THE 'CAULIFLOWER' NEIGHBOURHOOD: FALSE HOPE OR SOURCE OF INSPIRATION?

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1. Walter Schwagenscheidt, diagram of residential area in the form of a cauliflower (*Baksteen* 1972 1, 3)

Over one third of the Netherlands' current housing stock – that is, over 2.7 million dwellings – was built in the period 1965-1990.[1] By the end of the 1960s the post-war housing crisis had still not been resolved either quantitatively or qualitatively and a further increase in building production was needed. At the beginning of the 1970s production stood at 150,000 dwellings per year. Housing was the driving force not just of the building industry, but of spatial development in the Netherlands as well. Compared with previous years, more housing was being built and, what is more, being built differently. Typical of this period were the so-called cauliflower neighbourhoods; loved by residents, maligned by architects and architectural historians.

Now the future of those housing developments is the subject of heated debate. In addition to issues of liveability and indispensable alterations, questions from the heritage perspective also need to be addressed. What is the significance of these housing estates for the history of urban development? What are their spatial, architectural and landscape qualities? How relevant are those qualities to today's housing crisis? And what can we learn from the then prevailing ambitions and ideals of renewal with respect to community building and participation?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to take a look at social, cultural and economic developments in the Netherlands during these years. In this period, more than ever before, architecture, spatial development and landscape architecture were heavily influenced by societal events. The greatest renewal came not from developments within and debates about the disciplines themselves, but from changes taking place in society. The dull conventionality of the early post-war years came to an end. Leaders and administrators of various social and religious political blocks were finding it increasingly difficult to bridge differences of opinion, a necessary precondition for stable governance. Baby boomers were no longer satisfied by their parents' certainties.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON LIVING

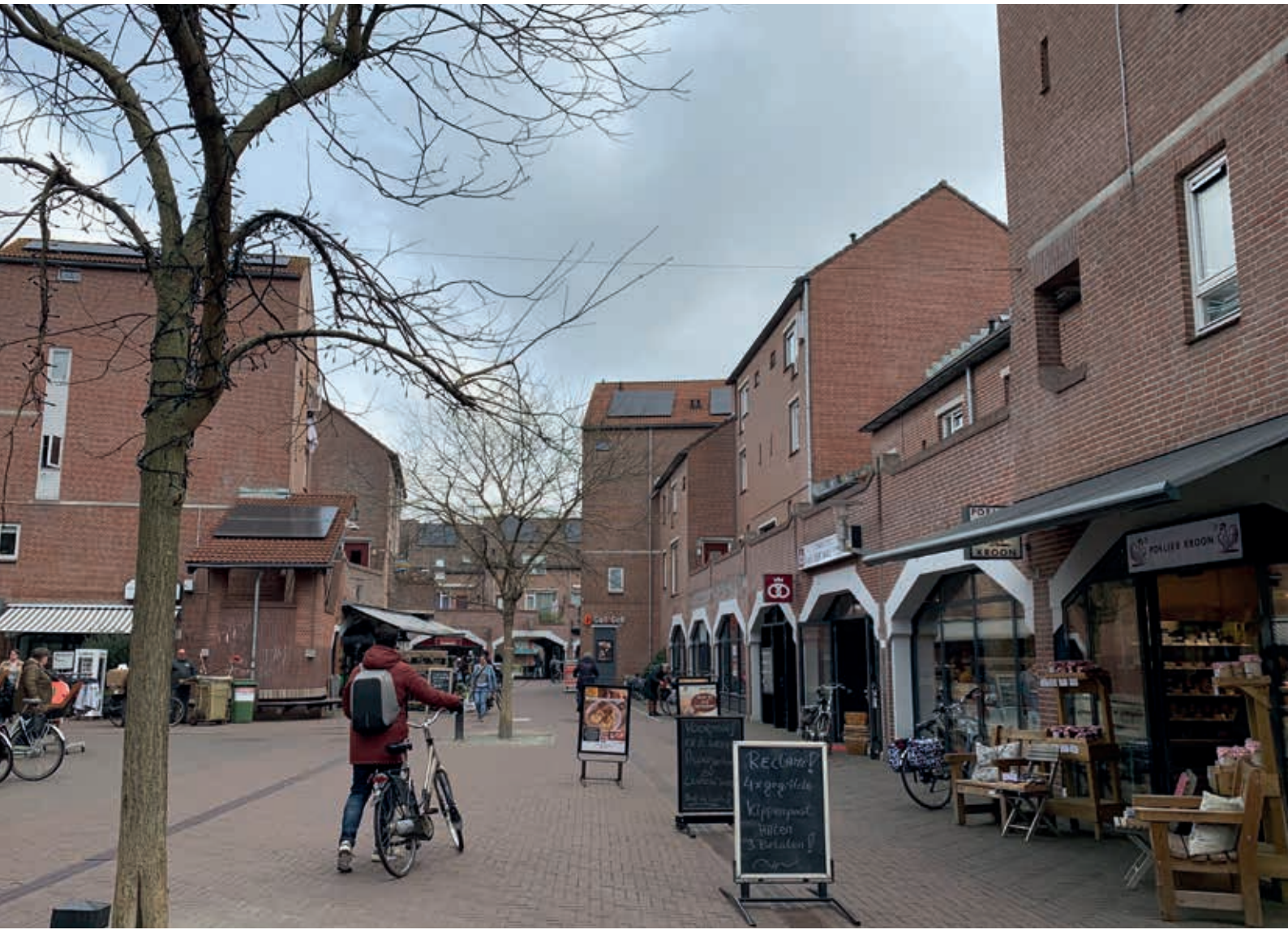
Thanks to the growing prosperity, people had a lot more money to spend. They were able and willing to spend more on their home and living environment, but they also wanted greater say in the matter. Towards the end of the 1960s opposition to the government's purely quantitative approach to housing construction grew among architects, public housing providers, administrators and citizens. There was resistance to large-scale housing estates and to living in massive high-rise apartment blocks. This was accompanied by a change in thinking about housing and about what kind of urban design principles should underpin it. The housing minister Wim Schut (1968-1971) abolished the subsidy for high-rise and used it for the construction of subsidized private dwellings.

Based on a population forecast of 21 million by the year 2000, a government policy document of 1966 (Tweede Nota over de Ruimtelijke Ordening) introduced a new spatial planning concept: clustered decentralization. In order to facilitate the growth of the big cities, villages and small towns on their peripheries were designated as 'growth centres'.[2] Examples include Zoetermeer, Spijkenisse, Purmerend, Nieuwegein and Helmond, as well as the Lelystad and Almere new towns. It was in these growth areas that the switch was made from large-scale, high-rise-dominated housing estates to small-scale neighbourhoods of ground-accessed dwellings with a garden.

This signified a different perception and use of the living environment. The resident population of young families with children and increased car ownership required a safer traffic structure.[3] This in turn led to the 'invention' of the home zone where pedestrians were prioritized over cars.[4] Car speeds were reduced still further by the use of obtuse-angled rather than rounded street corners. The blocks usually had staggered alignments, a mix of building heights and a variety of roof shapes. Together this made for a varied and lively streetscape with a new view at every corner. It also made for an area it was easy to get lost in; visitors were liable to find it confusing. The 'cauliflower' nickname arose from the similarity between the home zone street plan and a cross section of a cauliflower (fig. 1). The home zone was also intended as an informal meeting place for local residents. Encouraged by resident participation gatherings to use play areas, tables and chairs to give their home zones a distinct identity, they had no trouble telling the various home zones apart.[5] Amenities like shops and schools were no longer dispersed within the districts, as in the early post-war reconstruction districts, but concentrated between or on the edge of the neighbourhoods and districts, along with plenty of parking space (fig. 2). The earlier ideal of neighbourhoods with good amenities within walking distance was exchanged for the concept of a monofunctional and quiet residential area.

NEW QUALITIES

The subsidized private dwellings delivered an improvement in quality and, thanks to the advocacy of architects, there was also greater focus on architecture. One initiative that greatly influenced the design of housing and the residential environment was the Experimental Housing programme (1968-1980) established by the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning.[6] In 1968 the Stichting Nieuwe Woonvormen was founded in protest against the monotony and bureaucracy pervading housing construction.[7] It received a sympathetic hearing from Minister Schut who was himself by profession an urban planner. The aim of the Experimental Housing programme was to improve or renew the dwelling, the type of housing (for various target groups) and the residential environment. Before long pressing challenges like densification, flexible dwellings and urban regeneration were added to the programme. Schut's objective was to provide inspiration to market operators and local governments. The programme also helped draw attention to new themes like resident participation. The experimental dwellings in Lunetten in Utrecht and Molenvliet near Papendrecht, both housing schemes designed by Frans van



2. Ton Alberts, De Eglantier shopping centre in Apeldoorn with extension by AGS Architects (photo by author)

der Werf, are typical examples of participation and flexibility. Piet Blom's cube dwellings were inspiring owing to their unconventional design.

As appreciation for the aesthetic and history of the historical city grew, so too did interest in the existing built environment. Plans for new residential developments incorporated existing historical elements and spatial structures. For example, in De Geer, in the growth centre municipality of Houten, old agricultural buildings, existing greenery and country lanes were incorporated in order to reinforce the area's unique character. Such respect for the past was in stark contrast to the early post-war housing developments where the past was usually erased by a layer of fill sand.

SIGNIFICANCE OF POST 65 HOUSING ESTATES

Post 65 home zone residential areas were characterized by the small scale of the component parts and by the diversified streetscape of staggered, varied facades and rooftops (fig. 3).[8] The layout of new housing developments was no longer defined by clear, mainly orthogonal road structures, and the repetition of housing blocks. The first examples of home zone estates in the Netherlands were Angelslo and Emmerhout in Emmen, both designed by the urban planner Niek de Boer. In *The Critical Seventies. Architecture and Urban Planning in the Netherlands,* Aaron Betsky, the then director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, wrote that the essence of Dutch architecture in the 1970s was consensus and community. The home zone was in effect a revival of rural tradition in an urban context.[9] But despite the supposed sociological underpinning, the concept was wholly attributable

to the designers. According to the social geographer Ivan Nio, there were no sociological theories about the home zone circulating at that time because there had been no direct contact between the human sciences the design disciplines since the former's critique of high-rise.[10] As such, the home zone was primarily the product of the give and take between designer and residents.

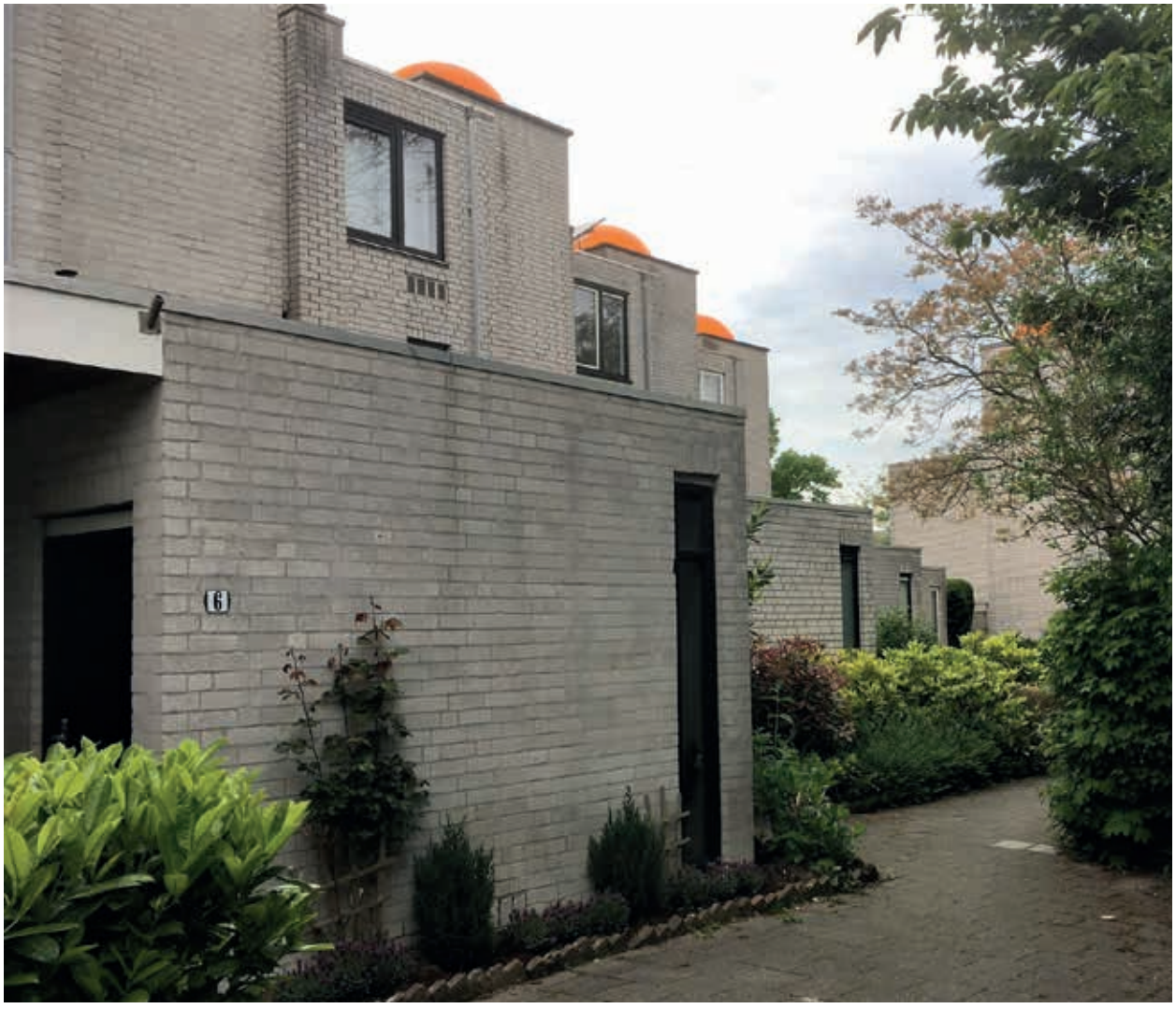
The concept of the home zone as the basis for neighbourhoods and districts proved extremely successful in the Netherlands. Nonetheless the urban planning concept's popularity was short lived. Criticism of the 'frumpishness' of home zone architecture from Carel Weeber among others, the 1979 oil crisis and subsequent economic crisis, and the revaluation of the city and urban culture later in the 1980s, all contributed to the demise of the home zone as the guiding design principle.[11] Subsequent new districts reverted to a clear and above all simple hierarchical structure, and a clear separation between private and public.

Yet even today residents continue to hold the neighbourhoods in high regard.[12] Equally notable is the appreciation among young families, whose parents often grew up a cauliflower district or home zone estate. A recent survey of the Experimental Housing programme of the years 1968-1980 revealed that all 64 realized projects still exist.[13] Most were in reasonable to good condition and once again the residents' regard for their dwelling and living environment was often high. However, increased car ownership had resulted in more of the (semi-)public space being paved than in the original plan. Some projects where participation had been an important design premise, such the Kasbah in Hengelo, The Centraal Wonenproject de Wandelmeent in Hilversum and the Vier Vierkanten in Alkmaar, still had an active residents' organization.

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Home zone estates continued to be built up until the late 1990s in urban developments like Ypenburg and Leidschenveen in The Hague, Assendelft-Noord in

3. Benno Stegeman, cupola dwellings in Meerzicht in Zoetermeer (photo by author)



4. Onix Architecten, veranda dwelling in Almere Buiten (photo François Hendrickx)

Zaanstad, Kern and Zanen in Alphen aan den Rijn, Leidsche Rijn in Utrecht and Oosterheem in Zoetermeer. The Veranda Homes in Almere (Onix architects) and the Scherf 13 estate in Leidsche Rijn (SeARCH) are further testimony to the home zone's viability as an urban planning concept (fig. 4). The aversion of architects and other professionals to the alleged dowdiness and musty ambience of the cauliflower neighbourhoods is a thing of the past. The concept's merits have been acknowledged and are providing inspiration in the design of new home zone developments. The layout of the (semi-)public space lends itself to resident participation.

In the coming years Post 65 cauliflower districts will undergo much needed redevelopment in relation to sustainability, climate change and energy transition, densification and dwelling typology. The residents' attachment to their neighbourhood should be the starting point. An active participation process has the potential to produce a constructive and broadly supported renewal scheme in well-regarded Post 65 districts. The De Pas neighbourhood in Winterswijk has been experimenting with this in recent years.

A new scheme for experimental housing that gives residents a say in the layout of both the dwelling and the living environment could generate additional support and greater involvement by residents in the construction and management of future residential districts. The results of the experimental housing projects of the 1968-1980 period can serve as an inspiring example.

NOTEN

1 At the end of 2022 the Netherlands had a little over 8 million dwellings, www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/82235NED.
2 The need for a 'spillover policy' to absorb the growth of the big cities had already been raised in a 1958 report about the development of the western part of the country (*De ontwikkeling van het Westen des Lands*). See also: A. Faludi and A. van der Valk, *De groeikernen als hoekstenen van de Nederlandse planningsdoctrine*, Assen/Maastricht 1990; M. Ubink and T. van der Steeg, *Bloemkoolwijken: analyse en perspectief*, Nijmegen 2011; A. Reijndorp, L. Bijlsma and I. Nio, *Atlas Nieuwe Steden*, Haarlem 2012; J.E. Abrahamse, *Opkomst en ontwikkeling van de bloemkoolwijk. Het ontwerp van woonwijken in Nederland en de zoektocht naar identiteit*, Amersfoort 2019.
3 The number of cars skyrocketed from 522,000 in 1960 to 3.2 million in 1973.
4 In housing areas constructed in 1975-1979, an average of 7% of the total road length was in home zones, in the period 1980-1984 that percentage was 10%. Since the 1990s it has dropped to 2%. Through traffic was catered for with ring roads around the neighbourhoods, www.crow.nl/downloads/pdf/verkeer-en-vervoer/wegontwerp/landelijke-data-analyse-verkenning-15-km-per-uur.aspx.
5 Thanks to the impoverishment of public space, the home zones no longer function as meeting places and that sense of identity has also declined over the years.
6 M. Barzilay, R. Ferwerda and A. Blom, *Experimentele woningbouw in Nederland 1968-1980. 64 gerealiseerde woonbeloften*, Rotterdam 2019.
7 The following architects were members of the working group: Dick Apon, Piet Blom, Willem Brinkman, Gerrit Boon, Aldo van Eyck, Max Risselada, Wiek Röling, Joop van Stigt, Jan Verhoeven, Nico Witstok and Carel Weeber.
8 In 1972 the trade journal *Baksteen* published the plan of the cauliflower neighbourhood, mistakenly ascribing it to Niek de Boer but, as a recent article explains, the plan was in fact by the German urban planner Walter Schwagenscheidt. https://decorrespondent.nl/11818/de-bloemkoolwijk-een-typisch-hollands-fenomeen-maar-de-bedenker-blijkt-een-duitser/1242628132350-a67fcd59.
9 A. Betsky, 'The In-Between Years: Dutch Architecture in the 1970s', in: M. de Vletter (ed.), *The Critical Seventies. Architecture and Urban Planning in the Netherlands* 1968-1982, Rotterdam 2004, 12-15.
10 I. Nio, 'Tussen collectiviteit en privacy', *DASH. Het woonerf leeft*, Rotterdam 2010, 4-17.
11 Weeber referred to 'Kleinschaligheid of ook wel Nieuwe Truttigheid genoemd' ['Small-scale development, otherwise known as New Frumpishness'; C. Weeber 'Geen architectuur zonder stedenbouw', in: H. de Haan and I. Haagsma, *Wie is er bang voor nieuwbouw... Confrontatie met Nederlandse architecten*, Amsterdam 1981, 227-236 previously published in *Intermediair* 1979.
12 www.gebiedsontwikkeling.nu/artikelen/onderzoek-een-bloemkoolwijk-is-zo-gek-nog-niet/.
13 See the survey report *Predicaat experimentele woningbouw 1968-1980*, by M. Barzilay, R. Ferwerda and A. Blom, Amersfoort 2018; Barzilay, Ferwerda and Blom 2019 (note 6). https://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2018/01/01/predicaat-experimentele-woningbouw-1968-1980.

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Could the organically designed 'cauliflower' neighbourhoods of the 1970s hold the secret to solving both the current housing problem and the need for greater social cohesion at the local level? The pressing shortage of housing and the associated emphasis on quantity threatens to diminish the quality of the dwellings and living environment with something like the monotonous, repetitive block housing that characterized the late 1960s. In reaction to those spartan and large-scale districts, young architects were determined to prioritize the human scale. In 1966, with population numbers still soaring, a government spatial planning policy document introduced the idea of designated 'growth centres': villages and small towns close to the big cities that would absorb the growing population. An obvious way of retaining the character of these small centres lay in small-scale, low-rise developments. And that was exactly what young families were looking for. The 'cauliflower' street plan, consisting of a succession of 'home zones', was devised especially for these growth centres. Pedestrians had priority in the narrow, winding streets where there was also scope for children to play and neighbours to meet. Staggered frontages and a variety of roof shapes made for a lively and diverse streetscape. Disdained by professionals, these neighbourhoods are often still popular with the residents. Time perhaps to re-evaluate this housing concept?