


Something in the air

By Kees de Graaf



Pollution is both a blight on our environment and a health hazard. Most of us would agree that measures taken to reduce it are steps in the right direction. However, linking air quality improvements to the granting of planning permission for building is taking it a step too far.

During the past 20 or 30 years things like cleaner car engines, diminishing reliance on coal and stringent constraints on industry have gradually reduced pollution in Western Europe. But something else is now threatening our health: particulate matter – pollution in the form of minute, airborne particles. The European Union has reacted by imposing rigorous air quality standards, which the Dutch government, in turn, has interpreted as a clean air act of its own. This legislation is now being applied in the Netherlands as a yardstick for building plans, as the industry has learned to its cost. One building plan after another has been ‘biting the dust’ after failing to comply with the new standard. The Dutch industry and employers association irately points to the possible damage being done to the country’s economy. The Neprom, the Association of Dutch Property Developers, is also displeased. Its director, Jan Fokkema, saw the writing on the wall a few years ago: “The threat is not new to us, neither is the Netherlands’ inability to comply with these stricter European standards.” But with the authorities now actually rejecting building plans – and given the nature of this legislation they have little alternative – it’s becoming all too real.” For the

moment, however, the industry has been offered some temporary breathing space. In early August the Netherlands’ Ministry of the Environment threw it a lifeline in the form of a new, stop-gap measure aimed at alleviating its most serious problems. This will be effective until new air quality legislation is introduced in early 2007. Fokkema: “Hopefully this future legislation will drop the explicit connection between building plans and air quality.”

Picking up the tab

But to what extent do other European countries face the same problem today? European air-quality images made by the Envisat satellite show dense pollution over most of the Netherlands, Belgium and the Ruhr in Germany. It all comes as no surprise to Bouwfonds director Friso de Zeeuw. “This is the Eurodelta, an area characterised by bustling economies and urban agglomerations, so it’s logical that these map images overlap.” It’s not all the fault of Dutch people that pollution in their country is way beyond the prescribed European limits: a third of it is ‘imported’ from other countries. And bearing in mind that natural particulates like sea salt and pollen are also included, it seems



grossly unfair that the building industry should pick up the tab. Fokkema sees no good reason why air quality should be linked to building, because building does not substantially add to air pollution. "The building industry is being leveraged – held hostage, if you will – to force politicians to come up with alternative measures, such as the large-scale use of particulate filters in vehicles with diesel engines." The Netherlands is the only country that has linked air quality to building in this way. Others are more active in tackling pollution at its source. With his Clean Air Strategy, London mayor Ken Livingstone is focusing more on environmentally-friendly transport and better use of public transport. Using an extensive network of measuring stations, cities like Berlin and Zurich have been monitoring air quality for the past 30 years. Here too, the importance of environmentally-friendly transport is continuously emphasized.

Eroding competitiveness

The Netherlands' interpretation and implementation of European legislation has put particular pressure on building in cities. Fokkema: "Whole urban areas will soon be off-limits; it won't be

possible to build anything there." De Zeeuw, meanwhile, points to the incompatibility between the new air quality legislation and Dutch government policy, which is striving for more economic growth, fewer regulations, more urban construction and more houses built. "The new legislation makes all these objectives more difficult to achieve, and it's creating a lot of uncertainty, particularly about new plans at local development level." According to De Zeeuw the risks involved in complex projects like the Amsterdam Zuidas and the Utrecht City Centre Plan will be compounded. In his opinion legislation like this is mostly drawn up by theory-minded politicians and lawyers who are out of touch with the real world. "They are eroding the competitiveness of the Dutch economy. Rather than stimulating permanence, they are making market players reluctant to invest in urban projects at a time when we need concentrated investments to strengthen our urban areas. Instead, it is leading to more longer-distance mobility by stimulating investments outside the cities in rural areas, which we would prefer to keep that way. All in all, it's just so short-sighted. This is why we have proposed workable alternative legislation, which we will be lobbying for." ■