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PLAN SUMMARY
STEDENBOUWKUNDIG PLAN
DE UITHOF

Universiteit Utrecht

ART ZAAIJER
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1. INTRODUCTION

General

De Uithof is located to the east of the city of Utrecht and is the home to several important knowledge- and health care institutions, including: Utrecht University, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, UMC Utrecht (University Medical Centre), the SSH (student housing) and the KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences). A growing number of businesses are also relocating to De Uithof in order to combine their research activities with those of the neighbouring institutions.

In 1989, Utrecht University commissioned Rem Koolhaas and Art Zaaijer to draw up a Master Plan for the spatial development of the area. This plan has since served as the foundation for development. The many parties affiliated with De Uithof are united in the Vereniging Samenwerkingverband Uithofbeheer (Uithof Management Partnership Association – VSU), where they coordinate their individual plans within the framework of the original plan.

As we gain new insights into the manner in which these developments should be implemented based on the progress made so far, De Uithof partners and the City of Utrecht have worked with the Spatial Planning Supervisor Art Zaaijer to update and expand the plan where necessary.

This plan summary describes the history of the spatial development of De Uithof and explains the guiding principles of De Uithof Master Plan. In 2010, this plan served as the basis for De Uithof zoning plan, which in turn forms the legal framework for further construction plans. The Architectural Plan also served as the foundation for the General Landscape Plan, which delineates the future development of the landscape of De Uithof.

Location

De Uithof is located to the east of the City of Utrecht, bordered on the north and west by the A27 and A28 motorways and by the Amelisweerd estate, the Kromme Rijn river and the Oostbroek estate on the south- and east sides.

De Uithof is approximately 1.5 km by 2 km and has a surface area of approximately 300 hectares. This gives De Uithof almost twice as much area as the historic city centre of Utrecht, which is about two kilometres away.
History

By the 1950s, the city centre of Utrecht no longer offered sufficient space for the continued growth of Utrecht University. In 1958, the university decided that any new expansions would take place in the Johanna polder, the area to the east of the city that had been left undeveloped in order to serve as the field of fire for the New Holland Water Line defence works. With the repeal of the Strategic Defences Act in 1951, this area became available for permanent construction.

J.A.G. van der Steur, an architect at the Van Hasselt & De Koning bureau, drew up a preliminary urban plan sketch for De Uithof that was characterised by a strict north-south, east-west orientation for buildings and infrastructure. The various university faculties were grouped together in clusters of buildings. Although this preliminary plan had not been officially approved, construction began in 1961.

In 1966 Van der Steur suddenly passed away. Due to the lack of central organisation, a group of architects already working in De Uithof drew up another urban plan. In 1968, the university’s ‘Bureau Bouwza-ken’ (Building Affairs Bureau) used this ‘Architect Plan’ as the basis for the ‘Model Plan’. This plan featured recognisable elements from the Van der Steur plan with a large-scale, functionalist layout typical for the 1960s.

Although this plan did not have an official status, construction continued along what appears to have been the path of least resistance. At this time no one seemed to have wondered what a newly built university should look like. By the early 1970s, this had resulted in a collection of scattered buildings without any clear cohesion. The corners of De Uithof were the first areas built up, as if the university were trying to mark the borders of its newly acquired territory.

Throughout the 1970s, the users of De Uithof began to feel that the area was an unpleasant place to be: bland and too far from the city. Protests against the monotony and lack of cohesion in the area led to a new architectural approach to construction in De Uithof. The ‘Urban Planning Project Group’ and the Kuiper Compagnons bureau drew up a number of detailed model studies that became a ‘Basic Development Plan for De Uithof’. The small-scale nature of this plan contrasted with the massive scale of the plans from the 1960s and suggested a more organic expansion of the built environment. Once again, construction continued despite the lack of official approval for the plan.
This unstructured addition of buildings only aggravated the negative atmosphere and reputation of De Uithof. By the mid 1980’s, an intolerable situation had developed. In 1985 the director of the former Building Bureau, now Utrecht University’s Housing Department, Aryan Sikkema asked Rem Koolhaas’ Office for Metropolitan Architecture (O.M.A.) to come up with a vision for De Uithof’s future. The result was the ‘Uithof 2000’ plan.

During this period, Utrecht University won an appeal against the City of Utrecht’s zoning plan, which called for the construction of residential buildings in De Uithof. Utrecht University was against housing in De Uithof because nearby residential use would limit the expansion possibilities of some of the university’s activities, such as laboratories. Also, the Ministry of Education had decided that De Uithof would also be the location of any future expansions of the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. In 1988 these developments led the University to commission O.M.A. to draw up a completely new masterplan for De Uithof, with sufficient space for the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences and with no residential buildings.

Analysis

By 1988, De Uithof was characterised by isolation and fragmentation. The area was cut off from the rest of the city by an eight-lane motorway. The various institutes were situated far apart and isolated from one another by excessively large distances. There was no sense of unity with other departments or with the city centre. No one lived in the area, and since the university institutes were the only residents of the sparsely populated area there was no demand for other services such as shops or cafés. This made De Uithof little more than the overflow area for university growth. Those who were forced to work there considered themselves as ‘victims’ of this undesirable but inevitable development.
The linear infrastructure and the rectangular buildings were strictly oriented north/south and east/west, 1.50 meters raised from the surrounding older landscape. Only the buildings from the late 1970s differentiated themselves with 45-degree angles. This mathematical angularity superimposed without context on the older landscape gave a bit of structure to the area, provided orientation for new buildings and created interesting juxtapositions with existing landscape elements: old was ‘crooked and low’, new was ‘straight and high’.

The buildings may have been ugly and loathed by most users, but they were large, sturdy and imposing. In some areas one could still notice the original attempt to group the buildings according to function, as the first plan for De Uithof had prescribed.

The landscape was the only element of De Uithof that was universally appreciated. Every direction provided views of beautiful meadows edged by hedgerows, stately manor homes, the forts of the New Holland Water Line and the meandering banks of the river Kromme Rijn.
Ideal

How should the ideal Uithof look eventually? The ideal Uithof of the future would be an attractive and characteristic area, both spatially and functionally, and would have a direct connection to the city centre. It would be a place where many disciplines could flourish in direct contact with one another, where people could share and expand their knowledge, where they could test and refine their ideas, where they could influence and stimulate one another. The masterplan would have to facilitate this process by bringing the institutes, and with them the people, into closer proximity to one another. Over time a critical mass of people and buildings would develop that would create a synergy, making the area more than just the sum of its parts. All of this would occur in a pleasant environment that would be recognisable as a place for reflection, experimentation and research. It would be full of vitality due to the cheerful mixture of individuals, institutes and facilities in an attractive landscape, with a convenient connection to the city centre.

Principles

The poor condition of the area led many Uithof users to be sceptical about anything to do with construction or plans. A new plan therefore needed to be clear and concise. Basic order would have to be created using primary resources. It would have to be easy to understand, with a minimum of rules and a maximum of freedom. It would have to be inviting to all of the parties that would want to move to De Uithof, despite all of the disadvantages. And no one would be convinced by the planners’ sales pitches, glossy advertising or rosy visions, as few could imagine that the area was capable of improvement. For the architects and urban planners involved, the only appropriate attitude was one of humility, and improvement would only be measured by concrete successes.

The masterplan would have to end the isolation of the separate institutes by realising new construction adjacent to the existing buildings. This would preserve the landscape while slowly but steadily achieving a concentration of functions and a structure of interacting buildings. And as the building density increased, a critical mass would develop that could serve as a basis for supporting functions.

The existing buildings could not be wished away or hidden out of sight, but in a healthy architectural setting, one ugly building would not be as much of a problem. The new plan would have to lovingly surround these ‘difficult’ buildings in an organic mixture of old and new, ugly and attractive.
2.
THE PLAN

Construction

The rudimentary clusters of existing buildings and the orthogonal lots are used as the guiding principle for a clearer organisation of construction, infrastructure and landscape. New buildings are to be concentrated in newly defined clusters with strict cluster boundaries. Within these boundaries, planners have unprecedented freedom, without limits on building height, function or building party. Building outside of these boundaries is not permitted.

In limiting the space available for construction, the Master Plan forces the planners to economise with space, to build carefully, to consciously select the right location and neighbours and to precisely delineate the desired relationship with the neighbours. Economising on space results in a number of vital advantages, such as compact, sustainable construction. Compact buildings require less infrastructure – an ecological principle that provides immediate economic benefits and leaves more space available for unpredictable developments in the longer term. Compact construction also limits the encroachment on the valuable landscape.

Centre

A university of this size needs a centre, and the centre cluster in the heart of De Uithof will fulfil this role. The northern half of the centre cluster consists of the large solitary buildings from the 1960s and -70s. In order to add sufficient density to the centre, the plan proposes the addition of a massive southern half across from the northern buildings; the ‘Kasbah zone’, with a number of exceptional rules intended specifically for this space. Building projects in the Kasbah zone are allotted a lot ‘slice’ with a floor space index of 2.0. This means that a project with a floor space of 20,000 m² is allotted 10,000 m² of land to build on. The buildings on these lots must occupy the four corners, and facades build on the boundaries between the lots must be ‘blind’ so that the neighbouring buildings can be built directly adjacent to one another. This eliminates any narrow alleyways between buildings, so light, air and passageways have to be designed within the buildings.
The end result will be a solid block of buildings in the Kasbah zone, where the continuous facade will contrast with the large solitary buildings on the northern half of the centre cluster. Public transportation, bicycle lanes and pedestrian traffic will be concentrated in the space between the northern- and southern halves of the centre, resulting in a 'boulevard' atmosphere.

**Accessibility**

Public transportation and bicycle traffic from the city will move along flowing lines from the Archimedeslaan and the Weg tot de Wetenschap to converge on the central boulevard. Car traffic will primarily enter De Uithof from the north via the Universiteitsweg. This traffic will pass along three curves, which will act as chicanes to slow the traffic. This effect will be enhanced by filling in the inside curves with rounded volumes in order to preserve the oblique view of De Uithof. The existing buildings along the straight stretches of the Universiteitsweg and the Bolognalaan will be filled with new building lots in order to form a series of solitary buildings that will emphasise these roads' traffic distribution function, with exits alternating to the left and right providing access to the various clusters.

Vehicle traffic to the central cluster will pass along two roads; the existing Leuvenlaan to the north and the new Cambridgelaan to the south. The latter has made the more southerly Toulouselaan superfluous, so it could be reduced to a bicycle path in order to allow the meadow landscape to continue all the way into the central cluster.
Landscape

Limiting construction within the cluster boundaries exclusively will act to preserve the landscape as much as possible. The open green spaces contrast with the compact construction within the clusters, thus providing an element separating the clusters while unifying De Uithof. New parking facilities will only be permitted within the cluster boundaries and are hidden from view. This will place the buildings directly adjacent to the green spaces and bring the landscape directly to the building façades so that the users can experience the landscape to the fullest.

The historic structure of the landscape will be preserved and restored as much as possible. Historic ‘crooked’ elements such as the Hoofddijk, the Bisschopsteeg, the Zandlaan and the antitank canal will be given precedence to the new orthogonal structure, and as they criss-cross through the architecture and infrastructure they will provide several unique experiences. Unnecessary pavement will be removed and streams, hedgerows and berms will be restored as much as possible to their natural state. Extending these structures beyond the boundaries of De Uithof will create connections with the various neighbours and position De Uithof in the greater Kromme Rijn landscape.

Public space

The design of the public space must allow for a comfortable use of the space while supporting the unique Uithof landscape. The layout is therefore structured around the existing buildings and landscape and the design is reserved and conservative. The main elements are grass, groups of trees and park benches. The uniform design, a minimum of pavement and the limited number of extra elements result in a green, functional and easily maintained public space.

THE PLAN
3.

DEVELOPMENTS.

Since the presentation of the first version of the ‘Koolhaas / Zaalijer’ plan in 1989, several major changes have taken place in De Uithof. The plan has proven flexible enough to accommodate a major expansion in construction and an enrichment of the programme, while encouraging new relationships and generating synergy among the various parties. These developments are especially visible in the centre cluster.

Kasbah zone / University of Applied Science

In 1988, the Utrecht University of Applied Science decided to move several faculties to De Uithof in order to concentrate their study programmes and allow them to collaborate with Utrecht University. Four of these large institutes, each measuring around 20,000 m², found a home in the Kasbah zone. Despite their limited construction budgets, this group of buildings had their own typology with the required compact construction and the attendant internal passageways, patios and inner courtyards. The connections between the buildings allowed the faculties to share facilities, resulting in more intensive and efficient use. Plus, the interconnected buildings have proven able to facilitate the most recent changes towards a more flexible educational structure.
Housing

De Uithof faced an unexpected development in the field of housing. In the early 1990s, Utrecht had the most severe shortage of student housing in the Netherlands. At the same time, the number of new students began to decline. Dutch universities were suddenly forced to compete for new enrollments, and the shortage of housing for students in Utrecht became a very important factor to the university’s disadvantage. Since 1970, the university had fought the idea of housing at De Uithof all the way to the national level, but in 1992 the Executive Board made a major reversal in policy. In order to improve the university’s competitive position, the new architectural plan – which was developed in part due to the elimination of the housing option – would have to find room for 1,000 student accommodations. A new residential cluster was added to the plan, immediately to the south of the centre cluster and separated from the other Uithof functions.

This first housing project was a great success. Modern students proved to be more than willing to live at De Uithof. The lack of the picturesque atmosphere of the city centre was more than compensated by the spacious rooms with panoramic views, fast Internet connections and the university within walking distance. This success paved the way for a second- and third housing project. New housing projects are in development that will bring the number of residents at De Uithof from 0 to more than 3,500 in just 15 years.

University Library.

The renaissance of De Uithof also allowed for another development. The University Library had always been located in the city centre of Utrecht, and many were of the opinion that it should remain there. However, moving the University Library to De Uithof would provide a major stimulus to the area. In order to create an opportunity for this to eventually come to pass, the most attractive building lot in the heart of the centre cluster was left open so that if the university were ever to consider moving the library to De Uithof, the availability of the perfect location might provide the extra incentive necessary to convince the Board. The planners’ prescience eventually bore fruit as the library outgrew its location in the city centre, because a tempting location at De Uithof was already available for new construction. So the University Library moved to De Uithof.
Networks

With its central location in the heart of De Uithof, the University Library is a link in a remarkable network. The first step was the construction of the Educatorium, a building containing a cafeteria and lecture- and exam rooms for the surrounding faculties. It acts as the physical link between two older, free-standing buildings: the Ruppert building and the Van Unnik building. Next to the Van Unnik building, the second link is formed by a café – with a basketball court on the roof – that was until recently connected to the other buildings via an expanded book shop. The University Library is connected to this network via a lounge/skyway over the Heidelberglaan, and can eventually be connected to the neighbouring building in the Kasbah zone via another skyway. The synergy generated by this network is one of the major contributing factors to the success of the new buildings, and has revitalised the older links in the chain.

Symbiosis

The obligation to build compact buildings generated unique forms of synergy in other ways as well. The success of the University of Applied Sciences in De Uithof led to the expansion of the Faculty of Social Studies and the need for a second student housing complex. The economic recession of 2001 made it impossible to finance both projects, but by stacking the two projects on top of one another within the Kasbah zone the builders could combine both projects on a single shared foundation. The result was the southern residential tower located on top of the five-story expansion of the University of Applied Sciences.

Co-creation can be observed on other parts of De Uithof as well. In the Northwest Cluster, the three parties TNO, Deltares and Utrecht University have built a common Environmental Laboratory with a shared entrance. In the new Northern Cluster, a P&R building with space for 2,000 vehicles was made possible thanks to the cooperation of four parties: the City of Utrecht, Utrecht University, the University Medical Centre and the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences.
The continued vitality of Utrecht University depends in large part on cooperation with private companies. In order to provide sufficient space for this development, the new Northern Cluster was formed and new building lots have been laid out on the Universiteitsweg. Here, knowledge-related businesses can benefit from the vicinity of the life sciences institutes and the P&R building with its tram connection to the city. The Northern Cluster is located directly next to the access road to motorway A28. The new lots are located on the west side of the Universiteitsweg, so this traffic corridor will eventually have buildings on both sides. This allows for more intensive use of the existing infrastructure, while leaving the landscape visible. Other places in De Uithof will offer space for businesses, allowing the development of the Utrecht Science Park to become an integral element of the spatial development of De Uithof.

**Landscape and public space**

Until recently, building projects were given priority while the design of the public spaces has received little attention. This is beginning to change. One example is the central boulevard, with its broad pedestrian zones, flower beds and bicycle expressway.

The development of the Science Park acted as the stimulus for a restructuring of the north-western corner of De Uithof, which is dominated by the New Holland Water Line fortifications such as Fort Hoofddijk and the anti-tank canal. The sports grounds have been moved closer to the centre in order to create a direct link between the centre and athletics, and the unobstructed artillery zone around Fort Hoofddijk has been restored. Space has been set aside for garden allotments and the area for the Botanical Gardens and greenhouses has been condensed. Improved access to the entire area will allow it to develop into a full-flowered park. Over the next few years, other areas will receive similar attention. For example, the landscape on the edges of De Uithof area will be restructured based on the General Landscape Plan in order to improve the functional and aesthetic link with the surrounding estates.
Since its construction in the 1970s, the A27 motorway has acted as a barrier between De Uithof and the city. Traffic between De Uithof and the city must pass under two unappealing narrow tunnels, with more than 40,000 people per day passing through the busiest southern tunnel. The A27 is scheduled to be widened over the next few years. This could provide the opportunity to convert the tunnels from barriers into functional connections between De Uithof and the city.

The stadium, the sports grounds, the river Kromme Rijn and the swimming pool are the obvious zone to be developed into an sports- and recreation corridor along the Weg tot de Wetenschap. The service providers and the Provincial Government Building along the Archimedeslaan will act as the anchor for a service corridor. The integral development of these two corridors and the A27 motorway zone will take full advantage of this area’s potential and will allow De Uithof and the city to grow into one integrated entity.
Computer model of De Uithof with existing and planned construction within the boundaries of the Koolhaas / Zaaijer plan.

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