

## Prison' Housing vs Housing' Prison

### A Comparative Analysis of De Koepel and the Oost III Projects by Koolhaas/OMA in the 1980s

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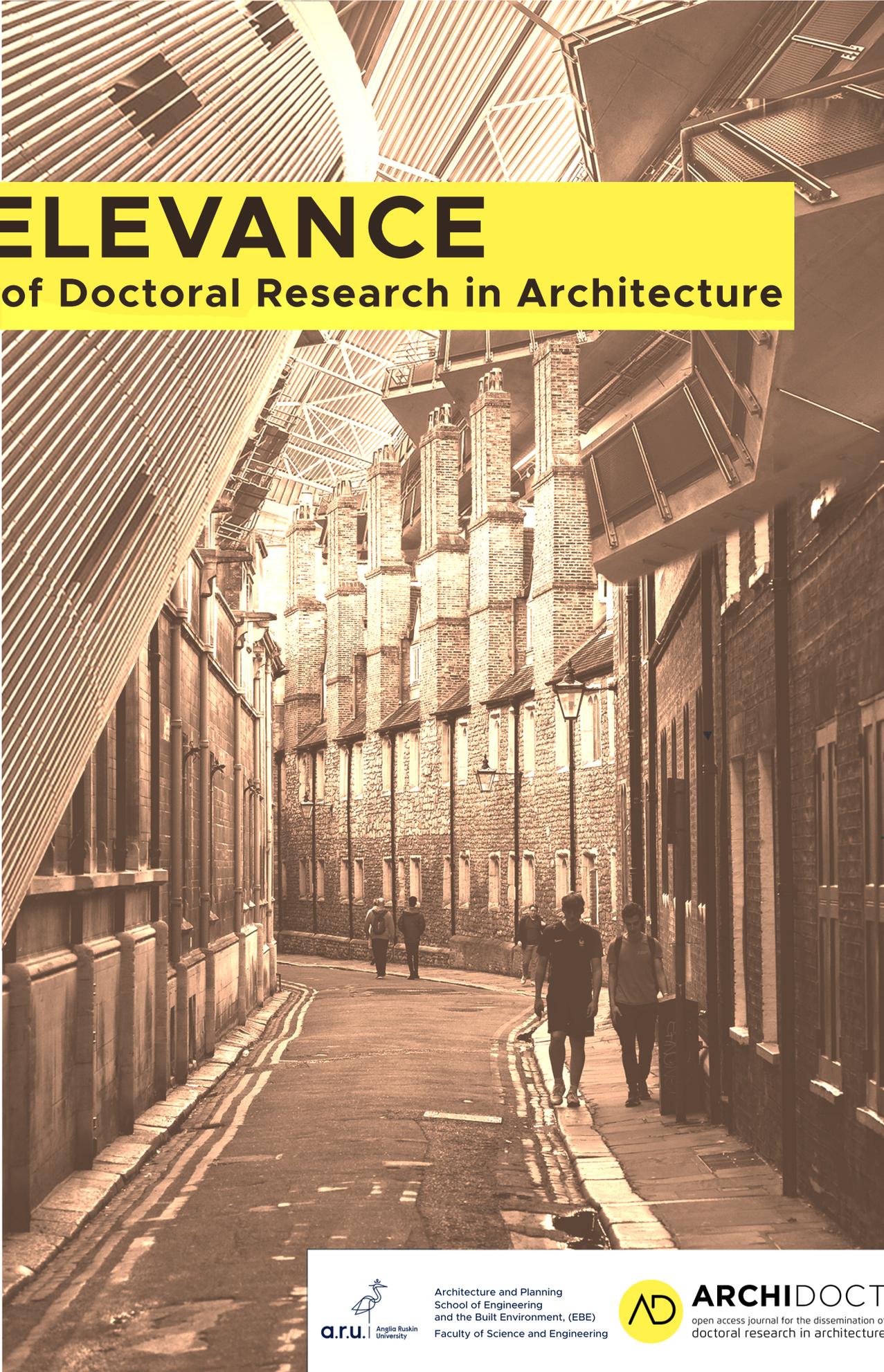
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# Prison' Housing vs Housing' Prison. A Comparative Analysis of De Koepel and the Oost III Projects by Koolhaas/OMA in the 1980s

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Keywords: domesticity; De Koepel prison; Oost III housing units; Koolhaas/OMA; 1980's

*Lede: This paper provides a comparative analysis of two projects designed throughout the 1980s by Rem Koolhaas and OMA, De Koepel prison in Arnhem and the Oost III subplan in IJ-Plein Amsterdam*

*This paper provides an overview on how small housing can be studied following an exploratory strategy, through a comparative analysis that brings together architectural theory and practice. This research stems from the author's doctoral thesis, Domesticity 'Behind Bars', and its subsequent development as a postdoctoral project, 'Unexpected' Domesticity. Both studies seek to provide an answer to the following research question: How is it possible to explore the tensions and contradictions of domesticity? To this end, this research studies Non-traditional Forms of Collective Housing, this is, other forms of collective housing for people who live alone, but within a community. Because one of the main challenges in many cities and countries today is the growing demand for non-family households. Two cases designed by one of the most influential architects of the last quarter of the 20th century, Rem Koolhaas and Office for Metropolitan Architecture, are placed in relation to each other, exploring their differences and similarities. In this paper, his proposal for the renovation of a 19th-century panopticon prison is analysed, together with another of his housing projects in which the typological variety shows small units as an alternative to those intended for families. For various reasons, both can be considered paradigmatic projects. The first is one of only three pure panoptic prisons built in the Netherlands at the end of the 19th century, known as De Koepel (the dome), specifically the one located in the city of Arnhem, which is a National Monument. The proposal for the renovation of the entire prison complex was developed over almost a decade, between 1979 and 1988, and culminated in the specific proposal for the design of the interior of the cells. The second case is the Oost III subplan of the IJ-plein urban plan, located in a former harbour area on the banks of the IJ in Amsterdam North, a plan in which all the housing was social housing, which is unique in the Netherlands and unfeasible today. The plan was designed and built between 1980 and 1988, and in the housing blocks of the Oost III subplan that Koolhaas/OMA themselves also implemented, the small housing units have a significant presence. Archival work plays an essential role in the methodology of this research, and the documents of both projects are held in the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning, at the Nieuwe Institute in Rotterdam. This research shows that individual small living units often are complemented by options for use that offer more complex ways of living together.*

## 1. Introduction

Among the projects developed throughout the 1980s by Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, this paper draws attention to two of them. The first is their proposal for the renovation and extension of a 19th-century panopticon prison, known as De Koepel (the dome), in the Dutch city of Arnhem (1979-1988). The second case is the Oost III subplan of the IJ-plein urban plan, located on a former harbour area, on the banks of the IJ in Amsterdam North (1980-1988). But why might it be interesting to study these two projects by Koolhaas/OMA now? Through a comparative analysis of these two projects, this paper aims to provide an overview on how small housing units can be studied following an exploratory strategy, which brings together architectural theory and practice.

This research stems from the author's doctoral thesis Domesticity 'Behind Bars'<sup>1</sup> (Martínez-Millana, 2017, 2018, 2021), and its subsequent development as a postdoctoral project, 'Unexpected' Domesticity<sup>2</sup>. Both studies seek to provide an answer to the following research question: How is it possible to explore the tensions and contradictions of domesticity? This is in line with previous studies on the relationship between modernity and domesticity, such as Hilde Heynen's (Heynen, 2005). To this end, this research studies Non-traditional Forms of Collective Housing, this is, other

forms of collective housing for people who live alone, but within a community. Because one of the main challenges in many cities and countries today is the growing demand for non-family households.

De Koepel prison and the Oost III subplan are placed in relation to each other, exploring their differences and similarities. The analysis of these projects addresses three different scales: first, the cells of De Koepel prison and the smallest housing units of the Oost III subplan; second, the spaces that connects these cells or housing units in each case, such as the access systems; third, the ground level or urban space. To do so, archival work plays an essential role in the methodology of this research, and the documents of both projects are held in the Dutch National Collection of Architecture and Urban Planning, at the Nieuwe Institute in Rotterdam. Concisely, this article looks at both projects together and highlight their design in relation to their smallest living units: could smaller units offer another reading of these projects?

## 2. De Koepel Prison vs IJ-Plein Urban Plan

The proposal for the renovation of De Koepel was developed over almost a decade, between 1979 and 1988 (Figure 1). The initial proposal carried out the years 1979 and 1980, was the one that was duly disseminated, since the *Biennale di Venezia* that took place in 1980 (Koolhaas & OMA, 1980), and

was immediately published in many architecture journals, such as *Lotus International*, *AMC*, *Artforum*, *Wonen TA/BK* (Koolhaas & OMA, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, 1982). However, after that, it was rarely disseminated. The project was defined, even until today, by the version that was made public in 1980, despite its development continuing for long after that. This is so, largely because Koolhaas/OMA left proof of it in the largest volume compiling his work, *S,M,L,XL* (Koolhaas, 1995).

De Koepel project, although well known, has hardly been studied or discussed, unlike what happens in other works by Koolhaas/OMA. As Meuwissen recently noted, if the programme been uncomplicated, the design could have brought about the paradigm shift in architecture that was established a few years later by the 'horizontal skyscraper' for Parc de la Villette in Paris (Meuwissen, 2015). Shortly after new articles were published. It was demonstrated how this proposal for a Panopticon prison, which for Foucault is none other than the emblem of what he called the "disciplinary society" (Foucault, 1975; Patrão, 2020), was conceived from his own theoretical discourse as a "social condenser", and eliminate the difference between what is considered housing and prison (Martínez-Millana & Cánovas Alcaraz, 2020, 2021).

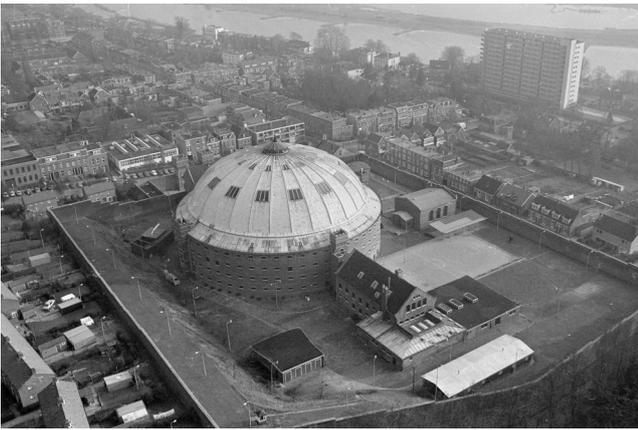


Figure 1: Aerial view of De Koepel prison, the year 1977, in the city of Arnhem, the Netherlands. Shortly before the renovation was commissioned to Rem Koolhaas / Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Gelders Archief / Fotocollectie Gerth van Roden / 1544-177-0015

Differently, IJ-Plein was duly disseminated and also studied throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Figure 2). Several articles were published in national and international architectural journals during that period, and there was also considerable coverage in national and regional newspapers. Of particular note are articles published in *De Architect*, such as those by Janny Rodermond (Rodermond, 1982, 1984), Bernard Leupen and Dirk Jan Postel (Leupen, 1988; Postel, 1988), as well as others in journals such as *OASE* and *Wonen-TA/BK* (Brouwers, 1982; Looise, 1987). The first that captured the relationship of this project to Koolhaas's theoretical discourse was Jacques Lucan's in *AMC* (Lucan, 1984). But the most exhaustive contribution was the book by Leupen, with whom Koolhaas taught at the TU Delft (Leupen, 1989).

Over the last decade, IJ-Plein has been the subject of some articles that seek to show the value of the project, one written by Lara Schrijver and the other by Christophe Ven Gerrewey (Schrijver, 2015; van Gerrewey, 2018). Regarding the housing block of the Oost III subplan that Koolhaas/OMA themselves also implemented, another article by Dirk van

den Heuvel is very interesting. According to van den Heuvel, the Oost III was one of those projects that marked a turning point in the evolution of collective housing in the Netherlands at the end of the 20th century, as it offered a reinterpretation of the modern tradition and introduced typological innovations in social housing, reviving interest in these issues after a period of lethargy (van den Heuvel, 2011).



Figure 2: View of IJ-Plein urban plan in Amsterdam North, shortly before the full completion of the Oost III subplan, the year 1988. Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Office for Metropolitan Architecture / Archief. OMAR. 110621935 IJ-Plein, Amsterdam (1980-1988).

### 3. The Public Domain

The most recognizable strategy of the intervention at De Koepel is the intersection of two streets excavated in the floor of the large central space, which perpendicularly cross in the centre of the Panopticon. This strategy put an emphasis on the condition of "normality", which was the core of all the new ideas on accommodation for prisoners by the Rijksgedebouwendienst (The Government Buildings Agency) (Koolhaas, 1980b). In the words of the author, "The same relative freedom that now exists in the dome is extended across the two streets. In this way, essential contrasts that define life outside –such as indoors and outdoors, home and work, house and street– are re-established inside the prison" (Koolhaas & OMA, 1981b). It was created an "exterior world", transforming the dome, as we will see, into a "home".

These streets gave access to all the new amenities of the "public domain" within the prison. The south street leads to the visitor's centre, whose façade opens towards a garden. The north street gives access to an excavated courtyard where the kitchens, the medical department, and a special area for difficult prisoners are located; the west street leads to the more active functional area shaped by four workshops, sports equipment, and a room dedicated to cinema, theatre, or religious events. The ceiling of the workshops is partially equipped for outdoor works such as gardening. Apart from the views towards the street, each workshop has a courtyard with plants. The stretch of street located in the sport's area shapes a swimming pool. The football pitch and the running track are accessible from the changing rooms located in the gym.

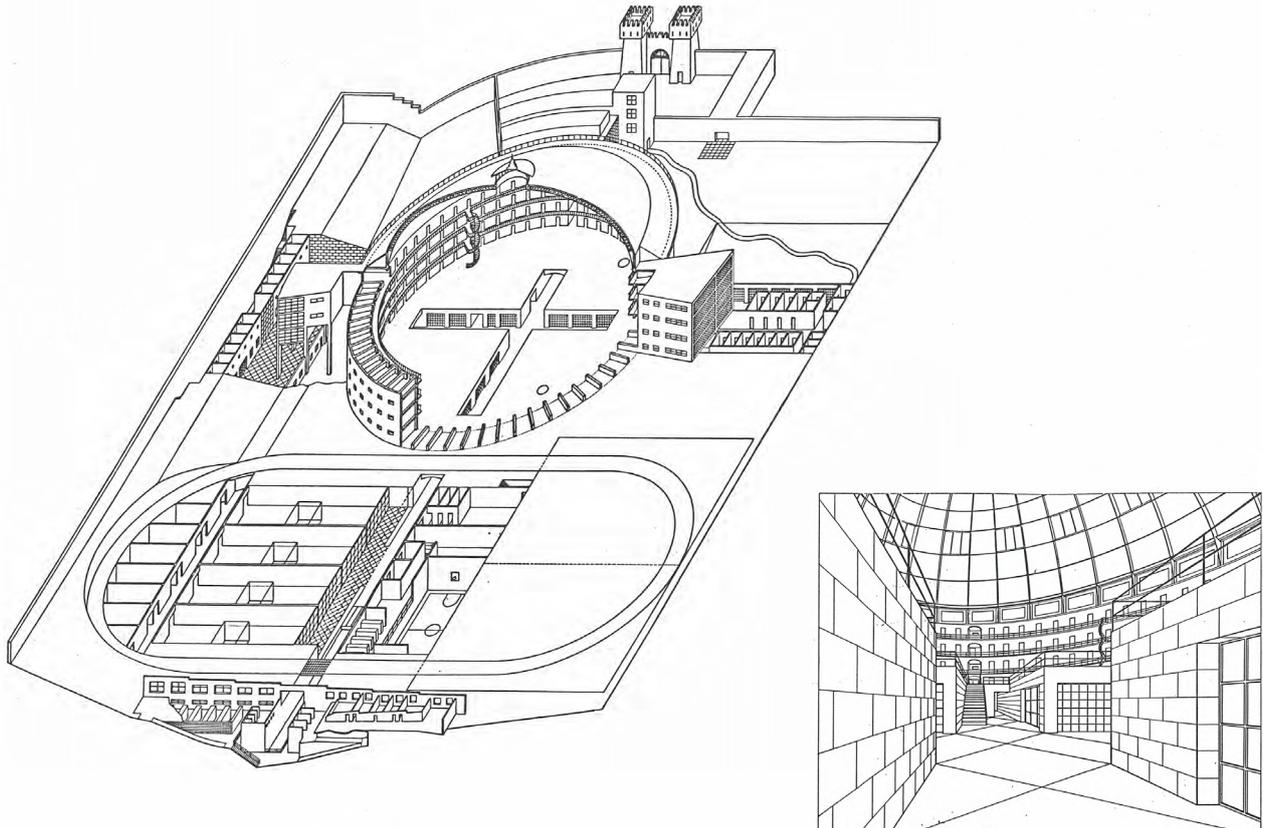


Figure 3: Axonometric of the House of Detention at the De Koepel prison, Wilhelminastraat 166, in Arnhem, first of the two proposals (1979-1980). Right side, a view of the street. Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Office for Metropolitan Architecture / Archief, OMAR. 110621884, Huis van Bewaring, Arnhem (1979-1980) (1985-1988). OMAR 166.

The IJ-Plein urban plan is divided into two parts, separated by a filled-in former water area of the old shipyard. The triangular eastern part has an arrangement of elongated blocks, in Koolhaas's criteria of parallel bands, and the western part also has isolated blocks. This arrangement creates a series of streets that provides a visual connection of the area with the IJ and the centre of Amsterdam, just like OMA's first project for the New York State Urban Development Corporation's Roosevelt Island Housing Competition (1974-75), on New Welfare Island in Manhattan's East River. As Koolhaas stated, "The site's tension lies exactly in the dichotomy between an almost village-like context and an effectively central location, between the desire to maintain a low scale for the buildings and the pressure to build" (Lucan, 1991).

This extensive urban plan is devoted entirely to social housing and includes education and leisure programmes. The Oost III subplan is located at the northeast end of the plan, and certainly, as Leupen already noted, it presents the most "congested" programme of the entire plan (Leupen, 1989) It consists of mainly two housing blocks: a larger one facing the wharf, which is elevated on a podium and pilotis where other programmes are included, even a road passage, and a short one behind. The non-residential programme was in five pavilions partly under the Oost III larger block, and over a podium which served as a dock and storage. It consisted of a community centre with nursery and a supermarket in two large triangular volumes, and four shops in two oval ones.

#### 4. The Access System

The proposal for De Koepel consist of another important strategy intervention on the "dome" preexisting building itself: all the necessary facilities for it to work as a dwelling were all located in two satellite constructions—living rooms, dining rooms and bathrooms per each floor. These were directly connected with the ring galleries but located in a sort of wedge shape in the exterior. This way, according to Koolhaas' explanations, the interior space of the dome would be preserved intact, and these new facilities placed in the exterior of the Koepel would be the proof that there had been an actual revision carried out (Koolhaas, 1980a). Apart from the collective space of the "outer world", which they could access via the new podium streets, there were other collective spaces as part of the "inner world" of the Koepel, in the "dwelling".

Moreover, in addition to the horizontal communication through the ring gallery, the vertical communication between the different levels of the cell rings made it possible to form groups of prisoners who did not necessarily live on the same floor. According to Koolhaas, this was an extremely flexible regime, where the prisoner could be part of different groups, at different moments and for different reasons, "the group which is created each time is not an architectural piece of fiction but a momentary social configuration which can suffer endless permutations" (Koolhaas & OMA, 1986). The individual cells of the Koepel, which had made it possible to have solitary confinement—now considered something negative—in this revision meant it made it

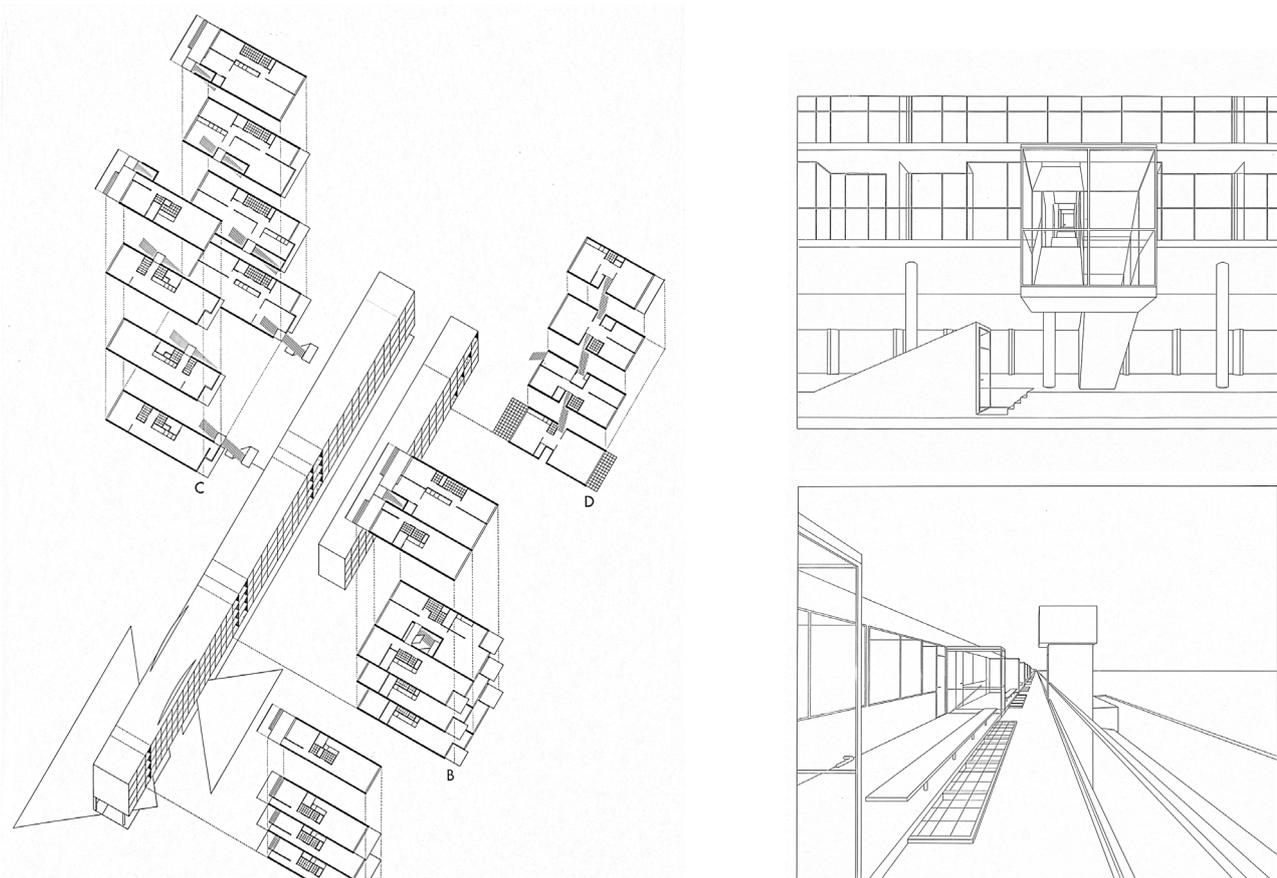


Figure 4: Exploded axonometric of the Oost III two housing blocks showing various dwelling types. On the right side, two perspectives showing the upper gallery of the larger block, and one of its several access systems. Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Office for Metropolitan Architecture / Archief, OMAR. 110621935 IJ-Plein, Amsterdam (1980-1988). OMAR 1148 / 4302. OMAR 166.

possible for the prisoner to have freedom of choice.

The Oost III blocks comprise many different types of housing: in the large block with two and three rooms, and in the shorter block with four rooms and a large collective unit for mentally handicapped. Of these, the smallest housing are the so-called 'HAT' units, a novelty in response to the initiative launched in 1975 by the State Secretary for Public Housing and Spatial Planning, to deal with the problem of affordable housing for singles or pairs, in the Nota "Housing for Singles and Two-Person Households", a whole new thing since the Housing Act of 1901 (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 1975) According to Postel, Oost III housing differentiation was "determined by what was left elsewhere on the IJ-plein, which resulted in a relatively large number of HAT units" (Postel, 1988).

The large block of 218m x 15m and 4 storeys comprises a total of 168 dwellings. The block assembles three dwelling "sections": the north one consists of 64 HAT units accessed by galleries, and the central and south one of 52 dwellings each, both combines pairs of 2 and 3 rooms, and are accessed by central and cross staircases respectively. These three access systems reach the long upper gallery of the block, and a lift in the middle of the main façade, connect it directly to the street. Thus, the differentiation on three access systems does not divide the block into three sections but connects them with both vertical and horizontal circulation. The result is that, paradoxically, the building has numerous exits and entrances, and all the dwellings, although part of different sections, are connected.

## 5. The Smallest Living Units

De Koepel prison, as the Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon architectural model, presents all the cells following the circular perimeter. Therefore, all the prisoners can be observed from a single surveillance point located in the centre of that circle. This distribution creates a large central courtyard which has a diameter of 52 m and is covered by an enormous dome with a height of 31 m. There is a total of 208 cells distributed in four floors, slightly trapezoidal, with a width of 2.40 m on the door side and 2.80 m on the opposite side, where the window is. The length or depth of the cells is 4.00 m. The windows of the cells measure 1.20 x 0.70 m. The doors, which are made of pinewood, open towards the outside and are equipped with a peephole or a window.

Within the prison cell, a series of activities had to be able to be carried out. As Rodermond pointed out, the proposal have to respond "the right of the prisoner to privacy in his cell" and, at the same time, "the requirements with regard to control and visibility" (Rodermond, 1986). Prisoners had to be able to eat, take care of their bodies, sleep, study, rest, talk to prison personnel, work, clean and do some maintenance. Koolhaas/OMA's proposal left the small space of the prison intact, giving the prisoner a greater range of possibilities use-wise. Two elements are worth mentioning: the design of the sanitary installations as a piece of "furniture" –so that no partitions had to be introduced– and the triangular-shaped wardrobe –which eliminated the formation of a blind spot within the cell.

The three main dwelling types of the Oost III large block

run from façade to façade, oriented to the northeast and southwest. They are all organised around the service core, which comprises the kitchen, laundry room, bathroom, and toilet. Leupen states, these dwelling types are a mixture of the New York-derived loft and the floor plan with a free nave developed by the Municipal Housing Department in Amsterdam. (Leupen, 1989). The Oost III “loft” or “free nave” have a deep of 15 m. and a variable width that ranges from 4.00 m. of the HAT unit to the 4.60 m. and 6.75 m of the 2 and 3-rooms dwellings. As Lucan wrote in the interview he did to Koolhaas on the IJ-plein, this project reflects “in a very singular way” Koolhaas’ concerns at the time about the “culture of congestion”, “even in terms of housing typology” (Lucan, 1984).

The total surfaces of the Oost III HAT unit are of 32.9 m<sup>2</sup> and 33.1 m<sup>2</sup>. They have their access on the northeast façade, through galleries arranged separately from the building, and at first it was even going to be two steps below. Like the other dwelling types, HAT units are organised around the service core, and they also have the terraces next to the living room on the southwest façade, except on the top floor, where they are next to the bedroom on the gallery side. At the entrance there is draught-proof space, due to the windy weather of the IJ. The position of the access gives the corridor a length of 7.22 m, and part of the service core opens onto it, the toilet, and the bathroom. The kitchen is open onto the living room, and the laundry room is closed behind it.

## 6. Conclusions

The “*culture of congestion*” that Koolhaas identified in Manhattan and theorised about in his book *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1978) was materialised in De Koepel prison and the Oost III subplan on different scales and in a very particular way from the small living units to the urban plan. The analysis of these projects shows how their designs determine different degrees of privacy or collectivity of the housing programme within the housing unit (private space) and the building (services and shared spaces), and its relation to the urban context (public space). Thus, it identifies, individually and comparatively, aspects of the design of these projects that reveal the possibilities of social interactions, ultimately showing how they contribute to inclusivity, fostering social cohesion or, on the contrary, individualisation.

The domesticity of De Koepel and the Oost III, of their materiality and their inhabitants’ ways of living, shows the extent to which they challenge the meanings and understandings inherent in housing architecture when the family is no longer the norm, with all that this entails, in very different ways. Whether living programme activities are partially or mostly private or shared (such as cooking, eating, sleeping, toilet, showering, working, storage, laundry, and outdoor space, among others), and whether the spatial configuration of the rooms and the layout of the rooms within the housing unit and the building provide space for several of these domestic activities. This research shows that small living units for people who live alone often are complemented by options for use that offer more complex ways of living together and apart.

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## Endnotes

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2. This ongoing postdoctoral research project is carried out at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, at the Delft University of Technology (BK, TU Delft), under the supervision of Prof. Dr.ir. Dirk van den Heuvel. Specifically, at the Architecture Archives of the Future group of the TU Delft and the Jaap Bakema Study Center of the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, which is a collaboration between the TU Delft and the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning.

## Author

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