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BOOK REVIEW

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Review of "Urban Oases Dutch Hofjes as Hidden Architectural Gems" by Willemijn Wilms Floet

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Book details

Willemijn Wilms Floet

URBAN OASES Dutch Hofjes as Hidden Architectural Gems.

nai010 publishers, 2021.

ISBN 978-94-6208-660-9.

€ 39.95, paperback (Also available in Dutch and as e-book in English and Dutch).

pp. 208, with illustrations (220 full color).

Keywords Hofje, Architectural heritage, Historic dutch cities, Housing design, Chronology, Netherlands.

A hofje is a Dutch word for a courtyard surrounded by small houses¹ that have existed since the Middle Ages. For six centuries, Dutch hofjes have captivated the imagination; their unique architecture keeps these modest, hidden urban oasis relevant. In response to shifting societal needs, architects have innovated the fourteenth-century archetype in every time. Residents and guests are constantly treated to a unique urban intimacy in a communal setting. After all, the interior courtyards of urban blocks have given rise to distinct styles of architecture and housing all across the world, which often date back centuries.

A typical hofje consists of a collection of identical cottages grouped around a common garden that is well-hidden in the fabric of the ancient city: as architectural entities, they might be regarded as quiet, green oases with an aura of collectivity. Around 110 of the more than

200 hofjes founded in the Netherlands since 1395 remain in good condition and are attractive places to live.

Willemijn Wilms Floet, an architecture scholar at Delft University of Technology, wrote *Urban Oases Dutch Hofjes as Hidden Architectural Gems* to explore the sustainable manifestation of the hofje. She leads the reader through the alleyways of ancient towns while simultaneously addressing an essential current question: how can we develop high-quality, small living settings that bring tranquilly to the frequently chaotic urban environment?

This book, which emphasises both text and graphics, is meant for architects, urban designers, developers, policy-makers, and private commissioners who wish to create a sustainable residential environment, as well as anybody interested in this extraordinary heritage.

This book kindly takes the reader on a tour of several historic Dutch cities. It is the result of years of visiting

¹ Almshouses.

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such cities and establishing a way for comprehending hofjes' long-term success. It takes more than just physically following the architectural route to and from the hofjes to accomplish this.

The author looked them up on historical maps—as it turned out, many hofjes did not survive the test of time - and re-mapped them. The meticulous drawing of hofjes, of each building and its surroundings, is at the heart of the method she uses to teach architecture students about the structure of buildings and cities, and to find that the city is more than just a random collection of constructed units.

The journey of discovery in this book is thus largely focused on the method of sketching, the architect's medium.

This book is divided into seven chapters, the first of which introduces Dutch Hofjes and the importance of dealing with them. Specifically, the author explains in this chapter why Hofjes are referred to as “hidden treasures”. Hofjes, she argues, are not merely cultural and architectural oddities limited to the Low Countries on the North Sea.

Hofjes can proudly claim their place in the rich continuum of urban block typology, which has created its own shapes throughout history and in all times and cultures. The hofje is anchored in this chapter to help the reader comprehend all of its characteristics as components of an architectural phenomena and to integrate it in a larger context for people from different continents.

In the first chapter, the author discusses the topic of her research, the data collection process, and provides an overview of the remaining chapters. As a result, reading the first chapter and its illustrations is crucial for the audience who is unfamiliar with hofje. The second chapter covers six significant architectural and urban features of hofjes in the form of six subsections, supplementing the text with several meticulously drawn configurations of actual hofjes. The reader can easily understand the key urban and architectural elements of hofjes through the maps, plans, elevations, and images offered in this chapter.

Furthermore, the architectural unity, which is the fundamental architectural arrangement of hofjes, is clearly explained and illustrated in this chapter to demonstrate to the reader that all hofjes consist of a garden surrounded by cottages; when combined, they form an architectural unit, though in a variety of different arrangements. In order to demonstrate that there is a way to control the accessibility of hofjes, the author presents this chapter at the smallest scale at which designers can work on the design of a hofje, which is the staging of its entrance.

The readers can see how existent hofjes have been designed as quite green oases in the urban surroundings in the last subsection.

The third chapter of the book details the social history of hofjes during the previous 600 years. What inspired private individuals at various eras to endow the city with a hofje is revealed to the reader. How was hofjes' survival ensured despite hardships and societal upheaval? And why does the hofje remain a popular style of house today? According to Willemijn Wilms Floet, since 2016, the legal calculation of rentals has considered living in historic sites, which is why the rent of properties in hofjes now regularly exceeds the social rent level.

Trustees must currently choose between the funding required for restorations and the mission of providing affordable housing.

Hofjes continue to exist today because they are considered as cultural treasure. They benefit from the growing popularity of small-scale, secure living in the heart of the city. Various hofjes now host music and theatre performances or Open Garden Days at the initiative of trustees to ensure that the connection between a hofje and its city is not only visible in the buildings; these activities give hofjes a more public function and turn them into urban oases that are open to other groups as well.

For centuries, stringent balloting preserved homogeneity among the people who lived in hofjes. Although the third part of the book is historical and social in nature, the author's effort in presenting historical maps and photos has helped the reader visualise hofje's social and supportive role.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the chronology of hofje architecture as an ever-changing typology. The author describes and exhibits how hofjes in Dutch cities have evolved over the years to reflect their time in terms of design and social relationships.

On a journey through time, the author examines these architectural developments, focusing on a number of typical examples, each of which is a highlight in hofje architecture. She starts in the late Middle Ages and works her way up to contemporary projects inspired by hofjes. This chapter contains figures and maps that show how hofjes can be viewed as a reflection of society, how gradually academically trained architects became involved in the design of hofjes, how hofjes began to look more and more luxurious during the seventeenth and certainly in the eighteenth centuries, and how the main focus was once again on living on a small scale in green surroundings after the hofje disappeared from view for a while post Second World War.

In the fifth chapter, the author attempts to demonstrate that the exceptional vitality of the hofje architectural

typology may also assist in meeting the design challenges of the twenty-first century. She begins by looking at instances of Dutch twentieth-century mass housing design influenced by traditional hofjes. While the Dutch hofje cannot always be reproduced elsewhere in order to create a new solution to the current social mass housing, the formal and social aspects of hofjes clearly provide beginning points for new alternatives. The enclosed garden in the core of the hofje, which forms the green oasis so typical of hofjes, can also serve modern uses. In times of global warming, these gardens can increase local biodiversity, collecting water, and creating a better microclimate. Willemijn Wilms Floet demonstrates how this approach was considered in the most current hofje in Amsterdam, the landmark Sluishuis, which is scheduled to be finished in 2022. This chapter demonstrates that hofjes can still provide an appealing living environment if their physical appearance and architecture offer their residents a wide range of options.

The sixth chapter illustrates and describes over 20 fine examples of hofjes built between 1395 and 2007, which are extensively documented with architectural drawings and photography. The thorough information offered for each exemplar hofjes includes the year of completion, dimensions, number of houses, maps, ancient and modern images, 3D representations, textual chronology, and a detailed description of architecture and landscape.

The seventh chapter of the book concluded with maps of Dutch hofjes. This chapter includes maps of Amsterdam, Alkmaar, Delft, The Hague, Dordrecht, Gouda, Groningen, Haarlem, Leiden, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Zutphen. The maps show not only charity hofjes that still exist today, but also hofjes that have relocated or disappeared entirely.

In our opinion, this book helps architects, urban planners, developers, students, and everyone else who cares about the important challenge of making cities high-quality and liveable. From this point of view, this book explains the hofje's "secret" and provides an explanation for why the idea has persisted for six centuries. The book might also aid in providing an explanation for why methods of a similar nature have been successful and are still in use in other parts of the world. It also raises the question of what function the hofje typology can serve in addressing potential design issues that occur as the city of the twenty-first century grows. The book looks at the hofje as a type of universal power to address this.

This book is exceptional in terms of research and architecture instruction due to its special features. First and foremost, this book accurately depicts the role of drawing in architectural research. This feature teaches architecture scholars and students that even in today's world, an architect should be able to use visual expressions in addition to detailed language. Second, architectural heritage

is studied in the context of time and space in order to demonstrate how social changes affect architectural heritage. Third, the book demonstrates the importance of architectural heritage in responding to today's complex social and environmental challenges. Since there are still a lot of unanswered questions in the history, the conservation approach to the heritage should be changed to one that is inspirational and responsive. The recently constructed Dutch hofjes make this quite obvious to see.

Worldwide scholars can utilise this book as a starting point for future research that compares and contrasts contemporary urban types in various contexts built on values found in Dutch hofjes.

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