

The house offers
a brick facade
to the street.

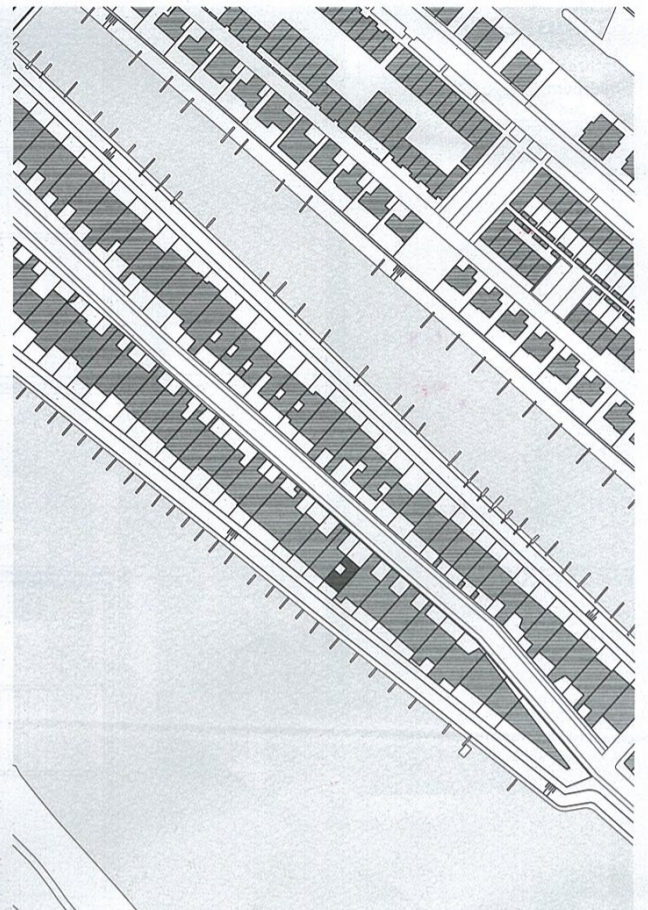
LEVELS OF BEING

A captivating view over water motivated the design of a spatially elaborate family house on an island in Amsterdam, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Stefan Müller



The waterfront elevation steps in plan to accommodate the site boundary.



SITE PLAN



Model showing the house's complex arrangement of levels.

While lying only a 10-minute drive from central Amsterdam, the fast emerging neighbourhood of IJburg provides what will soon be its 45,000 residents with a bucolic lifestyle. One of the Vinex developments initiated in the nineties, IJburg is ranged over six islands at the south end of the vast IJ lake, its extensive waterfront allowing many householders to maintain boats outside their homes.

With the completion of its first buildings in 2003, the area quickly proved enormously popular — not something that can be said for all Vinex developments — particularly with young families and retirees. However, to talk of IJburg as a “natural” counterpoint to the urban experience of Amsterdam

proper would be something of a caricature. This is, after all, the Netherlands: a country whose land is, to an unusually large extent, constructed. The islands on which IJburg is now being developed were built — by piling up sand — for the purpose and will be joined in the coming decade by four more.

The first to be completely built out is Kleine Rieteland (The Little Reed Island). Looking out across a narrow strip of water towards a park that lies to the south, this is the smallest and most attractively sited of the islands and has been configured as a single street of privately built houses. In a country where the public sector has recently played such a dominant role in housing delivery, this kind of development remains very much an exception.

The most obvious precedent

Office Winhov's design, uniquely among the houses on the island, offers not a single window to the street

is Scheepstimmermanstraat, the street in the redevelopment of nearby Borneo Sporenburg that comprises 60 terraced houses by different architects. West 8 conceived that project with the aim of maximising the street's formal diversity but the plan for Kleine Rieteland, devised by the architect John Bosch, has generated a less archly differentiated outcome.

As at Scheepstimmermanstraat

its fundamental discipline derives from the division of each side of the street into a terrace, the rear elevation of which addresses water. Two further stipulations enforce the houses' common relationship to the street: the capping of their height at 10m and the requirement that each should accommodate off-street parking. Bosch was specific about how that latter demand should be resolved, obliging each participating architect to meet the street with a single-storey portal and to give over the first 4m of its plot to a patio. Unfortunately, while these rules have been followed scrupulously, the collective effect is notably lacking in any sense of urbanity. The setting back of the primary facades robs the street of both definition and animation, consigning it to the status of a

desolate access road.

That critique is shared by the young couple who have recently completed the final house on Kleine Rieteland. When they commissioned Office Winhov — the Amsterdam practice known until last year as Wingender Hovenier — to design a home for their family of four, they asked for a scheme that would take best advantage of the views over the water to the south and turn its back, to all intents and purposes, on the street that it nominally addresses. Office Winhov fulfilled that brief to the letter, producing a design that, uniquely among the houses on the island, offers not a single window to the street.

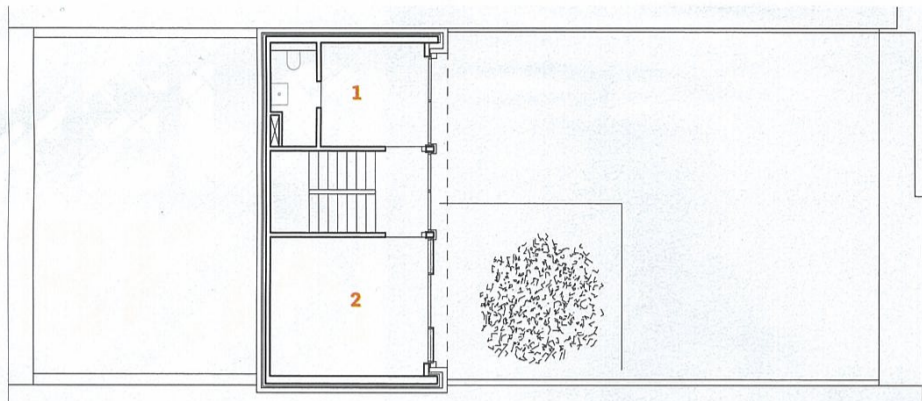
There is a glazed front door in one corner but otherwise the house's primary facade comprises an unrelieved expanse of brick articulated only through

the facing of the parapet and the lintel above the door with vertically oriented stretchers. Yet, read in relation to the carefully proportioned brick and white precast concrete portal that extends in front of it, the facade achieves an expression that is monumental without being overbearing: an effect that owes much to the use of the same richly variegated white/cream Engels Helden brick that was employed in Cambridge's Accordia development.

At the front door, the opacity that has characterised our initial encounter with the house gives way to an experience of pronounced contrast. The only internal walls are in glass, forming three sides of a courtyard at the centre of the plan, while beyond we find the far wall also glazed across almost its full extent. The resulting

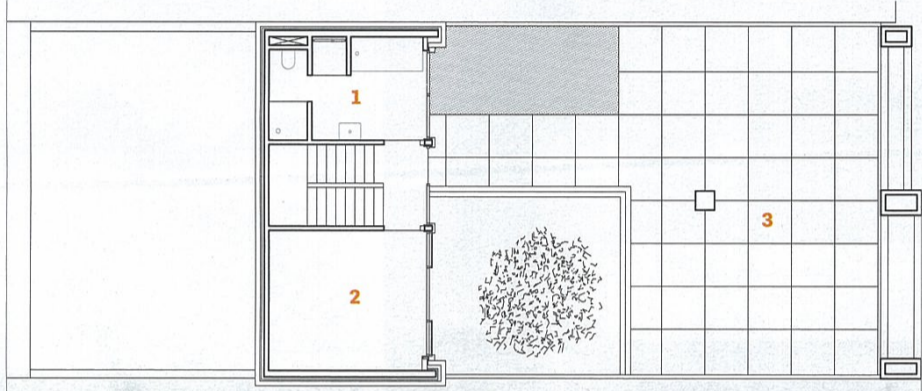
SECOND FLOOR

- 1 Bathroom
- 2 Bedroom



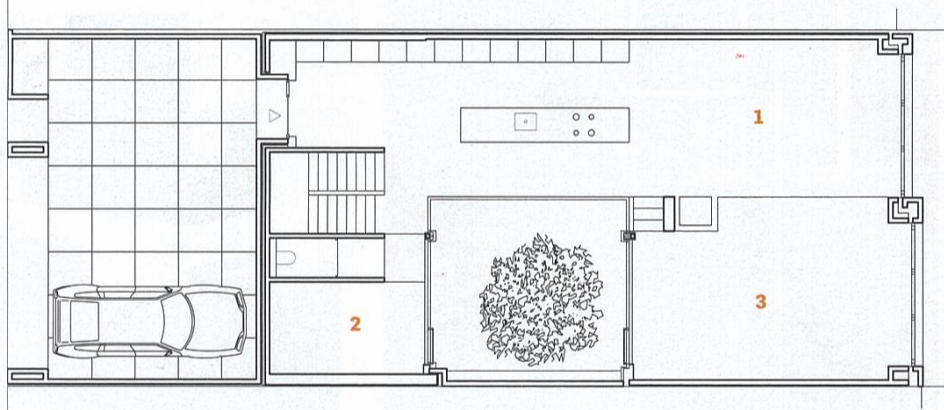
FIRST FLOOR

- 1 Bathroom
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 Roof terrace



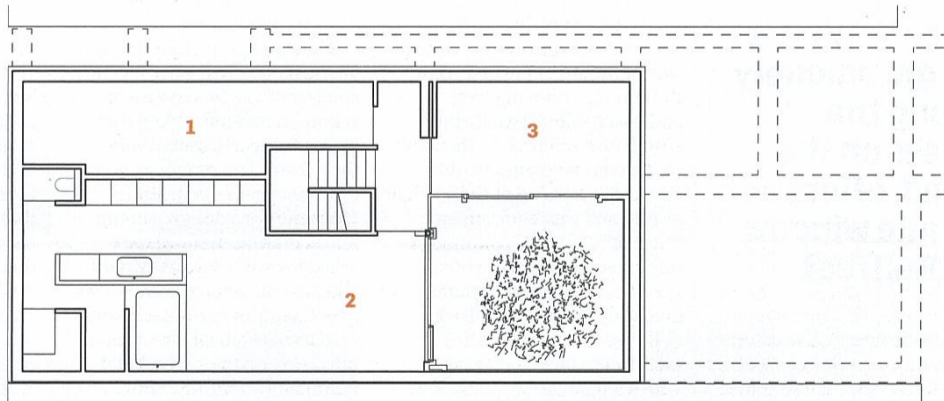
GROUND FLOOR

- 1 Kitchen
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 Living room



BASEMENT

- 1 Utility
- 2 Master bedroom
- 3 Office



The house is planned around an internal courtyard.



transparency offers two revelations: the lake, framed with cinematic assurance, and more surprisingly, a substantial basement level, visible where the glazed courtyard descends into it.

A key problem from the project's outset was that the site was too small for the growing family's needs. Their previous house, which they had built elsewhere on IJburg, provided them with 330sq m. As sailing enthusiasts, they were keen to make the move to Kleine Rieteland because of the opportunity to live beside water, but if they built solely above ground John Bosch's regulations permitted them a volume of no more than 180sq m.

Their solution was to build a basement — accommodating

the master bedroom, an office, sauna and utility room — that extends under the volume of the rest of the house and out into ground below the entrance patio. Building this in-situ concrete tank on ground characterised by such a high water level was not straightforward. Stopping the tank being buoyed by the upward force of the water required the introduction of 20 piles, each of 26m in length. The clients now acknowledge that had they appreciated the cost and complexity of this course of action they would have bought two adjacent plots and accommodated their brief entirely above ground.

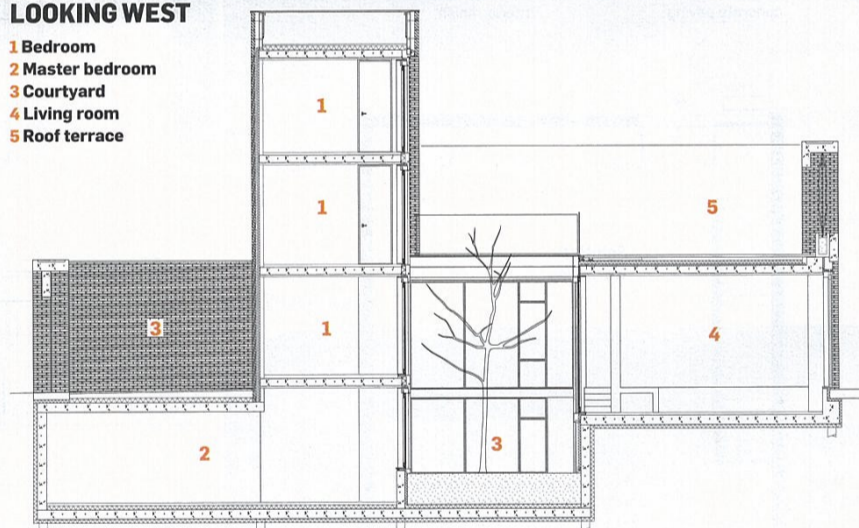
Yet, for all the headache that digging down may have represented, the effort has

View towards
the water on the
ground floor.



SECTION LOOKING WEST

- 1 Bedroom
- 2 Master bedroom
- 3 Courtyard
- 4 Living room
- 5 Roof terrace



Rooms stacked at the north end of the site read as a tower.

resulted in a house of a highly particular and exciting spatial arrangement. Making our way past the internal courtyard we can look back to the four storeys of single-aspect accommodation — one below ground, three above — that has been concentrated at the northern end of the plot. Almost twice as high as it is wide and glazed across its full extent, this block reads as a diminutive tower: a startling discovery given that many of the neighbouring houses are of two storeys and none are of more than three.

Optimising the views from these rooms has required that the volume to the south — which accommodates the principal living spaces — be restricted to a single storey. Above it a generous roof terrace has been

established, framed at its far end by three brick piers supporting a white concrete lintel: a device that reads as an extension of the structure below it and an echo of the portal that stands against the street. The resultant waterfront facade presents a character that is elemental but leavened by notes of informality: the doors at ground level are sited in response to need rather than symmetry while the two

The only internal walls are in glass, forming three sides of a courtyard at the centre of the plan

structural bays offset from one another in plan in order to accommodate a boundary line that falls at a slight angle to the house's dominant geometry.

From the beginning of the project, Office Winhov's clients were clear that they themselves would take responsibility for the fit-out, commissioning a joiner directly once the main contract was complete. That process is ongoing but the work they have undertaken to date is sympathetic to Office Winhov's vision while betraying a strong attachment to the precision cabinetry of high-end boat interiors.

Even with its basement, this is not a huge house and it communicates a strong sense that everything, of necessity, has its place. In briefing its architect,

the clients were explicit that while they wanted the practice to design them a shell, they were not looking for a loft-style interior in which functions could be freely redistributed. On the ground floor that choice has been inscribed strongly by the introduction of incremental level changes between the spaces ranged around the internal courtyard. The result is a variety of Loosian raumplan, but its motivation has not only been to articulate different parts of the plan.

Another has been to present the master bedroom — which faces south onto the courtyard at the lowest level — with an improved aspect. The floor of the child's bedroom located above it has been lifted while that of the living room that lies across

the courtyard has been dropped. Supported by the provision of floor-to-ceiling glazing, the arrangement ensures that a significant area of sky remains visible from deep within the lower floor.

A reading of the master bedroom as a basement should be further eroded when the clients realise their plan to introduce a stepped bank within the courtyard — an innovation that will provide a shortcut between bedroom and living room. At present the courtyard's sole occupant is a 6m high honey locust, rooted in a courtyard-sized planter.

Admiring the tree from the bedroom it took me a while to mentally process the ground adjustments that have enabled it to grow here: the accumulation

of sand to form the island, the subsequent excavation of sand to allow the basement to be built and finally the piling in of a metre of earth to allow the tree its bedding. It offers a beautiful focus to the daily life of the house and an image of nature of a singularly Dutch kind.

PROJECT TEAM

Architect
Office Winhov
Client
Private
Structural engineer
Pieters Bouwtechniek Haarlem
Installations
Technisch Adviesbureau Sanes
Construction
Vink en Veenman
Furniture
Studio de Klijn