

Shape Our Country

This was the invitation that the NAI held out for over six months to its public of designers, government officials, lobbyists, civil servants, investors, conservationists, community workers, artists, consultants, inventors, handymen, schoolchildren, seniors and all those concerned about the physical organization of the Netherlands and the quality of the living environment. Do it yourself – shape our country.

To help get things started, we set out the most obvious categories into which the task of spatial planning is usually divided: transport, housing, the workplace, leisure, greenery and water. Taking this classification as a basis for asking the opinions of ordinary people, inviting specialists, seeking sponsors or entertaining members of the press gave ample stimulus for discussion. On the whole everyone involved had been taught geography at school with much the same division into categories. And those who ever since continued in the subject enjoyed a further education structured on similar lines, and are now similarly pigeonholed in professional roles. We were thus in a position to benefit from attention and cooperation from the realms of transport, housing, the leisure industry, employment, nature conservancy and water management. They all acknowledged that their worlds intersect in the domain of spatial planning.

If we look at the results, however, a different picture emerges. The familiar categories are less and less significant factors in our spatial creativity. Questions about where to plan a woodland reserve or a water storage zone, about where to site a housing estate or a business park, are not the kind that bring out the best of people's talents. What really sets them going is a growing awareness that answering today's fundamental questions is a matter for everyone: new principles for food production, alternative energy, overcoming lack of time and space, the need for social cohesion, a healthy environment and a new definition of economic value. Once again it appears that these issues meet in the domain of spatial planning and design, and it is thus here that tremendous opportunities are to be found for the renewal of society.

Shape Our Country has shown that the new spatial creativity springs not from a preestablished competence, but from a perceived urgent situation and the determination to do something about it. Inventiveness and efficacy are also more effectively organized around these urgencies instead of around the social institutions once devised for them. Here are a few examples:

A municipality (Rotterdam) has created "economic opportunity zones, where the conditions for establishing businesses have been eased, the pressure of regulations reduced and public investments have been made in order to improve the business climate and social infrastructure (Economische Kansenzones Rotterdam, OBR and Pact op Zuid).

A design method, "Reuse", which takes a radical approach to recycling materials and waste energy (2012 Architecten and others, and the book Superuse).

Student accommodation offered in exchange for voluntary neighbourhood work (VoorUit in Slotervaart and Osdorp, Amsterdam).

The creation of allotment gardens between high-rise flats as a meeting place for local residents and a space for elementary foodstuff production (Wel.kom in collaboration with Wonen Zuid, Municipality of Roermond and residents of the Compositenbuurt Estate, Roermond).

Car parking in a Ferris wheel, saving space and raising awareness of the beauty of the city (Drive In Wheel, John Körmeling).

Construction of housing on top of disused industrial sites, reducing their isolation, reinstating their property market value and saving commuting time (design-based research by 2by4-Architects and others on behalf of the Province of Gelderland).

Agroparks, in which various forms of agriculture are combined in multi-storey landscapes where production facilities can be shared (Agroparks, study by Innovatienetwerk).

A campaign for adoption of small areas of nature, so that people can see themselves as joint "owners" of a nature reserve, thereby promoting care and loyalty for the green environment (Landschapsveiling, Kenniscentrum Triple E).

A "transformation house", in which residents can extend, shrink or otherwise modify their dwelling according to their stage of life and personal circumstances (Transformatiehuis by Barbara Visser, developed for the House For Sale competition, Leidsche Rijn, on commission of Bureau Beyond).

Infrabodies, in which building are combined with traffic intersections, making entirely new typologies possible (Infrabodies study by MONOLAB architects).

An Olympic Plan (Ministry of Housing) in which the prospect of a large, world-class event energizes spatial transformations ranging from national transport infrastructure to sports facilities.

These are just eleven ideas drawn from the many hundreds the NAI has collected, elicited, traced and refined in recent months. All these examples, different though they may be, have certain traits in common.

1. They are original, bold and innovative, and attest to an optimistic, practical attitude to life. They suggest a definite change in mood compared to the daily stream of negative reports concerning the spatial issues with which the Netherlands is overladen. This country is in sore need of a perspective that will make us enterprising and inventive. The proposals of Shape Our Country prove that this perspective is above all a question of mentality. We should not be condemned to incapacity but inspired by a sense of opportunity.

2. They are capable of generalization. This comes as a relief in a design culture where the order of the day is to create one-offs and pilot projects. The proposals to Shape Our Country were in many cases conceived for a specific location, client or target group, but the underlying principle is perfectly applicable on a much wider scale. What is more, the principle is attractive (or impossible to ignore) for various actors who generally compete for scarce space. These ideas are thus guidelines to government and industry for setting a new course for their decision making. These actors could show their leadership by distilling the essence of proposals like these into legislation, fiscal strategies, exemplary patronage and general government policies.

3. They return the culture of design to its original motive, to the "why" of architecture. Designers are not necessarily solvers of their clients' spatial problems. They could just as well be designers of spatial forms of organization and relation that, instead of consuming space, energy or nature, create these very things. These solutions could be so smart that normal clients for them do not yet exist. A design culture is emerging which does not wait until traditional commissions are handed down, but which creates work for itself by identifying new challenges; a culture that instead of boiling everything down to the familiar building types, seeks out new typologies with new expressive possibilities; a culture that seeks opportunities to mix functions instead of forever separating them; that seeks radically higher densities as a form of tranquillity rather than of pressure; that generates more energy than it consumes; a culture in which social cohesion is bolstered and in which new business models can be tried out; a culture where, to sum up, the quality of

the quality of the living environment and the quality of architecture are once more truly united.

4. They show that creativity in making combinations has an implicit integrated-design approach. You can defend your home against the rising water, but you could equally well live on that water, draw energy from that water and extract employment opportunities from that water. You can try to separate the green of nature as sharply as possible from the "red" of urban development, but you could just as well enrich that red with all kinds of green ranging from urban neo-nature to urban neo-agriculture. You could take advantage of the technology associated with the leisure industry to stimulate the knowledge economy or to create new dwelling concepts. You can screen roads from their surroundings, but you could alternatively embed these roads in a splendid landscape with new space alongside and under them. You can carry on endlessly dividing the spatial development task into separate sectors with their own special interests, professional literature, curricula and jargon, although the solutions can then only be highly predictable; real breakthroughs come when you succeed in establishing unforeseen connections.

5. They start out from what is really necessary, instead of from an accepted specialism that obliges its practitioners willy-nilly to make designs, lead projects and spend budgets. Something that made a deep impression was how many designers and clients are not the least interested in waiting for work to come to them solely because it is in their area of competence. They are much more interested in the opportunity to make contributions in areas that deeply concern mankind in general and the Netherlands in particular: sustainably safeguarding our food supply, saving time and finding space, creating new energy, contributing to human contact and social cohesion, improving the living environment, and finding economic value in places and at times where nobody expected them. These are areas where, in times of economic malaise, new prosperity lies in wait.

Shape Our Country is the start. The next step is to just that – to shape our country; in other words, to put the lessons into practice, to do what needs to be done and not to do what doesn't need to be done. Everyone has a part to play in this.

- The general public can participate actively in shaping the Netherlands much more often and on a much larger scale. The country cannot get by without their energy, loyalty and cooperativeness. It is not a matter of having a say at specially organized public meetings, but of dedicating energy to improving climate awareness, the living environment and social cohesion. Consider the idea of a climate street party, where neighbours join forces in a competition to make the country's most sustainable street. Every measure that saves energy or reduces CO2 emissions wins points. It turns an urgent issue into a national game. Play becomes a tool for raising awareness of individual possibilities for improvement. Shape Our Country has shown us that the Netherlands is in the process of discovering this kind of self-reliance.

- Designers can reestablish the relationship between what they can do well and what is urgently needed. What we need is to shape a country where the spatial organization is not the arbitrary outcome of a struggle for space in which every echelon of society exerts its claim; instead it should be an expression of the will to interpret societal tasks as spatial ones. Take as an example the battle conducted by Adriaan Geuze for preservation of the Green Heart. Take the manifesto issued by Atelier Kempe Thill about the quality-destroying effect of an overstrict application of European tendering rules. Take Kees Christiaanse's proposal for the International Architecture

Biennale Rotterdam, a candid appeal for a vital public domain. Take Rem Koolhaas's proposals for using the North Sea as Europe's rechargeable battery.

- Governmental agencies have a duty to elevate the creativity from project level to policy level. It is a matter of rendering spearhead issues like food production, energy consumption, shortages of space and time, the need for social cohesion, a healthy living environment and a definition of economic value into actual spatial planning measures, and of making sure that inspiration does not get bogged down in a motley of good intentions but is channelled into a national approach. Several of the meetings that took place in Shape Our Country made it clear how the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment is striving along several different policy pathways, often together with other ministries, towards reintegration within a national spatial vision. Separately developed strategies towards cities policy, landscape development, personal mobility, spatial planning and architectural quality are increasingly fusing into a programme for a "Beautiful Netherlands". Besides readopting this coordinating role, the government can contribute both locally and nationally to creating space for the above mentioned self-reliance. In the end it is up to the government to ensure that the concrete confidence that is nurtured at the level of small-scale interventions develops into a new national principle for the organization of the future of the Netherlands. Shape Our Country comes down to exactly that - to creating confidence in one another and in what lies ahead of us.

Finally, the NAI is not yet finished with its shaping activities. We have committed ourselves to allowing this national platform for architecture in its broadest sense to function as a forum where the task and the design can meet head on in the most inspiring way possible. Shape Our Country is an explicit outcome of this intention, and we intend to develop it further as a theme of our programme – by continuing to offer a laboratory for future design-based research, by continually drawing attention to the task at hand, by collaborating with commercial and government partners on projects with concrete results, and by success in seeking clients who are willing to adopt the supplied wealth of ideas for their own building portfolios.

"Shape our country" was and is a challenge addressed to many people, and the same has been true for the Shape Our Country event at the NAI. Countless highly creative individuals and socially responsible organizations have stuck out their necks in recent months to make possible our presentation of the above-described results. They are already Shapers of our Country. Who's next?

On behalf of all of them,

Ole Bouman
Director, Netherlands Architecture Institute.





Shape our country

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