



Challenging the rigid separation of public and private space, recent housing projects in the Netherlands reinterpret the perimeter block typology in response to changing urban and social contexts.

## Re-opening the Dutch city block: recent housing projects as experiments in the public domain

Karin Theunissen

Theory serves to name things that are already there. 'New things' originate in the process of 'making' as variations or adjustments to an existent theme. By looking at 'what is' we may become aware of something new and then try to interpret it. This paper originates from a fascination with some recent Dutch housing projects that demonstrate a tendency towards a more open organisation of elements within the perimeter block typology. In these projects the relation between the private dwellings, the open space that is bounded by them and the public urban space seems to become a new field of experimentation [1a]. This 'opening up', as a compositional issue and as an effect of changing urban life patterns, is the theme of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

The projects that are examined are already well known through international publication and form part of a series of projects which might be interpreted within this theme of 'opening up'. Such projects include the GWL district in Amsterdam (1998); the Müller Pier in Rotterdam (2003); the CiBoGa district in Groningen (2004); and the so called IJburg-blocks that are currently being realised in Amsterdam. In this paper, I will focus on two projects: Mariaplaats in Utrecht (1995), the first of its kind; and Rietlanden in Amsterdam (2001), an extreme example. A salient characteristic of both projects is that their design history was decidedly influenced by forces from outside the design profession. These 'external' forces were decisive in directing the plan from a closed perimeter layout towards an 'open' design.

### Analytical approach

The tendency to re-open the block will be considered from several different perspectives, beginning with the broader context in which the projects originate. The 'external' changes that influenced these projects were primarily societal; but changes in the local context and in the political/financial context of the housing question were also important.

First, therefore, the projects can be understood as explicit experiments in the relation between the public and the private realm. In order to establish useful categories from the social sciences that can be

used to underpin an architectural analysis, I will refer to the work of social urbanist Arnold Reijndorp and specifically to a book that was co-written by him and published in 2001: *In Search of a New Public Domain*.<sup>2</sup> This paper is much based on the interpretations of urban theory and the present condition of the public domain put forward in this book, as I will explain in the first section below.

The changing context of the housing question concerns the inherent differences between urban reconstruction of traditional working-class housing districts (where the majority of building occurred during the '70s and '80s) and that which is located in other, central or peripheral, urban areas. In these new reconstruction areas the morphological context is different from the nineteenth-century block layout of the inner-city. The political/financial context has also changed: from public housing to projects aimed at the free market sector. These issues are discussed in the second section below.

Third, the projects discussed also form part of a design history. Although the perimeter block was opened, or rather dissolved, for the first time in Modernist architecture, I propose the post-war period as a starting point for this design history. In this period notions about the interrelation of architecture, the city and the public realm became central, as in the work of the 'other Modern' such as Team X, the Italian group Tendenza and American architects such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Here I will introduce an analytical case study, *Redevelopment Plan for the Republic Square District in Austin*, carried out by Venturi Scott Brown and Associates in 1984. I will use this project to discuss their interpretation of the street, of the public realm and of the relation between urban research and design. This design history is described in the third section below.

There are few projects in the phase of urban reconstruction between the '50s and the '80s that were successful in their treatment of the relation between public and private space. Odham Walk, a remarkable project in inner-city London, which was realised in the same period and with an approach consistent with the Austin case study, stands out

<sup>1</sup> a De Grote Hof, Ypenburg, 2007. Architects: Rapp+Rapp, Rotterdam. Within this super-block there are 5 connected courtyards; these are publicly accessible and represent the 'formal' front sides of the buildings

today as a rare example. I will therefore present this project, in order to show continuity between this 'other' (or 'critical') position and the two recent Dutch projects.

Together, this background of theoretical, practical and design issues will constitute a framework with which to examine the architectural questions posed by the two recent Dutch housing projects: Mariaplaats, Utrecht and Rietlanden, Amsterdam. Some conclusions about 'urban architecture' will be drawn from the previous analyses.

### The 'urban experience', a theoretical notion

A particularly fascinating aspect of the projects under discussion is their challenging treatment of the relation between the private and the public sphere. One essential aim of this research is to discover in what ways this relation is changing: at first glance we may suggest that these spheres – in more architectural terms, domains – are becoming overlapped or intermingled. The clear distinction between the domains is disappearing. To consider this in more detail we must look at the conditions of the typical existing situation. The slim perimeter block, as generally understood, has a layout which defines the private interior space and the public streets by excluding the one from the other.<sup>3</sup> The inner space of the block is an exclusively private, possibly collective, space used by residents only, while the street is public and equally accessible to everyone. This relationship has at least two

limitations: the perimeter block creates an inescapable collectivity – in the inner space for example – between dwellers brought together by coincidence alone; and second, the public space formed by the closed arrangement of blocks is a continuous unequivocal space. The Austin case study of Venturi Scott Brown and the writings of Ignasi de Solà-Morales<sup>4</sup> both argue against this, suggesting instead the need for a diversification of public spaces.

To further understand the context of this changing balance between the private and public spheres we must look to the field of sociological urban theory. In their book, *In Search of a New Public Domain*, Hajer and Reijndorp demonstrate an approach to the public realm that is marked by a realistic though not unduly hypochondriacal view of public life. Their analytical approach is not new, as demonstrated by their citation of sociologists and urban theorists of the post-war period, but one which seems to have been forgotten or misused for a long time. In the meantime, the debate on the public realm has been dominated either by an uncomfortable idealism concerning neighbourliness and community life or by the paralysis summarised by (and/or caused by) Koolhaas' statement 'the street is dead'.<sup>5</sup> Equally paralysing may have been the critical attitude that cast any attempt at planned collectivity as an inherently untrustworthy action sponsored by a power-related ideology.

One of the surprises of *In Search of a New Public Domain* is the multitude of examples it offers, in text and images, demonstrating what appears to be a very diverse, active and intriguing public life taking place in the street. Pictures show crowds of people

1 b Photo from *In Search of a New Public Domain* by Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp (2001)



1b

populating public spaces, from beaches along the Seine to modern shopping malls [1b]. If scepticism regarding 'the public realm' has any validity, it must then concern the nature of this public life. The book is an attempt to interpret recent developments in the public sphere and through this to develop tools that help planners and designers to approach the contemporary situation.

Essential to this interpretation is the idea of the city as a communication system, as formulated by Melvin Webber in 1962.<sup>6</sup> Webber pointed out the need for interaction, for the flow of goods and information between people. The public domain, instead of a physical entity and identifiable space, was articulated by Webber as a 'non-place urban realm'. In modern life, he argued, citizens are not necessarily based in one place alone; they can choose where to go and which facility to use. In this 'network society', the mobility of people has increased; they participate in many different groups, change roles and move from place to place and from context to context. The experience of urbanity is therefore more mental than physical and urban life is no longer restricted to city-dwellers; the countryman may be urban while the city-dweller may not be. In consequence, Hajer and Reijndorp describe a public domain of 'surprise and reflection', of 'exchange rather than meeting', an experience of 'a mix of social worlds' and of 'expanding one's horizons'.<sup>7</sup>

In Webber's definition, the urban realm is a communicative agglomeration of interest-communities. These are heterogeneous groups of people communicating with each other, whose composition is never constant and in which participants are constantly changing roles. This constant exchange and shift is the essence of the quality Hajer and Reijndorp are seeking in the public domain. Public space in this sense is where individuals and/or groups encounter and experience each other's values and behaviour without necessarily meeting each other as a collectivity.

The interpretation of public life expressed by Hajer and Reijndorp presupposes the acceptance of conflict and heterogeneity. In this respect, Fuhimiko Maki's pronouncements on the city from as early as 1964 are of interest.<sup>8</sup> Maki described the city as 'a dynamic field' and urban society as 'a coexistence and conflict of amazingly heterogeneous institutions and individuals'. In a similar vein, Hajer and Reijndorp describe 'the urban experience' as the 'cultural exchange between different social groups'. This urban experience is possible in those places 'that are dominated by a different group [than one's own] and where different codes are being demonstrated'. In this view, the possibility of conflict or friction in the public domain is accepted or at least not completely excluded in advance. Instead of burdening urban design with the aspiration of positive community life, this attitude gives meaning to public space that is stripped of moralistic qualifications. A form of 'parochialisation' is allowed, including the appropriation of public space by different groups or 'tribes', as de Solà-Morales calls them.<sup>9</sup> This view gives meaning to the recent

tendency to theme public spaces and may provide a response to Koolhaas' claimed 'amnesty for the city':<sup>10</sup> public places do not necessarily need to have the same positive user-value to everyone in every respect at the same time; neither does positive user-value necessarily mean 'for all together'.

While Hajer and Reijndorp demonstrate the need for cultural exchange between different people as an aspect of public life, this same cultural exchange is often perceived as conflicting with many people's preoccupation with safety. It is, therefore, an important condition for the design of public spaces that they facilitate cultural exchange while at the same time providing appropriate safety and security.

Hajer and Reijndorp write about public space in urban areas in general. In this paper their interpretation is transposed to the particular context of housing projects. Their emphasis on cultural exchange rather than collectivity might well be useful in this context too. The projects discussed show a tendency to open towards the city: they more or less cautiously let city life influence the inner realm of the block. These projects challenge safety and privacy through their apparent desire to break through the barrier separating the collective interior from the outer world. There is a tendency towards an exchange between the private or collective spaces and the public spaces of the city. Indeed, it may be that this looseness and openness to the city helps to maintain balance among arbitrarily grouped residents.

One of the questions these projects raise is whether the space they define is collective space (thus private) or public space or if, as de Solà-Morales suggests, both of these notions are losing their value.<sup>11</sup> De Solà-Morales considers the notion of the 'public realm' insufficient to describe the full breadth of collective life in the city. He speaks in this respect of an 'official' city, alongside the networks of secluded, collective spaces of daily life, which can be appropriated for a diversity of particular activities and may play a communal role without the rhetoric of formal representation.

The housing projects discussed may be considered examples of the urbanisation of the private domain that de Solà-Morales describes. In this way, they effect a broadening of the collective domain of the city, within which the distinction between public and private space is imprecise and variable.

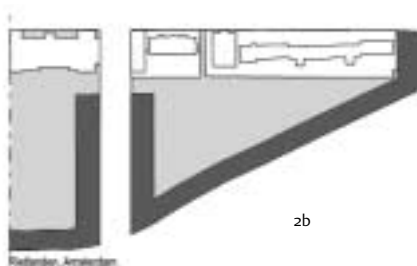
### **Morphology: the site and the size**

During the last decade, urban renewal in the Netherlands has moved away from the ring of working-class housing districts around the city centre. Development and renewal is now to be found both in the old inner city and at the peripheries of the city [2a].

In the Netherlands, the rings of working-class housing were mostly developed after the introduction of the Housing Act (*Woningwet*) of 1901. Since this act came into effect, Dutch housing blocks have tended to be no more than 40 metres wide, the distance necessary to accommodate the depth of one house, two gardens and another house. Prior to the



2a



2b

2 a Morphological map of Amsterdam (detail), showing relation between urban location and block depth

b Diagram of initial designs for Mariaplaats and Rietlanden, which maintain the traditional form of the perimeter block

Housing Act, deeper block sizes had been customary that allowed a multitude of inner-block functions to develop, including workshops, schools, churches and housing courts. The Housing Act was introduced in part to stop the creation of housing courts by private developers, which had been common during the nineteenth century, stating that every house should have its front door on the public street.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that the two recent housing projects discussed here have a block size considerably larger than the 40 metres of most housing blocks built since the early twentieth century. Mariaplaats is a block in the old medieval centre of Utrecht that is unusually deep, resulting in part from its former function. The other block, Rietlanden, is located in one of Amsterdam's old harbour districts, which also had a very different morphology.

The sheer size of these blocks made it difficult to maintain a traditional design using only perimeter buildings, as this would have resulted in a large empty inner space. The design history of both projects is interesting in that external forces (particularly the surrounding inhabitants) became important factors in transforming the traditional block compositions that were initially proposed [2b]. The resulting compositions show looser, more open and more multi-focused organisations of the perimeter block. They respond both to the urban fabric in which they are situated and to new patterns of social life.

In other new housing developments in the Netherlands, experiments in the morphology of the

urban grain and the adoption of a deeper block size have become more customary. At IJburg, which is a new housing development in Amsterdam situated on newly formed land in the waters of the IJ, a layout of blocks 60 metres in depth has been designed to stimulate multi-functional developments. At the Shell area, a former industrial site in Amsterdam North, a 'campus model' is being researched, in which urban fields will house free-standing apartment buildings. As an extension of this survey, research is needed into the effect of these new block sizes on the development of new approaches to the public domain and multi-functionality.<sup>13</sup>

### Towards a 'diversification of public space' – a design history

It may seem strange to start a design history of this theme of 'opening-up' after the Second World War, and therefore after the period in which an 'open urbanism' was pioneered. However, one might argue that the 'other Modern' of the post-war period was critical of Modernism exactly because of its failure to generate 'meaningful public space' which is the central issue here.

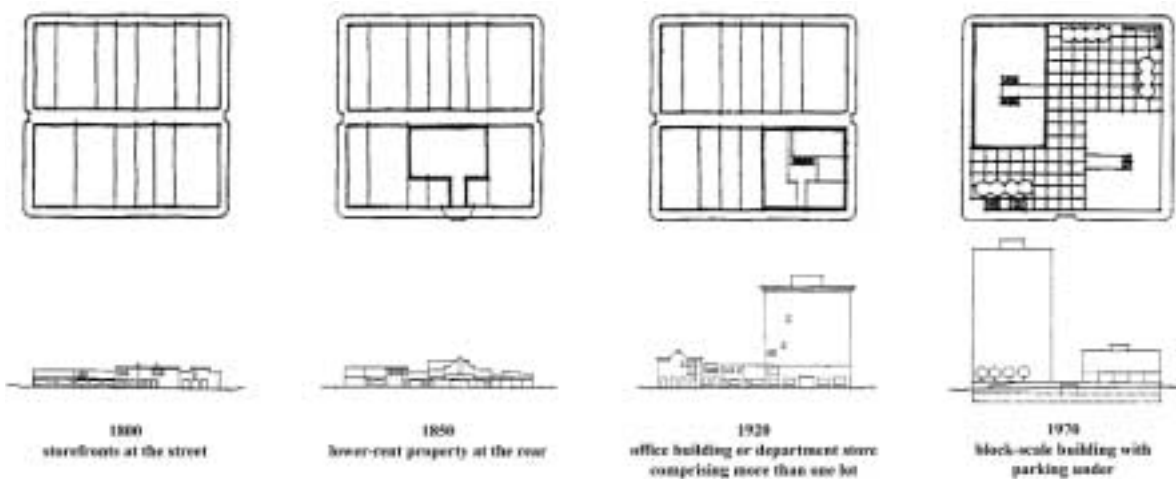
The early Modernist critique of the nineteenth-century block layout, which was led by Le Corbusier who stated 'the street is dead',<sup>14</sup> addressed the impoverishment of European medieval cities after the processes of industrialisation and worker immigration. The closed block as an urban model, which had worked well for centuries, began to collapse under the pressure of increased population

density, traffic, industry and other modern urban requirements. Yet early Modernism did not specifically search for a new domain of public life. They were primarily concerned with offering comfortable housing. The Modern House can be seen as a refuge from public life, and in that sense it is anti-urban. It was left to the post-war generation of architects to rediscover street life as a positive force.

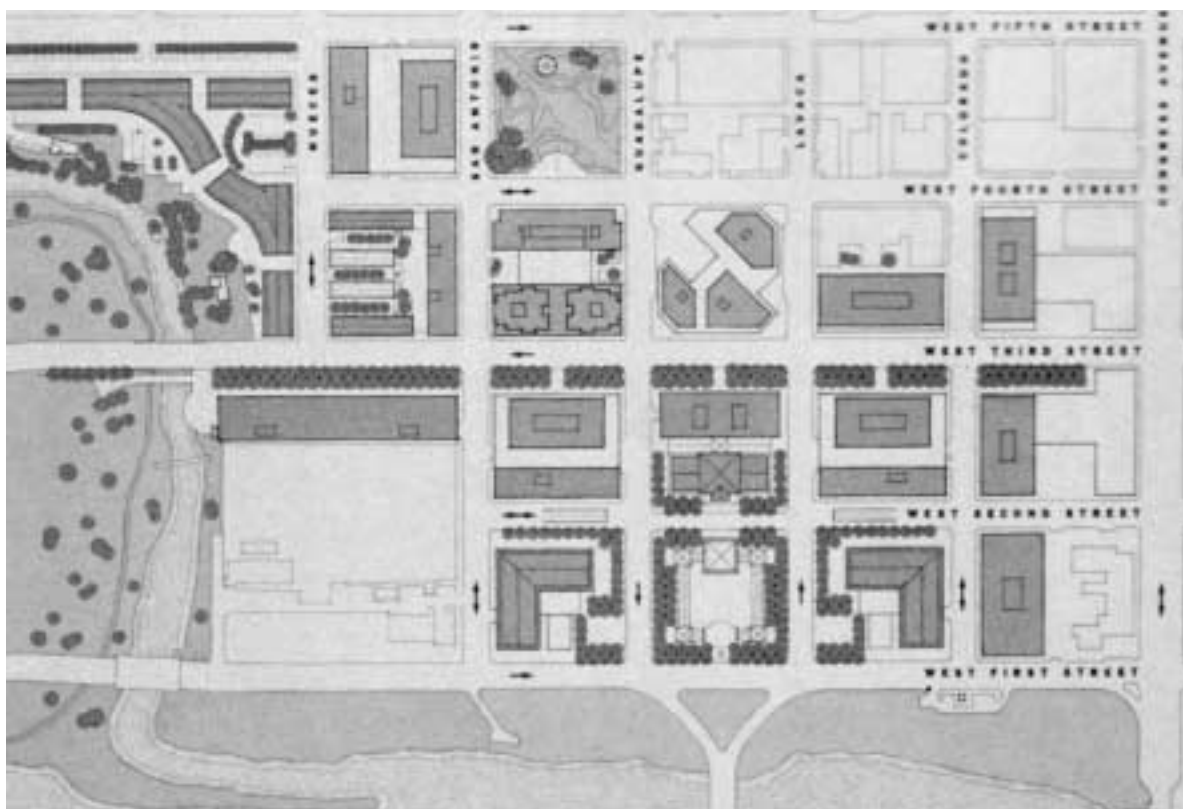
'The public realm' and the experience of the city as a qualitative phenomenon, rather than the construction of the city as a quantitative technological problem, became the central topic in architecture during the post-war period. The work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, which was begun during this period, is specifically centred on the city and the public realm. One particular case study, carried out by their office Venturi Scott Brown

3 Redevelopment Plan for the Republic Square District in Austin, 1984, by Venturi Scott Brown and Associates  
*a* Analytical diagrams of urban grid development. Blocks were initially divided into narrow lots, each with a front door onto the main street and rear access to a service alley. This engenders differentiation in the street grid: main streets along the front sides of lots are crossed

perpendicularly by secondary streets leading to service alleys. As city scale increased, so did the parcelling of lots. When single lots began to encroach on entire blocks, back alleys disappeared and blocks became accessible from one side only, via a deck above parking, reducing the number of activities related to the street  
*b* Plan for the redevelopment of Republic Square District

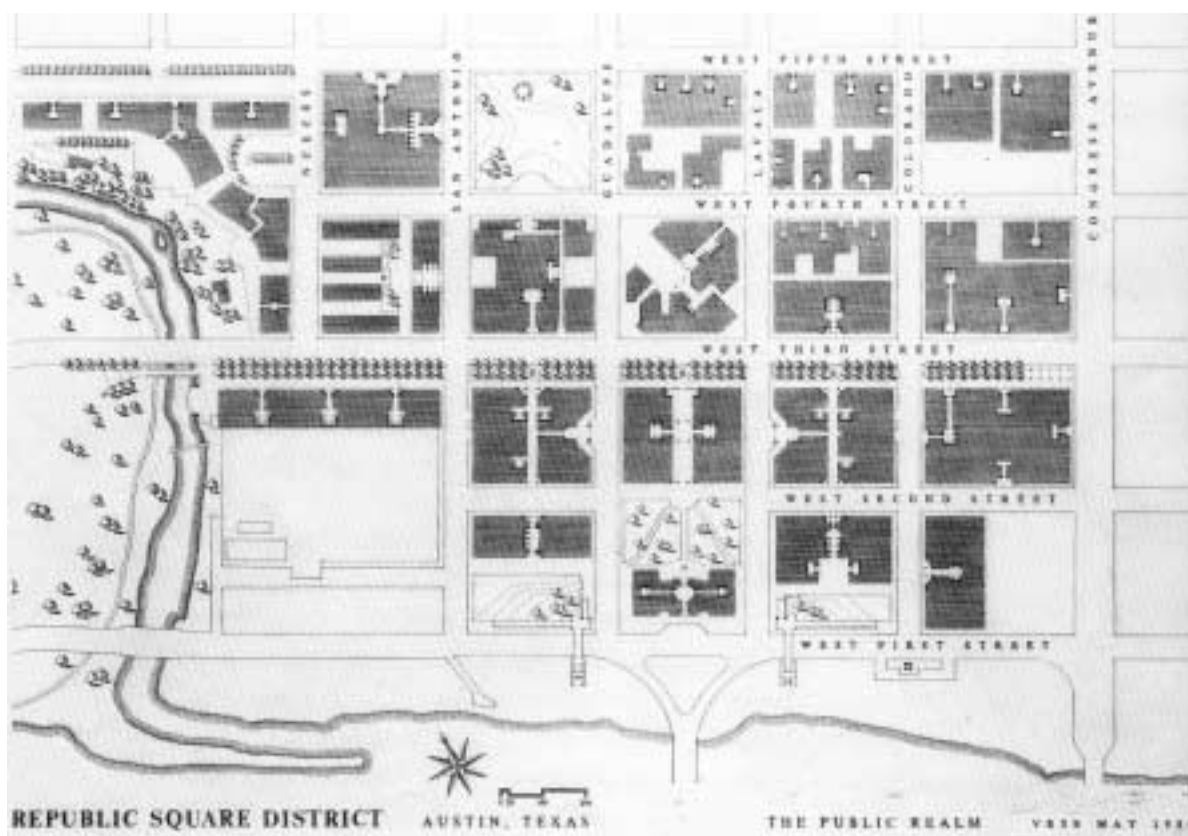


3a

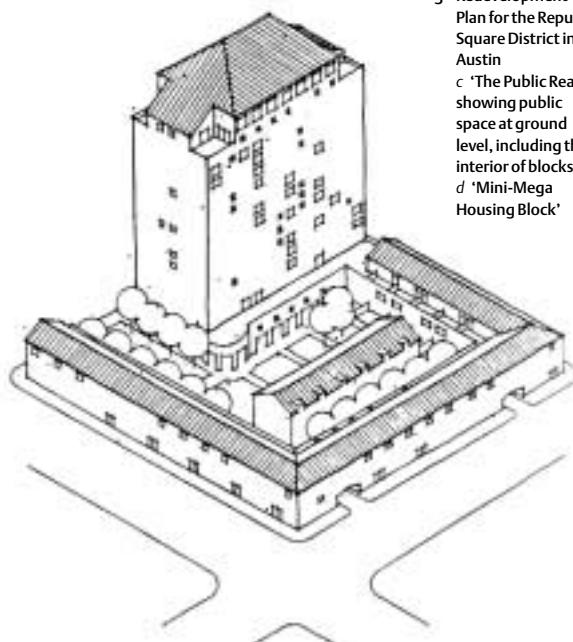


3b





3c



3 Redevelopment Plan for the Republic Square District in Austin  
c 'The Public Realm', showing public space at ground level, including the interior of blocks  
d 'Mini-Mega Housing Block'

3d

and Associates (VSBA), provides a very clear analysis of the shortcomings of the grid plan in modern society and of ways to tackle this through design. This study – the *Redevelopment Plan for the Republic Square District in Austin, 1984*<sup>35</sup> – analyses the development of the urban grid of Austin, Texas. It can be seen as exemplary for the American grid in general and – to a certain extent – for the European perimeter block system. A series of diagrams show the different phases in the development of the grid and the resulting constraints for the modern city. They reveal a dramatic weakening of the quality of the street as a

public space, due to the increase in traffic and the reduction in the number of activities related to and adjacent to the street [3a].

VSBA's response to the problems of public space as revealed by their analysis of Austin is embodied in their design suggestions for the Republic Square District [3b]. The design covers about 20 blocks in this run-down quarter of Austin and includes offices, shops and housing. A 'diversification of public space' is created, with various layers of public spaces introduced side by side. The most formal layer is the so-called Rambla: a locally widened street, or

boulevard, carefully designed as a high-quality public space with a broad pedestrian pavement, shops, street furniture and precise architectural guidelines for facades. This Rambla is part of the greater east-west system of transport lines. As the analysis of Austin revealed, the principal facades of the blocks face these east-west roads. Therefore, the north-south streets that already have side elevations in the original grid layout are designated for service and minor public functions.

This design for the first layer of public space is coupled with a new system for the interior of the blocks [3c]. The central office blocks are each organised as a single entity with a base of four storeys following the perimeter and a more slender tower on top. On the ground floor there are commercial units, which have public access from the east-west streets

and goods entrances at the sides. There are also secondary public spaces within the blocks, containing smaller commercial units and entrances to lifts serving the higher office (and residential) floors. Elsewhere, residential buildings are grouped around open spaces inside the block [3d]. Together, the ground floors of the blocks form a secondary pedestrian network, containing interior public spaces appropriate to each block. VSBA thus propose a new type of public space, which is neither a neutral territory of public thoroughfare nor a private interior designated for block uses and residents only. The block interior (which remains private in the legal sense) is instead 'opened' to the passage of pedestrians, creating a domain that allows encounters with different activities and diverse populations within the enclosure of the block.



4a



4b

#### Odham Walk, London

At around the same time in the heart of London, a housing block was built based on the same 'design by research' approach that was so essential to the work of VSBA and other post-war architects [4a]. This project, Odham Walk, designed by Donald Ball and London County Council and completed in 1981, also uses the existing urban fabric as its starting point [4b]. The aim of the design was to transform the traditional block to meet modern housing demands but also, as we shall see, to address new needs for public and collective domain.

Ironically, the Odham Walk project was severely criticised at the time because of its so-called 'kasbah' look, which appeared to be a complete negation (in

- 4 Odham Walk, London, 1981. Architects: Donald Ball and London County Council
- a Present view of Long Acre – Endell Street corner
- b Location within existing fabric of central London





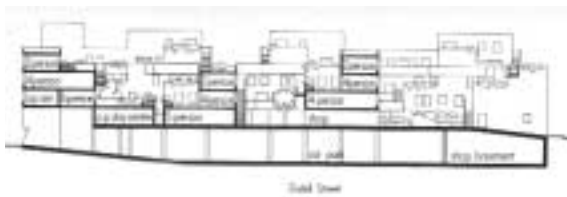
4c



4d



4e



4f

4 Odham Walk, London  
c Original interior view published in *The Architects' Journal*, 1982  
d Present interior view with abundant greenery

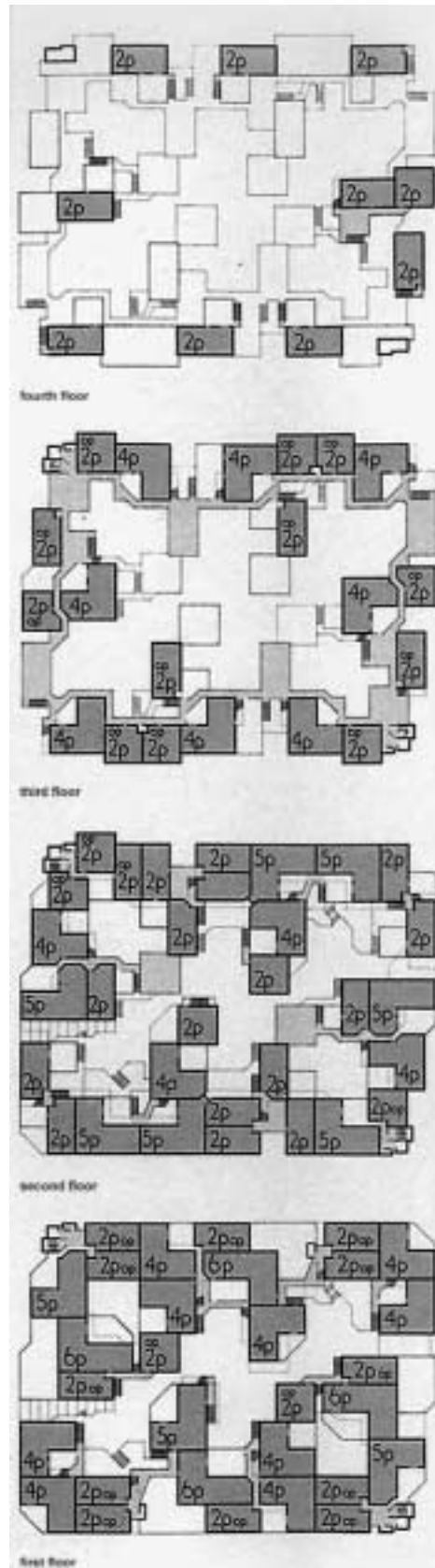
e First floor plan, showing public spaces at deck level  
f Section, showing stepped form  
g Arrangement of dwellings, first to fourth floor

h Orientation diagram, comparing a conventional perimeter block layout with the arrangement of dwellings at Odham Walk

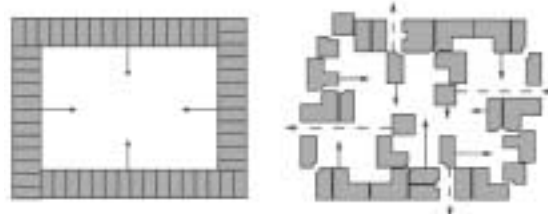
the eyes of critics)<sup>16</sup> of the surrounding typology of gallery-accessed apartment blocks [4c]. In England at that time, the climate for urban housing experiments became unfavourable in reaction to the failures of large-scale Modernist post-war developments. The project therefore had little influence. If one looks at the original black-and-white pictures that show what appears to be a complex stony landscape, one may understand the doubts at the time. Nowadays however, this urban, yet green oasis in the city centre, adjacent to Leicester Square, is certainly a great success [4d].

The property is owned by a corporation that maintains the building and the collective spaces. There are 102 apartments in the project, of which more than half are two-room apartments for elderly people. The density of the project is very high: 472 persons per hectare, plus commercial and service spaces. The perimeter block, with shops at ground level and housing on higher levels, fits in with the surrounding tissue of closed city blocks, and yet the dwellings within the blocks are arranged in a completely different way. Because the project was developed as a single entity it was possible to build underground parking and service facilities, with the apartments on the upper floors accessed from a collective deck on the first floor [4e]. The layout of apartments, stacked in a seemingly loose but rational cubic composition, together with the abundant green from the overhanging gardens, creates a beautiful interior.

The collective deck on the first floor [4f] can be accessed from the pavement via four entrances between the ground-level lots, by means of stairs,



49



4h

ramps or lifts. Although access is direct and easy, entrances are not accentuated from the street: one might say that the city is not invited into the block; rather, the block and the houses are connected to the city. The deck can be fenced off – at night, for example, or at other moments when the inhabitants feel pressure from the city towards their private homes.

Although the deck is a collective space, it is not specifically designed as a meeting place. As one moves through the inner space, its shape constantly changes; there is no single central space, but rather a chain of spaces. The apartments are linked and stacked in a complicated (yet logical) pattern, in such a way that the mass of the apartments decreases and recesses with height [4g]. Besides increasing the light reaching the inner space, this arrangement also allows large balconies to be constructed on the ‘terraces’, together with stairs and short galleries. The complicated spatial patterns result in diverse and multiform orientations of dwellings, and therefore multiple and ambiguous relations between the inner space and the apartments. This diversity of orientation is one important way in which the design creates an ‘open’ quality that differs radically from the closed block in which four rear facades face each other [4h].

Important for the specific quality of this inner space is the detached relation between the apartments and the space. The architecture consists of closed facades with relatively small openings. The living spaces are mostly distanced from the collective space: the entrance hall gives access to the smaller rooms first and to the sanitary spaces, and only then to the largest room, which is adjacent to the terrace.

In contrast to the inner experience, from the outside the block appears to be strongly uniform and sober – red-brown brick surfaces with minimal

openings. Only at ground-floor level are there ample openings for shop windows, such as the huge glass facade of the Swatch Shop. The strong form of the block suggests a clear edge between the neutral public space that surrounds it and the inner block space that, although publicly accessible while the gates are open, is more collective than public. This remained, I believe, a rather solitary experiment in new public and collective domains; yet in view of current tendencies it is extremely interesting.

#### **Mariaplaats, Utrecht**

When Bob van Reeth/AWG were asked to make a design for Mariaplaats<sup>27</sup> [5a], they were encouraged to depart from the original social housing design, which proposed perimeter apartment buildings above extensive parking facilities [2b]. The new approach they adopted responded to changes in the political and economic situation, which favoured a switch from social housing to more high-class private urban dwellings. Protests by neighbouring inhabitants against the scale of the original design and by the historical society of Utrecht provided a further stimulus. As part of their opposition, the historical society had provided the ‘Immunity Model’ based on the history of the site [5b]. Mariaplaats used to be under the ownership of the canons of a Catholic ‘Immunity’ – a foundation with considerable independent status in the city, with freedom to control its own rules. This autonomy was expressed in the way the canons organised their premises: the houses and workshops of the canons’ servants were arranged along the perimeter of the block, facing inwards; while larger mansions for the canons themselves were situated in the middle, dominating the domain. This model was included in the architect’s brief.



5a



5b



5c

In AWG's design, the typology of this historical composition is adapted in an ingenious way [5c]. As mentioned, the first social housing design provided for perimeter buildings only. This left a considerable empty space in the middle because, as discussed in section 2, Mariaplaats is approximately 1.5 times deeper than the average Dutch housing block. By contrast, AWG position two apartment buildings in the middle of the block, partly on a raised parking deck, and thus bring the focus of the composition to the centre. In this way, AWG follow the 'Immunity Model' of the dominant centre. The edges of the block are formed with single-family row houses; on the north side facing outwards to the public square [5d], on the south side facing inwards to allow small patios at the back adjacent to a small alley. Because the edges of the block are lower, the orientation of the central space is outwards towards the city, providing a view to the towers of the Maria Church [5e]. Smaller buildings, with one apartment on each floor, are clustered around the two bigger apartment blocks; these are each 5 by 8 metres in plan and about 10 metres high, forming small towers.

By using these three elements – row houses, apartment buildings and small apartment towers – the architects create a lively and interesting composition with a sequence of urban spaces, all of which are different and carefully elaborated [5f]. These spaces are not informal in appearance; they are strictly defined by the neutral, mostly red-brown

5 Mariaplaats, Utrecht,  
1995. Architect: Bob  
van Reeth,  
Architekten  
WerkGroep Antwerp  
a View of interior  
spaces by night  
b 'Immunity Model'

developed by  
Historical Society of  
Utrecht  
c Location within  
existing fabric of  
Utrecht  
d North facade  
facing city



5d



5e



5f



5g

brick facades of the buildings and pavements [5g]. Thus a public route is created within the block; accessed via entrances that are open yet inconspicuous, as in Odham Walk. The status of this secluded, secondary public space is much the same as that in Odham Walk: the intention is to make a quiet, pleasant, living environment for the residents (in this case private owners), which is not solely inward looking, and which other city dwellers are also allowed to enjoy. Mariaplaats, like Odham Walk, is a fragment in an existing urban pattern and its value to the city depends to a great extent on its capacity to fit into an existing pattern of secondary public spaces.

5 Mariaplaats, Utrecht  
e View from central interior space to city skyline  
f Ground floor plan  
g View through network of smaller interior spaces

## Rietlanden, Amsterdam

Rietlanden is a project in the redeveloped old harbour district of Amsterdam known as Oostelijke Eilanden; a complicated nucleus of infrastructure and collision of morphological fragments designed by the Amsterdam planning department (DRO Amsterdam; Ton Schaap) with architect Ton Venhoeven.<sup>18</sup> The project considered here consists of four residential towers around a deck [6a] and forms part of a morphological entity that could be regarded as a triangular perimeter block [6b]. The existing north side of this block consists of a row of nineteenth-century terrace houses. The first designs

for the project show the proposed new housing in the form of perimeter slabs [2b] that complete this perimeter block. The eventual solution of free-standing towers was very much the result of negotiations between the designers and the existing residents from the north edge, for whom 'view and sunlight' were the main parameters. The towers open up the view to the south side and are set back at higher levels, in order to give light and view to the residents of the terrace houses.

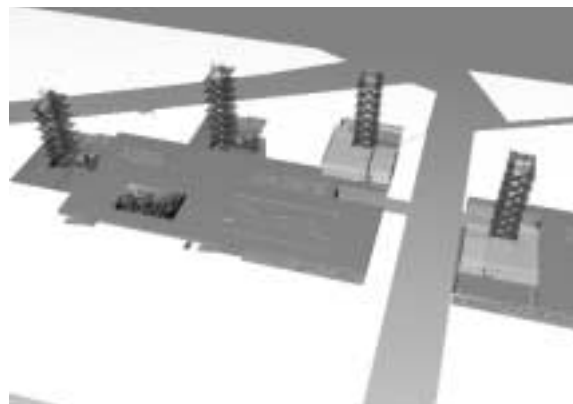
The potential confrontation between the towers and the terrace houses in the inner space has been carefully resolved by an edge of green, a public foot-



6a



6b



6c

6 Rietlanden, Amsterdam, 2001. Urban design: Ton Schaap, DRO; Architect: Ton Venhoeven

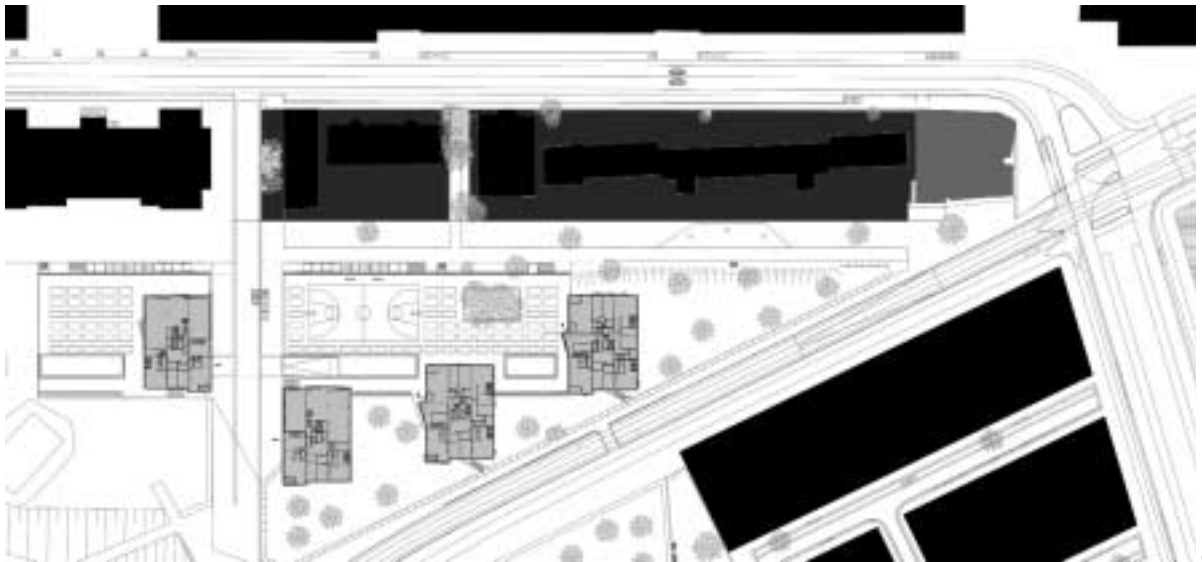
a General view of interior public space and residential towers  
b Location within existing fabric of

Amsterdam  
c Diagram showing residential, commercial, collective and public spaces



and cycle-path and the raised deck above ground floor parking [6e]. This use of public space to mediate between the two groups of residents – new and old – is interesting. The deck itself, although raised above ground level, is open and accessible to everyone and therefore public space; yet it nevertheless remains very much part of the total composition of towers and deck. It is detailed in an efficient, clean-cut fashion, reminiscent of an underground station: steel ramps – also accessible for bicycles – and stairways lead from the public pathways on both sides up to the deck. On top of the deck is a basketball court. In addition, the entrances to two of the towers, two deck-floor apartments and a commercial space are all directly accessed from the deck [6d]. The status of this space is therefore highly ambiguous.

Although the space is demarcated by the apartment buildings, it might be said that the arrangement of the deck responds more to an 'outside' group of users – skaters, basketball players – than to the inhabitants themselves, who are mostly young, double-income urbanites [6c]. Furthermore, there are two public pathways through the block; one passes east-west between the gardens of the housing row and the raised parking deck, while the other runs from the waterfront through the existing housing row and between the towers to the infrastructural nucleus with tramway stop in the south. There is thus an explicit mix of users. This mix also applies to the ownership and maintenance of the buildings, which is divided between the private owners, the



6d



6e

- 6 Rietlanden,  
Amsterdam  
d Plan of deck level  
e View from public  
path towards deck  
and towers  
f Detail of tower base  
and parking deck  
g View from deck  
level



6f



6g

corporation and the municipality which owns the deck, parking area and public pathways.

The contrasts in the facades of the project are intriguing as well. On the south side, the towers face the harsh context of infrastructural elements, such as the Piet Hein Tunnel, highways and tramways. This context called for what the architects describe as an 'alien' exterior: aluminium-clad silver towers as strange sculptures that seem to float above the dynamic world of urban transport. On the northern side, where the towers constitute the background to the inner world of the block, they are carefully attuned to the ground level. Where the public paths run alongside the towers, the base of the tower is clad with the same steel mesh panels that cover the facades of the parking. This earthbound base, with commercial spaces and residential entrances, and the abstract silvery towers above are intertwined by a play of aluminium, steel mesh and glass panels in the lower storeys [6f].

In its approach to the interchange between public and private domains, Rietlanden is far more audacious than Mariaplaats. Of particular interest is the contrast between the flashy buildings, suggestive of the Amsterdam yuppie scene, and the brutality of the deck that seems more suitable for mountain bikers and basketball players. The public domain that has been created is clearly open to groups other than the inhabitants themselves. No attempt has been made to evade the hidden conflict and anxiety felt in public spaces. Yet the ambiguity of the space, which might occasion restlessness, also provides relief from the restricted environments of the closed block [6g].

#### Conclusion: about the form of space

Outdoor space – collective or public – is today a central issue in urban design and in the design of housing projects. Paralleling the increasing diversity in the composition of society, the composition of housing projects is also becoming more varied. There is a marked increase in the number of experiments with different housing and living environments, while a greater differentiation of domains is discernible within housing schemes. This paper focuses on housing projects that – countering the effect of the traditional closed perimeter block – open up to the city.

The projects shown in this paper are exceptional experiments in the changing relationship between the public and the private domain. In these projects the notions of public, collective and private domain are being challenged and stretched in a struggle of repulsion as well as attraction. Outdoor space becomes the playground (or battleground) in this confrontation between different groups of urbanisers and the design of outdoor space becomes of central importance. In these projects the architecture of the individual buildings is therefore less important than the architecture of the spaces they form.<sup>29</sup> This implies the need for greater emphasis on outdoor space during the design process, which is more easily achieved when one architect is involved in the design of both the dwellings and the spaces they enclose. When more designers are involved in one project or

block, the enclosed space easily becomes neglected because the main attention tends to be on the buildings, rather than the space. The appropriate demarcation of design responsibilities is therefore of great importance.

In view of this, it seems interesting to concentrate not on the buildings but on the *form of the space* as the central design issue. Considering these projects in this way we can discern several different architectural aspects for discussion: the form of the open space; the cohesion of the surrounding surfaces; the relationship between the dwellings, the open spaces and the city; and last but not least the architectural articulation of social values, such as publicity, collectivity and privacy.

#### Form of space

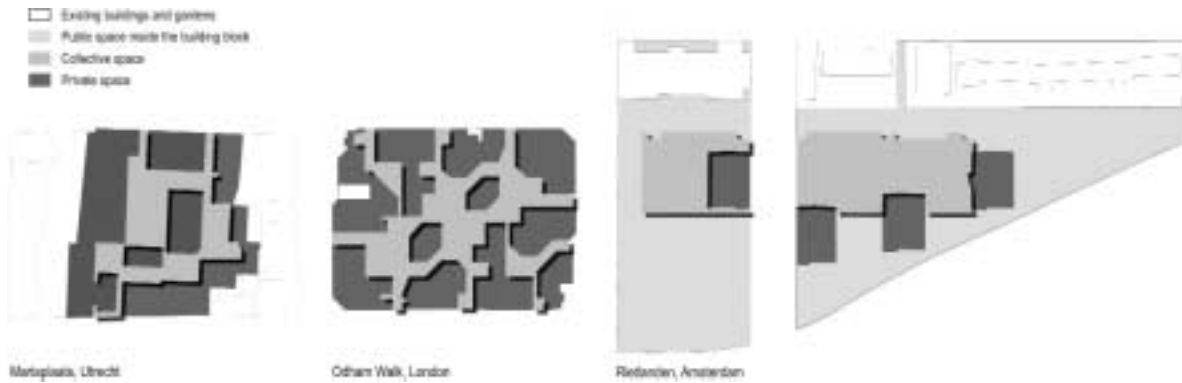
In the examples described, the form of the open space is a, or the, central issue of the design [7]. In Odham Walk there is no single central space; neither is the space centrally organised. There is instead a meandering continuous space, with places to sit or stand casually and with views up to the terraced gardens. Mariaplaats offers a chain of spaces, none of which on their own offers a place to stay. Each space seems carefully designed as a volume, with equal importance given to the dimensions of adjoining facades and those of the ground surface. One of the spaces is the central place, which is clearly indicated by its size, raised floor level and use of colour (it is the only white space, while all others are brick-lined), yet the chain of spaces is designed as a route through the block. The deck of Rietlanden is part of the wider network of public spaces yet, as the open space belonging to the surrounding towers, it is also a clearly defined and meticulously articulated place to be.

#### Surfaces of the space

The architecture of the facades of the projects is remarkably neutral; it forms a neutral background to the outdoor space. The individual dwellings are not articulated; there are in general few elaborated elements and few different materials and colours. Mariaplaats, for example, gives the impression that it is composed of one material only: brown-red brick for facades and floor covering. In all of these projects, even the dwellings that directly adjoin the outdoor space keep an appropriate distance; they are reserved and anonymous. The mask-like facades divert attention from the individual to the whole. The outdoor space thereby keeps its independence; it is an entity in its own right.

#### Relations between dwellings, open space and the city

It seems a characteristic feature of these projects that the relations of each dwelling unit to neighbouring units, to the enclosed space and to the wider city vary greatly across the scheme. All projects described show multiple orientations of block elements that do not only face inwards but also outwards to the city. The desire to escape the one-dimensional orientation of housing units within the traditional perimeter block seems an important motivation for opening up the block.



7

7 Form of space diagram, comparing relation between public, private and collective spaces in Mariaplaats, Odham Walk and Rietlanden

A useful distinction can be drawn between the relationship of dwellings to the city and the inverse relationship of the city to the dwellings and their enclosed domain. The former relationship influences particularly the nature of the interaction between neighbouring residents. If the city can be experienced from within the block (as in Odham Walk and Mariaplaats), or if public spaces are laid out in-between housing units (as in Rietlanden), then the pressure towards interaction between neighbouring residents is less imperative. On the other hand, the latter relationship of the city to dwellings concerns the degree to which other citizens are invited into the enclosed domain. This is an altogether much more delicate matter. The question then concerns how to organise access to the enclosed domain, how to interpret the character of the domain – as private, collective or public space – and to what extent this domain is dominated or appropriated by the adjoining housing units.

Odham Walk creates a quiet domain for the residents themselves; an outdoor urban space without the motorised traffic and noise of the street. Passing pedestrians are not particularly invited to enter, yet they are in no way hindered from doing so. It is only once inside the block that one can fully see and experience the collective space. Mariaplaats relates to the passing citizen in a similar way; yet the walkway which passes through the project could easily have formed part of an urban pedestrian network. If that had been the case, the project could have formed an important addition to the public domain. By contrast, Rietlanden is intersected by public foot- and cycle-paths and its inner space can be seen from the outside. The central open space is public, but secluded from the public street by its raised floor level. With residential spaces adjoining it directly, this space has a private function, but,

through its basketball-court, it is also clearly part of the public realm of Amsterdam.

To summarise: these projects tend to make their dwellings part of a wider public domain stretching beyond the boundaries of the immediate site; and contribute, to a greater or lesser degree, to the creation of diverse forms of public realm as advocated by de Solà-Morales.

#### Architectural articulation of the collective

An interesting issue worthy of further research is the way in which architecture is able to express 'social values' through the spaces defined by its surfaces. As already noted in the paragraph on facades, a neutral architecture giving little expression to the dwellings themselves or to separate building elements diverts attention from the private aspect of the individual housing unit to the collective or public aspect of the whole project, and therefore to the open space. Further study is necessary into the ways in which the detailing of doorways, windows and other elements of the facade can express the private or public nature of the spaces they adjoin.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the layout of the spaces themselves, and particularly the articulation of transitions from private to collective and from collective to public domains, has become much more important in the contemporary city. This involves many forms of demarcation of which the gate is among the most important. In Odham Walk and Mariaplaats, gates are used as instruments to regulate these transitions: gates can be opened and/or closed at different times of day and in response to different situations. They are an effective instrument in providing the necessary safety. As such, the gate may be an instrumental part of an alternative attitude to designing within what some perceive to be the contemporary 'urban battlefield'. Housing projects creating new – either public or collective – outdoor spaces need not be approached as solely defensive and exclusive enterprises. Indeed, the re-opening of the perimeter block may be seen as an essential tool for designers trying to respond to the challenges of the contemporary city, allowing mediation between neighbouring residents and between residents and other groups of citizens.

## Notes

1. This paper was originally written in December 2003 as an initial exploration of the issues involved in this subject. Currently, more structured research is being undertaken at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, which is due to be published in 2007 under the provisional title *Re-opening the Dutch Housing Block*.
2. Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *Op zoek naar nieuw publiek domein* [published in English as *In Search of a New Public Domain*] (Rotterdam: NAI, 2001).
3. For a history of the perimeter block see Jean Castex, Jean Charles Depaule, and Phillippe Panerai, *Formes urbaines: de l'îlot à la barre* (Paris: Dunod, 1977) [published in English as *Urban Forms: The Death and Life of the Urban Block* (London: Architectural Press, 2004)]; see also Arjan Hebly 'De dunne stad' ['The thin city'], *Archis*, 2 (1992), p. 37.
4. Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 'Openbare en Collectieve Ruimten', *Oase*, 33 (1992) [originally published in *La Vanguardia*, Barcelona].
5. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 1253.
6. Melvin Webber, 'The Non-Place Urban Realm', in *Explorations into Urban Structure* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).
7. Hajer and Reijndorp, p. 12.
8. Fuhimiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form*, 1964, cited in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, p. 1043.
9. Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 'Openbare en Collectieve Ruimten', see note 4.
10. Rem Koolhaas, 'Amnesty for the Present-day City', *de Architect*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1996) 36–41 / Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, p. 1253.
11. Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 'Openbare en Collectieve Ruimten', see note 4.
12. Arjan Hebly, 'De dunne stad', see note 3, p. 36.
13. The research described in note 1 includes the IJburg blocks.
14. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925).
15. See Denise Scott Brown, 'Urban Concepts', *Architectural Design Profile*, vol. 60, no. 1/2 (1990). This plan has been extensively researched by the author and published as Karin Theunissen, 'The Difficult Whole', in *Hybrides, De Architectonische Interventie* (Delft: TUD, 2000).
16. Christopher Woodward, Kenneth Campbell and Derek Poole, 'Two Perspectives on Odhams', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 175, no. 5 (1982), 31–46.
17. Mariaplaats, Utrecht, 1995. Architect: Bob van Reeth, Architecten WerkGroep Antwerp.
18. Rietlanden, Amsterdam, 2001. Urban designer: Ton Schaap, DRO Amsterdam; Architect: Venhoeven C. S., Amsterdam.
19. Arjan Hebly and Karin Theunissen, *Bouwen in de Stad/Building in the City*, Projectorganisatie Stadsvernieuwing's Gravenhage [Project Organisation for Urban Renewal, The Hague] (1989). In this study, the effects of urban renewal in The Hague were researched in comparison to the traditional city. One of the conclusions was that in new projects the 'form of open spaces' had been overlooked in favour of technological housing requirements.
20. This research, under the subtitle *Architectural Articulation of the Social*, forms part of the above-mentioned project currently in process (note 1).

## Illustration credits

Marcel Antonisse, AFP, 1b (from Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of a New Public Domain* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2001))  
*Architects' Journal*, 4c, 4e, 4f, 4g (from vol. 175, no. 5 (1982), 31–46)  
 Author, 1a, 4a, 4d, 5c, 5g, 6a  
 Author/Janine Toussaint, 2a, 2b, 4b, 4h, 5f, 6b, 6d, 7  
 Marjoleine Boonstra, 6e, 6f, 6g  
 Niels Donckers, 5d, 5e  
 Historical Society of Utrecht, 5b  
 Luuk Kramer, 5a  
 Venhoeven C. S., 6c  
 Venturi Scott Brown and Associates, 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d

## Biography

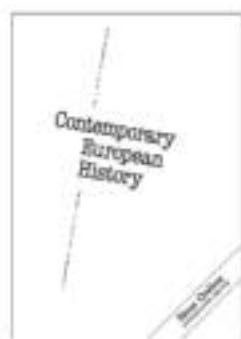
Karin Theunissen is an architect and Assistant Professor in architectural research and education at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology. After graduating at Delft in 1986, she co-founded the architectural practice Hebly Theunissen Architecten in Delft. She is currently preparing a thesis on the work of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates and is involved in the research project *Re-opening the Dutch City Block*. She has contributed to several journals, including *de Architect*, *Archis* and the *Architectural Annual Delft*.

## Author's address

Karin Theunissen  
 Faculty of Architecture  
 Delft University of Technology  
 P.O.Box 5043 – 2600 GA Delft  
[k.m.p.theunissen@tudelft.nl](mailto:k.m.p.theunissen@tudelft.nl)

CAMBRIDGE

JOURNALS



# Contemporary European History

**Contemporary European History**

is available online at:  
[www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH)

**To subscribe contact  
Customer Services**

**in Cambridge:**

Phone +44 (0)1223 326070  
Fax +44 (0)1223 325150  
Email [journals@cambridge.org](mailto:journals@cambridge.org)

**in New York:**

Phone (845) 353 7500  
Fax (845) 353 4141  
Email  
[subscriptions\\_newyork@cambridge.org](mailto:subscriptions_newyork@cambridge.org)

**Editors**

Jonathan Morris, University of Hertfordshire, UK  
Mary Vincent, University of Sheffield, UK  
John Connelly, University of California, Berkeley, USA

*Contemporary European History* focuses on twentieth-century European history in its broadest sense. It encompasses Eastern and Western Europe and covers the period from 1918 to the present. It is open to all forms of inquiry - including cultural, economic, international, political and social history - and welcomes comparative approaches.

Price information is available at:  
[www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH)

**Free email alerts**

Keep up-to-date with new material -  
sign up at [www.journals.cambridge.org/register](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/register)

For a free online sample visit:  
[www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/CEH)



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS