The Dutch home

Modern Dutch interior style is playful, chic and calm. Jane Szita finds it was hundreds of years in the making

Elaborate ceiling stuccos

Big windows with no curtains

Clever use of space

Light colours and bare wood

"The typical Dutch home?" Design agent Rini van Beek is sitting in her light, white, sparsely furnished living room, and gazing at the view through a floor-to-ceiling expanse of immaculately polished glass.

"I think the most characteristic style is more or less minimalistic," she says. "Carefully chosen design pieces, a calm space, with nothing excessive or unnecessary. It's all about reducing everything you need to the minimum, and limiting not just the number of pieces of furniture, but also the materials. Using few materials gives a quiet feeling."

As Van Beek is a design professional, it's not surprising that her own home fits the description perfectly – the type of simple but stylish Dutch dwelling seen on blogs like Bloesem and in the pages of international interiors magazines.

Spend some time in The Netherlands, and you'll see any number of houses that match this ideal. Chances are you won't even have to step foot inside them, thanks to the national habit of leaving the curtains open at night, putting the illuminated interior of just about every home on show.

Framed by tall, wide windows, those clutter-free rooms with snowy walls, large wooden tables, fleamarket finds and quirky lamps do show well. Are Dutch homes designed to be seen this way?

"There is an element of showing off your taste," says interior designer Maurice van Berkel at his light-filled studio – a sleek but sculptural space – on the Weteringschans in Amsterdam. "Duch homes are always open to the world in this way. It's as if we want to stay in contact with the street. There's a theory that the open curtains are down to Calvinism – wanting the world to see that you're not up to anything ungodly – but I prefer to think that it reflects our society's traditional openness to other cultures. It's something you don't see in other countries."

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Whatever the cultural reasons for these large, literal windows onto Dutch lives, their architectural origins can be traced back to the 17th century. House frontages were taxed according to width, and builders responded by erecting tall, narrow homes, which needed big windows at the front, to maximise daylight and allow goods in and out without negotiating the steep stairs. Big windows also reduced the weight of the brick structures – an important consideration in a country where everything was built on wooden piles driven into the sand.

The elegant results of these practical provisions were the calling card of a fledgling nation. The Dutch Republic was busily reinventing itself as a society run not by church or aristocrats, but by a prosperous, urban merchant class. ▸▸

Light that floods through big windows from front to back of narrow buildings

Classic, simple wooden dining table, ready to bear scuffs and scratches

Traditional flourishes

Tiny, well-used balconies

▸▸ The republic lived by trade, and the new economic order encouraged individualism and the rise of the nuclear family. The home became simultaneously a private place and an arena for public virtues that embodied the values of the republic: thrift, hard work, strict morality and democracy – as well as a quiet showcase for wealth.

It's a paradox that endures today. "Dutch people don't open their homes readily to strangers," admits Irene Hoofs, who set up the Bloesem blog to celebrate Dutch domestic design. Having the curtains perpetually open does not equate to keeping open house. In his book, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, architect Witold Rybczynski characterises 17th-century Dutch life as based on "family, intimacy and a devotion to the home" – and those three factors were largely inseparable.

Home was a hideaway and a haven, and even today, says interior architect Evelyne Merckx of Merckx and Girod, home for the average Dutch person simply stands for 'safety'.

> "Big windows maximised light and allowed goods in and out"

It also stood for cleanliness. Historian Simon Schama, in his book *The Embarassment of Riches*, suggests the national 'cleanliness fetish' was the manifestation of the moral purity that the republic hoped would sustain its trading empire and independence.

Other commentators have pointed to the large dairy industry, immensely productive for the time, which relied on rigorous hygiene.

"What was invented in the 17th century," sums up historian Heidi de Mare, "was clean running water, warm but not smoky rooms, working toilets, sufficient daylight in every room – things that over the subsequent centuries became normal in a home."

As well as being avid cleaners, Golden Age householders were determined consumers. Being the richest nation in Europe meant that even humble tradesmen could indulge in the trappings of modern décor, and whole industries sprang up to feed the demand. Many of Amsterdam's grand 17th-century homes now open to the public as part of the Amsterdam Heritage Days.

Blue-and-white Delft pottery (imitating Chinese porcelain), Flemish carpets (copying Oriental ones), pots of tulips and even oil paintings, which were sold at prices to suit all pockets, found their way into even modest homes, to the consternation of foreign visitors.

Having invented modern domestic comfort, the Dutch carried it with them to Britain, where William of Orange became monarch alongside Mary II in 1689, and to America (New York was originally a Dutch colony).

But as time passed and the republic declined, Dutch homemakers became imitators themselves. Forgetting the bare glass windows painted by Vermeer and others, 19th-century Holland adopted elaborate curtains, and kept them closed. It wasn't until modern times that the national sensibility reasserted itself.

The modern Dutch home was reinvented by Gerrit Rietveld and his client Truus Schröder in 1924, when they unveiled a new home for Schröder and her children on the outskirts of Utrecht.

Schröder wanted a complete break from stuffy 19th-century houses, instead asking for maximum simplicity and flexibility – something she later called 'the luxury of frugality', a phrase any of her Golden Age ancestors would have easily understood.

Rietveld obliged with a simple but sophisticated interior, in which sliding doors transform the space in a variety of ways and windows can open up completely, seeming to disappear and leave the residents in the open air.

Today, most of The Netherlands' registered 1,700 interior architects, plus its interior designers, acknowledge a debt to the Schröder House.

"It all started with Rietveld," says Maurice van Bakel. "He looked at the real needs of real people. It's a very human approach."

"Rietveld was a furniture maker first of all, and so his house has a lot of detail, as well as a great spatial quality," says Kees Spanjer, curator of 2013's World Interiors Event, which will celebrate the Dutch contribution to interiors of every kind. Rietveld's combination – an architectural impression of space together with an attention to fine details – seems to have been chanelled by Dutch homemakers, amateur and professional, ever since.

Early in the 20th century, the Amsterdam School of architecture, headed by Michel de Klerk, also brought creative buildings and fresh, modern interiors to the city's working population. Amsterdam School social housing developments, celebrated for their combination of practical utility and sculptural beauty, extended the idea of comfortable living to every social class. Later, architects like Aldo Bakker and Herman Hertzberger continued the Amsterdam School's efforts to humanise buildings inside and out.

In his groundbreaking Central Beheer office (1972), Hertzberger incorportated the qualities of home, encouraging workers to mould their own space and add their own private objects. "The idea of wellbeing has crossed from the private home and into the public domain in Holland," says Kees Spanjer. "I think that's the result of our social system, and our great awareness of styling and design, although who knows where these qualities came from."

They are qualities that continue today. Recent high-density developments in Amsterdam's Eastern Islands include the now famous Scheepstimmermanstraat on Borneo Island, where tightly packed but highly individual homes recall the varied harmony of the canal-house rows of the Golden Age.

On the outside, each tall, skinny, compact home reflects a conformity to strict requirements – established to create a certain uniformity – but each one adapts them in a fresh way. Facades of metal, wood, concrete and glass create a rhythmic play when the windows are illuminated at night, and, looking through them, of course there's plenty Duch domestic comfort still on show. ■