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## A Landscape of Projects – The Changing Context of Town Planning Practice in The Netherlands

On 20 March 1997 the so called *New Map of The Netherlands* was presented, a map on which all the 2650 town planning projects are shown that will be realized before the year 2005 or shortly after. Of these 2650 projects almost 2000 are so called urban projects for residential areas, business districts and office parks while 650 are projects concerning road and rail infrastructure or so called green projects for recreational grounds, nature development or ecological projects. With regard to the last mentioned projects one has to consider that nature in the Netherlands does not exist by itself. It is developed as a cultural, man made good.

### 1. The New Map of The Netherlands

The presentation of the *New Map* did not pass unnoticed. It was quite a performance. The presentation took place in a major concert hall in the city of Utrecht, the topographical centre of the country. It was accompanied by a music and dance show that could have been appropriate for the opening of the Olympic games or an Oscar gala. Everything was done to give the impression that a major event had taken place. The message was clear, *the future is no fiction, it has already begun and now one can see what it looks like.*

After the actual presentation several experts, critics, developers and politicians took a seat on the *New Map* that was laid out on the floor of the concert hall. The debate could begin. But on which topic? What were the questions that were raised by this *New Map of The Netherlands*?

Let me first underline that it is a major achievement to produce such an overall survey of all the projects that are developed in the planning agencies, at diverse governmental levels. After all, until now, nobody had produced a summary of the way in which the country will be reconstructed in the near future.

To a foreign public this may seem strange, but The Netherlands are not so overplanned as is often suggested. That this mayor achievement could succeed is significant for the planning system in The Netherlands in many different ways.

In the first place the remarkable fact is not that a summary of all the projects that will be realized in 10 to 15 years did not exist – after all, does any country have such an overview? The remarkable thing is, that it was possible to create such a map for a whole country in a very short time, a country which isn't large, but has a very dense usage of space for its nearly 15 million inhabitants.

The whole operation started with a call for information sent to all the planning agencies on the municipal and provincial level and the private town planning offices. After several

rounds of corrections the *New Map* was presented in March 1997, that is six or seven month later. This achievement however cannot be claimed by the central governmental planning agency. It was initiated and controlled by the professional community of townplanners and landscape architects and their institutions.

Major changes in spatial planning in the Netherlands never came from within the planning agencies, but always from parts of the professional community, most times in colusion with different social movements.

The *New Map of the Netherlands* is not only in this literary sense the result of the initiative and the united efforts of the planning community. What it shows is of course also the result of the daily efforts of planners, urban designers, architects and landscape architects. The map shows an enormous amount of projects, scattered over the country. In that way it convincingly proves that The Netherlands are in an increasing way a man made country. The *New Map* however also shows something else. It makes clear what the effects are of the fundamental changes in the spatial planning policy that took place ten years ago.

### 2. A Turn in Spatial Planning Policy

The map shows the results of a major change in spatial planning policy in the second half of the 80's. In 1988 the central government presented an important planning document, the *Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning*. Based on the neo liberal policy, it aimed at a less centrally directed and more market oriented policy. This fundamental change was ideologically motivated by the growing social and cultural diversity of society and the quest to give people more responsibility for their own lives and resulted in a significant withdrawal of central government in the fields of housing and urban renewal. Exactly the domains on which urban planning in the Netherlands was based, from the beginning of the century to the late eighties.

More emphasis was laid on economic potentials, the so-called main ports, the harbour of Rotterdam and Amsterdam airport, the development of a certain number of larger cities and the redevelopment of older industrial areas. The central credo was: don't bother with the weak, but strengthen what is already strong or has the potential to become strong. The spatial policy approach that was developed is rather ambiguous. On one hand the central government withdrew its influence on the local level, but on the other hand it formulated a range of very high aspirations concerning the quality of the environment to be realized at the local level by local authorities and private enterprises. For example, the central government called for an increase in the quality of public space, but didn't give the means for achievement. The instruments that were developed aim at stimulation and 'seduction'.

This spatial planning policy has changed the conditions for the work of urbanists, architects and landscape architects in The Netherlands in a fundamental way.

In the first place urbanists and architects dealing with urban planning have no longer one or two important principals, e.g. a local authority or a housing association, their traditional clients as far as the broader urban schemes are con-

cerned. They have to deal with complex situations in which many interested parties have their own and often conflicting demands.

In the second place the decentralization of planning did not result in a reinforcement of the planning agencies on the local level. The same neo-liberal policy aimed at a reduction of governmental bureaucracy and more involvement of private enterprises on all governmental levels. The profession of urban planning, which was in The Netherlands more or less institutionalized in the governmental planning agencies and a few big private offices saw itself fragmented into a growing number of small firms of young architects and urbanists.

Thirdly, and maybe most important, is the dualism between program and project that has arisen. In former periods urban planners dealt with two clearly defined tasks: the expansion of the city and the reconstruction of the city. The latter the consequence of the former. Both tasks were initiated, facilitated and directed by central and governmental government in hierarchical order. These clear tasks have now been substituted by a far more diverse situation, an urban field in which all kinds of developments take place, some of them planned but most of them spontaneous. As a result of these developments the context of urban planning in The Netherlands has become more like the situation elsewhere. It has lost its specific character of a *planners paradise*. But maybe the answer of the planning system and the planning profession to this new reality is even more specific, more in line with the Dutch planning tradition than is generally recognized.

### 3. The Cleft Between Program and Project

The answer of spatial policy to this new context is the formulation of a rather abstract program on a general level – such as: the 'compact city' as an answer to urban sprawl and increasing automobility; the 'undivided city' as an answer to segregation and concentration of minorities, or an 'ecological superstructure' as an answer to the decrease of natural values. On the local level these programs resulted in projects of a very different kind. In the new situation that of the 90's, design requirements have to be formulated as concrete, well defined and limited projects, that can succeed if they are managed and financed by local governments together with private developers.

A project can be a housing complex, a park or a square, an ecological project or a bridge. It can have the scale of a few houses or an extension area of 8000 dwellings. The point is that the transformations that are created in the environment are in most cases not dealt with as temporary processes but as spatial products – new environments – rather than new stages in an ongoing process of urbanization. That is the case in urban, as well as in rural areas.

As a result of the direct translation of a rather abstract program in different, often one-dimensional projects, the traditional level of urbanism – between program and project – is abandoned. This is probably a weakness of the new Dutch planning system that was so strong in the near past. It was always mainly based on a strong collective ideology and a fragmented practice of local housing initiatives. However when the ideology of the welfare state was abandoned in favour of a more market oriented policy with fragmentation of the projects, there is no common denominator.

This is the result of the fundamental change in spatial planning in The Netherlands that one can observe in the *New Map*. This is the context in which younger urbanists, architects dealing with urban planning and landscape architects will have to find new answers. Some of them have been radicalizing the duality between program and project even more than in present official planning.

The system of different housing typologies that the office of Adriaan Geuze / West 8 developed as a critique of the official town planning concept of extending the existing cities with new housing districts with traditional neighbourhood facilities is a good example of such an approach. The answer to the requirement to extend the city is no longer found in an urban plan that aims at the preparation of the rural area for further urbanization, but in a catalogue of housing typologies that fit in very different situations in the urbanizing field.

### 4. A Growing Quest for New Concepts

The presentation of the *New Map* marks the growing dissatisfaction in the planning community with this scattered situation. The debate – if it is a debate, most of the time it looks like a permanent talk show – is focused on one item: lack of connection. People ask: what do all these projects on the map have to do with each other? What is the idea behind all this activity? What seems to be missing is a 'project of projects' to use the terms of the Joan Busquets, architect and urbanist from Barcelona. That is a project on a higher level that gives meaning and more dimensions to the different, often one sided projects on a local scale.

There is a growing quest for concepts, new concepts that can give isolated projects meaning and direction. The first level, the call for new concepts is that of the infrastructure. In an urbanized area like the Randstad, freeways are no longer roads interconnecting different cities. In the *Randstad Map* – it seems that urbanists are obsessed with drawing new maps that can help them to understand their changed conditions. Lucas Verwey for example presented, the highways between Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht as an innercity ringway.

There is also a quest for new concepts on the level of the country as a whole. The position of the Netherlands in Europe is not restricted to the main-ports function of Amsterdam airport and Rotterdam harbour. The Dutch coast and river delta are unique in Europe, but still neglected with regard to the position of the Netherlands as an European region.

Last but not least there is a quest for new concepts on the regional level. Cities are growing towards each other and it is no longer clear to which city their extensions belong or whether they are an extension of a city at all or a new entity in its own right. For example, the remaining open spaces, the 'holes' in the 'carpet metropolis' by Willem Jan Neutelins, cannot be looked upon as part of the urban field, instead they should be treated as green areas without connections and with urbanisation.

Old concepts on this level are obsolete, for example the concept of the Green Heart of the Randstad. Official planning policy was to keep it open while planning practice says that it should become silted up by houses, industrial and agricultural buildings and infrastructure. The map Lucas

Verwey has drawn of the Randstad as one metropolis gives a more realistic image.

The new concepts on this level aim at a more ambivalent approach to city, landscape and nature than the official concepts that still dominate planning policy., as for example:

- a more traditional, morfological approach: Prinsenland, a new housing district of Rotterdam;
- a symbolical, metaphorical approach of Ashok Bhalotra;
- an ecological, landscape architectural approach: studies of urbanists and landscape architects of so called city-landscapes or urban-landscapes;
- a more market oriented approach of some younger urbanists, in which the traditional approach of Prinsenland is radicalized, but with an implicated reference to an older tradition, namely that of Unwins *Townplanning in Practice*.

In this last proposal the landscape is accepted as it is, but every lot is analyzed for its potentials for urbanization. A framework is developed that gives places to urban facilities. This plan intends to overcome the arisen dilemma's of a more market oriented planning policy.

It is a remarkable fact that many younger architects and urbanists get commissions by planning agencies on different governmental levels to develop alternatives for the official concepts. The quest for new concepts is translated as a quest for new talents. The danger of this quest for *new, new, new* is, that sometimes brilliant but often mono-dimensional ideas are introduced as answers to complicated, multi-dimensional problems.

Therefore the most important question is, whether the new concepts will land, in the fysical as well as in the institutional landscape.

## 5. Professional Practice and Training

What are the consequences of this changed planning situation for the profession and the training of new professionals? At this moment several proposals are made to encounter the challenges in planning practice.

A strong need is felt for a centre, an institution, a platform on which the ongoing and very intense debate on new concepts can 'land' – an institution of the profession itself, that can deal with the actual questions in the field of planning from a more autonomous position. In the last decade we can observe a growing gap between official planning policy and the debate in broader professional circles. Paradoxically this seems the result of the growing political character of planning. As a consequence, parts of the professional debate are placed outside the politically controlled planning agencies. It is obvious that sometimes this gives the professional debate a rather 'free wheeling' character. The proposed institution is aimed at filling the gap between official planning policy and the professional and public debate on new approaches and concepts.

The second proposal is concerned with the training of urbanists and town planners. What is lacking in our actual knowledge, is knowledge about the processes of ongoing urbanization and the different forms those processes take. We need a new type of planner or urbanist to bridge the gap between politically formulated programs and the urban

projects. This new species of spatial planner combines knowledge of processes of ongoing urbanization and the impact of infrastructure with the ability to design new ambiguous forms of the urbanizing landscape.

The discussion on the profession tends towards the strengthening of boundaries between the specific professions of planners, architects, engineers and landscape architects. The challenge is however to open these boundaries and to develop a curriculum that will enable members of different planning professions to develop into this new kind of urbanist.

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### Pictures

**Figure 1:** Urban landscape project for the South flank of the Randstad

(architects: Paul Achterberg, Jaap van der Bout, Roy Bijhouwer, Stefan Gall)

**Figure 2:** Market oriented project for the area between the Hague and Rotterdam

(architects: Edzi Bindels, Ruurd Gietema, Henk Hartzema)

**Figure 3:** Metaphorical project 'City fruit full'

(architect: Ashok Bhalotra)

**Figure 4:** Morphological project Prinsenland, new residential area in Rotterdam

(architect: Frits Palmboom, town planner, Mecanoo architects)

Alenka Fikfak

## Planning Non-urban Settlements – The Method and Elements of the Method for Designing Renewal Plans

*In the novel The Man Without Peculiarities (1961) Robert Musil differentiates between the sense of reality and the sense of possibility. He defines the sense for possibility as "possibility to think, how anything could 'easily' exist and refrain from pondering about what already exists". One who can perceive possible truths, Musil continues, has "at least according to ones followers ... a truly divine, passionate, sublime, constructive will ... who doesn't fear reality, quite the contrary, it is recognised as a mission and an invention ... Since ones ideas are nothing more than unborn reality, one nevertheless has a sense for reality; it is however a sense of possible reality ..."*

U. Beck and E. Beck Gernsheim (1996)