Architecture

Dutch Planning: Cities in a Box

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IF the Dutch did not invent the ruler and T-square, they were invented for them. The rigid geometry of rectangular Dutch fields and the measured straight lines of canals, roads, trees and dykes leading to endless flat horizons make one of the most oddly romantic landscapes in the world.

With a huge red sun suspended low in a hazy sky behind bat-winged windmills and the eye reaching to infinity, the Dutch landscape is pure surrealism. In the cities and towns, where rows of new houses are as unrelentingly straight and horizontal as the landscape, it is pure pragmatism.

The Dutch are a notoriously practical people and they have painstakingly created their strangely exotic landscape from the sea. The hard-won land has been regulated into a totally "planned" country of carefully decentralized cities. Now controls are so rigid, bureaucracy so complex, labor so short and social change so great in the postwar years that they are in a straight-edged box.

To this reporter, on a recent housing and planning trip, it was a fascinating box, with Alice in Wonderland overtones. Even with comprehensive government controls and a record amount of construction, the Dutch housing shortage remains as critical as ever. In this through - the - looking - glass country where the fields are lower than the sea, planners are running as fast as they can just to stay in one place.

Looking-Glass Mathematics

Since 1945 approximately 1.3 million new dwellings have been built. But as many dwellings are needed today as were needed after the war. With reduction of the family unit through earlier marriages, separation of generations, rising birthrate and falling deathrate, the same number of dwellings today house proportionately fewer people. About 320 dwelling units per 1,000 are required now, as against 272 in 1939. This is looking-glass mathematics.

Current building activity is concentrated on the planned extension of towns and villages and the construction of new districts and suburbs. The areas southwest of the Hague, south and west of Amsterdam and south of Rotterdam are a totally new Dutch landscape, closer to the De Stijl architectural pioneering of the 1920's and to the principle of the English garden city laid out with the Dutch straight-edge, than to Ruisdael's celebrated and familiar 17th-century pastorals. The result is a tidier Dutch landscape than ever.

Looking-Glass Logic

If it is neat, it is not gaudy. In the words of the Ministry of Housing, an effort has been made to produce "well thought out plans in which efficiency and beauty are soundly balanced. It must unfortunately be admitted that efficiency is apt to predominate." The Dutch are not only neat and efficient, they are honest.

With the greatest concentration of population to land in the world, the low density garden city has been the module of postwar development. This is looking-glass logic.

Enless straight rows of widely spaced, rigidly arranged, pleasantly enough designed low apartment blocks with squared-off open green plots are neither gardens nor cities. The flat blankets of grass often do little more than spread the houses out at too great a distance for unity or use. Now high rise towers are appearing in the newest developments on the edges of cities, rupturing the small, low scale of Dutch tradition, but promising a giant step into the future.

The uniformity of Dutch housing grows largely out of the rigid controls of government regulation, reaching even to room sizes and construction costs. Every plan for anything larger than a small garage must be approved by the Ministry of Housing at The Hague. It is argued in Holland that less centralized control and more competitive building could provide a greater amount of housing of more varied design. Since free competition usually produces equivalent conformity according to economic, rather than government rules, the point is moot. But without government control, the limited Dutch land would be in hopeless chaos.

Another factor in the strong state role in all construction is the technically complex and extremely costly process of preparing the land for building, which must be undertaken by the government before anything else can be done. The cost of filling and preparing the boggy land for the postwar expansion west of Amsterdam alone was over $100 million. The construction that follows is largely by nonprofit building companies, building societies, or the municipality, all heavily government subsidized.

Balancing the housing monotony is some relatively superior planning. The most notable example is the heart of Rotterdam, almost 100 per cent destroyed in the 1940 bombings, replanned in 1946 and 1948, and rebuilt in the early 1950's.

Standard Setter

The city's commercial and shopping center, the Lijnbaan, designed by van den Broek and Bakema, is the prototype for all of the handsome Swedish centers after 1952, as well as the direct ancestor of the various versions of pedestrian malls currently appearing in Germany and the United States. An equally attractive example by the same architects has been carried out recently at Amstelveen, a new community for 100,000 just outside of Amsterdam.

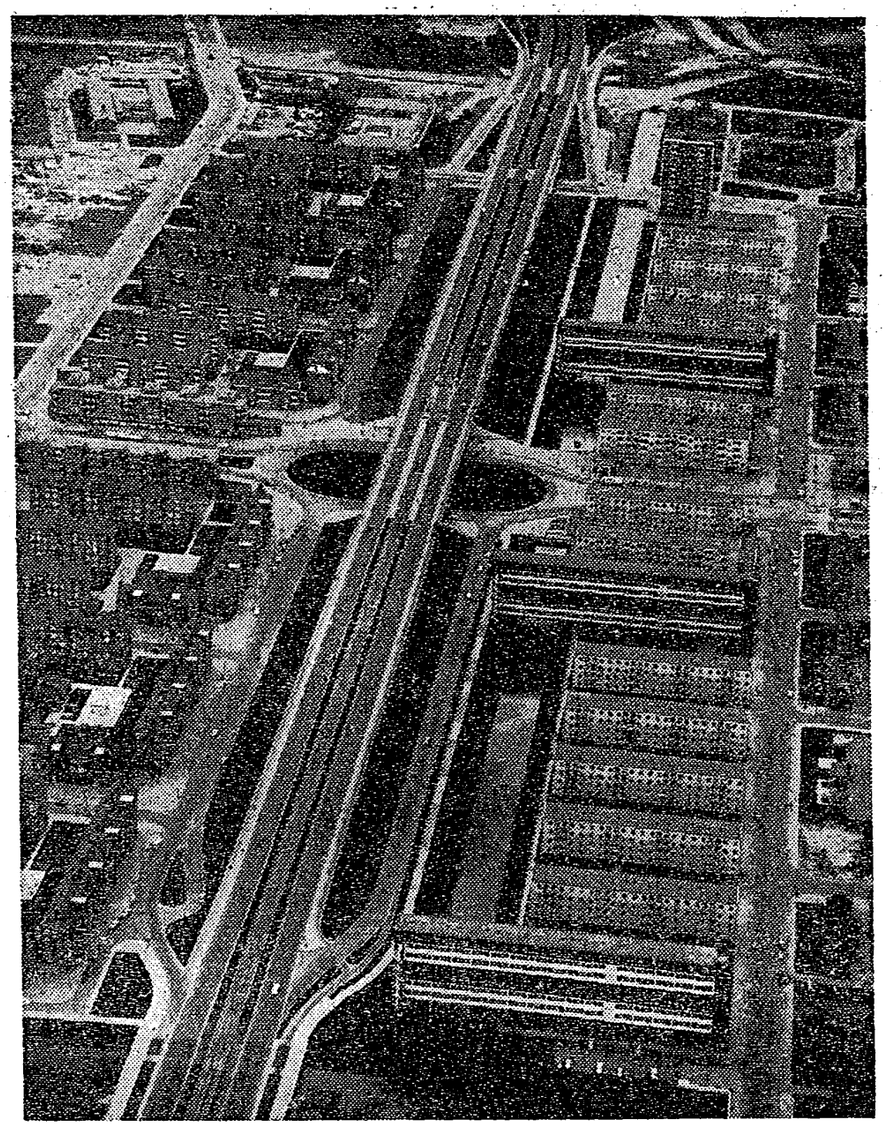
The relationship of housing to Rotterdam's commercial center is particularly satisfactory. High rise apartments by Maaskant, Krijgsman and Bakker are placed at right angles to the mall of shops, with their backs to service streets and their fronts to open courts of grass and flowers. The arrangement offers community closeness and residential serenity in the midst of lively urban activity.

The consistent impression made by the best Dutch building is that architecture is approached primarily as a social art. This is equally true throughout Europe and is perhaps the most striking difference between today's building here and abroad. European architecture is part of a social pattern; this is rarely the case in the United States.

The European work, in the mass, is low-key building of very acceptable quality, short on theatrical esthetics and long on contributions to environment. These commendable effects have been consistently upstaged by American architectural exhibitionism and the European product is beginning to be corrupted by its influence.

A superb new building in the Netherlands, for example, the auditorium just being completed at the Technical University at Delft, by van den Broek and Bakema, is an illustration of both worlds. Much more self-consciously muscular than the architects' previous work, it is fortunately not yet structurally double-jointed and it still clearly reflects the primacy of its functional program.

In general, European architecture is far less photogenic than its American counterparts. But it is often far more felicitous for human purposes.



KLM Aerocarto n.v. Airport Amsterdam

Housing and superhighway at Tuinstad-Slotervaart, west of Amsterdam.
A totally new Dutch landscape laid out with a tidy T-square.