The reuse of ‘ordinary’ existing buildings

AR3ar071 Heritage development

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Introduction
The Netherlands is filled with empty buildings which have great potential for reuse. These buildings don’t necessarily have to be monuments or buildings with a high value. Around me I notice a lot of people immediately assume that restoration and renovation only has to do with monumental buildings and their ornaments, like churches, castles, farmhouses and canal houses. But there are many more buildings that can be reused and revitalized. An example is the Willem van Rijn building which doesn’t have any monumental status.

Willem van Rijn
The Willem van Rijn building is located in the neighbourhood of Landlust in Amsterdam-West. Amsterdam-West developed after 1850 and incorporates the 19th century belt, ’20-'40 belt, and the AUP in several stadia (General Expansion Plan). The expansions developed due to the need of worker housing caused by the expansion of the harbour area in the Amsterdam-West and the industrialization. In general the urban structure is divided in four parts. The harbour part in the north, the housing part in the north, the Brettenzone separating the two, and the food centre bulging into the housing area.

The Willem van Rijn building is situated at the Haarlemmerweg 475 in the neighbourhood of Landlust. Landlust was part of the General Expansion Plan and developed between 1933 and 1939. It is located between the food centre and the Admiraal de Ruyterweg just south of the Brettenzone. Within the dwelling area of Landlust the architects B. Merkelbach and Ch.J.F. Karsten broke with the traditional closed housing blocks by applying open row housing in the housing area. The Willem van Rijn building is situated in the industrial area of Landlust, directly west of the food centre. In the General Expansion Plan the area was already designated as an industrial area. Water inlets for transport by boat were developed and a road system was integrated in the plan. No actual allotments were created in the area within the General Expansion Plan.

The Willem van Rijn building developed in three stages. The architects Merkelbach and Karsten designed the first stage of the Willem van Rijn building in 1938. They worked together until 1949. It was designed as a
industrial office building for the company of Willem van Rijn, which was a Bosch distributor in household appliances. In the first stage the design of the building can be described as a u-shape containing one and two levels buildings parts. The entrance and the shop window of the Willem van Rijn were oriented at the north towards the Haarlemmerweg. Behind the entrance the showroom and store were located. The offices could be found on the second level above. In the back a large workshop area was providing a space for the repairs, which in that time were performed more locally.

The second stage was designed by the architect P. Elling in 1961. B. Merkelbach and P. Elling worked together between 1949 and 1955. Due to the need of extra space the u-shape was extended on the east side towards the south and increased with an additional storey. This stage is consistent with the architecture of the previous and first building stage.

The third stage however is totally different. This stage was designed by the agency of Elling, Visser, Van Gelderen, De Leeuw and Hoogewoning in 1967. P. Elling had already passed away but the firm kept using his name. The need for storage space resulted in a five storey tower on the southwest corner of the building. The extension within this stage created a enclosed block with a inner court that could be reached through an opening between the 1938 and 1961 building parts on the east side. Above the opening a bridge connects the parts internally.

Remarkable is that the resulting almost closed building block doesn't correspond to the ideas of Merkelbach, who was actually trying to move away from the closed building blocks. Also the tower has a totally different design. It almost seems to be a different building with a totally different height, size and facade structure.

In 1995 the building lost its function and was bought by the Da Vinci Bedrijvenhuis in Amsterdam. They developed the building into small office spaces for creative entrepreneurs. The whole interior was stripped and transformed into individual offices, a reception and canteen. The internal oriented corridors completely disconnect the visitor from the envelope and the context of the building. The facade of the tower was changed due to the former storage function and more window openings were created. Nowadays the former entrance is only used by one office that is situated behind it. The main entrance of the
Da Vinci Bedrijvenhuis is located in the inner court and actually quite strangely placed.

Value assessment
From the value assessment emerges the Willem van Rijn building doesn't have a high value, but mainly indifferent with a few positive elements. The positive value is determined by the involvement of the architect Merkelbach who was of great influence within Landlust and 'Het Nieuwe Bouwen' and the location within the industrial area of Landlust that was part of the General Expansion Plan. A few Merkelbach elements that were contained have a positive value, like the former entrance, a window and rounded details. Regretfully most of the elements have disappeared due to the many building stages and the internal reconstruction in 1995. The rest of the building can be regarded as indifferent.

Cultural value
From an expert view, I think the Willem van Rijn is not a unique, one of a kind building. It is an industrial office building of which there are more available in the Netherlands. From the value assessment derives the building doesn't have a interesting expert value. But this certainly doesn't mean the building should be demolished and replaced by a new building. The Willem van Rijn does have a cultural value. It has lead a interesting life. It underwent several building changes in which several architects left their influence behind. It was build in a time when modernism was a present-day topic, it survived the second world war and was expanded extensively in the 60's. In the 90's it was internally totally remodelled into a new function which is still functioning intensively. Several generations of people made use of this building and all have their own memories.

I think dealing with existing buildings which don’t have a obvious high value is perhaps even more interesting than dealing with monuments. Our country is filled with this type of existing vacant buildings at the moment, while on the other hand there is a lack of space. Instead of continuing constructing new buildings and leaving the empty ones behind or demolishing them we can redesign and redevelop the existing architecture and reuse it. Like is mentioned in the book 'Herbestemming in Nederland' by Steenhuis and Meurs, the building construction task should be changed into a building reconstruction task. (Steenhuis Meurs 2011, p10) Jo Coenen makes the restoration aspect
even broader by saying that it is not only about the monument but also about the landscape in his book 'The art of blending'. (Coenen 2008, p20) Continuing on this subject within restoration I would say that on the level of landscape and urban structure a change should be achieved from shaping to reshaping. A lot of existing areas can be reshaped into a better functioning and nicer space without making a totally new design for the area.

Reuse offers a lot of interesting possibilities, is financially interesting and doesn’t use any more of our valuable space and nature. The urban structure can be preserved. And the existing building with its new function can almost naturally fit the context when a suitable function is chosen. The building, the new function and the new users need to combined into a coherent redesign by customization. The redesign of course should measure the governmental demands and rules.

A monumental existing building brings along many more governmental restrictions than a ‘ordinary’ existing building. Often it seems that monuments lead to the housing of more representative functions than the more ordinary everyday functions like offices, houses, industry and schools. While also these functions are very important within our society.

Design approach
The used design approach within the masterplan of the industrial area of Landlust is ‘urban composition’. (Meurs 2012) In the current situation the area is completely abandoned in the evening and the weekends and there is no visible connection with the surrounding area. By reshaping the urban composition the area becomes more lively during these hours. The companies that are housed in the area are not really big and can be combined with housing. Also by demolishing some abandoned sheds connections with the water can be created.

For the building the Willem van Rijn within the context of the masterplan another design approach is used, ‘continuity of the site’. (Meurs 2012) The building will be redesigned into offices with dwellings for independent entrepreneurs and a restaurant facility. A function I think fits the masterplan and the current situation of the industrial area. For the Willem van Rijn itself I’m thinking of making use of the toolbox. (Meurs 2012) Since the value of the building is not very high I think it is interesting to use the old building, or actually envelope, to make something new within combined with the few aspects of the
building that have a positive value. For example regarding the value of the building and my personal taste I would like to relocate the main entrance to the former location at the Haarlemmerweg. It still contains Merkelbach elements and there are not many left within the buildings. It is one of the few authentic aspects within the building visible from the outside. 

Ordinary
Although I think that also a lot of 'ordinary' buildings contain cultural heritage, which our country is filled with, I also think that a existing building doesn't necessarily need a great cultural value to qualify for redesign and reuse. Also a building that was designed by a less known architect not according to some specific style can be revitalized and perhaps even improved by providing it with a new function and redesign. Reuse provides the existing building a new life within the current society and daily functioning.
Sources

