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## Living on Estate Agents' Water

In the Netherlands, living with water has become a socially desirable commodity. The quest to distinctively combine human settlement and water has evolved in interesting ways – and calls for designers to develop new architectural icons.

It might not strike you at first glance but many Dutch people live in the midst of a treacherous landscape. The story of the Dutch reclaiming their country from the sea is a familiar tale but the fact that they are now well on their way to returning the land to that very same sea is something new, even for the majority of Dutch people. The increase in flooding because of climate change is, of course, the outcome of human behaviour but that is not what I mean; in general, the dikes here still fulfil their protective task. The danger lies in the land behind the dikes, the polders, which are subsiding ever further because of urbanization and highly effective water management systems. Architecture and urban development are increasingly capitalizing on this, by coincidence, but also intentionally.

Until the 1960s, the dynamism of water was a natural fact. When building a house in an area that might be flooded you laid flagstones in your living room instead of a parquet floor. If the water rose then you moved the furniture to the first floor and went to lodge with a family elsewhere. Once the water level had fallen you scrubbed the floors and put the furniture back in its place. Since the 1960s, the faith in our technical ability to control water has been growing and as a result we have become less and less concerned about the sites used for construction. The state secretary still actually con-

siders a “tremendous challenge” to build at the lowest point in the Netherlands, which is about six metres below sea level. It is our heart's desire to live overlooking water and to achieve this we are all too happy to re-excavate previously filled-in urban canals. The water is an enemy that has become a friend and our understanding of the true dynamism of water and its perceived image have become increasingly estranged.

Thanks to our engineering acuity it was possible to construct part of the Randstad urban conurbation on the waterlogged soil of a former morass. Houses are built on piles of sometimes have to be driven to a depth of thirty metres in order to reach the solidity of the sand layer beneath the peat, a substratum that will no longer subside. However, that is prohibitively expensive for roadways, footpaths, parks and gardens, which are subsequently lain on a layer of sand that is a “mere” metre or two deep. A layer like this stabilizes the unstable topsoil a little and, at least on completion, looks very trustworthy. This semblance of stability leads to absurd situations. Any weight that rests on the unstable soil compresses it, and pumping off water, made necessary by the situation below sea level, lends a helping hand. With every new layer of sand that is added to keep houses accessible the ground subsides even faster. It is a process that is un-

detectable depth by Monday. Later on, at the same site as the “disappearing” sewers, a series of “lighthouse dwellings” was realized, giving the spot a readily marketable identity and reflecting the connection with water. This relationship was initially left unacknowledged, then combatted, and ultimately represented in a ridiculous way.

This example demonstrates that in the quest for identity its most important vectors are often missed. These “bearers” of identity have for a very long time been the specific limitations of a site within which a particular development ambition has to be conceived and realized. For centuries, limitations were the most effective shapers of our built identity. Nowadays we resolve the limitations using technical means and contrive an identity afterwards. To this end, it is often the icons that have evolved over time that are copied, such as lighthouse dwellings, typical dike and bridge houses or windmills, but we fail to develop new icons. Proceeding from this idea I devised the “Amphibious Living” project in 2000, a project that generated many potential new icons for settlement and for water.

No more than a decade ago, you could receive a premium from Gouda City Council if you abandoned your houseboat and allowed it to be demolished. Houseboats were then still subject to the municipality's legislation on slum dwellings. Even a city like Amsterdam has never been truly happy with the houseboats lining its canals. They certainly provide picturesque photo opportunities, but they are an untidy eyesore amid the cityscape, they constitute a safety risk and they discharge sewage directly into the canal. Houseboats were legally considered to be moveable property and were therefore ineligible for a mortgage or for rent subsidy. It was usually DIY adventurers who made their home on the water. However, this policy shifted about five years ago. Alongside increasing prosperity and liberalization of the housing market this was primarily

driven by the above mentioned quest for identity in the built environment. Living alongside water had been a guaranteed sales hit for a long time already, but living on water was now deemed worthy of a mortgage as well.

In more and more expansion plans, plots are being reserved for floating dwellings in developments with overblowing names such as “Water Gardens”, “Blue City”, or “Gold Coast”. The lakes and canals in these newly built neighbourhoods are also mockingly called “estate agent's water”. Thanks to the introduction of tailor-made mortgages and to a number of “water villas” being realized by respected architects such as Herman Hertzberger and Art Zaaijer, living on water has transcended the world of adventurers and odd-jobbers and has become socially desirable. This goes hand in hand with the image of freedom and independence that is associated with living on water. The floating dwellings can be turned to face the sun or even moved to a completely different location. The reality is different, of course, because the plots are usually so confined that there is not much chance of being able to turn, and the dwellings are generally fitted with every modern convenience and are therefore wholly dependent on the umbilical cord of mains and amenities at their moorings. These mooring places are limited in number so the dwelling cannot be tied up anywhere, to say nothing of the often insurmountable obstacles such as bridges and dikes that the dwelling would encounter en route from one berth to another. The freedom and independence of the marketing brochures therefore rely on suggestion, but that is precisely the level at which they work best. The inhabitants of floating dwellings are generally very fond of their comfort and security. They are primarily seeking the image of independence and the sense of freedom without having to suffer the negative consequences.

For the housing market, the quest to distinctively combine human settlement and water has become a welcome and rewarding theme. Archi-

ecture bureaus with names such as Aquitecture and Waterstudio are capitalizing on this trend and present their concept dwellings in catalogues. Living with water has become a commodity to be reckoned with, for which water is even artificially created. In the economically weak region of East Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands, a public-private partnership is developing an 800-hectare expanse of agricultural land that has been re-flooded in order to establish an ideal residential and recreational environment. This project also draws on the positive identity of water: as a bringer of peace and quiet, an element that creates space, a recreational lake and a mirror for the architecture.

Now it is the government that is starting to develop an eye for the identity-imbuing power of water. A body of water is not only the surface, but also has a bottom. The use of agricultural pesticides over the decades has resulted in the accumulation of highly polluted sludge at the bottom of expanses of water and waterways. Intriguing alternatives have been devised for the expensive process of dredging up and transporting this polluted sludge. Sealing the dredged-up sludge in containers and using these to raise traditional “terps” (mounds historically constructed to provide a safe human settlement) in areas prone to flooding would generate identity that springs from solving a problem. Experiments in river forelands have also been promoted recently. In the knowledge that total water management is no longer feasible, the government has commissioned research into how human settlement and unstable water levels might be reconciled. The river forelands are the ideal testing ground for this. Inadvertently, the many luxurious floating villas on the quiet and stable recreational lakes will then be best prepared for that prospective instability or deluge. And then their inhabitants can at last truly put into practice the image of freedom and independence to which they aspire.

Near Arnhem, the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management tests the use of sludge out of ditches for raising “terps”, mounds constructed to provide safe settlements (top). In areas prone to flooding this would generate identity. Bottom: A study, initiated by Waterstudio, suggests housing in a water-retention area in the Haarlemmermeer.

