

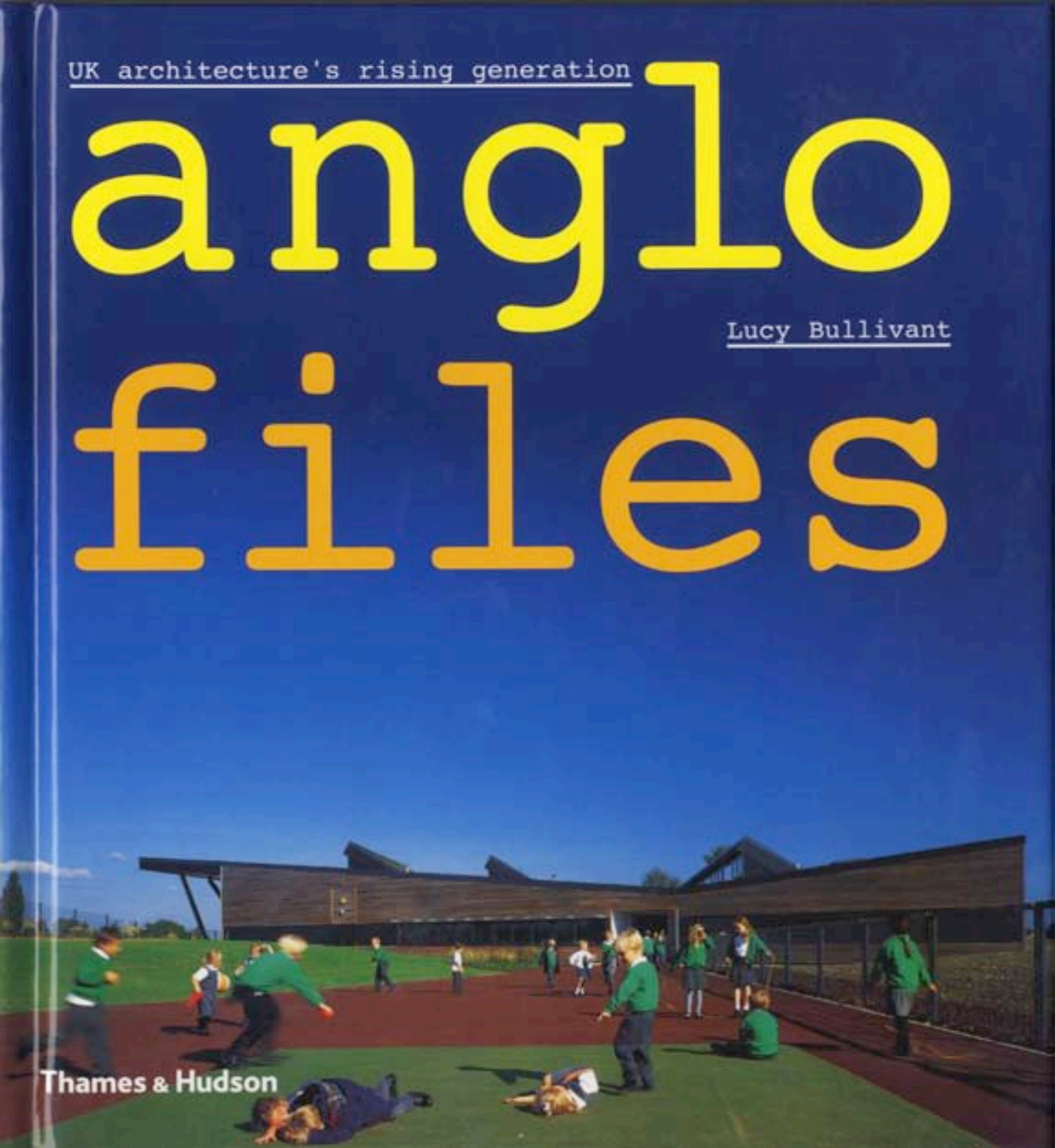
UK architecture's rising generation

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Lucy Bullivant

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Thames & Hudson



S333

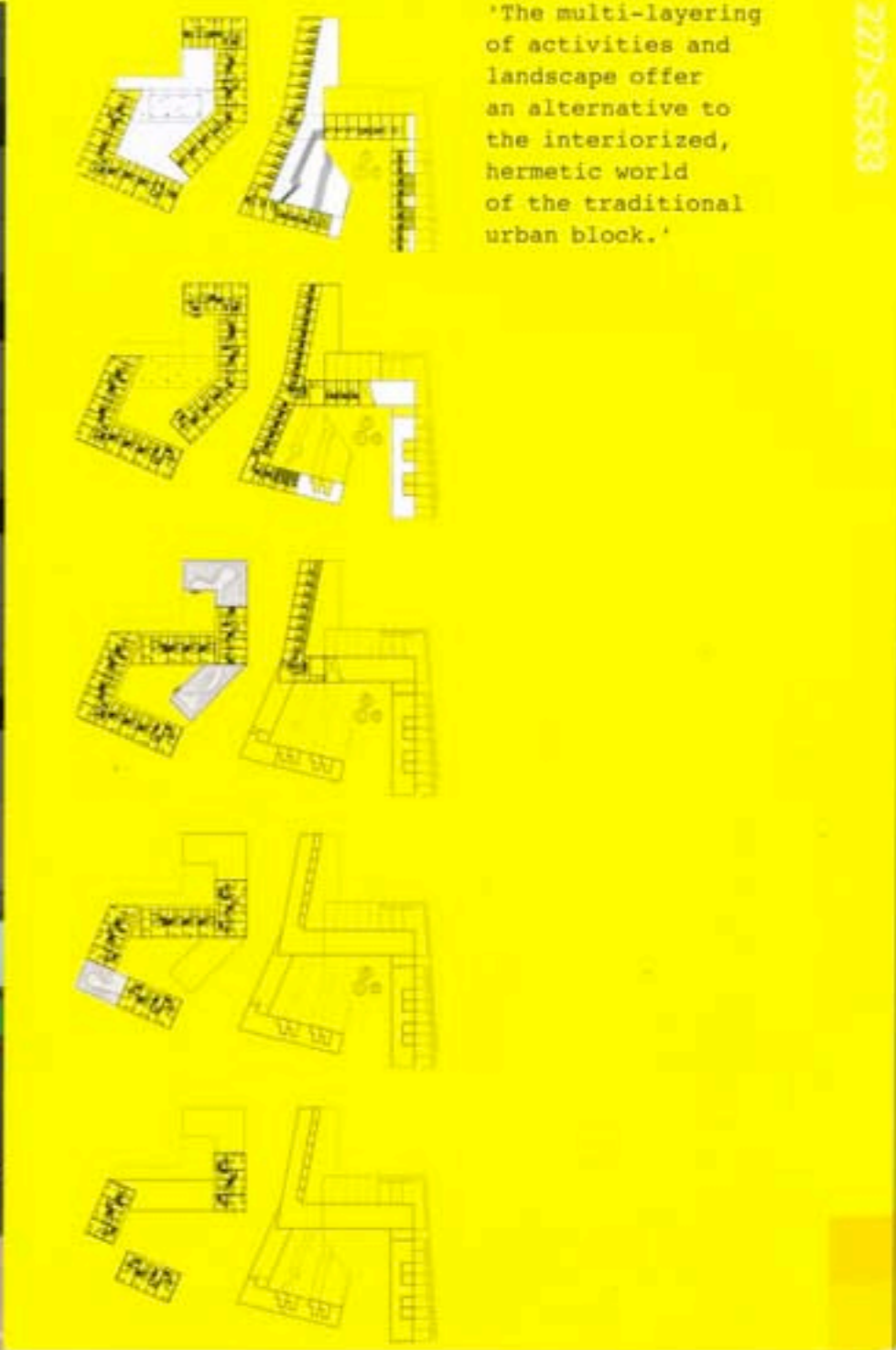


223 > S333



> *Schöta 1 and 2*, Clinge Terrace, Dordrecht, the Netherlands, 1997-2002; (left) sloped landscape and terraces of *Schöta 2*

> (right) first floor interior part of *Schöta 1*

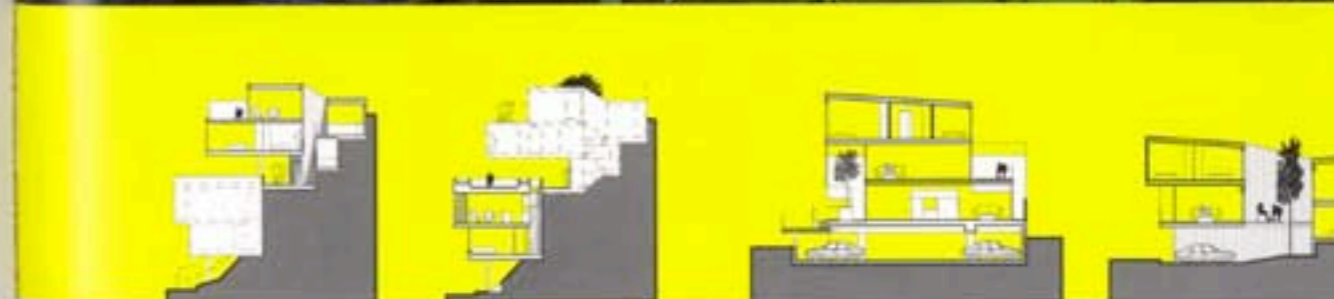


» Blocks 1 and 2, Oude Taverne, Groningen, the Netherlands, 1997-2002; (left) shopping street between blocks 1 and 2; (right) vertical green landscaping walls (far right) first floor glass

In its commitment to speculation about urban processes and to building, S333 is one of the most internationally active architectural practices among a small number in Europe that are predominantly responsible for a slow paradigm shift in architecture towards a new way of reading urban reality. A multidisciplinary studio of architects and urbanists, led by Dominic Papa, Jonathan Woodroffe, Chris Moller and Burton Hamfelt, S333 generates operating strategies that draw on architecture, landscape and urbanism, infrastructural design and socio-economics. Current commissions are located as far apart as Singapore and Bergen, Norway. Determined to 'rediscover architecture within contemporary cultural conditions', as Papa puts it, rather than being over concerned with representing reality through physical form, S333's interest 'in manipulating programme to create a sense of place is driven by social concerns, and treats form as a verb rather than a noun', says Woodroffe.

The practice was formed in London as a strategic think-tank in 1990, at the height of the recession, out of a shared wish to generate debate about contemporary urbanism in Europe. Operating in the early days by organizing workshops, publications and competitions, S333 has since then substantially bridged the gap between architecture and urban design through its multi-scalar activities. Right at the outset, in 1991, it beat 600 entrants to win an international competition for the revitalization of the 27 hectare city centre of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. Bordered by four distinctly varied urban conditions, Samarkand offered itself as an experiment in alternative masterplanning techniques. 'Instead of specifying zones, the plan simply set up a system of routes through the site, linking back to the surrounding fabric,' says Moller. 'Between the empty spaces of the future city centre, the site was free to be developed following market requirements, and rather than showing one urban scenario, we suggested many.' However, before the mayor's plans could be realized, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the project was scrapped.

A more robust architectural scene awaited them in the Netherlands, where the practice decamped in 1994 after winning the European 3 international housing competition for Groningen's Circus site. The exposure aroused by this project led more recently to commissions for medium density housing in Beaumont Quarter, Auckland, New Zealand (completed in 2004), Oldham, Manchester (urban plan, 2004) and for mixed-use social housing by the Toynbee Housing Association on the Tarling Estate at Shadwell in east London (the competition was won in 2000 in collaboration with architects Stock Woolstencroft). Tarling resulted from a competition to transform a post-Second World War estate with poorly defined public spaces into an urban setting: the



> Blocks 1 and 2, Cihole Dervais, Groningen, the Netherlands, 1997-2003; (from top) two cross-sections through shopping street, long section through Schuts 1, long section through Schuts 2

> S333 in association with Studio of Pacific Architecture: Beaumont Quarter, inner city housing, Auckland, New Zealand, 2001-3; (top) view from "Leap Frog" to "Big Day", two of the housing types; (bottom, left to right) "Cliff Harper", "Leap Frog", "Saddle Bag" and "Big Day"



• Woonwilletoef Vijfhuizen, Vijfhuizen, the Netherlands, 1996-2002 (phase 2, 2005) housing type 21 3 in 1, three-bedroom house

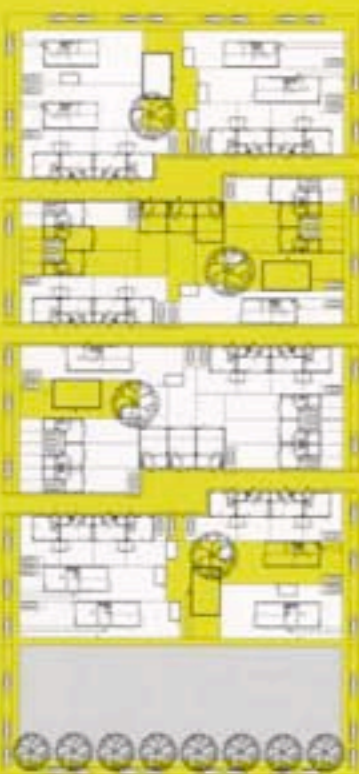
challenge that S333 took on was to provide spatial diversity, reinventing terraced housing.

S333 frequently finds itself labelled 'Dutch', but now that the public sector bodies behind Thames Gateway, a major urban regeneration project in east London, have given Dutch architects and planners West 8 and Maxwan a key masterplanning role, S333 is in a good position to take advantage of this fluidity in intellectual trading based around the regeneration of place. Their strategy is a tactically productive one that plays on political and cultural exchange across national boundaries.

Another of S333's early commissions was the 1995 project for the city of Zaanstad in the Netherlands, an urban development study for a 20-hectare site around Zaanadam railway station. As part of their plan, S333 proposed to transform a 4-hectare waste dump into a 'Dutch Mountain', a recreational park incorporating land art in a meshwork of paths and multi-coloured, angled gardens. The park gave S333 the ideal opportunity to create a variety of conditions for open public space, from calm and sheltered to rugged and windy. 'It highlights the challenges inherent in designing a living organism that is in a continual state of change. Whether it is soil settlement, weather conditions or planting cycles, design concepts have to accommodate this flux,' explains Hamfelt.

CiBoGa Terrain in Groningen, S333's 1994 winning scheme for European 3, embodies a modus operandi that as in so many of their projects uses analysis of the site as the generator of ideas. Groningen's local authorities were well known for inviting architects such as Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas to build in the city, but had failed to find a new way of perceiving this particular site. The 14 hectare zone of CiBoGa is in the north-eastern former industrial area of the city, which follows the curve of the original medieval walls. Once the site of a circus, freight storage and gas works, it was a nebulous area which the city council at first hoped to capitalize on by creating an edge condition with offices. Later, once the national government agreed to provide €12 million to depollute the area, it came to see CiBoGa as a potential residential area. From the 1970s onwards, alongside an interest in masterplans, the compact city plan increasingly came back into favour in the Netherlands as well as the UK. In their design for CiBoGa, the S333 architects were able to combine compactness while triggering an ecological rebirth of the whole area, creating a reborn edge city that previously would doubtless have been dismissed.

The competition, entitled 'At Home in the City - Urbanizing Residential Neighbourhoods', requested proposals for the design of a new living environment, specifying that the architects should 'rethink the



► Blomvliedshof Vijfhuizen, Vijfhuizen, the Netherlands, 1996-2003 (phase 2, 2005); (top left) housing type 2; (bottom left) site plan; (top right) view down one of the new lanes; (bottom right) view from interior through first-floor living zone



relationship between the city's private and public spaces and the spatial scaling from domestic intimacy to urban collectivity'. S333 responded to the fact that the developers wanted a high density of residential units, while the city wanted to establish an ecological corridor through the site to connect the park to the west and the canal to the east. In response to these conflicting demands, S333 set about creating what Papa calls 'a three-dimensional overlapping of programme and landscape elements'.

During the developmental stages, the city's department of urban planning expanded the remit, asking S333 to draw up a masterplan for the entire CiBoGa site, to include 1,000 housing units, 1,000 parking spaces and 30,000 square metres of mixed use and recreational areas. In response, S333 undertook intensive studies, forums and typological research, working with other architects to explore contemporary living and working patterns, issues of time-share, security and privacy. On-site workshops were run with Foreign Office Architects, Professor John Frazer and architects Battle McCarthy, and members of the Architectural Association's Housing and Urbanism Unit mapped movement and spatial links. Research projects by environmental engineers, and workshops with developers and local business groups, explored the potential conflicts of the new commercial programmes and leisure-based facilities on the adjacent urban fabric. Working with the city's ecologists, and with landscape architects, S333 also examined how initiatives in ecological sustainability could direct the development of a critical mass of housing.

It is likely that no other European win has resulted in such an intensely prolonged and public-involving form of scrutiny. Focused on the theme of social change – in this case flexibility in living patterns – the project centred on the fact that 'urban dwellers, in establishing new parameters for the use of public and private space, are promoting spatial usage that is more time-based, aligned to individual work/living patterns, mobility and their own personal choice', explains Papa. CiBoGa is intended to help break with the time-honoured tradition in the West of leaving the city for the suburbs and countryside for more living space.

S333 was also commissioned to design the first two urban blocks as *schotsen* (icebergs), described by Papa as 'a compact building volume eroded by views and "desire lines" that negotiate between the public and private realms'. With three levels oriented in different directions to take advantage of the sun, the composition was clearly defined by movement flows, sight-lines and the wish for oblique open public spaces rather than the kind of geometric restraint that working in a historic centre would have imposed. Shops and housing entrances are all at ground level, and houses and apartments are in U- and L-shaped blocks oriented at the middle level around a courtyard, with private roof

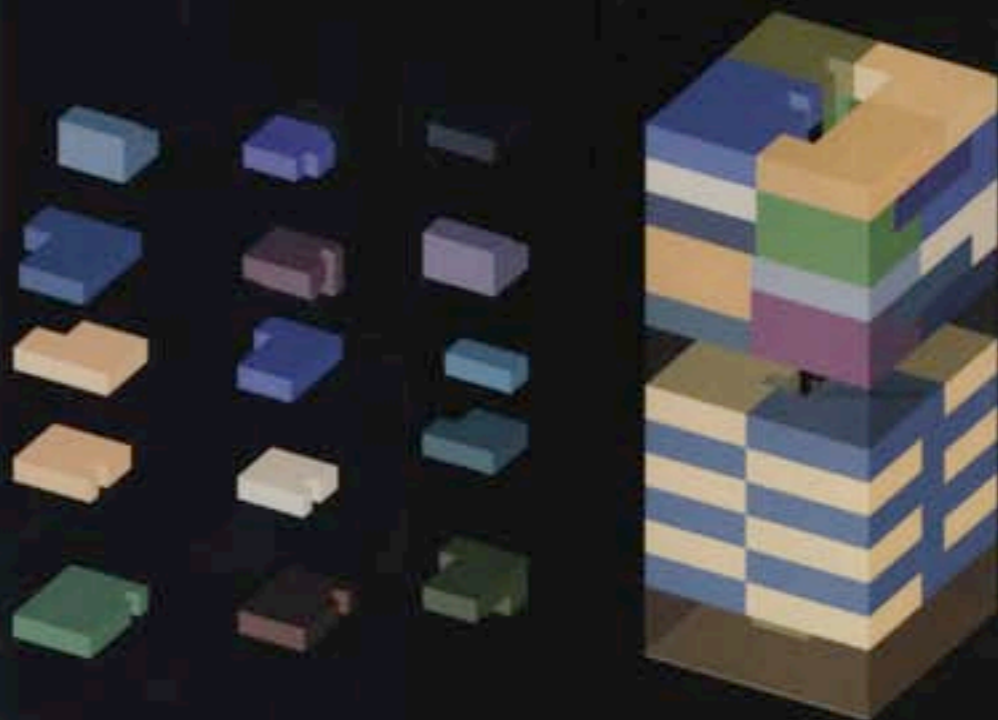
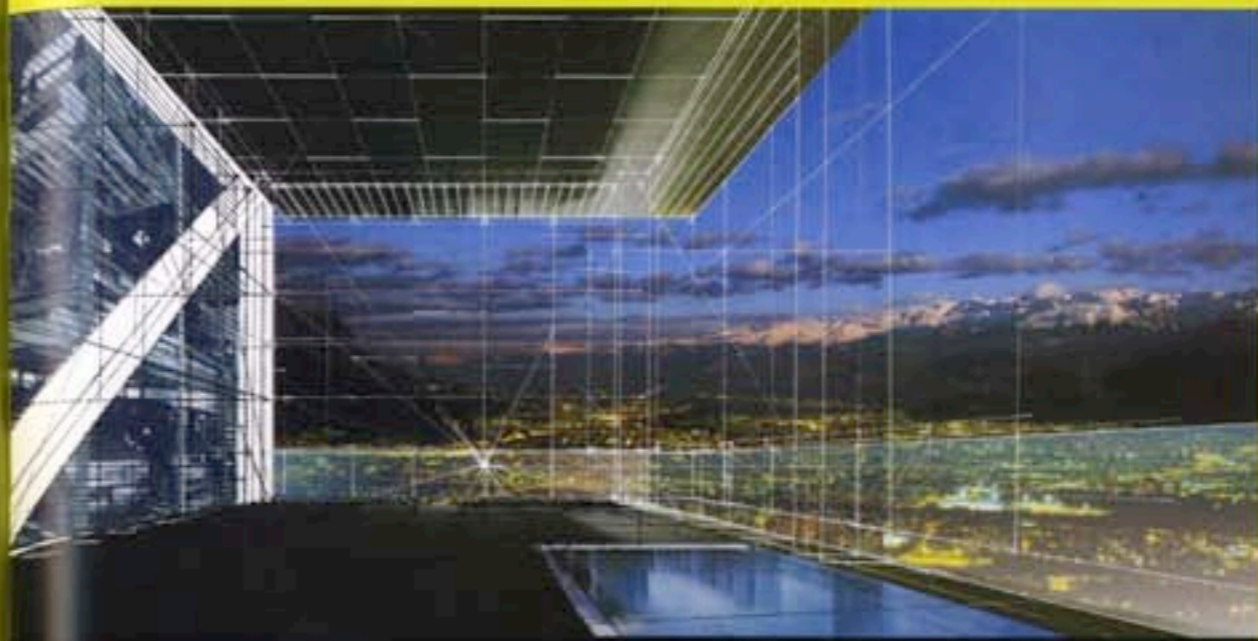
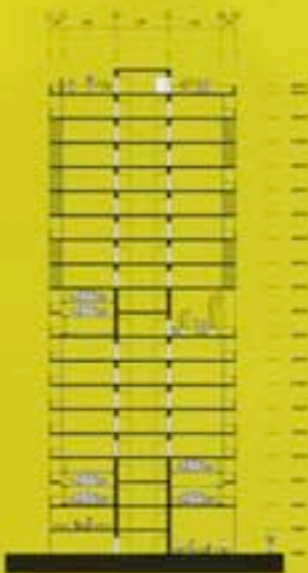
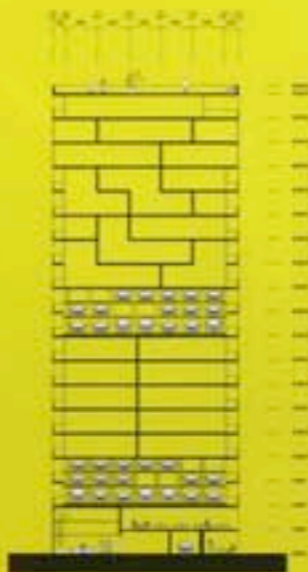
terraces and gardens on top. 'Unlike the tradition in Britain of architecture focusing on itself, Schots 1 and 2 do not form an isolated object but rather respond to their surroundings,' Papa explains. It is not a self-contained, isolated suburb or edge condition, but a new hybrid type of living environment in an area with very limited housing provision. The housing and shops have density, but they do not prevent openness and high-quality public and collective space, so that the site acts as a link between the park to the west and the canal area to the east. A series of galvanized steel steps with gravelled tray surfaces (*taluds* in Dutch) lead up to three large terraces that provide more intimate areas.

While the far rarer incursion into mixed use in the UK so often gets developers and local councils nervous about aesthetics and siting, the *schotsen* (completed in the summer of 2003) not only innovatively mix housing and retail but also incorporate a range of terrace houses, courtyard blocks and apartment towers. The scheme represents an important architectural response to increasingly shifting and fragmenting patterns of living in the city: residents can move between the rented dwellings as their aspirations, family size and finances change.

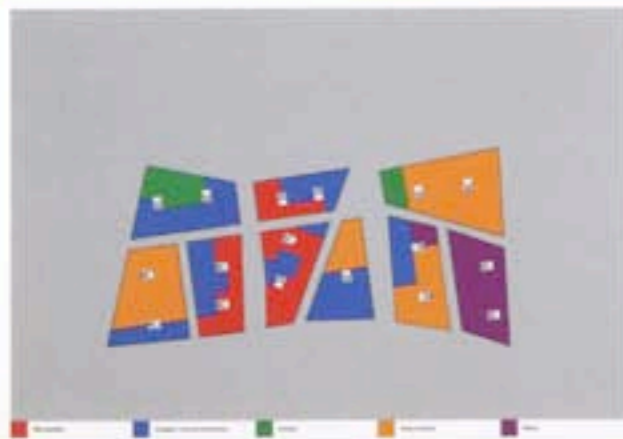
Each *schots* is overlaid by a surface landscape interweaving with the architecture: large areas of ivy, patios, flat-glazed roof gardens, ramped surfaces, courtyards and playgrounds lend variety and promote biodiversity. 'The multi-layering of activities and landscape offer an alternative to the interiorized and hermetic world of the traditional urban block,' explains Papa. 'Context, nature and urban ecology re-position themselves here as generating forces in the re-evaluation of the role of housing within cities.' Cars are banned from the site (only fifty per cent of the housing units may have a parking space on the perimeter, and public transport has been boosted), pedestrian routes link the park and the canal, integrating the scheme within the overall urban landscape.

As a result of the team's research into housing typologies, energy alternatives and ecological issues, the CiBoGa scheme won recognition as a national pilot scheme for sustainable urban renewal. While in the UK the trend is to use marketing imagery to sell shell and core space, in Groningen the collaborative ethos established by the city council, development consortium client and S333 brought about an innovative design approach in which far more emphasis was placed on the project's organization and strategic development, delaying emphasis on the final aesthetic form.

In 1988 the Dutch government launched VINEX, a much vaunted policy paper on housing in the context of regional planning, with a rota of new sites assigned for up to one million dwellings to be built by 2005.



• *La Villa Pando*, 1,700 housing units and 18,000 square-metre mixed-use community, Grenoble, France, 2000 (top and bottom left) sections; (top right) visualization from mid-level parking system and terrace pools; (bottom right) diagram of typological variations.



► **2003-04** Regional Splendid Centre Amsterdam Noord, urban study for a 10,000-square-metre community college, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2003 (top left) Integration of community college within urban plan (top right) Multi-functional sections

Developments were largely determined by competition, with a policy of including quotas of young practices on shortlists; in short, there was a tried and tested mentoring system which the UK lacked. S333 found in the Netherlands fertile pre-conditions for applying their methodology. Their competition win for the village of **Vijfhuizen**, also in the Netherlands, gave them the chance to go further in answering a vital question that applies to all VINEX developments: How do you avoid the creation of a monoculture, and open up the possibilities for complexity? The housing programme at the 1.2 hectare site of Vijfhuizen, near Schiphol Airport (1998–2002), adds 700 new dwellings to the village. Its design is based on the premise that the expansion of communities does not have to lead to sprawl: the suburb can be reinvented.

S333's strategy for Vijfhuizen created 'a regular irregularity' through the redistribution of collective space, introducing a higher than usual diversity of housing types; for example, the double-fronted house type is given work/live spaces with an alternative front, side and back door access, as well as varied garden orientation. The architects created 'plug-ins', roof extensions or additional ground floor rooms so people could customize their houses. Land use has been considered carefully, with lanes through the site and the redistribution of public space; new short cuts and parking positions introduced; and areas for expansion, leasing and other services allowed for. 'We re-configured the site as an active field, a system with order, rules and limitations from which the arrangement of the housing could ultimately emerge,' says Hamfelt.

Both the scheme for Vijfhuizen and their three-stage urban design for the 6 hectare centre of **Nieuw Vennep** (2000–3) are situated in the Haarlemmeerpolder, to the south-east of Amsterdam, close to Schiphol Airport. Their implementation strategy for the development, phasing, and investment for the new centre was based on a sequence of large and small 'urban rooms', serving as starting points for the arrangement of public space and a mix of buildings, 280 new houses, 625 parking spaces and 22,500 square metres of retail and commercial space. A series of workshops enabled local residents directly to influence and contribute material to the development plan, the third and final stage in the project. In working on this project, it was becoming increasingly clear to the practice that there was 'a need to begin developing tools and methods to help facilitate negotiation between different interests and stakeholders, with the ambition of reaching a broader collective', says Moller. He describes how for the workshops 'we invented and built a game, rather like Monopoly, with rules, pieces and monetary restrictions specific to the constraints of the project. This allowed the workshop participants to begin to engage in the complexities of the plan, "playing out" a series of potential development



► **2003-04** **Dutch Mountain**, transformation of waste landfill into a recreational public park, Saenstap, the Netherlands, 1997–01 (left) model (above) site plan

scenarios.' S333's urban scenarios address issues of social segregation, and new forms of intensification, bringing into close focus the limiting ways in which land has previously been used. The elements which the practice propose building into the fabric of an intensive mixed-use scheme, such as CiBoGa, offer a series of densities in an urban development not just a single model of intensity.

S333 feel that we need to talk in terms of urban intensity not density, so that housing design is seen as part of a variety of provision for a community, including schools, infrastructure and social services. An intensive approach to a site also needs to be seen as an urban ecology, understanding the interrelationships between these different layers of the city. Their strategy for *La Ville Forêt*, a housing scheme for the city of Grenoble in France (2000), makes this way of thinking a priority. The result of an invited competition, it establishes a set of programmatic layers that create a new density and flexible blueprint for a prospective community. The prospect of a continuing exodus to the suburbs, bringing with it urban sprawl without real growth, is addressed on the level of a highly dynamic yet open-ended conception of programme. 'The project speculates on just who these inhabitants are and on what kind of strategies and formalizations could be developed from such a condition,' says Hamfelt. The design proposed a wide range of housing typologies against a backdrop of the surrounding mountains. It included car parking areas and collective and private gardens; leisure and retail facilities are innovatively stacked in tall structures. The proposal centres on creating a new street life to accommodate these diverse programmes.

The *Beaumont Quarter* in Auckland, New Zealand, completed in 2005, was another medium density counterproposal to urban sprawl, for which S333, in association with the locally based Studio of Pacific Architecture, drew on the lessons learned from their speculative work at *La Ville Forêt*. S333's strategy here, as Papa explains, was about 'shaping the conditions under which forms and objects may emerge'. The complex form of the cliff face, combined with regulatory restrictions, created a maximum sectional envelope that changed every metre along the cliff. S333 addressed this by designing four types of houses, playfully named 'Cliff Hanger', 'Leap Frog', 'ZigZag' and 'Saddlebag', clustered to create villa-scale elements (thirty-two cliff dwellings and seventeen terraced houses on the half-hectare site) in forms generated from the vertiginous topography, deploying galvanized metal, wood and corrugated steel and bound together by a boardwalk from the street to the cliff top.

The design process also involved negotiating what Papa has described as the 'conflict between programmatic demands for density, privacy, large interiors, generous outdoor space and stunning views against

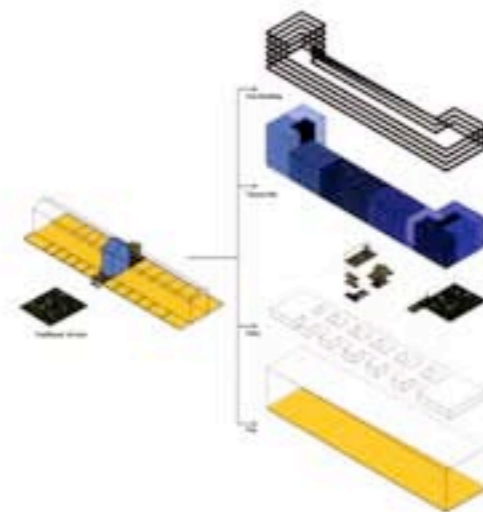


environmental issues of acoustic pollution from a nearby motorway'. S333 argued publicly that medium-density housing at Beaumont would liberate some of the finance for resources like a sports club, café and high quality private landscaping. An even more audacious proposal to maximize vertical space was produced in 2004 for Groningen City Council's new 'High Buildings' urban policy, which advocates multi-use at a time when the cost/benefit ratio for the relatively few new high-rises in the Netherlands is being examined closely. However, instead of an iconic form flagrantly rising from an unspecified public realm, where the ground level is completely cleared, S333's towers 'plug' into a proposed urban fabric drawing on cultural and historical conditions at ground level.

In recent years, S333 has acted as a strategic advisor for urban development. In this capacity the team worked on the 2002 commission for the Regional Opleidings Centrum Amsterdam Noord (ROCvA), a community college in the new centre of Amsterdam. It shares a site with the North/South metro station. The design for the college appropriates 'the useful part of' a shopping mall and model of a traditional urban passage to fuse public and educational space. One of several contemporary educational facilities being re-evaluated by young architects, ROCvA, like all S333's projects, investigates the need for diversified daily usage and for freeing the potential of urban typologies and their uses from a state of isolation, as seen in many planning schemes in the past, to realize the potential of contemporary communities.



• New Town Centre, Groningen, 2002: urban development plan for a 400-hectare site, with 480 housing units and 22,500 square metres of retail and commercial spaces, Netherlands, 2002-04 (left) site plan showing new alternatives emerging from a traditional type



• Vennopoly game: designed as interactive tool to engage the public (top left); 8333 in association with Streeklustbouwcoöperatie, Groningen, 2004 (top right); mixed tenure housing and retail (bottom) perspective of block 2