

Utrecht Campus Developments: One University, Two Campuses

In recent decades the University of Utrecht has experienced a period of unprecedented growth. It is situated in three different environments: the historic city centre of Utrecht, an area east of Utrecht called the Uithof, and a campus located between these two poles. The development of the two sites outside the city centre requires concepts that respect their specific characteristics at the same time as making the most of the differences between them.

The Uithof

In the immediate postwar period the University of Utrecht grew very rapidly, becoming the largest university in the Netherlands. In 1958, when the historic city centre of Utrecht was no longer able to meet its needs, the Uithof was made available to the university for the purposes of expansion. In order to lay claim to the new site, the outer corners of the area were developed first, immediately establishing an extremely low-density development. Over the years the space between the corners was filled in as the need arose, following the path of least resistance. However, the outcome of this overhasty construction process in an excess of space – without a clear plan and without any idea of how a new university should look – was simply untenable and did not create any sense of coherence. No-one wanted to work there, no-one wanted to study there, and no-one was allowed to live there.

The Uithof found itself having to contend with both isolation and fragmentation. The site had a remote feel, cut off from the city as it was by a six-lane highway. The institutes, positioned far apart from each other, were separated by emptiness. There was no sense of connection, neither to each other nor to the institutes in the centre of the city. Due to this monoculture and the low building density, there was no basis for retail or cultural functions. As a result the Uithof did nothing more than soak up the overflow from the expanding university. Those who worked or studied there regarded themselves as the victims of this undesirable but inevitable situation.



The Ideal

As we started on a new urban plan for the Uithof in 1988,¹ we were confronted with this situation and tried to imagine our ideal Uithof. It should be a place where the various disciplines could flourish, bringing people together in a pleasant setting, influencing and stimulating each other. The result of this cross-pollination and healthy competition would be greater than the sum of its parts. The Uithof should be identifiable as a place for reflection, experiment and research that would be full of vitality thanks to a plurality of functions and a cheerful jumble of diverse individuals and institutes. It seemed so obvious.

Analysis

The Uithof is located in a beautiful park-meadow landscape of rivers and fields, country residences, hedges and the fortifications of the Hollandse Waterlinie, the water-based defence system on the banks of the meandering Old River Rhine. This landscape was the only feature of the area appreciated by everyone.

The structure of roads and buildings, which originated from the very first sketchy outline plan for the Uithof by van der Steur, had a strict orthogonal north-south/east-west orientation with straight roads and rectangular buildings. This mathematic angularity, detached from the context, taken straight from the drawing board and engraved into the landscape, gave some degree of structure to the area. The straightness of buildings and roads resulted in interesting confrontations with older, oblique elements of the landscape.

The existing buildings, although maybe not beautiful and despised by their users, were at least large, sturdy and striking. In some parts of the site, groupings of buildings in spatial and functional clusters, which also originated from the initial plan, were vaguely recognisable.

Points of Departure

How could a new urban plan contribute to the improvement of a degenerated, despised and neglected area? What could be done with the non-structure of thirty years of directionless development? Due to the poor condition of the Uithof, users were highly suspicious of anything that had to do with planning and construction. In the 1960s and 70s, attempts to establish a



Aerial shots showing the Uithof in 1972 (top) and in 1988 (bottom).





Collage (1988) showing the concept of the new urban plan for the Uithof.

serious, final plan for the Uithof failed outright. On the contrary, if anything these plans increased the suspicion that met any large-scale proposals. So, above all, any new plan would have to be lucid and comprehensible, and with as few rules as possible; it would have to appeal to those, who, in spite of everything, were prepared to consider new initiatives at the Uithof. This plan would have to be devoid of tempting final visions when no-one could even begin to imagine any form of improvement, devoid of droning stories when architects and urban planners should only maintain an embarrassed silence, and devoid of glossy documents when only built proofs of improvement would be accepted. A fundamental reordering of the site would have to be realised with primary tools; not complex, but straightforward.

The Plan

The main goal of the new urban plan was to resolve the isolation of the individual institutes. New buildings should seek out the proximity of exist-



Isometric drawing (1988) showing a possible development of the central cluster.

ing buildings, developing a concentration and network of different functions in order to create identifiable neighbours, encouraging people to make contact with each other, exchange ideas and share facilities. The increased building density would provide the critical mass required as a basis for any secondary functions.

The Uithof had to be cured from its addiction to space. We therefore introduced a new concept: scarcity. By limiting the constructible space, the new urban plan demanded a sharply focused approach towards building development, a deliberate choice of location and position of neighbouring buildings as well as a concise definition of the desired relationship to those neighbours. The existing rudimentary grouping of buildings and the strict orthogonal layout were adopted as principles for a clear ordering of the landscape, architecture and infrastructure.

New buildings were concentrated in clusters with strict boundaries. Inside the cluster boundaries, the pattern of development could evolve freely,

with neither rules for building heights nor programmatic restrictions. Outside the clusters, however, building was not permitted. The existing buildings could not be denied or camouflaged. In a healthy urban setting, an ugly building is not a problem. This urban plan aimed to achieve a sympathetic integration of the problematic buildings within the cluster boundaries, where recognisable groups of buildings should be created: old and new, beautiful and ugly – a natural hotchpotch. Concentration within the clusters would make the individual buildings each other's immediate neighbours.

The open, green landscape should contrast with the compact development of the clusters, functioning both as the separation between different clusters and the binding element of the Uithof as a whole. In order to reinforce the contrast between landscape and buildings, old and new, the combination of oblique historic landscape elements and the strict orthogonal orientation of the buildings was retained. This interplay of meadows, old hedges, meandering watercourses as well as right-angled roads and buildings reflected the development of the Uithof: old was oblique, new was straight.²

A Centre

A university of this size needs a clear centre. The cluster in the heart of the Uithof aims to fulfil this function. In the northern half of this central cluster, the large solitary buildings from the 1960s and 70s were loosely grouped together. To create sufficient density in the centre, a compact southern half was conceived opposite the open northern one. An exception was made to the principal that buildings would be subject to as few rules as possible. For the Kasbah zone these included the highest possible building density, the development of the corners of the plots – 'chunks of Kasbah' – and the specification of blank walls along shared plot boundaries. These rules meant that the buildings could be built right up against one another, without narrow alleyways in between them; this in turn also meant that light and air had to be designed into the buildings.

The solid structure of the Kasbah zone with its continuous façade was specified to contrast with the large solitary buildings in the northern half. The area between the two parts of the central cluster with its concentration



Aerial photograph (2007) showing the concentration of faculties, university library, Educatorium, HBO-institutes, housing projects, and other functions in the central cluster.



Aerial photograph (2007) showing the main axis of the central cluster, mutating into a central boulevard.

of public transport, cyclists and pedestrians was designated as a central boulevard.

Developments

Since our first version of the new urban plan in 1992, there have been significant changes at the Uithof. The urban plan easily accommodated a considerably higher level of development and an enrichment of the programme. New connections were established, generating synergy between various parties. These developments are clearly visible in the central cluster.

Around 1990, the decision was made to locate several faculties of the Utrecht School of Higher Practical Education at the Uithof in order to concentrate these departments in one location and stimulate collaboration with the university, which was the new policy of the Ministry of Education. Four of these large institutes were built in the Kasbah zone. Despite the low construction budgets, these buildings established their own typology within the terms of the required compact architectural style and the related internal access routes, patios and inner gardens. The connections between the buildings allowed the occupants to share facilities, which were therefore used more intensively and efficiently.

An unexpected development occurred regarding housing at the Uithof. The University of Utrecht used to be fundamentally opposed to the construction of residential buildings at the Uithof; the view was that housing would restrict the expansion of the university and the location of specialized facilities such as laboratories. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, Utrecht had the most serious shortage of student housing in the Netherlands. At the same time, the number of new students going to university declined, meaning that henceforth universities would be competing with each other. The ability to provide sufficient student accommodation became a key factor in this competition. Utrecht scored very poorly on this point. To become competitive, the university authorities made a dramatic political U-turn and proposed that 1,000 student units should be built at the Uithof. Accordingly, we added a cluster specifically for housing to the master plan, directly to the south of the central cluster. We saw this as a very real opportunity for the Uithof to become a true campus, housing members of the university within its own boundaries.



South-east part of the central cluster with central boulevard, 'Kasbah-zone' and university library by Wiel Arets Architects.



South-west part of the central cluster with central boulevard, 'Kasbah-zone' and FEM-School by Mecanoo Architecten.

The first housing project with 1,001 rooms was a great success. The latest generation of students was far more willing to live at the Uithof. Fresh, spacious rooms with fantastic views and fast Internet connections located within walking distance of the university proved enough of an attraction to tempt students away from the picturesque atmosphere of the historic city centre. This success paved the way for a second and a third housing project, this time not in a separate cluster but combined with other functions in the heart of the central cluster. Preparations are being made for a fourth housing project for nurses from the teaching hospital, guest lecturers and foreign students. The number of residents at the Uithof will have grown from 0 to 3,000 in the space of just fifteen years.

The revitalisation of the campus also encouraged the relocation of the university library from the historic centre of Utrecht to the Uithof. All those involved in the development initially felt that the historical location was the place where the library of the 375-year-old university should remain. By contrast, our dream was to have a university library at the Uithof. In order to give this dream a chance, we had left the most attractive site in the central cluster undeveloped. As the lack of space in the city centre became unbearable, this alternative central place was appealingly available, and the library did indeed move to the Uithof.

The new university library in the heart of the Uithof forms a major link in a remarkable network. The Educatorium by Rem Koolhaas' O.M.A., which contains a canteen as well as lecture and examination halls for the surrounding faculties, was built first, acting as the missing link between two older, originally solitary buildings. A lounge/walkway connects these buildings with the library. This walkway/lounge overlooks a new café that has a basketball court on its roof and a bookshop built underneath one of the old buildings, linking the café to this network. The synergy generated by this network improves the functioning of the new buildings and revitalises the older buildings at the same time, typifying the development of the Uithof from a scattered collection of isolated monoliths into an interactive community.

There is another way in which the determined compact building structure generates special forms of symbiosis. One of the faculties of the Utrecht School of Higher Practical Education needed to expand. In addition, a



second student housing complex was required. In the challenging years after the stock market crash, both of these projects proved financially impossible. By stacking the two buildings within the Kasbah zone and combining them into one project, the plans became viable. As a result, the southern block of the residential complex was built on top of the five-storey extension of the faculty.

This phenomenon of symbiosis also occurs in other clusters. In the north-west cluster, three parties (TNO, RIVM, and the University of Utrecht) are together building a shared environmental laboratory, which is linked to the various institutes via walkways. In the new north cluster, a multi-storey car park for 2,000 vehicles and a transport hub became feasible thanks to the cooperation between four parties (Municipality of Utrecht, University of Utrecht, Utrecht Academic Hospital and Hogeschool van Utrecht).

With so much attention focused on the building projects, the Uithof's public spaces had been largely neglected. That situation is beginning to

Computer animation (2007) showing the different phases of the Uithof in 1988 (dark grey), 2000 (grey), 2007 (light grey) and a potential development scenario (white).

change. The main axis of the central cluster is being adapted for high-performance public transport and completely redesigned with wide footpaths, flowerbeds and a cycle 'highway'. When the work is completed, this space will take on the function of a central boulevard.³

Good public spaces are the backbone of any healthy urban plan. In this context 'good' means that a public space is lively and stimulates interaction between people, and between people and buildings, facilitating relaxation, movement and transport. In short, it should function as a stage for public life in all its unpredictable variety. However, public spaces don't simply stop at the doorstep of buildings. Particularly (semi-)public buildings on campuses – such as libraries, sports halls, theatres, shops and cafés – are part of this public space and need to be designed as such. Emptiness kills public space. So it needs to be filled with life and charged with a variety of activities. The surrounding buildings provide this charge, and it must be a powerful charge. The critical mass will generate this power. The bigger the space the harder it will be to provide that charge. Consequently, public spaces should always be a little cramped rather than too big, like pubs and kitchens.

Our urban plan eradicates emptiness by squeezing out oversize. By forcing a high density, we build up critical mass, and by stimulating a mixture of functions we introduce a variety of programmes into the area.

University College Utrecht

By the 1980s, the principle of equal opportunities for everyone had led to an unforeseen mediocrity in education. In its search for ways to halt this process, the University of Utrecht came up with the idea of developing a new study programme for their most promising students. The university decided to found University College Utrecht with a bachelor degree programme structured according to the Anglo-Saxon model, where students can follow courses in a number of broad disciplines, instead of the traditional, limited fields of study pursued in separate faculties. The College will also provide housing, care and three meals a day for the students on its own campus. As a small-scale development, the College complements the large-scale developments taking place at the Uithof.

A top location is essential for such a prestigious college, and in 1997 the University of Utrecht found itself in the fortunate position of being able to



purchase the oldest part of the Kromhout army barracks complex. This site is located in a luxurious residential area to the east of the old city centre. By virtue of its location, the new University College has become the perfect stepping stone between the Uithof and the university institutes in the historic city centre.

Aerial photograph showing University College Utrecht in 2007.

Analysis

The newly purchased site was divided into two very different parts. The northern half was defined by the former parade ground: a rectangular pebble field surrounded by precisely arranged and nearly identical barracks. The buildings in the southern half of the complex were much more loosely arranged, comprising former workshops, offices and a mess hall, each with its own distinct appearance and different from the buildings surrounding the parade ground. The overall aspect of the area was dominated by the sight of neglected shrubberies, poorly maintained roads and parking lots.

The Plan

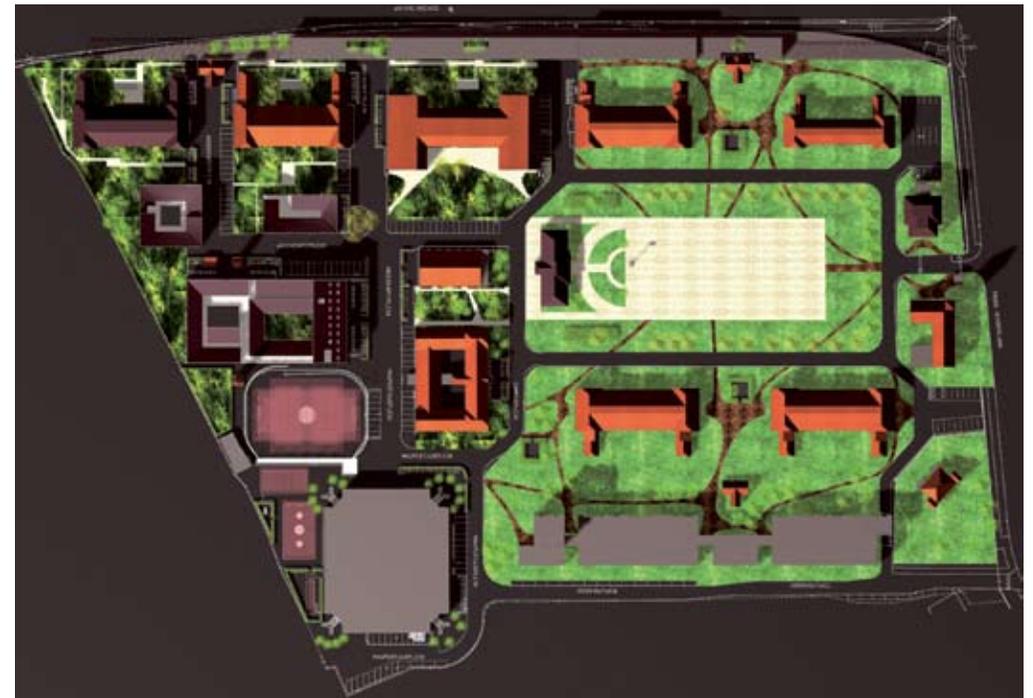
Together with Michael van Leeuwen we developed a concept for the regeneration of the area.⁴ The courses of study at the College are strictly organised. The formal buildings around the parade ground formed the perfect home for this educational part of the programme. The southern half and the fringes of the area were perfect to accommodate the less formal elements of the lives of the students who would also be living on the campus.

We chose to reinforce the characteristics of the two areas by accentuating the difference between studying and living. We surrounded the strictly symmetrical buildings around the parade ground with carefully manicured lawns. Flagstone paths were laid along the most logical walking lines. A large part of the pebble parade ground was maintained as a reference to the area's previous function. This all gave the educational part of the area the classic atmosphere of a *campus*.

In the southern part, we filled the open spaces with varied volumes and sports facilities. By reconstructing the existing buildings and maintaining the old chimneys, the *couleur locale* gave this part of the area the informal atmosphere of a *village*. The layout of this 'village' emphasises the contrast with the campus. This informal part of the area was paved with red bricks like a farmyard. Each building has its own garden with terraces and hedges. The periphery is bordered by long new buildings for student housing.

Soldiers and Students

How can an ensemble built by the army in the early twentieth century promote the cause of a university in the twenty-first century? The classically



symmetrical structure of the army property was strictly hierarchical and rigid. Visitors entered through a gate and reached the large central space by passing between two guard houses. All of the army barracks' important functions were located next to the central parade ground: the barracks on the flanks and the command building at the head. Any other functions were further away and slightly hidden.

The hierarchy of the design of the premises gave the area its own, not solely military, logic: a guarded or controlled entrance, the soldiers or students making up the flanks and the commander or Dean at the head, with the parade ground as the forum taking precedence over all the other humbler functions. The power of this rigid structure lies in the logic of how the classical spatial components are arranged. The ensemble is in fact a universal model that proves to be as functional for a twenty-first-century university as it was for a twentieth-century barracks, demonstrating that rigidity can also be sustainable.

Computer animation (1999) showing the urban plan for University College Utrecht by Architectenbureau Art Zaaier and Architectuurbureau Sluifjmer & van Leeuwen.

All the available space at the College has been fully developed. This year the gardens around the student housing project, designed by my own office, will be planted. When this work is finished, the University College campus will be completed. The contrast with the development of the Uithof could hardly be greater. There the university has been developed for almost fifty years, and only now can we begin to see some sort of structure. It is wonderful that the College is finished, and it is wonderful that it will never be possible to say the same of the Uithof.

Notes

- 1 In 1988 the commission for a new urban plan for the Uithof was given to the Office for Metropolitan Architecture by the University of Utrecht, with Art Zaaijer as its chief architect. With the opening of his own firm in 1992, it was decided that he should continue to design and coordinate the development of the master plan as urban supervisor for the University of Utrecht.
- 2 The urban plan for the Uithof was developed in close cooperation with the Building Department of the University of Utrecht, and particularly with its visionary director, Aryan Sikkema, who also commissioned, on behalf of the University of Utrecht, the majority of buildings within the urban plan.
- 3 The central boulevard was designed by West 8 up to the final design stage. The IBU (Ingenieursbureau Utrecht) developed the working drawings.
- 4 The urban and landscape plan for the campus of the University College was designed in cooperation with Michael van Leeuwen from the Architectuurbureau Slijmer en van Leeuwen.

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Aerial photograph (2007) showing the 'village area' at University College Utrecht with the student housing project by Architectenbureau Art Zaaijer.



Photograph (2007) showing the student housing project, building W by Architectenbureau Art Zaaijer.