



The VAC Rotterdam's Work on Model Home Exhibitions (1951–1956): Women's Voices in Housing Must be Heard

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In the post-World War II period in the Netherlands, a women's organization set the agenda for improving the quality of social housing projects. Beginning in 1946, the Vrouwen Adviescommissie (Women Advisory Committee, VAC) in Rotterdam established a pathway in the 1950s for women's interventions at a municipal level through bureaucratic procedures, particularly by engaging in intensive advisory activities. Consciously or not, those voluntary consultants were also making politics and defining space: their expertise influenced housing and urban design. However, their early role as organizers of model home exhibitions has been little explored. Why did the VAC Rotterdam believe that such exhibitions were necessary? This article documents the conceptual and design work of the VAC through the model homes exhibitions they produced in the postwar neighborhoods of Rotterdam from 1951 to 1956. Even before the well-known model homes were exhibited in the mid-1950s and 1960s in the Netherlands by the organization Goed Wonen (Good Dwelling) to improve standards for furnishing homes, the VAC made visionary efforts to strengthen the public's relationship with social housing and practical interior design.

Keywords: Vrouwen Adviescommissie; VAC; Women Advisory Committee; Rotterdam; Exhibitions; model homes; Gender



Women Organizing to Perform Public Services

In the immediate post-World War II period, a time when women faced great difficulties in accessing and staying in the architectural profession in the Netherlands, the Vrouwen Adviescommissie (the VAC, Women Advisory Committee) emerged as an organization of women, in chapters across the country, whose primary role was to look ‘after the interest of [female] residents’ in ensuring quality in housing construction (Hutjes 1987: 4). The inaugural VAC, established in Rotterdam in 1946, from which numerous VACs would be replicated in different ways in the following decades, promoted a bureaucratic structure and network to locally ‘advise’ the (primarily male) architects and civil servants responsible for designing social housing. In Rotterdam, their establishment and advisory work extended at least until the mid-1960s.¹ Even if, in the mid-20th century, the process of ‘housewifization’ that excluded women from paid labor (Mies 1998) and assigned unpaid domestic responsibilities disproportionately to women fuelled the gendered division of work in the Netherlands, this collective organization helped some of them to perform expert (though still unpaid) positions. This led them to work in close collaboration not only with architects, researchers, and officeholders, but also with other social organizations, such as voluntary, business, and housing associations. The VAC members could function as ‘street-level bureaucrats’, performing public services with which citizens interacted but without being employed or exercising authority, such as having direct contact with the future inhabitants of social housing (Lipsky 1980). To date, their work has received little attention in Dutch architectural history, and almost nothing is known about their interactive work with the public in the context of their model home exhibitions.

As feminist scholars have identified, architectural histories of the 20th century have often exalted the individual genius — creative, masculine, and heroic (Stratigakos 2016). However, histories of the solo master do not respond to the significant transformations the architectural profession is undergoing, and there is a growing need to delve deeper and gain a broader understanding. This shift underscores the importance of collective focus, increased engagement with the public, and architects assuming roles beyond that of the traditional ‘hero designer’. In an institutionalized world, it also involves acknowledging bureaucratic roles, such as street-level bureaucracy, and integrating them into the complexity of architectural narratives. In this sense, the postwar work of the VAC Rotterdam becomes particularly relevant, because it is positioned between institutionalized bureaucracy and citizens, with the goal to mediate and facilitate dialogue — a process in which exhibitions played a pivotal role.

The VAC Rotterdam followed the tradition of other women-only organizations that emphasized the importance of quality in housing design and domestic equipment.

In the Netherlands, examples include the Nederlandse Vereniging van Huisvrouwen (NVVH, the Dutch Association of Housewives), founded in 1912; the Nederlandse Bond van Boerinnen en andere Plattelandsvrouwen (Dutch Association of Farmers and Other Rural women), founded in 1930; and the Vrouwen Electriciteits Vereeniging (Women's Electricity Association), founded in 1932. Their work aligned with other national initiatives related to social housing, such as the Nederlands Instituut voor Volkshuisvesting en Stedebouw (Dutch Institute for Social Housing and Urban Planning), founded in 1917, and the association of housing associations, the Nationale Woningraad (National Housing Council), established in 1913.

Nevertheless, several characteristics make the VAC a unique women's association. Social geographer Harkolien Meinsma, in a publication to mark the 25th anniversary of the national body of the VAC (1990: 9), argues that there was no comparable organization in the world. If it is accurate that there were differences among organizations related to women and housing, there are examples in other countries where women have long participated in government-appointed committees and were often engaged in ways to amplify women's voices in discussions about broader social and political issues, especially in the realm of housing design. For example, Elizabeth Darling identifies how in Great Britain, as early as 1884 women like Octavia Hill provided evidence to the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes (2005: 51). During World War I, the British Minister of Reconstruction appointed a Women's Sub-Committee to investigate women's needs in housing (McFarlane 1984). In 1944, the Housewives' Committee of the Council of Industrial Design commenced its activities (Whitworth 2016) and the Women's Advisory Committee was established at the British Standards Institute in 1951 (Hilton 2003). In general in some western countries, there was a growing acknowledgment in the late 1940s and early 1950s that housewives, despite their significant underrepresentation, held a crucial position in postwar society. The association between 'women' and their idealized role as 'housewife' was common in public discourse. However, women during the 1950s were not only housewives and mothers; they were also 'workers, campaigners, consumers, spinsters, widows, lovers, divorcees, prostitutes, and citizens' (Beaumont 2016: 147).

In the Dutch context, as the VAC Rotterdam demonstrated, women also sought to make their voices heard. After the occupation and the bombing of Rotterdam, the vast postwar reconstruction project created opportunities for them to contribute to the immense work required. Urgent answers were needed for housing issues, but with the establishment and increasing size of the welfare state and the growing importance of professional 'expertise', it became even more challenging for women's organizations to exert influence (Beaumont 2016: 154). Instead of simply adopting the perspective

of users and consumers, therefore, the VAC Rotterdam asserted women's role as experts in housing design from the perspective of housewives who work at home. The organization's goal was to look after the interests of working- and middle-class women. To fulfil this purpose, they formally established a committee, linked to the Dienst voor Volkshuisvesting (Social Housing Department) at the municipality of Rotterdam. The committee was intended to advise architects, civil servants, and politicians on housing projects publicly developed by the department and to inform the people of Rotterdam about housing matters. Consequently, upon the completion of Social Housing Department projects, members of the VAC Rotterdam conducted excursions, wrote evaluation reports, and organized model home exhibitions, lectures, and information evenings.

Nevertheless, in the history of Dutch architecture, other organizations — like Goed Wonen (Good Dwelling), which was interested in promoting modern interior design — are better known for organizing model home exhibitions (van Moorsel 1992: 171–197). Already in one of their meetings in December 1955, the VAC Rotterdam discussed the lack of recognition for their work on this matter:

Miss Kuiper remarks that the foundation Goed Wonen published an article in which it was stated that 'for the first time in the Netherlands exhibitions were held to guide interior housing design.' Miss van Hessen had also read this article but believed that it said, 'for one month long'. Miss Kuiper and Miss van Hessen will contact them further and consider whether a response is required. (VAC R 1955b)²

The members of the VAC discussed contacting Goed Wonen about the lack of credit given to the VAC's work on previous model home exhibitions, even if such exhibitions had lasted less than a month. But what was this work actually about? Why did the VAC Rotterdam consider exhibitions of model homes necessary? Were exhibitions of model homes useful for thousands of working- and middle-class families who moved into such dwellings? This article explores the establishment and work of the VAC Rotterdam, particularly focusing on the exhibitions of model homes in the postwar neighborhoods of Rotterdam in the early 1950s. It relies primarily on the limited documentary evidence preserved under their name in the municipal archive (three file boxes). When exploring the group's history, a pivotal question emerges: Why did the model home exhibitions prove unsustainable, to be gradually phased out, despite being considered essential and successful? The article looks at the challenges the VAC Rotterdam faced, particularly the role that financial support played in sustaining their voluntary specialized labor.

Establishment of the VAC Rotterdam (1946–1951)

The organization of the VAC Rotterdam's model home exhibitions cannot be explored without understanding its members aims, as well as the social and political history of their time, when voluntary women's organizations sought to ensure that their voices were represented in public life (Beaumont 2016: 147). By 1945, at the end of World War II, only 21 women had graduated as architects in the Netherlands (Smeets-Klokgieters 2021). Until 1957, Dutch women who were married were barred from public service jobs.³ Following civil and societal norms, most married women were compelled to adhere to the ideal of becoming housewives and working in the domestic realm. At the same time, after 1940 building nuclear family houses became a priority, especially in the heavily bombed city of Rotterdam.

The reconstruction of the city began in phases, building upon a tradition and a stable state regulatory framework initiated in 1901 with the first Woningwet (Housing Act). Even before the two world wars, this Act provided municipalities and housing associations with the tools to address the housing shortage, contributing to the consolidation of modernist processes of standardization and industrialization in Dutch architecture and urban design. Public housing policies accompanied the entire process. The unprecedented amount and speed of housing construction moved some women to act collectively to make professional, unpaid, contributions, in close collaboration with architects, developers, and municipalities. In Rotterdam, constructive conversations with the councillor of Openbare Werken (Public Works) about creating 'a committee' first took place in 1939 (Nicolai-Chaillet 1960b). Johana (Hannie) Dekhuijzen-Zeehuisen (1890–1973), a municipal councillor of the city before and after the war, played a key role in establishing the committee (Figure 1). In 1937, she was involved in a survey for the municipality on living conditions, and shortly after the war, she contacted the councillor of Openbare Werken en Wederopbouw (Public Works



Figure 1: Photograph of Johanna Zeehuisen Dekhuijzen, by Erich Adolf Hof, 1936. P-004149, Centraal Fotopersbureau, Stadsarchief Rotterdam <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoeken/resultaten/?mivast=184&miadt=184&mizig=299&miview=gal&milang=nl&micols=1&mizk_alle=dekhuyzen-zeehuisen> [accessed 28 February 2023].

and Reconstruction), Evert Kraaijvanger, who supported the initiative (Heijkoop and Bakke 2010). However, the advent of World War II and the consequences of the bombardment of Rotterdam on 14 May 1940 dramatically halted proceedings.

From 1946 to 1951, before the VAC was formally established as a body by the Social Housing Department, it primarily functioned as a study and research group, offering advice on different aspects of housing, normally in connection with the care work performed by Dutch middle- and working-class married women. After 1951, the committee extended its scope of activities to include the organization of model home exhibitions that commenced in 1952.

Surveys, Reports, Discussions, and Politics

Records of the VAC's work in that first period include reviews and reports on washhouses, or washing facilities in collective housing. In the minutes, the committee members ask the municipality to take responsibility: 'Laundry is definitely a social issue!' (VAC R 1946: 2). In its early days, the committee primarily wrote reports about washing equipment, acknowledging that 'the housewives, particularly those in working circles, are so heavily burdened with work and taking care of the family that in the first place, it is necessary to find out which work can be simplified by better equipment in the house or by a better solution in the neighbourhood or block' (VAC R 1947: 1). In subsequent years, discussions increasingly revolved around the provision of storage space, closets, and integrated kitchens. However, these topics were not the sole focus of the VAC Rotterdam.

Up until 1950, the commission conducted numerous surveys and reports on diverse subjects, including the maintenance of 'residential pads', 'homes and residences for the elderly', and the topic of 'the housewife's verdict of her home'. These reports were linked to the evaluation of housing projects developed by the Social Housing Department. By studying the plans, the VAC Rotterdam assessed topics such as the orientation of buildings, the integration of trees, the minimum measurements for the rooms and kitchen, the provision of laundry spaces, the provision of storage spaces, and the integration of shops in residential buildings. The results materialized in spatial articulations, such as the explicit provision of washing and drying spaces, a minimum closet width of 55 cm, and short distances and practical connections from the dining area to the kitchen. All those topics would be present in the model home exhibitions that began in 1952.

The VAC Rotterdam worked on a voluntary basis to make women's voices heard in housing design. Prior to envisioning and using exhibitions for research purposes, they had already cooperated with the NVVH to distribute the survey they designed

in collaboration with Dutch architect Margarete Staal-Kropholler (1891–1966). This survey was conducted from 1946 to 1947 ‘to make the housewife’s voice heard in the advice that will be given to the Ministry of Reconstruction’ (1947: 1). The VAC criticized decision-making procedures and the austere governmental reconstruction policies and argued that the housewife could not be left behind, since she was the most important stakeholder (Tummers and Novas Ferradás 2021: 24).

In the process of formally defining the aims of the VAC Rotterdam, the members addressed crucial questions. In September 1949, during a meeting with Alexander Bos, the director of the Social Housing Department, the VAC posed some of these questions: ‘Should we consider our commission a correction of the work done by men?’ ‘Is it necessary for the women to influence the reconstruction?’ ‘We are not officially recognized ... Should we shape our organization differently?’ The discussion led to the conclusion that the commission was useful and needed direct association with the Social Housing Department (VAC R 1949).

In January 1950, the VAC Rotterdam remarked that the women of the Netherlands maintained 2,000,000 houses and pointed out that those housewives, with unpaid labor, were contributing to the national economy (VAC R 1950a). In December 1950, it acknowledged again the uncountable complaints of housewives — ‘women’s voices in housing must be heard’ — and concluded that, as a municipal committee, the VAC, ‘after several years of preliminary study, is well qualified to give advice to the Department, both commissioned and unsolicited’ (VAC R 1950b).

The steady members of the VAC Rotterdam at that time were nine women of different religions, backgrounds, and life experiences. Most were married or widowed and came from middle- and upper-class Dutch white backgrounds. They were Maria Anna Bourguignon, director of the Algemene Meisjesschool voor Nijverheidsonderwijs (General Girls’ School for Industrial Education); Johanna Dekhuyzen-Zeehuisen, municipal councillor, member of the NVVH, the Unie van Vrijwilligers (UVV, Union of Volunteers), and the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vrouwenbelangen en Gelijk Staatsburgerschap (Dutch Association for Women’s Interests and Equal Citizenship); Adriana Elisabeth Dommissie-de Quaasteniet, expert in domestic sciences and part of the Dutch resistance during the war; Pieterella Cornelia van Dijk-van Kersen, housewife involved in exhibitions and congresses; Johanna Elisabeth Everts-Goddard, member of several women’s organizations including Vrouwenbelangen; Wilhelmina C. M. Jansen, the sole graduated, and practicing, building engineer during this period and a member of the Vrouwen Werkzaam in Bedrijf en Beroep (Women Working in Business and Professions) and the Vereniging van vrouwen met Academische Opleiding (VVAO, Association of Women with Academic Education); S. M. (Rie) Krijgsman, employed at

the Department of Construction Workers and Technicians and member of the NVEV; Wytze Jentje Ploegsma-Bentum, expert on social issues and housing associations, home inspector and member of the Vereniging van Woningopzichteressen (Association of Home Supervisors); and Johanna R. van der Pols-Broeze, member of the UVV (VAC R 1950b). Even though the members were sensitive to social issues, difficulties in finding working-class women persisted throughout the years, as they indicated several times in their minutes, without providing further details.⁴

Finally, in 1951, to acquire official status after some years of collaboration with the municipal department, the VAC members wrote the statutes of their Women Advisory Committee on Housing Problems. The draft explains that the task of the committee was to give advice on housing issues to the Social Housing Department in Rotterdam, if requested, or on their own initiative, and to inform Rotterdam's inhabitants about housing matters after consultation with the department. The statutes also mention the group's intent to study housing problems in the city, organize surveys, and hold meetings (VAC R 1951b). By then, the VAC's training agenda had intensified, encompassing the study of literature, visits to housing complexes (excursions), and participation in lectures and conferences (Tummers and Novas-Ferradás 2021: 26). Model home exhibitions were not yet in their plans.

As part of the Social Housing Department, the primary activity of VAC was to assess public housing projects, but they also participated in municipal research under the auspices of the service's Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Directie (Scientific Research Direction). The process of the VAC's advisory work followed a consistent pattern: architects drafted the plans in consultation with the department, then the VAC received the designs and produced a report, sometimes accompanied by a sketch, by which they meticulously examined domestic working and storage spaces. However, their role remained purely advisory, and their ideas were not always implemented, often due to budgetary constraints.

Annual reports show that, as the VAC grew, its activity broadened to include not only additional surveys, studies, and reports, but also the organization of model home exhibitions. Consequently, the number of members also grew. By 1951, a point of contact from the Social Housing Department, Johannes (Hans) Barends, attended the committee meetings. Other new members who joined that year were Ada Kuiper-Struyk, a graduated architect and housewife, president of Vrouwenbelangen in Rotterdam, secretary of the national board of the VVAO, future municipal councillor, and member of the Dutch Parliament; Adriana J. Dooremans-Lans, member of the UVV and Vrouwelijke Vrijwillige Hulp (VVH, Women's Volunteer Aid); and P. Ch. Dubois, a garden expert. This brought the total number of members to twelve. The VAC Rotterdam

established a presidency, held by Dekhuijzen-Zeehuisen, and a secretariat, held by Dubois. Following their example, new VACs were created in the nearby municipalities of The Hague and Voorburg (van Kessel 1987). Over time, the VAC Rotterdam created sub-commissions: for laundry, the elderly, house information, exhibitions, and so on.

Design and Model Home Exhibitions (1951–1956)

In 1951, the VAC Rotterdam concluded that organizing model home exhibitions was a good way to interact with citizens. The *Femina* exhibition — an annual household business fair for middle-class women in Rotterdam that began in 1949 — attracted 100,000 visitors. Inspired by this, the VAC wondered if they could reach the same result (VAC R 1951a).

At a time when few people had a television, exhibitions played a major role in publicizing a topic to the world, as they did for modern architecture. Prominent early examples include *L'Exposition des arts décoratifs* (Paris, 1925), the Deutscher Werkbund's *Die Wohnung* (Stuttgart, 1927), and the *Stockholmsutställningen* (Stockholm, 1930). In addition, there were specific exhibitions on architecture and women, such as the *Saffa* in Zurich in 1928 and 1958 and an exhibition on women and homes in Denmark in 1950 (see Bendsen, Riesto, and Steiner 2023). The World's Fair that took place in Brussels in 1958 is perhaps the biggest example of this tendency toward organizing large exhibition events.

In the Netherlands, the *Wederopbouwtenoonstelling* (Reconstruction Exhibition) of 1955 stands out. But even before that, Rotterdam's Social Housing Department had planned to organize exhibitions in all new districts, which seemed like a good financial, technical, and material opportunity for the VAC to make their contribution. The department's contact for this project was F. de Pree, whose work was highly valued. Collaboration with the Goed Wonen group failed, however, due to their demand for exclusive control. In consultation with the Social Housing director, Bos, the VAC decided to begin these local model home exhibitions after September 1952, to last no longer than a week. Kuiper-Struyk was responsible for contacting the department store De Bijenkorf and other furniture firms, as well as the housing associations of each of the neighborhoods (VAC R 1952a). From the very beginning, in close collaboration with the department, the VAC established a collaborative multi-stakeholder organization process.

The VAC Rotterdam thus began to organize model home exhibitions to show how the living standards of social housing inhabitants could be improved. This included fostering people's thinking on different furnishing possibilities. Among the key factors addressed were 'good lighting' (interior design choices related to curtains and lamps), spaciousness, simple and practical furniture, and the avoidance of 'decorative excess'.

The VAC also focused on the function of each room — especially those for children — as well as the maintenance and arrangement of collective spaces, such as the entrance, the staircase, and the basement.

On this basis, the first three model home exhibitions took place in three new Rotterdam neighborhoods, Overschie, Hoogvliet, and Zuidwijk. The initial exhibition in Overschie was held in April 1952 (the exact dates are unknown) (Figure 2). The VAC had only one month to prepare it; it was considered a kind of experiment. As the committee would continue to do in subsequent exhibitions, held in four-story buildings, each of the floors was adapted to different requirements. The first floor provided general information, including printed pictures and a model of the entire neighborhood. To address a range of financial realities, the interior design of the apartment on the second floor showcased traditional furniture, the apartment on the third floor featured a mix of traditional and modern furniture, and the one on the fourth floor was furnished with modern furniture only.⁵ The fourth floor also held a mailbox for questions, comments, and complaints (mainly from prospective renters) (VAC R 1952b).

Due to budget limitations, they could not afford certain elements, such as carpeting and curtains. Consequently, the VAC expressed regret that the result did not exactly align with what they wanted to achieve. Nonetheless, based on feedback and reports, the exhibition was deemed a great success, attracting approximately 3,000 visitors and drawing a large crowd for the information evening. The housing association overseeing



Figure 2: The model home exhibition in Overschie, 1952. From Beukman (1955: 11). <https://www.delpher.nl/nl/kranten/view?coll=ddd&identifier=MMKB19:000332012:mpeg21:a00158>.

the event in the new neighborhood was satisfied, prompting the VAC Rotterdam to put on model home exhibitions in other newly built neighborhoods in October of that same year (VAC R 1952b).

In addition to the collaboration with De Bijenkorf, which provided furniture free of cost, other members of the UVV and 'some women's groups' contributed by providing information on the fourth floor during the opening hours (VAC R 1952b: 1). An electric company assisted with lighting and kitchen appliances. Interestingly, in a later analysis, the VAC Rotterdam acknowledged that the apartments displaying modern furniture made the best use of the space. The VAC was particularly pleased that the fourth floor, equipped with modern furniture, was successful, although some visitors still preferred the traditional design displayed on the second floor. Since the Overschie exhibition, the VAC was committed to the modernization of interior design while not neglecting those who could not afford new furniture or who preferred traditional styles. While the VAC Rotterdam preferred innovative solutions, it remained cognizant of the challenging requirements, adapting to the needs and tastes of a rapidly changing society.

The next two exhibitions took place in Hoogvliet and Zuidwijk according to the same scheme. In response to the feedback of future inhabitants, the VAC Rotterdam diversified the furnishing options. Consequently, one apartment showcased a more affordable solution, while another featured more expensive furnishing. The exhibition in Hoogvliet (10–14 October 1952) attracted 700 visitors, the one in Zuidwijk (16–24 October) 2,000. Despite these numbers, 'complaints' in relation to the exhibit contents were few, probably due to the importance the VAC placed on the evaluation phase and the way they could adapt rapidly to new circumstances. The entire organizational process was continuously adjusted to match the financial situation of future inhabitants. In general, and despite acknowledging the limitations, the VAC Rotterdam was satisfied with the results (VAC R 1952b: 4).

While the exhibitions served the department by informing people, the VAC also seized the opportunity to conduct research, documenting all insights in a short report after each event. Most of the feedback on the first three exhibitions focused on the small size of the rooms, and the domestic working spaces were 'widely condemned' by many women (VAC R 1952b: 4). These spaces were inadequate for storage and for doing the laundry (washing and drying), cabinet heights were inappropriate, finishing materials and windows were not easy to clean, and so on.

The VAC was not responsible for deciding the size of the rooms or apartments, of course: their limited size was a common issue. The VAC members did address this during the advisory process, but the problem persisted due to financial limitations.

In the fourth exhibition in Schiebroek (11–19 April 1953), a new neighborhood with more than 600 homes, the rooms were again considered too small. Additionally, the rent was deemed too expensive, as was the proposed furniture. This time, the media echoed the question of money: the furniture was too costly for working-class families. The VAC explained their exhibition philosophy: what is on show is not an imperative ‘how it should be’, but rather how ‘it could also be done’ (HVV 1953: 13). This exhibition attracted around 1,500 people. In one of the apartments, a modern room was envisioned for a teenage girl, in their continued interest in adapting the spaces to the diverse lives of residents (VAC R 1953: 1).

For the fifth model home exhibition, which ran from 7 to 9 October 1954 in Lichtenburg (Figures 3 and 4), the VAC implemented some changes. First, they charged an entry fee of 10 cents per adult (VAC R 1954). Despite the new entry fee, the exhibition drew around 1,400 attendees, not only neighbors but also students from the Domestic School (Huishoudschool), staff from the Home Economics Department of the Bouwcentrum, and, interestingly, people from Goed Wonen. Also in contrast to previous experiences, the information evening occurred at the end of the exhibition. This allowed the VAC Rotterdam to create a forum for addressing the questions in the mailbox while the exhibition was still open. Although not all questions were satisfactorily resolved, the VAC had the impression that the goal of giving housewives a voice was achieved, as was conveying the idea that the home is not only the place where housewives live but also where they work.



Figure 3: A modern furnished home, probably at the model home exhibition in Lichtenburg, October 1954. Fototechnische Dienst Gemeentewerken, Stadsarchief Rotterdam. <<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/659E7F7115D14CBD9AE0D90F9CC1C222>>.

In 1955, the sixth exhibition took place in Crooswijk from 11 to 15 March (Figure 5). Approximately 600 people visited it, and the most unfavorable comments appear to have come from the media. One journalist said that the living rooms were, 'let's be honest, a bit old-fashioned', and noted that the rooms were smaller than normal (HVV 1955: 7). Four people were accommodated in a one-room apartment — with one double folding bed, a single folding bed, and a baby cot — but this was not favorably received. This fact attests to the inherent paradox of their work: they sought to devise solutions for meeting the needs of thousands of families living in tiny spaces while simultaneously having to accept this given insufficient standard.

The burden of voluntary work was challenging for the VAC Rotterdam members. Consequently, in 1955 they discussed whether to continue with the exhibitions. Although the VAC was not originally established to organize exhibitions, all committee members were convinced that providing information was part of their task. However, even if the information evening in Crooswijk was considered a success — half of the visitors were not future inhabitants but interested groups of young people (VAC R 1955a) — the VAC realized that they could not adequately fulfil this task with their limited budget and membership (VAC R 1955c).

After extensive discussions, they concluded that they could no longer afford to organize the exhibitions by themselves. Instead, they decided to collaborate on other exhibitions with organizations like *Goed Wonen*, the Home Economics Department of the *Bouwcentrum*, and the association *Mens en Huis*, even if they did not appear to share the same objectives:

Unlike *Goed Wonen*, the VAC aims to place more emphasis on furnishing and does not intend to promote specific furniture. Unlike the *Bouwcentrum*, the VAC aims to disseminate information to the public. Unlike the association *Mens en Huis* ... the VAC aims to adjust to the financial possibilities of future residents. (VAC 1956a)



Figure 4: A modern furnished home, probably at the model home exhibition in Lichtenburg, October 1954. Fototechnische Dienst Gemeentewerken, Stadsarchief Rotterdam. <<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/411CA5E9555F46A0B5393FC4880DC2DF>>.

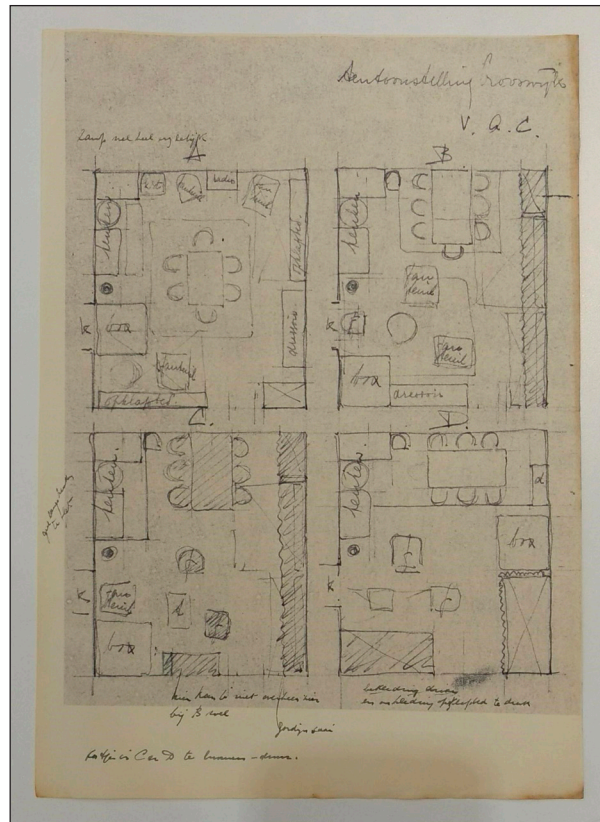


Figure 5: Sketch by the VAC Rotterdam showing different furnishing possibilities for the model home exhibition in Crooswijk, 1955. Archive of ir. W.C.M. Jansen, Schiedam Gemeentearchief.

Therefore, as a possible alternative to organizing model homes exhibitions, they created a booklet, directed at a broad audience, that visually explained various furnishing options (VAC R 1956a) (Figure 6).

In 1956, the VAC launched its final exhibition, at Pendrecht. For this exhibition on Stellendamstraat (19–27 October), 10 cents per person was again charged, but this time the fee included the booklet, called *Finally We Have a House!* The VAC furnished two three-room and two four-room apartments: one equipped only with second-hand furniture, two showing a mix of new and second-hand furniture, and one featuring only new furniture. Once again, the VAC Rotterdam attempted to adapt to the needs of the people by displaying not only solutions for a range of budgets but also a combination of new and old furnishings. They realized that many new inhabitants tended to combine existing furniture with new pieces, so this affordable solution could provide inspiration. All members contributed their own second-hand furniture, such as tables, chairs, divan, bureaus, and dressoirs. The exhibition attracted 3,000 visitors, and an information evening was organized on 25 October at the neighborhood school. On that

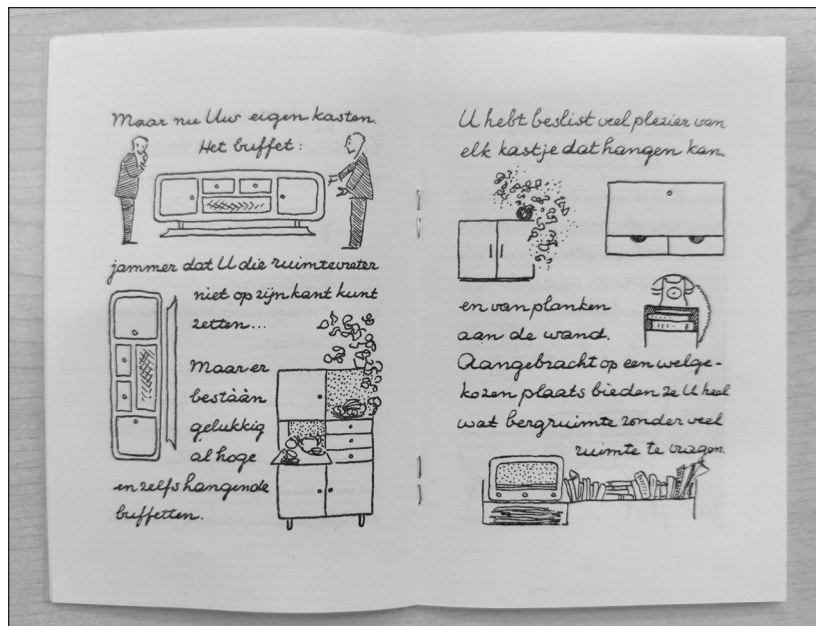


Figure 6: Two pages of the booklet produced by the VAC in 1956, *Finally We Have a House!* (VAC R 1956). Stadsarchief Rotterdam.

day, the VAC also conducted a tour (VAC R 1956b). An extensive article was published in the media, including sketches and plans (**Figure 7**), explaining that housewives were more and more interested in modern furniture because it was easier to clean than traditional furniture (Beukman 1956: 13).

By December 1956, the VAC finally concluded they could no longer organize further model home exhibitions. The members had invested a significant amount of voluntary work and time — bringing their own furniture had entailed a considerable burden. They were also aware that the exhibitions, due to financial reasons, could not fully achieve their objectives. However, they saw the exhibitions and information evenings as indispensable, and this work needed to be continued through the establishment of an office at the Social Housing Department, or through collaboration with different organizations. The VAC also wrote that this work should be properly funded (VAC R 1956c). Despite their crucial role, the VAC saw no potential for having their specialized work compensated; within five years, the model home exhibitions had become unsustainable.

These exhibitions have been forgotten largely because of their short-lived nature. Even though exhibitions are inherently ephemeral, they typically ‘gain a peculiar endurance and permanence in the cultural imagination through the various media that support them: catalogues, posters, press photography, reviews, and popular and professional reception’, as Thordis Arrhenius acknowledges (2014: 8). However, in

the case of the VAC exhibitions, time and financial constraints might have affected the later limited preservation and dissemination. The documentation that happens through the media coverage that Arrhenius says helps perpetuate exhibitions in the cultural imagination was limited in this case as well. In addition, certain perceptions of values and norms in the way architectural information is disseminated might explain the success of other organizations like Goed Wonen in the endurance and permanence of their model home exhibitions in later years. In a broader sense, the problem of lack of remembrance also highlights the historical devaluation in architectural histories of collective, 'nameless', and often feminine endeavors that focused on the everyday needs of women in social housing design.

Conclusion

In a time when explicitly declared 'feminist' notions had not yet entered architectural discourses, some women joined forces through organizations such as the VAC Rotterdam to improve women's lives through social housing design. Although their members did not explicitly challenge the role of the housewife, they wisely acknowledged the amount of unpaid work they were doing, which, during the postwar reconstruction period, saved the state millions. Before the changes promoted by a new generation in late 1960s, the members of the VAC likely did what they could on a voluntary basis, as a matter of expertise and political endeavor. The advisors of the VAC appear to have never received payment for their work, and in fact, contemporary commentators made a point of saying that being a member carried little financial cost (Nicolai-Chaillet 1960a).

Although the VAC Rotterdam also received a municipal subsidy, it continued to be limited by financial constraints. The budget they had available as a committee was not sufficient to travel, publish, and organize the necessary events and exhibitions. The issue that was so important to VAC members — the lack of acknowledgement and payment for women's labor in the home — also appears to have been one that affected their VAC activities, ultimately leading to them to give up the time-consuming exhibitions.

Although its existence is generally unknown, the VAC Rotterdam nevertheless managed to accomplish remarkable work in organizing model home exhibitions in the early 1950s, before other organizations gained recognition for doing this work in the Netherlands. According to their records, more than 12,000 people visited the exhibitions between 1952 and 1956. Yet their work is still in the process of being documented. This task is not an easy one: the archival limitations are considerable and contemporary records insufficient and often biased, disregarded, or devalued.

The members of the VAC Rotterdam studied diligently, adhered to the rules, and carved out their space as expert advisors, differentiating it from housewives' organizations, even if some of the members were also identified as housekeeping experts or members of the NVVH. In a time when the situated knowledge of housewives tended to be devalued, stigmatized, or ridiculed, asserting themselves as experts helped them claim epistemic authority, paving the way to influencing housing design. Although the VAC Rotterdam initially asserted that no housing would be built without their approval, this was not always the case. Yet, as acknowledged by one member, Dooremans-Lans, in the 1990s, they did succeed in being heard (see de Wit 1995).

The organizational process was continually refined, managing to establish a collaborative multi-stakeholder model that not only included other voluntary organizations but also fostered public participation. Through exhibiting the interior spaces of new housing projects, the VAC Rotterdam developed a method to test ideas, create dialogue, and stimulate feedback. As Carolina Quiroga (2021) has argued, the VAC can thus be considered a valuable antecedent of spatial gendered approaches that promote equitable and inclusive practices. One cannot help but wonder what might have happened if their work had been adequately valued, effectively disseminated and, most of all, properly funded.

Notes

- ¹ Yet the VAC continued to exist. According to Wiebe Bijker and Karin Bijsterveld, from 1946 to 1975 the number of VACs grew as follows: 1946–1; 1950–3; 1955–17; 1960–45; 1965–77; 1970–110; and 1975–156 (2000: 497). In 1994, there were 285 registered VACs across the country. VAC member Lily Hutjes (1995) has pointed out that even in the 1990s, women continued to be largely under-represented in the decision-making processes concerning the design of homes and their environment: the construction world was still a man's world.
- ² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.
- ³ All married women, specifically in post offices, primary education, and the civil service. For the full list of these measures, see van Eijl (1994).
- ⁴ In 1955, Bos insisted that there should be working-class women in the commission. Apparently, they encountered many difficulties in finding such members. New members like Maria Johanna Lancée-Koek would help in this aim (VAC R 1955b).
- ⁵ In Dutch, *ouderwetse* (old fashioned) versus *moderne* (modern).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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