

'WoonKeur' a Dutch label for life-span-sustainable living

After the Second World War (1945), housing shortage was overwhelming in the Netherlands, and a demand arose for a large quantity of simple and cheap housing. Little attention was paid to occupants' wishes or future dwelling use. Housewives were quick to react by establishing in 1948 the Women Advice Committees (VAC), but it took decades to develop the idea of the 'occupant as a consumer' with housing becoming a commodity guided by demand.

With demographic aging, the elderly population was faced with little attention being paid to their needs and requirements. So, associations for the elderly were established that committed themselves to tailoring houses for living quality. Several quality labels arose: Senior Citizens Quality¹, Accessibility², and the VAC³. So, some 10 years ago, a number of consumer organisations had formulated demands for housing production. Unfortunately, these overlapped or even opposed each other.

The market requested harmonisation and this led to one user-quality label: 'WoonKeur' (Label for living) that also incorporated the security label of the national police⁴. The new label is based on the idea of functional housing and building. The functionalities of homes are described and then translated into technical demands. All functions must be accessible, adaptable, safe, and user-friendly.

CHARACTERISTICS

WoonKeur is a quality certificate developed by consumer organisations and targeted on technical requirements for new residential projects. All organisations relevant to house construction are involved: (i) consumer groups such as the association of home owners, elderly

associations and the national consumer and security foundation, as well as (ii) project developers, architects, and housing corporations.

WoonKeur is not specifically aimed at one target group, such as older persons. It is based on logically situating functions within houses and buildings. Everyone should be able to reach and use homes safely. The label provides criteria for the technical aspects of user friendliness and quality of housing. Also it ensures that houses remain usable during an operational period of fifty years (average period in the Dutch system); it requires that adaptations to homes can be realised cheaply and simply afterwards.

Requirements include, among others⁵, (i) The bathroom has to allow for easy wheelchair manoeuvrability, (ii) A house staircase lift or elevator is installed at little extra costs, (iii) The reception room and toilet are located at entry level and easily accessible, (iv) All floor unevenness is reduced to 2 cm or less.

WoonKeur has influenced national legislation. After WoonKeur increased the user-quality of staircases by lessening steepness (tread of 0.22m instead of 0.185m and a rise of 0.180m instead of 0.21m).

Although WoonKeur is supported by the Dutch Ministry of Housing (www.vrom.nl/pagina.html?id=10717), it will not be incorporated into the Bouwbesluit. The user-oriented philosophy of WoonKeur is hard to harmonize with legal minima for dwellings and other buildings. In contrast to WoonKeur, Bouwbesluit permits: (i) the absence of outside spaces such as a balcony or a garden, (ii) the absence of storage



Keelpark residential area, Veldhoven, The Netherlands, received its WoonKeur label on January 20, 2005

spaces, and (iii) a toilet that opens directly into the living room, (iv) no requirements for the topography of the different spaces within a dwelling.

WoonKeur is so strongly embedded into the Dutch system of (social) housing that no comparison with user labels in other countries has been made, and the WoonKeur-organisation has no plans to expand its activities internationally. However, exchanging information with comparable labelling organisations elsewhere would be welcome.

WOONKEUR'S FUTURE

Everymore Dutch municipalities are now using WoonKeur as a quality standard for new dwellings, and as a term of condition for issuing building grounds. WoonKeur has been taken as the golden standard by a large national corporation 'Woonzorg Nederland', which specialises in constructing houses for the elderly and other specific target groups. WoonKeur is developing a certificate for existing dwellings, to be introduced in April 2006.

A number of drawbacks of WoonKeur have been mentioned by users, project

developers, and architects. Construction costs are higher. Architects are irritated by the diminishing of their freedom of design. Architects are not used to focus on both the first and the future owners and users of a dwelling. As a national standard, the label may oppose the demands of certain individual residents. For instance, WoonKeur explicitly forbids the construction of an open staircase since such a staircase is dangerous in use. The open staircase proves, however, to be a favourite among residents and architects.

COSTS

The incremental costs of a WoonKeur labelled dwelling amount to about €2,000 per house. This includes the loss of interest and breaks down to €40 per year during the operational period. For project developers it amounts to 0.9% of the average selling price. Savings come when the house needs adaptations for care, or is sold. In one example, the costs to adapt the house for a disabled occupant amounted to €1,500, rather than the usual €25,000!

References

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