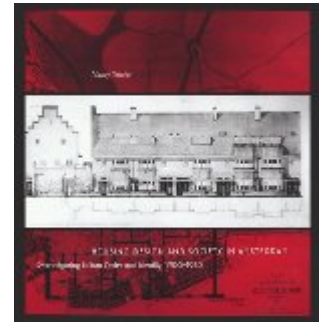


**Nancy Stieber.** *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900-1920.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. viii + 386 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-77417-6.



**Reviewed by** Pierre Yves Saunier

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*Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam* is a rewarding book for many reasons, not only because its jacket is beautiful and smart (good points for the Chicago University Press design team, with special mention for the astute location of the jacket illustration caption) and not only for the praising backcover quotes, still so unfamiliar and unpleasant to this reviewer but for many better reasons.

First, it brings elements on one of what is too often called a "small country." In speaking of Europe, the Netherlands—together with Finland, Switzerland, Belgium and many others—is not what the academics call a "country." Also, the Netherlands, together with Finland, Switzerland or Belgium and many others, is not what the academics call a "good subject." It is easier to get accepted in journals, reviews, teaching staffs and conference when you work on Germany, France or England rather than on Portugal, Austria or Norway. Languages surely do matter, but I do bet there are some cultural "iron" laws, linked to the professional historical market and to the ways hierarchies are built, that prevent many historians

from taking interest in "small countries," in the fear that their work might be labeled as "small work" and themselves as "small historians." Nancy Stieber, under circumstances that brought her to Amsterdam (and now have taken her back to the University of Massachusetts where she teaches art), has accepted the challenge for her MIT Ph.D. The result is a reward both for her and for us. She has found a relevant ground for her problematic, and we are given a book that will interest all those who have an interest in housing, city planning, and urban reform in the Netherlands, but whose inability to read Dutch has killed their curiosity. Being one of them, I thank Stieber for her work.

But this is not all. The book is also rewarding because, though she holds a strong problematic line, Stieber does not make any intellectual hype. Nowhere does she talk about "rethinking," "revisiting," or going "beyond" this or that, and she never forces the reader to credit her with writing a "new history" of architecture. This is very refreshing, as well as the ways Stieber uses footnotes. The introduction pays tribute to Bourdieu,

Deleuze, Lefebvre, Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault and Harvey (in the order of appearance). The rest of the book develops Stieber's own reflections, without calling and dropping names as alibis at the bottom of a page (though the footnotes are at the end of the book, and this is tedious as usual). Indeed, Stieber has built upon all of these authors, and she acknowledges her debt, but she also takes full responsibility for what she writes and demonstrates.

From the start, Stieber makes her aims clear. Her interest is in the history of architecture, and she develops this interest in a very specific direction. This study, she writes, "begins from the notion that the movement for improved mass housing in Europe catalyzed new patterns of public architecture patronage, and that this experiment in creating architecture for the public good is illustrative of issues central both to the modern welfare state and architectural modernism. Accordingly, this study does not approach architecture from the view internal to the discipline, that is an object-oriented view trying to explain the genesis of particular forms. This is not a book about style: the development of the Amsterdam School has been ably described and its forms analyzed elsewhere. Instead, the aim has been to provide the social history of a particular struggle to define architecture as knowledge, art, profession and social service" (p. 2). After reading the book, I must say that Stieber was faithful to her agenda of treating architecture as a product of the cultural field, an analytical tool she borrows from Pierre Bourdieu because she considers that it "offers no deterministic hypotheses," but nevertheless allows to grasp the constraints that weigh on the architects, in a manner that refuses the false doomed choice between Marx and Riegl, e.g. between the autonomy and the instrumentality of art.

Through the case of the aesthetical and technical control of housing in Amsterdam, Stieber conveys a sense of how architects participated to

the arena opened to professionals by the "rise of the social" in modern western societies, and gives stimulating views on the construction of the welfare society, its appending and contested definitions of "public good" and "general interest." The book is then to be recommended far beyond the sphere of those who are interested in the history of architecture. All the scholars who consider the city as a key-locus of social changes that are bunched together under the term of modernity will benefit from reading, converging, or engaging Stieber's findings. The quest for urban order lays at the heart of her study on housing design. We have a long list of books and articles that deal with urban reform at the turn of the century in the industrialized world, and *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam* takes place on the shelf alongside Guido Zucconi, Gwendolyn Wright, M-C Boyer, Paul Rabinow, Jon Teaford, Paul Boyer, Brian Ladd, Kenneth Fox, Martin Schiesl, Christian Topalov, Patrizia Dogliani, and many others.

This was accomplished through a three part book, that, after having mapped the theater of housing reform with its political and professional forces, pays equal attention to the question of housing plans and housing facades design. Through each of these two dimensions, that Stieber locates as well in the "discourses of hygiene and aesthetics" as in their specific context (for example, showing how the separation between plan and facade is a product from an administrative and professional division of work), she wants to examine the attempts to normalize this aspect of daily life that the "dwelling" is, stressing how much the housing question is crucial for the various segments of the Dutch political landscape. For plans and for facades, Stieber then examines in double aimed chapters the extent of government control, the professional's role in defining standards, and the application of these standards for the whole community. The construction is all right, and fits very well with the

author's aims, but some screws might have come loose.

It seems to me that this is the case with Chapters Four and Seven, the two chapters that deal with the attempts to "civilize" the working class in its ways of dwelling and in its tastes. First, Stieber announces in her introduction that those chapters were to be devoted to "the professional role in shaping working class behavior," while these chapters (and especially Chapter Four) address the reformers' attempts to "civilize the working class," whether the reformers be lay or professional people. Second, those two chapters are more chaotic in their conception than the rest of the book. For example in Chapter Four, the "tests" that Stieber uses to track the "civilizing project"--a notion she carefully distinguishes from the "civilizing process" put forward by Norbert Elias, and about which she writes stimulating considerations--appear one after the other, in a semi-detached way that broke my reading. The ways she jumps from the experiences of one cooperative housing society to the "parlor question" is still a mystery to me. Idem with Chapter Seven, where the theme of interior decoration of workers' houses bursts in a part of the book that is supposed to be devoted to facades.

For sure, Stieber proves that this is part of the aesthetic discourse, and that the considerations about popular interior decoration has strong echoes with considerations about what exterior decoration should be, but still the step is a bit elliptic. Maybe this is because Nancy Stieber found less material to address the question of how aesthetic criterion were proposed by housing societies regarding the facades of their projects, but also maybe because she is less comfortable in this question, as the fact that the two chapters dealing with shaping working-class behavior are less coherent than the rest of the book would signify. But who would not be, when like Stieber you try to keep a balance that was not always kept between the criterion that the civilizers and reformers

wanted to promote, and the ways the civilized and reformed proposed their own criterion. Indeed, Stieber is very keen on that, developing what she said in her introduction about the double aspect of the disciplines dealing with the regulation of the social sphere and especially of daily life. Building on Foucault's reflections about the power/knowledge connection that bends emancipation towards new forms of domination, Stieber ranks with Charles Taylor to consider that the ambivalence between emancipation and domination is a tension that goes through all of the disciplines that take the human being as a subject, in all the views of the world that consider progress as an aim, and in all the aspects of the rising social sphere. Hence her continuous attention to the way cooperative housing societies propose their own conceptions of plans and facades, their own solution of dwelling organization, their own definition of the "good living" in the face of the ones proposed by confessional or socialist reformers and by professionals such as architects or physicians. This is also the richness of Chapters Four and Seven, and the readers might accept paying the price of a little less coherence for that.

They might be even more willing since they will receive a lot from their reading. It offered me some fascinating moments, that some weaknesses could not darken. Yes, it is true that I found overwhelming the "rhetoric of the hammer" that bring so many American scholars to expose their full argument in their introduction, to repeat the relevant part in the chapters' introductions, to develop the argument and then to paint another layer in the partial and general conclusions. Stieber is especially performant in that. But it would be a bad trial to accuse her for something that is but a cultural pattern, as French and Italian scholars have their own.

More seriously, I am convinced that Stieber might have cut or cleared some points. Some contradictions could surely have disappeared, as the ones I (mis?)perceive between elements included

in Chapters Five and Seven, when she first underlines that standardization of housing is a mere technical process that answers shortages--opposing standardization to normalization as a process of definition of social values--and then acknowledges the value of standardization as a social project as embodied in the architect Berlage's view or the 1920s housing projects of Frankfurt in Germany. Her considerations on space in her final conclusion, where she tries to build on Paul Rabinow around functionality and historicity to examine the fate of the spatial realm, would also be worth clarifying. On page 264, the space of the laissez faire era is "undifferentiated abstract entity," and on page 265 the space of the normalization era is "a continuous abstraction." I am a bit lost.

Some elliptic passages would also call debate. For example, the conclusion where Stieber develops the notion of "modern urban Heimat" for describing the way Amsterdam's municipality action in housing embodies the research of "place" as the antidote for the abstract space that modernism vehicles (pp. 255-57). The demonstration she made of that a chapter earlier, when she wrote how the Amsterdam School style was a mean of bringing meaning back in the city through the design of facades, and was favoured as such by the social-democrats in search of markers of their quest for a new working class culture, is convincing. In the conclusion, however, she hits a contradiction by emphasizing unity when all of her book insists on the conflict between different views of the world in the very segmented Dutch society. Earlier in the book, her considerations of how the two conceptions of the architectural profession she brings out identify with political affiliation is rather sketchy (p. 181) and might owe more to her bourdivine[1] homological framework, that identifies position in the political field with positions in the cultural field, than to an argument built on materials. She surely could have elaborated this passage more extensively. From those two points, In the same vein, one can wonder whether there

is not a sort of conflict between her references to Bourdieu and Harvey. When the first inclines her towards insisting on morphological and homological relations and oppositions responding themselves in all the fields of society, the second makes her think about modernism as a process that tends to swallow everything on its way except when there is some community resistance. This is just a feeling however.

These minor defaults do not harm the pleasure I took in reading the book. Not for a moment does Stieber wonder whether she is writing history of art, social history (old or new), cultural studies, or sociology. And who cares? After finishing it, I thought that she had produced a book that realized the promises Paul Rabinow's *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, 1995) made in its introduction, e.g. linking the norms and forms that had taken the attempt to produce a different social order that "reformers" saw as "modern," that is improved. But I remember that, when I read Rabinow, I was finally disappointed as I did not think the content was up to the expectations the label suggested. This is definitely not the case with Stieber, because she puts in relation the process of normalization with the production of forms, with all the struggles, negotiations, uncertainties, and resistance that it included. Her readers will learn a lot about housing and municipal policies in Amsterdam, about the "piliarization" of Dutch society, about housing societies, about the meaning and values that design can embody, about urban reform in the Netherlands, about the history of rising urban experts such as architects and engineers, about urban design as an intermingled aesthetic and technical meaningful action, and about the history of architecture. If they wish to read it along side works such as Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987) to add some elements about the meaning of cleanliness in the Netherlands (see pp. 140-41 of Stieber), as Mariuccia Salvati's *L'inutile salotto. L'abitazione piccolo-*

*borghese nell'Italia fascista* to dive further into what dwelling means in other contexts[3] (see the part devoted to the "parlor question" in Stieber, that would have benefited from analogous scholarship in France or Italy), or as Maureen Flanagan's articles dealing with "municipal housekeeping" to interpret the positions of women circles such as the Federation of Social Democratic Women Clubs, their reward will be even bigger.

Sure, they won't find what Stieber has not intended to do, meaning a complete history of housing in Amsterdam. She deals mainly with the housing stock that has been built under the Housing Act of 1902, that allowed Dutch municipalities to support, launch and control programs of housing on municipal land. In 1919, 90 housing projects had been approved in this legal frame, comprising some 14,000 dwelling units. Stieber does not say whether it is a lot or not compared to the total numbers of built units, but the map that she produces on page 270 suggests the importance of these housing programs, in a time when private building ran short during the war and its aftermath. Moreover, she quotes a vast array of Dutch scholarship that the people interested in this country will be able to use,[4] whether they wish to examine this specific point.

Last but not least, Stieber's study reminds us how much it is relevant to work on "small countries." She points several times to the exchanges between reform circles in Germany, Britain, France and the Netherlands. Moreover, she reminds us that Amsterdam was one of the most famous pilgrimage centers for reformers from all over the world in the two first decades of the century. This is something that too many things, including the language problem, make us forget. Thus Netherlands is quite forgotten in Daniel Rodger's *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Harvard UP, 1998), as are Belgium and Italy. *Housing Design and Society* underlines how small countries are not parochial. The very men that were at the heart of the Am-

sterdam experience, like Florentinus Marinus Wibaut, the alderman of housing, his stepbrother Arie Keppler who topped the Housing Authority, and Dirk Hudig who played a role took part in many of Amsterdam's reform and municipal structures were also major figures of international institutions like the International Union of Local Authorities, the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning, or the International Association for Housing. Amsterdam was a world city, as Fernand Braudel and his disciples coined it once. It still was in the sphere of reform of the early twentieth century. This is to say how Stieber's book addresses a much wider sphere than the scholars of the Netherlands.

#### Notes

[1]. 'bourdivin/e' is an adjective used to qualify what derives from the work of Pierre Bourdieu—people, approaches, problematics. However, the adjective of 'bourdieusien/ne' is also circulating. Might God know his own!

[2]. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

[3]. See the review essay by Susanna Magri "L'interieur domestique. Pour une analyse du changement dans les manieres d'habiter," *Geneses*, No. 28, September 1997, pp. 146-164 for a stimulating panorama of some books on the question.

[4]. By the way, it would have been fine to have some quotes in Dutch translated in English, even if those non translated bits are in the endnotes. (see note 115 p. 327. If what Jacob Johannes Van Veelen, age 26, has so interesting things to say, we would no doubt benefit from understanding them).

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