

Livable Netherlands

Ole Bouman

This spring offers a special moment in the History of the Dutch Environment. While the liberal-socialist coalition that has been running the country for eight years on the basis of the polder model is nearing the end of its term, its spatial policy is being weighed in the balance. We recently witnessed the launching of the New Map of the Netherlands, which shows virtually every plan that is programmed for the next few years. The progress of modernization in the Netherlands can be taken in at a glance.

It seems an irreversible and uncontrollable process, especially

when you recall the maps of the country from not so long ago. This map gives you a feeling of total helplessness: all you can do is stand and look. Only the completely arbitrary national border still supports the notion that there might be an administrative mandate directing these developments.

But you can also pay a visit to the Netherlands Architecture Institute, where there is no need to look down on the map – you can literally walk into it. The Main Hall contains a life-sized, three-dimensional model of the whole country. It is the vehicle for a survey of the state of play of the Big Projects, the name under which Dutch architecture policy is currently being conducted and implemented. It is also the synthesis of ten years of trying to turn architecture from an exception into a rule, from a unique event into a principle affecting everyone. According to recent cultural policy, architecture not only ‘belongs to everybody’, but also concerns everything with spatial implications. The ten Big Projects thus include both a couple of traditional building projects for monumental buildings and the transformation of sandy areas, the development of business parks and the

construction of infrastructure. So while the Map offers a picture of a force bigger than us, the Big Projects offer one of an ambition to be more powerful than ‘them’, which is to say chaos, chance and caprice. This also neatly sums up the paradoxes that characterize an architecture policy that is currently the object of admiration in so many countries because of that very ambition. What is generally regarded as the gap between dream and reality is in practice a contradiction between the desire for control and the lack of administrative force, between the beauty of the dream and the untidiness of reality, between responsible spatial management and the hotchpotch of private interests, between urban development and suburbanization, and so on.

The synthesis of ten years of trying to turn architecture from an exception into a rule.

What the Map and the exhibition in fact illustrate is the contrast that still exists between architecture and spatial planning, even though on paper they may have grown closer together in the last few years. And not just on paper – the big projects themselves have been





Three-dimensional map of the Netherlands in the Netherlands Architecture Institute.

The midlife Polder-Geist

set up to a large extent at the level of town and country planning. The Government Architect is involved by virtue of his position in the supervision of these pro-

Successful spatial planning requires something more substantial than suggestion based on a good example.

jects. And members of the government have been designated as policy coordination officers. Everything is being done to ensure that space is conceived and shaped as a matter of public interest. So, at the level of design and administration, too, everything is being done to bring different fields closer together. But now that the electorate will shortly be passing judgement on this policy, the gap suddenly looks very wide again. There is a Fifth Memorandum on Spatial Planning and there is an Architecture Memorandum, but what do they really have in common? They remain two documents, produced by two different ministries. Genuine integration of culture and space calls for a single document.

It is debatable whether that is in the offing now that the coalition seems to be drawing up its political testament. But were there to be a major step forward along the road already taken in the near future, it should consist of transforming exemplary policy into

regular policy – moving from exception to rule. In other words, from culture to society.

It would mean taking the step from architecture policy to responsible administration. That is the secret agenda that was there from the start. For what is the whole idea of a model? That people can follow its example. How do you achieve that? By making sure that it is so convincing that it is logical to follow it. Or by laying down rules. The question of whether the big projects are convincing enough cannot be answered yet, and it will not be an easy one to answer. Nor is it by any means an automatic process. On the contrary, when you think of all the resources, talent, media interest and administrative attention being mobilized to enhance the Big Projects' chance of success, you realize what is missing from all those projects that do not happen to have been labelled exemplary and that in these circumstances are unlikely ever to be so labelled.

But there is something else. In the last resort, successful spatial planning requires something more substantial than suggestion based on a good example. So it has to be imposed. Since Minister Pronk announced an end to the anything-goes approach to the built environment during the launching of the 'charcoal sketch' for the Fifth Memorandum three years ago, we

have seen little more than an administrative ambition to tie architecture and spatial planning together by way of legislation. Perhaps it is because that takes us into the realm of responsible national government: land use policy, leasehold tenure, zoning plans, fiscal and monetary policy, environmental measures, family policy, building policy... Perhaps architecture policy must first recover from the range of its own ideals before it can enter the last stage of its emancipation. That might well be a bridge too far.

But if enough self-confidence can be developed, it might also become an issue in the forthcoming electoral struggle. Architecture policy: the proof that work has been proceeding on the concept of a Livable Netherlands for many years. All we need now is the legislation.

Architecture policy: the proof that work has been proceeding on the concept of a Livable Netherlands for many years.

revolution hits also ourselves