

KEY ROLE FOR CITIES IN ROTTERDAM AGENDA FOR SPATIAL COHESION IN EUROPE

# Agreeing to be different

There's plenty of consensus about the need to harmonise European spatial development policy. The new Rotterdam Environmental Agenda goes a long way towards addressing this need, but does it go far enough?

By Annemiek Diekman – Illustration Ronald Blommestein

**M**inister Sybilla Dekker, the Netherlands' Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, used the recent Dutch chairmanship of the EU to tackle what she sees as a lack of commitment in harmonising European spatial policy. She wants 'active co-operation', but not at the expense of uniformity, and she knows that substantial differences between member states must be reconciled. Before the Netherlands relinquished the EU chair last December, European spatial ministers committed themselves to the Rotterdam Environmental Agenda (RAR, a Dutch acronym for 'Ruimtelijke Agenda Rotterdam'). Expected to be completed in early 2007, the RAR is a 'define as you go' political agenda, that, according to Dekker, should make for a more lively discussion, and help policy-making for spatial development in Europe.

## Relevant and feasible

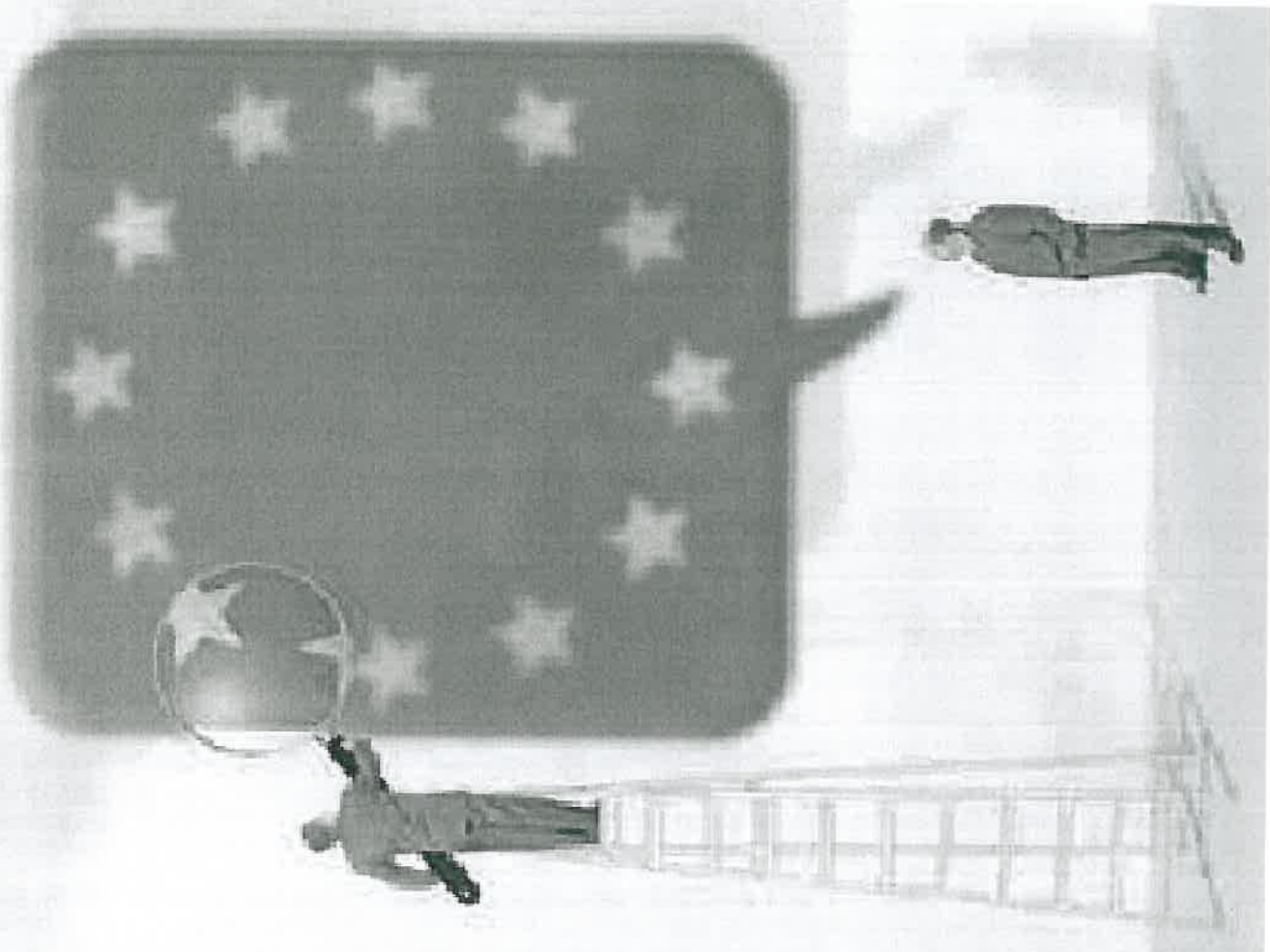
Minister Dekker has plenty of reasons why European spatial development needs something like the RAR. "To start with, European policies increasingly impact spatial planning. Take the EU Habitats and Birds Directive, for example, or the mandatory air quality standards that affect housing construction next to main roads. Regulations governing state subsidies, tendering and competition are also important, as is the 'Single European Sky' - the overhaul of European air traffic control. This, and the deregulation of aviation could have major repercussions on the position of Schiphol Amsterdam Airport. At the end of the day

though, EU policy must be in line with the Netherlands' spatial priorities and be both relevant and feasible." Dekker also wants to explore the opportunities and pitfalls presented by the Lisbon Objective, which aspires to make Europe the world's most competitive knowledge economy by 2010. Cities are major drivers of knowledge, innovation and development. Together with her EU colleagues she'll be looking for a more efficient clustering of activities, and better spatial synergy and integration on an international scale.

The central role RAR gives to cities is important to French spatial planning minister Frédéric de Saint-Sernin, who feels it will create many opportunities. "A spatial approach at European level will allow our cities to exploit their maximum potential, and make better use of European regional funds earmarked for spatial cohesion," he says. "Like their European counterparts, French cities want their problems to be acknowledged by policymakers." German spatial planning minister, Robert Scholl, agrees that cities play an important role in spatial development, and he wants to see this importance mirrored in the RAR. Like his Dutch and French colleagues, he is confident the agenda will indeed be implemented. "All member states decided on it together, and approved it," he reminds.

## Keep it clear

In contrast with the satisfaction its authors feel about the RAR, Friso de Zeeuw, Director of New Markets at Bouwfonds, thinks it lacks clarity. "And I'll remain





Friso de Zeeuw

**"Co-operation must be between urban regions, where the potential for economic growth is"**



Sybilla Dekker

**"Working towards more cohesive spatial planning in Europe is still in its infancy"**



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sceptical until it's clear just what's been agreed," he laments. "It's too vague. The items should have been more clearly defined. What's more, its ambitions are modest; they could have been formulated more powerfully." He does feel, however, that the RAR touches on an important aspect – the correlation between sector regulation and regional development. "The EU generates masses of sector regulations on things like pollution and water, and these are often at odds with the crux of spatial planning, which is the optimum use of a region's potential. These rules can often stagnate environmental development. It's been a bone of contention in the Netherlands for many years, so it's good to see it addressed at a European level." The lack of a clear message in the RAR disappoints De Zeeuw. "Its nucleus should have been: In Europe, regional development is in danger of becoming enfolded under an avalanche of sector regulation. How can we stop it?"

De Zeeuw supports the ministers' aspiration to underwrite countries' diversity because he believes that on a European level you should do no more than is absolutely necessary. "Europe shouldn't interfere with things that can be dealt with more efficiently locally," he insists. According to De Zeeuw, closer co-operation between EU member states could benefit areas like knowledge exchange and thus promote the balanced development of urban regions. "We have much to learn from each other. The Netherlands is often cited as a model of spatial planning, but the mix of spatial development and good infrastructure

is weak here – France and Spain do it much better. We can learn from the United Kingdom too. The British have a very effective policy in tackling urban degeneration. Germany, meanwhile, is on top of things when it comes to spatial planning between cities, as proved by its Ruhr region. The new member states from Eastern Europe can learn from all our mistakes by avoiding the unbridled suburbanisation of cities, which can lay their centres to waste, economically and socially."

#### Consequences

As the RAR takes effect, it will become clearer how co-operation between European member states will intensify, and it's interesting to speculate on the impact this will have on the European real estate market. Minister Dekker foresees consequences for the property market. "Our focus is on co-operation with the key region of Northwest Europe, which will increase the chances of attaining a stronger international competitive position. A strong economy will positively impact the property market because increased economic activity will generate a new demand for housing. The successful implementation of this agenda will also mean that EU policy will be more in line with the practicalities of national development policies. The construction of homes along busy roads and regulations concerning government aid, tenders and competition are just a few of the things that can have repercussions for the Dutch property market."

For the time being, German minister Scholl finds it 'very difficult' to predict the consequences for the European real estate market. He does think though, that closer international co-operation in some areas will influence the market positively, such as in urban development. "We have all had to contend with the issue of empty homes or offices at one time or other. Member states can learn from one another or seek solutions together," says Scholl. "We're currently running a joint project called Lhasa, outside the scope of RAR. In it, he explains, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Italy are collectively seeking solutions for the redevelopment of derelict residences and buildings, thereby improving the social and economic climate.

French minister De Saint-Sernin meanwhile, doubts that the decisions taken in Rotterdam will influence the real estate market, because the co-operative agreements are extremely generic. "There has been talk of possible special fiscal measures to stimulate the economy in urban problem areas," he says. "This could influence real estate markets in those regions, but there is little room on the agenda for housing."

#### Urban, not national level

It would seem then that the Rotterdam Environmental Agenda is not essential for the further growth of the European real estate market. However, Sybilla Dekker believes that it could contribute significantly: "Stagnation or growth of the Dutch real estate market is inextricably linked to the performance of the

national economy, which I'm sure will be best served by effective European co-operation and the proper harmonisation of measures that have spatial consequences for member states."

Bouwfonds director De Zeeuw, insists that when it comes to the content of spatial policy, little will be accomplished on the real estate market by co-operation at national level. "Co-operation must be between urban regions, that's where the potential for economic growth is. The expansion in metropolitan areas like the Dutch Randstad or Munich in Germany is therefore relevant for the real estate market. It's less relevant at national level though because agreements at a European level adds little value." De Zeeuw sees the removal of impediments in border regions as a potentially positive aspect of the RAR. "This will stimulate the cohesion, and, if it leads to investment, the real estate market would benefit."

However, it will be at least two years before we reach that point, and the present Dutch minister might no longer be in office, something Dekker is acutely aware of. "Working towards more cohesive spatial planning in Europe is still in its infancy," she explains. "And you can't just make a 'correction' to the course Europe is set on. It's about a cultural change, focusing more on spatial development in the way that we think about Europe. This takes many years, and there's a great deal at stake. I have no illusions about the fact that this will be a long drawn-out process. However, it's one I want to put into practice as soon as possible." ■