

The Rhythm of Renewal

■ ARJAN HEBLY

“At the start of the twentieth century we saw two great inventions: the airplane and the Garden City. Both of them announced a new era; the first gave wings to man, the second promised him a better house after his return to earth.”

IN THE NETHERLANDS, thirty percent of the housing stock was built during the first twenty-five years after World War II. Now, however—in sharp contrast to that founding period—these neighborhoods appear in a very bad light. Proud municipalities, commissioners, designers and inhabitants have yielded to decay, both physical and mental.

The homogeneous housing stock of these neighborhoods, with its big scale and anonymity, is seen as a great evil. Some key figures in today's Dutch planning practice, commissioners and designers, even declare them to be totally obsolete. This leads to a radical reorientation of these postwar areas towards the latest ideas on idyllic living.

One cause of the bad image of these postwar urban districts is today's political and professional adulation of the city. We can speak of a double phenomenon of suburban fear and of city hype—especially within the cultural urban elite, who adore the cozy quality and the rich urban facilities of the nineteenth-century metropolis. The city is thought to be more 'sustainable,' too, because of the short distances between working and daily activities. In the Netherlands, this kind of appreciation applies to some old inner cities, especially Amsterdam, although Amsterdam is more the exception than the rule. One of the consequences of this vision for the postwar districts is, nevertheless, an urge to remodel them into the likeness of dense nineteenth-century inner-cities.

BUT is the solution really that simple? Against this vision, for example, one could argue that dense urban areas generate extra travel during weekends and holidays, and encourage people to buy second homes in sensitive country areas elsewhere. Since the twentieth century, too, it seems impossible to argue beyond the urban fact of the suburb, and the demand for free choice of where to settle. Maybe we have indeed eaten from a forbidden fruit, the fruit of suburban life, and we know it is impossible to pretend we haven't eaten from it.

LA MÉTAPHORE DU « RYTHME », SELON ARJAN HEBLY, PEUT NOUS AIDER À APPRÉHENDER L'« OUVERTURE » NON-HIÉRARCHIQUE DE L'URBANISME MODERNISTE – UNE APPROCHE PLUS SUBTILE ET RAFFINÉE QUE CELLE DE L'URBANISME GRANDIOSE DES RUES ET MONUMENTS RESSUSCITÉ PAR LES DÉFENSEURS DES ANNÉES POSTMODERNES QUI, AUJOURD'HUI ENCORE, FORMENT LE COURANT « ORTHODOXE ». À PARTIR D'UN CAS D'ÉTUDE À ROTTERDAM SUR LEQUEL IL A TRAVAILLÉ EN TANT QU'ARCHITECTE, L'AUTEUR AFFIRME QUE LE RYTHME SUBTIL, « DÉCENTRÉ » DE L'URBANISME MODERNISTE PEUT APPUYER LES EFFORTS DE RÉGÉNÉRATION, ET PERMETTRE DE S'INTERROGER : ALORS QU'ELLE EST TRADITIONNELLEMENT PERÇUE COMME « ANTI-URBAINE », L'OUVERTURE RYTHMIQUE MODERNISTE N'EST-ELLE PAS, AU CONTRAIRE, « SPÉCIFIQUEMENT URBAINE » ?

THUS, it is all the more daring to investigate a different, positively-framed question: what is the potential of these postwar areas for today? Because a powerful argument can be constructed, that these postwar areas are not only still revolutionary, but also, in principle, highly sustainable and human. From this perspective, today's practice of metropolis-worshipping design appears potentially retrogressive, and doubts begin to bubble up: is the new urban landscape, with its closed city blocks and romantically picturesque dwellings along curved streets, the real modern answer for our time?

And it is in the postwar districts themselves that lies the most important evidence for these postulations. Many are largely free from 'urban' problems, highly appreciated by their inhabitants, and have developed a self-renewing ability over time, a condition that is the ultimate test for the sustainability of urban districts. One can think of neighborhoods like Kerschoten in Apeldoorn, De Pettelaar in Den Bosch, Mariahoeve and Morgenstond in The Hague, the Kuyperwijk and the Voorhof in Delft and Buitenveldert in Amsterdam. What they all have in

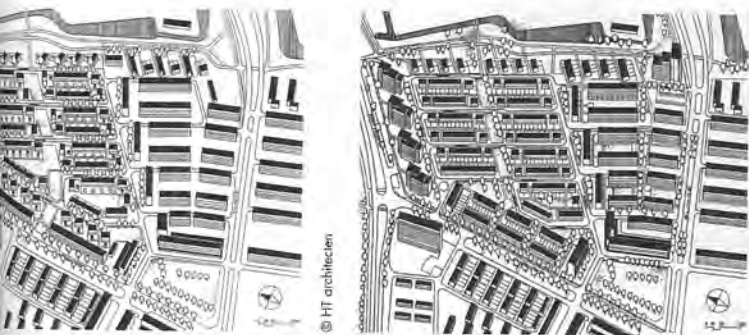


Fig. 1. far left. Old layout of the Horsten

Fig. 2. left. New layout of the Horsten

Fig. 3. below. North and western edge



common is a fine mix of different housing types, separated from, yet connected to, one another, within an open and abundant green environment. These are the places from where we can learn how to renew others that suffer from more intractable problems.

What are the main problems demanding attention? As many of these neighborhoods were built in impecunious times, when good materials were scarce and expensive, their sound and climate insulation is often of poor quality. Their large scale and one-sided mix of housing types, their outmoded proportions of dwellings, and their soaring car-ownership levels all call for intervention. The wide green spaces—one of the trump cards of the postwar city—need to be managed and maintained in a sustainable way. And because of the intrinsic openness of the postwar city, there is also the issue of the perimeter: what do these new borders and transitions look like? All in all, then, the challenge is to achieve a modern partitioning and mingling of people and groups of different status, ages, ethnicities, beliefs, states of health, and so on, in a city.

To help structure my analysis in this text, I want to make use of the metaphor of "Rhythm," both as a guide to the process of renewal and as a key to understanding the spatial syntax of the postwar city. Rhythm, in a way, epitomizes that great, overarching shift from the nineteenth century to the modern culture of the twentieth century.

TUNING IN

The rhythm of modern renewal means 'functionalism' in its true sense—not so much an architectural style as a way of intervening, a design attitude rather than a pre-imposed form. The functionalist approach demands a survey of the renewal task. This research demands a scientific environmental empathy, which has its consequence in the profile of the designer. Besides 'normal' urban data, a renewal task has three specific issues of its own: the handling of information about the inhabitants, the need to research cultural history, and the judgment of the intensity of intervention required.

The first stems from a recognition of the value of the inhabitants, acknowledging their input as a true source of knowledge rather than a cumbersome burden. They know, for instance, the important connections, the insecure places in their areas—which functions are

missing, and where the memorable spots are. Inhabitants are often also more open-minded than one might expect. Confronted with plans for the future of 'their neighborhood,' they are sometimes spurred to take even bigger mental steps than the professionals involved in the process of renewal.

The second specific element of the survey is the need to research the cultural history of the location. Each neighborhood in the Netherlands is the result of conscious human acts, and this kind of research can highlight a great diversity of values embedded in its environment. This leads, in turn, to the design itself. By studying the original intentions of the designers and the commissioning organizations, these areas often come to life in another unexpected way, yielding up a host of hidden qualities and subtle details. Our plans can then, in turn, be directed at these qualities, echoing but also critically interrogating them.

THE LAST ELEMENT of the survey is our own judgment of the intensity of the intervention really needed. Sometimes the change in environment must be very radical, but sometimes the change can be grafted upon the existing spatial qualities of the location. Much depends on the reputation of the area in the city as a whole, a factor shaped by the constant competition of the different areas in a city. When the reputation of a neighborhood is bad, a profound change is the remedy. When, on the contrary, the new design can be built upon the existing qualities, these qualities are, mostly, already evident to all participants in the process of renewal. But even in the case of a necessary contrast, our own designs can still draw on the reservoir of postwar spatial syntax, which is not only a very rich urban language but also, still, the most modern we have. In the next section of my paper, I want to explore in more detail the formal importance of rhythm as a means of fully understanding postwar architecture and urbanism and their utopian potential.

THE REVOLUTION OF RHYTHM

To help grasp the importance of rhythmic ordering as one of the great formal inventions of modern architecture and urbanism, we first have to investigate two things. Firstly, we need to establish the most appropriate cultural context for bringing this 'popular' theme of rhythm into focus.



Fig. 4. The intimate eastern edge

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Secondly, it is important to explore what spatial rhythm actually means.

Rhythmic ordering is something quite different from repetition. Repetitive structures are as old as the grid in urban and architectural ordering, a pattern that stretched from old Egyptian or Greek architecture and

city planning through to the Colonial approaches to shaping the land and the city. A different, hierarchical sort of repetitious order emerged in the post-Renaissance European concern with the harmonious city, with its ordered balance between the ordinary city and the monuments. Long streets lead to monumental squares and architectural highlights. This was a way of expressing the hierarchy of society and its institutions.

During the profound changes of the early twentieth century, both of these ways of ordering the city became obsolete. Mass-society, equal-rights movements and representative democracy required another way of looking at the world, a redefinition of art, the city and its architecture. In the early modern movement the emphasis lay in the invention of a new world by technical means. Soon, though, another tendency became apparent, first in the visual arts, literature and music, and later in architecture and urban planning. In analyzing, looking at the world of the common, the ordinary and the popular culture came into special focus. Artists like Duchamp, Picasso, Schwitters, Dali and others incorporated ordinary things within their works of art. Mondriaan combined, in his *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, his own artistic conception of the rhythm of the street-life of New York. And in music, composers like Ravel, Shostakovich and Ives took over common tunes. Within this broadening of cultural scope, rhythm was a central aspect.

TO EXPLAIN spatial rhythm we have to look towards its musical base. A rhythm is the equal repetition of beats or tones, each with its own position, length or emphasis within an even, repeating time-measure. Essential to rhythm are the intervening moments of absence of beat, the repetition of silence. These silent 'beat-dots' are as important as the 'filled' beat-dots. Within certain classical music, from Bach to Mahler, a moment of silence can also occur, but it is usually used to underline a dramatic moment in the composition. In rhythmic music the alternation between dot and void are of equal importance. The source of this rhythmic music lays within the non-classical musical tradition, in Afro-American music like blues and jazz, and in other popular musical styles. The incorporation of rhythm in architecture and urban design, especially during the postwar period, meant the

application of a rhythmic repetition of mass and void into space and, by that, a rejection of the long sweeping street, as, for instance, had been applied in Amsterdam South by architects like Berlage and others of the Amsterdam School. This rhythmic starting-point forms the basis of a very rich repertoire of solutions.

TOWER-ZONE

An example of one such solution is the incorporation of high flats into the urban fabric. Due to the dwelling shortages after World War II, multi-storey blocks became topical in planning practice. How should they be situated in the city? Traditionally, a high building, like a church or an office, indicated some symbolically important urban function or place. With high buildings that only contain dwellings, this kind of urban signage seems inappropriate and even absurd. The freestanding, monumental *Unités* of Le Corbusier are, in this respect, always a bit of a problem: they cannot be a part of an urban structure and thus appear intrinsically anti-urban. Within Dutch planning practice a new typology was applied: a zone of multi-storey blocks rhythmically ordered along or at an angle to main roads. The designer of the *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan Amsterdam* (AUP, 1934), Cor van Eesteren, was well aware of the potential of rhythmic ordering. His ideas and designs were also shaped by the artist Theo van Doesburg and his many international contacts in the CIAM. He wrote, for instance, in 1958 that the neighborhood *Buitenveldert* "is designed within a rhythm of more or less equally-spaced motifs, also called living units."² The postwar areas of Amsterdam took up this theme with a vengeance, adopting the most striking spatial rhythms—a 'modern heritage' that can inspire our regeneration efforts today.

THE RAVENHORST RHYTHM

In our office's design for *Ravenhorst* in Rotterdam, the function and topicality of rhythm in modern housing design are strikingly echoed. Different from the mainstream "high-rise zoning" mentioned above, this is a street with low-rise housing. The street is part of the *Horsten* neighborhood, originally designed by the famous Dutch architect Willem van Tijen, and built in 1951. During the 1990s, the need for renewal of this area became apparent, due to different social demands. With the approval of the inhabitants, it was decided to demolish and rebuild the neighborhood—yet the new plan was, in many respects, shaped upon the rhythm of the old *Horsten*.³ In particular, the north and west edges of the neighborhood, facing the city, were redesigned to communicate the new future of the neighborhood to the whole of the city district of *Zuidwijk*. In the north, a long housing block was replaced by a transparent zone with high flats, so the city-inhabitants were given a glimpse into the new inner low-rise world of the *Horsten*, and, from the *Horsten* itself, views were created towards the

main Zuiderpark on the north. On the western edge, two long housing blocks were replaced by a rhythm of four urban low-rise housing blocks (figs. 1, 2 & 3). The eastern edge of the neighborhood,

the Ravenhorst, was a special street. The neighborhood became more and more intimate towards its eastern border. Behind this border lies a park, and the edge itself comprises a rhythm of little housing blocks, each of two dwellings. The orientation of these blocks was not parallel to the street itself, but parallel to the direction of the western edge. The whole grid of the Horsten consists of an ingenious play of three directions. At the Ravenhorst, we see a lively rhythm of eight little blocks, with the front-façade to the south, little public-parks in front and high trees of the park in the back. The well-known critic Blijstra wrote in 1965 about this street: "Especially nice are the single family-houses, situated at the extreme eastern border" (fig. 4).

How does one renew such a delicate spot, to fit in new requirements of living, such as the quest for privacy and parking space? At first we had to convince the commissioning organizations, and especially the municipality, that the correct solution was, again, low-rise single-family housing. Under their own initial plan to build a series of so-called 'urban villas,' we argued, the unique and intimate sphere of this spot would be totally destroyed. Eventually we made at the Ravenhorst twelve houses within six double-villas. The blocks are not situated parallel to the street, but follow the direction of the internal green zone of the grid, the Ellenhorst. The result is that the houses have a private garden oriented to the south, a little parking place at the north-side and broad in-between views towards the park. The gardens are separated from the street by transparent fences. The double-villa houses each have a wing, projecting symmetrically: these have, for each house, a different function. For the house along the street the wing provides more privacy in the garden whereas for the 'rear'-situated house, it provides a view from the kitchen to the street.

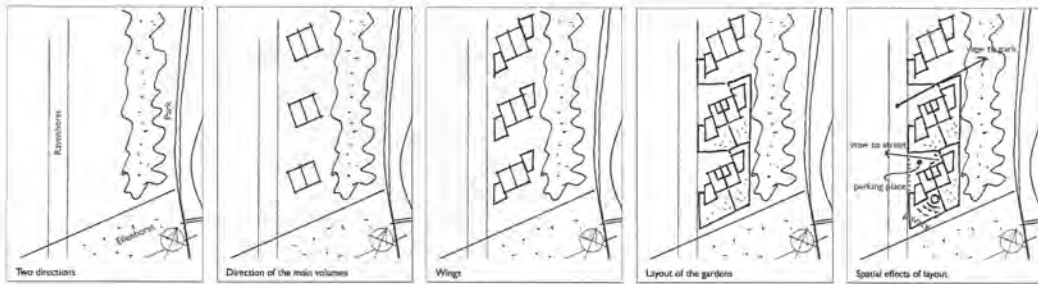


Fig. 5. Birth of the Ravenhorst rhythm.

By cutting the additions and the roof, parallel to the street-direction, the perspective of the street and the park is enlivened, especially in its rhythmic ordering—an indirect evocation of the modern requirements of living (figs. 5, 6 & 7).

THE MOST profound meanings of rhythm in architecture and urban planning are unspoken ones. Once you get an eye for this rhythm, you see the richness of its repertoire, especially in postwar areas. Just where, though, does its enchantment come from? Is it the quietness, in the midst of hectic urban life, that is so tempting? That could be the case—yet you could equally argue that rhythmic ordering is not anti-urban at all, but especially urban. On the one hand, rhythmic ordering of space shows us, through its openness, that the urban reality is bigger than the single perspective of the directional street. And on the other hand, rhythmic ordering links us to each other. To put it slightly differently, it enables people to dance with one another, all within the rules of urban life.

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NOTES

- 1 Lewis Mumford, introductory essay in Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945).
- 2 Cornelis van Eesteren, "Tuinstad Buitenveldert," *Ons Amsterdam* (1958): 110-4.
- 3 Renewal of the Horsten neighborhood under direction of Hebly Theunissen architecten, 1991-1999.

Fig. 6. The Ravenhorst seen from the street



Fig. 7. The Ravenhorst seen from the park



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