

EXPIRED EXPERIMENT - MODERN MONUMENT

The Heritage Significance of the Justus van Effen Housing Complex as Driver for Urban Regeneration and Social Sustainability

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Abstract. This paper presents the Justus van Effen housing complex in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, as an illustration of the way heritage can act as a driver for urban regeneration. Special attention will be given to the role that the transformation of image and the construction of cultural-historical significance have played in this process. It will show how a once expired experiment of modern housing is reclaiming its identity as modern monument, and consequently functions as a catalyst for further urban renewal projects and social developments in the surrounding residential district of Spangen.

Introduction

The Netherlands is internationally renowned for its high quality social housing that was realized after the Second World War, following the Housing Act. The quality of many of these complexes can still be called high, although over time many things have of course changed, for example as part of the large-scale urban regeneration campaigns. Because of those alterations, living conveniences have improved greatly; the same can not always be said for the architectural quality." (Asselbergs 1997)

Looking back on urban regeneration campaigns from the period 1970-1990, parties concerned have often been blamed for poorly executed preservation of listed social housing complexes. Supposedly, owners were blind to heritage values, and conservation policy was not embedded in actual urban regeneration practice. But isn't this wisdom in hindsight? Only now do the various parties involved – i.e. municipalities, housing corporations, conservationists of built heritage and occupants – begin to understand what it takes to successfully renovate a listed social housing complex, and do they start to grasp the complex interrelationship of the various aspects of that assignment.

Renovating listed social housing complexes often exceeds what is considered conservation of a monument, i.e. preserving historical material, repairing constructional defects and updating a functional scheme within a conservation philosophical framework. Firstly, in the Netherlands, a social housing

complex is often part of a wider stock of municipal or housing corporation owned properties. These non-profit, public institutions concentrate on exploitation and management of their building stock, which usually entails restricted investment capital and risk for individual projects. For a listed property this can be a problem, since preservation operations are still considered to be more costly than e.g. demolition of old and construction of new complexes. Secondly, most of the pre- WW II social housing complexes that are currently listed, were built after the introduction of the 1901 Housing Act and date mostly from the period 1910-1930. Their evaluation and listing was part of the Monument Selection Project (MSP), that was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. Their cultural-historical significance was defined differently than is done today. Lastly, preservation of these complexes is often part of a broader strategy of urban regeneration of whole, sometimes impoverished residential areas. In that case, problems in the social sphere need to be dealt with as well. This varies from a monotonous composition of the population, a lack of facilities, or a high vandalism and crime rate. Therefore, strategies for urban renewal and building renovation not only have to pay attention to building related aspects, but also to social ones.

This usually entails stringent social-political and administrative terms. Summarizing, it may be said that regeneration of an urban area with one or more listed social housing complexes is about finding an optimum between preserving the tangible and intangible

significances of the residential monument, improving the social and urban aspects of the building and the surrounding urban area, and all that on strictly defined financial, socio-political and administrative terms.

This paper presents the preservation campaigns of the listed Justus van Effen social housing complex in the urban area of Spangen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, as a case of a “learning by doing” process of urban renewal. The relatively quick succession of a renovation with major restoration works, makes this a good illustration not only of the way the perception of the heritage significance changed, but also how the interests of the various parties involved in the preservation of this monument shifted. As this paper will show, this influenced the overall perception of the complex, both in the literal and figurative sense.

Realization and Reception of an Experiment

It had taken A. Plate, director of the Municipal Housing Agency (MHA), great effort to get the Justus van Effen complex built. At first, the town council of Rotterdam was not enthusiastic about Michiel Brinkman’s design for a large four-storeyed, flat-roofed building block of 264 working-class apartments, with

a public courtyard that was accessible through four gateways. A shared gallery gave access to the upstairs dwellings. Some members of the council thought it a mere tenement house, complete with its poor living conditions and undesirable social situations. But on completion in 1921, the Justus van Effen housing complex proved to be a revolutionary and very much appreciated example of modern living.

Occupants were happy to have a dwelling that was a great improvement on the common working-class alcove house. Now they had their proper kitchen with garbage chute and gas fitting, a living room with central heating, a lavatory, and three separate bedrooms. The apartments on the ground floor had a small, private garden, and those on the second and third floor a balcony. Via two goods lifts and the wide gallery, the milkman could easily deliver his milk, even to the upstairs dwellings. A communal bathhouse and laundry was located in the middle of the courtyard. Exactly this shared use of gallery and facilities would induce “a certain sense of solidarity” that would make this “experiment” a success, Brinkman (1920; 1923) argued.

Architects famed their colleague Brinkman for the aesthetic way he had managed to solve a technical



Figure 1. The courtyard of the Justus van Effen complex in 1924 (photo: MAR).

problem (Berlage 1921; Leliman 1924; Sibers 1924; Sweijts 1924; De Jonge van Ellemeet 1925). Although being a large complex, it did not look massive due to a staggering alignment of the inner façades, varying heights where different sections of the building met, and the use of different types of brick. Brinkman was especially praised for the efficient lay-out of the complex, and for the innovative concept of gallery apartments. Each bay contained four dwellings: two identical, one-storeyed apartments on the first and second floor, and two mirrored, two-storeyed apartments on the third and fourth floor. The arrangement of the windows and front doors – which stood in direct relation to the floor plan of the individual houses – ensured an expressive façade. This was enhanced by the design and finish of the impressive concrete gallery: the railing was decorated with coloured tiles and fitted with concrete flower boxes that were casted in one go with the railing.

In 1925, only a few years after completing the complex, Brinkman died. In several obituaries it was named “one of his best works”. Its fame kept on increasing among architects, and on a small scale it was also internationally recognized as one

of the best and most innovative examples of social housing (Hilbersheim 1927; Heykoop 1928). Van Tijen (1934) said that Brinkman’s complex inspired him to his design for the “Bergpolder” flat, the first high-rise building in Rotterdam. During and immediately after World War II, the Justus van Effen complex became a model for modern social housing (Plate 1941). In the 1960s, the fame of the Justus van Effen complex reached its height. The more it was placed in an architectural-historical context, the more its pioneering image became underlined (Füeg 1959; Bakema 1960; Hertzberger 1960; Fanelli 1968). At the start of the 1970s, the Justus van Effen complex was perceived by architects as an *Umwertung aller Werte*; not only because of typological and architectural aspects, but mainly in the urban planning and socio-cultural sphere (Sharp 1972; Tafuri 1976; Sherwood 1978).

In 1973 it came as no surprise then, that it was nominated by the Rotterdam historical society “Rotterdamum” as a municipal monument. Following the Monument Selection Project (MSP) carried out by the National Agency for Cultural Heritage (NACH), the complex was nominated as a national monument in 1982. It was officially registered in 1985 because of



Figure 2. A detail of the gallery in 1924 (photo: MAR).

its “urban and architectural-historical value, as well as from the viewpoint of the development of public housing” (RCE 1985). Especially valuable were the urban spatial scheme with its characteristic division of public, collective and private spaces, and the architectural finish of different types of brick in the façades and exposed concrete of the gallery. Specifically the concept and typology were valued. Less value was attributed to those characteristics that had been praised by Brinkman’s contemporaries: the efficient and novel lay-out of the dwellings, and its relation to the façade.

Modern and Celebrated – Out-dated and Notorious

In spite of its international fame and listed status, it were exactly those aspects so much appreciated by historians that had given the Justus van Effen complex a bad image as well. Since the 1960s, the façades and gallery showed much wear and tear, and the apartments were too small according to prevailing standards (Rosema 1956; Bosschaert 1957; Bakema 1960). Many occupants left and the Justus van Effen complex lost its social cohesion that had characterised it from the start (Fooy 1978; Abelman 1978; Reedijk 1978). In addition, Spangen had become an impoverished area with much vandalism and crime. Buildings that looked worn, like the Justus van Effen complex, added to the negative image of the neighbourhood. Thus, as part of an overall urban regeneration campaign in Rotterdam, urban renewal in Spangen began in 1982. The renovation of the Justus van Effen complex started in 1984, and was commissioned by the proprietor, the MHA, to Leo de Jonge architects.

As far as the renovation strategy was concerned, many of the discussions between owner, architect and the NACH centred around one main point: was it about preserving a concept or an image? The architect realized that combining two existing apartments to a new one would do no justice to Brinkman’s original concept, and would either deny the function of the gallery or the logic behind the arrangement of the façades. However, at the insistence of the owner and occupants, the 264 small apartments were merged to 164 larger ones. On this point, the NACH was practical: the apartments had to be enlarged. Their request for one “museum house” was denied by the owner. Although the authenticity of the interior did not seem to be a big issue, that of the concrete gallery indeed was. Because of its condition, the owner chose – mainly for financial reasons – for complete renewal. The NACH was convinced that restoration was possible, but eventually agreed with a new gallery as long as its original design and finish would be

reconstructed. The coloured tiles were brought back, but the concrete flower boxes were reconstructed in plastic. The windows were also replaced in a new material, aluminium, that was decided upon by the owner for financial reasons. The architect had argued that when using another material than the original, also the design of the windows should be altered. The NACH however argued that regarding the windows the existing image – being design and colour – had to be continued.

The biggest problem during renovation proved to be the repair of the façade itself. Because of the “social vulnerability” of the complex, all parties decided that the façade was to be “immaculately clean” again. However, cleaning, replacing damaged brickwork and applying an anti-graffiti solution, did not have the desired effect: the façade looked splodgy. High-pressure cleaning was not an option, since the brickwork was too soft and would be damaged. Instead the façades were painted over in a palette of white and grey; a shade of pink was used for the entrance gates.

After renovation, the complex looked well, but was far removed from Brinkman’s original concept. To make things worse, with its public courtyard, staggering alignment of the façades and easily accessible gallery, it provoked vandalism and crime. Although very valuable from an architectural-historical point of view, these aspects actually caused many problems for the daily management of the complex. These social problems increased during the nineties in Spangen as a whole, and it became one of the first “no-go areas” in the Netherlands. The Justus van Effen complex not only suffered from this particular development, but also from the unexpectedly rapid decay of the aluminium windows and façade paint. Due to these social and technical problems, many occupants left and the apartments stayed vacant. Only ten years after the completion of its renovation, the Justus van Effen complex battled with an ambiguous image again: celebrated for its architectural- and cultural-historical value, but notorious as a danger area with a worn appearance and poor living conditions.

A New Course

Had the modern experiment from the 1920s reached its final expiration date? The urban regeneration in Spangen, and the renovation of the Justus van Effen complex had not stand the test of criticism. On the one hand, conservation was not well embedded in urban regeneration practice, and on the other, past strategies for urban renewal and renovation had left little room to take heritage significance into consideration (Giltaij-Lansink 1987; Maas 1987; Van Swieten



Figure 3. The complex immediately after renovation.

1990; Ten Cate 1991). The Housing Company Rotterdam (HCR), successor to the MHC, decided that the downward spiral of Brinkman's building could only be reversed by creating high quality apartments. The major difference however, proved to be a shift in attitude: the heritage values of the Justus van Effen complex had to be restored completely. This included restoration of the façades, reconstruction of the windows, and a redefinition of the role of the public courtyard within the urban fabric of Spangenen. That these measurements would require a substantial financial commitment on the part of the owner, was acknowledged by the HCR.

To guarantee an integral heritage preservation and management strategy, several investigations were carried out to give insight in the heritage significance, the technical qualities of and social housing options for the complex. Through a building historical research insight was gained in the amount of surviving remnants of the original building material and internal structural lay-out (Van der Hoeve, Stenvert and Friso 2002). A technical investigation concluded that restoration of the façades was very well possible (Spring Architecten 2002; Nuselder 2006), and a study of the housing market in Spangenen showed that a mix of owner-occupied and

rented accommodation would be a desirable and feasible option (Mondria Advies and De Jong 2002). The investigation into the cultural-historical significance pointed out that the Justus van Effen complex was the key object in the urban lay-out and social-cultural context of Spangenen (Steenhuis 2003).

The conclusions of the researches combined resulted in a strategy of "historically sound improvement". Molenaar & Van Winden architects, a bureau specializing in preservation, together with Hebly Theunissen architects, an office specializing in upgrading social housing, drew up a restoration plan. As a motto for the new course of the Justus van Effen complex, the MHC decided upon "100% MoNument", not only meaning a monument all the way, but also a monument of the present ("nu" is Dutch for "now") (Molenaar & Van Winden 2010). This implies that "the original heritage values of the complex [will be combined] with the most modern types of conveniences and life standards, and state-of-the-art insights with regard to sustainability" (Goede 2009; Woonstad Rotterdam 2010; Hoogerland et al. 2010). The architects came up with a plan that fits as closely as possible with the original lay-out of the apartments, the architectural design and urban scheme. The façades have been restored, the windows and flower boxes



Figure 4. The complex in 2010, only twenty years after renovation and on the eve of the restoration.

have been reconstructed. After completion, the courtyard will have a lay-out with lawns and trees, thus functioning as a public park for Spangen.

In addition to the restoration, a specific campaign was launched to reverse the bad image of the complex, and to regain its identity as the unique housing complex it once was. Current and future residents have been recruited as “Justus-believers”, acting as ambassadors for a contemporary living concept in a new and improved Justus van Effen complex. A special website is dedicated to the restoration, providing a glimpse behind the scenes of the whole process (www.justuskwartier.nl).

Conclusion

After thirty years, Brinkman’s Justus van Effen housing complex is transforming from a once expired experiment of modern housing to a modern monument, both physically as well as in the minds of people. Regaining its identity as the lively and colourful complex it once was, it is set as an example of “best

practice” for other urban renewal projects and social developments in Spangen.

In conclusion, with respect to tools and frameworks for local urban and social development some concrete features can be drawn from the case of the Justus van Effen complex. It is important to note that heritage in itself is not a driver for development per se, but that it can only function as such when that process is carefully directed. An integral approach can only be achieved by a full understanding of all aspects of the project at hand, and of their interrelations, dependencies and internal conflicts. Therefore, outcomes of social, economical, technical and cultural heritage studies must be combined.

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Figure 5. An impression of the end result of the restoration
(photo: www.justuskwartier.nl).

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