

AN ESSAY BY PROFESSOR FRISO DE ZEEUW

# SMALL CITIES IN AN ARTIFICIAL LANDSCAPE

## *Polders and urban planning in public-private partnership*

Complaining appears to be a Dutch national pastime; it may not rank first, but it is certainly high on the top ten list of daily activities in the Netherlands. A popular subject for complaint is spatial planning. Ugly business parks, mono-functional suburbs, poorly designed public spaces: the Dutch don't often perceive their country as attractive. Strangely enough, foreigners visiting the country look at it with completely different eyes. They are often full of praise about how one of the world's most densely populated countries uses its space to best advantage and has done so with great success for centuries. This invites us to take a fresh look at the past, present and future. Where do we come from and where are we going?

Most foreign visitors entering the Dutch Delta will catch their first glimpse of the Netherlands from the air. From this vantage point, the Netherlands gives a tidy and neatly organized impression. Generally speaking, this is the landscape described by Auke van der Woud in his

studies on the origins of the Netherlands as a modern country, *Het lege land* (The Empty Land) and *Een nieuwe wereld* (A New World). It is a strongly utilitarian landscape, especially in the western part of the country, where the battle with water was fiercest on account of its situation below

sea level. Every square meter is put to use in this landscape for polders, waterways and small, compact cities. The waterways, served to connect the cities with their environs and hinterland, encouraged regional trade and the rise of a well-balanced pattern of urbanization which is peculiar to the Netherlands. Without any prominent highs and lows, this pattern perfectly reflects the culture of equality and entrepreneurship that blossomed in the seventeenth century and is so effectively described by Simon Schama in his *The Embarrassment of Riches*. The Netherlands never boasted the great metropolises of the sun kings of France. Rather, a system of cities expanded gradually, with a decentralized government that seamlessly corresponded to this pattern of urbanization.



PHOTO: BOUWFONDS ONTWIKKELING

*Prof. Friso de Zeeuw, Director of New Markets Bouwfonds Ontwikkeling and Professor Urban Area Development at Delft University of Technology.*





PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

*Amsterdam's canals represent an early form of private-public partnership: the city government (a group of merchants) had the canals dug and citizens were allocated plots within a strict system of urban planning.*

## Historic perspective

The polder structure of the Netherlands is not only interesting and distinctive in terms of spatial planning (the Beemster region, to the north of Amsterdam, was awarded a Unesco World Heritage predicate for good reason), its history is also of special interest: a history in which private initiative and public coordination united for a common cause (a trend that was to return in subsequent stages of Dutch spatial planning).

A number of recent publications of substantial interest have highlighted the fact that the Netherlands owes much of its identity to its history as a country of polders. In 1607, a group of merchants and town administrators from Amsterdam were given the opportunity to build spacious estates in the Beemster Area. To accomplish this, land first had to be reclaimed. This was done according to a plan drawn up by hydraulic engineer Jan Adriaanszoon Leeghwater.

Forty-seven prefabricated windmills were deployed to drain the lake and subsequently the plots could be allocated. Apparently, these early venture capitalists had recouped their investment within a year's time. The planning principle of the Beemster - a grid of canals perpendicular to a grid of roads, with identically shaped rectangular plots of agricultural land each accommodating a single farmstead, house or country estate, was to see its likeness in the spatial planning of New York. Manhattan's grid of streets is identical to that of the Beemster. The Amsterdam Defense Line (also on the World Heritage list) and the New Dutch Waterline also reflects this combination of aesthetics and utility: built to keep the enemy outside

by flooding large tracts of land, but now is a prime example of landscape design. The same applies to the construction of the Amsterdam canals, extensively researched by Jaap Evert Abrahamse in his recent work entitled *De grote uitleg van Amsterdam* (The Great Extension of Amsterdam). This too repre-

The Vondelpark in Amsterdam, for instance, was not the product of investments by the city council, but was developed by private parties who, by creating the park, hoped to sell their own allotments in the streets near the park. Similar private investors were active in Rotterdam, as described by Len de Klerk in his

---

“NETHERLANDS OWES MUCH OF ITS IDENTITY TO ITS HISTORY AS A COUNTRY OF POLDERS.”

---

sents an early form of private-public partnership: the city government (a group of merchants) had the canals dug and citizens were allocated plots within a strict system of urban planning.

### The first half of the twentieth century: special coalitions shape the cities

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Netherlands had been developed into a modern nation founded on this pattern of urbanization within a man-made landscape. Nonetheless, the contrast between the pre-war and post-war periods is remarkable. Before World War II spatial planning was primarily a concern of private investors. Inspired patronage resulted in several true jewels of urban planning. Among these are the various garden cities built by factory owners for their workers, of which the Agnethapark in Delft and Klein Lansink in Hengelo are prime examples. These were based on the garden cities built in Great Britain, where the industrial revolution was a couple of stages ahead compared with the Netherlands.

In the cities such new initiatives were also taken by visionary citizens out of an enlightened form of self-interest.

dissertation entitled *Particuliere Plannen* (Private Planning). In Rotterdam this approach led to the construction of attractive “singels”, streets along the waterways that originally delineated the city's outer limits, such as the Heemraadsingel.

Nevertheless, the city council was not impressed at first and dismissed the result as “bourgeois messing-about”.

At the same time, other private investors were involved in speculative building. Low-quality housing projects sprang up in areas such as the Amsterdam De Pijp district and Crooswijk in Rotterdam, encompassing narrow streets without greenery, and lined with buildings accommodating cramped apartments that were rented out to working class tenants at extortionate prices. This led to intolerable and unhygienic living conditions, aggravated by the pollution from manufacturing sites situated in the midst of these residential areas. Fortunately, a typically Dutch invention made an end to all of this: housing corporations soon began to preside over the construction of public sector housing, which gave rise to the development of several very attractive districts in some of the cities. >>

### **After the war: large-scale housing development by the central government and corporations**

In the period following World War II corporations took over the management of public housing in the Netherlands. The housing supply grew at record speed, frequently based on plans drawn up before the war, according to the principles of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM): functional, without decoration and with plenty of light and air. Post-war garden cities with their repetitive blocks of houses were developed for the multitudes seeking to escape the densely populated urban districts.

This changed the face of housing construction drastically. The most significant transformation was seen at the national level: the central government assigned the production of housing a priority that took precedence over all other housing policy matters, including spatial planning. Lots of houses had to be built, and quickly. The urgent need for social housing continued for many years, since the Netherlands had come out of the war with a severely dilapidated housing supply while the population was expanding rapidly: the post-war baby boom had become a fact.

Housing construction was placed on the political agenda from a centrally organized perspective, in which all parties stood in agreement. Politicians, construction firms, corporations, architects: accelerating production served everybody's interests. Grants were awarded liberally and industrial construction methods were developed to build as many houses as possible in the shortest possible time.

However, this development did not fail to have an impact on the urban landscape. Like trees, the compact cities from previous centuries began to grow annual rings: starting with the spacious residential districts comprised

superlative example of Lelystad, capital city of the last generation of polders and built up from nothing at all. In fact, this was just an extension of the former small-scale pattern of urban settlement.

administrators. Market parties also regained their appetite for investing in urban housing. In comparison to the 1970s, the Netherlands' cities are doing very well indeed nowadays, according to a recent study published by Herman de Liagre Böhl entitled *Amsterdam op de helling* (Amsterdam on the Ascent). Amsterdam has no ghettos or no-go areas, nor does it experience the problems of the Parisian banlieues. The quantitative housing shortage has decreased, the quality of the houses is quite decent, and social segregation is modest, certainly when placed in a European perspective. The Supplement to the Fourth Spatial Planning Memorandum (Vinex, 1991) saw the government take on a last extensive and hitherto unprecedented program, in collaboration with provincial and city administrators, to build some 500,000 houses in extensive locations in and around the cities. >>

---

**“IN THE EARLY 1980S THE DUTCH  
BECAME INCREASINGLY AWARE THAT THEIR  
CITIES WERE NO LONGER IN TIP-TOP SHAPE.”**

---

primarily of apartment blocks that were erected in the 1950s, followed by high-rise architecture from the 1960s and the residential areas with traffic-slowing restrictions typical of the 1970s. Although the principles of urban planning changed, the motive remained the same: alleviating the housing shortage. In the 1970s, entire cities emerged in no time at all: centers of urban growth such as Zoetermeer, Spijkenisse, Purmerend and the

In the early 1980s, the Dutch became increasingly aware that their cities were no longer in tip-top shape, due to declining population (500,000 in the four largest cities), run-down districts and economic impairment. In response, they launched an urban renewal strategy. With the support of substantial grants, the cities managed to bring the quality of the urban housing supply up to standard, often under leadership of inspired councilmen and



PHOTO: HEIJMANS

*Haverleij ('s-Hertogenbosch) shows that complaints voiced by the administrative and architectural elite (“too mono-functional, a veritable sea of houses, not urban”) cannot be justified.*



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

*C ramique in Maastricht, along with other city center projects such as the Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam, the Rotterdam Kop van Zuid, and the Resident in The Hague, show that the Netherlands has been able to achieve outstanding solutions to complex problems, often through public-private partnerships.*

The Netherlands are probably the only country in the world to name its suburbs after a government memorandum: Vinex districts. Market parties (developers and contractors) were involved in these projects to a greater extent than ever before, a transition in which increased market-orientation and a consistent spreading of risks were the principal factors. In the past 15 years, this has led to the construction of residential areas generally considered attractive by their inhabitants. Studies such as the Vinex Atlas and other surveys amongst residents show

standing” includes the standard of quality, residents’ perception of quality and future-proofness. A new series of area developments show that the Dutch have not forgotten the art of connecting green, red (urban) and blue (water), as they learned in Leeghwater’s time. This is good, because, due to climate change, water has once again started to play a significant role in most plans developed today. Nevertheless, there are many obstacles, including extremely complicated cumulative regulations, administrative fragmentation and distrust between the

We have also noted a few points of discord: in many cases newly urbanized areas are not adequately linked to regional public transport (certainly by European standards), endless chains of amorphous commercial properties have developed along the highways flouting official policy, culminating in ‘wild’ urbanization, where official spatial planning policy failed to respond adequately to market demands (as exemplified by the Veenendaal area near Utrecht). A similar development has occurred in the province of Brabant, with obvious negative impacts on its valuable traditional, man-made landscapes.

---

“THE NETHERLANDS IS PROBABLY THE ONLY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD TO NAME ITS SUBURBS AFTER A GOVERNMENT MEMORANDUM”

---

that complaints voiced by the administrative and architectural elite (“too mono-functional, a veritable sea of houses, not urban”) cannot be justified. Special mention must be made of projects such as Haverleij Den Bosch) and Brandevoort (Helmond), both of which managed to translate consumer requirements into attractive urban planning concepts. However, poor public transportation and an inadequate access road infrastructure remain crucial drawbacks to the Vinex concept. Countless projects in city centers such as the Eastern Docklands in Amsterdam, Céramique in Maastricht, the Rotterdam Kop van Zuid, the Resident in The Hague, and districts adjacent to railway stations such as in Breda, show that the Netherlands has been able to achieve outstanding solutions to complex problems, often through public-private partnerships. In this case, “out-

government, citizens and market parties, as highlighted in two recently published books, *Nederland boven Water 2* (The Netherlands above Water 2) by Peter van Rooij and *De Engel uit Graniet* (The Granite Angel), which I wrote together with Agnes Franzen.

#### Impact of the crisis

Nevertheless, while this retrospective, overall, gives little cause for dissatisfaction, the next question we should ask ourselves is how these lines can be extended towards the future. There is no lack of ambition. The spatial planning agenda for the next 15 years includes plans for the construction of some 700,000 houses to be built primarily in the city centers. >>



PHOTO: ING

Rotterdam Kop van Zuid. There is no lack of ambition.



In 2010, development and construction in the Netherlands is in a different shape than when it was on the brink of the previous urbanization round (the Vinex development). The playing field has undergone significant changes brought about by the economic crisis, which has led to serious stagnation on the housing and real estate markets. A positive impact of this stagnation is, however, that there is no mercy for plans suffering from raw ambition, a poor cost/benefit ratio and inconsistency with market requirements. The sellers' market has transformed into a buyers' market. Market parties such as property developers, construction firms and investors are severely hit by the economic crisis. Their numbers will be seeing a steady decline over the next few years. Financial institutions are asking higher risk premiums. Market have to search for new positioning options and reinvigorate their senior management teams at the same time. Members of the baby boom generation, who have held the

highest positions, will soon be replaced by a new generation. Progress is also stagnant at housing corporations, whose behavior more and more came to resemble that of risk-bearing enterprises. Many of their losses have been running into the millions. The tendency is that most of them are returning to their key task: management and renovation of social-sector housing. The government is having to cope with severe cutbacks. Municipalities with their own development companies have seen their profits turn into losses. Additionally, there is a great deal of pressure to retain administrators and government officials with the necessary qualities. Many municipalities have seen talented people leave, reducing the availability of knowledge and expertise to manage complex projects.

#### **Perspective in times of uncertainty**

It is against this background that the Netherlands is considering the future development of its

spatial planning. Roughly speaking, two directions can be discerned in the current debate, which is largely concerned with the future of the Randstad area and the cities that are part of this agglomerate. Zef Hemel, vice-president of DRO Amsterdam (the city of Amsterdam's spatial planning department) is a principal advocate of the first direction. In the TV documentary *Amsterdam Make-Over 2040* he asks when the Netherlands will finally be able to boast a true metropolis, with high-rise living and working environments, densely developed and highly accessible with high-tech public transport, comparable to cities such as Paris and London (not to forget everyone's favorite, New York). The idea is that the Netherlands absolutely needs an urbanization strategy like that if it is to be able to keep up with the times and retain its knowledge workers, who will otherwise leave for more promising shores. This is also the ambition expressed in the *Structuurvisie Randstad 2040*, in which the



*The Resident in The Hague.*

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

central government sketches an image of densely developed cities with high-rise construction on strategic locations. Green areas in between the cities are typified as ‘metropolitan parks’, analogous to New York’s Central Park.

However, there are a number of drawbacks and misunderstandings inherent to this vision. For instance, a small-scale, interconnected urban structure might well develop into an equally attractive metropolis. Living proof of this is Berlin, which is in fact nothing more than a conglomeration of smaller villages and towns, linked by a high-quality public transportation network, with green areas in between. A second drawback concerns the outdated focus on the “old” Randstad area covering the Netherlands’ four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. In fact the northern wing of the Randstad area, which runs via Utrecht down towards the eastern part of Brabant, is developing into the Netherlands’ economically strongest area, whilst the southern wing, comprising mainly Rotterdam and the ‘Drecht’ cities (Dordrecht, Sliedrecht etc.) are showing an economic decline. A third drawback is the lack of funding for these hyper-metropolitan ambitions. Cost-benefit analyses show that they cannot be financed from tax revenues alone and only partly reflect the preferences of consumers and businesses.

In my opinion, we would do better to consider a second, more restrained strategy for the future: a strategy that could best be described as “going with the flow”. Typical of this approach are the gradual, non-radical transitions we are seeing in the cities, usually resulting in densi-

fication, but sometimes also in lighter urban textures. The edges of strong economic regions see the interlocking of urban (“red”) functions with “green” and “blue” functions. This approach could benefit areas such as Haarlemmermeer, the Dune and Flower Region, Leiden, and their surroundings. Permanent dwellings predominate in these areas, in varying densities and types of environment. Green and blue areas with a proven value will remain protected from urbanization and become more easily accessible. The result will be a more relaxed form of urbanization, after the postulates of urban theorist Jane Jacobs: keeping things down to a human scale, amalgamating functions and creating attractive public spaces. A potentially weak link in this strategy is the limited support for high-quality regional public transportation. In his dissertation *De aantrekkelijke stad* (The Attractive City), Gerard Marlet pointed out that in addition to Amsterdam, “provincial cities” such as Groningen, Zwolle, Tilburg, Den Bosch, Haarlem, Utrecht and Maastricht are also attractive for people and businesses, including highly educated young knowledge workers. Key factors in this connection are the atmosphere of these cities, the available facilities, attractive residential areas and shorter commuting times. The Netherlands has been quite successful with its small-town structure and ability to resolve new problems through the application of integrated plans. We have every right to take pride in our accomplishments, modest though they may be, before continuing our critical observations...

&lt;&lt;



**Prof. Mr. F. (Friso) de Zeeuw**

- **Director New Markets, Bouwfonds Ontwikkeling**
- **Professor Urban Area Development, TU Delft**
- **Member of the Board Neprom (Council of Developers Real Estate)**
- **Member Supervisory Board Delta Multi-utility**
- **Member Supervisory Board Movares**
- **Member Supervisory Board Institute of Construction Law (IBR)**
- **Member Supervisory Board Institute of Economics and Building (EIB)**
- **Commissioner Spring Architecten**
- **Member Advisory Council, Innovation Network Mobility**
- **Chairman of GDR-Museum in the Netherlands**
- **Chairman of Sing-along Choir Waterland**

## MORE INFORMATION

Bouwfonds Ontwikkeling

T: +31 33 25 39 210

E: f.zeeuw@bouwfonds.nl

Practice-oriented Chair of Urban Area Development TU Delft

Drs Agnes Franzen, Assistant professor Urban Area Development

E: a.j.franzen@tudelft.nl