

Social Housing in the Netherlands

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In many respects “social housing” in the Netherlands and “affordable housing” in the United States fill a common need: serving those residents who, based on their incomes and assets, are unable to secure adequate housing within the free market. Though they appear to hold parallel roles, in practice the concepts of Dutch social housing and affordable housing in the U.S. are quite distinct. In the Netherlands, the term social housing applies specifically to rental housing subsidized by the government. In the United States, affordable housing is a broadly used term with many varied interpretations.

As one accepted definition, housing in the United States is considered to be affordable when it costs no more than 30% of a household’s income. In the U.S., housing is made affordable to people with limited means - generally those making significantly less than the median income for their area - in a variety of ways. When available, government operated public housing is leased to qualifying residents, rent is means based. Government vouchers are provided to some qualifying individuals to assist them in accessing privately owned rental housing. Non-profits, such as community development corporations, create and manage rental housing intended to serve households unable to afford market-rate housing. Other non-profits focus on assisting poor families to achieve homeownership. To supplement all of these efforts, there are many emergency shelters (often privately run) throughout the country to serve those who have fallen through the cracks. In addition to being an inadequate substitution for actual housing, shelter beds are in short supply. As the above description outlines, affordable housing in the U.S. is a large complex patchwork of possibilities and opportunities. The reason for this hodge-podge response to housing needs, to put it quite simply, is that housing in the United States is not considered a basic right, and is not guaranteed by the government.

The Netherlands has taken a much different approach. Whereas the U.S. prides itself on individualism, the Dutch way is to recognize the strength of consensus and cooperation. More than a century ago, the Housing Act of 1902¹ legally established housing in the Netherlands as a shared national responsibility.

This action is consistent with the Dutch experience. As a land precariously situated at sea level, keeping the water at bay has been a shared responsibility throughout Dutch history. As planner Jan-Wouter van Bruggenkamp explained in Almere, without this special culture of mutual cooperation “the Netherlands would have been drowned in the seventeenth century.” Examples of recognizing individuals in need, like the natural forces of water, as a shared duty were visible in the nineteenth century. These included worker housing created by business owners and housing for the elderly created by

benefactors. However, this piecemeal approach was no longer sufficient as Dutch cities became increasingly crowded and housing conditions deteriorated in the late 1800s. The response to this need was the Housing Act of 1902.



Historic Worker Housing - Enkhuisen - May 27, 2008

The Housing Act of 1902 addressed the perceived need for adequate housing in two ways: increasing quality and increasing quantity. To address the physical quality of residences, the Act

¹ Some sources refer to the Housing Act of 1901.

required that “municipalities establish building regulations.” (Grinberg, 36) This action laid the groundwork for improvements such as better ventilation, drinking water, fire safety, water closets and even the transition from sleeping cupboards to bedrooms. Similar concerns, including efforts to improve air quality and water safety were also being addressed in the United States during this period. However, the Netherlands’ national approach to increasing the supply of low rent housing did not have a U.S. equivalent, in spite of the terrible housing conditions in major American cities at the turn-of-the-century.

The Housing Act of 1902 directed the creation of additional housing in two ways. First, it empowered municipalities to recognize building associations created solely for the purpose of developing housing. These housing associations were then able to qualify for financing from the State. Second, the Act required that large (10,000+) and growing municipalities establish extension plans, which would be revised every ten years. (Grinberg, 38) With this dual approach significant strides were made to alleviate the national housing crisis. The immediate growth in housing associations in the early 1900s demonstrates the direct impact of the Housing Act. In his book on housing in the Netherlands, Donald I. Grinberg describes it this way: “By 1906 fourteen had been allowed, between 1918 and 1920 under the impetus of a severe housing shortage 743 were recognized, and by 1922 there were 1,341.” (p. 38) Throughout the twentieth century housing associations and the homes they created became an integral part of Dutch society.

The Netherlands, like Europe as a whole, was significantly impacted by the First World War, when the nation remained neutral; the Depression of the early 1930s; and the Second World War,



1915 de Klerk Social Housing & Little Horse School
Amsterdam - June 13, 2008

when the country came under the control of Nazi Germany. However, despite these challenges and setbacks new housing was developed during the early decades of the twentieth century. Influential architects and planners of the time, including H. P. Berlage and Michel de Klerk embraced social housing in their work. Social housing was geographically integrated, and often aesthetically artful.

By the end of the Second World War more than one in ten housing units in the Netherlands were social housing. Between 1945 and 1975 the proportion of social housing grew from 12% to 41%, and by the early 1990s the share had reached to 44%. (Boelhouwer, 17)

Because social housing occupied such a significant portion of the Dutch housing stock, it was in no way perceived to be exceptional. Once qualified, individuals living in social housing units are not obligated to relocate as their financial situation improves. (OECD, 8) Therefore, the type of stigma associated with affordable housing in general, and public housing in particular, in the United States appears to be absent within the Netherlands.

In the U.S. the popular view of subsidized rental housing and its inhabitants is most often negative. This perception has been nurtured by government decisions and actions. Unlike the

Netherlands, the United States government maintained a very modest role in actual housing development during the twentieth century. The National Housing Act of 1934 significantly increased the number of Americans able to purchase their own homes by providing more favorable mortgage options. However, those without the means to purchase a home and those disqualified by race remained disenfranchised. (Davis, 22)

The influence of government policies is clearly visible in both countries. Data from the beginning of the 1990s shows that 67% of households in the U.S. were owner-occupied, compared to only 46% in the Netherlands. Of the remaining one-third of U.S. households almost all, 32%, rented housing within the private sector. Only 1% of U.S. housing was described as social housing, which is assumed to be public housing. In the Netherlands, where 54% of households rent, only 13% of all units were private sector rentals, meanwhile 40%, were social rentals. (The remaining 1% were simply described as “other.”) (OECD, 8) Within any democracy, it is understood that 40% of the population will have a much stronger influence than 1%. It is not difficult to recognize how low-income renters in the U.S., especially those in public housing have been overlooked or dismissed.

As homeownership opportunities expanded in the U.S., especially following World War II, the growth driven both by policy and demand occurred almost entirely in the suburbs. In almost every instance, admission was controlled to exclude non-whites. As resources were drained from central cities significant urban decay was left in the wake.

In response to this disturbing deterioration, the United States government passed the 1949 Housing Act. Through the guise of so-called urban renewal, this act funded the large-scale clearance of metropolitan areas determined to be blighted. “These areas were then typically rebuilt according to the then-fashionable theories of modern architecture as high-rise towers set in massive superblocks, or, worse, remained vacant for decades.” (Fishman, 2003) The residents of these superblocks, or ghettos, were individuals and families who had no other option; in other words those already excluded from mainstream American society.

The Netherlands was not immune to the ideas of urban renewal. In the same way that modernist architects built Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini Green in Chicago, designers in the Netherlands created Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam. At the time of its construction Bijlmer was believed to represent the ideal community of the future. Tragically the outcome on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrated a common result.

When these projects were built the social and economic challenges exasperated by the concentration and isolation of poverty were not properly considered. Over time these projects, and many others, have fallen into disrepair and been labeled as failures.



Bijlmermeer Modernist Housing - Amsterdam - June 9, 2008

Though it is too late for Pruitt-Igoe, which was demolished in the 1970s, Cabrini Green and Bijlmermeer are currently being reconsidered and reconstructed in an effort to create an appropriate and sustainable mix of residences. For the U.S. government active support for

housing integration remains new territory. The Netherlands has the advantage of being able to look to its own history for examples of successful blendings.

A June 12, 2008 tour of de Klerk's Amsterdam School architecture offered a particularly powerful illustration of the staying power of social housing in the Netherlands. The tour guide, an articulate, well-educated architectural historian, explained the unique characteristics of de Klerk's work. Even these many years later, the pride of place he strove to create was apparent. In addition to being employed by a local architecture firm, the guide was also a current social housing resident.

In the Netherlands there is an understood social contract that all people be appropriately housed. In the United States this view is not universally held. Though the Dutch approach risks being perceived as paternalistic, it has had very positive results. As James S. Russell wrote for *Architectural Record* in 2000, "A rational, humanistic planning and design process that dates from the 1920s has made Holland among the world's wealthiest and best-housed nations." Perhaps in the future, the United States can incorporate the lessons of Dutch social housing when addressing American housing needs.



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