

An interview with Jan Hengeveld

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FIG. 1. 37 Herenstraat. This small street, in which Stadsherstel owns nine premises, has served as a touchstone for restoration in Amsterdam during the last twenty-five years. From being in a run-down condition almost beyond redemption, it has been successfully rehabilitated. This view is of one of the company's properties seen from another.



FIG. 2. The Stadsherstel symbol.

There is no need to stress that Amsterdam is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and an urban environment that approaches the ideal. To live in one of the houses facing on to one of the major canals or the smaller ones that connect them by cutting across the rational, concentric layout of the seventeenth-century city, is to experience urban living at its best. Everyone who has been to Amsterdam knows that already; but what makes it especially interesting today is the way in which the city is succeeding in preserving both its beauty and its life. Walking along the canal quays, past the tall, narrow brick houses of which the facades seem to blossom into fantastic architectural flowers as they reach their crowning gables, there is no sense of a museum city. True, many merchants' houses and warehouses now have other uses, but they are alive as well as continuing to play their part in the characteristic townscape.

This is a great achievement, due to the activities of many individuals and organizations; but an observant stroller along the canal quays will notice a particular emblem that recurs on many buildings and indicates that one organization has been, or will be, responsible for something. The three St. Andrew crosses, Amsterdam's coat of arms, are linked vertically by a pile that symbolizes the city's special structural problem of building on water (Fig. 2); and this may be seen on metal plaques attached to houses or painted on signs attached to buildings that are, or shortly will be, under restoration and conversion. This is the emblem of the *Amsterdamse Maatschappij tot Stadsherstel N.V.* (Amsterdam Company for Town Restoration Ltd.), and we sat in a house with facades to two canals talking to Jan Hengeveld, the organization's director, about its work and ambitions (Fig. 3).

It all began with Jhr. Six van Hillegom,¹ a committed Amsterdamer who was proud of the fact that one of his burgomaster ancestors had been painted by Rembrandt. It is, of course, a characteristic of the city to show a practical concern for the old; we remembered the seventeenth-century portrait groups of merchants who had set up charitable foundations in which old people could be housed and live together in comfortable independence. These organizations confirm that 'a group of individuals can come together and take corporate responsibility' which represents 'the practical, social application of the philosophy that things must be made to work'.²

It is not fanciful to suggest that this spirit has persisted into the present century, and it is noteworthy that several of the seventeenth-century foundations in Dutch towns are still offering accommodation for the elderly in the original buildings, although many of the larger building groups erected for social welfare in Amsterdam (such as the *Burgerweeshuis* which is now the city's splendid *Historisch Museum* after conversion by B. van Kasteel and J. Schipper Jr.) have been adapted to other uses. Nor is it stretching this point to suggest that a similar spirit has

¹ See Balk, J., etc., *Mens en Monument, 25 jaar Stadsherstel Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1981.

² Clark, K., *Civilisation*, London 1969, 197.

extended beyond old people to include old buildings; and that leads us back to Jhr. Six van Hillegom. He regretted that the inner city was beginning to be dominated by large commercial organizations after World War II and that the number of residents was decreasing. How could this tendency be reversed? Positive action would have to be taken, and being a good business man (another traditional Amsterdam characteristic) he knew that sentimental attachment to the past was not enough. An insurance company, with which Jhr. van Hillegom was associated, agreed to take shares in a new company promoted to invest money in properties that could produce a return on the capital; and this lead was followed by other insurance companies, shipping firms and banks which contributed to a combined share capital of £¼ million (1956 value).

It was another ten years before Jan Hengeveld joined the company in 1966. How did this happen?

I studied economics at the University of Amsterdam, and then I went to work in a paper mill, with responsibility for the factory outside Amsterdam and also for a department in the city itself. I was there for eleven years, during which I had begun to develop a great interest in the old buildings around me and their restoration—which I could see was turning into a major problem. My wife Paulien, who shares my interest and has worked devotedly for many years for a number of conservation organizations, had a friend whose father was chairman of an insurance company. One day we began to talk about old buildings, and as a result I was introduced to his colleague, who was a member of the board of directors of Stadsherstel; two months later I was offered the job as director of Stadsherstel.

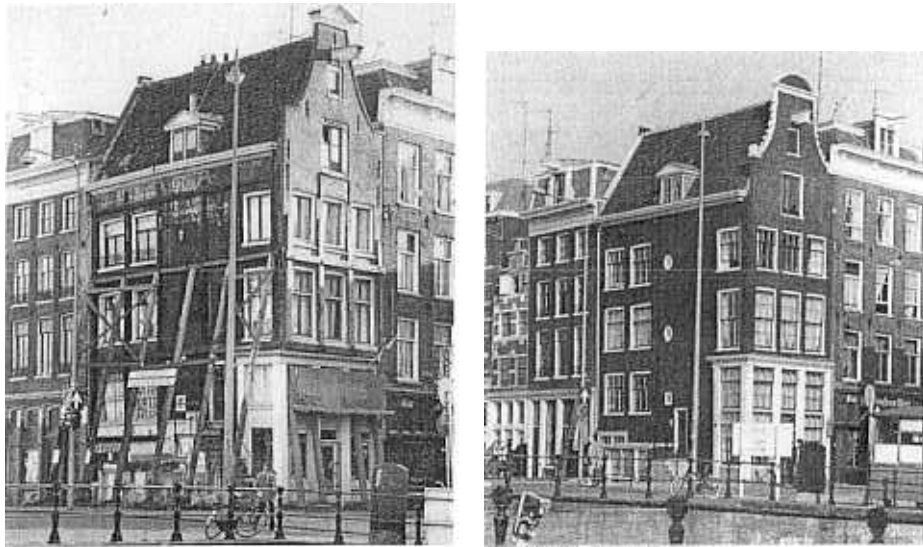
That was in 1966. How many properties had the company acquired by then?

We had ninety houses in our possession, of which twenty had been restored; but 1966 was quite an important year for our company because, as a result of obtaining mortgages on the buildings already restored, we were able to increase our capital, increase momentum, and begin to pay a dividend to our shareholders. Just how great that momentum has been is clear enough. We now have about three hundred houses in our possession, of which two-thirds have been restored. We are aiming to buy between ten and twenty houses each year, and to restore about fifteen annually. We now have sixty-three shareholders, made up principally of banks, insurance companies and department stores; and our reputation and standing are perhaps best confirmed by having the Central Bank of the Netherlands as our second most important shareholder and the Amsterdam City Council as another. Our capital assets are now about £11,000,000, our issued share capital about £9,000,000, and our rental income about £1,100,000.

Obviously this is a commercially successful story in the Amsterdam mercantile tradition; but then we began to discuss what it has meant for the city's old buildings. What is the company's policy on the type of buildings they buy? There were some interesting answers. In the first place they look for the most dilapidated houses they can find. They know that if they do not buy them no one else will, and then the houses will be



FIG. 3. Jan Hengeveld.



Figs 4 and 5. 1 Nieuwendijk, before and after restoration.

lost. Over the years they have come to specialize in saving corner properties which are vulnerable yet of great importance visually in the traditional townscape (Figs 4, 5). Being where they are, they cost more to restore since they have two street facades instead of one; and because they are not supported on two sides by other houses, like the majority along the quays or in the narrow streets, they have a tendency to lean outwards, sometimes in two directions. If one of these corner properties collapses or is demolished, the loss is greater than of it alone; often it sets in train the physical and visual disintegration of a whole group. On the other hand, if a corner property is rescued, restored and given a viable use, the effect can often be felt sideways in one or both directions and a whole block might be stabilized and improved as a result. As we walked around the city it was easy to see how this policy has been applied, and how successful it has been.

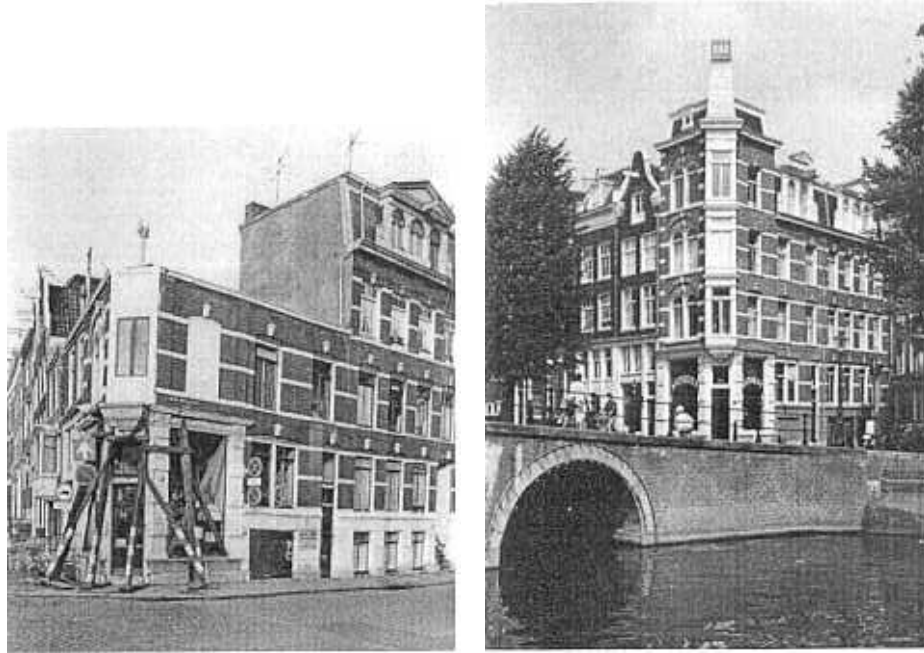
Linked with this policy is that of trying to acquire groups of buildings rather than individual houses (Fig. 6). This means that there is greater flexibility in adapting the plans to new uses, although the company tries to ensure that internal changes such as combining two buildings horizontally are not apparent from the outside. They believe that there ought to be a relationship between the external appearance and the interior. They would be reluctant, for example, to remove party-walls—partly for structural reasons obviously, but also because they want to



FIG. 6. 5, 7 and 9 Prinsengracht. A fine group of houses, of which no. 5 on the corner is especially important as a late example (after the middle of the seventeenth century) of a stepped gable. No. 9 is dated 1653. The whole group has been restored.

preserve the historical forms and divisions of their properties. In this connection we discussed the recently completed work at 539 Keizersgracht (Figs 7, 8), in which the plan has been simplified by removing two internal walls and a part of a third on the ground floor in order to make the available space more adaptable.³

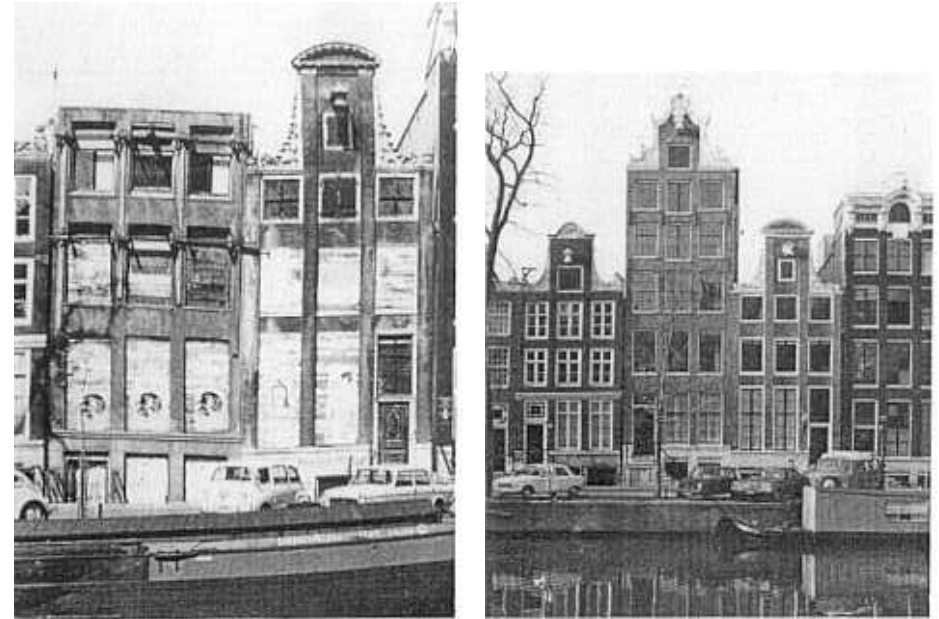
³ See *Restauratie. Keizersgracht 539, 541, 543, Nieuwe Spiegelgracht 22*, Amsterdam 1984.



FIGS 7 and 8. 539 Keizersgracht before and after restoration. The upper parts of this dilapidated building were missing, and the whole has been reconstructed from old photographs and drawings.

This is a building in which a number of rather controversial questions are introduced. Firstly, it is a quite late nineteenth-century house which was not listed; but it is on an important corner site. Secondly, although originally four storeys high, it had been partly demolished in 1959; two floors only were left, and they were in such poor condition that they had to be taken down and rebuilt. The appearance and detailing of the missing floors, including a corner turret, had to be reconstructed from old photographs. This seemed to raise a number of questions about conservation philosophy; is there ever disagreement, we asked, about the degree of restoration?

Sometimes we see things differently from our friends in the municipality, who have an official policy more or less forbidding the reconstruction of buildings that have already been pulled down. In such a case, the normal request would be for a new design. But on the whole, my personal opinion is that few new designs within old groups of housing have been successful, and I believe there is a good case for reconstruction if there are plenty of photographs and drawings on which to base it (Figs 9, 10, 11, 12).



FIGS 9 and 10. 62-64 Keizersgracht. This extensive restoration completed in 1973 incorporates twenty-seven studios, a library and administrative offices for the Conservatorium of Music.

This led us to talk about the very large Blaeu Erf project that we had visited earlier (Figs 13, 14). The largest single contract the company has tackled so far, it involves two groups of buildings divided by a narrow side street, on a prominent site close to the Royal Palace and the New Church.⁴ The first phase is already complete, and this has provided housing accommodation, shops and offices. The second and larger phase, now under construction, incorporates quite an amount of new building for social housing, as well as public houses, shops and private housing. What is the company's policy about the design of such new building, although it is not normally on such a large scale as in the Blaeu Erf project?

Generally we show clearly what is new; but we use traditional materials. We have a stock of materials from demolished buildings, and we are always on the look out for more. The municipality has a store too, and so do a number of specialist contractors. But obviously the situation is changing since fewer buildings are being demolished and more restored! In the work on the old buildings themselves we are constantly having to perform a balancing act between restoration and adaptation. We try to make use of the old elements such as doors and

⁴ See the *StadsHerstel Jaarverslag 1983*, 27f.



FIGS 11 and 12. 37 Bloemgracht before and after reconstruction in 1977. Unusually, this was a complete rebuilding and replacement of a house that was in poor structural condition and totally out of keeping with its surroundings. It was rebuilt as four residences in a more appropriate style.

ironmongery; but if these are neither available nor usable we have to introduce new. Again, in looking at the plans, we sometimes have to change staircases to make the revised plans workable. Sometimes we have to put in lifts. It all depends; but it is no good being too purist. We are not dealing with individual unique monuments, but with old buildings which would be lost completely if we did not save them and find a use; and we are also providing housing accommodation at reasonable rentals. These two major considerations require flexibility of interpretation. Nor is there any point in denying that we are commercially minded. We have to be to succeed, and we know that people want to live in the city in surroundings that are (and look) historic, and in interiors that are nostalgically reminiscent of the past (Figs 15, 16); and so we try to keep or make the traditional character of an interior, for example, in detailing balustrades on new staircases.

This caused us to wonder about how the company selected the architects. Their policy in the past has been to work with seven or eight practices, all experienced in working on historic buildings. Each has its turn; but gradually the company has been building up an office of experienced technicians who can undertake some of the jobs. However, the last thing the company wants is uniformity of work in the buildings they restore, so they intend to continue using their external architects,



FIGS 13 and 14. The Blauw Erf project, the largest undertaken by StadsHerstel. In the upper photograph work is in progress on the first phase to the right, while the buildings on the left of this view show the seriously dilapidated condition of all in the group. The lower photograph shows the first phase after completion, and work in progress on the other buildings.

FIG. 15. 19 Stromarkt; a rehabilitated interior.



maybe alternating with their own staff. Similarly, they generally work with experienced building contractors whom they know. Before the present recession they normally negotiated a tender with a single selected contractor, but now they invite three or four to compete. Interestingly, the successful one has to pay the costs of the others' calculations.

How does the company acquire the properties? Do they look for them? Do they bid for them? 'We are now very well known in the city, and so we

FIG. 16. 21 Herenmarkt; part of the residential accommodation in a restored house.



can afford to be passive in the property market. We wait for houses to be offered, and I generally have a strong feeling as a result of experience about which we can buy and make profitable'. How closely do they work with the municipality?

We have excellent co-operation. Although we sometimes bought unlisted houses when 1850 was the official terminal date, we are now concerned only with listed buildings and this means that we can obtain grants or subsidies of up to 50% from central government, province and municipality; but we work all the time with and through the municipality. This grant is for that part of the work that is restoration; but as we are also a housing company we can obtain support from the Ministry of Housing when we are forming accommodation for low-rent social housing. I suppose about 60% of our work is pure restoration on an average, and we negotiate our historic building grant on that basis. Central heating, baths and such improvements come under the Ministry of Housing's grant.

Conservation in general often comes under fire for being 'elitist' and benefiting the middle classes at the expense of the poorer residents who might be compelled to leave a district as the result of a conservation policy. Is the company ever criticized for this?

Yes, of course. But there is no simple answer. Either we buy the houses ourselves or the municipality buys the houses and sells them to us. We restore them and then lease them—we are not allowed to resell. We have limited our profit margins to such a point that they are far below what would be acceptable to a normal

FIG. 17. 11–13 Reguliersgracht. Two typical Amsterdam warehouses restored and converted for residential accommodation and a restaurant.



⁵ The work of Stadsherstel may be seen as a justification for the small, self-motivated private agency, for it is difficult to believe that a similar volume of work could have been done by any official organization with a staff of only 17 (12 professional and 5 clerical) and overheads accounting for only 13% of its annual turnover.

⁶ It should be recorded that in the Jordaan district of Amsterdam the City Council is making strenuous efforts together with the Ministry of Housing to avoid 'gentrification', not only through the use of additional subsidies to the restoration company but also by means of rent subsidies to the last inhabitants to enable them to return after the restoration is complete.

commercial company. Our task is to save the Amsterdam townscape, and decisions about the appropriate housing mix stem from the municipality's policy. The demand for houses in the inner city is great, and the authorities see our work as part of their renewal activities, undertaken by us because they themselves do not want to restore.⁵ We and they co-operate comfortably towards the same end—which is to conserve Amsterdam's character by renewing its life (Fig. 17, 18) and restoring its dilapidated buildings.⁶ Our work will continue to expand; and so will participation in that work. In 1983 we initiated the idea of 'Friends' of our work, and we now have about 300 with a yearly increase of twenty to thirty.

FIG. 18. 38 Herenstraat. This very dilapidated, heavily shored-up building was restored in less than one year. Completed in 1980, it is now an extremely desirable house and the ground floor shop is used by a dealer in old musical instruments. The facade was rebuilt, but the original gable decoration was re-used.



But besides encouraging others to share in our activities in this way, we also have in mind that a limited liability company such as ours is not allowed to receive money from a source such as the Prince Bernhard Foundation. 'Friends', on the other hand, may do so; and already the Blauw Erf project has benefited because of this possibility.

No wonder, we thought, that Amsterdam was once the chief banking centre of Europe! The Amsterdamers instinctively understand these things. Already we could see a vision in Jan Hengeveld's imagination of

FIG. 19. 1 Haarlemstraat. This building, dated 1685 in the cartouche on the facade, is important because of its location in the townscape. It is also unusually well documented and retains evidence of underground passages to other buildings and the Singel canal.



even more restorations in his beloved city. In the years to come the number of Stadherstel emblems affixed to houses along the canals will multiply, and the image of Amsterdam will be even more enhanced as dangerously leaning or already shored facades are saved from collapsing (Fig. 19). There will be more contented residents in the ideal urban environment; but there is still one major snag—the motor cars on the leafy quays.⁷ If the municipality can solve that problem the city will be

⁷ Granted that some vehicles are necessary in order to keep the inner city going, must the canals be lined with parked cars and none of the quays be restricted to pedestrians?

unrivalled for its quality of life and it will have sustained its seventeenth-century reputation as a community that was prepared to 'join in a corporate effort for the public good'.⁸

lark, *op.*

Photographs: Maarten Brinkgreve 1,3,4,5,7,10,12, Amsterdamse Mij tot Stadsherstel N.V. 6,8,9,11,13,14,15,17,18,19

Résumé

Il n'est nul besoin de rappeler qu'Amsterdam est l'une des plus belles cités du monde et qu'elle représente à peu près l'idéal de l'environnement urbain; mais ce qui est particulièrement intéressant aujourd'hui, c'est la manière dont elle préserve à la fois sa beauté et sa vitalité. Il s'agit là d'un grand succès, le résultat de l'action de nombreuses personnes et organisations. Cet article illustre le travail de l'une de ces dernières, la Amsterdamse Maatschappij tot Stadsherstel N.V. et de son directeur Jan Hengeveld.

La Stadsherstel fut fondée en 1956 et M. Hengeveld en devint membre dix ans après. L'association était alors devenue propriétaire de 90 maisons dont 20 avaient été restaurées; maintenant elle en possède environ 300 dont les deux tiers ont été restaurées. L'un des traits de sa tactique d'acquisition est qu'elle s'efforce d'acheter les bâtiments en plus mauvaises conditions car elle sait que si elle ne les achète pas, personne d'autre ne le fera et les maisons disparaîtront. De plus elle se spécialise dans la restauration des maisons d'angle car l'effet de la destruction de celles-ci est beaucoup plus important que leur seule disparition: souvent c'est le signal de la désintégration de tout un groupe de bâtiments. L'association s'intéresse aussi à des groupes de maisons car ceci lui permet une plus grande flexibilité d'adaptation à de nouveaux usages, habitation ou autres.

M. Hengeveld examine deux projets qui posent la question d'une totale reconstruction à partir de photographies et de dessins ainsi que la stratégie de l'association quant à de nouvelles constructions enclavés dans une groupe de bâtiments historiques ou simplement anciens. Il parle aussi du terme critique d' 'élitisme' souvent employé à propos de l'oeuvre de conservation d'une organisation comme la sienne. Il considère que c'est là le résultat de l'attitude de la municipalité qui a une politique différente en matière de rénovation urbaine. Pourtant il lui semble que son organisation et la municipalité s'entendent afin de promouvoir le même objectif: sauver le caractère spécifique d'Amsterdam en lui assurant une nouvelle vitalité et en restaurant ses bâtiments dilapidés.

Resumen

No hace falta insistir en que Amsterdam es una de las ciudades más bellas del mundo y un medio urbano que se aproxima al ideal; pero lo que la hace especialmente interesante hoy día es el modo en que está consiguiendo mantener tanto su belleza como su vida. Es ésta un gran logro debido a las actividades de muchos individuos y organizaciones, y el presente artículo trata de la obra de una de éstas últimas, el Amsterdamse Maatschappij tot Stadsherstel N.V. y su director Jan Hengeveld.

El Stadherstel se fundó en 1956 y el Sr. Hengeveld se unió a él diez años más tarde. Por aquellas fechas había adquirido ya 90 casas, de las cuales se habían restaurado 20; ahora posee unas 300, de las cuales se han restaurado dos terceras partes. Al comentar su política de compras, la compañía declaró que busca los edificios en peor estado ya que sabe que, de no adquirirlas ella, no lo hará nadie y se perderán las casas. Se especializa en la restauración de edificios situados al extremo de un grupo. puesto que, en caso de demolición o hundimiento, la pérdida resulta mucho mayor que la de la sola casa. A menudo pone en marcha el proceso de desintegración física y visual de todo un grupo. También tratan de adquirir grupos de casas porque esto permite mayor flexibilidad en adaptarlas para vivienda y otros fines.

El Sr. Hengeveld comenta dos proyectos que plantean la cuestión de una reconstrucción completa a partir de fotografías y dibujos, y la política de la compañía en cuanto al diseño de nuevos edificios en un grupo histórico o antiguo. También menciona la crítica del "elitismo" que se hace a veces sobre obras de conservación tales como las de su compañía. Cree que éstas constituyen la responsabilidad del municipio, que tiene su propia política de renovación urbana; pero cree que su compañía y el municipio están trabajando en buena armonía hacia un mismo objetivo, que es el de conservar el carácter de Amsterdam renovando su vida y restaurando edificios en malas condiciones.