

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories:

27: 2010–2015 The Uilenstede renovation



The new Uilenstede meeting place, designed by NEXT Architects, photo: Ossip van Duivenvoorde

The Uilenstede campus is currently home to 3,400 students and others, including many VU Amsterdam students. There are also numerous amenities, including a sports centre, a bicycle repair shop, a supermarket, an eatery and various shops. The first flats were opened in 1966. Since that time, the complex has grown to become the largest student centre in northern Europe. Uilenstede has an illustrious history and has been extensively rebuilt and renovated on several occasions. The festive opening of the renovated campus took place on 12 May 2016. A brief outline of its history is given below, after which Duco Stadig, who lived in Uilenstede in the 1970s, looks back on his time there.

When Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam was still based in the [inner city](#) and Amsterdam South, some of the students lived in so-called [hospitia](#): student housing managed by the university. When the university decided to move to Buitenveldert in the 1950s, an initial attempt was made to build housing on the [new campus](#), but the rapidly growing number of students made this impossible. An independent student complex designed by architect Leo de Jonge would eventually be built in Amstelveen, some distance away. The first pile was driven on 26 May 1964, and Uilenstede, as the complex was named, was opened in 1966 by Minister [I.A. Diepenhorst](#). In 1976, there were already 1,500 VU Amsterdam students and 1,000 UvA students living there, as well as 300 student nurses from the VU Amsterdam hospital. There was a sports centre and a centrally located ‘combination building’: a meeting centre that housed the Uilenstede café, the VU Amsterdam cultural centre and a student restaurant.

It was hoped that, despite its large scale, the student centre would retain some of the sense of security provided by the old VU Amsterdam student life. Unfortunately, the reality was different. Not only the location – a stone’s throw from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol and far away from the city – but also the uniformity of the buildings meant that Uilenstede was not a popular place to live. It was seen as a student ghetto and was given derogatory

nicknames like *Vuilenstede* (a pun on its name and the Dutch word for dirt) and Amstelveen's Manhattan. In 1980, a black book was published with numerous complaints, varying from noise, poor-quality concrete and crumbling stairs.

The early 1990s, however, saw the beginning of a renewal. Existing buildings were renovated, housing was added and the living environment was refurbished. At the end of the 1990s, the [Griffioen cultural centre](#) arose on the site of the old combination building. The student housing provider SSH, responsible for management from the start, was renamed Intermezzo and later became part of DUWO. The site again became the property of the municipality of Amstelveen.

Renewal on a larger scale was initiated in 2009 on the basis of [a vision developed by Lodewijk Baljon Landscape Architects](#), aimed at creating a green campus with space for various aspects of student life, meeting and interaction. [Architectural firm NEXT](#) renovated the central building in 2014. At the heart of the campus, a meeting place was created in the form of a central square, with a glass greenhouse – an event venue – and the catering outlet [Il Caffè](#). On 12 May 2016, [the renovated campus was opened](#) with the unveiling of a plaque.

The 1970s: memories

Duco Stadig

When I moved to Uilenstede in early 1970, the student centre – as it was called – was still under construction. The low buildings and the three low towers were already there, grouped around the pond that was there at the time. The three tall double towers were already finished or under construction, as was the 'combination building' in between. The sports hall was also there, as well as a temporary Spar supermarket and a temporary café built alongside. Much later, the UvA built three more double towers across the road.

There was a Management Committee, headed by the general manager, Mr Buitink. He saw to it that the worried parents from the provinces were put at ease, assuring them that there was good supervision and therefore no chance of misbehaviour by their offspring. Boys and girls lived separately, so everything was under control.

However, it was the time of the sexual revolution and of the NVSH – the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform. A certain Wiebe Braam was a member, and you could get contraceptives from him, much to the dismay of Mr Buitink. More and more girls were spotted in the boys' flats, which occasionally smelled of hashish, and some students experimented with LSD. We listened to music by the Stones, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, Bob Dylan and their contemporaries.

The rooms were grouped into 'units', consisting of 14 rooms behind a front door. In the old building, we had to share showers and toilets. In the tall towers, only the kitchen was shared. And then there was the telephone; each unit had one telephone in the corridor. You couldn't have a confidential conversation, and you had to write down the telephone units you used.

The combination building housed the bicycle parking facilities for the towers, a supermarket, a social club and an oversized café-restaurant. This was discovered by the youth of Amstelveen, who came there in ever-increasing numbers to party away the weekend. While this was good for turnover, they also brought heroin and knives, so the situation got out of hand and they were no longer welcome.

We were in the flight path of Amsterdam Airport Schiphol's 'Bulder' runway, which was much busier then than now. With a westerly wind, a plane would come over every few minutes. Some went crazy from the noise, and others managed to ignore it. 'When you're having a conversation, you just stop,' I used to explain, but the radio news service doesn't stop, so that's tricky. I didn't study much. I hardly ever went to lectures. Instead, I sat on committees and boards, including that of the SSH. I did eventually obtain my Master's degree in Economics after 12 years, but by then I was already living elsewhere and even had a job. In those days, that was no big deal.

Even back then, there was a massive housing shortage in Amsterdam. That's why there was a system of housing distribution at the time: vacant homes were allocated by the Municipal Housing Service, and if they were refused twice, they went to student housing. In 1975, at the age of 28, I was offered a house scheduled for demolition in

Nicolaas Beetsstraat. However, it had been broken into by squatters, so I was offered another one on Rozengracht. I continued going to Uilenstede for a while, because I was still chair of the SSH board. Four years ago, I visited again after a long time, marvelling at everything that had changed in the many intervening decades.

Duco Stadig is a former SSH board member (1970–1977), former alderman of Amsterdam and, since 2014, board member of the VU Association.

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