improve public health (Puur Rotterdam, n.d.).

This period highlighted a tension between ambitious urban planning and the realities of rapid growth and economic inequality, which outlines the situation right before the falling of the bombs (Dettingmeijer, 1990).

### 6.2 The mentality of Reconstruction

On 14 May 1940, a German bombing raid devastated much of Rotterdam's historic city centre. In just fifteen minutes, 25,000 homes were destroyed, leaving around 80,000 people homeless and creating an empty space in the heart of the city—its *Brandgrens*, the 'fire boundary', remains visible till today. Although some buildings could have been saved, many were cleared to make way for a new vision. The bombing marked the beginning of the *Wederopbouwperiode* (Reconstruction era); an opportunity to reshape the city rather than restore the old.

Rotterdam's pre-war mindset was pragmatic and modern, focused on efficiency and practicality. The destruction enabled a fresh start, aligning with ambitions for a city free from 'outdated' structures. In the post-war years this mentality intensified, inspired by modernist thinkers like Le Corbusier, leading to functional zoning: distinct areas for living, working, traffic and leisure (Groenendijk, 2022).

The new urban ideals emphasized light, air and green space, contrasting with the dense, narrow streets of the past. This modern approach was reflected in bold architectural projects, such as the Lijnbaan (1953), Europe's first car-free shopping street, and the opening of the metro in 1968, which enhanced mobility and access. However, despite the scale of reconstruction, only 5,000 new homes were built back in the centre; far less than the 25,000 lost. The city's main focus lay elsewhere: on the port, on logistics and on a new international identity. Its motto "*geen woorden maar daden*" ("no words, but deeds"), captured this forward-looking spirit.



Figure 5. Centre of Rotterdam after the war, with the Laurenskerk still standing @StadsarchiefRotterdam. (n.d.). Rotterdam in oorlog | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoek-en-ontdek/themas/rotterdam-in-oorlog/>



Figure 6. The slum king of Rotterdam; Fennis in the 70s NTR. (n.d.). De krottenkoning van Rotterdam - Andere Tijden. Andere Tijden. <https://andere-tijden.nl/programma/1/Andere-Tijden/aflevering/866/De-krottenkoning-van-Rotterdam>



Figure 7. Boarded-up home on Heemraadssingel with De Vliegerstraat on the right, 1988 @StadsarchiefRotterdam. (n.d.). Zoeken in archieven | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoek-en-ontdek/archieven/zoekresultaat-archieven/?mizig=299&miadt=184&miaet=14&micode=4005&minr=71025163&miwiev=ldt>

This rapid transformation led to a fragmented urban fabric. Modernist zoning and wide traffic arteries divided the city into isolated districts with limited cohesion. The result was a city that, while ambitious and modern, often felt cold and disconnected. This is a different kind of fragmentation than what can be found in West, which received, like other older neighbourhoods, little to zero attention during this period. The focus on modernity, infrastructure and commerce left existing housing areas to decline. This neglect would soon spark criticism and eventually lead to a renewed search for what livability really meant (Van Veelen, 2022).

### 6.3 Doubts and critique: rethinking Livability

From the late 1960s onward, international and local perspectives on livability began to shift. Influenced by broader developments in public health and urban theory, the concept of a “healthy” city expanded beyond hygiene and infrastructure. The World Health Organization’s 1947 definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” gained renewed relevance. This shift in mindset coincided with growing criticism on post-war modernism. Thinkers like Jane Jacobs challenged the large-scale, rationalist planning models that had dominated urban renewal in her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961): “Open space for what? For muggings, bleak vacuums between buildings?” Jacobs called for mixed-use neighbourhoods, walkable streets, smaller-scale developments and the preservation of historic character; qualities the post-war city centre of Rotterdam lacked drastically (RIGO Research en Advies BV et al., 2003).

The promise of a modern, healthy city had, by the 1970s, revealed its limitations. The inner city felt sterile and impersonal, lacking in social cohesion and community, while the outskirts were suffering from neglect, decay, and increasing inequality. Many homes were aging, poorly maintained and increasingly unfit for living, a problem exacerbated by absentee landlords who speculated on eventual buyouts by the municipality.

## 6.4 From pillars to participation

### 6.4.1 A shift in society

At the same time, the Netherlands was experiencing a major transition that shaped the society as we know it today. In the 60/70’s depillarisation (ontzuiling), democratisation, emancipation and immigration took place. The influence of television and other forms of mass communication also played a significant role in this. In West, residents began advocating for better housing, maintenance and local services. This shift laid the foundation for more participatory forms of urban renewal (RIGO Research en Advies BV et al., 2003).

### 6.4.2 Residents response for urban renewal

The growing frustration led to activism, especially in districts like West. One of the most striking examples was the public battle against Mr. Fennis, a notorious real estate speculator who had acquired over 6,000 homes in neglected neighbourhoods. In the short documentary made about him, the first shots were filmed in the Pupillenstraat in West. To find out which homes were exactly his, further research is required.

The documentary mentions that Fennis expected the municipality to eventually purchase his properties as part of urban renewal plans. He refused to invest in basic maintenance, while charging illegal administration fees and raising rents. After a while, residents had had enough and began to organize. They set up tenant clubs, filed legal complaints and withheld rent, placing it into alternative accounts managed by tenant advocacy groups. Municipal housing inspectors were horrified by what they found in those homes and some reportedly even cried when witnessing the dangerous living conditions. The campaign against Fennis reached a dramatic climax when residents traveled to his villa in Wassenaar to deliver thousands of protest letters and sing the famous Fennis Song at his doorstep.

Through coordinated legal pressure, media attention and mass protests, the city was forced to act. Fennis, buried in debt and unable to meet

basic repair orders, eventually sold his properties to the municipality and fled to Chili. The homes then came into possession of social housing corporations, which marked the beginning of urban renewal in West, the *Stadsvernieuwing periode* (NTR, 2021).

Unlike the post-war Wederopbouw period, which was often characterized by large-scale demolition and tabula rasa planning, the Stadsvernieuwing period (1970s - 1990s) introduced a more localized, incremental approach. Rather than wiping out entire neighbourhoods, this policy emphasized careful renovation and renewal on a case-by-case basis and more often in consultation with residents. As Ben Maandag notes in his book *Stadsvernieuwing in Rotterdam. Vijftig jaar bouwen in de buurt* (2019), this approach took some time to gain momentum, since Fennis definitely wasn’t the only landlord with bad intentions the municipality had to deal with. However, between 1974 and 1996, no fewer than 71,299 homes were addressed under the Stadsvernieuwing program. Of these, 32,604 were newly built, 30,224 were renovated, and 5,084 received minor maintenance (Maandag, 2019).





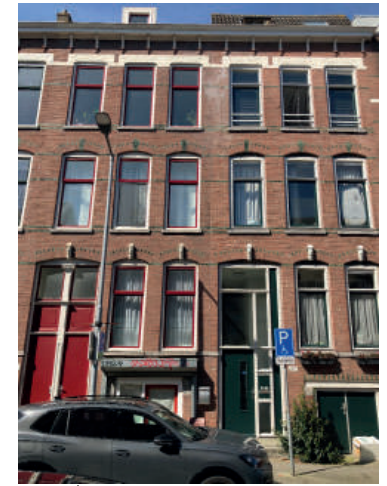
45 Uniformity



46 Loggia's with trespas



47 Roof boxes



48 Porch



49 Prefab balconies



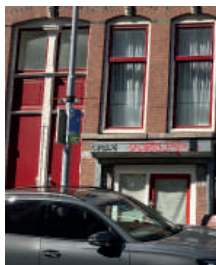
50 Bay windows with trespas



51 renovation vs. new built



52  
Series of colored doors



53



54



55



56

TRACES OF  
URBAN RENEWAL in 70s-90s



## 6.6 The physical legacy of Stadsvernieuwing

### 6.6.1. Piet Blom

The era of Stadsvernieuwing left a lasting mark on the visible identity of Rotterdam. This period saw a shift towards creating more livable, community-oriented spaces. In the city centre, it prompted the demolition of Wederopbouw blocks to make way for new developments. An iconic example for this are the Kubuswoningen (Cube houses) designed by architect Piet Blom in the late 1970s. These innovative structures sought to introduce a village-like atmosphere within the city, challenging traditional housing designs and becoming a symbol of Rotterdam's attempt to reintroduce human scale and social interaction into its urban fabric. Blom also envisioned a comprehensive urban plan for the Nieuwe Binnenweg in West, aiming to create a vibrant, mixed-use neighbourhood that combined living and working spaces. However, for a yet unknown reason, only a small part of his plan was realized: a residential building at the corner of Van der Hilststraat and Duyststraat, featuring his distinctive snake-like building block patterns, marking the entrance to the Nieuwe Binnenweg (-Gundlach, 2018).

### 6.6.2. Renovations

Although this period significantly improved the liveability of housing and public spaces for many residents, its architectural expression seems often shaped by pragmatism, cost-efficiency, and large-scale standardisation rather than spatial or aesthetic refinement. Social housing associations, newly established or empowered during this period, frequently acquired entire housing blocks and their renovations were typically conducted in one sweep, with little room for individual variation. As a result, many streets in West display a repetitive pattern of identical balcony railings, brightly coloured front doors and standardised window frames. A particularly visible feature of this period is the widespread use of Trespa panels, chosen for their low cost and durability. Social housing can often be recognised at one glance due to these consistent visible cues. This drive for visual uniformity was not accidental. Maintenance was necessary as soon as possible and in order to prevent rent increases after renovations, a strong demand from residents, construction budgets had to remain minimal (-Maandag, 2019).

Beyond facades, internal transformations were equally significant. Many traditional ground- and upper floor homes, typi-

cally divided between multiple households since the war, were converted into porch homes, improving hygiene, privacy and access to light and air. However, these new layouts often placed storage spaces on the ground floor, reducing active use at street level. The physical and social disconnect between the housing above and the street below, diminishes natural surveillance and street life, elements now understood as key contributors to perceived and actual liveability (Vereniging Deltametropool, 2022).

### 6.6.3. Newly built

In several areas, housing blocks were completely demolished and replaced by new-built developments, particularly where structural damage or subsidence made renovation unfeasible. One example is a block located along the Nieuwe Binnenweg, the historically significant shopping street connecting the city centre to the former municipality of Delfshaven. In places where the old canal beds had caused severe subsidence, demolition became unavoidable. This particular project involved 81 dwellings spread across five locations, of which this block contains 22. In order to maintain the continuity of the commercial function along the street, the ground floor was entirely reserved for retail spaces. This type of infill development typifies the fragmented but targeted nature of some urban renewal efforts, where smaller gaps in the urban fabric were patched with new-built architecture adapted to local conditions, in contrast to some other renovation projects (Rotterdam Woont, 2024).

### 6.6.4. The share of social housing

Due to the limited availability of documentation from the period in question, Figure 9 presents the current distribution of social housing ownership in Rotterdam West. While acknowledging changes may have occurred since the 1990s, this map offers valuable insights into the substantial role social housing plays within the area's current housing stock. Notably, many social housing units encompass entire blocks, which contribute to the strong contrasts observed between these areas and adjacent streets lacking such developments.

The detected shift in roofing types (see figure 8 and 10), also speaks to the scale of renovation projects. In contrast to historical images featuring predominantly pitched roofs, West's skyline of today is largely defined by flat roofs. This transformation, which was less individualized and more block-based,

echoes the pattern observed in the map of social housing ownership (Atlas Woonomgeving, n.d.).

Predominantly, two patterns emerge: streets dominated by comprehensive social housing blocks and those without any. Additionally, certain streets exhibit a fragmented presence of social housing, possibly indicating partial sales or transitions over time. Further research is warranted to investigate these patterns and to uncover historical records that could shed light on the evolution of housing ownership in the area.

### 6.6.5. Mixed-use; pros and cons

The aspiration for mixed-use neighbourhoods in this period also had unexpected consequences. Prestigious 19th-century townhouses along avenues such as Mathenesserlaan and Heemraadssingel became unaffordable for residential use and were often repurposed as office spaces, a move that aligned with the goal of functional diversity instead of separation, like during the Wederopbouw. However, others were left vacant or used for informal or illicit businesses, including brothels and drug-related activities. Eventually, due to this shift in function and atmosphere, the nickname 'Wild West' came into use (Van de Laar, 2000).

## 6. WEST AFTER WAR

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored the evolution of West from 1900 to 1990, focusing on the significant urban planning events, interventions and their impact on the disparities observed between adjacent streets.

### Visible Differences

- Housing typologies: Social housing developments led to standardized housing blocks, particularly with flat roofs, as opposed to the more varied housing typologies in streets without social housing. These blocks often symbolized the larger scale and standardized approach of the Stadsvernieuwing era.  
>> Interventions: 'Dakdozen', flat roofs, standardized window frames, balconies, loggia's, trespas panels, portiek entrances, the same colored doors.

### Historical events and urban planning decisions

- Post-War pragmatism: during the Wederopbouwperiode Rotterdam's focus was on the city centre, port and logistics, leaving neighbourhoods like West largely neglected. This lack of attention contributed to worsened living conditions in West, which attracted speculants and absentee landlords.
- Urban renewal: The Stadsvernieuwingperiode, starting from the 1970s, focused on incremental renewal, mixed-use and the transformation of social housing. Activism and community participation played a crucial role in improving housing conditions, done with these large-scale renovations. Although they improved housing quality, it led to uniformity and limited social interaction (storages on the main floor).
- Resident participation improved social cohesion in certain streets, but the fragmented nature of renewal remained.



Figure 8. Types of roofs

Platte daken-kaart. Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu (RIVM), 2022



Figure x. View on mostly pointy roofs, with the Nieuwe Binnenweg in the foreground, Pupillenstraat in the middle and Mathenesserlaan in the back, 1984  
4232 Collectie panorama en luchtfoto's, Geschat 1930-1980. Gemeentelijke Archiefdienst Rotterdam.



Figure 9. Distribution social housing properties

BAG\_Corpos. [https://www.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?url=https://diensten.rotterdam.nl/arcgis/rest/services/RWW/Data\\_kk\\_bestaandvastgoed\\_corporaties/MapServer](https://www.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?url=https://diensten.rotterdam.nl/arcgis/rest/services/RWW/Data_kk_bestaandvastgoed_corporaties/MapServer)



Figure x. Hoge Erf Delfshaven, inspired by Piet Blom  
0037416 John Gundlach / Beeldunie.nl



## 7. THE WILD WEST

### 7.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter explored the evolution of urban renewal in West, this chapter turns to the parallel social dynamics that shaped the neighbourhood between the 1980s and late 1990s; a pivotal period for West. These years were marked by a perceived decline in safety, a rise in criminalised street activity and increasing frustration among residents, which explains why it got its nickname. This chapter explores how national policy, street-level experience and local mobilisation interacted to shape unequal perceptions and realities of livability in West (Stichting Boulevard, n.d.).

### 7.2 The Build-Up to Disorder

In the 1980s, national strict measures, partially due to the oil crisis, and the retreat of the welfare state coincided with growing unemployment and housing shortages across the Netherlands. These developments had a disproportionate effect on neighbourhoods with older housing stock and vulnerable populations, which exacerbated existing challenges. The government's retreat from housing provision and care led to increased squatting and unregulated living arrangements. While new suburban developments, like VINEX, attracted investment and middle-class residents, neighbourhoods like West were left behind, concentrating vulnerable populations and problematic functions.

In West, many homes were outdated, poorly maintained, or even declared uninhabitable, contributing to high levels of vacancy. This created what some have called a "spatial opportunity structure": West became both a site of social need and experimentation. The area drew a concentration of vulnerable populations and services, and became visibly associated with sex work, addiction, and crime.

While it is difficult to draw linear cause-and-

effect conclusions, this spatial clustering undeniably shaped public perception. A local mythology began to form; one that informed both media narratives and everyday experience. Over time, feelings of unsafety grew and more affluent residents began to leave. A notable decline in social cohesion and maintenance levels was experienced when the *tippelzone*, a special zone designated for legal street prostitution, opened nearby (H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 05 March).

### 7.3 The Corridor of Nuisance

By 1985, the G.J. de Jonghweg had become an official *tippelzone* for sex work, and in 1987, the municipality opened Perron Nul, as a supervised facility for drug users near central station. The Heemraadssingel and Mathenesserlaan became physical connectors between these zones, inadvertently forming a "corridor of nuisance." Stichting Boulevard noted that the southern parts of West were most affected, describing Zuid-Middelland as particularly vulnerable to these overlapping dynamics.

By the early 1990s, the lived experience of many residents had worsened significantly. Stichting Boulevard conducted a local survey that revealed alarming findings:

- 71% of residents considered leaving the neighbourhood
- 65% had experienced burglary or attempts
- 62% avoided the streets after dark

Newspaper articles from that time echoed these results, describing the area in terms of chaos and neglect; *"There were hotel rooms rented by the hour, syringes in front of our doors, constant noise and fights. It was a jungle."* (Het Vrije Volk, 1985). The term *Wilde Westen* captured this atmosphere. Some of this decline was likely influenced by a shift in



Figure 10. Arrangement of a *tippelzone*  
*Tippelzone Keileweg in 2002 @Jaap Rozema/RD.*



Figure 11. Perron Nul, where addicts used freely  
Veerbeek, N. (2024, March 11). *Gabbers, Perron Nul en nieuwe architectuur: dit was Rotterdam in de jaren negentig*. Rijnmond. <https://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/1785095/gabbers-perron-nul-en-nieuwe-architectuur-dit-was-rotterdam-in-de-jaren-negentig>

harbour-related activity westward, which affected patterns of street-level sex work and addiction services. In 2000, the closure of the G.J. de Jonghweg tippelzone and its relocation to the Keileweg attempted to address the nuisance, yet critics noted this merely displaced the issue, echoing broader fears about the “waterbed effect” in urban policy and extending Wild West’s area (Koenders, 2014).

#### 7.4 From resistance to influence: Stichting Boulevard’s role

In the early 1990s, the streets that form the main axis of West, were engulfed in turmoil. Residents faced daily challenges: rampant drug use, street prostitution, and a pervasive sense of insecurity. Amidst this chaos, a group of determined residents decided to take action, leading to the founding of Stichting Boulevard in 1994.

Comprising residents from the Mathenesserlaan, Heemraadsingel and Heemraadsplein, the foundation aimed to restore the neighbourhood’s livability and pride. Hans Siertsema, a longtime resident and one of the foundation’s former board members recalled:

*“We were tired of the neglect. The name ‘Boulevard’ was chosen deliberately, it sounds chic and ambitious, fitting to a big city and reflecting our vision for the neighbourhood.”*

(H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 14 April).

The foundation’s initial efforts included conducting detailed surveys to map out problem areas, which also led to the creation of the “bolletjeskaart” (dot map), which highlighted each building’s use, like drug houses, dilapidated buildings and other hotspots of concern since there wasn’t any data like this yet collected.

Boulevard didn’t just identify problems; they proposed solutions. In 1995, they published a “witboek” detailing the neighbourhood’s issues and potential remedies. This proactive approach caught the attention of national figures, including State Secretary Kohnstamm, who acknowledged the urgency of the situation. Subsequently, *Operation Victor*, a targeted campaign to combat drug-related nuisances was launched, marking a significant shift in governmental response.

Beyond policy advocacy, the foundation championed tangible improvements, like

- urban planning initiatives: advocated for the re-design of the Heemraadsplein, transforming it into a more pedestrian-friendly space with small pebbles instead of asphalt.
- infrastructure proposals: pushed for the overpass of ‘s-Gravendijkwal, envisioning a green park atop the tunnel to reconnect divided parts of the neighbourhood.
- social equity campaigns: highlighted the disproportionate concentration of social services in West compared to other neighbourhoods, leading to a more balanced distribution across the city.

This comparison, first raised by Stichting Boulevard, underscored their central argument: West was shouldering more than its fair share of urban dysfunction.

Recognizing that urban renewal wasn’t solely about infrastructure, the foundation organizes cultural events to rejuvenate community spirit. Festivals like Ketikoti and De Parade celebrated the neighbourhood’s diversity, fostering unity among residents. These events transformed public spaces into arenas of joy and togetherness, countering the narrative of decline. The

foundation’s broad approach yielded significant results and

- enhanced safety: with targeted interventions, like the placing of street lighting, led to a noticeable reduction in crime rates.
- revitalized public spaces: since strategic urban planning made streets more accessible and inviting, like their Bomenkaart, a greening plan for public spaces.
- empowered residents: through active participation in decision-making processes instilling a sense of ownership and pride among locals. They had a local communication system with one contact person per block (H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 14 April).

The foundation’s influence was also tied to the presence of influential residents who lived in the big houses on this axis of Mathenesserlaan and Heemraadsingel who amplified their concerns within political circles. Hans Siertsema, among others, became both a witness and a spokesperson for this local transformation. He explained that the foundation’s success was tied to its mix of protest, media strategy, and direct negotiation. By 1999, their efforts were celebrated in *Boulevard Bruist!*, a publication reflecting renewed optimism. Still, critics warned that structural issues remained unresolved, and that simply shifting zones or upgrading greenery could not undo decades of structural inequality (Stichting Boulevard, n.d.).

## 7. THE WILD WEST



## 7.5 Opzoomeren

Parallel to Stichting Boulevard, other participation efforts shaped the narrative of street-level livability in West. One of the most enduring was *Opzoomeren*. Originating in the Opzoomerstraat in 1989, this movement involved residents cleaning, planting greenery and organising social events. By 1994, the first Opzoomerdag mobilised over 20,000 people city-wide (Opzoomer Mee, 2025).

The effects were visible, like street signs marking it as “Opzoomerwijken,” and in 2023, thirty streets received the *Opzoomer Mee Trofee*, including several in West such as Volmarijnstraat, De Vliegerstraat and Brigantijnstraat. Though these awards came decades later, they reflect an enduring legacy of self-organisation (Zoetmulder, 2024).

Yet, rather than resolving existing inequalities, this form of participation, although one of the 25 official “building blocks” of Leefomgevingskwaliteit (Van den Bosch, 2023), mirrored uneven distribution in West. As sociologist Justus Uitermark observed, participation tends to follow pre-existing lines of social capital. Streets with more cohesion and resources were more likely to mobilise, while more fragmented areas lagged behind. A city-wide survey conducted in the early 2000s similarly showed that residents in more organised streets reported greater feelings of safety and laid the groundwork for a new phase of institutional responses (RIVM, 2024).



## 7.6 Conclusion: unequal streets, unequal voices

Between 1980 and 2000, West underwent a dual transformation: socio-spatial decline and residents’ response. The “Wild West” nickname captured both stigma and agency; a sense of abandonment, but also the will to reclaim. While some residents left, others fought back. Stichting Boulevard professionalised protest. Opzoomeren turned participation into pride. West had gotten more save, cleaner and friendlier. However, differences between streets and their level of participation shaped the uneven geography of livability. Some streets came to embody this new mode of civic pride, while others remained caught in a cycle of perceived neglect. Visibly, the level of greenery in a street and the signs of Opzoomeren can tell a lot about the participation and social cohesion between the neighbours in a street.

The next part of this study examines how the pressure of these movements became institutionalised. They changed the streets and helped lay the groundwork for a new chapter in Rotterdam’s urban policy, one where livability moved from the street to city hall.



Figure 12. Activity flyer for 30 years of Stichting Boulevard Facebook. (n.d.). <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=478171821212729&set=a.207852434911337&type=3>



## 8. (TOWARDS) THE MILD WEST

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the policy-driven transformation of urban liveability in West between 2000 and 2025. While the policies discussed were implemented city-wide, the attention lies in what they can reveal about street-level differences that emerged or persisted. Shifting governmental priorities, institutional reforms and systematic inequalities contributed to diverging living conditions, street aesthetics and resident experiences within West. In this analysis, “liveability” becomes both an evolving policy goal and a contested measurement tool.

### 8.2 Measuring livability

The notion of liveability has guided Dutch urban policy since the late 1990s. Over time, however, the definition and operationalisation of liveability have shifted. Initially linked to public safety and physical upkeep, liveability later encompassed broader indicators like social cohesion, health and sustainability (Leidelmeijer & Frissen, 2020).

Despite its frequent use, liveability remains difficult to define precisely, especially at street level. From 2008 onwards, Rotterdam’s municipality introduced the *Leefbarometer*, a dashboard combining objective and subjective indicators to assess neighbourhood well-being. It was updated in 2014 and 2023, reflecting shifts in how liveability is conceptualised (RIVM, 2024). In 2014, the city also launched the *Wijkprofiel*, a reporting tool for each neighbourhood combining safety, satisfaction and social cohesion scores (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2014). Yet both instruments only operate at neighbourhood scale, not street level.

Furthermore, the indices are often used strategically by policymakers, raising questions about their intentions and their role in legitimising interventions.

### 8.3 Timeline of major policy interventions

Below, key developments from 2000–2025 have been reviewed and how they have impacted West.

#### 8.3.1 *The rise of Leefbaar Rotterdam and the Rotterdamwet (2002–2005)*

After four decades of PVDAs political dominance, the drastic decline in livability during this period led to a change in political direction. According to Siertsema, PVDAs influence waned, as the focus remained on national economic growth rather than solving the city’s social issues. In 2002, political newcomer Pim Fortuyn gained traction by linking urban decline to migration, governance failure and moral decay. His party, Leefbaar Rotterdam, won the municipal elections, marking this profound shift in the city’s political culture. Fortuyn’s critique resonated with concerns about liveability, especially in districts with high crime rates and visible neglect.

His party’s motto was ‘*schoon, heel, veilig*’, improving the city’s cleanliness, safety and security, which was seen as the main solution for fixing livability in that time. The amount of police in the streets increased, stop-and-search measures were implemented and ‘stadsmariniers’ (city marshals) were introduced to ensure urban security. Stichting Boulevard also advocated for these efforts, aiming to improve the area’s safety and livability (H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 04 march).

This climate paved the way for the Special Measures Metropolitan Problem Act introduced in 2005, which came to be called the Rotterdam Act since this city was the first to use it and many cities followed. The law enabled municipalities to restrict access to housing in ‘vulnerable neighbourhoods’ based on income, employment or criminal history (Permentier, 2020). It also allowed the demolition of housing blocks to improve socio-economic “mixing.” It was meant to encourage middle-class residents to stay in the area by offering incentives, aiming to foster local investment. However, this strategy faced challenges, as the city lacked sufficient family housing, limiting its potential to retain long-term residents and improve overall livability.

The law provided a legal basis to target and transform certain streets, often by displacing vulnerable residents or clearing housing stock. In West, this facilitated selective upgrading, but also deepened divisions between ‘favoured’ and ‘neglected’ streets (Eijk, 2022). To find out on which exact streets this was implemented, further research is required.

#### 8.3.2 *Krachtwijkenbeleid and the legacy of Stadsvernieuwing (2007–2012)*

The *Krachtwijkenbeleid* (Power Districts Policy) aimed to reinvest in the country’s 40 most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, one of those being West. In Rotterdam, many of these were already shaped by Stadsvernieuwing in the 1970s–90s. However, large apartment blocks with prefabricated materials and cheap rooftop extensions were increasingly seen as eyesores (RIVM, 2007). The very architecture once meant to improve liveability now required upgrading. This period marked a shift in the notion of livability, now including sustainability and environmental quality as core components

as well. The *Krachtwijkenbeleid* thus often focused on renovating the renovated, addressing poor insulation, maintenance and aesthetics. Some blocks were replaced by public, green space; others were cut through to reconnect streets, like in Oude Westen (Maandag, 2019).

This policy reinforced architectural contrasts within West. The Mathenesserlaan stands out with monumental facades, while adjacent typical Stadsvernieuwing-blocks deteriorated and complete new blocks were added. This, among others, explains why certain streets have changed so much since their existence, making them unrecognizable nowadays. For example, it is hard to find any similarities, when comparing an archival photo out 1930 and one taken this year, at the exact same location on the Gerrit van Mulderstraat.

#### 8.3.3 *Crisis and austerity (2008–2014)*

The 2008 financial crash hit poor districts hardest. Budgets shrank and many local services, like youth centres, libraries and community workers disappeared (Kullberg et al., 2015). The *Krachtwijkenbeleid* has been prematurely terminated. The *Verhuurdersheffing* (landlord tax), introduced in 2013, further strained housing corporations. This halted renovation projects, especially in low-income areas (Van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2019). Meanwhile, some residents began to perceive liveability more critically.

The austerity decade intensified inequalities. While some streets, especially those with market potential, received investment, others were left behind, thus differences in decay, care and investment widened within West.

## Middelland

Vergelijk 2024 met 2022, 2020, 2018, 2016 of / 2014



Figure 13. Wijkprofiel; indices are intricate to read  
Wijkprofiel Rotterdam. (n.d.). <https://wijkprofiel.rotterdam.nl/nl/2024/rotterdam/delfshaven/middelland>

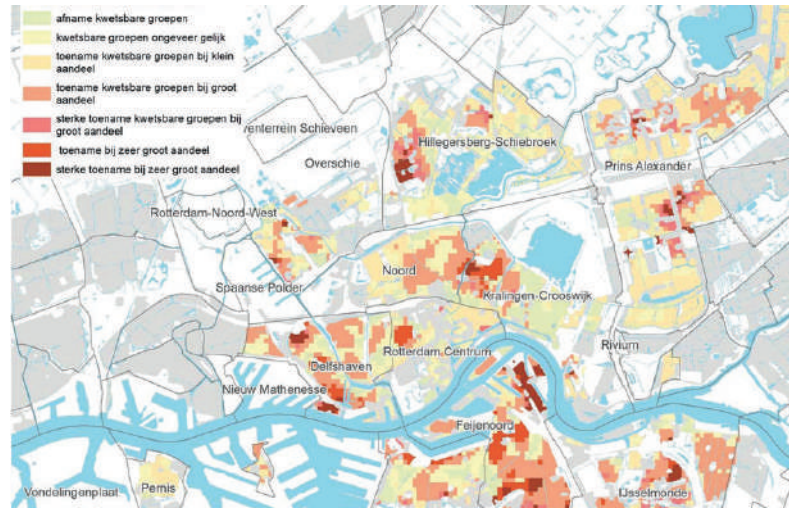


Figure 14. Development of concentration of vulnerable groups in Rotterdam (2012-2018)  
Leidemeijer, K., J. van Iersel & J. Frissen (2018) *Veerkracht in het corporatiebezit: Kwetsbare bewoners en leefbaarheid*. Amsterdam: Rigo.

## Nieuwe Westen

Vergelijk 2024 met 2022, 2020, 2018, 2016 of / 2014

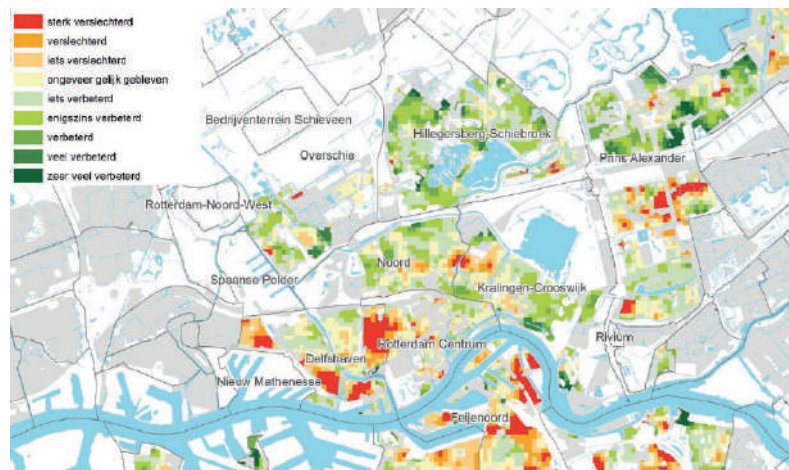


Figure 15. Leefbarometer: development of nuisance and insecurity in Rotterdam (2012-2018)  
Leidemeijer, K., J. van Iersel & J. Frissen (2018) *Veerkracht in het corporatiebezit: Kwetsbare bewoners en leefbaarheid*. Amsterdam: Rigo.

### 8.3.4 The revised Woningwet (2015–2020)

The 2015 revision of the Woningwet fundamentally changed the role of housing corporations. They were now limited to housing the poorest residents, while liveability investments were no longer a core task (Rijksoverheid, 2015). At the same time, municipalities received new responsibilities via decentralisation laws (Wmo, Jeugdwet, Participatiewet). These overlapping shifts led to the residualisation of social housing: increasingly, only the most vulnerable remained, clustering poverty in West. Meanwhile, support networks, like integrated care or maintenance coalitions, fell apart (Van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2019).

### 8.3.5 A renewed national focus: Programma Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid (2017)

In 2017, policymakers began to worry that certain neighbourhoods had reached their maximum absorption capacity. The *Programma Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid* (NPLV) was launched in 2019 to tackle accumulated disadvantage in 16 priority districts. While it did not include any funding, they pleaded for physical upgrades, social programmes and coordination between housing, health and safety domains (Rijksoverheid, 2019).

West was not among the 16 NPLV areas, but this renewed national focus on livability, among other reasons, like selling homes and economic growth, might have helped restart smaller projects. Further research into this is required, but it would explain the Woonbron-led Pupillenstraat renovation in 2022. Also, the effects of the messy storage rooms on the street seem to have gotten more awareness. Although it might not be the perfect solution, Woonbron recently covered them with plates on which iconic photographs of Rotterdam are shown.





Figure 16. Hooidrift in 1930, from the Heemraadssingel, intersection with Nozemanstraat, in the distance Mathenesserlaan.  
 @StadsarchiefRotterdam. (n.d.). Archief | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. Stadsarchief Rotterdam. [https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&miadt=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last\\_mod%7Cdesc&mistart=25&mif4=true&mif5=Ja&mizk\\_alle=hooidrift](https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&miadt=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last_mod%7Cdesc&mistart=25&mif4=true&mif5=Ja&mizk_alle=hooidrift)

68 " in 2025



Figure 17. Ice cream sales in the Schermlaan, 1918. Jan Porcellisstraat on the right and Claes de Vrieselaan in the background.  
 @StadsarchiefRotterdam. (n.d.). Archief | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. Stadsarchief Rotterdam. [https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&miadt=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last\\_mod%7Cdesc&mif4=true&mif5=Ja&mizk\\_alle=schermlaan](https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&miadt=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last_mod%7Cdesc&mif4=true&mif5=Ja&mizk_alle=schermlaan)

69 " in 2025



Figure 18. Claes de Vrieselaan off the Nieuwe Binnenweg, 1930  
 Publ. in Delfshaven oude ansichten deel 2, afb. 116. Collectie: Prentbriefkaarten verzameld door het Stadsarchief Rotterdam

70 " in 2025

100 YEARS LATER: COMPARING  
 & (UN)RECOGNIZING



## 8. (TOWARDS) THE MILD WEST

### 8.3.6 Mobility and future interventions (2018–2025)

Around 2018, Rotterdam introduced significant changes to improve traffic safety in response to increasing accidents and congestion. The rising number of cars, alongside economic prosperity, led to more traffic in the narrow streets, contributing to shortcut routes and pressure on the urban infrastructure. In response, one-way systems were introduced in West to alleviate these issues and reduce traffic-related risks. Hans Siertsema noted that these measurements came relatively late, as the livability first had to increase in the area and brought more cars into previously quieter streets, causing congestion. The main priorities were to address dilapidation, maintenance and promote greening first, and, only later, improve traffic safety with measures like one-way streets, adjusted limited speed and speed bumps. The good public transport accessibility in Rotterdam, like the metro from the Wederopbouw period, also contributed to reducing the need for excessive car use (H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 14 april).

The focus on traffic safety now plays a central role in Rotterdam's urban planning, as the city continues to balance economic growth with livability; now including sustainability and ecological ambition as well. In 2024, Rotterdam launched a new circulation plan aimed at enhancing walkability and public space. Over 115 streets, including Mathenesserlaan and Vierambachtstraat, should be transformed into 30 km/h zones and they plan to make the Nieuwe Binnenweg a one-way street too (Rijnmond, 2024).

### 8.4 Gentrification; goal or side-effect?

Many policies in Rotterdam, such as the *Rotterdamwet*, *Krachtwijkenbeleid* and *Kansrijke Wijken*, aimed to attract middle-income groups into poorer districts, a process often linked to gentrification (Permentier, 2020). Gentrification in West has brought improvements such as better public spaces, safer environments and a broader range of amenities, seen in areas like Nieuwe Binnenweg; now home to upscale cafés and boutiques. However, it also led to disruptions, such as rent increases and demolition, which sometimes displaced residents (Marcuse, 1985). While this occurred, many locals viewed the upgrades positively, especially with the enhanced amenities. Neighbourhood Katendrecht was an exception, where gentrification led to stronger critiques due to issues of exclusion and unaffordability (Koenders, 2014).

Another strategy, selective sale of social housing, aimed for “curated diversification”, which improved streets like Volmarijnstraat and explains its gaps in the map showing corporation possession (figure 9). The street became more diverse and better maintained, even winning the Opzoomertrofee for its civic engagement in 2024 (Kullberg et al., 2015). Research of RIVM (2020) confirmed that areas with more owner-occupied homes showed improved livability, as homeowners tend to invest in properties and engage more with their surroundings.

However, selling social housing has raised concerns about housing scarcity and exclusion, especially if displaced residents struggle to find affordable housing. Gentrification's effects have been uneven, with some streets transformed positively, while others experienced subtle exclusion or were left out.



Figure 19. Years of construction

Kaarten | Atlas Leefomgeving. (n.d.). <https://www.atlasleefomgeving.nl/kaarten?config=3ef-897de-127f-471a-959b-93b7597de188&layerFilter=Alle%20kaarten&use=piwiksectorcorde&gm-x=136953.82633932462&gm-y=455387.8095180758&gm-z=11&gm-b=1544180834512,true,1;1544724925856,true,1>



Figure 20. Concept circulation plan, 2024

Document RotterdamRaad - [24bb003568] Bijlage behorende bij 24bb003567 over het Rotterdamse concept Verkeerscirculatieplan - iBabs Publieksporaal. (n.d.). <https://gemeenteraad.rotterdam.nl/Reports/Document/bc8dae06-ab9c-4dec-819c-dd3fa1b499d0?documentId=07f2674f-60e4-4fd6-a25b-1234c602f6ca>

Recent policy discussions and research suggest a turning point. Rather than framing diversity as a problem, with risks of polarisation, it should be seen as an asset, according to RIVM. Most policy tools treat diversity as something to be managed rather than embraced. For example, as noted earlier, tools like the Leefbaarometer indirectly associate migrant presence with lower livability scores. But with over 200 nationalities in Rotterdam West and no majority ethnic group, RIVM(2020) emphasises that inclusive urban design, tailored to a multi-ethnic, multilingual population, offers new avenues for strengthening cohesion and well-being. They advise that liveability frameworks must embrace this complexity, recognizing not just ethnicity, but overlapping layers of age, gender, class, mobility and identity(Crul, 2018). It should prioritize inclusive, participatory approaches that go beyond fixed indicators, and move towards a more nuanced view of liveable diversity. Policies that account for superdiversity could unlock creative interventions at the street level. This perspective offers hope amid gentrification debates and polarisation concerns(Dekker, 2019)

However, challenges remain. Cultural differences and differences in perception and content of the notion of livability cause division between long-term residents and newcomers, leading to different expectations for how communities should function. As Siertsema notes, there is still fear around addressing these differences, especially when it comes to avoiding confrontation. This leads to social isolation and disconnectedness, where communities “live past each other” instead of collaborating (H. Siertsema, personal communication, 2025 14 april).

initiative encountered during fieldwork in the Ruilstraat. A group of young people from diverse backgrounds across the neighbourhood gathered on a sunny day to green their area, transform a local property into community space and turn its courtyard into a flower farm. Unlike *Opzoomeren*, where residents collaborate to improve their own street, the *Urban Farmers* initiative aims to extend its efforts beyond one street, with plans to benefit the entire neighbourhood. Interestingly, when the comparison with *Opzoomeren* was made in this small encounter, the participants were unfamiliar with the term despite the fact that its office is just 50 meters away from theirs (Annebeau, personal communication, 2025 16 april). Although still in its early stages, with little documented so far, the initiative offers a glimpse of what superdiversity can achieve when people from diverse backgrounds and streets, unite for a shared goal. The project could prove to be an essential step in overcoming fragmentation seen in West.



Figure 21. Corner Pupillenstraat and Heemraadsstraat, under construction, 1988

@StadsarchiefRotterdam. (n.d.). Archief | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. [https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&mivast=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last\\_mod%7Cdesc&mif4=true&](https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/archief/?mivast=184&mizig=299&mivast=184&miview=gal&milang=nl&misort=last_mod%7Cdesc&mif4=true&)



Figure 22. Corner Pupillenstraat and Heemraadsstraat, 2018  
Google Maps, (2018). Google Maps. <https://www.google.com/maps/@51.9121584,4.4503366,3a,48.9y,223.39y,89.2t/data=!3m1!1e1!3m1!1scfCZ0BRTqt-qE8fQ53fITBq!2e0!5s20150601T000000!6shttQXN!4x!KXMDSoAsAFQA>



71 Corner Pupillenstraat and Heemraadsstraat, 2025

## 7. (TOWARDS) THE MILD WEST



## 8.6 Conclusion

The period from 2000 to 2025 saw numerous policies aimed at improving livability in West, but many were short-term, reactive and failed to address the core issues. While the overall livability improved relative to the Wild West era, these policies resulted in uneven progress.

### *Visible differences between streets*

Some streets received significant upgrades, while others left behind, deepening disparities in livability and highlighting the need for consistent, long-term planning. However, mobility interventions did improve livability in the smaller streets, bringing them closer to the level of investment and quality seen in the more prominent boulevards.

### *Historical events and urban planning*

The early 2000s saw a political shift in Rotterdam, with Leefbaar Rotterdam advocating for cleanliness, safety and security. This shift led to an increased police presence on the streets and a greater emphasis on livability, which became institutionalized. However, this approach was often one-sided, focusing on security and public order without fully considering the social needs of residents.

Policies like the Rotterdamwet and Krachtwijkenbeleid led to some improvements but also caused displacement and social fragmentation, with gentrification reshaping certain areas, while others stayed stagnant.

### *Critique on measuring livability*

Tools like the Leefbaarometer mask street-level disparities by averaging results of the complete neighbourhood. A street-level approach is needed for more accurate and

targeted interventions. Also, the subjective factors that determine this score need to be re-evaluated, especially regarding diversity.

### *Superdiversity and future directions*

According to RIVM, embracing superdiversity can foster social cohesion and community renewal, as seen in projects like Urban Farmers. Future policies should focus on inclusive planning, sustainability and equitable investments, prioritizing bottom-up engagement and street-level interventions. However, creating policies that embrace superdiversity and other new approaches is not straightforward.

In conclusion, while policies have improved some areas, they have also created new divisions. The street-level perspective of this research shows both the limits of aggregated policy tools and the need for context-aware urban design. Still, the challenge remains: how can cities govern for liveability without flattening complexity? A more consistent approach and future strategies, especially those embracing superdiversity and participation, could begin to bridge this gap. Towards a more livable and cohesive West, further research is required to fully understand the street-level impact of these interventions and how new policies can be best implemented.



72 Plates with photographs to cover storages, Pupillenstraat



73 African café, coffee bar and turkish supermarket Nieuwe binnenweg



74 Different groups on a sunny day - Nieuwe Binnenweg



75 Mix of home ownership in Volmarijnstraat



76 Johannes Gewin's work, architect, Mathenesserlaan



77 First house on Heemraadssingel, neglected





## 9. CONCLUSION

### *The Wild, Mild West*

This research set out to answer the main question:

***‘Which key urban, political, and socio-economic developments have contributed to the disparities found between streetscapes in West?’***

The findings illustrate the complex and layered nature of these disparities, shaped by a combination of historical events, urban planning decisions and socio-economic factors. From the speculative development in the late 19th century (Bouwverordening, 1887) to post-war reconstruction and urban renewal efforts, West has experienced multiple phases of transformation. These interventions often led to uneven outcomes.

The post-war Wederopbouwperiode prioritised the city centre and port development, leaving neighbourhoods like West underdeveloped. This contributed to worsened living conditions and increased exploitation by absentee landlords.

The Stadsvernieuwing period introduced incremental changes aimed at improving social cohesion and infrastructure. However, it also led to uniformity, diminishing the richness of street-level interactions. From 2000 to 2025, a variety of policies, including the Rotterdamwet and Krachtwijkenbeleid, sought to address these issues, but many were short-term and resulted in uneven progress.

Key insights show that measurement tools for livability, such as the Leefbaarometer, have limitations as they fail to reflect street-level disparities and the complexity of urban diversity. Policies aimed at improving livability often overlooked the specific needs of smaller streets, leaving many areas behind.

Looking ahead, superdiversity could offer new opportunities for improving social cohesion and community renewal, as evidenced by initiatives like Urban Farmers. Future policies should focus on more inclusive, participatory approaches, addressing the complexities of diverse neighbourhoods.

In conclusion, West’s development illustrates the challenges of balancing urban policies with the diverse needs of a neighbourhood. To answer the main question, it is clear that a long-term, street-level approach to urban planning is essential. Further research into the actual impact of these interventions is crucial to ensure WZmore equitable and sustainable development in West. While this study provides valuable insights into this specific neighbourhood, it also highlights the need for a tailored approach that could be relevant for similar urban areas. However, as this research demonstrates, each neighbourhood is unique, and strategies that work in one context may not be applicable in another. Future studies should therefore focus on the specific needs of individual streets and communities, in chance of real solutions.



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