

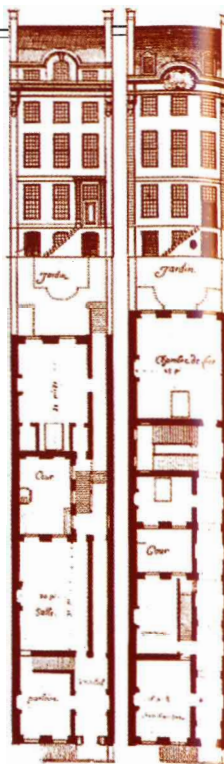
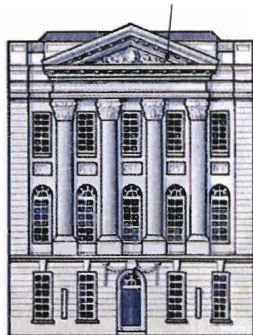
A Guide to Canal House Architecture

Amsterdam has been called a city of “well-mannered” architecture because its charms lie in intimate details rather than in grand effects. From the 15th century on, planning laws, plot sizes and the instability of the topsoil dictated that façades were largely uniform in size and built of lightweight brick or sandstone, with large windows to reduce the weight. Canal house owners stamped their own individuality on the buildings, mainly through the use of decorative gables and cornices, ornate doorcases and varying window shapes.

Broken pediment and vase

“Broken handle” window surrounds

Pediment carvings symbolize



Bartolotti House (1617)

The contrasting brick and stone, flamboyant step gable, with its marble obelisk and scrolls, is typical of the Dutch Renaissance style of Hendrick de Keyser (see p110).

Felix Meritis Building (1778)

The Corinthian columns and triangular pediment are influenced by Classical architecture. This marks the building by Jacob Otten Husly as Dutch Classical in style.

Ground Plans

Taxes were levied according to width of façade, so canal houses were often long and narrow, with an achterhuis (back annexe) used for offices and storage.

CORNICES

Decorative top mouldings, called cornices, became popular from 1690 onwards when the fashion for gables declined. By the 19th century, they had become unadorned.



Louis XV-style with ro-coco balustrade (1739)



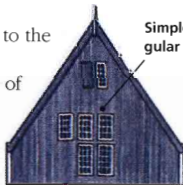
19th-century cornice with mansard roof



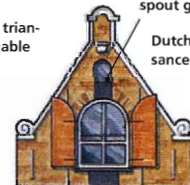
19th-century dentil (tooth-shaped) cornice

GABLES

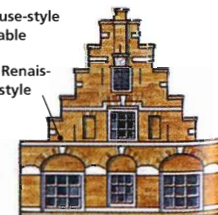
The term “gable” refers to the front apex of a roof. It disguised the steepness of the roof under which goods were stored. In time, gables became decorated with scrolls, crests, and even with coats of arms.



No. 34 Begijnhof (c.1420) is one of the few remaining timber houses.



The style of gable on No. 213 Leliegracht (c.1620) was used for warehouses.



Step gables like the one on No. 2 Brouwerwvgracht were in vogue between 1600–65.



Leaning Façades

Canal houses were often built with a deliberate tilt, allowing goods to be winched up to the attic without crashing against the windows. A law dating from 1565 restricted this lean to 1:25, to limit the risk of buildings collapsing into the streets.



Dutch Hofjes

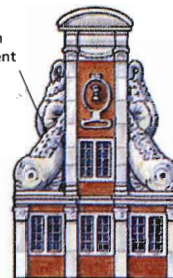
Alms-houses (hofjes) were built throughout the Netherlands by rich benefactors in the 17th and 18th centuries. By providing accommodation for the elderly and infirm, the hofjes marked the beginning of the Dutch welfare system.

Shell motif



No. 419 Singel has a neck gable, a common feature from 1640 to around 1840.

Dolphin ornament



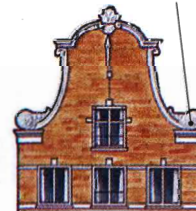
No. 119 Oudezijds Voorburgwal has an ornate 17th-century neck gable.

Unadorned bell gable



No. 57 Leliegracht has a plain bell gable, popular from the late 17th century.

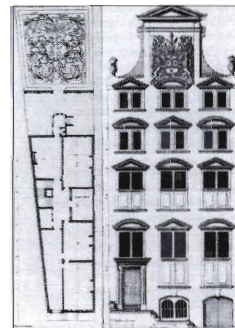
Stonework with cornucopia decoration



No. 298 Oudezijds Voorburgwal has a bell gable dating from the 18th century.

GOLDEN BEND

The stretch of the Herengracht between Leidenstraat and Vijzelstraat was first called the Golden Bend in the 17th century, because of the great wealth of the ship-builders, merchants and politicians who originally lived here. The majority of the buildings along this stretch are faced with imported sandstone, which was more expensive than brick. An excellent example is house No. 412, which was designed by Philips Vingboons in 1664. He was also responsible for the design of the Witte Huis at Herengracht No. 168 as well as Bijbels Museum at Herengracht 366. Building continued into the 18th century, with the Louis XIV style predominating. The house at No. 475, with its ornate window decoration, is typical of this trend. Built in 1730, it is often called the jewel of canal houses. Two sculpted female figures over the front door adorn its monumental sandstone façade.



Ground plan and façade of the building at Herengracht 168



Sign of a sailors' hostel



Symbol of a dairy producer



Noah's Ark – a refuge for the poor

WALL PLAQUES

Carved and painted stones were used to identify houses before street numbering was introduced in the 19th century. Many reflect the owner's occupation.