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## Housing the Unexpected

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Martínez-Millana, Elena

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## ***Housing the unexpected: Kruisplein project in Rotterdam by Mecanoo/Francine Houben (1981-1985)***

**Elena Martínez-Millana**<sup>a, b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, [id](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9146-4444), [e.martinezmillana@tudelft.nl](mailto:e.martinezmillana@tudelft.nl); <sup>b</sup> Departamento de Proyectos Arquitectónicos, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, [elena.martinez.millana@upm.es](mailto:elena.martinez.millana@upm.es)

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### ***Abstract***

*Francine Houben was a student at the Faculteit Bouwkunde, Technische Hoogeschool Delft, when designed the Kruisplein project together with her classmates Henk Döll and Roelf Steenhuis, between the years 1980 and 1983. The youth housing competition “Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein Rotterdam” was held by the Projektgroep ‘Het Oude Westen’ and the Maatschappij Volkswoningen, both in Rotterdam, and consisted of two rounds. This research analyses the Kruisplein project regarding the competition process, studying both the first and second versions presented in 1980 and 1982, and considering the academic context to which they were still linked when they designed it. Together they presented their graduation report at the TH Delft “Woning en normering. De rol van het architectonisch ontwerp” on housing and norms in 1984. This was also the year in which they founded their office ‘Architektengroep Mecanoo’, and the realisation of the project began. For them, Kruisplein’s project was their start to pursue “a fundamental renewal of Dutch domestic architecture”, introducing the concept of “neutral dwelling”. This paper shows to what extent Mecanoo’s Kruisplein project was able to offer a different perspective about the competition’s programme itself but ultimately on how the problem of housing “special” groups such as the “youth” was pursued at the time.*

**Keywords:** *Social housing; youth; domesticity; unexpected; flexible; Kruisplein; Rotterdam; 1980’s; Mecanoo*

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## 1. Introduction

When Francine Houben was still studying at the Faculteit Bouwkunde, Technische Hoogeschool Delft, together with her then classmates Henk Döll and Roelf Steenhuis, participated in the youth housing competition “Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein Rotterdam”, held by the Projektgroep ‘Het Oude Westen’ in cooperation with the Maatschappij voor Volkswoningen both in Rotterdam. The ideas competition was launched in November 1980, and received a total of 196 entries, of which the Jury prized 5 winners in June 1981. After this first round, the assignment was readjusted, and those teams resubmitted their proposals in May 1982.<sup>1</sup> In the second round, the ultimate winner who would be allowed to develop the plan was selected: Houben’s team won with the project entitled *Ozoo*, leading to the creation of ‘Architektengroep Mecanoo’ in 1984.



**Figure 1.** a) Mecanoo’s fifth founders in the 1980s: Henk Döll, Erick van Egeraat, Francine Houben, Roelf Steenhuis, Chris de Weijer; b) Portrait of Francine Houben. Photos by Pieter Vandermeer. Cusveller, Sjoerd. *Mecanoo: vijftientig werken*. Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 1987. p. 4, p. 82.

*Ozoo* or Kruisplein’s project was Mecanoo’s start to pursue “a fundamental renewal of Dutch domestic architecture”, as they stated in their graduation report at TH Delft “Woning en normering. De rol van het architectonisch ontwerp” (Housing and Standards, the Role of Architectural Design).<sup>2</sup> At TH Delft they had been working on the specific problem of changing housing plans for some time, and in June 1984 they graduated with this report where they advocated for the so-called “neutral housing” precisely while Kruisplein was being built. Indeed, the design of the Kruisplein project was explained in this academic document, providing

<sup>1</sup> Cocky Blauw, Jan Mulder, and Wytze Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 1* (Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, 1981); Cocky Blauw, Jan Mulder, and Wytze Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 2* (Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Henk Döll, Francine Houben, and Roelf Steenhuis, ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’ (Graduation Paper, Delft, Technische Universiteit Delft, 1984), 2. A copy of this document is preserved at the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning, Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam, where the author of this paper had access to it.

an exceptional context for this analysis.<sup>3</sup> With this project, they stated a different perspective to deal with the problem of housing “special” groups in social housing, such as the youth.



**Figure 2.** Cover of the graduation report by Francine Houben, Henk Döll and Roelf Steenhuis, with a photo of the Kruisplein project under construction; ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’. Graduation Paper, Technische Universiteit Delft TU, 1984.

Kruisplein project has been pointed out as one of the projects that marked a turning point in the evolution of collective housing in the Netherlands at the end of the 20th century, as it offered a reinterpretation of the modern tradition and introduced typological innovations in social housing, reviving interest in these issues after a period of lethargy.<sup>4</sup> Although it received considerable coverage in architectural journals at the time, such as *O, Plan*, among others, this has not been the case in subsequent decades.<sup>5</sup> For example, in recent publications, such as the one by the journal *DASH (Delft Architectural Studies on Housing)* devoted to the issue of “Housing the Student”, where the return of the topic to the agenda was addressed, the Kruisplein project was not among the selected project analysed.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> It is also worth mentioning that they also included their design proposals for the competition organised by UNESCO. Tomorrows Habitat/ Wonen in de Toekomst, in Het Nieuwe Westen in Rotterdam and at Walsteeg in Utrecht.

<sup>4</sup> Dirk van den Heuvel, ‘After-Images of an Avant-Garde: From Plan Analysis to SuperDutch in Dutch Housing (1980-2003)’, *DASH | Delft Architectural Studies on Housing*, no. 04 (2011): 20–37.

<sup>5</sup> Henk Döll, Francine Houben, and Roelf Steenhuis, ‘Plan OZOO’, *O: Ontwerp, Onderzoek, Onderwijs*, no. 4 (1982): 38–45; Henk Döll, Francine Houben, and Roelf Steenhuis, ‘Woning En Normering’, *Plan*, no. 3 (maart 1983): 24–25; Izak Salomons, ‘Kruispleinprijsvraag: Een Methode Om Te Winnen’, *FORUM Voor Architectuur*, no. 1/2 (April 1983): 6–13; Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’; Pieterneel Fortuyn et al., *Stadsvernieuwing Rotterdam 1974-1984. 134 Sociale Woningbouw Projecten* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 1984); Mecanoo Architecten, ‘Architectuur Documentatie: Woongebouw Te Rotterdam. Architectengroep Mecanoo Te Delft’, *Bouw*, no. 1 (1986): 23–26.

<sup>6</sup> Dick van Gameren, Paul Kuitenbrouwer, and Harald Mooij, ‘Housing the Student’, *DASH | Delft Architectural Studies on Housing*, no. 10 (2014): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.7480/dash.10.4891>.

## 2. Objectives

This paper's main objective is to analyse Mecanoo's Kruisplein project, mainly regarding the competition process structured in two rounds, studying the first and second versions presented in 1981 and 1982. But also considering the academic context, specifically, regarding the graduation report they produced together in 1984, in which the Kruisplein project was presented as their response to their critical analysis of Dutch housing design and its norm. So, the paper is structured in two parts according to the following sub-objectives: to show the requirements in the two rounds of the competition and what they proposed in each of them; to discuss their perspective on how social housing for "special" groups could be, together with their concept of "neutral dwelling".

To do so, several documents have been studied. Among them, the following ones were selected as the most significant. The two books published about all the competition process in 1981 and 1982, "Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein", by DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam.<sup>7</sup> As well as the authors' graduation report at TH Delft "Woning en normering. De rol van het architectonisch ontwerp".<sup>8</sup> Also noteworthy is the book by Mecanoo dedicated to the project, which was published at the end of its realisation in 1985.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, within the *O: ontwerp, onderzoek, onderwijs* journal issue on the topic of youth housing, "Jongerenhuisvesting", the Kruisplein competition, and specifically the *Ozoo* project by Mecanoo was extensively discussed including by the architects themselves.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3.** Covers of the two publications on the Kruisplein competition: *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 1*, and 2. Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, published respectively in 1981 and 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 1*; Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 2*.

<sup>8</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, 'Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp'.

<sup>9</sup> Mecanoo Architecten, *Woningbouw Kruisplein. Anders Wonen in Rotterdam* (Delft: Uitgeverij Academia, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, 'Plan OZOO'.

### 3. Youth housing competition Kruisplein

The Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein resulted in a unique coincidence between the architectural education from the then Technische Hoogeschool Delft (Bowkunde, Department of Architecture), and the development of public housing in Rotterdam. As it was pointed at the time, precisely in the *O* journal founded at TH Delft, “It should not be surprising that this competition devised, written and judged by people from Delft was also won by people from Delft.”<sup>11</sup> The nine members of the competition jury included Wytze Patijn (Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam), Tjeerd Dijkstra (Rijksbouwmeester), Arnold Reijndorp (Het Oude Westen), and Max Risselada (TH Delft).<sup>12</sup> In particular, among the mentors of the graduation report of the winning students were Tjeerd Dijkstra and Max Risselada.

This competition has been regarded as a turning point in Dutch architecture. Dirk van den Heuvel, Madeleine Steigenga and Jaap van Triest outlined why on *Lessons: Tupker\Risselada*. As they pointed out, in a context of general economic malaise and a difficult employment situation for architects, the competition was seized upon by a new generation of young architects and architectural students to present themselves and, in the case of Döll, Houben and Steenhuis, even to start their professional career before their graduated. They described the competition catalogue like “a display of the architectural production to be realised in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, ranging from well-wrought typological studies to tough statements announcing the autonomy of the image in Dutch architecture”.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.1. The first round of the competition (1981)

The first round consisted of an ideas competition on a study basis. The competition required the proposal to have many different types of housing and to be very flexible.<sup>14</sup> It was intended to accommodate three types of residents (aged from eighteen to thirty-four): X, single people who want to live strictly on their own; Y, single people who want their own living space but want to share housing facilities with several people; Z, single people who wants a closer form of living together and therefore want to share more than just the living facilities. Also included the requirement that the housing types should be changeable and in two different ways: types X, Y

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Drijver and Janne Hobus, ‘Illusie En Verleiding Rond de Kruisplein-Prijsvraag’, *O: Ontwerp, Onderzoek, Onderwijs*, no. 4 (1982): 37. “Het hoeft geen verbazing te wekken tot slot dat deze door Delftenaren bedachte, uitgeschreven en gejureerde prijsvraag ook door Delftenaren is gewonnen”.

<sup>12</sup> Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 1*, 4. See: ‘Hoofdstuck 1. Samenstelling the jury’ (Chapter 1. Composition of jury).

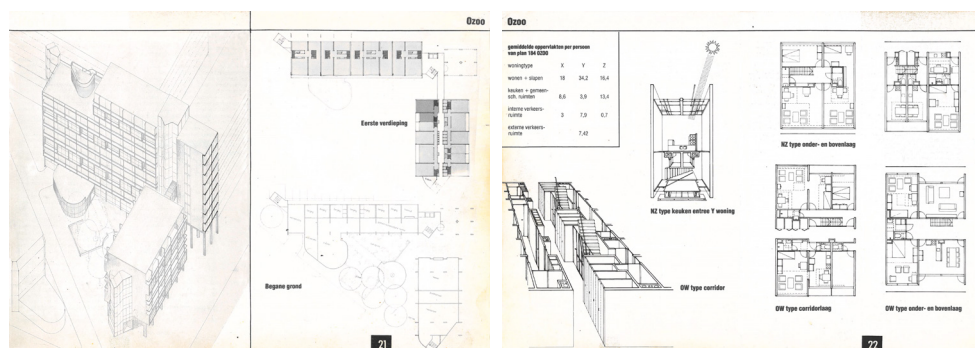
<sup>13</sup> Dirk van den Heuvel et al., *Lessons: Tupker\Risselada. Double Portrait of Dutch Architectural Education, 1953\2003* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2003), 54–55.

<sup>14</sup> Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 1*. See: ‘Hoofdstuck 2. Het prijsvraagprogramma’ (Chapter 2: The Competition Programme).



and Z had to be changeable in each other; also, small types had to be mergeable into larger ones and, conversely, large types had to be divisible into smaller ones.

Döll, Houben and Steenhuis tried to see the assignment in its context, analyse it and work from its critique. The critical consideration they made in the first round referred to the duality of the competition task: “The problem of a type that works for itself, generally applicable, perhaps even a new housing standard, and a situation that is so ‘fraught’, (...) that the design can hardly contain anything more than mere particularities”.<sup>15</sup> For them this problem was exacerbated by the way the programme was elaborated: on the one hand, the size and surface norms of the “Voorschriften en Wenken” and the “de Woonprogramma’s 1 en 2”, on the other, the regulation of use in the three variants X, Y and Z. They questioned to what extent this coupling of requirements could be used to conceive of other housing forms in types X, Y and Z.



**Figure 4.** The first submission of the “Ozoo” proposal for the Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein (Rotterdam) by Mecanoo. In: *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein*. Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, 1981, pp. 20-22.

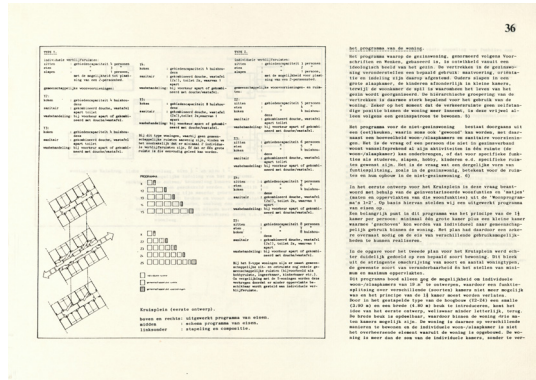
One of the references they mentioned in this regard, was particularly on the notion of “flexibele woningbouw”,<sup>16</sup> as they explained “the flexibility of a space is often linked to a certain excess and functional indeterminacy of such space”.<sup>17</sup> It was the traditional Dutch house, as can be used for all kinds of functions precisely because of its relatively large spaces (front and back rooms) and its functionally indeterminate nature. Another reference they pointed out to explain the scale in which the functions in different space could be shifted, was the communal plans from the USSR in the 1920s. As these worked mainly on a distribution of functions across

<sup>15</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Plan OZOO’, 38. Extrait from the Submission to Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein, motto OZOO, sheet 1; ‘Het probleem van een op zich werkend type, algemeen toepasbaar, misschien zelfs een nieuwe woonstandaard, en een situatie die zo “beladen” is, waar zo veel aanzit, dat het ontwerp haast niet meer dan enkel verbijzonderingen kan inhouden’.

<sup>16</sup> Wytze Patijn and Jan Mulder, *Flexibele woningbouw* (Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Plan OZOO’, 38. ‘Immers, de flexibiliteit van een ruimte zit vaak vast aan een zekere overmaat en een functionele onbepaaldheid van zo’n ruimte.’

different scale levels (cell, cluster of cells, floor, block, building, district, city) and the minimisation of those functions in sizes. In the competition brief the unit remained the house.



**Figure 5.** “Kruisplein (first draft). Above and right: detailed programme of requirements. Middle: schedule programme of requirements. Bottom left: stacking and composition.” Francine Houben, Henk Döll and Roelf Steenhuis, ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’. Graduation Paper, Technische Universiteit Delft, 1984.

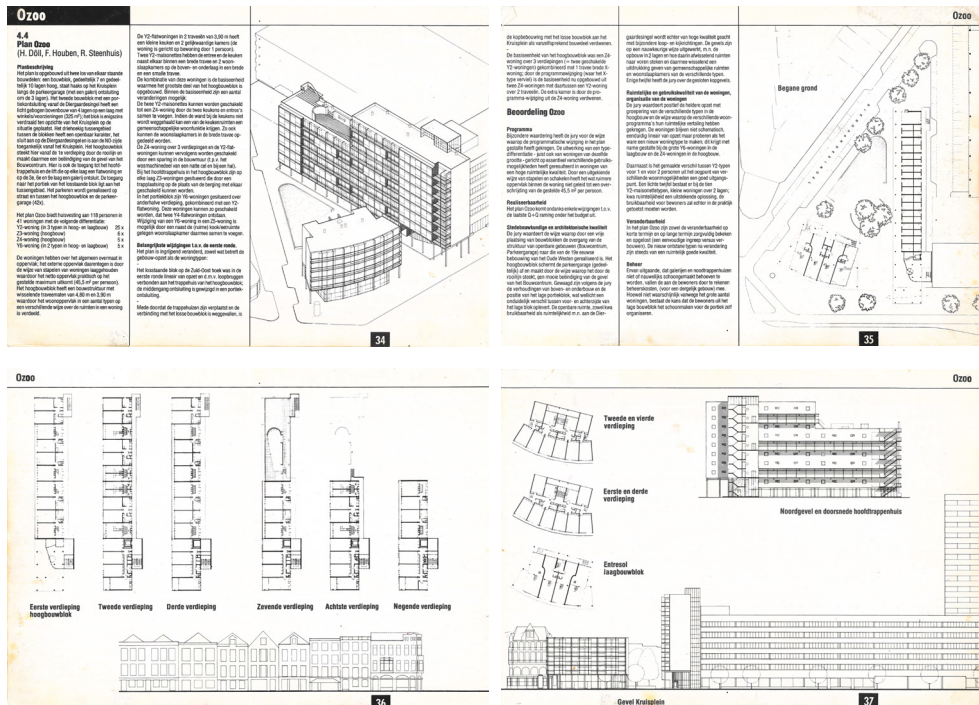
### 3.2. The second round (1982)

The second round consisted of a multiple assignment that should lead to a feasible plan. In contrast to the first round, an important issue such as the differentiation of dwellings was completely fixed, and minimum and maximum surface areas were also set. Furthermore, new additional requirements were introduced regarding several issues.<sup>18</sup> So, the changes of the *Ozoo* project compared to the first round were significant. The plan had been “radically” changed, both in terms of the building layout and the housing types. For instance, the detached low-rise block on the South-East corner was linear in the first round and by means of walkways connected to the stairwell of the high-rise block, however, in the second round the stairwells were relocated and the connection between them disappeared, as the central corridor access.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, Pijlsraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 2, 34–35.

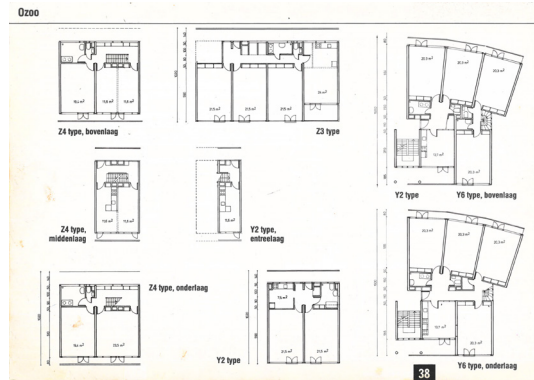




**Figure 6.** The second submission of the “Ozoo” proposal for the Jongerenhuysvesting Kruisplein (Rotterdam) by Mecanoo. In: *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuysvesting Kruisplein*. Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, 1982, pp. 34-38.

Other important change in the second *Ozoo* proposal was regarding the layout of the dwellings. In the competition programme for the second round, the type X for single people who wanted to live strictly on their own dropped, and for the reminder other types, Y and Z, it was adopted “the principle of dominant individual sitting/bedroom by requiring a minimum area of 19 m<sup>2</sup>”,<sup>20</sup> The authors pointed out to what extent the new requirements were consistent with those of the first round, where two levels of flexibility were required: the definition of three use cases (X, Y, Z) that should be interchangeable by the possibility of merge or split dwellings. The dwellings of the second round had a strong emphasis on the individual room, on Y and Z “the potential extra room comes at the expense of the only communal space”.

<sup>20</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Plan OZOO’, 40.



**Figure 7.** The four types: Y2, Y6, Z3 and Z4 of the “Ozoo” proposal. Second round for the Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein (Rotterdam) by Mecanoo. In: *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein*. Rotterdam: DROS Volkshuisvesting Rotterdam, 1982, pp. 34-38.

#### 4. The “neutral” dwelling (1984)

In the 1970s, much of the housing stock in the Netherlands was tuned to the families, and social changes had left them largely outmoded. Therefore, in 1975, Marcel Van Dam, State Secretary for Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, introduced the so-called “HAT units”, in the *Nota Huisvesting Alleenstaanden en Tweepersoonshuishoudens* (Housing for Singles and Two-Person Households), a whole new thing since the *Woningwet* (Housing Act) of 1901.<sup>21</sup> In the late 1970s, as Stef van der Gaag explained, the Projektgroep ‘Het Oude Westen’ suggested to the College van B. en W. van Rotterdam that a working group be set up to investigate the possibilities of building around 60 HAT units on Kruisplein in Rotterdam. The College agreed, and in February 1980 the working group’s first report was published.<sup>22</sup>

The Kruisplein competition was clearly prompted by the demand of housing for single persons, for “non-families”. As van der Gaag pointed out, the need for one- and two-person households was not only met by financial corrections on the small “Housing Act” houses (two- and three-room houses); the Government, through the “van Dam note” precisely defined the level of quality of one- and two-person households (one- and two-room houses): “small, just short of a Housing Act house, and all in all a temporary shelter”. And he concluded, “The van Dam note articulated the housing needs of young people and single people in terms of family housing,

<sup>21</sup> Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, *Nota Huisvesting Alleenstaanden En Tweepersoonshuishoudens*, Tweede Kamer Der Staten-Generaal (Den Haag: Ministerie van VRO, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> Stef van der Gaag, ‘De Kruisplein-Prijsvraag’, *O: Ontwerp, Onderzoek, Onderwijs*, no. 4 (1982): 31–33.

every individual was elevated to the status of a potential family, his current existence is temporary and not ‘real’”.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 8.** Cover of the *Nota Huisvesting Alleenstaanden En Tweepersoonshuishoudens*. Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening. Den Haag: Ministerie van VRO, 1975.

The Kruisplein project took part of the so-called “Van Dam offensive” which analysed and criticized the new legislation on this issue. Regarding the role of the HAT units in the Kruisplein competition programme, Arnold Reijndorp and Rint de Vries in their introduction to the second competition catalogue, mentioned the reason why the requested X-type (the one-room house) disappeared in the second round: “it turned out to be nothing other than a HAT-unit criticised by the project group in 99% of the submissions” (the X dwelling).<sup>24</sup> For the authors of the *Ozoo* project, the Y and Z dwellings were “only smarter than Van Dam homes because the room is bigger and the facilities are communal. But the whole is hardly more than the sum of the individual rooms and has fewer uses than a comparable family home”.<sup>25</sup>

Döll, Houben and Steenhuis, in their graduation report, explained the two designs they made for the Kruisplein project, in 1981 and 1982, together with the concept of “neutrale woning”.<sup>26</sup> In brief, the neutral dwelling advocated for “a less coercive subdivision and a more sophisticated

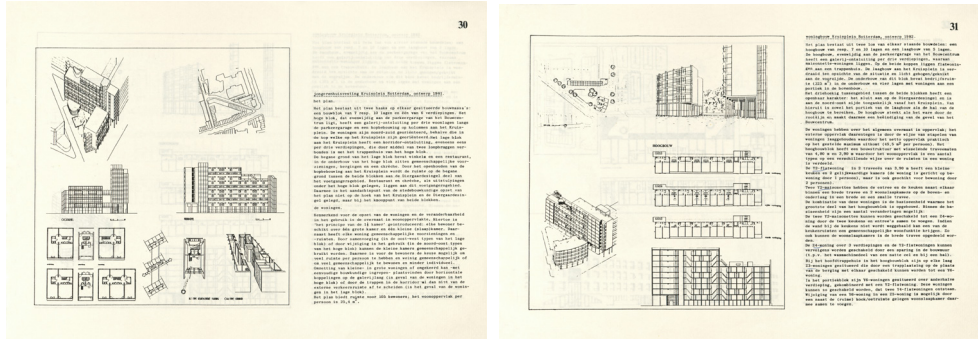
<sup>23</sup> van der Gaag, 31. ‘De van Dam-nota verwoordde de woonwensen van jongeren en alleen-standers in termen van gezinswoningbouw, ieder individu werd tot potentieel gezin gezin verheven, z’n huidige bestaan is tijdelijk en niet “echt”.’

<sup>24</sup> Blauw, Mulder, and Patijn, *Prijsvraag Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein 2*, 6. ‘Het gevraagde X-type (de eenkamerwoning) bleek bij 99% van de inzendingen niets anders dan de door de projectgroep gewraakte 1-kamer-HAT. Voldoende reden om ditype voor de tweede ronde te schrappen.’

<sup>25</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Plan OZOO’, 40. ‘Met andere woorden, toch weer die kleine individuele woning, alleen slimmer dan Van Dam-woningen, omdat de kamer groter is en de voorzieningen gemeenschappelijk zijn. Maar het geheel is nauwelijks meer dan de som van de individuele kamers, en heeft minder gebruiksmogelijkheden dan een vergelijkbare gezinswoning.’

<sup>26</sup> Döll, Houben, and Steenhuis, ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’, 29–31.

internal flexibility”.<sup>27</sup> They pursued this goal through the study of Dutch housing “standards”, introducing interesting discussions to support their own critical approach to housing designs, as they did with the Kruisplein project. Among them, is their position on public housing for “special groups”, offering another perspective on the distinctions between various categories of housing according to their users (families, singles, young or old people, etc.).



**Figure 9.** The graduation report by Francine Houben, Henk Döll and Roelf Steenhuis, the two versions of their “Ozoo” proposal; ‘Woning En Normering. De Rol van Het Architectonisch Ontwerp’. Graduation Paper, Technische Universiteit Delft TU, 1984.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper Mecanoo’s Kruisplein project have been analysed, mainly regarding the competition process structured in two rounds, studying the designs they presented in the 1981 and 1982. But also considering their academic context, particularly, regarding the graduation report they made together in 1984. The Kruisplein project was part of this academic document and was presented as their response to their critical analysis of Dutch housing design and its norm. These two issues have been analyses along the two parts in which the paper is structured: first, the design they proposed in each round of the competition, pointing out their critical approach to the assignment; and second their perspective on how social housing for “special” groups could be, appealing to their concept of “neutral dwelling”.

<sup>27</sup> Kees Sömer, ‘Architectuur Een Feest / Architecture as Celebration’, in *Mecanoo Architecten*, Monografieën van Nederlandse Architecten (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 1995), 7–23.



**Figure 10.** Model of the final project for the Jongerenhuisvesting Kruisplein (Rotterdam) by Mecanoo. National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning, Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam, MAQV1094.

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