

Intervam as a Mediator

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Introduction

The Heritage & Architecture studio is adopting a holistic approach that contains the field of Cultural Value, Building Technology and Architectural Design. The purpose of this essay is to position ourselves on the Cultural Values of built heritage. As a group, we developed the Cultural Value Assessment Matrix about the building system and its particular location. The Matrix places relative heritage values according to Alois Riegl's theory on the X-axis and physical element of heritage site according to the 'Shearing Layers' of Steward Brand's idea on the Y axis. The significance of each value is decided by using different color codes. The Cultural Value of Intervam housing estate in Overvecht is assessed in depth by this Matrix system and critical values were taken into account during the whole design process.

The first and second part of the essay focused on the overall historical research and observation of the current situation. The Intervam housing was facing the similar problem what other post-war mass housing products might have. The city was built to provide an ideal community where people from a different background can harmonize together. The urban theory that applied extensively to the whole Overvecht area conflicts with today's way of living. The boundary between public and private space has been changed drastically, which influences the relationship between housing and the surrounding environment.

The next chapter goes deep into the assessment and justification of the Cultural Values. The social housings of the post-war decades were regarded as a failure of modern architecture that should either be demolished or replaced by new buildings. I believe there are many qualities from the history and building system that are still relevant to our society. Those mass housing estates provided spatial and hygienic standards to inhabitants in those days, and now they occupy the substantial part of the built environment at the outskirts of the cities in the Netherlands. They also still provide a shelter for all kinds of households. To create a sustainable neighborhood, the awareness of community which requires more organic approach should be considered in response to the contemporary times.

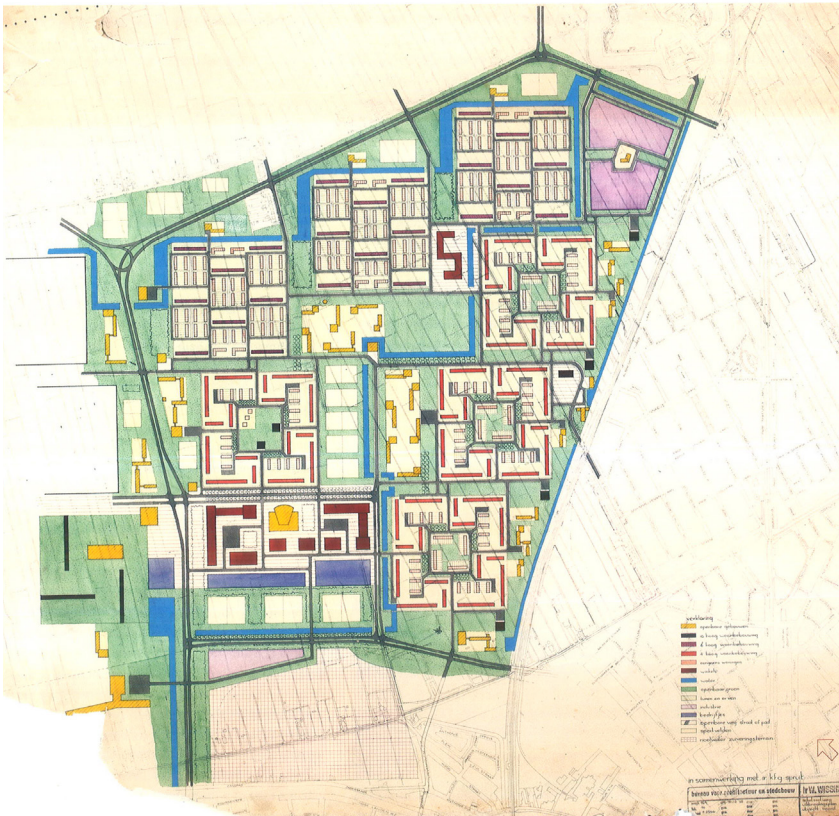


Figure 1. Expansion plan of Overvecht-Zuid by Wissing & Spruit in 1958 (NAi Archive)



Figure 2. View of the apartments in Taagdreef (Utrecht Archive)
 A long strip of medium-rise Intervam flat implies the systematic building system of post-war period. Low-, medium-, and high-rise building show clear distinction of the skyline

1. History of Urban Construction

1.1 Urban Planning of Overvecht-Zuid

In the sixties, a large scale polder located in the Northern outskirts of Utrecht which is now called Overvecht began to transform into a residential area. The rapid economic growth and urgent housing shortage at the time fostered the development to be realized at a great speed. Due to the lack of human resources, the city council commissioned the design of new estate to the external office: Bureau Wissing in Barendrecht.¹ The architect Wim Wissing designed the master plan in 1958 based on the idea of “Wijkgedachte” which was the typical product of the post-war period in the Netherlands. According to the initial plan of Wissing, Overvecht-Zuid was divided into seven recognizable neighborhoods that could function as a full-fledged community. Therefore, each neighborhood should consist of housing types for all social groups. The basic facilities such as bakery, grocery stores, and community center were also included in each neighborhood. However, the original master plan was not fully implemented because the demand to solve the housing shortage was very high. The municipality already began to clear the land before the approval of Wissing’s urban plan. During the construction of Overvecht, there were two significant changes compared to the original master plan. First, the minimum height of the building in the neighborhood was increased from six-storey to ten-storey. The second change was the increased amount of single-family housing so-called ‘keuzeplanwoningen’ which could have more financial support from the central government.² These changes resulted in a stark contrast of low-, medium, and high-rise buildings, which creates a unique skyline of Overvecht.

Traditional building methods were not adequate to fulfill the needs of housings after the Second World War. A number of traditional building materials and skilled workers were not enough to satisfy the demand for housings. The development of non-traditional-building-methods which focused their attention on cheap and rapid construction process gained favor with the government and building contractors for these reasons. The construction industry put effort into prefabrication and standardization of the building system. Some of the building materials such as concrete and steel were mass-produced at the factory to replace the traditional building materials. Intervam is one of the building systems invented in this period. This construction method uses large prefabricated concrete element produced at the factory. The production factories were located in Valkenburg, Hoogkerk, and Utrecht.³ It is natural to find a large concentration of Intervam building in Utrecht because the biggest factory that manufactured major parts of the building elements was located there. After the factory produces all the necessary prefabricated elements, they were transported to the site and assembled by the crane. Due to the assembly process which requires 38.5m to be kept free next to the construction site⁴, all Intervam buildings are facing the wide street. The repetitive and systematic way of construction process creates monotonous housing block standing along the street.

1) Connolly et al., *Kijken naar Overvecht de naoorlogse woonwijk anders in beeld gebracht = Looking at Overvecht : other ways of picturing the post-war housing estate* (S.l. : s.n., 2011), 17

2) *Ibid.*, 19.

3) Van Nunen, *Documentie Streekwoningen '50-'75* (2013), 23

4) Elk, *Niet-traditionele woningbouwmethoden in Nederland, chap. 12.4* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom, 1971), 13



There are about 6,500 Intervam buildings in Utrecht.⁵ In 1962, the five-storey Intervam flats were first built in Kanaleneiland on a large scale. There was a collective parking space, playground and private garden between the housing blocks. In Overvecht, the similar five-storey Intervam flat was also realized in 1962 near Donaudreef. The housing complex consisted of six buildings with 336 households, but these buildings were demolished in 2011. Another five-storey Intervam housing in Overvecht was built two years later in 1964 around Camera Obscuradreef. The area included six housing blocks with 312 of dwellings.⁶ The floor plan was almost same as the previous five-storey Intervam flat, but the collective outdoor space located at the center of the building site became larger and more open to the public area compared to the others. On the ground floor, public facilities were placed to attract people living close to the neighborhood. At the time, many stacked housings were constructed in portiekflat which was the most common dwelling type until 1965.⁷ The Intervam building system was a good example showing one of the typical portiekflats in this period.

From the year of 1965, natural gas was widely introduced to the housings as a source of heating.⁸ This meant the housings could be built higher than five-storey, because the coal was no longer needed to be carried upwards. The ten-storey Intervam flats began to build from this period without having a private garden. The Intervam buildings in Camera Obscuradreef were also planned to be demolished in 2008 for new housings, but the plan was not executed by the economic crisis in the same year. As a result, the building site is remaining as the last five-storey Intervam flat in Overvecht-Zuid showing the transitional phase between the medium- and high-rise Intervam building.

5) Ibid., 12.

6) Paul Meurs and Marinke Steenhuis, *10 cultuurhistorisch onderzoek en ruimtelijke analyse Utrecht NaOorlogse Wijken: Overvecht* (2006)

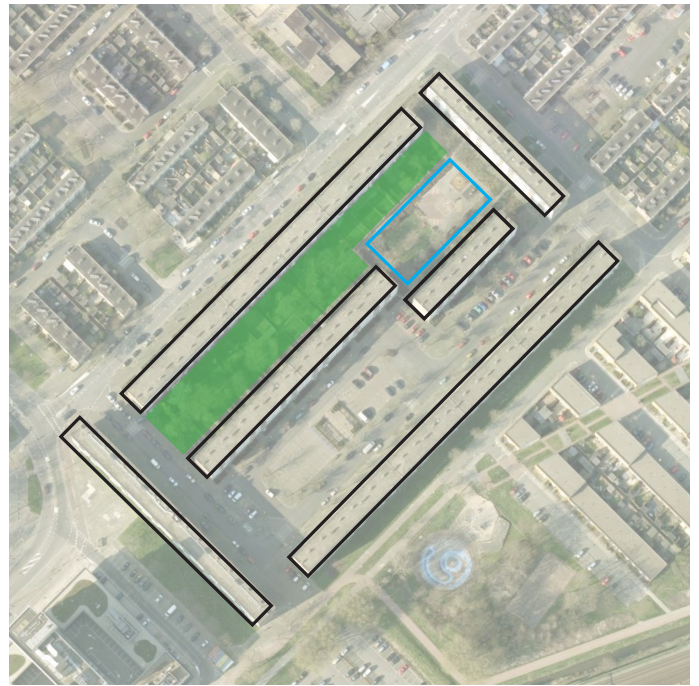
7) Garritzmann Architecten and hp architecten, *Kansen voor de naoorlogse portiekflat: Het specifieke van de middenniveau renovatie* (2015)

8) Ibid.

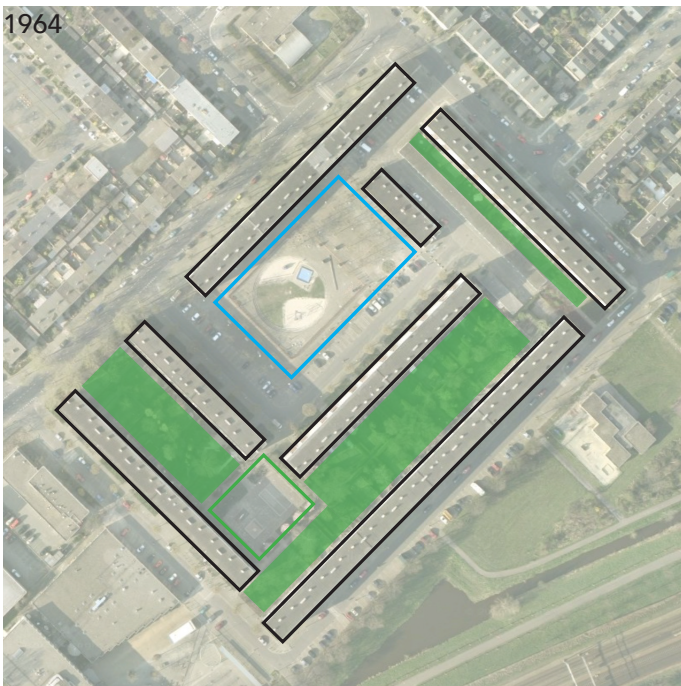
Figure 4. Development of Intervam urban planning



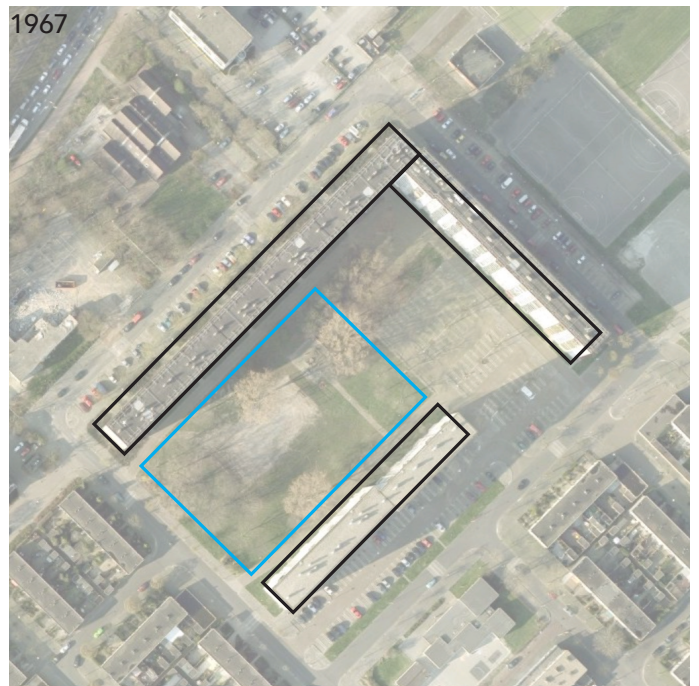
five-storey Intervam flat in Kanaleneiland (1962)






five-storey Intervam flat in Donaudreef of Overvecht-Zuid (1962; demolished in 2011)



five-storey Intervam flat in Camera Obscuradreef of Overvecht-Zuid (1964)



ten-storey Intervam flat in Atlasdreef of Overvecht-Zuid (1967)

-  Intervam building
-  communal outdoor space
-  private garden

1.2 Historical Value of “Wijkgedachte”

During the war architects and urban planners in the Netherlands had made a planning of residential areas based on the neighborhood unit concept called “Wijkgedachte”. It was conceived as a physical planning tool for designing what they perceived as an ideal city in response to the dislocation of the past war and the fear of unstructured urban growth from previous years. The idea was to construct cities made up of neighbourhood units, which would function as close-knit communities. Residents would be able to find what they needed close to their house. The neighborhood also included various types of housing related to different stages of life and an individual’s increasing range as he or she grew up.¹

The ambition of “Wijkgedachte” is explained in the brochure *Wij en de Wijkgedachte* (Us and the neighbourhood unit).² ‘In huge agglomerations such as cities, the necessity manifests itself to architects and urbanists alike for defining smaller units for those big concentrations of people: the neighbourhoods, the size of which should facilitate the interaction between individuals and the community, something that got lost in our large cities.’ In other words, it is important for residents to feel safe and comfortable in their neighborhood and to take care of their affairs. I think the idea of “Wijkgedachte” can bring new light to the contemporary society to help rebuild a sense of community.

1.3 Findings and Conclusion of Historical Research

The “Wijkgedachte” was seen as the panacea against the negative social effects of the industrialized city. The publication *Wij en de Wijkgedachte* stated that ‘as a result of the war it has become necessary to begin a major attempt to fundamentally reconstruct and renew our country and our society.’³ It should have enhanced the feeling of identification for inhabitants to support their spatial integration, foster social cohesion and prevent social pathology that represented as an alienation and civic indifference. However, the unintended consequences of modern urban planning raised the question of its application. Due to the divisive nature of the neighborhood unit, the idea was misused as an instrument for social segregation. Moreover, the top-down planning strategy solely emphasized on the physical and functional environment as a determinant for wellbeing. To strengthen the inherent value of Wijkgedachte, the residents should actively engage in the design process to meet new requirements for today’s lifestyle. The Intervam housing could play a role as a central hub of the neighborhood that encourages the self-contained community for the inhabitants.

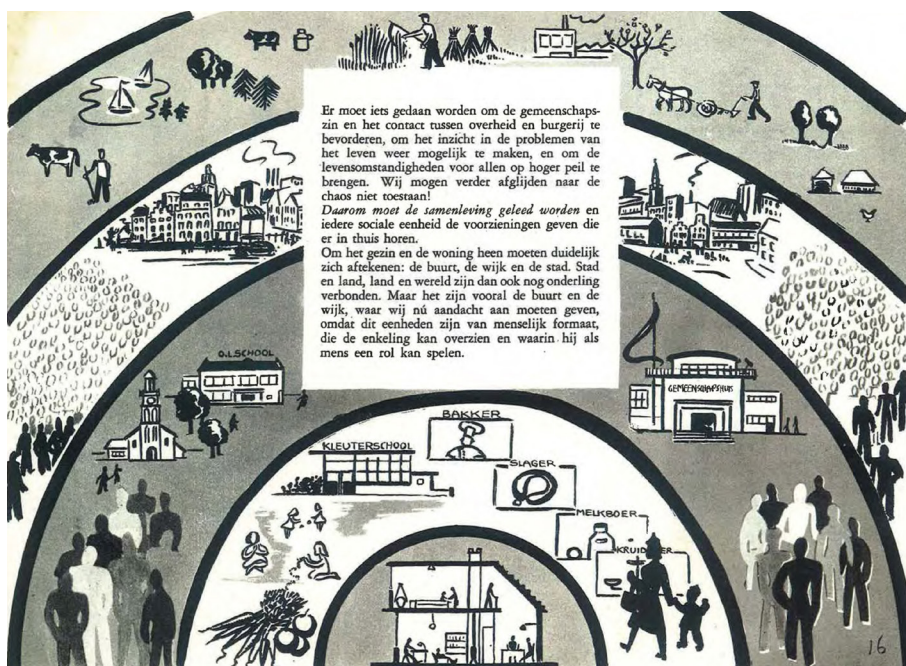


Figure 5. Scheme of the concept of the neighbourhood unit (from the Brochure *Wij en de wijkgedachte*)

1) Connolly et al., *Kijken naar Overvecht de naoorlogse woonwijk anders in beeld gebracht = Looking at Overvecht: other ways of picturing the post-war housing estate* (S.l.: s.n., 2011), 13

2) W.F. Geyl, *Wij En de Wijkgedachte* (Utrecht, 1948).

3) Ibid.

2. Observation

2.1 The relationship between private building and public outdoor space

The outdoor spaces can be defined by three different environments. The first area is a communal outdoor space where the inhabitants can enjoy diverse activities. The communal areas were more open to the public in the past. One of the housing blocks had open passages on the ground floor to connect the main street and the communal space. When the demolition plan had been canceled in 2008, the housing estate was often occupied by unwanted strangers. The residents decided to place the fence on the boundary between public street and the housing estate to secure safety and privacy. Residents decided to close the playground and garden by the fences. The open passage has been filled with social programs such as donation shop, bicycle repair store, and an office of the volunteer organization. The strong relationship between public street and the communal space is no longer exist. The second outdoor area is a private garden located in-between two housing blocks. Due to the fences, it is not possible to enter the garden area from the public street. Those two outdoor areas became more isolated from the surrounding environment than the original design. The last area is the public street placed next to the outer layer of the housing block. There were several public facilities along the street, but most of them now remain empty because they did not survive from the changing circumstances.

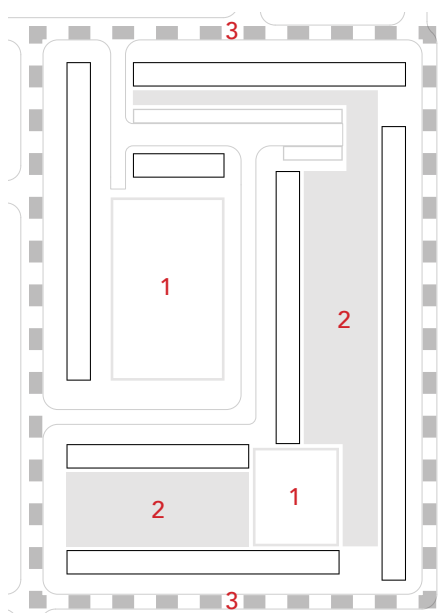


Figure 6.
1. communal outdoor space
2. private garden
3. public street

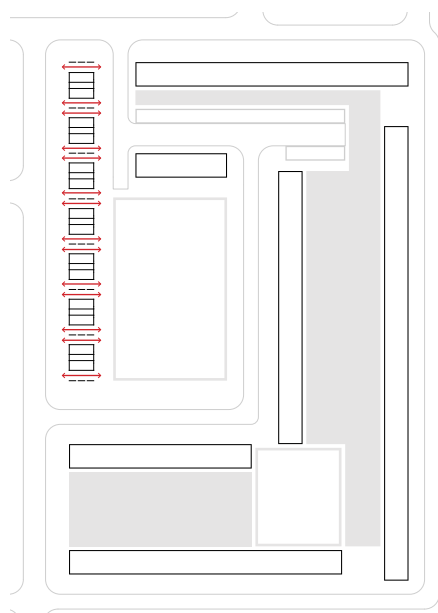


Figure 7.
original site plan in 1964

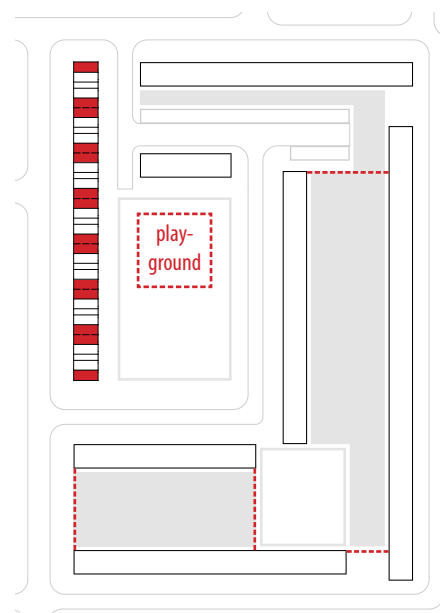


Figure 8.
closed passage and fences
after 2008



Figure 9. View of private garden from the Taagdreef. The boundary between public and private space was not clearly defined in the past, but now the fence is standing against the public street.



Figure 10. View of the garden in November 2014 (left) and in September 2016 (right). Residents do not put much effort to maintain the garden.



Figure 11. Playground has been closed by fence after 2008. Most of the time the space remained empty.

Figure 12. The vegetable garden was placed in communal space but became ruined and useless.

2.2. Flexible use of the ground floor

The ground floor of the Intervam building is used for various purposes. Mixed use of ground floor was considered from the beginning to offer necessities that residents would need for their living. The flexible use of ground floor strengthens the idea of “Wijkgedachte” by having the facilities in the neighborhood. There used to be a public library next to the Vader Rijndreef and a church in Ebrodreef. Churches in those days contribute to foster a sense of community. The two-storey housing block was designed to accommodate shops on the ground floor and the living spaces for the shop owners on the first floor. Many of the public facilities, however, disappeared from the street due to the changing trends over time. I found that some spaces on the ground floor are now used for various social activities such as donation shops, bicycle repair store, and art studio. There are some spaces which still have public functions, but they do not contribute to create positive relationship with public space.



Figure 13. Diverse use of ground floor in the past (Utrecht Archive)
Public Library (left), Two-storey residential-commercial complex (right)



Figure 14. Diverse use of ground floor in current situation

1. commercial
2. social
3. office
4. residential
5. storage

2.3. Facade of Intervam housing

The structural module of the Intervam building system is represented on the facade by concrete grid and infill of the window frame. Intervam buildings can have diverse appearances by using different materials and composition for the infill. Despite the different design options for the facade, Intervam buildings are sharing common ground because they follow the same order and rhythm within the grid system.



Figure 15. Intervam building facade filled with different design within the grid system.

The facade of the Intervam building in Camera Obscuradreef has changed from the original design during the renovation in 1984. The wooden window frames were replaced with plastic window frames. The original concrete grid is relatively well-preserved, but the concrete surface is now covered with white paint. The transparent nature of the original facade reflects the aesthetic value of the post-war age. The window was divided into three parts by thin wooden frames which did not stand out from the exterior facade. The store front of the ground floor was more open to the public street. The new plastic window frame tried to follow the previous configuration, but the change of material has degenerated the aesthetic and historical value of original design. After the renovation, window frames became conspicuous against the facade that would weaken the inherent quality Intervam housing block.

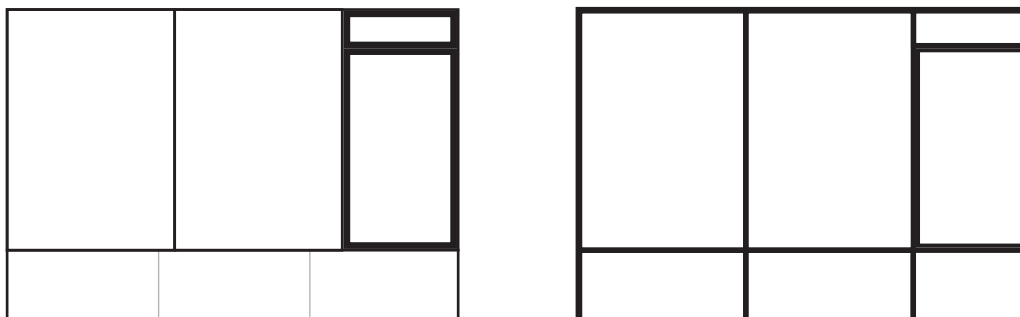


Figure 16. Comparison with wooden window frame(left) and plastic window frame(right)



Figure 17. Front facade of two-storey Intervam building before renovation. The window and store front have more transparent appearance than the rear facade.



Figure 18. Rear facade of two-storey Intervam building before renovation



Figure 19. Original facade with wooden window frames



Figure 20. Changed facade with plastic window frames after renovation

* picture from Utrecht Archive

2.4. Conclusion

The modern principle of Light, Air and Space allowed offering large green outdoor space and comfortable living environment. However, the large-scale post-war building production and the industrialisation of construction process regarded the city as a functional environment that does not seem to correspond well with today's situation. The notion of openness and transparency conflicts with today's privacy and security issue. The Intervam housing was meant to be a place where people could interact with each other to build a self-contained community. Instead, the monotonous housing block became isolated from the surrounding environment. This is because the previous renovation mainly focused on enhancing energy efficiency and security problem that neglected the original design quality. It is not until recent that the cultural value of Intervam housing estate has been evaluated as a heritage from today's viewpoint. My design proposal will aim to bridge the gap between two different perspectives of modern and contemporary times to forge sustainable growth for the future.

3. Cultural Value

3.1 Significance of Cultural values

Sustainable and continuous development of the urban environment and architecture is important because the city is a sum of the collective memory of its people. The overlapping layers of repetitive housing blocks, especially in Intervam buildings, signify the identity of the region for many years. If space embodies many stories from the past, the place already contains a lot of potential for the future use. The residents could relate themselves to the common spatial background and share daily experiences with their neighborhoods. The visitors could also feel attractive to the place where they can find interesting stories of former times. The historical value of “Wijkgedachte” is deeply rooted in the whole area of Overvecht. The desire to create a self-contained community will cast new light on the subject that we are facing today. The use value of the Intervam building system strengthens the feasibility of cultural value in the future plan. The building system was invented to provide appropriate dwellings for people in post-war period. The rational way of thinking in those days determined the proper size of space, sufficient amount of daylight and efficient circulation that could fulfill the needs for contemporary housings as well. The structure of the building has also remained in a good state which makes it possible for the economic development. The new intervention would provide spaces that support diverse social activities. There are a lot of social events happening around Overvecht. Those activities should be evaluated as a cultural value along with other heritage values. The collaborate effort to make a better living space would consolidate people to take care of their own environment. The Intervam housing should play a role to convey the social value that will pass down from generation to generation.

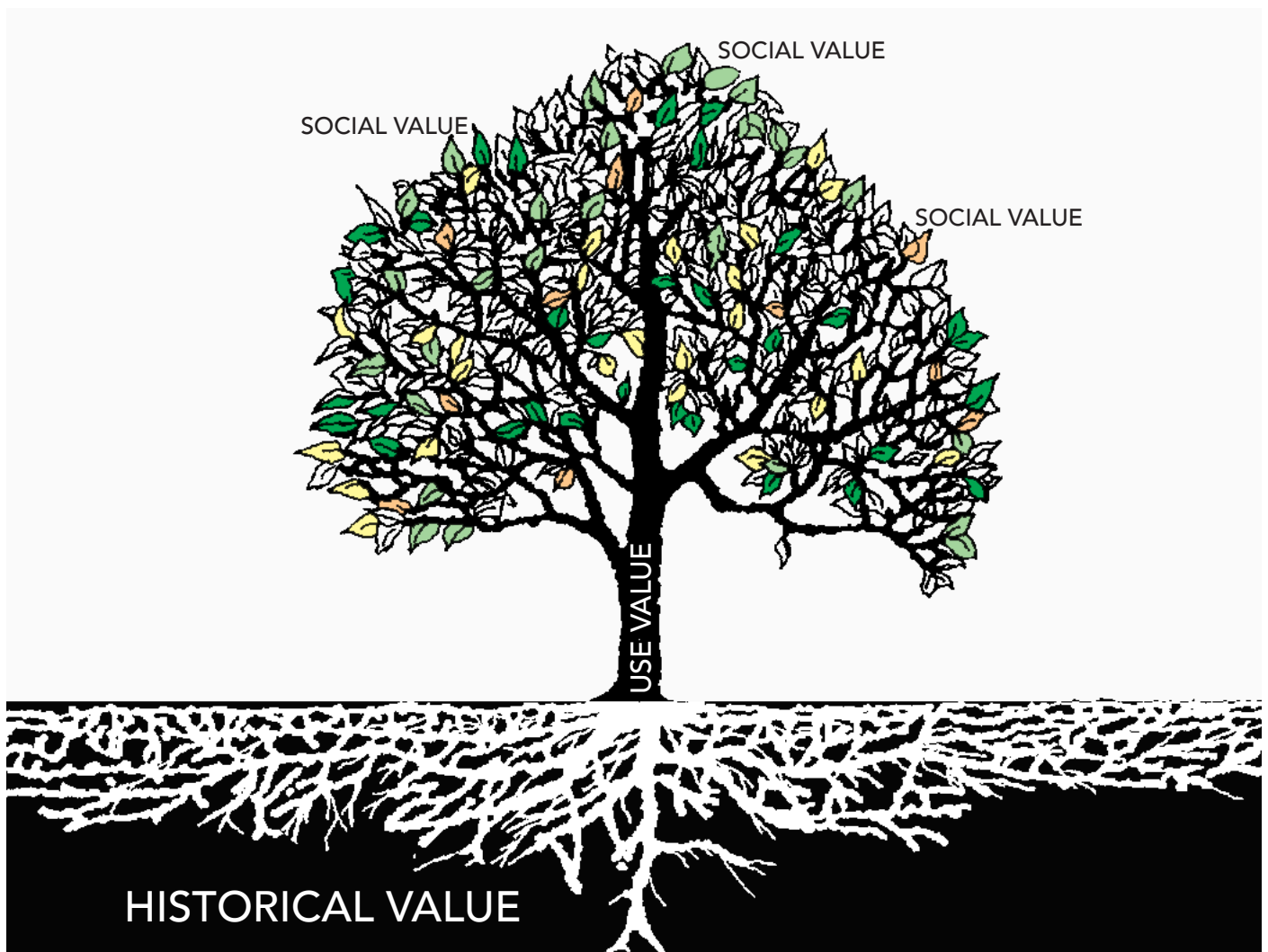


Figure 21. Cultural Value Diagram of Intervam building system

Historical Value as a root that form a basis for the development, Use Value as a trunk of tree that sustain the continuous use, Social Value as a fruit of all the efforts in the whole process

3.2 Argumentation of chosen site and building system

Overvecht was designed as a modern garden city based on the principle of open planning. The position and typology of the housing blocks were determined to have a close relationship with public space. In the past, the boundary between public and private space was not clearly defined. It was easy to see through the private garden and communal area while walking along the street. The notion of openness and transparency was applied to the design at the beginning, but the original intention conflicts with today's individualized society that requires more privacy on the living space. The original urban planning strategy was to build a community where different groups of people can harmonize together. This idea merits careful consideration to give new insight into our living environment following today's requirements.

There are low-, medium-, high-rise dwellings in the neighborhood to serve different housing types for the residents. The medium-rise Intervam housings have been acting as a mediator that not only links between different types of housing, but also provide various public facilities. With the public facilities on the ground floor, the communal outdoor space would have a more active relationship with people living in the neighborhood. The spaces on the ground floor are still used for diverse purposes such as bakery, small office, bicycle repair shop, art studio, hair salon, and community space, but those facilities no longer function as an integral part of the neighborhood to form a community. The load-bearing concrete walls and floors remain in the good state to foster economic and sustainable development, but the rigidity of the structure seemed to limit the flexible use of the ground floor.

The discrepancy between the original design and the current state of Intervamflat now raise the question for the sustainable use of Intervam housing. I am interested in the urban theory and modern principle in the post-war period that could be interpreted broadly in today's society. The new intervention will encourage people to actively engage with the built environment, local community, and the passing of time which will be inherited to the future generation.

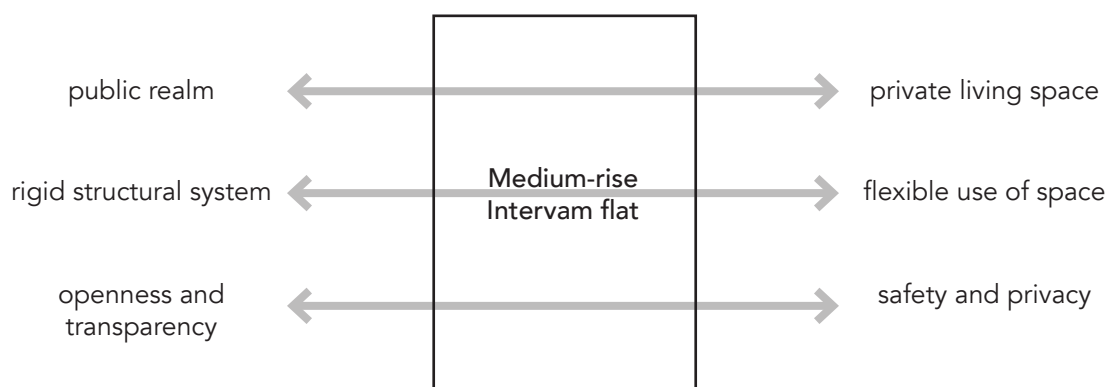
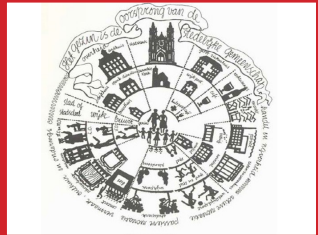







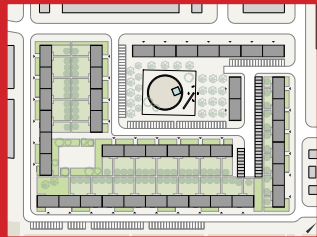
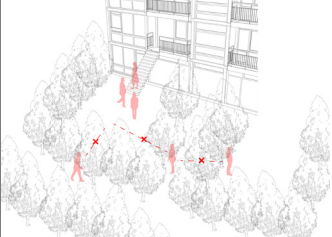
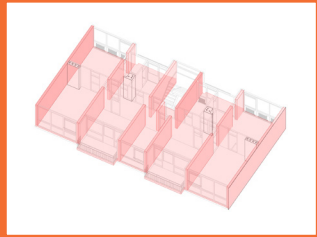
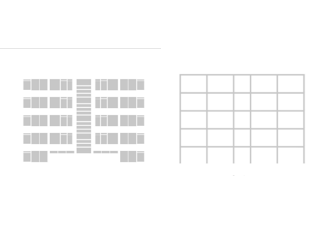
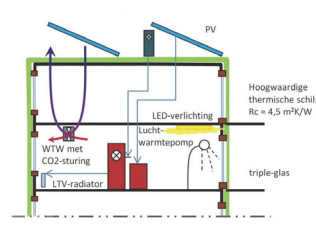

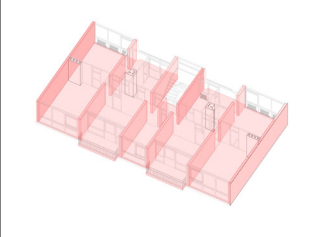





Figure 22. Dilemmas in Intervam housing estate

3.3 Cultural Value Matrix

<p>VALUE</p> <p>SYSTEM</p>	<p>AGE</p>	<p>HISTORICAL</p>	<p>ARTISTIC</p>	<p>COMMEN</p>
<p>SITE</p>				
<p>STRUCTURE</p>				
<p>SKIN</p>				
<p>SERVICE</p>				
<p>SPACE PLAN</p>				
<p>STUFF</p>				
<p>STORY</p>				

MORATIVE	USE	NEWNESS	SOCIAL	DILEMMA
				
				
				
		 <p>Hoogwaardige thermische schil: $R_t = 4,5 \text{ m}^2\text{K/W}$</p>		
				
				

VALUE SYSTEM	AGE	HISTORICAL	ARTISTIC	COMMENT
SITE		The idea of "Wijkegedachte" was applied to the urban planning of Overvecht. It was the typical product of post-war period to form independent community on the outskirts of the congested city.	The sculpture made by artist David van de Kop in 1983 is still remained in the playground.	
STRUCTURE		The structure of Intervam building represents the systematic approach of large prefabricated building system.	The aesthetic value of the facade is implicit in the concrete grid.	
SKIN		The repetitive image of building facade shows the significant characteristic of cityscape.	The paintings on the wall was drawn by artist Jan Is De Man collaborated with children in the neighborhood.	
SERVICE			The old chimney was still remained in original state. Its appearance also stands out among the other buildings in the neighborhood.	
SPACE PLAN			The large window in each room brings the natural daylight, fresh air, and pleasurable view to interior space.	
STUFF				
STORY				

MORATIVE	USE	NEWNESS	SOCIAL	DILEMMA
	<p>The site was planned according to the modern principle of light, air, space and greenery. There are diverse outdoorspaces inbetween the housing blocks.</p>		<p>The urban planning strategy of openness and transparency contribute to form a close-knit community.</p>	<p>Discrepancy of the open outdoor space in terms of privacy and security issue.</p>
	<p>The original concrete structure is still remained in a good state.</p>			<p>The load-bearing walls of Intervam building prevent the flexible use of floor plan</p>
	<p>The facade can have various appearance by using different materials within the concrete grid.</p>			
		<p>The first attempt to make sustainable Intervam flat that could apply to other Intervam case is on the process by housing corporation Mitros.</p>		
	<p>The ground floor is used for various purposes such as small shops, community space, office and storage.</p>			
<p>In the past, there was public library on the ground floor.</p>			<p>Social activites happening around Overvecht will reinforce the relationship with users and surrounding environment.</p>	<p>The modern principle of openness and transparency conflict with today's individualized society.</p>

3.4 Cultural Value Statement

Intervam housings are the typical product of the post-war period which was invented to ease the housing shortage in the Netherlands. The modern principle of those days can be found in all aspects, varying from spatial design to urban planning of the Intervam housing estate. For example, the housing plan was developed to meet the basic standards for a majority of the population at the time, and the urban planning of the housing blocks was based on the idea of openness and transparency that captured the spirit of the age. The aspects of the post-war housing were neglected for many years, but I would like to research and document the cultural value of the housing legacy concerning its appropriate use for the future.



Figure 23. The Catholic version of “Wijkgedachte”

The urban theory “Wijkgedachte” was utilized for the construction of modern cities after the Second World War. According to the theory, the city should consist of self-contained neighborhoods surrounded by the green frame. The neighborhood should include different types of housing and basic facilities so that people from the different background could settle down and harmonize together. However, the idea was failed to materialize. The urban construction was mostly controlled by the government and thus mainly focused on the functional environment, not the people who would actually live. The top-down planning of “Wijkgedachte” turned out to be a place where people no longer desire to live. The facilities which were originally planned to offer necessities for the residents have now remained empty because they were not able to adapt to the changing circumstances. The theory emphasized the importance of the neighborhood that allows inhabitants to feel safe and comfortable and also available to take care of their affairs. I believe the idea is still relevant and worth to preserve in today’s society.

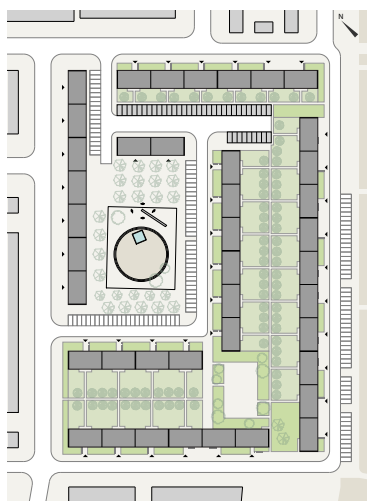


Figure24. Urban planning of Intervam flat

With the support of all the available expertise and the central government, the modern principle of Light, Air and Space rapidly spread throughout the country to develop an ideal city around the suburban areas. The idea set guidelines to the housing blocks to occupy the best position for favorable solar exposure. The high-density apartments allowed to offer spacious outdoor spaces next to the residential buildings. However, most of the post-war housing production look different from what urban planning theory aimed to create. The emphasis of tall and high-density housings amongst wide, green spaces ended up with the isolation of residents from outdoor space and improper maintenance of communal areas. Those outdoor spaces would be a place to encourage residents to revitalize the sense of community when they become attractive and inviting.



Figure 25. The flexible use of ground floor

The flexible use of ground floor is a distinctive characteristic of the medium-rise building to serve the needs within the neighborhood. The medium-rise Intervam building was intended to take a crucial part to create a close-knit community. These days, some spaces on the ground floor are used for social programs, but they do not contribute to forming a sustainable community that was expected from the original design. To bring back the notion of “Wijkgedachte”, it is essential to encourage diverse use of ground floor and create various experiences in everyday life.

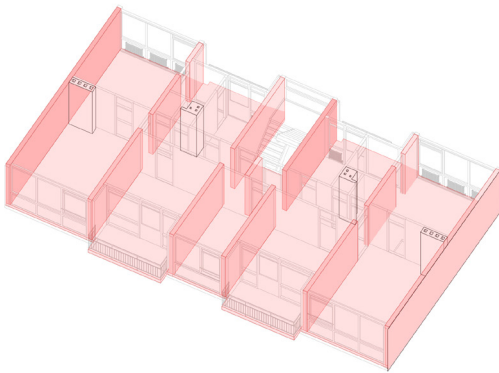


Figure 26. Load-bearing structure

The Intervam building has a stable structure that will support the continuous and sustainable use for the future. The design of space plan and facade stems from the structural module. The rigid module of the structure limits the flexible use of the floor plan since it is hard to remove a big part of the concrete structure. For this reason, the floor plan has not changed much from the past. The facade also follows the structural module which can easily distinguish Intervam housing from other buildings. The well-preserved structure enabled to keep the identity of Intervam housing from several renovations in the past.



Figure 27. The cityscape of Overvecht

The scenery of Overvecht is characterized by the overlapping layers of repetitive housing blocks. The repetitive image of building facade indicates the industrialized construction process of the post-war period. This image of cityscape builds up a collective memory that creates close affinity among the residents. Intervam housing estate is a part of the urban environment that represents the identity of Overvecht. The residents can feel connected to each other by sharing the common spatial background.

4. Opportunities and Obligations

The Intervam housing blocks are facing different kinds of outdoor spaces: public street, communal space, and private garden. The dwellings and the adjacent outdoor spaces need to have more interaction without compromising the privacy of the living area. The new design will focus on reinforcing the relationship with users and built environment as well as introducing new connections with public realm and private housing. The top-down planning from the post-war period is no longer a driving force for the future development. The use of ground floor will be decided by the discussion of residents and housing corporation to adjust to the changing circumstances and to create the close-knit community.

4.1 Opportunities

- The idea of “Wijkgedachte” will be reintroduced to guide the new design and create a sustainable community that will pass down to the future generation.
- The urban plan of the post-war period offers spacious outdoor space that will contribute to having a mutual interaction between users and surrounding circumstances.
- The flexible use of ground floor would fulfill the new requirements of the contemporary world and allow to adapt to the changing trends when it is needed.

4.2 Obligations

- The relationship between public and private space should have mutual interaction without intimidating the privacy of the living area.
- The new facade of the building should follow the impression of existing appearance that will not completely change the cityscape of Overvecht.

5. Conclusion

The post-war mass housings in the Netherlands were built under the modern principle of Light, Air and Space, but the passion for establishing the ideal society has been eclipsed by the individualistic ideology of contemporary world. Intervam housing in Overvecht area is a typical example that shows the conflict of old and new context. The dilemmas should take into account in the design process to bridge the gap between two different time periods. The cultural value assessment would guide the new intervention that will bring new meaning to the neighborhood.

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