



## **e<sup>2</sup> design “Adaptive Reuse in the Netherlands”**

### Background Essay

Because land in the Netherlands is limited, the government has traditionally taken a strong role in the planning of their cities and suburbs. Under the auspices of a government-sponsored program called VINEX, it was decided that a disused dock area on the outskirts of Amsterdam should be the site for high-density urban housing. In 1996, West 8, an urban design and landscape architecture firm, won the commission from the city to transform Borneo and Sporenburg into residential neighborhoods with 2,500 housing units. Because these were the last two peninsulas in the area to be developed, the urban planning department had already learned a lesson from the lack of children in the other neighborhoods - families with children wanted to live in houses. So while it was a good decision to re-use the abandoned docks and keep the population of the area high-density, the challenge would be to do this while appealing to families with children. Using design ingenuity and the natural landscape, Adriaan Geuze, a founding partner of West 8, and his firm found a way to demonstrate that family housing is not incompatible with dense urban areas.

Geuze's design for the master plan was to build a sea of narrow waterfront houses on intimate streets punctuated by three large sculptural superblocks of apartments. He decided the houses would be tall, narrow and deep like traditional Dutch canal houses and would sit back-to-back. Each house would have its own ground floor entrance with strong gates and a secure parking space to provide the privacy and security that families wanted. The master plan also stipulated that 30% – 50% of each house should be void to compensate for the fact that there was no garden or public green space to share. This void space usually came in the form of a private patio space within the house or a deck on the roof. The houses were also built right up to the water's edge, which enabled safe private moorings to encourage the residents to use and enjoy their waterside location.

By harnessing natural daylight and using the vast waterways as core landscape design elements, the city planners and designers have successfully created a feeling of spaciousness while meeting the requirements of high-density housing. By offering an antidote to the typical trappings of suburban sprawl, the development maximizes limited space while maintaining the privacy desired by families inhabiting the neighborhood. Internationally celebrated as an example of high-density suburban-style housing done right, Borneo Sporenburg is a visually stunning and inspiring work of landscape architecture at the crossroads of sustainable design.

For more information about West 8, visit [www.west8.nl/W8\\_Archives/archive.html](http://www.west8.nl/W8_Archives/archive.html)



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### **PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS**

1. What do you think is the difference between high-density and low-density housing? What are the benefits of each? Which do people usually prefer? Which do you think you would prefer?
  2. What are the major differences between urban and sub-urban life (e.g., transportation, housing, open space)? What are the pros and cons of each?
  3. What is urban sprawl? Does it have a negative or positive connotation? Why is this the case?
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### **POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think people want ground-floor access to their homes?
2. Why do you think they stipulated that 30-50% of each dwelling should be void? How does open space change the feel of a home?
3. Some of the houses borrowed space from the house next-door on one floor and then lent the space back on another floor. How did this borrowing and lending of space benefit both houses? What was this balancing act demonstrating to the larger picture of architecture in general, especially in dense urban areas?