ORANJEBOOMSTRAAT, ROTTERDAM

Hans van der Heijden's housing scheme on the Oranjeboomstraat avenue in Rotterdam rekindles the tightly built, historic parcelling of the Feijenoord district, while still bringing a new typology to the area. **Hugh Strange** reports

All photos: Stefan Muller

The new housing terraces sit either side of a 19th century school and adding house

Project Orangeboomstraat
Architect Hans van der Heijden
Location Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Once a large avenue with lines of trees along the centre and to either side, Oranjeboomstraat in the Feijenoord district of Rotterdam was traditionally characterised by a mix of tightly built housing interspersed with schools and churches. During the post-war era, the street lost much of its historic elegance, with the various forms of housing more recently introduced producing a greater variety and looser grain. In contrast, a recently completed housing scheme, designed by Hans van der Heijden, has sought to repair the historic fabric while introducing a new typology to the area.

The project provides a total of 42 new units over two sites, positioned either side of a 19th century school and adjoining house. A sense of vertical orientation borne out of the historic parcelling of sites along the street has been reintroduced by reinterpreting the traditional narrow house typology. Two-storey maisonettes have been stacked on top of each other, four-bed units below and two/three-bed units above, each with its own entrance off the street, producing what van der Heijden refers to as a "House with 2 Doors." The result is a pair of dense, four-storey terraces, with multiple front doors lined along the pavement.

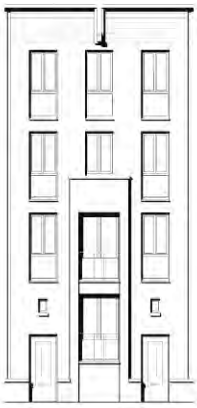
A passageway located between one of the terraces and the old school building rises up over made-up ground, and connects Oranjeboomstraat through to a public space, Rosepark, behind. The rear of the terraces, facing towards this park, have relatively simple brick facades, and are stepped in section, thereby providing external space to the upper maisonettes. The lower units have private gardens, screened off from a shared space for parking and bicycle storage. Separating these areas from the park is a substantial new brick wall, with pre-cast concrete screens, constructed at intervals, providing glimpses between the two spaces.

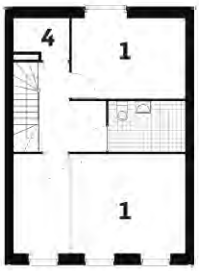
The two front elevations are also formed in masonry, and the brickwork here, in common with the upper areas to the rear, has a very distinctive feel. A random bond has been used and the horizontal joints have been raked, while the vertical joints are left open. Together these details give the surface a rough and even texture, emphasising the whole composition over the unit part. Pre-cast concrete overflow spouts at the top of the facades and metal balustrades to Juliet balconies provide a counterpoint to the overriding brick-ness of the scheme.

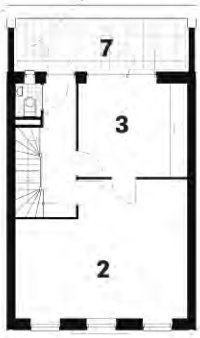
The composition of these front facades has a decidedly more traditional feel than those to the rear, with vertical joints between each of the paired units suggesting a row of large houses. This emphasis relates in part to the grandeur of the neighbouring school building's front facade, but also intentionally disguises the maisonette typology in favour of

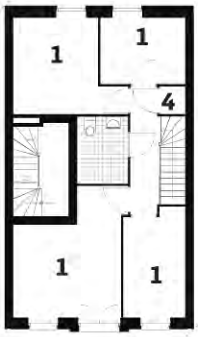
Plan and section

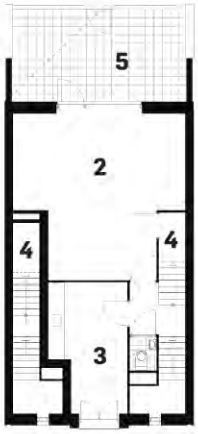
1 Bedroom
2 Living room
3 Kitchen
4 Storage
5 Garden
6 Entrance
7 Balcony

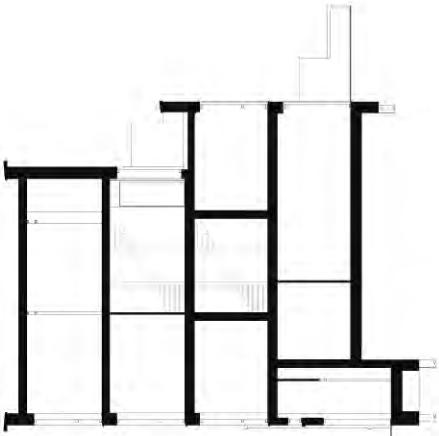


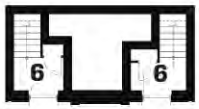






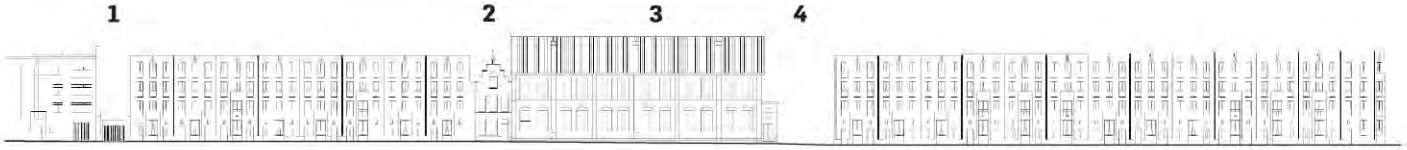






Section

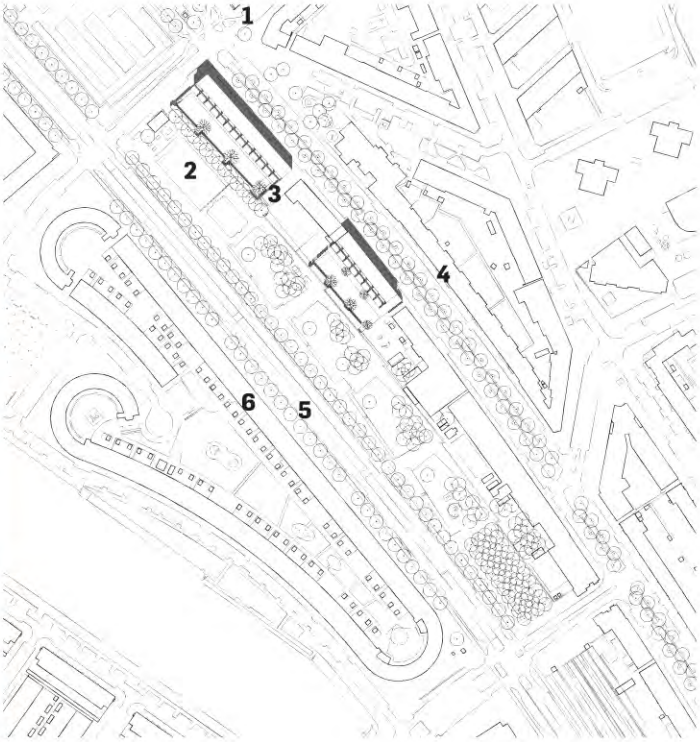
1 Gate to rear court
2 House, Grade II-listed
3 Former school, Grade II-listed
4 New passage to Rosepark



Observing the way Dutch buildings historically form corners, the architect incorporated it into the design as a way to replicate historical precedent

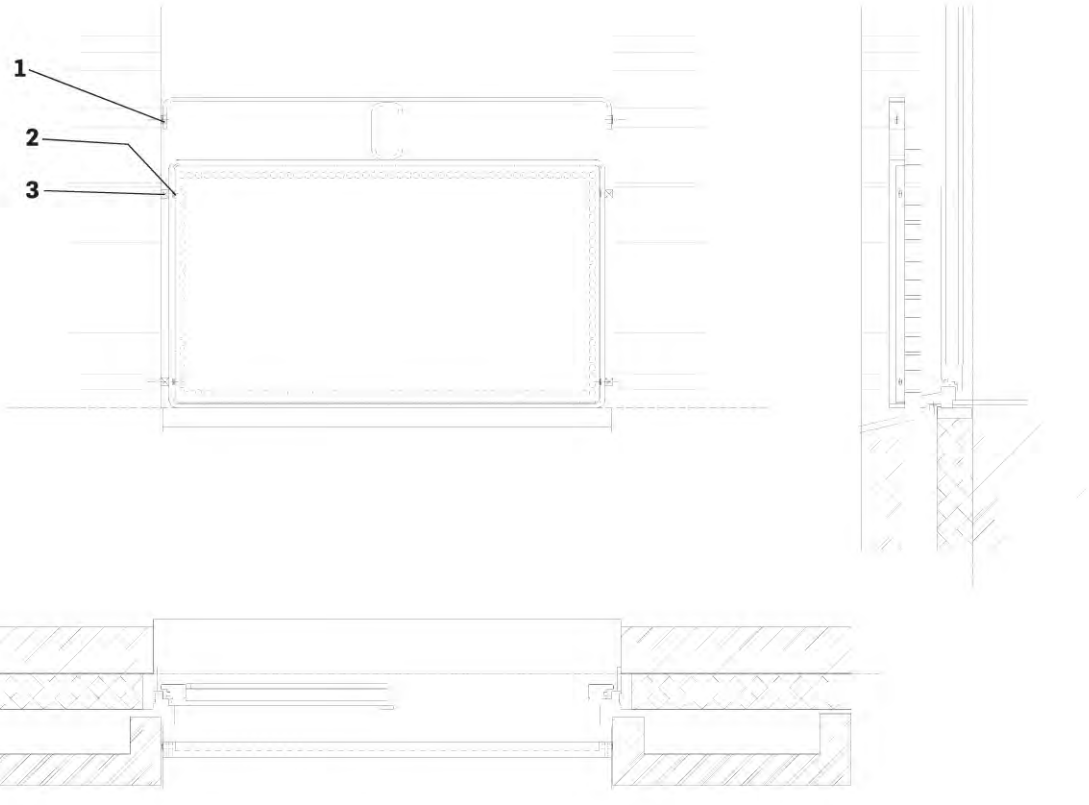
Site plan

1 Steven Hoogendijkstraat
2 Rosepark
3 New passage
4 Oranjeboomstraat
5 Rosestraat
6 Peperklip



Balcony detail

1 Sleeper screw 8x70, Nylon spacer ring 25
2 Nylon spacer ring 25
3 Sleeper screw 8x70, Nylon spacer ring 25



an image reminiscent of historic Dutch houses. A plinth of purple bricks grounds both terraces, whilst above a rhythm is created through the use of different coloured bricks that group the housing into a series of smaller terraces. Formed in the same purple bricks in a stacked bond, slightly protruding brick details are suggestive of bay windows.

Either one or two stories high, these reinforce the secondary rhythm of the alternating brick colours to the facades, rising up at the end of the terrace to a single exception, where the bay is three floors high.

At this moment the scheme meets a street junction, and the manner in which the project reinforces the historic fabric becomes most evident. Van der Heijden studied the way in which Dutch buildings historically formed corners, and noted that as well as formally celebrating these moments, there was a remarkable consistency in the specific ways in which these intersections were handled. In a very similar manner to each other, buildings would turn the urban block, with the building cut to form a 45-degree chamfered corner.

This chamfer would be projected by a single brick's dimension and, quite remarkably, the size of the chamfer would consistently be one-and-a-half metres in length off the street line.

These observations have been transferred through to the scheme, with the detail at this point replicating the historic precedent, but within a manner that is very much specific to the architecture of the overall scheme.

The result is a richly articulated composition at the corner that, as with the scheme as a whole, successfully balances a sensitive and thoughtful respect for the historic city with an architectural language that is nevertheless both particular and personal.

PROJECT TEAM
Client: Woonstad
Architect: Hans van der Heijden Architect
Structural engineer: Leen Brak
Main contractor: Bouwbedrijf Frans Vink & Zn
Quantity surveyor: Van der Ree & Vermeulen

Opposite: Bent metal and anodised aluminium form balustrades to the bays

Above: The corner detail echoes historic Dutch precedents

Right: The two-storey bays provide a secondary rhythm to the street

INTERVIEW: HANS VAN DER HEIJDEN

Fresh from his Oranjeboomstraat housing scheme, architect Hans van der Heijden discusses with **Hugh Strange** his relationship with Dutch architectural culture and bringing traditional style to a modern market

I'd like to start by asking you about your relationship with Dutch architectural culture. Much of the modern movement, and certainly a significant Dutch contingent of it, saw lightness of construction as an inherent quality to be aspired to. In contrast, your buildings are consistently built in brick and heavy in character. How do you feel you relate to that local modern tradition of people like Rietveld?

Hans van der Heijden: The nightmare of Dutch modernism was that it almost exclusively started looking westwards after the Second World War. Before that, Berlage, Oud and Van Eesteren were actively taking part in central European debates. They were excellent German speakers and writers. J.J.P. Oud taught himself English by reading detective paperbacks and noted that his former modernist friends moved to America. Post-war lightweight architectures are the consequence of the Anglo-Saxon steel frame. Steel does not prescribe form or proportion and many architects love the lack of counter pressure from the construction industry and the building site. Yet, steel has remained an alien material in the Dutch construction industry. Even today there is an almost universal preference amongst contractors to build with brick, stone and concrete.

HS: And how do you see that played out in the current architectural discourse?

HvdH: I find the tectonic verismo of the likes of Hans Kollhoff more appealing than the collage architecture as practised by, say, Francine Houben. The increasing extravaganza of internationalist commercial modernism I find actually quite boring - and inappropriate as a model for housing design. A house should be a stable shelter. It needs to be sustainable and able to resist fashion and individual taste.

HS: I can see that. However, contemporary brick buildings are generally constructed as a thin outer skin of a cavity wall. How do you feel about the imposed conditions of contemporary brickwork construction such as movement joints? Do you see these as a necessary evil?

HvdH: There are no necessary evils in the construction industry! I try and work with what's available; brickwork is very much a normative product in the Netherlands. That's a pro and a con. There is a lot of excellent craftsmanship available and brickwork facades are cheap to build. Traditionally housing is about cheapness and thinness. If you go to Venice, Amsterdam or London, basically what you see are barracks dressed up. So I don't have any pretension that my housing is anything other than that; it's mass-produced stuff, and it's trying to achieve an analogy with that type of production.

HS: And yet, when you have an opportunity, your projects take advantage of doing more. For instance, by forming a deeper reveal, expressing the full thickness of the brick, and you seem to enjoy that.

HvdH: Yes, I do, but that's nothing new. That also happened in speculative housing from 120 years ago. It's a small manoeuvre; it was like that, and it's still like that. And you have to make those small steps or there is no architecture.

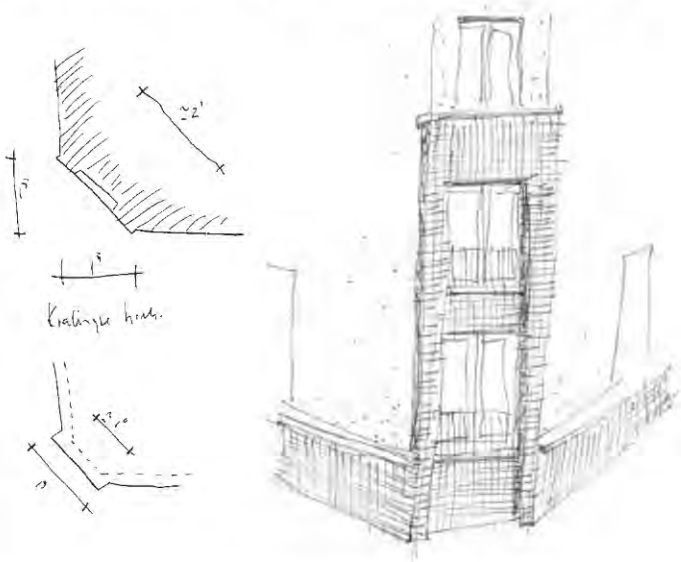
HS: You talk a lot about the city, about making an urban architecture. What do you mean by this?

HvdH: Everyone talks about the city lately. What city do we mean? I am afraid that our current urbanity is not well understood by architects. Our world is urbanised. The suburb, the post-war housing estate, the village, the hypermarket and even the countryside have become parts of urban networks. This city presents itself as a multi-directional aggregate of chance artefacts. In this confusing reality I can't think of any other option than to construct plausible links between what was and what is and what will be. Architectonic construction simply can't be firm enough if you want to achieve such goals.

HS: And what relationship might there be between your urban ideas and your thoughts about how buildings are constructed?

HvdH: Well, I always try to achieve a diagrammatic quality in my designs in the sense that I am looking for a relation between type, structure, materials and appearance.

HS: I see, in something like your corner detail at the Oranjeboomstraat project, an enjoyment of a small-scale articulation of material that expresses a delight in construction and the building site, but simultaneously says something about the city - its



van der Heijden's sketches of the Oranjeboomstraat corner detail

structure, its past and its possible future. I wondered if you could talk about these scales of thinking and working.

HvdH: It's a very traditional thought; that a brick is made in its format, that it needs to be hand-able. Indeed I like the idea that a 45-degree reveal of a few centimetres suddenly gives scale to the entire building. But that's exactly what Schinkel did with his buildings. He could make enormous boxes, and then tiny decorations in the stonework which make you realise that - yes - this building is big, but its also small; its got both scales in it. And I think that the scaling of buildings, the capacity of a building to work at a city level, a street level, but also the level of a door handle, has a great value in architecture.

HS: Is this what you mean about type, structure, materials and appearance?

HvdH: Yes, but in addition I think architects do well to focus on things that are permanent, or have the highest permanence in what they do. I mean a type will never change and constructions are hard to change. In those Aldo Rossi years, the difference between type and design was huge. So a figure like Mendini was about design, the stuff that comes and goes. In contrast, I really try and work with those things that are permanent.

HS: In your work there's an evident recognition of the value of the historic European city. But things do change: modes of inhabitation, technologies. How do you understand that relationship between tradition and innovation?

HvdH: I once read a magnificent article by Martin Steinmann, trying to understand the work of Kay Fisker, the famous Danishhouse builder. He argued that there are two different poles in traditionalism. One pole was the type of architect that focuses on eternal values and the continuation of fixed architectural formats, etc. And the other pole was the type of architect who tries to work with what is available in a given culture, trying to understand that particular contemporary tradition and optimising within that tradition. He argued that Fisker was of the latter school, and I immediately recognised that I am also in that school.

And those issues are connected. In Holland, it is quite obvious that the bricklayer is connected with a very long masonry tradition in the country, that is what we like doing; earth-bound stuff. So to me it's really a matter of understanding what these guys on site and in their offices think and what their logic is, and trying to optimise that.

HS: So to frame ideas of change and convention in a different way: if the general sense in your work is of a search for permanence, do you think there's a discernible chronology to your offices work?

HvdH: What keeps me busy now, and I almost hate to admit it, is, I've come to the conclusion that architecture needs this individual signage. So, quite slowly, there is an element of exuberance in the work; it is losing some of its clinical approach. There's a new balance.

HS: Would you agree that maybe one way of seeing that development, is that in the context of the SuperDutch experience, perhaps your practice felt a need to re-establish certain conventions and codes, followed by the sense that there are nevertheless freedoms within conventions.

HvdH: Wittgenstein has a beautiful phrase, "as soon as you've climbed the ladder you can throw it away". It's a bit of that. Perhaps that's what I recognise in Rossi's work; that he established a language and then could go further. Although I'd like to stress that we're still discussing housing, so the bandwidth is small.

HS: Finally, having worked in both the Netherlands and the UK, what differences in the construction industries most struck you, and were there any architectural implications to these?

HvdH: In the Bluecoat arts centre in Liverpool I was amazed by the skill of the engineers, especially Techniker. They managed to design the building in load-bearing brickwork and there is only one single unavoidable expansion joint. The building is built exactly as specified, and the design has always been supported by the client. But the UK is a country of extremes. One can build Stansted Airport, but also a vast array of far less refined buildings. My Green Lane Triangle housing estate in Birkenhead was the outcome of a design competition organised by an ambitious client with the help of an ambitious planning department. But my client representative at Oranjeboomstraat would never have accepted the design changes the contractor was allowed, and even encouraged, to make in Birkenhead. And the Dutch planning system is incomparably more hands-on. I would say that the UK seems in need of client-ship.