

SHARED IDEALS: WORLD GARDEN CITIES AND THE AMSTERDAM SCHOOL

By Esther Kreikamp, Augustus 5th, 2022



The Amsterdam School and the garden city idea are movements that both originated at the beginning of the 20th century. This was a turbulent period with political changes, industrialisation, urbanisation, severe housing shortages and inner-city slumming. The architects of the Amsterdam School played a major role in solving the problems of the time. This was not the only movement involved, the urban planning ideas of the garden city idea were widely used around the world to solve the housing problem. These two movements were driven by the same ideals that emerged from the spirit of the times and therefore have several similarities.

THE GARDEN CITY IDEA

The garden city movement emerged in England at the end of the nineteenth century due to poor housing conditions in cities. Manufacturers and societies, among others, started building settlements with low housing density, spacious gardens and a carefully designed urban and architectural plan where everyone could live pleasantly and healthily.¹ Ebenezer Howard drew inspiration from this for his garden city model and published the book 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow' in 1902, describing his ideas for the ideal living environment and publicising the garden city movement. His aim was to unite the best of city and countryside in the garden city, where the good qualities of both worlds of life were merged.²

The 20th century expansion of Aghetapark (Delft) by architect Jan Gratama

This marriage between city and countryside had both a spatial and a social side.³ The idea was that land should be jointly owned and managed by a cooperative organisation of residents through self-management and co-determination. The construction of the city was financed by the residents themselves, allowing everyone to own land and home. In addition, the garden city was not only aimed at workers, but was instead a reflection of society as a whole. The design also had to encourage a sense of community, by facilitating various social and green spaces.

The garden city idea quickly spread through Europe and the rest of the world. In the Netherlands, the Garden City idea was brought to attention by Jan Bruinwold Riedel in the book 'Tuinsteden' (1906). Although no Dutch garden city association arose as in England and Germany, the garden city idea was embraced by many building associations. In the Netherlands, it is better to speak of garden villages because they were built on a much smaller scale, but still have many similarities to Howard's model. The garden villages had a low density of houses and were situated in green surroundings. In addition, some garden villages emphasised the ideal of upliftment and education. The villages were also often based on self-governance.⁴

¹ H.J. Korthals Altes, *Tuinsteden - tussen utopie en realiteit* (Bussum: Thoth, 2004), 17.

² Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (Londen: 1902), 18.

³ Korthals Altes, *Tuinsteden*, 12.

⁴ Korthals Altes, *Tuinsteden*, 139.

THE AMSTERDAMSE SCHOOL

The Amsterdam School also emerged at the beginning of the 20th century and was mainly expressed between 1910 and 1935 in the Netherlands. The movement began with architects Michel De Klerk, Joan van der Meij and Piet Kramer, who met at Eduard Cuypers' architectural firm in Amsterdam. Their political ideals and social vision made them strive for a new design of architecture and urban planning. As a result, the Amsterdam School was mainly known for its workers' palaces, although villas and public buildings were also designed. Underlying this was the ideal of elevation: educating workers through art and culture and elevating them to better citizens.⁵

The Amsterdam School is recognisable by the artful use of materials such as brick and roof tiles and a total composition in design of interior and exterior. It was also characterised by imaginative and expressionist design. The architects turned against rigid lines and systematics and stood for expressionism and fantasy.⁶ The design was therefore more important than the function and construction of the building. The design also paid attention to human scale and decorative design.

Craftsmanship was central to the Amsterdam School. The architects wanted to interweave crafts with architecture. They were also very interested in folk arts and also found inspiration in nature in crystals and shells. The architects not only focused on the appearance of the building, but also shaped the furnishings by designing lamps, chairs and crockery.

The design also included street furniture such as mailboxes, wastebaskets and urinals. It was all about the overall picture, the inside was as important as the outside, creating a true *gesamtkunstwerk*.

The best-known structures can be found in Amsterdam, but many were also built outside. The distinctive design language of the Amsterdam School can also be recognised in various garden villages across the country. The decorative brickwork is well represented in Tuindorp Heijlplaat in Rotterdam, but features of the Amsterdam School can also be found in Tuinwijk Zuid in Haarlem, the twentieth-century extension of Agnetapark, the Bloemenbuurt in Groningen and in Betondorp. The garden city idea and the Amsterdam School were driven by the same ideals and *zeitgeist*, resulting in cross-fertilisation and several similarities can be recognised between the movements.

ZEITGEIST

The garden city idea and the Amsterdam School could not have developed into the recognisable solutions for public housing without the social and political situation of the early 20th century.

⁵ Petra van Diemen e.a., *Een kunstwerk van baksteen: betekenis en restauratie van Het Schip, Amsterdam, icoon van sociale woningbouw en architectuur, 1919-1921* (Amsterdam: Museum Het Schip, 2018), 11.

⁶ Museum Het Schip, *Arbeiderspaleis Het Schip van Michel de Klerk* (Amsterdam: Museum Het Schip, 2012), 44.



Tuindorp Heijlplaat (Rotterdam)



Workers' palace De Dageraad in Amsterdam Zuid with cooperative shops in the plinth.

After years of economic recession, the industrial revolution also began to gain a foothold in the Netherlands in 1870. The rise of industry led to a concentration of production in cities, and the agricultural crisis caused many workers to move to cities. The population of cities grew at a rapid pace. In Amsterdam alone, population growth between 1869 and 1889 was a staggering 54%. Urbanisation had begun, but there were not enough houses to house all these workers. Building speculators tried to take advantage of this by quickly building cheap houses and also renting out the basement and attic. Living conditions and hygiene in these houses were very poor due to lack of sanitation and sewerage and overcrowding.⁷

An early development to solve the housing problem came from the manufacturers who built houses for their workers. The factory village Agnetapark (1883) in Delft by J.C. van Marken of the Gist and Spiritus factory was an example. Philanthropic organisations, such as the Society for the Benefit of the Working Class founded in 1852, also built homes for non-profit workers. This was also criticised because these villages were often paternalistic and controlling in nature, where the manufacturer oversaw compliance in the homes. In the Netherlands, health committees were additionally set up to do something about housing problems.⁸

Very little changed in the nineteenth century. Many workers did not want to depend solely on charity. The urge to form an independent and influential section of the population was growing. Karl Marx was one of the important thinkers who influenced workers' emancipation. His book *Das Kapital* (1867) denounced the problems of capitalism and called for a more equal society. He created awareness among various sections of the population that workers were important for sustaining society and advocated that they should be treated well. The *Communist Manifesto* (1848) he wrote with Friedrich Engels concluded with the famous words 'Proletarians of all countries, unite!'

⁷ Maristella Casciato, *De Amsterdamse School* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij O10, 1991), 20-21.

⁸ Elinoor Bergvelt en Adriaan Venema, *De Amsterdamse School, 1910-1930* (Amsterdam: Van Gen-nep, 1979), 3-12.

Workers united in trade unions, associations and political parties at the end of the nineteenth century, really starting the emancipation of workers. In 1881, the first social democratic party, the SDB, was founded in the Netherlands and participated in parliament. The SDAP, Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij, was founded in 1884. This became the largest socialist party in the Netherlands and had public housing and better facilities for workers as its main programme item.

According to them, every worker was entitled to a house with a garden, and they believed that if the worker lived in a beautiful environment, he would also be happy. This would elevate the working class and allow them to own a house.¹⁰ This required a return to crafts, as machines could only produce ugly objects. Out of this thinking came community art, where architecture, sculpture and painting came together.¹¹



Betondorp (Amsterdam)

IDEALS AND OBJECTIVES

The solutions did not only come from political quarters. Utopians of the nineteenth century also tried to find an answer to the wretched conditions of the industrial age. Social reformer Robert Owen devised a utopian plan to solve housing problems in England as early as 1817. He was sceptical of industrialisation and saw agriculture as the principle of society. His idea was therefore to establish villages with 2,000 inhabitants that were entirely self-sufficient. Everyone had to contribute his share of work to strive for full equality in society. Howard later adopted these ideas in his garden city model to achieve better living conditions in cities.⁹

John Ruskin and William Morris were also such utopian thinkers with great influence on art, architecture and urban planning. They were the forerunners of the Arts and Crafts social and art movement of the second half of the nineteenth century in England.

These ideals of elevation and healthy housing, spawned from the ideas of the nineteenth-century utopians, also emerged in garden city thinking and the Amsterdam School. The architects of the Amsterdam School, such as Michel de Klerk at Het Schip, wanted to create a beautiful and pleasant living environment to elevate workers to full citizens. Het Schip consisted of spacious living units and a beautifully designed and richly decorated facade that looked like a true workers' palace. Not only the well-to-do were allowed to live in beautiful houses, but the worker too was the idea. Beauty was no longer just for the upper classes.¹²

Supporters of the garden city movement mostly had this elevation ideal in mind as well. By housing the proletariat in a beautiful environment with plenty of light, air and space and making it possible to own a home, the worker would elevate himself to a full-fledged citizen. This was sometimes taken very literally.

⁹ *Bergvelt en Venema, Amsterdamse School, 15.*

¹⁰ *Bergvelt en Venema, Amsterdamse School, 16.*

¹¹ *Casciato, De Amsterdamse School, 34.*

¹² *Bergvelt en Venema, Amsterdamse School, 3-12.*



The Bloemenbuurt (Groningen) by architect Siebe Jan Bouma

The Amsterdam garden village Asterdorp, for instance, was intended as a residential school, where problem families were housed and raised to become good citizens. Several garden villages created from factories also had an educational idea as their basis.

In addition, both movements sought to form a community by including amenities in the area. The garden villages all had shops, schools and other amenities such as kitchen gardens. Amsterdam School architects' residential blocks also included amenities, such as the post office in Het Schip. The shops also incorporated a bench in the window frame, where people could linger for a while and chat with local residents. Many of these houses in garden villages and Amsterdam School residential blocks were built by associations.

ORGANISATIONAL FORM

The growing discontent of workers, the rise of the SDAP, the deplorable sanitary conditions and concerns of the wealthy bourgeoisie eventually led to the Housing Act in 1901 that allowed the government to intervene in housing and provide subsidies. In addition, the Health Act, which controlled the provisions of the Housing Act, was also passed. Subsidies were only given to those who wanted to build without a profit motive.¹³ This initially provided the possibility of slum clearance and the removal of speculative construction. The housing associations became then the main implementers of housing construction.¹⁴

It took some time before housing construction really took off after the introduction of the Housing Act. The limited financial resources at the beginning of the twentieth century and the First World War that led to material scarcity caused little building activity. In the years after the war, major building then really took off. Between 1910-1923, housing associations built 11867 houses and the municipality another another 4710 houses in Amsterdam. The housing associations were set up by different groups.

The housing association Rochdale, for example, was set up by a group of forty workers who named themselves after the place in England where cooperative ideas had originated. De Dageraad grew out of a consumer cooperative, where workers could buy cheap foodstuffs from cooperative shops. Eigen Haard, the housing association that hired De Klerk as architect for Het Schip, had emerged from a group whose aim was to build good and affordable housing for workers.

In Amsterdam, the rise of the SDAP in the municipal administration and the placement of socialist aldermen in various public housing positions were important in shaping this housing development. Arie Keppler, director of the Municipal Housing Service, was a major player within housing construction and believed that nothing was beautiful enough for the workers, having already suffered so much.¹⁵ Keppler had a strong preference for the architects of the Amsterdam School and extensions in the form of garden villages, due to the underlying ideals and design that fitted well with his socialist views. Also, the beauty committee set up by the municipality consisted mainly of Amsterdam School architects. Not surprisingly, much of the housing built by the municipality and housing associations was designed with the ideals of the garden city idea and the Amsterdam School in mind.

¹³ Bergvelt en Venema, *Amsterdamse School*, 3-12.

¹⁴ Casciato, *De Amsterdamse School*, 23.

¹⁵ Casciato, *De Amsterdamse School*, 26.



Het Zonnehuis in Tuindorp Oostzaan (Amsterdam North)

TOTAL DESIGN

Amsterdam is home to many examples of Amsterdam School architecture and the influences of garden city ideas. Tuindorp Oostzaan in Amsterdam North is a fine example where both movements converge. The garden village has a spacious urban plan, with the houses having both front and back gardens. The garden village has a large square with shops and the clubhouse Het Zonnehuis. The buildings were designed in the style of the Amsterdam School by architects Berend Boeyinga and Johannes Mulder. Het Zonnehuis has many decorative brick elements and an expressive design. Vogeldorp, Disteldorp and Nieuwendam are also Amsterdam garden villages in the rural Amsterdam School style.

Of course, not every garden village was built in the Amsterdam School style and not every Amsterdam School design could be found in a garden village. But the design of the garden village-like extensions and Amsterdam School-style buildings had some similarities that can be seen in almost all designs. Total design was an important aspect here. The Amsterdam School architects aimed for a total design by designing both exterior and interior and even the (street) furniture. This made use of various crafts. Sculpture or ironwork can be seen on many Amsterdam School buildings. Garden villages were also designed as an overall design. The houses and the urban plan were set up with the inclusion of parks, public facilities and club buildings. Social life was also taken into account here, as was the case with the Amsterdam School. The distinction between the movements lay in that the Amsterdam School was an overall design at block level, while the garden city idea was expressed at district or village level. Both sought uniformity in design.

The general penchant for traditionalism and the countryside that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century also influenced the design of both movements. The village-like design with rural architecture in the English cottage style introduced by architects Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker at Letchworth (England) in 1903 reflected this need within the design of garden villages. With the Amsterdam School, the use of craft techniques and materials as well as design inspired by nature and countryside were clear examples of this. The use of historicising architecture and artisanal design allowed the village feel to be expressed in garden villages and Amsterdam School designs.¹⁶



Rural influences on Het Schip (Amsterdam)

¹⁶ Smit, *De Droom van Howard*, 51.

The designers of garden villages and architects of the Amsterdam School also took the human dimension into account. The occupations and lives of residents were taken as a starting point for design. In garden villages, for instance, the scale of the village and the distance to amenities were important in the design: everyone had to have good access to green spaces and shops. They also chose to design single-family houses instead of massive housing complexes. Amsterdam School architecture also focused on individuality and the human scale in design. The buildings and interiors were tailored to individual needs and the surroundings. The different houses in a building block were often arranged slightly differently or had different decorative elements.

The distinctive ideals of the Amsterdam School and the garden city idea emerged from the zeitgeist of the early twentieth century. On the one hand, this led to a similarity in the ideals and objectives from which designs were made. On the other hand, it also ensured the same organisational form and corresponding features in design. As a result, these two movements can be seen in historical perspective as different elaborations within the same body of thought, although this also converged in several Amsterdam School garden villages.

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IMAGES

Image 1. Roel Siebrand

Image 2. Floris Weekhout

Image 3. Stadsarchief Amsterdam / Cornelis Willem Jacob Schorteldoek

Image 4. Stadsarchief Amsterdam / Bernard F. Eilers

Image 5. Museum Het Schip

Image 6. Stadsarchief Amsterdam / Martin Alberts

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