

## AREA DEVELOPMENT 2.0

Friso de Zeeuw interviewed by Arjen Oosterman

**Area development is a term used by local authorities and project developers. One party sees its potential for the city, the other for its order portfolio, and both welcome an integrated approach to existing or new building locations. However, the complexity and costs are increasingly a problem. The holder of the practice-oriented chair in Urban Area Development at the TU Delft and New Markets Director for Bouwfonds Property Development presents his vision of local and international developments and the possibilities for standardisation.**

**Arjen Oosterman You are the holder of the practice-oriented chair in Urban Area Development. What should I understand by the term area development?**

**Friso de Zeeuw** Area development is about seeing a building or green project within the wider context and involving that environment in the planning and investment. Taking the context seriously and broadening the frame of reference, that is how I would characterise it.

As the urban designer Riek Bakker once put it: Sometimes you have to make a problem bigger in order to arrive at a solution. (Don't try that out at home, let me immediately add.) So it soon becomes multifunctional (not just the residential district in itself, but also the greenery, water, infrastructure). It is the art, especially in our developed Western societies, of establishing connections, while compartmentalisation and specialisation are the main tendencies.

**AO** So, as the Dutch politicians like to call it, area development is about an integral approach. On the other hand, you can detect a tendency in society to transfer control to the lower levels, right down to the consumer. It's about being able to make decisions and wield an influence yourself. How do those two tendencies relate to one another?

**FdZ** It's an interesting question. In this country we will have to learn to pay more attention to the preferences of the final users. We sometimes bypass them in a fairly systematic way – because we have certain ideas on urban design, for example, or because it suits the builders and developers not to really get involved in those issues. And because the housing market is under pressure in parts of the country, the parties can get away with it. After all, the house will still get sold. If I can be provocative for a moment: modern architecture is not widely appreciated, but the success of Superdutch is possible because we have a tense housing market in which the architects could give free rein to their ideas since there was a demand anyway. That is how we managed to act without taking the preferences of people into account. I now address the government, with its own ideas and ideals (what we in the market call 'hobbies'), the urban designers and architects (the ideals that they picked up from their training) and the market parties, even though the latter are the closest to the people.

A second point is that it is easier to achieve an integral approach at a somewhat lower scale level of government. If you look at the national or European level, it is much more difficult to break through the compartmentalisation. I am in favour of decentralisation, as long as you take into account the fact that the necessary expertise is not always there at a lower scale level.

**AO** Integral sounds fine, but it runs the risk of too much complexity resulting in an impasse.

**FdZ** Absolutely, there certainly is that risk. We must not organise the situation to death, otherwise nothing happens. There has been an increase in the number of regulations since the 1970s. It is the drama of good intentions, because all those norms naturally have an understandable origin and the noblest of aims: fine particles, water quality, soil quality, safety zones, and so on. But the cumulative effect is a disaster.

**AO** But in that case shouldn't the politicians have the guts to say: there is no such thing as no risk, we simply can't offer more health guarantees?

**FdZ** It's a difficult message, but that idea is beginning to gain support here and there. Things have to be made simpler. But after every accident we get an orgy of new regulations. In the past a minister once tried to introduce a rule of abstinence: a compulsory period in which no regulations were introduced after a catastrophe. It's an interesting idea which didn't stand a chance, of course. That's why I distinguish between inherent and contrived complexity. In the field of area development there are different interests at stake, so it is complex, but in addition we have also thought up a lot of the complexity ourselves.

**AO** Is there anything to be gained there?

**FdZ** The more complicated we make matters, the more dependent we become on external advisers. So overheads increase. I hear complaints about that even from the circles of the advisers themselves. The relation between what I call procedural chores and the creative moment has... shifted a lot.

**AO** The gap (in time and money) between the initiative to build and completion has grown larger and larger in the course of time.

**FdZ** Yes, that's a demonstrable fact. In a complex society like ours it's something that you have to accept, it's advisable to weigh up the interests properly. But the process has gone too far. It would be wise to leave a bit more up to the moment and the local situation. A further rationalisation of the building process is certainly a course to be recommended. Let me take an example from our own practice. We think about the standardisation of ground plans: more, copy and paste, in other words. Some people hate that, but why is it necessary for colleagues to sit bent over ground plans day in and day out, to keep on inventing the wheel over and over again, when we already know what people prefer? So it's an obvious way to save money. And then it becomes important to be able to respond in a flexible way to what people want.

**AO** What do you think of the Solids concept (robust buildings without any internal divisions, which are 'divided into plots' depending on what the buyers and tenants want, who also finish the interior)?

**FdZ** It's a good idea, but it's diametrically opposed to a rational investment decision. That is based on present demand. But in the proposal by Frank Bijdendijk [the director of the Stadsgenoot housing corporation and the brain behind the scheme] there is oversize to accommodate future development and change of function. It only seems applicable on a limited scale to me.

**AO** You just mentioned the standardisation of ground plans. But can you also imagine the copying of entire buildings (right to copy) as Bouwfonds policy?

**FdZ** In itself I can, though with some hesitation, because at the start of 2000 we carried out a few experiments with what we called 'personal housing': combining development with a personal principal. That meant that people could themselves decide what to build on a location, complete with, say, a kitchen in the attic if they wanted. What was the result? When it comes to a home, most people want roughly the same thing. A couple of degrees of freedom are enough. So as a product, housing lends itself well for such a standardisation approach. I also tend to call into question the entire ideology of the maximal fulfilment of everyone's personal wishes in the field of the home. Those wishes are pretty clear.

**AO** **But does it also involve a serious saving?**

**FdZ** I think so. We are already working with a limited number of prototypes in the north of the country. That means savings not only on technical aspects (shelf life, safety) but also on design expenses.

On the other hand, people do tend to want to be different. They are opposed to the anonymity of the serial product. Reference is often made in this connection to the car industry. The customer is at the centre, the customer is king. But it's also true that the steering wheel is always on the same side. Still, in the field of emotion and experience all kinds of things are possible.

Take for instance Rob Krier's Brandevoort fortified town near Eindhoven, which was co-developed by Bouwfonds and the City of Helmond. The discussion is always about retro architecture, but in the end all of those homes are different, and that makes it expensive. In the GDR there was not a millimetre of difference between the homes. Still, it functioned because people were getting on, just as in the garden towns around Amsterdam and other cities in the Netherlands in the 1950s.

**AO** **But isn't Rob Krier an example par excellence of intelligent standardisation, in which a limited number of details and elements in different configurations result in a visual variation that still remains affordable?**

**FdZ** Answer: yes. You can do it, but it's still not cheap. Still, today's technology enables us to evoke the illusion of a past. It may be called fake nostalgia, but what's wrong with it? Though I must add that an architect must offer something that he has not been asked to do and which the principal likes, so not the same everywhere and 100% doing what people want. There is more than that. It's something that has to be taken into account in the discussion as well.

In terms of quality – use value, experiential value, future value – variation is a factor. A good example of the combination of standardisation and individuality is the Amsterdam School: behind those splendid façades are standard homes.

**AO** **We have the impression that after a period of maximal dedication to the individual difference and the minimisation of the collective aspect (particularly in the public domain), we can now detect a new appreciation of the collective aspect of life in the city.**

**FdZ** Yes, yes. I don't share your conclusion on Vinex [housing estates from the period 1995–2015], because it did result in diversified neighbourhoods and districts – projects in which the public domain makes sense, parking has been cleverly solved, and there is enough room for children. But more attention is being paid to it at the moment. It's just that the public domain is under pressure in terms of resources. Less revenue from estate development, lower budgets for maintenance.

**AO** **Do you see international differences in how much attention and money is available for the public domain?**

**FdZ** We can certainly learn something from the French and German examples with regard to both implementation and design. My impression is that the Dutch design courses still do not pay enough attention to how a design is experienced at night or in bad weather. Little attention is paid to the aspect of how a situation is experienced.

**AO** **Attempts are being made in project development in the Netherlands to hold the developer responsible in the longer term as well for the proper functioning of the project. What do you think about that?**

**FdZ** First of all, I think that project developers simply have a share in the market. The claim that neighbourhoods and buildings built by project developers are of lower quality than those of investors and corporations is often heard but remains unproven. Besides, in a country the size of the Netherlands, if a project developer produces low-quality results, he is soon kicked out of the game. In the public domain developments come under the supervision of the local authority once they have been completed, so there is a controlling agency there.

What we haven't discussed are intermediate forms of management: semi-public space in the city that is collectively managed but open to the public and perhaps fenced off at night. That works quite well.

**AO** **You consider that architects often ignore how the user or occupier experiences the design. In the same way you can imagine that project developers turn a blind eye to social sustainability.**

**FdZ** Yes, that's true. By the way, I don't believe in social engineering – as a marketing instrument, but not as a spatial policy. But it's still a good thing that governments ask developers for a vision of that social development. That keeps them on their toes. Otherwise they end up filling shelves and filling their pockets, as a colleague once said.