

Private initiatives in housing developments in The Netherlands and the role of directed urban design

1 Introduction

The Dutch tradition of buying land and building your own home was almost entirely lost during the course of the twentieth century. The historic town centres and many villages in the country are largely the product of individual commissioning: private individuals bought a piece of land and built a home themselves or commissioned its design and construction. Current practice is different for two reasons: the rapid rise in demand for housing, which has made mass build necessary, plus the compact city and restrictive building policies.

Since the 1990s there has been renewed interest in individual commissioning. Stimulated by social trends such as increasing prosperity and individualisation, it is a response to the failure of mass housing to meet many of the needs and preferences of its occupants. It is an interest, moreover, which is encouraged by central government.

According to the government's Housing policy document, from 2000 a third of all new homes should be individually commissioned. This target has since been dropped from the 2006 housing strategy. Most people with an interest in individual commissioning want a single family home, and preferably a detached house. Moreover, they want a large home with lots of rooms and a big living room. There is a gap, however, between the number of people who want to build or commission the building of their own home and the number of people who are able to, particularly in the Randstad. Despite this, individual commissioning has not yet taken off. Rather than rising, the proportion of individually commissioned new homes has even fallen in recent years.

This paper explores these trends and addresses the questions of what individual commissioning is, in what forms it occurs, and what urban design approach is best for achieving the desired quality of individual build in the desired quantities. These questions are answered using the results of a literature study, a design research analysis and a comparative case studies of three different examples of individual commissioning: Borneo in Amsterdam, De Vijfhoek in Deventer and four locations in the Municipality Bladel.

2 Individual commissioning

Individual commissioning (*particulier opdrachtgeverschap* in Dutch) involves one or more private individuals acquiring land and deciding themselves which parties to commission for the design and construction of homes for their own use. It distinguishes itself from the mass build market (*projectmatic bouw* in Dutch) by 'reversing' the construction process: the prospective resident does not appear at the end of the line as a customer, but at the beginning as the commissioning party. They have more to say in the process and more choice, and therefore more opportunities to build a home that meets their specific needs and desires. For the same reason, individual commissioning is also distinct from 'consumer-oriented building'. In this formula, the developer buys the lots and designs and builds the houses; the consumer can choose from a range of variations, for example in use of materials and size.

Although this somewhat widens the choice available to housing consumers, it does not give them control over the design and building as such. Individual commissioning also differs from the 'wild living' concept introduced by Weeber (1997). Besides the building of standard homes, this also relates to more unusual buildings such as summer houses and mobile homes. Moreover, 'wild living' only includes buildings that do not fall under municipal building aesthetics control and applies only to individual projects.

3 Different formulas

To build their own home, people can follow one of a variety of processes and choose from a range of physical designs. On the process side, individuals can choose from a range of individual or collective initiatives and construction methods (self-build, commissioning an architect and contractor, system build or 'off the peg' catalogue buildings). In physical terms, people can choose between different types of homes (detached house in a landscape setting, suburban detached house, semi-detached, terrace or apartment) and various architectural styles. At district level there are different types of residential environments (country, village, suburban or urban), numbers and distribution of lots (scattered, grouped or clustered), contrasts with the surroundings (integrated or independent) and incorporation into the building unit (homogenous or heterogeneous). These differences are largely determined by municipal policy.

Individual initiative combined with self build or hiring an architect and a contractor offers many opportunities for individuals to bring the design of the home into line with their own wishes. Various types of homes and architectural styles may sometimes be available on the mass market, but commissioning their homes gives people much more say in the process and allows them to choose their favourite housing type and architectural style. At district level, for example, people can choose a scattered lot layout or a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous neighbourhood, as well as a lot in a cluster or group, which the standard market offers as well.

4 Directed urban design for individual commissioning

The planning approach is largely responsible for progress with the construction of new homes. In the Dutch context, we can identify three development routes: 'individual', 'collective' and directed urban design.

The individual route is mainly for the smallest development units. Private parties buy lots to build or commission the construction of a home for their own use; the local authority sets planning conditions and sometimes architectural requirements. Because building proceeds on a lot-by-lot basis, the built environment changes gradually.

The collective route is for developments on a larger scale in which large numbers of homes are built in a relatively short time. Originally, local authorities drew up the housing programmes and the housing corporations implemented them; later, local councils started working more closely with developers, construction companies and privatised housing corporations.

Directed urban design emerged at the end of the twentieth century. In this approach, the homes are built in a relatively short time, but the developments are not as large as in the collective route. The initiative, as in the individual route, lies with private parties. The local authority coordinates the urban and architectural design, but the responsibility for the construction of the homes lies with the private parties.

In our opinion, individual commissioning has the best chance of success within directed urban design. The literature study and the cases investigated in this study show that this

form of development is most suitable for reducing the discrepancy between the demand for and the reality of individual commissioning.

5 Cases

One of the most important sources of knowledge for this study were the cases of already built examples privately commissioned homes. We have visited many others, but here we will present the basic data about the three cases that we deeply studied.

Borneo in Amsterdam, Scheepstimmermanstraat

Borneo location in Amsterdam is a part of the urban reconstruction area in the eastern part of the former harbour of Amsterdam. The individually commissioned houses are situated in the part of the Scheepstimmermanstraat, while the rest of the Borneo island is built with the houses for mass build market.

Size of the district	23 ha (Borneo 10,5 + Sporenburg 12,5)
Size of the cluster	5.400 m ²
Density	100 houses/ha
Number of privately built houses	51
Surfaces of lots	67 – 96 m ²
Height	9,50 m
Commissioner of the master plan	Municipality Amsterdam en New Deal
Designer of the master plan	Adriaan Geuze, West 8
Architects	Chris Boot, Christian Rapp, Heren 5, INBO Amsterdam, Koen van Velzen, Marianne Elber, MVRDV, Niek van Slobbe, OMA, Peter van der Klucht, René de Prie, Stepan Rektorik Tekton and others



Fig. 1 Borneo peninsula in the ostelijk havengebied in Amsterdam - Scheepstimmermanstraat

De Vijfhoek in Deventer

The Vijfhoek in Deventer is a VINEX location (a city extension area) which is designed in the manner of a garden city. The larger part of the Vijfhoek is realised with mass build houses. Individually commissioned houses are located within three districts: Op den Haag, Gravenland and Het Fetlaer.

Surface of the Vijfhoek	204 ha		
Locations	Op den Haar	Graveland	Het Fetlaer
Surface of the cluster	34,7 ha	15,5 ha	26,2 ha
Density	34,9 houses / ha	9 houses / ha	34,6 houses / ha
Number of privately built houses	137	126	56
Surfaces of lots	Stand alone: 330-700 m ² Two under one roof: 243 m ²	588-1449 m ²	130-467 m ² privé plus 122-160 m ² collective
Height	2,5 leyers	6 m	1,5 leyer
Commissioner of the master plan	Municipality Deventer	Municipality Deventer	Municipality Deventer
Designer of the master plan	Dienst Stedelijk Ontwikkeling	Heeling Krop Bekkering	Heeling Krop Bekkering

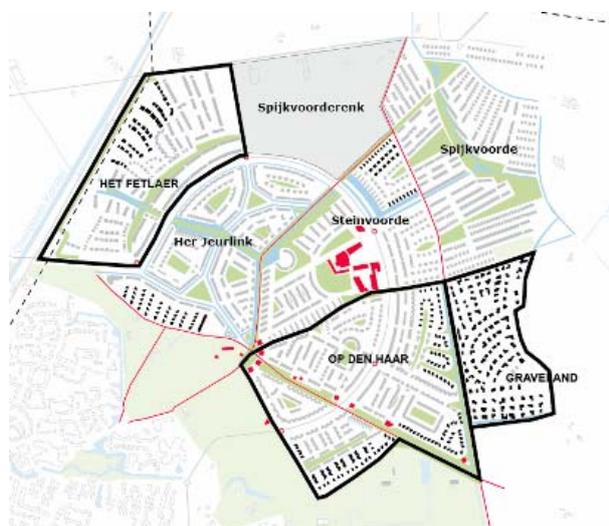


Fig 2. De Vijfhoek in Deventer

Municipality Bladel

Municipality Bladel is located on the south-west of Eindhoven and consists of four small villages: Hapert, Hoogeloon, Casteren, Netersel, and the biggest one Bladel. Here four new locations for new housing, mainly for collective individual commissioning (but not only for those) were developed: Bieshof and Coppens in the village Hoogeloon, Zandstraat in the village Casteren, and De Blikken in the village Netersel. The four locations were designated for 'starters' which means beginners on the housing market, and for 'seniors' which means people above 55 years old.

Size of the village	Casteren: 721 ha	Netersel: 1073 ha	Hoogeloon: 1247 ha	
Size of the cluster	Zandstraat	De Blikken	Bieshof	Coppens
Density			2403m ²	5060m ²
Number of privately built houses	34	15	9	19
Surfaces of lots	Starters: 178 m ²	Starter: 193 m ² Seniors: 215 m ²	Starters: 108-179 m ² Seniors: 355-400 m ²	Starters: 119-228 m ² Senior: 231-268 m ²
Hight	Ground Floor plus one floor	Ground Floor plus one floor	Ground Floor plus one floor; roof maximum 8 m	Ground Floor plus one floor; roof 9 till 10 m
Commissioner of the master plan	Buyers association	Location association Building in Netersel'	Location association 'Plan Coppens'	Location association 'Plan Coppens'
Designer of the master plan	Van den Pauwert Architecten BNA	Hulshof Architecten	Jos Franken	Jos Franken
Architects	Van den Pauwert Architecten BNA	Hulshof Architecten	Jos Franken	Jos Franken



Zandstraat, Casteren



Bieshof and Coppens in Hoogeloon



De Blikken, Netersel

Fig 3. Four locations for the collectively built houses in the municipality Bladel, North Brabant

6 Characteristics of directed urban design

Local authority coordination

Local authorities must ensure that sufficient land is assembled and that enough building lots are allocated at affordable prices. Local authorities are also in a better position to smooth out any obstacles than private individuals. This is especially important in the Randstad because the gap between the number of people interested in commissioning the building of their own

homes and the number of people that can actually do it is large – and it is where much of the land is in the hands of developers and housing corporations. Finally, local authority coordination is needed because private individuals will have little experience of building a house and will benefit from good information and guidance.

Active land policy

Although some developers also allocate ‘free parcels’ on which private individuals can have their own homes built, it makes sense for the local authority to assemble the land for individual build projects. An active land policy seems to be generally more effective than a facilitative land policy. The cases in Deventer, Bladel and Amsterdam indicate that strategic land assembly (before a planning strategy has been adopted for the area) and pre-emptive land acquisition (when only the global land use framework has been established) is crucial to prevent other market actors from acquiring land holdings in these areas. Strategic and pre-emptive land assembly has become increasingly difficult in recent years because market actors are acquiring land holdings before the planning and land use frameworks have been adopted.

Allocation of lots

Various methods can be used for allocating building lots, including an open registration procedure, drawing lots and public auction. The Borneo and Deventer cases show that when sales of building lots are disappointing local authorities can be too quick to sell the remaining lots to a developer, thus taking the ‘soul out of the project’. Before selling to a developer, other possibilities for selling lots to private individuals should be explored. Selling lots at relatively low prices to stimulate individual build can increase the risk of speculation, as the Borneo case shows. To prevent this, local authorities can insert an anti-speculation clause or building obligation in the contract of sale.

Licensing and contracts: Obtaining the necessary licences and permits is often a complicated and time-consuming exercise for private individuals. The application for building consent can best be left to professionals (architects or contractors). On the other hand, to process large numbers of applications the local authority will need to organise its operations well and mobilise or hire additional capacity in good time. Having to conclude a large number of contacts within a short time can also be a barrier to individual build for local authorities. They can overcome this barrier by working with standard contracts, by organising the procedure well or by appointing external consultants.

Coordination of building activities

Within the directed urban design model, the allocation of large numbers of lots and small-scale construction operations can present problems, particularly in urban environments. To ensure continuous construction activity it is essential that the main services and streets are installed before construction of the homes begins. Frustrations, conflicts and even legal action can be avoided. A building coordinator could play a useful role if given sufficient authority.

Information and supervision

By providing appropriate information and offering guidance, local authorities could remove obstacles and ease the reluctance many individuals feel about building or commissioning the construction of a new home. The research shows that confidence in the local authority quickly evaporates if information turns out to be incorrect or incomplete. An expert can be appointed to supervise the process and provide guidance, or a firm of consultants can be brought in.

Coordination of urban design and architecture

Good coordination between urban design and architecture is needed to resolve conflicts of interest between satisfying individual housing preferences on individual lots and ensuring a

coherent urban design. This coordination does not have to be in the form of rules; planning via the design of the public realm and architectural supervision is also possible. Rules in the local land use plan are a key tool for enforcing the planning and architectural design regimes because they are legally binding. Of course, the local plan must be prepared and adopted on time. The close connection between the coordination, the buildings and the public realm should not be lost sight of at any time during the process.

7 Future prospects

The application of directed urban design and the outcomes obtained are not just a reflection of the activities of actors like the direct stakeholders, but also of factors like the regional domestic culture, housing market and land market, and on provincial and national policies.

- The regional domestic culture is reflected both in the level of interest among residents in having their own homes built and the various formulas for doing it.
- The overheated housing market, particularly in the Randstad, is putting local authorities under considerable pressure to build large numbers of new homes. As a result they tend to prefer mass housing projects and provide far fewer opportunities for individual commissioning than people want.
- Because more houses are being built for the owner-occupier market, major market actors are finding it increasingly interesting to acquire land holdings. This makes it difficult for local authorities to assemble the lots for individual commissioning.
- The housing agreements have both hindered and promoted individually commissioned homes. Mass housing projects tend to be preferred, particularly in the cities, because large numbers of dwellings have to be built quickly. The cities are now ripe for individual commissioning because the agreements involve much reduced building subsidies.
- Although the government set itself high ambitions for individual commissioning in the Housing policy document (2000), the measures adopted have proved to be inadequate to the task. Particularly in the Randstad results have lagged far behind the targets. In its housing strategy (2006) the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment has also tempered its aspirations.
- The new Land Development Act, which will come into force at the beginning of 2008, offers local authorities more opportunities to allocate free lots under a facilitative land policy – on condition they make watertight agreements with the developers.

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