

The Van Eesteren Museum

A PROTECTED FRAGMENT OF AMSTERDAM'S GEUZENVELD- SLOTERMEER POSTWAR DISTRICT

■ VINCENT VAN ROSSEM

The so-called “Van Eesteren Museum” is a projected protected townscape in the western garden-city zone of Amsterdam. It forms part of the Geuzenveld-Slotermeer district, whose municipal authority has recently designated a small part of Slotermeer Garden City as a protected cityscape. Such postwar residential districts are now considered by many people as a failed experiment with too many rented social dwellings that, according to current standards, are just a little too small. But the Van Eesteren Museum ensemble, dating from the early 1950s, is exceptional, and has an obvious rarity value.

A NEW ‘FRONT-LINE’ OF URBAN CONSERVATION

In time, everyone will understand that, in their own way, these city extensions were just as important as the city's third expansion (*Derde Uitleg*). But for the moment, it is national policy to radically redevelop the most important heritage of the Reconstruction (*Wederopbouw*). Reconstruction implies demolition and new development. Thus, in a very short time, a characteristic townscape including much greenery, housing from the 1950s and school buildings stemming from a fresh view of Dutch education, is simply disappearing. An intact townscape—and that is what is involved in a protected urban prospect—assumes a balance between different scales. The large scale of the reallocation of sites that initially determined only building lines and building heights gradually came to include the detailing of the buildings. This is true not only for the historic inner city but also for the postwar residential areas.

THE HOUSING CORPORATIONS concerned with the current redevelopment proposals for West Amsterdam lodged a joint objection to this proposed designation. Although the district council wished to preserve no more than a representative part of the early postwar district, even this modest attempt to conserve was opposed by

CET ARTICLE MET L'ACCENT SUR LES STRATÉGIES EXISTANTES QUI PERMETTRAIENT DE CONSERVER DES GRANDS ENSEMBLES DANS LEUR INTÉGRALITÉ PLUTÔT QUE D'OPTER POUR UNE RECONSTRUCTION RADICALE. VINCENT VAN ROSSEM SOULIGNE ICI LE FAIT QUE, DANS LE CAS DU « VAN EESTEREN MUSEUM » – UNE PETITE VILLE DE LA BANLIEUE D'AMSTERDAM DONT LA PROTECTION EST AUJOURD'HUI À L'ÉTUDE –, L'AUDACE DU PROJET ET LES DIFFICULTÉS QUI ONT PRÉVALU LORS DE SA CONSTRUCTION REPRÉSENTENT DES CARACTÉRISTIQUES HISTORIQUES UNIQUES. L'ENSEMBLE DU VAN EESTEREN MUSEUM MÉRITERAIT SON CLASSEMENT EN TANT QU'EXEMPLE REMARQUABLE DE CONCEPTION URBAINE MODERNISTE À GRANDE ÉCHELLE PAR OPPOSITION AUX FORMULES DE PRIVATISATION ET DE FRAGMENTATION DE L'HABITAT QUI POURRAIENT LE REMPLACER.

every possible legal means—a stark testimony to the banality of the housing agencies' future vision for the city. If all remnants of the years of Reconstruction are expunged, the city will no longer be complete. The frontline of the defense battles waged by the Municipal Department for the Preservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings and Sites is shifting necessarily, as the extensions of the city age. This process began long ago

in the inner city, and it is now the Geuzenveld-Slotermeer District that is in the vanguard of experimentation in the conservation of 'historic' buildings; an experiment that bears witness to great administrative courage.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The Van Eesteren Museum forms part of the Slotermeer Garden City extension plan, confirmed by the municipal council in 1939. Although previous district plans had been approved, Slotermeer Garden City marked the beginning of a new era. It was the first residential district outside the Ringbaan (circular rail track) designed by the Urban Planning Department. Because the Municipal Property Company had been able to purchase the land outside the Ringbaan for agricultural prices, it was possible to introduce new ideals for public housing in the Slotermeer Garden City. The aim was to have lower densities, more single-family dwellings, more green open spaces and 'open' buildings.

FOR SOME TIME, the programmatic requirements for modern residential districts had already been under discussion by architects and town planners. On an international level, various organizations were active. These included the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning and the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), who were occupied with the problems of mass housing construction. In Amsterdam the 'de 8' Architects Association played an important role in the debate about the modernization of residential districts. With their colleagues at the 'Opbouw' Association in Rotterdam, also part of the avant-garde, in 1932 the members of 'de 8' drew up a manifesto in which the foundations of the new urban planning approach for residential districts were laid down. Ben Merkelbach and Wim van Tijen were the leading authors and the manifesto was entitled "De Organische Woonwijk in Open Bebouwing" (The organic residential district in open construction).

The use of the term *organic* was intended to indicate that all the functions in the district should be attuned to the creation of a harmonious social whole. Different types of schools for various ages, sports facilities and public green areas for open air recreation, shops, and social and religious infrastructure, should all be taken into consideration, so that residential districts could meet all social needs.

THE CONCEPT of 'open building' was a striking innovation in the site layout of residential districts. The architects of the avant-garde branded the closed building block as an outmoded element of urban planning. They argued that the orientation of the dwellings was not good; when the weather was warm and the wind was still, the closed block was a stuffy space, surrounded by dusty streets, while from an architectural point of view the



Fig. 1. Amsterdam, General Extension Plan, 1935

appearance of the inner side of the entity was hardly inspiring. The alternative to the closed block was to build rows of dwellings: north-south running blocks of *portiekflats* (flats with open entrance halls) with east-west facing dwellings surrounded by green space.

THE BUILDINGS in the Van Eesteren Museum are representative of this postwar experimental development stage, from the viewpoint both of urban development and of architecture. The design had already been drawn up before the war, and at the beginning of the 1950s was constructed in a modified form as part of the first development of the Western Garden Cities. In many ways, this zone forms a transition between pre-war renovations and later parts of the Western Garden Cities such as Slotervaart and Osdorp, where the characteristic standardization of the 1960s can be observed. This is a key attribute of the proposed preservation of the area. The Van Eesteren Museum fits in very well with the protected vistas around the older garden villages in Amsterdam Noord from the period 1920–30, and thus helps build up a careful, incremental record of the process of improvements in metropolitan social housing construction.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The design, which was published on 7 July 1939 with a comprehensive, detailed explanation in the Municipal Publication (*Gemeentebld*), forms a chapter in a long history. The first draft dates from June 1936. The reallocation of the land was then little more than a rough scheme, but the outlines of the Van Eesteren Museum can already be recognized. The Burgemeester Vening Meineszlaan and the Burgemeester Eliasstraat formed a green strip that also functioned as a pedestrian route from Bos and Lommer to the Sloterplas (lake). The Gerbrandypark was also shown on the plan from the very beginning. The Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan, connecting to the Bos and Lommerweg and the Hoofdweg, was

inflexible dimensions gave these residential blocks a markedly businesslike character, contrasting with the more traditional formal idiom of the low-rise buildings behind them. Undoubtedly, Van Eesteren considered this to be an enhancement.

THE BUILDINGS on the south side of Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan also finally assumed their definitive form. The composition of the series of rows with shops on the street side was refined, with more variation in the length of the rows. Thus a more symmetrical composition was created that, although designed by different architects, can be considered as a large aggregate: a super building block, with inner streets and gardens, open towards the side of the park and closed on the north side. The 'closed' buildings with shops along Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan consisted of three parts: two high blocks with four residential storeys above the shops on both sides of the

balanced. Thus, a residential district was created that gives a representative picture of the evolution of town planning between 1920 and 1950. The striving for single-family dwellings in a green neighborhood, which was of primary importance to the Housing Department, became almost seamlessly transformed into a more urban vision, with multi-storey buildings and shops along a main street.

The Van Eesteren Museum of today coincides almost exactly with District A, the first part of Slotermeer Garden City that was constructed; only the five rows of dwellings between the Vening Meineszlaan and the Arthur Meerwaldtpad fall within the Museum but outside District A. Site preparation work on District A began in March 1949 and, on 1 December 1951, the first pile was driven in the corner of the Prof. Oranjestraat and the Wolter Brandligtstraat. On 1 September 1952 the first single-family houses were ready for occupation on the Harry Koningsbergerstraat.

CHARACTER OF THE BUILDINGS

As we saw in the description of the site's original urban-design concept, the Museum consists partly of single-family dwellings and partly of multi-storey buildings. The multi-storey buildings are concentrated along the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan. The Department of Urban Planning avoided, as a matter of policy, the mixing of single-family houses and multi-storey blocks. Along the Vening Meineszlaan and the Harry Koningsbergerstraat, a number of *middenstand* dwellings were built, which were architecturally clearly distinct from the mass housing. In the northwest corner of the Museum is an unusual complex of dwellings for old people, designed by Aldo van Eyck and Jan Rietveld. District A has two middle schools and one primary school (on the Harry Koningsbergerstraat), which remains in almost its original state. The Slotermeer School, on the Burgemeester Fockstraat, has been partly renovated with modern materials but otherwise is reasonably intact. The middle school in the southwest corner of District A, on the Burgemeester Eliasstraat, has been radically remodelled/reconstructed.

THE ARCHITECTURE of the low-rise buildings is traditional in character, with brick walls and pitched, tiled roofs. This architecture has not been enhanced by the subsequent insertion of window frames with double-glazing. The architectonic quality of the modular buildings of Berghoef on the north side of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan has already been mentioned above. A number of blocks are still in the original or almost original state; a few others have been drastically renovated. As a result of this the architectonic renovation the unity of the ensemble has been partially lost, but the extraordinary urban planning structure is still clearly recognizable. The large urban ensemble on the south



Fig. 4. Slotermeer, further elaborations, 1937

Burgemeester Fockstraat, flanked by two lower rows of buildings. The two higher blocks formed part of a greater architectonic whole, designed by Arthur Staal, which gave form to the crossing of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan and Burgemeester Fockstraat. In a modest way, this crossing is widened almost into a public square by the oblique positioning of the building block in the northeast corner. This also explains the, at first sight, unusual siting of the rows of Berghoef, specifically those around and parallel to the obliquely positioned block of Staal.

THE VARIOUS DESIGN STAGES of the ensemble that make up the Van Eesteren Museum show that Van Eesteren had long sought a balanced composition. The draft of 1936 was the first confrontation between the program of requirements and the principles of rational land reallocation. Its abstract image caused some unrest in official circles, but over time this became more

side of Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan was built by various architects with divergent architectural views, and has never formed a formal architectonic unit, yet, despite this, a remarkable architectonic ensemble emerged. Here too, some blocks have been radically renovated, but the urban planning idea that formed the basis of the project is still clearly recognizable. The shopping square designed by Arthur Staal on the corner of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan and the Burgemeester Fockstraat forms an architectonic unit that decisively interrupts this long through-traffic street, for the spatial benefit of pedestrians and cyclists.

AS THE DEVELOPMENT of the plan shows, Van Eesteren always considered both sides of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan a single unit. The super block on the south side of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan has a pronounced urban character, with the Gerbrandypark as suitable for a large city green area, while the open series of rows of Berghoef on the north side form the transition to the small scale urban space around the low-rise buildings, which still calls to mind a garden village. The unusual complex of dwellings for old people and the blocks of middenstand dwellings, beside the green zone north of the Burgemeester de Vlugtlaan, almost have the character of an exclusive residential neighborhood. From a town-planning point of view, the profile of the Burgemeester Vening Meineszlaan is of special interest. The part between the Ringbaan and the Burgemeester Fockstraat runs parallel to a green strip that is bounded on the south side by small but rather high blocks of flats. West of the Burgemeester Fockstraat the profile was given a different character: the built area is closer to the street and is more horizontal. The green strip in which Arthur Meerwaldpad lies is behind these buildings, but is clearly visible between the rows of houses. In the meantime, the entity has been completed by the planting of full-grown trees.

THE FUTURE OF AMSTERDAM WEST

In the Western Garden Cities, within the framework of the current renovation, a large number of dwellings were demolished. As a result, in a very short time, the characteristic urban image of these postwar residential districts disappeared. The Department of Monuments and Archaeology deeply regrets this development, but up to now all appeals for a more cautious approach to urban redevelopment have been in vain. It is for this very reason that the Van Eesteren Museum is of such great importance to Amsterdam. It will guarantee that, come what may, a small part of Slotermeer Garden City will continue to exist for the sake of posterity.

VINCENT VAN ROSSEM (b. 1950) is an architectural historian, specializing in the history of the modern movement. His PhD thesis on modern town planning in Amsterdam was published in 1993 by NAI; he has also published on Hendrik Petrus Berlage, the Amsterdam School, and Cor van Eesteren. At present, he is working for the Amsterdam Historic Buildings Committee.



Fig. 5. 'Slotermeer Garden City,' definitive design, 1939



Fig. 6. Slotermeer, Part A under construction, October 1952