

LA MAIEUTICA DELLA CITTÀ
Contributi sul progetto urbano e architettonico

a cura di
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AIÓN



Areal view of Heesterbuurt

1. Papaverhof - 2. Laan van Meerdervoort - 3. Weigeliaplein - 4. Holy Family Church

Hans van der Heijden

Reconstructing Weigeliaplein, The Hague

Weigeliaplein is a neighbourhood square in the Heesterbuurt district of The Hague. The dwellings in the surrounding perimeter blocks are owned by a social housing trust, which considers the dwellings to be outdated and has decided to prepare for reconstruction. Hans van der Heijden Architecten designed a scheme which departs from the critical reading of the urbanistic figure, consisting of the square and the surrounding blocks. The design is the result of the recognition that the square and the housing relate dialectically to the urban figure, or the ensemble, they establish. It is argued that within the ensemble the square and the housing are both needed in a typological sense. Yet, their actual architectural manifestation may be open for design research.

The Weigeliaplein ensemble was a design by the municipal Urban Development and Housing Department, developed and built between 1915 and 1927, based on H.P. Berlage's 1908 General Expansion Plan of The Hague. The client was the social housing trust Woningbouwvereniging 's-Gravenhage. A total of 193 apartments and two warehouses were built as three-storey high urban blocks. The square of the ensemble consists of a ring road which surrounds a neighbourhood park. The main landscape features are a toddler's playground and a lawn bordered by shrubs and trees. Minimal parking spaces are supplied along the ring road. The square is enclosed by three perimeter blocks, which have been renovated in the 1970s. During this operation, the subdued brickwork architecture was badly damaged and the ordering of the dwellings within the blocks was changed. Typically, the repetitive unit within the blocks consists of ground floor flats with entrances directly from the street and two floors of apartments stacked upon those and accessed by interior run-up staircases.

Such urban figures occur in other places in Heesterbuurt as well. The most renowned example is Papaverhof, constructed

in 1921 to a design of Jan Wils. De Stijl member Wils raised a problem which also presents itself at Weigeliaplein: just 25% of the dwellings sit directly at the park, and the remaining dwellings sit at the surrounding city streets. In response to this issue, Wils introduced a house type in which a small entrance area was added to the main volume containing the living spaces. By repeating 180° rotated houses within the block, all houses have a dual aspect. The houses either have a prospect on the park from the living room, or they have their entrances on the park side. The response to the existence of the neighbourhood park was found at the housing-typological scale.

In comparison to Papaverhof, the Weigeliaplein block arrangement remains inert to the presence of the neighbourhood park. The park is surrounded by conventional closed perimeter blocks which display morphological adaptations to the topography and the diagonal streets towards the park. The housing typology, again, follows the conventions of the time and the place.

The proposed intervention, therefore, aims at the housing typology, being relatively autonomous against the square. Two particular objectives drove the research on the housing type. First, because of the need to re-accommodate the current residents, the required number of flats could not be decreased, whilst the flats themselves had to be around 50% larger. Second, there was a desire to enhance the spatial relations between all dwellings and the square in the centre of the ensemble. After all, as observed above, in the original perimeter block most dwellings are not directly connected to the square and its green amenities.

The proposed dwelling type is developed from the speculative domestic palazzo, which has been commonly used in cities like Naples and Milan from the 18th century onward. The perimeters of the existing blocks have been divided into smaller



View from Weigeliapark

units, each based on the same rectangular typological diagram. The topography of the site and the resulting angular corners of the blocks induce further deformations of the diagram.

The architectural repertoire that can be found in historic manifestations of the palazzo type, in particular the portone, androne, cortile, galleria and scala aperta are conceived within the possibilities and restraints of contemporary housebuilding practice.

The standard typological diagram shows two axes. Perpendicular to the streets, the portone, the androne, the cortile and a back alley with a fence form a collective sequence of architectural spaces. In the cortile a secondary cross axis is suggested by scale aperta, external staircases, and lifts that lead to the upper floors. A tall tree marks the intersection of the two axes. Gallerias surround the cortile, giving access to the upper-level apartments and offering space for private terraces. At the ground floor level of the cortile, collective features, including bicycle and storage rooms are supplied, underlining the shared nature of this space.

Through the cortile and the back-alley, the green of Weigeliaplein can become part of the daily navigation of the residents through their habitat.

The dwellings differ according to the position within each unit. Level access flats sit along the urban streets that surround the ensemble, forming four-storey high urban facades to the streets. Three-storey high maisonettes sit alongside the back alley at Weigeliapark, allowing views of nature from the houses and their outdoor terraces.

Arguably because the industrial revolution happened quite late in The Netherlands, high-density models like the Berlin mietkaserne, the Paris maison à louer, the London mansion and the Neapolitan palazzo have never been needed to accommodate large amounts of workers. In the Dutch harbour, infrastructure and finance economy as of the late 19th century the urban row house, an offspring of the richer canal house, sufficed to accommodate the working class.

Early 20th century architects must have been familiar with the palazzo typology through the obligatory 'grand tours' to Italy. After all, famous Dutch buildings, including W.M. Dudok's Hilversum town hall, are based on the palazzo type. Yet, it has most rarely been used in 20th century housing. Modernism was a dominant trend in architecture and tended to skip the intermediate scale in favour of high-rise living.



Room view to Weigeliapark

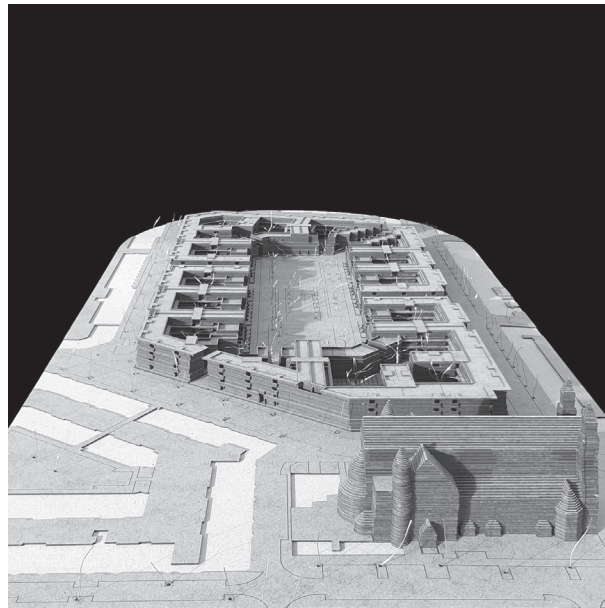
Cities like Naples and Milan depend heavily on the palazzo as a model for housing. They are object lessons in urban density and demonstrate how cities develop on a plot-by-plot basis. Key in the here described design proposition is, of course, the use of the backyards of the currently closed perimeter blocks. By partly using the backyards for building, the density of the blocks could be increased.

This proposal made it possible to increase the density without raising the construction height above the common height of Heesterbuurt, four stories and without building on the square. Also, by accepting the current perimeters of the blocks and subdividing them, phasing in demolition and construction is possible. Although the square itself has deliberately not been designed, there is the obvious potential of removing the road within the ensemble if underground parking is supplied in the scheme, resulting in even stronger reciprocity between the square and the surrounding cortiles.

My gratitude goes to Karin Templin, my most important teacher in architecture, who introduced me to the world of palazzo architecture.



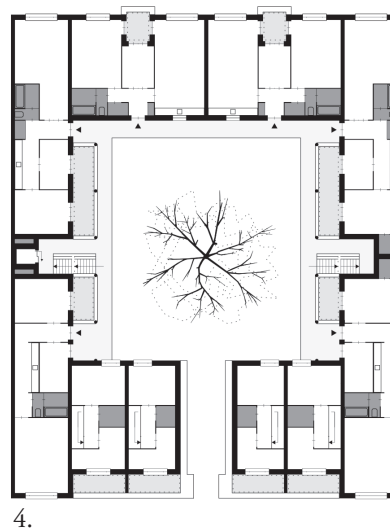
Access decks with private terraces



Weigeliaplein ensemble with Holy Family Church

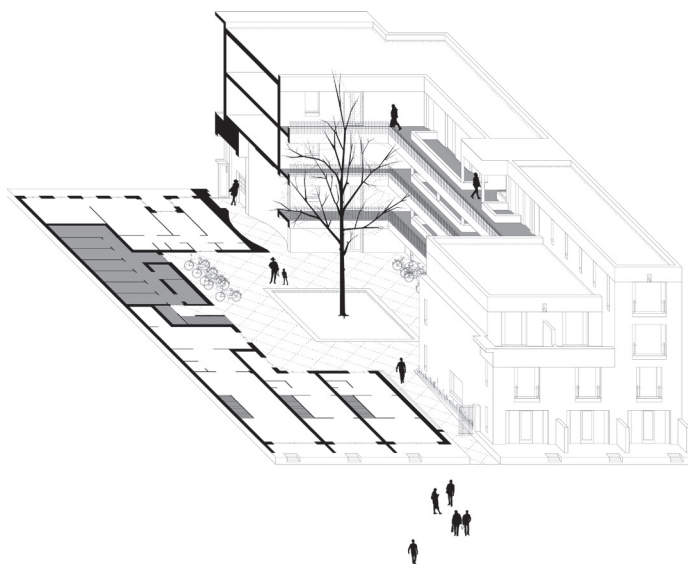


Urban design

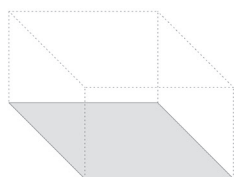


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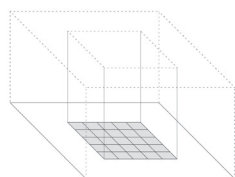
Plan drawings
 1. Park facade 2. Street facade 3. Section 4. Plan 2nd floor



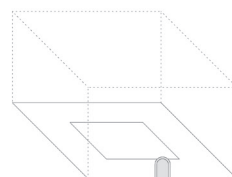
Cut-away isometric projection of palazzo unit



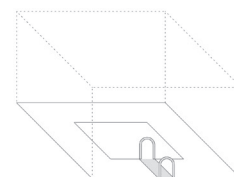
Sito



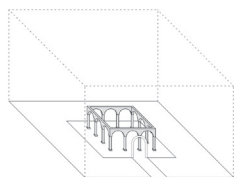
Cortile



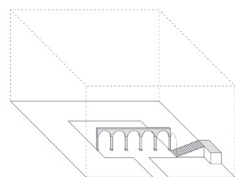
Portone



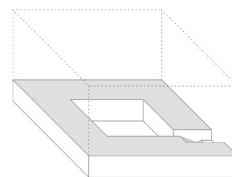
Androne



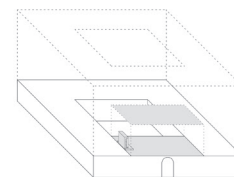
Colonnato



Scala aperta

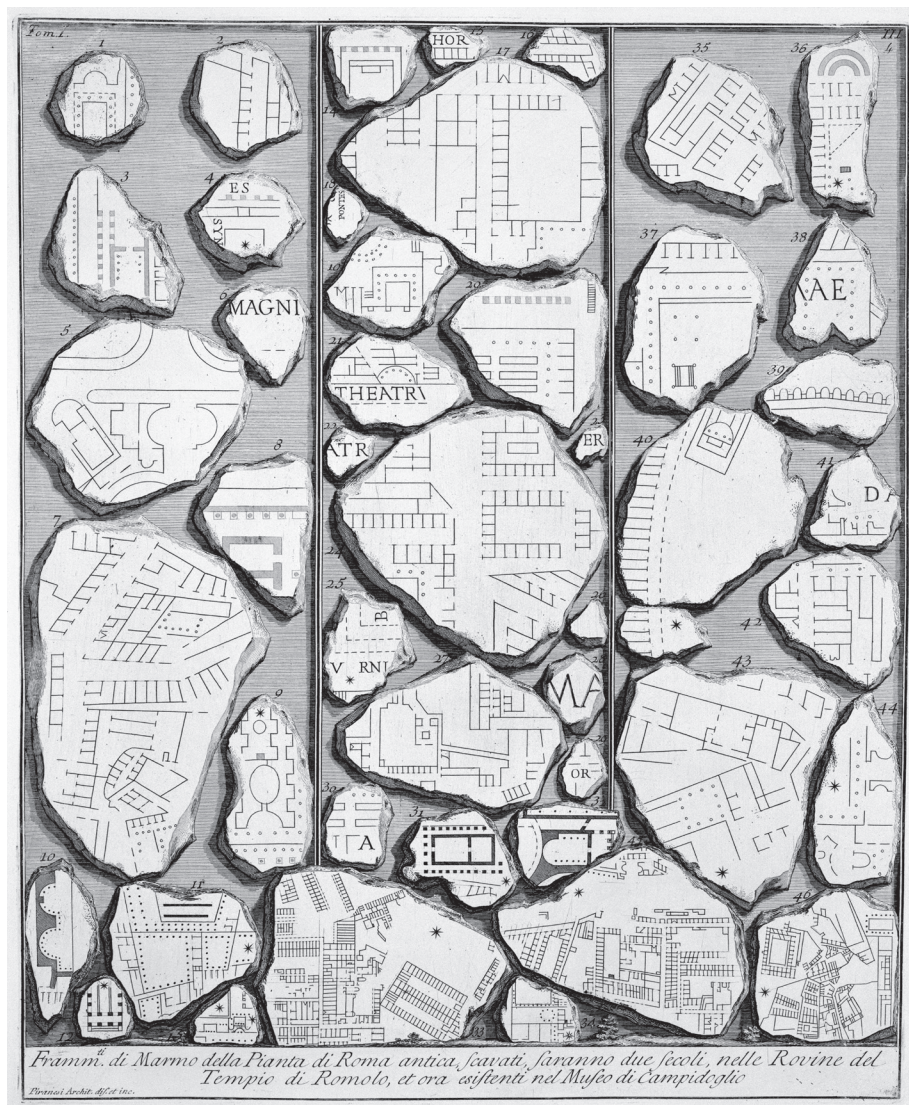


Piano nobile



Sala

The palazzo's repertoire



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Framm. ti di Marmo della Pianta di Roma antica*, Tomo I, tav. III, 1756
Opere di Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Francesco Piranesi e d'altri, Tomo 1, Firmin Didot Freres, Paris 1835-1839