



The Zaanhof

About the birth of a paradise for
workers at the beginning of the
twentieth century in Amsterdam

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De Zaanhof

The Zaanhof in Amsterdam

If people who do not know this court building from their own sight talk about it, it may happen that one may encounter some slight disregard, and the opinion that residents will find living in 'courtyards', as one deliberately says contemptuously, less pleasant. But nothing is less true.

(Mels J. Meijers, "Hofbouw", Bouwkundig Weekblad [Construction Weekly] jrg. 38 1917)

Oases of peace

Near the museum of the Spanish city of Valladolid, somewhat hidden among the buildings, the modest *Plaza del Viejo Coso* is located. It consists of an octagon of



Plaza del Viejo Coso

apartments around a small flowerbed. It looks like an Amsterdam courtyard, but is octagonal instead of rectangular, and it was not created as a residential courtyard. Built in 1833 as the first plaza de toros (arena) of Valladolid, it was transformed in 1890 into a barracks with shelter for the Guardia Civil. Ninety years later, the municipality renovates it and turns it into a residential court. Whether these apartments were

intended for workers is unknown to yours truly, but it is a fact that this courtyard is an oasis of peace in the busy city, just as is the case with many "hofjes" [courtyards] in Amsterdam. The most famous - and therefore the least quiet - courtyard in Amsterdam is the Begijnhof, which dates from the Middle Ages, with the Houten Huis [Wooden House] from circa 1530 as its main attraction (not the oldest house in Amsterdam, which is located on the Warmoesstraat). Less well known is the Hofje Venetiae from 1650, built to house 'poor widows and elderly maids'. Some years ago it was closed for public in because of the many tourists. A wonderful place for the residents. And then there is the Zaanhof from 1919, built as a residential oasis, as a paradise for workers, but that is preceded by a long and eventful history.

The Housing Act

When the nineteenth century comes to an end, it is clear that in large parts of Amsterdam housing is running out. The city has fallen into decay and cannot handle the influx from the countryside of people looking for work. With the urban expansion according to the plan of city architect Jan Kalff from 1877, which is laid out in a semi-circle around the seventeenth-century city centre, the city tries to alleviate the need, but this cannot avoid houses in the centre becoming completely overcrowded, such as in the Jordaan and on the Oostelijke Eilanden [Eastern Islands]. The Kalff Plan provides for only minor improvements. In the neighbourhoods of Staatsliedenbuurt, Kinkerbuurt, De Pijp, Dapperbuurt and Funen, closely packed, monotonous looking blocks of four floors are being built. It is speculative building, hastily executed and aimed at achieving a maximum profit. Rents are rising sharply as a result of high land prices and the free hand that investors have on the



Czaar Peterstraat 1918

housing market. It is time for government intervention. In 1901, Liberal Prime Minister Nicolaas Pierson comes up with a bill that is passed as the *Housing Act* a year later under his successor Abraham Kuyper of the Anti-Revolutionary Party. It is a law that gives municipalities options to control the process of urban planning and housing, provide public facilities such as gas, water and light, but otherwise leaves intact the liberal system of the free market, in the spirit of laissez-faire.

Amsterdam already went its own way in 1896 when it ended the unlimited sale of land to private individuals. The municipality introduces a ground lease system that gives it more control over the use of the land. Three years later, after the collapse of a few ramshackle buildings, the Bureau Bouw- en Woningtoezicht [Bureau for Building and Housing Supervision] is founded, where Jan Willem Cornelis Tellegen works as a director from 1901 onwards. In 1905 he launches the *Amsterdamsche Bouwverordening* [Amsterdam Building Regulation] which renders the construction of so-called alcove houses - houses with rooms without ventilation and toilets without water flushing - impossible and which constitutes an important impulse for the construction of workers' or popular houses, simple but of a better quality.

In 1915, after the beginning of the First World War, the *Gemeentelijke Woningdienst* [*Municipal Housing Service*] is established in Amsterdam, which develops its own building plans but mainly is in charge of the activities of the existing housing associations, such as *Rochdale*, founded in 1903 (named after the English town of Rochdale near Manchester which is considered the Mecca of cooperative housing) and the Roman Catholic *Housing Association Patrimonium* Amsterdam dating from 1886 (in 2004 Patrimonium merged with Rochdale). The social democrat Arie Keppler becomes the director of the Municipal Housing Service, who, together with alderman Floor Wibaut and Tellegen, who has been appointed mayor, forms a strong trio in the field of urban renewal and housing. In 1919, the city council has already adopted ninety housing projects, which together account for 14,000 residential units that are being realized in, for example, the neighbourhoods of Indische Buurt, Transvaalbuurt and Spaarndammerbuurt. New quarters are also emerging north of the IJ river: the Tuindorpen [Garden Villages], built in the spirit of Keppler's idea about the creation of independent working-class communities in new, fresh neighbourhoods, outside the suffocating city. During the next two decades, important and large construction projects are built such as the Plan Zuid [Plan South], designed by Hendrik Petrus Berlage, and the pearls of the Amsterdam School, including *Het Schip* [*The Ship*] by architect Michel de Klerk.



Philanthropy, Socialism and Courtyard Building

Housing offers every opportunity for reformists of a liberal denomination to contribute to the development of high-quality residences for less privileged people without addressing the necessity of social or economic rearrangement. In 1862, for example, the *Bouwmaatschappij tot Verkrijging van Eigen Woningen* [Building Society for the Acquisition of Own Homes] is founded, a cooperative housing association that aims to enable tenants to call their rented homes their property after twenty years of paying rent plus a weekly extra of a 'dubbeltje', a dime. That plan will not succeed but the name *Dubbeltjespanden* [Dime Houses] has survived. The current housing association *De Key* has its roots in this building society. A typical example of a philanthropic housing project is the construction company *Oud-Amsterdam*, founded in 1898 by Johanna ter Meulen and sugar refiner Willem Spakler. Johanna ter Meulen - chairwoman of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* [*Society for the Benefit of All*] - is the driving force behind this initiative to build affordable housing for workers.

She is inspired by the British philanthropist Octavia Hill, who regards good housing as the basis of educating the masses. In 1864 Hill starts projects in the slums of London in which she is not afraid to impose what she feels should be and should not be on



Octavia Hill
(1838-1912)

working-class families. It is well-intended and produces modest results, but in the eyes of socialists it is a form of charitable despotism. They mockingly portray her as the *inquisitrix-general* of the slums. Around 1880 in Delft appears Jacques van Marken as the British benefactress's peer. Van Marken, son of a Protestant minister and graduated as an engineer, is a pedigree entrepreneur who started the *Nederlandse Gist- en Spiritusfabriek* [*Dutch Yeast and Spiritus Factory*] in his early twenties, followed in 1884 by the *Nederlandse Oliefabriek* [*Dutch Oil Factory*]. He is - as his biographer Jan van der Mast states

- the first social entrepreneur in the Netherlands, which is reflected in the establishment of a works council *avant la lettre*, the installment of health and disability insurances and the like, and as its crowning glory the so-called *Agneta Park* (named after his wife) where Van Marken builds simple and affordable housing for his workers in a park-like environment.

Significant achievements, but like Hill, Van Marken is very paternalistic and often lacks the right modesty. For example, the Van Marken couple decide to live among the workers in a luxury villa, something their workers are not really pleased with. His contemporary Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis accuses him - just as it happens to Hill - of being a champagne socialist who stands in the



Agnetapark 1890

way of essential changes in social relations - i.e. the proletarian revolution. In any case, Van Marken is of the opinion that the education of mankind can only be given shape and substance if workers have an attractive and safe living environment. What better way to achieve this than in the seclusion of a park or a court? This is a building concept that also appeals to a number of Amsterdam School architects. Herman Walenkamp, designer of the Zaanhof in Spaarndammerbuurt of Amsterdam, is one of them.

The Zaanhof and its predecessors

It is Arie Keppler who, already prior to being appointed head of the Municipal Housing Service, initiates improvements in the designs of workers' housing-to-build in collaboration with the housing associations. Keppler is impressed by what was previously realized in Arnhem in courtyard building, namely in the neighbourhood of Verschuerwijk dating from 1913. In the words of Mels Meijers from the Bouwkundig Weekblad [Construction Weekly] of 1917:

In our country, the first application of courtyard building in modern public housing took place in Arnhem. It is the well-known complex on the former Binnenvisschersweide, built by architects De Roos and Overeynder for the



Verschuerwijk in 1927

Vereeniging "Volkshuisvesting" [Association Public Housing]. The so-called "Verschuerwijk". The inner courtyard is reached from 3 sides by 4 gatehouses, two in the axis of the block and two at the front on either side.

As a result, this inner area remains completely aside from any through traffic that might still occur, and has been converted into a playground surrounded by a wide grass edge. This arrangement ensures in a very decent space the quietest possible location, free from wind and dust. In the front the school building is located, far from the street noise, without any disturbance from traffic; the most peaceful location one can imagine.

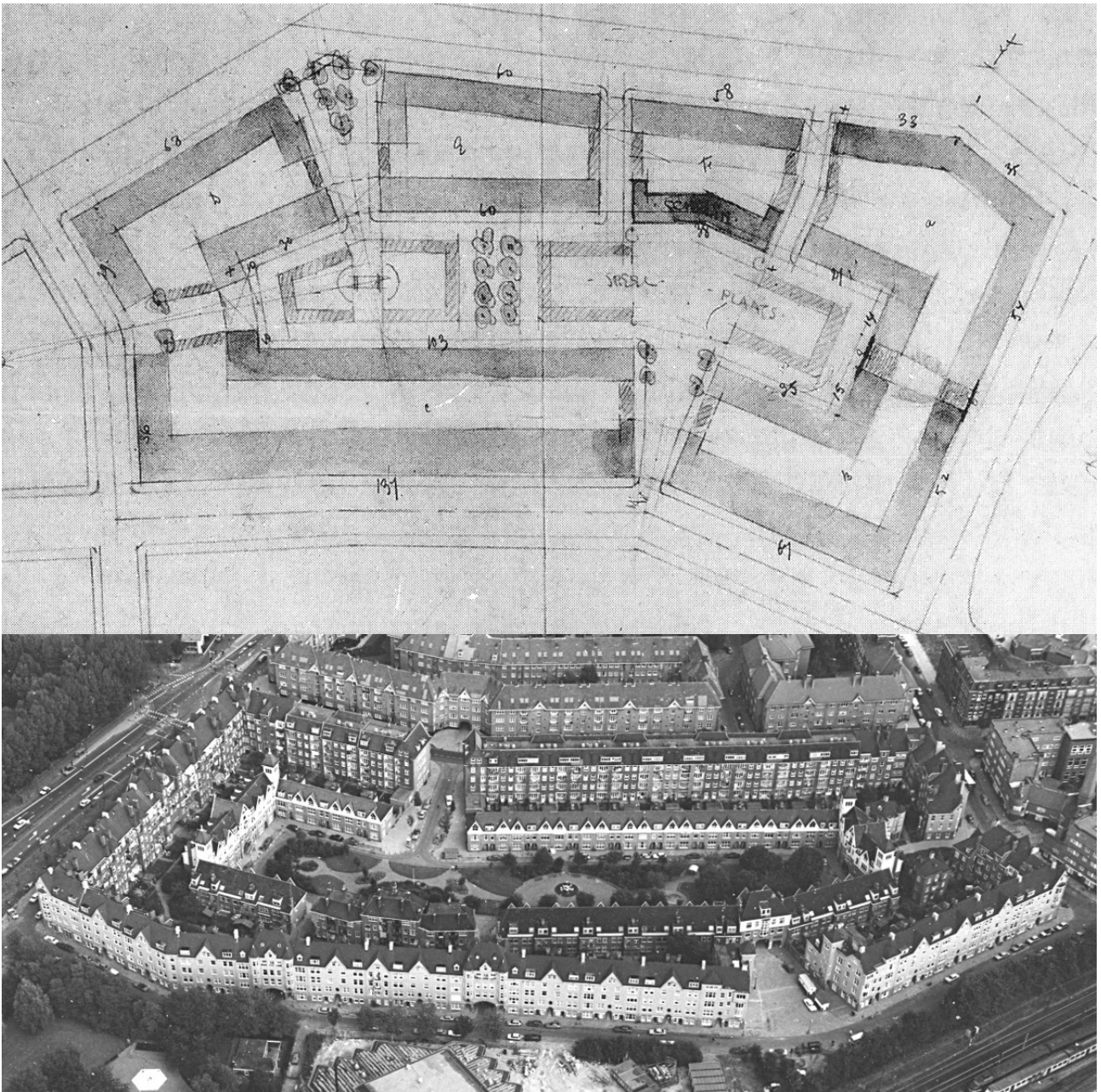
Meijers also remembers of the existence of the Patrimoniumshof in Rotterdam:

The Arnhem example has been followed on a smaller scale in Rotterdam. In the past year, 'Patrimoniumshof', near the south of the Maas, was completed, according to the design of architect A.K. Kruithof, thereof.

Instead of the usual two building blocks from the street plan, an approximately square block with inner courtyard was formed, accessible via two entrances: one treated as an open roadway, and the other exclusively for pedestrians, passing through spacious, overbuilt gate openings.

At the instigation of Keppler, Spaarndammerbuurt will be enriched with various construction projects by architects of the Amsterdam School. Construction of a residential block on the Spaarndammerplantsoen designed by Michel de Klerk begins in 1913, after which Het Schip [The Ship] is built a year later, also by De Klerk. De Klerk is considered to be the most prominent architect of the Amsterdam School and his work distinguishes itself by the many playful ornaments, the unconventional style, which he expresses in his masterpiece Het Schip. This style contrasts sharply with the austere residential complexes built at the same time by the functionalists of the Bauhaus in Germany and with the austere style of Hendrik Berlage. To the northwest of Het Schip, across the Hembrugstraat, is the Zaanhof, the construction of which started in 1916, and to the east of it, on Oostzaanstraat, is Zaandammerplein, a design by Karel de Bazel that was realized as of 1922.

The Zaanhof is originally a plan designed in 1913 by the architect Joan van der Meij, invited to do so by Keppler. Van der Meij sketches a double ring of houses around a courtyard surrounded by a narrow street. The outer ring is designed by Tjeerd Kuipers and Arnold Ingwersen and built by the Roman Catholic housing corporation *Patrimonium*. This ring is a series of four-storey residential blocks with turrets and a monumental main gatehouse for pedestrians on Spaardammerdijk. The gate has a staircase because Spaarndammerdijk is higher than the courtyard.



There are also gatehouses on Oostzaanstraat, Zaanstraat and Hembrugstraat that give pedestrians, cyclists and - in two places - cars access to the Zaanhof. The outer ring is reminiscent of a fortress and differs in all respects from the inner ring, which is designed by Walenkamp and built by housing corporation *Het Westen* [The West]. Walenkamp projects a wreath of connected houses of two storeys, consisting of ground floor houses and and first floor houses with pointed roofs and attics. He puts small turrets on the corners of this inner ring. The gatehouse on the north side has three floors. In the design of Meij space has been left for the construction of a small school in the Zaanhof. *De Standaard* [The Standard] of May 5, 1920 writes about this:

In the nice Zaanhof they have already decided on which terrains a Christian preparatory school will arise, and a Christian M.U.L.O. school [secondary education] will be built soon. They are now working on the masonry for a number of new homes. Mels Meijers formulates it differently in his article on courtyard building:

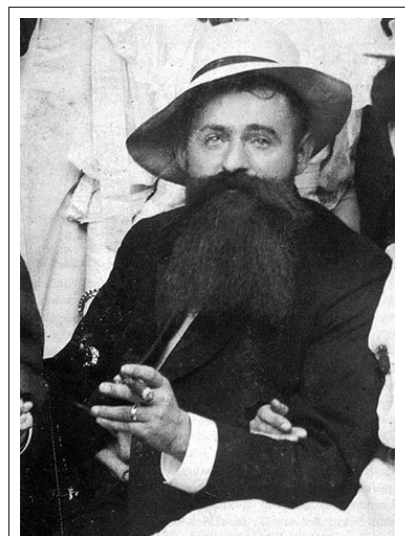
Just as in Arnhem, a school building will be built on the Hof in the axis of the wide entrance of Zaandammerplein. Here, too, the school is thereby given a worthy place. The architects Kuipers and Ingwersen, to whom the surrounding high-rise buildings for Patrimonium have been commissioned, will also carry out the building of the school.

Anyway, the Zaanhof remains an open space and plans to build a school there apparently disappear in a desk.

In 1923 the Willem Barentszschool, a school for regular primary education for boys and girls, arises on the Zaandammerplein, a design of Karel de Bazel. The Zaanhof as a whole is one of the first attempts by Amsterdam to break through the monotony of the usual street-long residential blocks under the regime of the Housing Act. It is a real "hof", a courtyard like any other courtyard in the capital, but intended for workers and one hopes that the architecture will promote the development of community spirit and thus contribute to the elevation of the worker.

Herman Walenkamp

The creator of the Zaanhof is born on December 12, 1871 in Weesp. He follows a course at the Quellinus arts and crafts school - later the Gerrit Rietveld Academy - named after the sculptor Arthus Quellinus who made many sculptures for the city hall in Amsterdam. After completing his education, Walenkamp works as an unpaid employee and a draftsman in the offices of Pierre Cuypers, the architect of the Rijksmuseum and the Central Station in the capital. Walenkamp then works as an independent architect and shows great interest in theosophy, the teachings of universal, timeless wisdom. He makes connections between mathematical architectural order, nature and the cosmos.



Herman Walenkamp
(1871-1933)

During a lecture for the society Architectura et Amicitia in 1907, he criticizes the existing architecture:

The universal indifference to architecture during the last century was mainly manifest in the general neglect of the appearance of cities. Thus it has come to pass that all the thriving cities all over the civilized world were expanded in the saddest way, and mutilated were their old districts. And with this we touch upon one of the major points of the vocation of architecture in relation to modern times. Because also with regard to the mutilation of cities we are slowly approaching better times. The universal indifference has given way to a still slight, but ever-increasing interest.

The earlier urban expansions were aesthetically all so horrifying, so dead and arid, that in the long run a turnaround could no longer be held off. What all has been maimed in this area in the last century! Yes, in this era more urban beauty was lost than in all previous wars and iconclasm altogether. This is the truth. Because when cities used to be lost because of wars, they afterwards were replaced by something better; but in the last century the aesthetic atmosphere was spoiled everywhere by spiritless new structures and the corruption of the old; it was the decay of nature everywhere.

Then follows his theosophically charged vision of the city of the future:

What will the cities of the future be like?

The new cities will be built more and more to the Central principle of growth in nature, and the old will be gradually changed accordingly, and thus the cities will slowly become like flowers: in variety of form and colour, in construction, in the course of life cells. As varied in their appearance as flowers, and also similar in their internal structures: They will be like roses: white, dark and lush; pure and calm like lilies; simple like daisies, or like orchids mysterious and fantastic; there will also be those like cacti, which instill fear. To this level cities will grow in thousands and thousands of years; they will cover lands and seas like flowers in spring cover the fields.

They can be called "flower towns".

Blossoms of purely human thought. Evolution is moving in this direction, as is demonstrated by some modern cities that have been founded in recent years, such as the garden cities in England, America and Germany. These foundations have been designed and executed after careful preconsideration and according to plans that, both theoretically and practically, have been seriously studied. They are among the most remarkable expressions of the modern mind.

[....]

Let us end with Schinkel's [German set builder and architect] words: "Man's task is to complete nature according to the necessity of his own laws of existence. He has to do this with awareness and without arbitrariness. Architecture is the continuation of nature in its building activity." This says it all! These words clearly explain the vocation of architecture.

In addition to these mystical views on urban planning, good and attractive public housing is close to Walenkamp's heart. He wrote about this earlier, around 1900:

THE HOUSING ISSUE IN VIEW OF THE DESTINATION OF THE LANDS ON THE OTHER SIDE [of the river IJ] AND WHAT ARCHITECTS COULD DO FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF A GENERALLY DESIRABLE SITUATION.

It has been repeatedly pointed out how these sites, just by their location, are already fit for the establishment of Trade, Shipping and Factory plants, This can lead - especially for the working class - to great and fortunate consequences, Because it creates the opportunity to FINALLY do something DURABLE for the much needed improvement of the condition of Public Housing. It is unnecessary to point out how deeply saddening the situation is, especially in Amsterdam; poignant revelations have recently been made about this. However, what seriously gives us hope of improvement is the fact that all circles, of whatever colour or persuasion, agree that significant and speedy action is required in this situation. But what is the best way to achieve this, one asks? Until now, it has only been tested by purchasing some of the most miserable slums and then erecting homes on those sites that will at least slightly improve the lack of air and space. These efforts - however small in proportion to what should be done - deserve high appreciation, and we would not like to see them discontinued. But wouldn't it be much better and a lot more drastic if people started to build simple houses here on the Other Side [of the river IJ] on a large scale? Block houses of 1 floor, 2 floors at the most with modest front and back gardens.

All the cities of the world do this nowadays and consider it wise to provide for the housing shortage that prevails everywhere and to do something to alleviate these sad conditions, which bring along destruction, corruption and decay everywhere. In LONDON, BERLIN, HANNOVER, VIENNA, in all capitals (even in some places in RUSSIA), people are building such simple houses, and often it is the Municipality itself.

DIRECTORS OF AMSTERDAM! who could do it more easily than You! Over there on the Other Side thousands of ears of land are the property of your Municipality, They are at Your disposal; people are waiting for it!

Herman Walenkamp passes away on September 24, 1933 at the age of sixty-one.

Newspaper Algemeen Handelsblad honours him with an obituary:

H.J.M. WALENKAMP †.

As we have reported earlier, on Sunday at Zandvoort, his hometown, the architect H.J.M. Walenkamp passed away. (...) Ever since Walenkamp appeared as an independent architect, he has been particularly involved in public housing. He built large complexes in the Spaarndammer neighborhoods and designed the first modern courtyard: "Het Zaanhof". In 1910 he was the architect of the world interior arts and crafts exhibition in Brussels, for which he was awarded the Grand Prix and médaille d'honneur. He was also appointed knight of the order of Leopold II.

In 1913 Walenkamp was the architect of the E.N.T.O.S. [First Dutch Shipping Exhibition]. His publications include: "'Over hedendaagsche en toekomstige bouwkunst" [About contemporary and future architecture], published in the World Library; also numerous articles about architecture and related subjects in "Architectura", the "Algemeen Handelsblad", "De Groene Amsterdammer", "Buiten", "Onze Kunst" [Our Arts] and the "Maandblad voor beeldende kunsten" [Monthly Magazine for the Visual Arts].

As an important work outside of proper architecture should be mentioned his discovery of the $1-\sqrt{2}$ ratio ("the diamond format"), which is relevant for rational proportions for book sizes.

Walenkamp made this discovery more than 30 years ago, at the time it was described in detail in the Handelsblad. Since then, this ratio has been implemented by the international "Standardization" and also the Dutch government has applied it to some of her documents (format-seals).

Walenkamp has been a board member of "Architectura et Amicitia" several times, has been a member of the Schoonheidscommissie van Amsterdam [Amsterdam Prosperity Committee], co-founded the courses for Higher Architecture Education and the Bond van Nederlandsche Architecten [Federation of Dutch Architects].

Renovations of the Zaanhof

During the 1970s, both rings of the Zaanhof complex are renovated as part of the renovation of the Spaardammerbuurt. That is not without a struggle. In de Waarheid [Truth] of May 10, 1973, we read:

There is currently great concern and uncertainty in the Spaarndammerbuurt.

Says Henk Curière, chairman of the Comité Wijkverbetering Spaarndammerbuurt [Committee Improvement Spaarndammerbuurt], who like few others knows the problems in this neighbourhood. "Together we managed to have the very first renovation plans rejected," says Curière. "Those plans would have meant that virtually not a single resident could have returned to their home because the rent would have become too high. The point now is to renovate in a way that makes affordable renting for current residents possible."

The latter is underlined in the same article by Mientje Vlaar, a housewife in Spaarndammerbuurt:

(...) speaks from experience when she says: "Start refurbishing as soon as possible. And affordable rents for the renovated homes." As a mother of three children (boys aged 10 and 15 and a daughter of 14), she experiences the daily worries of living in a nineteenth century neighborhood.

"When we were offered a town house in the Hembrugstraat nine years ago, we felt on top of the world. What do you expect if you've spent five years on half a house and where we had to live in a room, a kitchen and an alcove. We had three bedrooms in Hembrugstraat. A luxury! ... we thought.

Now we think differently. The youngest is now in fifth grade. I don't even want to think that we are still in the same house when he goes to the MAVO [secondary education]. A desk won't fit in my bedroom. There are now two beds, a wardrobe and a spin dryer. There is no more space...

When my kids were younger, I didn't realize it all that way. But the problems have become more complicated. Renovating the house? Of course; start right away! But we have to be able to pay the rent. "

During the first decade of this century, the entire Zaanhof is overhauled once again by housing associations De Key and Rochdale. Ever since, the complex looks tip-top. The houses on the inner ring of the Zaanhof - rental properties that are fully managed by De Key - now house a mix of young and old. Children can romp around and climb the Woezel, a brightly coloured sculpture of a double bird in polyester. It is a creation of the visual artist Marijke Ouendag-Van Lis, which gives the Zaanhof a special cachet.



In closing

I walk through the Spaardammerbuurt, via the Zaandammerplein past Het Schip and perch on a bench in the Zaanhof. Next to me is an elderly Muslim woman with a huge shopping bag. Children run around the Woezel, which sprays small fountains of water. A few young families spread a bed sheet and start to make sandwiches. Amsterdam at its finest.

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Recent photos of the Zaanhof can be seen at:

<https://www.casacultural.nl/europa/zaanhof>