

'D E P E P E R K L I P', reads the huge label in polychromatic tile strung out over a quarter kilometer of facade. There is a wilful absurdity to these giant semi-legible letters, an idea incomprehensible; a game (Venturi?). We pass through a wall, the block--pastel gingham, glazed tiles in modular panels (Bofil?). Inside (outside?) spaces squeezing, streaming, bending. Sheds like armoured elephants in ominous rank and file, glower demanding an answer to the riddle: De Peperklip... The Paperclip ...huh?... Does this 'mean' HOUSING ?...



Beyond Modernism:

Notes On A Dutch Housing Experiment

by

Peter Scriver with Adrian Sheppard

A pronounced difference between the built environment of Holland and the rest of Western Europe is its marked dearth of monumentality. Whereas the palace, the cathedral, or the grand boulevard are signal impressions one might keep of the French or German city, it is a texture, the residential intimacy of the Dutch street and canal, which speaks for Holland. The housing project that we wish to discuss in this article is the severe quintessence of a monumental statement. It is at once an object of fascinating incongruity to the impressionable visitor; an alien manifesto to the Dutch architectural establishment.

The Dutch, we believe, have always had a highly conscious understanding of what 'housing' entails. This tradition of enlightened residential building practices was, of course, the womb of some of the most significant early movements of Modernism in architecture — lively polemics enacted in many remarkable housing projects. It is fascinating, then, to compare *De Peperklip* with its recent historical context. What it draws from these models but also what it ignores or, indeed, wilfully confounds in them is very telling. What we have is a case study of the first significant infusion of 'Post Modern' (read: after Modern) architectural principles into the original, perhaps most incestuous of progressive, Modern design culture.

What, in simple terms, is *De Peperklip*? The name, as already implied, refers to the distinctive form in plan of this low-income mass-housing project just being completed in the dockyard outskirts of the Rotterdam city centre. The shape, roughly that of a slightly splayed paperclip, is not entirely arbitrary. Architect Carel Weeber has obviously delineated the large elongated wedge of land between the water and a main service road astride his site with the linear mass of his low-rise housing block. There is no relevant urban context to respond to. The curious simile with stationery hardware is perhaps only a whimsical accident of Weeber's desire for closure of the form without unresolved continuity.

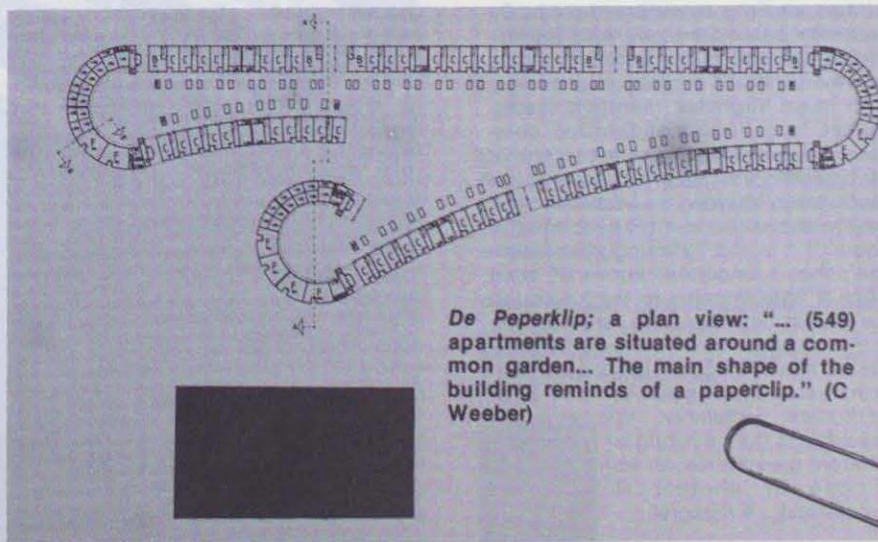
The single linear block serves as a wall in the communal sense, enclosing a large semi-public zone within. Much of the central space is occupied by large storage sheds and a single public footpath is the only additional amenity provided in the narrower passages. Automobiles are excluded from the project and must park in lots or on the streetside periphery. The basic section of the housing block is a conventional four storey walk-up with eight units to a stairwell. The pattern repeats *ad-infinitum* with only the slightest curvature detectable in the linear mass. The three corner tower elements are the only articulation that the architect has provided, this by stacking four tiers of maisonettes upon a single ground storey (nine levels altogether) in a tight half-cylinder framed by stair and elevator cores. *De Peperklip* is built, like most big scale construction in Holland today, with a largely prefabricated system. The concrete frame is poured in place but the same three by three metre modular panel, busily variegated by alternate blue, red and yellow, tile appliqué, covers the entire wall surface of the building. The square module leads to some rather clumsy proportioning about details such as the public portals through the block, and creates an odd visual tension overall.

It is significant that *De Peperklip* is a product of industrial building technology. Holland, like all European nations, underwent a major high-rise housing boom in the post-war years as a result of growth and zoning pressures but in response to new refabrication potential as well. A profusion of vertical extrusions was clearly the most logical revolution to ensue. Only much later, when widespread disenchantment with the tower block has set in, have the logistics been set aside in quest of alternative architectural solutions to mass housing. Though certainly unproven as yet, Weeber's project is already being lauded by some as the new prototype specifically because, one would suppose, it is the high-rise in all its big-scale, prefabricated economy laid on its side and thus 'humanized'. But, this would seem the least of its achievements. If anything it is the very unusual character — the provocative, arresting image of the standard pre-fab building system as there applied — which is the achievement. Through his juxtaposition of tower scale modules with street scale forms and his deliberate spatial contortions of the site — the contradiction between form in space and space in form — Weeber has certainly done much to make a more affecting experience of mass housing.

Bizarre and alien as *De Peperklip* appears, it does find certain precedents in Holland. If Weeber is rejecting the later functionalist notion of high-rise living, he is quite clearly recalling some of the more obvious characteristics of the high density inner city housing which took shape in the politically and ideologically enlightened years immediately following the first war: the low-rise, site-wrapping configuration of the block, its self-expressing unity, the *hofje* (court) created within. But, he falls far short of a comparable quality of residential environment. . . Why? The

explanation we propose relies on a fundamental distinction that we feel we must make. In keeping with the theoretical climate presiding evermore influentially in both Europe and North America today, Weeber seems to be exploring the notion of 'architectural memory' in his forms and gestures. It is the idea of the form, the power of the stipped monumental gesture for which he cares; function, tacit solutions, seems to be an entirely independent concern. The heroic ideals which he eulogizes are not a nostalgic fabrication. They were very real in the original municipal and workers' housing schemes, but as a product, not an objective, of genuine efforts to design the intimately functional ideal of communal housing upward from the smallest elements.

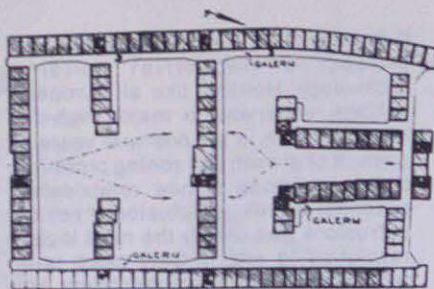
About ten minutes drive across town from *De Peperklip* in the Rotterdam quarter of Spangen, an entire neighbourhood of exemplary working class housing blocks were erected in the early Twenties under the planning (and design in part) of the great early Modernist J.J.P. Oud, Rotterdam's chief municipal architect in that era. The large block designed by Michiel Brinkman (1919-1921) is the most innovative of that particular group, a sophisticated synthesis of the stronger principles in housing prevailing at that time and thereafter. As a model of the type, it shows us above all the fundamental notion of a street-defining, space-enclosing block. The building presents a unified collective expression to the exterior; a stern but protective wall containing a single community. However, within the semi-private zone, and this is important, there is a busy, markedly more lived-in expression. Through a subtle progression of degrees — a breakdown of the major zone into layers of lesser courts, the subdivision of green space into public garden and private plots, the standar-



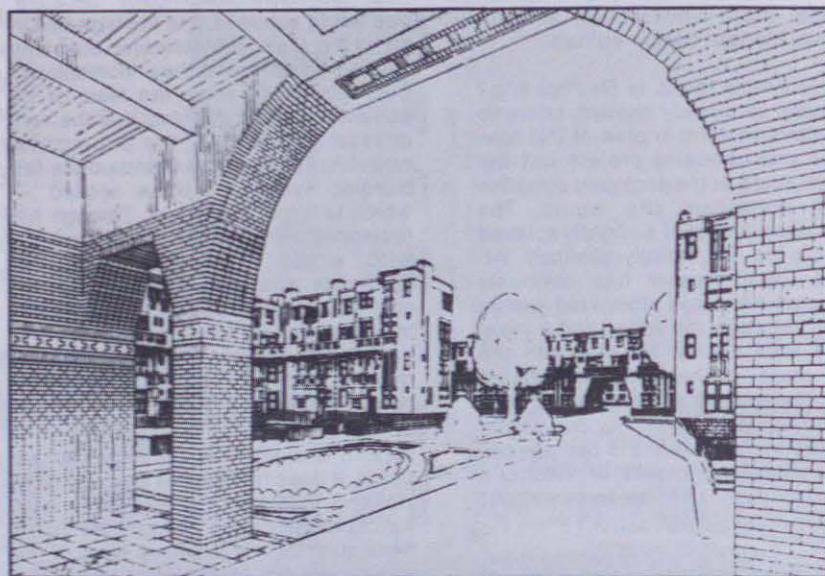
De Peperklip; a plan view: "... (549) apartments are situated around a common garden... The main shape of the building reminds of a paperclip." (C Weeber)

dized articulation of the individual unit and then of specific domestic and functional features — a complex texture of public to private space is built up in the architecture. Received by the collective whole, individuals can always feel their intimate niche within.

A major innovation of Brinkman's Spangen block was the creation of an elevated street, for both pedestrians and bicycles, to access a second tier of maisonette units. This provided every resident on or above ground level the important domestic right to his own 'defensible' private address in the public domain. The raised street was an isolated piece of ingenuity but a conviction in the importance of entrance and private address was prominent in all the contemporary housing in Holland. The much more expressionistic Amsterdam School achieved some remarkable whimsy in the statement of doorways through the delightful collaboration of such masters as Michel de Klerk with the gifted brick-layers and masons of the day. The other housing principles which unified the functionalist underpinnings of Holland's stylistically divergent schools of architectural theory in the Twenties were guided, like those already mentioned, by the central concerns for good hygiene, economy, and aesthetics. These included the importance of cross-ventilation, the avoidance of internal corridors and large communal stairs (paired accesses were common however), the extensive use of mitoyen walls within the block for fire control, and the celebration of the collective spirit of the block in a single aesthetic expression to the street and the city outside.



Municipal Housing, Spangen, Rotterdam 1919-1921, M. Brinkman: A plan view, and the architect's original presentation perspective view of the hofje (garden court).



Housing in the Netherlands 1900-1940, Donald I. Grinberg

The folly of Mr. Weeber, to return to the present, has been his failure to appreciate that it is not the forms but the depth of residential texture in the early housing prototypes which is their success. In a quirky, cartoonish way the forms are there in *De Peperklip* but more likely with the opposite spiritual effect from what they convey in their original incarnation. With latent 'high-rise' mentality the architect 'specifies' standardized solutions to functional requirements, and in an independent gesture relies on the associative 'memory' of shapes and their relationships to infuse life into the whole. If it is the 'meaning', the 'intention', that is important above all, then there is little impetus to think through the details and innovate anything so subtle as an inviting public portal or a useful flower bed, as the early functionalists managed to do with methodical regularity. Weeber's *De Peperklip* is then a hybrid of two utterly different mentalities; an ironic homage of one to another it will not understand... a mongrel.

A case in point to characterize this antagonism of crossed intentions, is the obstructive placement of the large metal storage sheds in two stern ranks down the center of the enclosed 'green' zone. Discrete garden sheds are a common, indeed, often standardized cultural feature of horticulturally minded Holland's backyards. With land and privacy at such a premium in this the most densely populated country in the world, the sheds provide storage, organization and a partial screen to optimize the usefulness of private garden plots. As 'symbols', the sheds in Weeber's scheme evoke the only obvious thread of Dutchness in the place, but at the same time they are robbing virtually all potential private or public space in the zone to the visual and spatial detriment of all. When J.J.P. Oud was faced with the question of the sheds in his own Spangen project of 1918, he pragmatically chose to integrate storage within the block and liberate the precious interior court entirely. The sheds have never figured significantly in urban mass housing



De Paperklip: View from within the 'garden' space.



blocks since.

There is something to the Dutch state of mind which has naturally characterized Dutch architectural theory. Like the children's story of the good boy who saves the land and people before himself by plugging a leaking dyke with his cold and aching finger, the Dutch ethic has always had to be to serve the safety, comfort and effective function of the collective before allowing individual urges to rise. One can see it recorded from early mercantile days in the near homogenous blend of warehouse and mansion along Amsterdam's canals, to reiterate our introduction. In this century, with a remarkable housing act adopted in 1902, the Dutch government elected to serve social housing needs through an enlightened program of monetary and legal incentives to collective housing societies and their architects to create quality housing free of the speculative

builder's prerogative.¹

This was the ground work for the developments in housing discussed above and an impetus for the spirited functionalism which took shape in the early decades. If the cadre of Dutch theory and practice in architecture remains 'Modernist' today, it is that functionalism/modernism is innately Dutch.

This is not to say that Weeber's challenge is the only radical divergence that has come to light. But it is his manner of alien mutation which, unless we are very wrong, will provoke and fester until it is rejected. If anyone will lead Holland, and perhaps those others who have followed her initiatives in the past, beyond modernist housing, it will be the patient, dogged critics within the well understood bounds of her design culture. Aldo van Eyck and Hermann Hertzberger are the most obvious examples. Each is a distinctly radical

force of strongly independent expression, but there is no question; they are intimately Dutch. For years each has worked both critically and creatively on the text of Dutch modernism to advance the process of spontaneous evolution. When, years hence, they are accessed posthumously, historians will reward their work with new labels, classifications that these practitioners would likely think irrelevant.

In concluding, it is important to set things in perspective. In this article we have reacted to Carel Weeber's *De Peperklip* scheme for one as a fascinating housing project in its own right; two, as a foil for discussion of some lessons in recent architectural history which may not be too familiar to this readership; three, as a new building which we found quite emotionally provocative... a rare thing. We have spoken with disdain of the inadequacy, indeed the relative brutality, of the notion of 'architectural memory' as it seems to have influenced this scheme. But, this observation should in no way be interpreted as a condemnation of the current theories of 'Post Modernism' or 'Rationalism' to which the notion has been attached. As a case study, this losing showdown with Dutch Modernism might simply suggest that our understanding of what a pleasing and effective Architecture should be is probably best founded in the consciousness of building within one's own cultural context. Without dismissing faith in the universal truths of our art, theoretical criticism is probably best applied where it is spawned; that is, Hertzberger in Holland, Rossi in Italy, Venturi in Las Vegas!

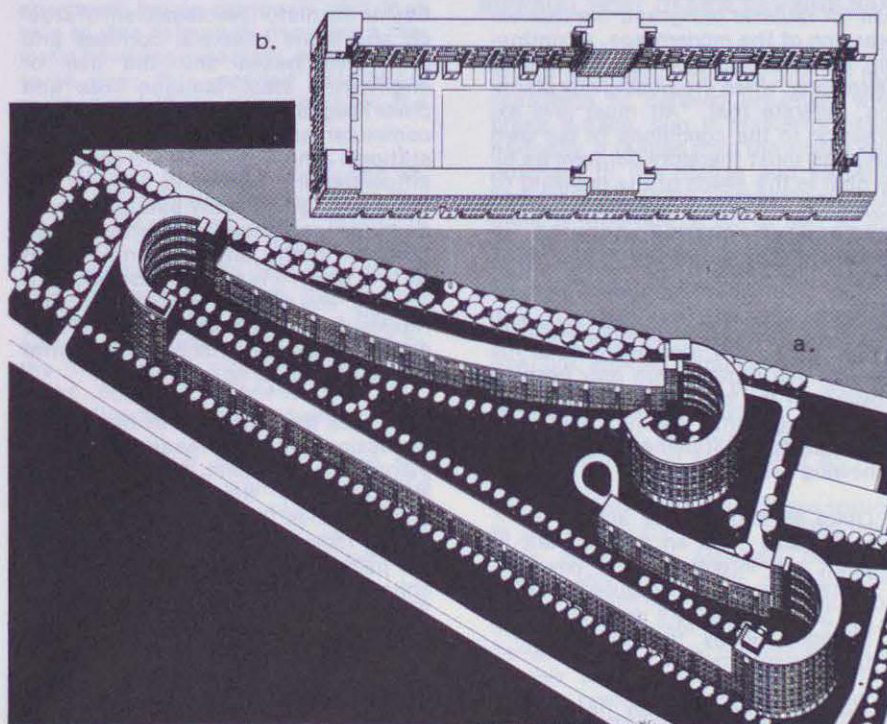
Note

1. For a discussion particularly relevant to the theme of this issue, see the chapter "With Red Flags Flying: Housing in Amsterdam 1915-1923", by Helen Searing in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics* (MIT Press), which gives a full account of this fascinating collaboration of political policy with architectural aspirations.

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Peter Scriver and Professor Adrian Sheppard participated in a McGill-Shaver study tour of Holland and Belgium in August 1982.

IMAGES OF A NEW PROTOTYPE (?)



De Peperklip (a) is only one of several municipal housing projects that Carel Weeber has designed recently for the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Both his *Block 1 Venserpolder*, Amsterdam (b), and his *Woningbouw Katendrecht*, Rotterdam (c), feature a similar formal preoccupation with the monumental low-rise block and the contained court (or its vestiges). With the big scale economy of pre-fab construction, Weeber's new prototype presents an arresting challenge to high-rise social housing, which Dutch municipal planners don't seem to be ignoring.