Berlage and Housing, ‘the most significant modern building type’

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Berlage’s designs for housing are seldom illustrated or discussed. This is not surprising, perhaps, since they have never evoked the admiration accorded to the Bourse, the Lodge at Hoenderloo, or the Gemeentemuseum. Yet in seeking to evaluate the career of this extraordinarily versatile man, one should consider his contributions to the building type he himself believed was the most significant for the development of modern architecture.1 Such an examination can lead to a deeper appreciation of the special quality of Berlage’s genius, which lay in his intense commitment to architecture as a social as well as creative activity and in his willingness to struggle, as a socialist, for the reform of society at the same time that he fought, as an artist, for the renewal of architecture.2

Housing presented a particularly meaningful challenge to Berlage because it brought into play the political as well as architectural implications of his theory. His definition of architecture was two-fold: it is the social art par excellence, and it is the art of space, which meant for Berlage the enclosure of sublime dimensions.3 Housing, the most democratically oriented building type, is pre-eminently suitable to fulfill the first condition; but the second is not particularly applicable to a program which requires the putting together of a repetitive series of small rooms. As will be seen, Berlage was able to come to grips with this problem to some extent, in both the practical and theoretical spheres, although there existed inconsistencies which always bedevil the profound mind in dealing with complex issues.

While he stated in 1918 that ‘modern architecture has clearly achieved the most in the area of the dwelling’ 4, housing formed a relatively small part of Berlage’s own practice, especially when he is compared in this respect to some of his colleagues. The Stock Exchange remained the socialist’s most important work, and the Christian Science Church is better known than the anticleric’s housing schemes.5 Nevertheless the role which Berlage played in housing cannot be dismissed. His entry into the field was described by one specialist as crucial for encouraging other talented architects to ‘dedicate themselves to that part of architecture which in the nineteenth century had been left entirely to those without expertise’.6 Furthermore, his housing commissions cast light on Berlage’s own stylistic evolution, as well as on his activity as a city planner, and indeed may have affected both. Therefore it seems fitting to offer an account of Berlage’s major housing schemes 7,
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which spanned the years from 1904 to 1927, their connection with his theory, and their relation to general housing practice in the Netherlands at this time. Perhaps a consideration of Berlage and housing will help to elucidate the broader history of modern Dutch architecture as well.

Housing throughout the nineteenth century had been the province of the speculative builder. Berlage in *Gedanken über Stil* had written feelingly about the pervasive ugliness of nineteenth-century cities with their dreary districts of mass-produced housing, which were the products of this speculation. While bad housing conditions were not unknown before the industrial revolution, the urbanization which accompanied industrialization brought a mounting heap of slums. Urban blight came later to the Netherlands than to England, France, and Germany, but after 1870 the same cycle of overcrowding and decay was experienced by Dutch cities. The quarters for the working class which began to grow around the core of existing towns presented a particularly depressing aspect of endless rows of monotonous, flimsily built structures which provided minimum accommodation in terms of space, light, ventilation, and sanitation.

In 1901 the Liberal government in The Netherlands succeeded in passing the *Woningwet* (Dutch Housing Act) to halt the growth of slums and improve housing conditions. Its framers attacked the complex ramifications of the housing problem on several fronts. First, in order to break the monopoly of the speculators and at the same time insure that there would be funds available for construction, the government offered loans to two types of organization, the municipality itself, and a special housing society (*woningbouwvereniging*) set up 'exclusively for the purpose of improving housing'. Secondly, to insure that the new dwellings would be of high quality, the law required the municipalities to enact building codes which set minimum standards. Cities were given powers of condemnation and expropriation to facilitate slum clearance. Finally, cities larger than 10,000 or growing at certain rate, had to prepare extension plans at least once every ten years.

While the *Woningwet* did not legally require that architects be involved in housing design, it made it possible and advisable for them to be drawn into the process. The high cost of money and the short term of loans had made it unlikely that the ordinary speculative builder could spare funds to hire an architect. But the new bodies, whose concern was quality, not profit, were willing to pay architects’ fees and could afford them because they could borrow at a relatively low interest rate for a relatively long period—50 years. Further, it became not only possible but also prudent to consult an architect because a number of cities enacted codes which only a trained expert could meet. The necessity for extension plans gave a boost to the fairly recent profession of city planning and architects, including Berlage,