

According to research carried out at University College London, people living in households of four or more each produce 1000 kilogrammes of waste every year, while those living alone are responsible for 1600 kilogrammes.

SPIRAL STEP HOUSE

A townhouse in Amsterdam. Several bikes are parked behind ornamental steel gates nearly four metres tall. Upstairs, on the first floor, a couple of people are working at desks in a large studio. At one end, a third person has stepped out onto a small balcony for some air. At the other, two steps lead up to the first of a series of platforms that spiral up through the house forming a sequence of linked, informally defined spaces; some are arranged for reading or studying, others for eating, others have chairs pulled together in cosy little groups. The giant stair winds its way around a slanting spine wall, past another balcony and a large kitchen where lunch for four is on the stove, up into a grand double-height volume on whose cascade of terraces remains the evidence of last night's party. And tucked away at a desk in the one modestly-sized bedroom is the single person who lives here, alone.

Over half of all households in Amsterdam contain just one person, but on completion next year, Spiral Step House will be the first designed specifically for a single lifestyle, rather than simply for one person. And it projects an image at odds with most representations of the single-person household: that those who live alone might be social but have a life that revolves around the home rather than the café, and that they might even have someone to stay for the night once in a while – there are two basins in the single bathroom.

The caricature of singles as poor sad people, fated never to receive the blessing of children and live lonely lives on the margins of the community is a relic of a more morally authoritarian age, says Gijs Bakker of droog, the prime mover behind the development of Spiral Step House. "Times have changed. Singles have rich lives, have children, have fun, but choose not to live together." Bakker first started thinking seriously about the lives of single people three years ago, when he asked the students of Droog's IM Master programme at the Design Academy Eindhoven, and students of Interaction Design Institute Ixrea to look at new products for this burgeoning population that were not merely cut-down versions of existing devices, but new ideas tailored to a new way of living. Some were practical – a keyholder that won't let you lock the front door if you've forgotten your key (who's going to let you back in?), and some sought new opportunities for fun and pleasure, such as a table mat that doubles as a novel, with a new page to be torn off each day. The idea is fanciful but the intent is serious: mealtimes alone are a different kind of occasion.

The question of what a house for a single person might be occurred to Bakker early on, but it took Droog's collaboration with two other parties – Dutch housing association Ymere and Japanese architects Atelier Bow Wow – to make it a reality. It is rare that architectural projects beginning life in this kind of conjectural way make the leap into reality, and the building will continue to have a dual role as a house and test bed for an idea about housing – what Momoya Kajima of Atelier Bow Wow describes as a "hypothesis" that will be tested by life and the market.

A separate research programme by Ymere, conducted simultaneously with the development of Spiral Step House, polled 600 singles in Amsterdam to assess what forms of housing and locations might suit their needs. It identified four types: the first, which Ymere's Elly de Boer dubs 'Harmony', are people for whom friends and family are of paramount importance, and for whom living around a courtyard with opportunities for neighbourliness and spontaneous meetings might be appropriate. 'Homebodies' who love privacy might value the anonymity of tower-block living. The 'Challenge' type grabs life with both hands, greedy to experience everything urban life has to offer. They want to live in established districts in the centre of the city, in a building with history. And the 'Self-willed' single is typically entrepreneurial, often in a creative occupation, ambitious and culturally voracious. It is this type at whom Spiral Step House is aimed.

Developing housing according to lifestyle concepts is a significant move for the housing industry. Assessing need and desire not on the basis of whether people are single or in a couple, young or old but according to cultural preferences, values and

everyday behaviour should provide a variety to match the enormous diversity in household types.

"There are more times in life now where you live alone," says de Boer, "but the flexibility of people's living arrangements is not matched by the fixed nature of most market-led housing. Traditionally most housing projects start with a location, but now we start with people and the way they live." So how is a single lifestyle manifested in built form at Spiral Step House?

Some things are the same as any other house, inevitably. The rebuilt nineteenth-century façade is, as Bakker says "rooted in familiar experience – the house in the street." Others aspects are more unusual – not least the soundproof room that is a hangover from an earlier scheme for a house shared by two singles but which Bakker, an ardent classical music fan, has come to regard as essential in a dense urban environment. As drawn, the house allows one modestly sized bedroom and one bathroom – at this end of the market even a house for a couple might have two – and will be offered at the end of 2009, fully equipped by Droog with furniture and products appropriate to the target occupant.

Where most cookie-cutter developments simply subtract bedrooms from an established model to cater for a particular demographic cohort, Spiral Step House questions each aspect of the house based on the initial principles. And it is striking that approaching the question of the house from a different starting point – the lifestyle of a particular type of single person – has generated architectural ideas that may be much more widely applicable (indeed it was for an outsiders' perspective that Bakker recruited Japanese rather than Dutch architects). The designers envisage that this will be a live/work environment, meaning that there will often be people other than the occupant in the house. There is what Momoya Kajima describes as a "hierarchy of spaces from top to bottom, from the intimate to a more open condition lower down the house," but it is notable that the bedroom and bathroom, for example, are on different floors, suggesting that the single might

develop a degree of intimacy with unrelated people who share their space a little like families do in single-family houses.

Likewise, the spiralling platforms that give the house its spatial and programmatic character are a solution to an age-old Dutch problem: with limited plot sizes – Spiral Step House occupies a relatively generous area five by 12.8 metres – circulation eats significantly into usable space. Here, all circulation is usable. Indeed, architect Momoya Kajima prefers not to call the spiralling platforms a stair at all, talking instead about a sequence of distinctive spaces whose distinct qualities are a spur to the imagination of the inhabitant – an interior landscape of possibility.

There is a common assumption when housing for single people is discussed that city centre apartments and studios are a universal norm. In fact research among people living alone in the UK, for example, shows that over a third are unwilling even to consider living in an apartment. Despite the evidence of demand, it takes a developer of sufficient scale and with a particular outlook to consider the problem afresh. Ymere is a housing association and real-estate developer with 82,500 properties on its books, formed in 2008 from the merger of two housing associations nearly a century old. Social housing remains the core business, and while Ymere develops real estate on a commercial basis, it retains a social agenda – profits are reinvested in the fabric of the city – and can therefore allow itself the freedom of thought and action required to pursue a project like this one. Concern for the city as a whole is a central motivation, and healthy cities need to attract and retain a wide diversity of people, suggests de Boer; this house is aimed at a member of what Richard Florida calls the 'wealth-generating' creative class'. But Spiral Step House is not, in terms of its precise dimensions, a provision of spaces or projected use, intended to be a model for single-person housing. Rather, it is a lesson in how to think about housing. "Because the house is so big, it will only be suitable for a very small part of the market," says de Boer. "But for us, it is a trigger to focus on single living. Single people are the future of cities."



Single-person households are now the most common type in Japan, following a rise that saw them account for 20 per cent of the total in 1980 to 30 per cent in 2006. It is anticipated that 37 per cent of households will comprise just one person by 2030.

VIEWPOINT: DON MURPHY

Singles are changing the shape of the city.

A conundrum – how can a city be shrinking yet growing at the same time? The answer is single-person households, says Amsterdam-based architect Don Murphy. "In the Netherlands we are constantly building housing, and have been doing so for the last 50 years," he explains. "We try to build 100,000 units a year. At the moment, for example, we are building a huge Amsterdam extension area called IJburg. And the question is often asked: 'where do all these people come from?' Now the city itself hasn't grown in population. In fact it has shrunk." But more single-person households demands more space, and the inhabitants of those households want even more. "They are not satisfied with 25 square metres which is the normal amount of space you'd have for a person if you are sharing – a family of four might normally have 120 square metres. Single people tend to have a minimum of 75 square metres but they want 100 or 200 square metres. Maybe it will change with the energy crisis but up till now the problem has been how to create bigger and bigger dwellings."

This desire for more living space is making the city far less dense. The social issues that such a change might create are not a significant issue in the Netherlands, says Murphy, but what are the implications for resources? "Of course they want all the facilities that you would normally share with more people, like washing machines, fridges, ovens, bedrooms and workrooms – and nowadays you see the trend that people want to have two ovens and two fridges and two dishwashers."

Coupled with the outward pressure caused by the pressure for more and more space is an 'inward pressure' as many single people want to live centrally. In Amsterdam, says Murphy, the solution has been to redefine the centre. "The centre is no longer just circular – it's linear. And it's in particular areas. So for instance the city calls IJburg 'Amsterdam', although it's outside the ring and other areas outside the ring are not called Amsterdam. They're pulling the centre along a line." Stretching the 'centre' gives more people

the opportunity to live 'centrally'. But, says Murphy, IJburg is essentially suburban. "We designed an apartment building there with a lift so you could park your car on the floor that you live. And that was based on the idea that in suburbia you can park outside your front door. But the city insists that it is 'Amsterdam'."

Car elevators aside, there is little interest within the Netherlands in trying alternative housing forms that might reduce the pressure on space, Murphy has found. For the most part, even simple sharing arrangements are resisted. "In Switzerland it is common that you have a laundry room with a washer and a dryer that residents of an apartment building would share. In the Netherlands it's impossible. We keep trying to do that, we say 'how often do you need to do your laundry?' But still single person households want their own laundry room, their own washer, their own dryer – everything that a traditional family would have."

It is in the provision of facilities outside those that might ordinarily be found in a single-family home that Murphy has experienced a greater willingness to share – integrated balconies and access galleries allowing more contact between neighbours in the case of an apartment building for older people in Rotterdam, or a shared landscape and communal room privately commissioned by a group of households in Almere. And he points to a growing number of self-initiated communities, such as an apartment building containing twelve elderly gay men and women who choose to live next to each other while maintaining fully-functional, self-contained homes. In terms of housing, says Murphy, the trend might be towards insularity, but offset to some degree by the emergence of communities of choice: "You choose to live in a particular community; the community doesn't come organically from living in a city."

Don Murphy formed VMX Architects, based in Amsterdam, after winning the European 3 competition. A graduate of the Berlage Institute, he has taught there and at the Academie van Bouwkunst Tilburg. His projects include work in housing, education and healthcare.

droog KesselsKramer

SINGLETOWN

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