

**AR2A011**

# **Stories around the Nirwana-flat**

Merging modern design and social history (1925-1930)



**AR2A011 – Architectural History Thesis**  
**MSc Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology**

## **FINAL THESIS**

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## Preface

I am fascinated by the old buildings and their architectural history, especially in The Hague, where I live. On my supervisor's advice, I chose to write about the Nirwana-flat, designed and built between 1925 and 1929.

This architectural history thesis aims to get a realistic picture of the design of the Nirwana-flat in the socio-historical context of its time.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mrs. Maria Novas Ferradás, for providing me with valuable insights and feedback throughout the process.

Enjoy reading!

The Hague, April 2023

Keesy Main

Cover photo: Aerial photo from 1929 of the K.L.M. with completed Nirwana-flat on the bottom right.

Source: <https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/7177a6f4-0ea4-4570-9fc8-25193cd3e592/medi593f-f103-c602-19673c62567f?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=Luchtfoto%201929&rows=1&page=1>.

The author added color to the original photo.

## Abstract

After the First World War, there was a housing shortage in The Hague, not only for the working and middle classes but also for the upper ones. Between 1925 and 1929, Dutch architects Jan Duiker and Jan Gerko Wiebenga designed and realized in The Hague the first residential hotel made of a reinforced concrete structure: the revolutionary Nirwana-flat. The residential hotel has a height of 25 meters with seven floors and a penthouse on the roof. High-rise was efficient, hygienic, comfortable, cheap, and the solution to the housing shortage. Functionality and efficiency played an important role in the design of the Nirwana-flat. The purpose of the flat was to allow a large number of people to live in a relatively small area which includes a cluster of luxury apartments with access to collective facilities, a lift, a restaurant, and a launderette.

This architectural history thesis aims to explore the design of the Nirwana-flat in the socio-historical context during the 1920s and 1930s in the Netherlands. The research has been based on archival sources such as media publications, magazine articles, architecture magazines from the time of construction and after the construction of the Nirwana-flat, and the plans at the Duiker Archive. The thesis firstly explores the typology of the residential hotel in The Hague, then the Nirwana-flat (1925-1929), to finally address the media coverage of the Nirwana-flat once built.

Finally, it concludes that in the first decades of the 20th century, the concept of residential hotels and their application has been the subject of debate and differing opinions. This included population density, urban planning, and balancing private space and communal living. As a result, the debate continued to shape discussions around housing policies and urban planning in The Hague and beyond.

All in all, the (hi)stories around the Nirwana-flat prove its important socio-historical significance for the development of housing architecture.

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## Keywords

The Hague, The Nieuwe Bouwen, the residential hotel, the ideal home, High-rise buildings, flexible housing layouts

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## Introduction

In the 1920s, Dutch architects Jan Duiker and Jan Gerko Wiebenga designed the first residential hotel in The Hague made with a reinforced concrete structure: the revolutionary Nirwana-flat.<sup>1</sup> The building was designed in the Nieuwe Bouwen style and was built between 1925 and 1930 in the neighbourhood of the Haagse Bos in the mid-west of The Hague. The image below provides a visual representation of the Nirwana-flat located on the right side and the Haagse Bos on the left side. (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nirwana-flat, 1952.

Source: Haags Gemeentearchief, [https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/84c8b661-5036-4134-9224-8d4f1387063d/media/2dca8f16-b261-4c9f-84e2-66a416ab3514?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=11q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=7\\_0.08454](https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/84c8b661-5036-4134-9224-8d4f1387063d/media/2dca8f16-b261-4c9f-84e2-66a416ab3514?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=11q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=7_0.08454)

An important characteristic of the Nieuwe Bouwen was the focus on creating functional modern spaces to provide practical and affordable design solutions, after the population growth and the economic crisis, in the interwar period. In this context, high-rise buildings emerged as a good solution to the housing shortage. In addition, there was the possibility of jointly applying special technical facilities, such as central heating and ventilation, hot water supply, passenger and food lifts, and municipal and home telephones.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rainier Bullhorst, "Nirwana" in "Duiker in Den Haag", Gemeente Den Haag, (VOM-reeks nummer 1, 1999), 64-79

<sup>2</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 64-79

This architectural history thesis aims to understand the Nirwana-flats design while looking at the architectural values in the socio-historical context of its time.

The research gathers data from primary sources of information and secondary ones. Primary sources of information include articles published in the media, magazine articles, and architecture magazines from the time of construction and after the construction of the Nirwana-flat preserved at the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* in The Hague (*Delpher* database). In addition, plans at the Duiker Archive preserved at the *Het Nieuwe Instituut* in Rotterdam. Regarding the secondary sources of information, the following sources were used to supplement the research:

The “Nirwana” chapter from the book “*Duiker in Den Haag*”<sup>3</sup> the architect Rainer Bullhorst writes in this chapter about the design and typology of the Nirwana-flat.

The article from *Cement* number 12 of 1986 describes the work of the constructor/architect Ir. Jan Gerko Wiebenga and his design of the reinforced concrete construction of the Nirwana-flat.<sup>4</sup>

The article from *Renovatie & Onderhoud* number 2, February 1992, describes the urban design and typology of the Nirwana-flat.<sup>5</sup>

The findings are presented in three chapters. The first chapter explains the development of the residential hotel as a concept and typology in The Hague. The second chapter explores the architectural design of the Nirwana-flat from the original design to the final building.

The third chapter explores the media coverage of the Nirwana-flat once built.

The conclusion will present the main findings and conclusions drawn from this research, highlighting the key insights gained about the architectural history and socio-historical context of the Nirwana-flat and its significance in the development of residential hotels in The Hague.

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<sup>3</sup> Bullhorst, “Nirwana”, 64-79

<sup>4</sup> Jan Molema en Wessel de Jonge, “Ir. J.G. Wiebenga (1886 - 1974), Constructeur/Architect van het Nieuwe Bouwen”, *Cement* 1986 nr. 12, 22

<sup>5</sup> Sjo van den Eerenbeemt, “Jong monument niet voldoende beschermd. Moeizame aanloop tot aanpak particuliere Nirwanaflat Den Haag” *Renovatie & Onderhoud* nr. 2, februari 1992, 33-35.

# 1. The residential hotel: an emerging typology

After the First World War, there was a housing shortage in The Hague, not only for the working and middle classes but also for the upper ones. Since the end of the 19th century, domestic workers progressively improved their working rights, rebelling against overwork and underpayment. They looked for better working conditions in newly materialized factories.<sup>6</sup> The amended *Labor Act* of 1907 regulated the employment rights for domestic workers.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of residential hotels arose as a solution to this situation, aimed at the housing shortage and the need for comfort and living conveniences for upper-class people. The service staff worked in paid employment for the residential hotels and cared for all central facilities. A residential hotel clustered apartments in high-rise buildings to provide an efficient architectural solution that centralized domestic work. Residential hotels were equipped with all modern conveniences, including an elevator, a restaurant, a central laundry, heating, and central warm water installation. During the interwar residential hotels were mainly built in The Hague, where upper-class people such as administrators and military officers who worked in the Dutch East Indies stayed in the Netherlands during their holidays and after retirement. For those people, living in a residential hotel was more accessible than living in a whole house for which they needed a lot of staff.<sup>8</sup>

The architects of the Nieuwe Bouwen strived to create rationally constructed, functional, and livable buildings. They followed the latest technical developments. Many of their clients came from the upper echelons of society, especially in The Hague. The flats in The Hague were gaining more and more ground after the First World War, as reported in the building section of the newspaper *Vaderland* in 1927. Moreover, Nirwana's flat plan brilliantly expanded the idea of flats as the ideal home.<sup>9</sup>

*Algemeen Handelsblad for the Dutch East Indies* published an article titled "*The Nirwanaflats near Haagse Bosch in The Hague. Extreme application of the flat-idea*" in 1927. It described the ideal home for upper-class people. The article stated that upper-class individuals required a substantial amount of staff to maintain their ideal homes. In addition, the article noted that mechanical and electrical resources were also necessary to maintain their homes. Household services were no longer performed by the residents themselves. The author of this article outlined ten commandments that the ideal home needed to fulfill for upper-class people. The ten commandments included: "first, freedom; second, comfort; third, beauty; fourth, economic construction of the house; fifth, economic life in that home; sixth, daily health to the fullest; seventh, smooth harmonic operation of all necessary services outside the home; eighth, the worker-maid is no longer needed in practice; ninth, trained skilled personnel must be available for other light household activities. Tenth, fruitful participation in pleasures, city life, going out, etc. should be possible without any problems, even if one has children".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Author unknown, "Brief uit Holland", Suriname, Koloniaal Nieuws- en Advertentieblad, 6-07-1923, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Arbeidswet van 13 juli 1907, S 193, "Huur van dienstboden en werklieden", 5

<sup>8</sup> Baron Hop, "Haagse Hopjes", *De Indische courant*, 12-07-1929, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Author unknown, "De Nirwanaflats bij het Haagsche Bosch, Architectuur Bijvoet, Duiker en Wiebenga", *Het Vaderland*, politiek-literair dagblad, avondkrant A, Bouwkatern des Vaderlands, zaterdag 26 maart 1927, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Author unknown, "De Nirwanaflats bij het Haagsche Bosch in Den Haag. Uiterste toepassing van de flat-idee", *Algemeen Handelsblad voor Nederlands-Indië*, zaterdag 28 mei 1927, 10.

Residential hotels offered several advantages to their residents, such as a single floor plan and a favorable location. One of the advantages of a residential hotel was that all rooms and service areas were located on one floor. This means all rooms and areas, such as the living room, kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom, were on the same level. Residents could easily move from one area to another on the same level in residential hotels, avoiding the need to climb stairs, which was both tiring and time-consuming.<sup>11</sup> Another advantage of the residential hotels was their location. They were mostly situated near green areas in The Hague but still close to the city center.<sup>12</sup>

For example, two residential hotels, the Huize Boschzicht (designed by architects Willem Verschoor and Cornelis Rutten) and the Nirwana flat on the Benoordenhoutseweg were located right opposite too the Haagsche Bos. (Figure 2).

Another advantage of residential hotels was the central shop, managed by a concierge. The concierge was responsible for a variety of tasks as a true "jack of all trades". The concierge could handle tasks such as maintenance, repairs, and cleaning of the building. Some residential hotels provided guest rooms as an additional convenience for their guests. These were typically available to all residents. Instead of using their own rooms, guests could utilize one of the guest rooms. In these residential hotels, employed professionals did not have continuous work. Thus, they could be made available to the residents for half of a day. This could be useful for residents who needed assistance with certain household tasks.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. Huize Boschzicht, 1930 (source 1)



Nirwana-flat, 1929 (source 2)

Source 1: Haags Gemeentearchief, [https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/22ac0250-1e85-4ad5-81a3-1571075604e0/media/04b517f4-73c8-4be2-807c-9637b6689412?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=boschzicht&rows=1&page=19\\_0.08439,6.02616](https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/22ac0250-1e85-4ad5-81a3-1571075604e0/media/04b517f4-73c8-4be2-807c-9637b6689412?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=boschzicht&rows=1&page=19_0.08439,6.02616)

Source 2: Haags Gemeentearchief, [https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/61e67eaf-f3c9-4e50-883e-b42026aa3f0a/media/78057c27-de61-495a-a243-089ffcdf8da2?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=7\\_0.08454](https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/61e67eaf-f3c9-4e50-883e-b42026aa3f0a/media/78057c27-de61-495a-a243-089ffcdf8da2?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=7_0.08454)

Living in a residential hotel was more affordable than owning one's own home property. The residential hotels also had modern infrastructures such as central heating, fixed washbasins, and bath installation. In 1929, residents paid between f2500 to f3000 for depreciation, repair costs, and maintenance, which could be paid in one go or f300 per year. Private telephone services cost at least about f 100, and for water, gas, and heating, residents paid f 250. Altogether, these costs amounted to f 650 per year, which could be saved when occupying a residential hotel.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Author unknown, "Residentiezaken, Gemeenschappelijke woonbehoeften, Flatgebouwen", Algemeen Handelsblad, ochtendblad – tweede blad, 's – Gravenhage, woensdag 13 november 1929, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Author unknown, "Residentiezaken,"6.

<sup>13</sup> Author unknown, "Residentiezaken,"6.

<sup>14</sup> Author unknown, "Residentiezaken, Het financiële verschil tussen de bewoning van een herenhuis en een flatwoning", Algemeen Handelsblad, avondblad – eerste blad, 's – Gravenhage, donderdag 14 november 1929, 2.



One advantage of living in a residential hotel was that it significantly lessened the need for service personnel (in other words, domestic workers). This was a major concern for housewives in all civilized countries. In America, the matter had already been largely resolved in favor of the servantless family. The Haagsche Department of Housewives (no specific name mentioned in the source) had even presented samples of model homes at exhibitions, in which the housing issue and the simplification of the household were simultaneously approached. Home furnishing was much more important than expanding the number of items that could simplify work in the kitchen or living room. But above all, the housewife wanted a suitable home designed by an architect who knew her wishes, paid attention to whether the doors closed properly, and had an eye for the thousand little things that could make the housewife's task easier. Much had been done in this direction, but more needed to be achieved. In modern small houses, the aesthetic requirements were usually more important to the architects than those of efficiency.<sup>15</sup> Thus, living in a residential hotel solved the lessened need for having service personnel only if the apartment was a comfortable and functional living space.

In the first decades of the 20th century, women's organizations took the initiative to improve living comfort and ease of use. Women's organizations are also experimenting with cooperative services and residential hotels. One example was the "*Het Wilhelmina Huis project*" envisioned in the city of The Hague in the 1920s.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, in The Hague, the board of the Hague section of the Dutch Association of Housewives proposed a committee. This committee was established in 1928 with the cooperation of the mayor and aldermen of The Hague. The committee investigated ways to improve living conditions. They stated the following: "What defects in the existing home and how to improve it, with particular attention to the wishes of the housewife with regard to housework".<sup>17</sup> The report of the committee contained a detailed description of the existing housing types and the desired changes. The report focused only on housing types "for the modest and somewhat larger middle classes".<sup>18</sup> The discussions in the committee led to an intermediate form, a very simplified apartment house, which retained various advantages of the apartment for rental values that were not too high. In this simplified apartment house, a consistent separation was made between the living areas and the sleeping areas. A hall separated the sitting-dining room from the living room and behind this whole were three bedrooms and a bathroom. The houses had a completely equal layout, the floors had a wide balcony, and the ground floor had a terrace. The floors also had a separate balcony for the garbage chutes.<sup>19</sup> This information comes from the article "*How people live in The Hague. Modern Apartment Houses*" by *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad* in 1929. This article confirmed the existence of an active women's organization in The Hague concerned with improving the housing floor plan and ease of use.

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<sup>15</sup> Emmy Belinfante, "De vrouw in de 20e eeuw. Vereenvoudiging der Huishouding", *Haagsche courant*, 27-02-1928, 13

<sup>16</sup> Liesbeth Bervoets, Marije Wilmlink, Frank Veraart, "3 Coproductie: emancipatie van de gebruiker? 1920-1970, Samenwerking tussen architecten en huisvrouwen", *Stichting Historie der Techniek*, z.p. [Eindhoven/ Walburg Pers, Zutphen 2003], 163-164.

<sup>17</sup> Author unknown, "Hoe men in Den Haag woont. Moderne Flatwoningen", *Soerabaiasch Handelsblad*. Staat- en letterkundig dagblad van Nederlandsch – Indië, 6 juni 1929, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Author unknown, "Hoe men," 5.

<sup>19</sup> Author unknown, "Hoe men," 5.

## 2. The Nirwana-flat (1925 – 1929)

The Dutch architects Jan Duiker and Jan Gerko Wiebenga started in 1925 with the design of the Nirwana-flats. With this project, they wanted to express their ideas about high-rise buildings, flexible housing layouts, the first application of a concrete skeleton, and the clustering of facilities. The architects initiated this project themselves without developers and were also looking for investors.<sup>20</sup> The project was initially very ambitious, with plans for high-rise residential blocks on a considerable surface surrounded by gardens. The first design, dated 1925, consisted of ten identical towers, each over fifty meters in height.<sup>21</sup> (Figure 3).

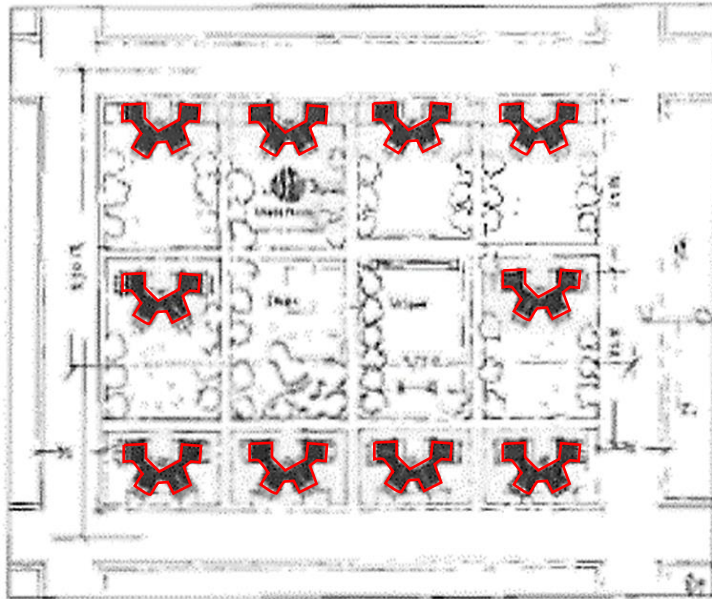


Figure 3. - Situation drawing of the first plan design from 1925. Source: Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 66. The red contour of the building block added to the original drawing by the author.

Interestingly, one of these initial plans indicated that the building plan was designed for low-cost housing. (Figure 4). Perhaps that had been the intention of the original plans. Nevertheless, the plan was ultimately designed for upper-class people and the rising middle class.

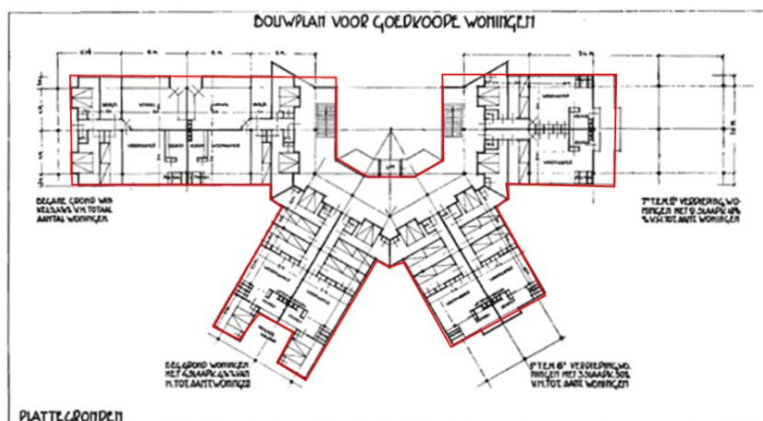


Figure 4. – Building plan for low-cost housing from 1925. Source: Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 67. The red contour of the building block added to the original drawing by author.

<sup>20</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 64-79.

<sup>21</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 64-79.

[illegible]

Source: *Het Vaderland*, evening paper A, March 26, 1927, 13.

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The original plan was for ten identical towers, each over fifty meters in height. However, the municipality had not approved this plan because of the height. In The Hague, buildings were not allowed to be higher than 25 meters. In addition, there was limited space on the site, and the plan was no longer affordable. Therefore, the project was reduced to five buildings. Five large squares were between the five buildings, each more than 500 m<sup>2</sup> in size, which allowed for sun entry, light, and air into the buildings. (Figure 6). This created three large parks at the foot of each building, and a separate area on the left was reserved for a sports and playground area for children. The city streets remained exclusively for city traffic.<sup>23</sup>

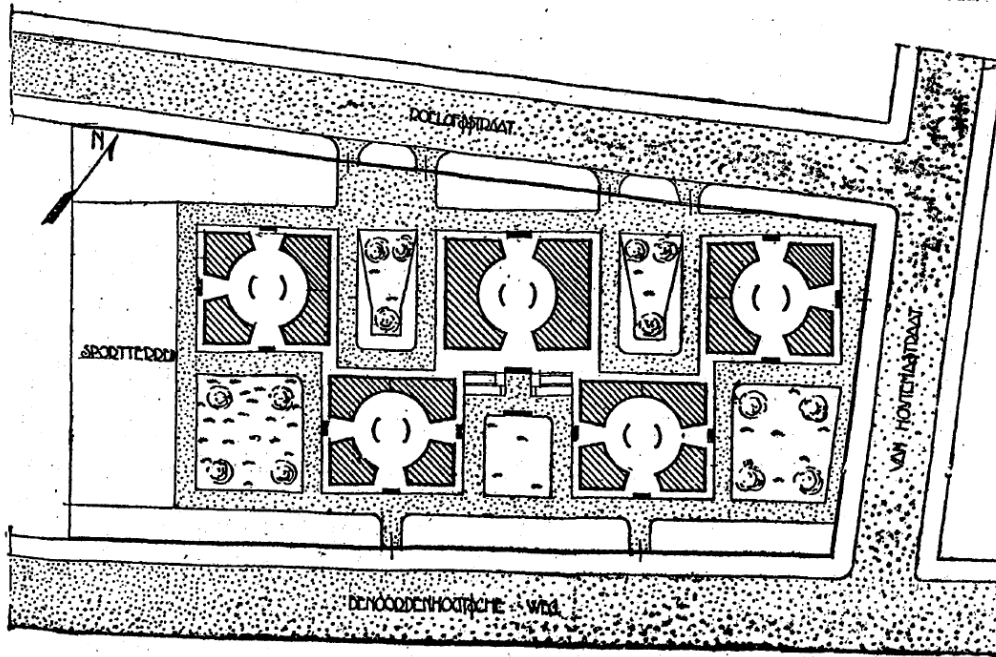


Figure 6. – Situation drawing checkerboard configuration with five buildings

Source: *Het Vaderland*, evening paper A, March 26, 1927, 13.

Below, you can see a perspective drawing of the five buildings, showing the green layout of the courtyards. (Figure 7).

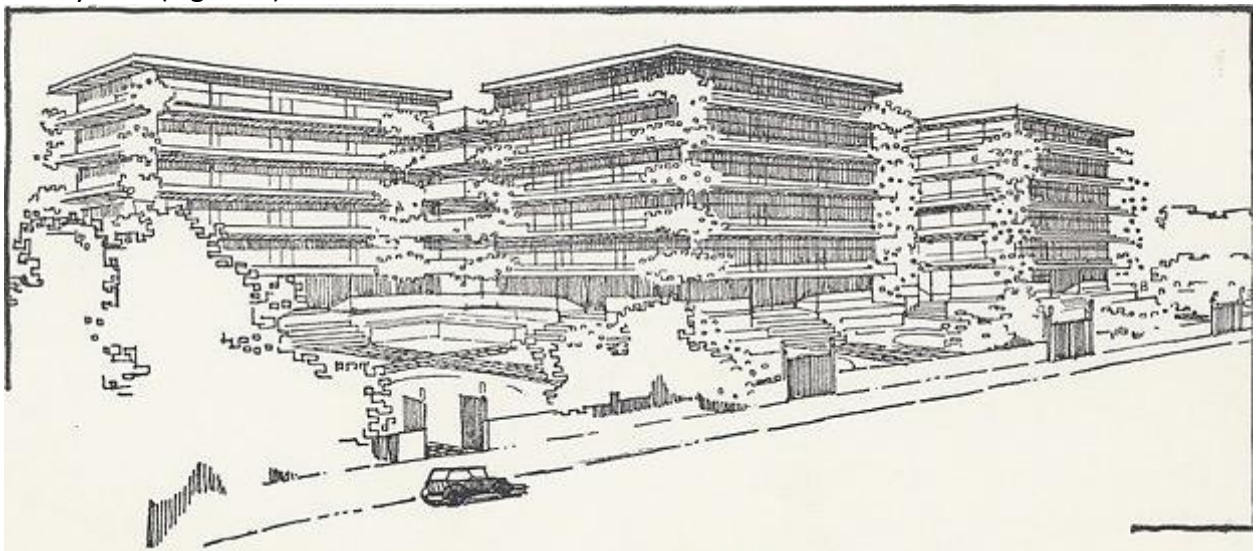


Figure 7. – Perspective drawing of the five buildings with squares and gardens. Duiker.

Source: *Het Nieuwe Instituut*, Duik\_235-003, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/archives/scans/DUIK/2.5/limit/25>

<sup>23</sup> Author unknown, "De Nirwanafats", *Het Vaderland*, 13.



Sky bridges interconnected the five buildings at the corners, as described in Bullhorst's "Nirwana".<sup>24</sup> The image below shows an isometric perspective of the five buildings. (Figure 8).



Figure 8. – Isometric perspective of the construction plan from 1926 with five buildings.

Source: Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 73

The architects made further changes to the plan, resulting in three identical buildings instead of the originally planned five. The situation drawing below, created by Duiker, shows which of the three buildings was to be built first. (Figure 9). However, in the end, that building remained the only one to be constructed.

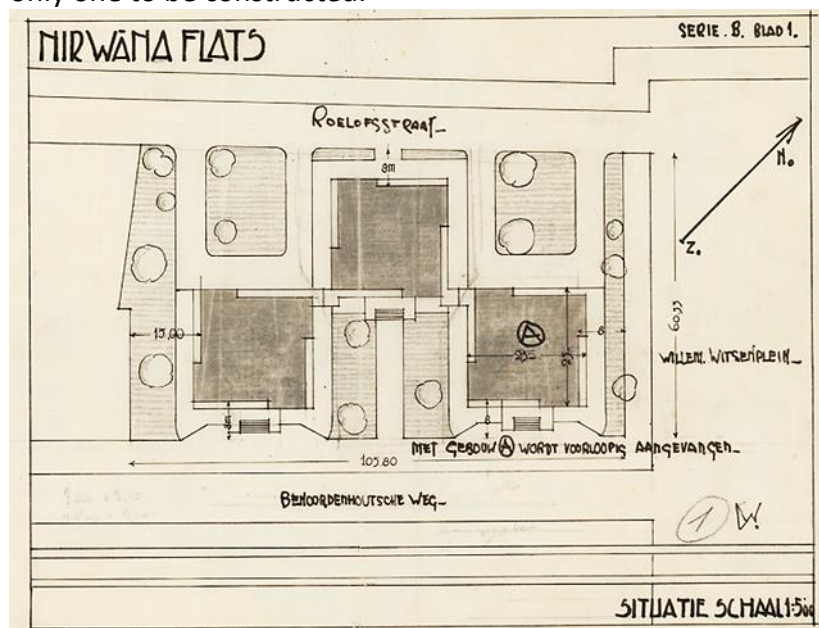


Figure 9. – The situation drawing with three buildings, Duiker.

Source: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_78.1, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirwana&page=3>

<sup>24</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 64-79

The building's height was 25 meters, and it had a basement, a first floor, five residential floors, and a penthouse on the roof. The facades featured many large windows and long window strips, with smaller windows and closed surfaces on either side of the entrance.<sup>25</sup> Dutch architect Jan Duiker drew the front façade and the right-side façade to show this building typology. You can see his drawings below. (Figure 10).

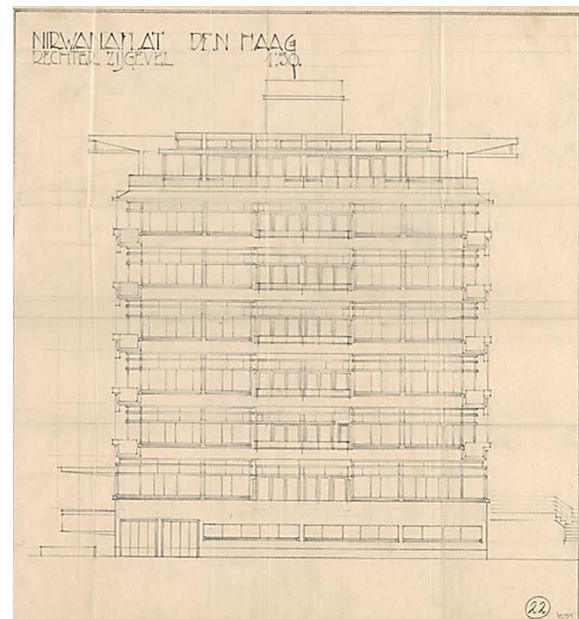
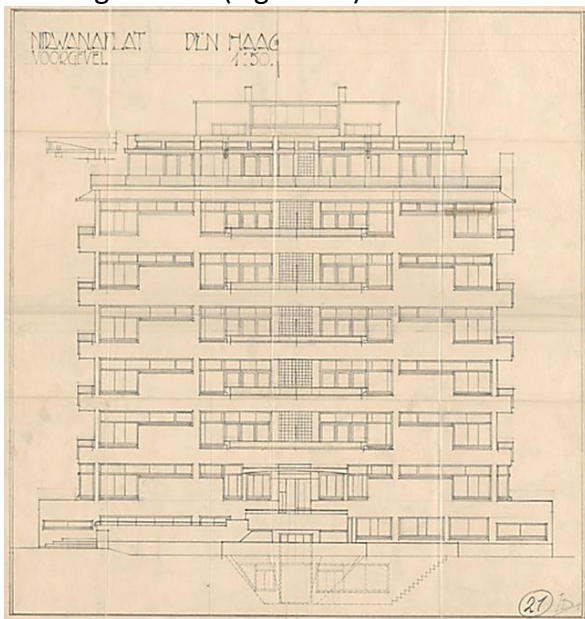


Figure 10. – Front facade Nirwana-flat, (source 1).

Right facade Nirwana-flat, (source 2).

Source 1: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_80.21, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirvana-flat&page=25>

Source 2: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_80.22, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirvana-flat&page=26>

The drawings of the cross-section and longitudinal section of the building show the Nirwana-flat underground basement layer. (Figure 11).

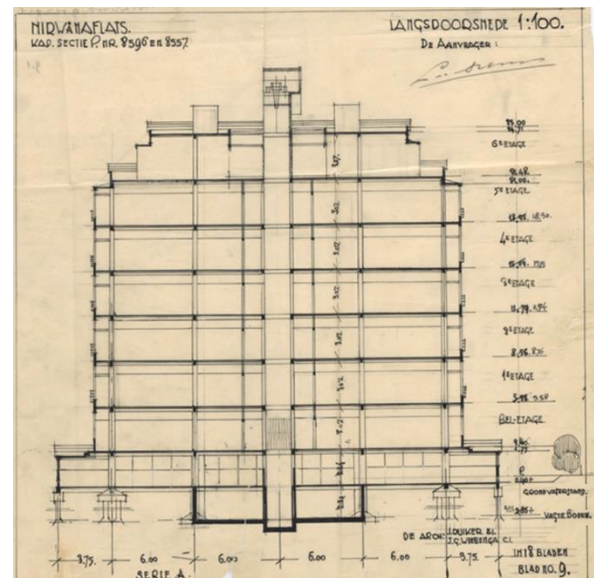
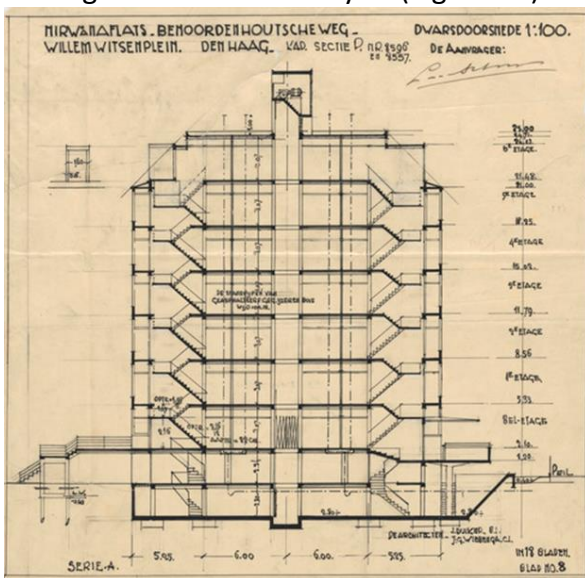


Figure 11. – Cross-section Nirwana-flat, (source 1).

Longitudinal section Nirwana-flat, (source 2).

Source 1: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_80.8, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirwana&page=11>

Source 2: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_80.9, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirwana&page=12>

<sup>25</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 64-79



The Nirwana-flat was known for applying the flat idea. It offered its residents a variety of convenient and innovative features. One of the notable features was that the street extended into the garages beneath the building. Residents drove their cars into their own box garage in the basement and exited in the passenger lift, providing easy access to their apartments. The apartments had kitchens designed with practicality in mind, equipped with modern appliances. The architects installed mechanical ventilation in all bathrooms and kitchens, with a fan circulating air throughout the day. Additionally, the Nirwana-flat had noiseless floors and private roof gardens.<sup>26</sup>

The article in the construction section of the *Fatherland* described the four benefits of the design of the Nirwana-flat as follows: Firstly, it offered low capital participation compared to other existing plans. Secondly, it provided residents with complete freedom in layout and furnishing, enabling them to create homes that truly suited their needs and preferences, (Figures 12 & 13). Thirdly, residents could decide when the rent would start in consultation with management, facilitating a smooth transition into their new apartments and allowing them to plan their finances more efficiently. Finally, the Nirwana-flat offered a greater number of larger rooms with advanced mechanical home furnishings, including heat, water, gas, and electricity. All of these benefits were available at a lower price than other comparable plans. These conveniences contributed to a higher standard of living and reduced the cost of living. Furthermore, it enabled the residents of the Nirwana-flat to enjoy a more self-sufficient lifestyle.<sup>27</sup>

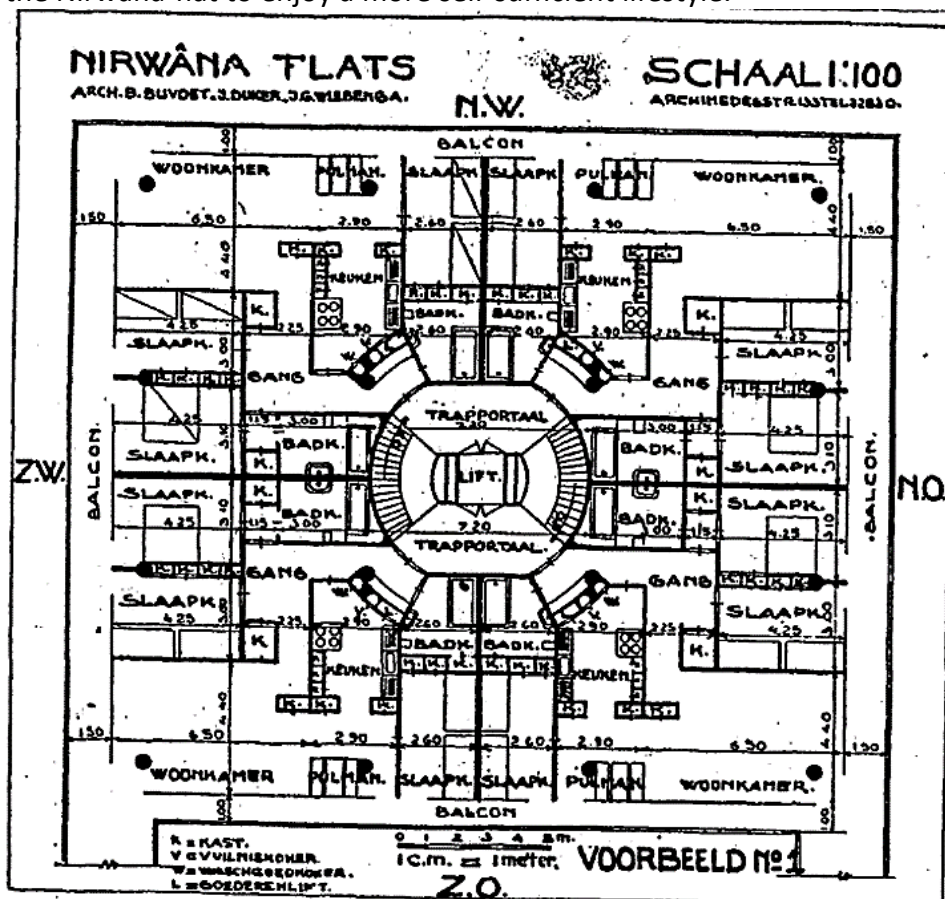


Figure 12. – Example 1 for the layout and facilities. Source: *The Fatherland*, evening paper A, March 26, 1927, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Author unknown, "De Nirwanaflats", *Het Vaderland*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Author unknown, "De Nirwanaflats", *Het Vaderland*, 13.







The architects designed the floor plans over the six floors with dimensions of 22 meters by 26 meters. Four apartments with three, four, or five rooms surrounded the central core, and each house had two or three outdoor spaces in the form of balconies and loggias. The floor plan layout oriented all homes diagonally in three cardinal directions, resulting in apartments that were very light and open due to the numerous windows and balconies.<sup>31</sup> The second floor showcased various housing types, ranging from large to small homes. (Figure 16).

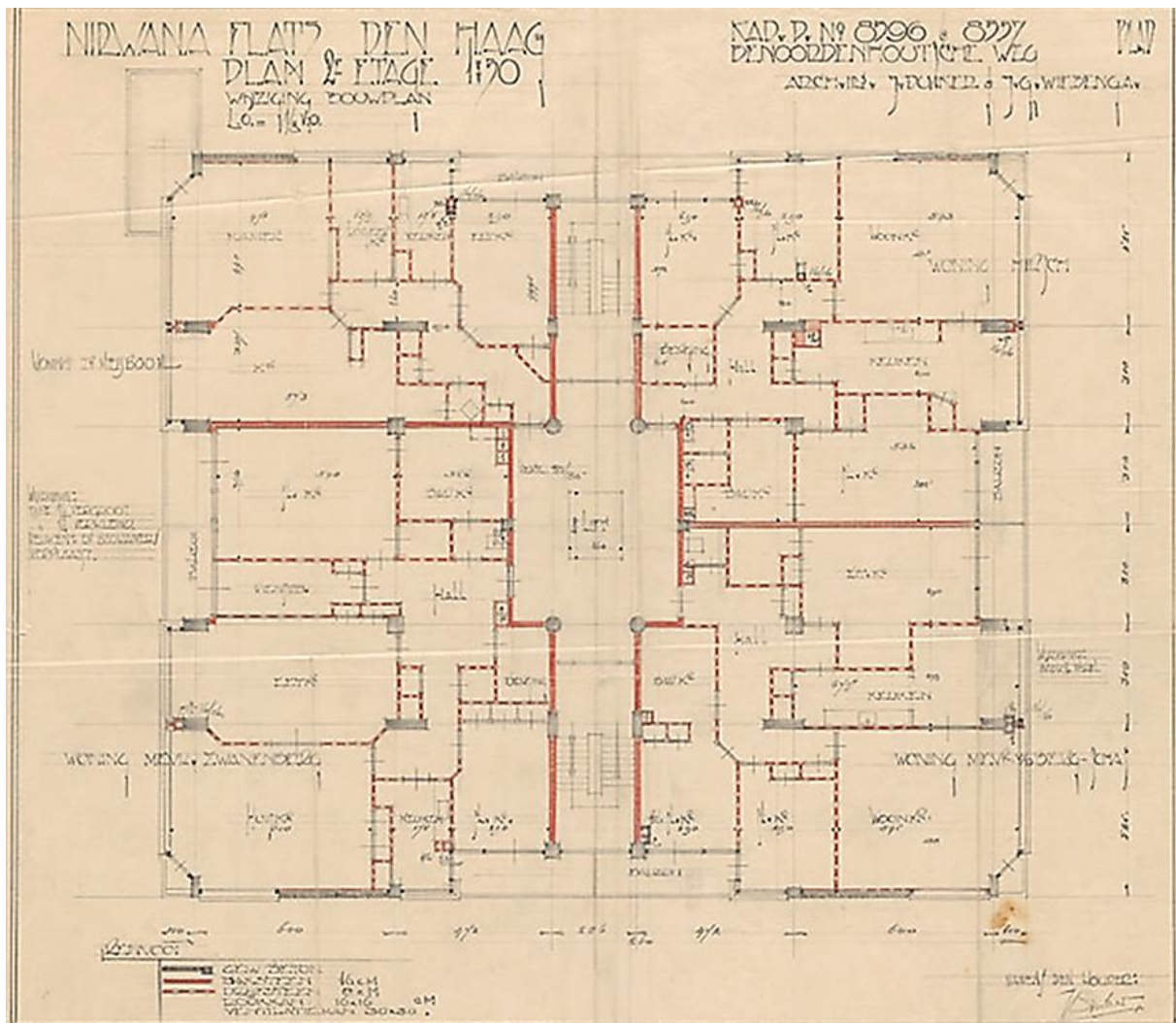


Figure 16 - Plan second floor Nirwana-flat, Duiker, 1927.

Source: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_80.23, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail?q=nirvana-flat&page=27>

The architects used unique technical solutions to construct the Nirwana-flat, including a reinforced concrete skeleton for a building 25 meters high. No one in the Netherlands had used such a method before. The building's facades did not have to support the structure, allowing for the use of long window strips.<sup>32</sup> (Figure 17).

<sup>31</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 68

<sup>32</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 68-69



Figure 17 - Nirvana in the structural phase, 1929.

Source: Haags Gemeentearchief, [https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/61e67eaf-f3c9-4e50-883e-b42026aa3f0a/media/78057c27-de61-495a-a243-089ffcdf8da2?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=4\\_08440](https://haagsgemeentearchief.nl/mediabank/beeldcollectie/detail/61e67eaf-f3c9-4e50-883e-b42026aa3f0a/media/78057c27-de61-495a-a243-089ffcdf8da2?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=nirwanaflat&rows=1&page=4_08440)

To realize a flexible housing layout in the floor plans, the structural engineer/architect Jan Gerko Wiebenga designed a column-beam structure of reinforced concrete.<sup>33</sup> (Figure 18).

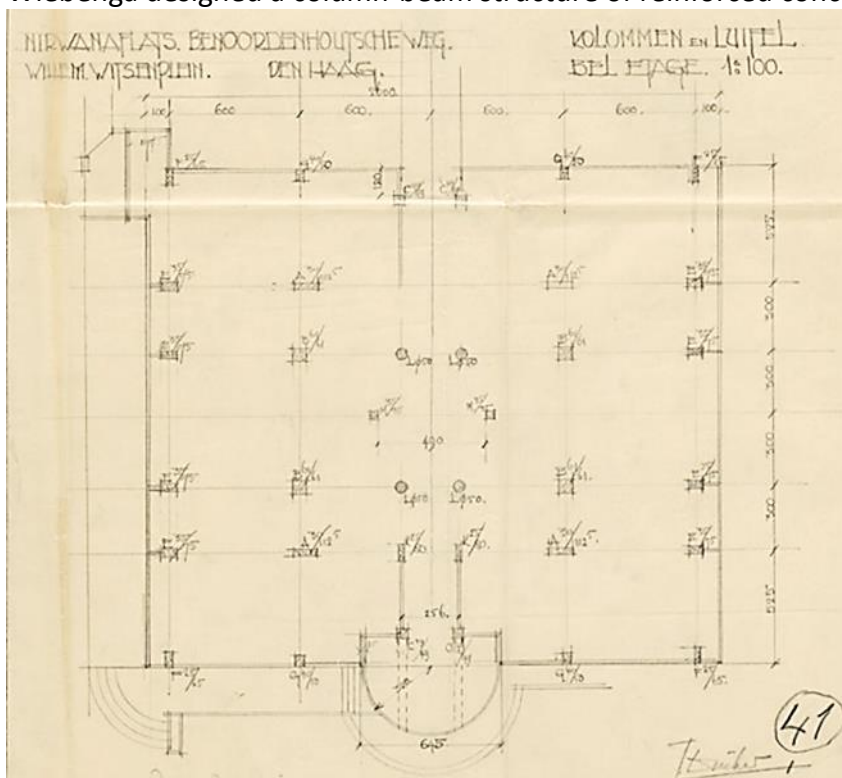


Figure 18 - Construction drawing of concrete columns structure, Wiebenga, 1926.

Source: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Duik\_82.41, <https://zoeken.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/objects/detail/?q=nirwana&page=43>

<sup>33</sup> Molema and de Jonge, "Ir. J.G. Wiebenga, " 22.



The load-bearing skeleton of reinforced concrete offered possibilities for flexible housing layouts. This included wide windows and cantilevered balconies. The architect Jan Duiker presented a sketch to show the impression from the balconies to the wider area. (Figure 19). It adopted a unique way of presenting that was later used by more architects. Furthermore, residents could see the high rise of the original plan with ten building blocks from their balconies.<sup>34</sup>

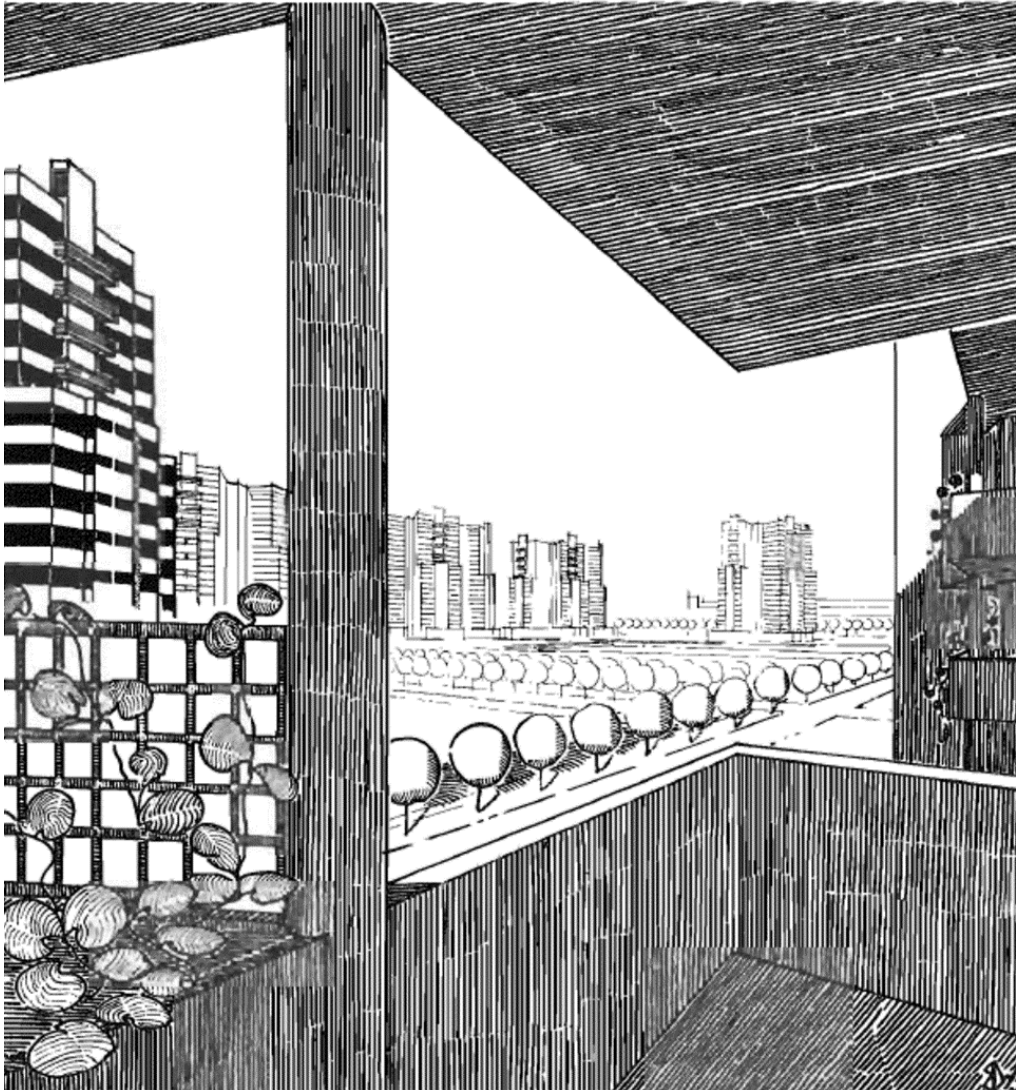


Figure 19 - Design sketch: view from the balcony, Duiker 1925.

Source: Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 68

In summary, the Nirwana-flat, was designed for the upper-class and the rising middle class and offered a luxurious lifestyle for its residents. The residential hotel was a cluster of luxury apartments with access to central collective facilities. The service staff such as the concierge, restaurant cook, hairdresser, and cleaners, were centrally arranged. These conveniences allowed its residents to live comfortably. The homes varied in size. The more spacious homes were suitable for couples and families with children. The smaller ones were for singles.

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<sup>34</sup> Bullhorst, "Nirwana", 68-69.

### 3. The media coverage of the Nirwana-flat once built

In the article "*Haagse Hopjes*" in the *Indische Courant* of July 12, 1929, the author discussed the importance of finding suitable housing in The Hague. Immediate housing upon arrival in the Netherlands was important for upper-class people, for example, administrators and military officers. They worked in the Dutch East Indies and visited the Netherlands during their holidays or stayed after retirement. Finding temporary or permanent housing that suited one's preferences and budget presented a challenge. However, The Hague's surplus of several thousand homes, which continued to expand, made it undoubtedly possible to find suitable housing. Baron Hop, the author of the article "*Haagse Hopjes*," presented the expectations of these upper-class individuals, by stating the following: "The Amsterdammer, for example, is a sociable living creature and therefore has no objection to the housing type with a large number of floors of multi-storey houses, which have a common entrance. On the other hand, the inhabitants of The Hague prefer to live in isolation. The first requirement is that his home must be completely isolated from the neighbouring families and therefore requires at least a private street door and private entrance. The apartment block is, therefore, an abomination to him; imagine that he lived on the first floor in a dignified manner and then had to share his entrance stairs with the inhabitants of the higher floors, who are not of the same standing as him. Everyone prefers a home in which they feel completely free and closed off from the outside world if given a choice. A house of which he can rightly say: "My home is my castle." However, it is not always possible to meet this requirement."<sup>35</sup>

Over the years, the social perception towards housing in The Hague had changed. In August 1931, two years after the Nirwana-flat's construction, the *Indische Courant* newspaper reported that this type of housing had become established in The Hague. The Nirwana-flat was no longer viewed as a foreign intruder. The author stated the following: "In the Netherlands, a flat is a luxuriously furnished apartment. This is equipped with the most modern conveniences such as central heating, passenger- and shopping lift, telephone, bathroom, cold and hot water, refrigerator, etc. Even the radio is present. On the other hand, a flat is generally no more than an ordinary apartment, where the resident must purchase all the living comforts himself. Renting one of these apartments remains a luxury and is still the privilege of a few wealthy people who can afford a monthly rent of f 150 to f 500 or more."<sup>36</sup>

Despite their much larger populations, Amsterdam and Rotterdam had fewer residential buildings than The Hague. The Hague had more residential buildings, and new residential complexes were constantly being constructed. This was often in prominent places, on corners or on squares, the cityscapes. The author of the same article of the *Indische Courant* newspaper claimed that: "As a rule, one cannot just become a tenant of a flat: the future resident of a complex under construction must participate in a bond loan to be issued for the construction."<sup>37</sup> According to the author, living in a flat was "not for everyone".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Baron Hop, "*Haagse Hopjes*", 5.

<sup>36</sup> Author unknown, "Uit de ooevaarsstad. De flat is ingeburgerd", *De Indische courant*, 01-08-1931, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Author unknown, "Uit de ooevaarsstad", 17.

<sup>38</sup> Author unknown, "Uit de ooevaarsstad", 17.

Although people's social perception towards housing in The Hague changed and residential hotels became an established form of housing in the city, not everyone was convinced. Some critics argued that the luxurious, modern residential hotels built in The Hague did not meet the city's housing needs. In July 1931, a daily correspondent of the *Algemeen Handelsblad* criticized the architects of the Nieuwe Bouwen. The correspondent believed that the practitioners of the Nieuwe Bouwen were too focused on creating completely hygienic and sterile buildings.<sup>39</sup> The correspondent implies that the architects of the Nieuwe Bouwen were well-meaning but misguided in their efforts to create modern housing. Regarding The Hague's "Nirwana" apartment building, the installation of an immense amount of awnings, roller shutters, shutters, and tensioned tarpaulins. This was done to lessen the effects of warm summer days to improve indoor temperature comfort. The correspondent suggested that the building was over-engineered and overly focused on comfort instead of functional and practical design.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the municipal council meeting of the municipality of The Hague in 1931, raised several complaints about the Nirwana-flat. They objected to its height and impact on surrounding urban planning. Furthermore, they argued that apartment buildings were unsuitable for the area. They also believed that the Nirwana-flat should not have been approved. They did however acknowledge that refusing another apartment building on the same road was not possible.<sup>41</sup> Despite these objections and complaints, it seems that there was still a demand for residential hotels in The Hague.

In an article in the *Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad* from 1931, the author referred to the residential hotels in The Hague as "residential barracks". The author noted that there was still a demand for residential hotels in the city, despite builders constructing many "residential barracks" for the wealthy citizens.<sup>42</sup>

In 1932, a year later, critics were still doubtful about residential hotels as a solution. Even despite the construction of new residential hotels, doubts about these types of buildings persisted. On April 13, 1932, *The Indische Courant* newspaper published an article. The author of the article stated that the residential hotels did not suit the Dutch preference for living in homes. They preferred to live in homes where they would not constantly encounter their neighbors on stairs and corridors. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, there was still a great shortage of affordable, modernly furnished homes in The Hague.<sup>43</sup>

Overall, the criticism surrounding residential hotels versus traditional homes in The Hague reflected broader concerns and discussions. This included the impact on population density, urban planning, and the balance between private and outdoor spaces. As a result, the debate continued to shape discussions around housing policies and urban planning in The Hague and beyond.

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<sup>39</sup> Author unknown, "Uit de bouwkundige bladen – Nieuwe Zakelijkheid", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, avondblad – derde blad, donderdag 9 juli 1931, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Author unknown, "Uit de bouwkundige bladen – Nieuwe Zakelijkheid", 9.

<sup>41</sup> Author unknown, "Gemeenteraad, Flatgebouw aan den Benoordenhoutscheweg", *Haagsche Courant*, eerste blad, maandag 16 februari 1931, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Author unknown, "Weer nieuwe flatgebouwen", *Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad* van 17 februari 1931, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Author unknown, "Haagsche Brief: De bouwbedrijvigheid in Den Haag. Vele dure woningen staan leeg, doch er is gebrek aan goedkope. De flatgebouw-rage loopt ten einde", *De Indische courant*, 13-04-1932, 5.

Architect professor ir. Jannes Gerhardus Wattjes stated that the design of the Nirwana-complex on the Benoordenhoutseweg was very interesting from an urban, structural, and architectural point of view. He stated the following: "Architecturally and structurally, this design was very important because here the constructive possibilities of the reinforced concrete have led in an unsought and natural way to a typical architectural language of form. It is strange that it is precisely the very scientific reinforced concrete construction that has conquered one-sided rational constructivism in architecture. The far-reaching circular balconies with their sober closed balustrade give the impression of closedness: the continuous glass walls, on the other hand, give the impression of openness, especially from the inside, without any interruption by supports. It is precisely this harmonic contrast of openness and closedness that gives this complex a certain charm."<sup>44</sup>

The combination of openness and closedness was practical and excellent for the Nirwana-flat on the Benoordenhoutseweg due to the busy thoroughfare and the beautiful view of the forest. According to Professor Wattjes, the Nirwana-flat design was attractive from an urban, structural, and architectural standpoint. Although he preferred single-family homes, he recognized the need for other housing types, such as residential hotels. This was particularly true in densely populated cities like The Hague. While Wattjes hoped that single-family homes would regain prominence in Dutch housing, he acknowledged the necessity of other housing options.<sup>45</sup> (Figure 20).

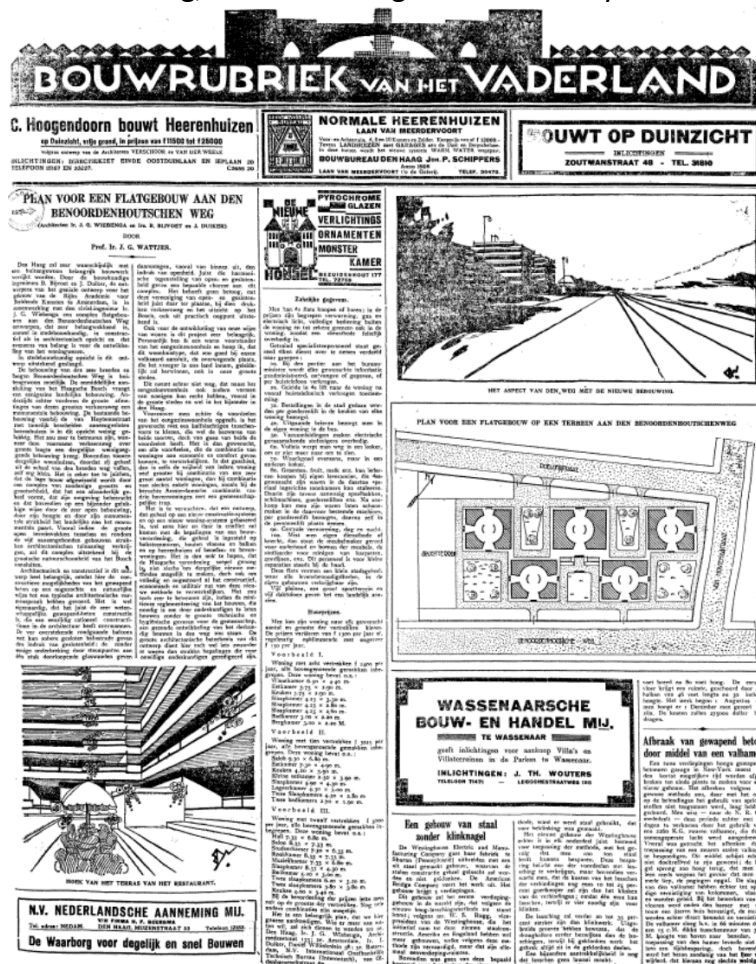


Figure 20. - "Plan voor een flatgebouw aan den Benoordenhoutseweg", Jannes Gerhardus Wattjes, 1926. Source: Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad 21 augustus 1926, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Jannes Gerhardus Wattjes, "Plan voor een flatgebouw aan den Benoordenhoutseweg", Het Vaderland: staat- en letterkundig nieuwsblad 21 augustus 1926, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Jannes Gerhardus Wattjes, "Plan voor", 11.

## Conclusion

During the interwar period, residential hotels were mainly built in The Hague, where upper-class people such as administrators and military officers who worked in the Dutch East Indies stayed in the Netherlands during their holidays and after retirement. The residential hotel typology emerged as a way to provide an efficient architectural solution for centralized comfort and living enjoyment. For upper-class people, living in a residential hotel was considered more practical than in a traditional home because it allowed them to delegate domestic work. By sharing service personnel, people could live comfortably in a more affordable residential hotel. Clustered apartments in high-rise buildings provided an efficient architectural solution that centralized some domestic work. Residential hotels were equipped with all modern conveniences, including an elevator, a restaurant, a central laundry, heating, and central warm water installation. Besides, they had a favorable location near green areas but were close to the city center of The Hague. In the first decades of the 20th century, women's organizations also experimented with cooperative services and residential hotels. One example was "*Het Wilhelmina Huis project*" envisioned in the city of The Hague in the 1920s. On the other hand, the architects of the *Nieuwe Bouwen* strived for rationally constructed, functional, and livable buildings. They followed the latest technical developments. This was especially true of Nirwana's flat plan, which brilliantly expanded the idea of flats as the ideal home for the future.

Between 1925 and 1929 Dutch architects Jan Duiker and Jan Gerko Wiebenga designed and realized in The Hague the first residential hotel made of a reinforced concrete structure: the revolutionary Nirwana-flat. The residential hotel has a height of 25 meters with seven floors and a penthouse on the roof. Functionality and efficiency played an important role in its design. The purpose of the building was to allow a large number of people to live comfortably in a relatively small area. It included a total of 24 luxury apartments with access to central collective facilities, a lift, a restaurant, and a launderette. The homes themselves varied in size. The more spacious homes were suitable for couples and families with children, and the smaller ones were for singles. In this project, the architect and engineer Wiebenga used reinforced concrete structures for the first time for a high-rise building in the Netherlands. The load-bearing skeleton of reinforced concrete offered possibilities for flexible housing layouts, wide windows, and cantilevered balconies.

The concept of residential hotels and their application in the design of the Nirwana-flat has always been the subject of debate in Dutch society. This is evident from the consulted literature sources. Overall, the criticism surrounding residential hotels versus traditional homes in The Hague reflected broader concerns and discussions about population density, urban planning, and the balance between private and outdoor spaces. The debate continued to shape discussions around housing policies and urban planning in The Hague and beyond during the interwar. For example, in July 1931, a daily correspondent of the *Algemeen Handelsblad* suggested that the Nirwana-flat was over-engineered and overly focused on comfort instead of functional and practical design.

Despite the ongoing debate and criticism towards residential hotels, some architects and urban planners, such as architect professor ir. Jannes Gerhardus Wattjes saw potential in designing new residential buildings in The Hague.



The Nirwana-flat could be assimilated to a residential hotel. However, the big difference is that the Nirwana-flat was designed, not only for single people and couples, but also for families with children. Furthermore, it was remarkable that the architects initiated this project themselves without the involvement of developers and were also looking for investors. They did this to realize their ideas about the high-rise, the flexible housing layout, the clustering of facilities, and the first application of a concrete skeleton for a high-rise building in the Netherlands.

The Nirwana-flat was known for the application of the living concept of the ideal home. This offers residents a variety of useful and innovative features for comfortable living. Functionality and efficiency played an important role in the design of the Nirwana-flat. While the Nirwana-flat did not solve the housing shortage after the first world war, it did provide a solution to the lack of service staff that used to provide the comforts and conveniences of the upper-class people. Furthermore, it also offered ease of living and comfort for the rising middle class.

All in all, the (hi)stories around the Nirwana-flat prove its important socio-historical significance for the development of housing architecture.

Nirwana-flat followed the developments of the 1920s in The Hague and the needs of the upper-class people and the rising middle class. The design applied the ideas of the Nieuwe Bouwen and expressed the views on high-rise buildings and flexible housing layouts. It was also the first application of a concrete frame for a residential hotel.

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Cover photo: Aerial photo from 1929 of the K.L.M. with completed Nirwana-flat on the bottom right.

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