

Spatial plan for the Netherlands RPB launched

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They are, it seems eternal dilemmas: should we first make a plan and only then think about form, or is it possible to arrive at good plans by simply starting to design? Should we correct things that have gone wrong by going back in time, or do we venture to use time as a creative element for new solutions? In other words, do we want order before we can move, or do we find order in movement itself?

We encounter this same dilemma elsewhere in this issue, in the debate on what to do at the site of the World Trade Center in New York. There, a design discussion is taking place, under the critical eyes of the victims' relatives, local authorities and international opinion makers, on what comes first: idea or form, realism or idealism. While one person may favour the speedy rehabilitation of the skyline as an icon of a proud America, another advocates measured reflection on how the city should handle its traumatic experience, other than by denying it. But one doesn't have to be at the centre of world history to witness this issue in all its intensity. It is universal. It recurs in every debate on how to deal with the dynamics of modernity. 3 October 2002, saw the inauguration of a Dutch government

agency that is destined, from its inception, to be dominated by this debate. The agency concerned is the Ruimtelijk Plan Bureau (RPB, Netherlands Institute of Spatial Research). Styled as a 'knowledge centre for spatial matters', the new spatial research agency's mission as defined in policy jargon is to 'explore, monitor, analyse, forecast, develop, report'. If you are of the opinion that this is a recipe for endless and aimless discussion, you should meet its director Wim Derksen. Derksen declared from the outset his ambition to influence the spatial debate in such a way that choices would at last be made again. If politicians still failed to exercise their primacy, they could be bombarded with hard facts to such an extent that they would quite simply be unable to avoid that primacy any longer. The RPB would prove its relevance as think tank through the acuteness of its results.

It is a noble aspiration, the more so because, since the installation of a new (and, in the event, short-lived) Dutch government there has been great uncertainty about the extent of its involvement in spatial developments in the territory it governs. Implementation of a collective plan, embodied in the Fifth Policy Document on Spatial Planning, was deliberately delayed. The prevailing policy on

architecture, for which four ministries are responsible, seemed to have become redundant – a social democratic relic – and local authorities and private individuals everywhere started seizing the opportunity to convert plans into action. So for the time being absolutely no decisions are being taken and an active research agency that will draw attention to the consequences of that inaction is badly needed. After all, at a certain level of passivity, even the naked truth is a bold assertion. In that respect, Derksen has much to do. One of his first conclusions was that the Netherlands is in fact a city state, and as such could be approached in its entirety as an urban assignment. This means that the distinction between town and country can no longer serve as a guideline for the regional plan.

But the RPB wants to do more than draw attention to the facts. It also wants to make suggestions about what might become facts in the future. And what better way to do so than in the language of the design? In that way you can immediately envisage the future. For the inaugural conference, therefore, the architect Winy Maas (of MVRDV) had been invited to present several ambitious scenarios for the Netherlands of the future. We saw proposals for a new coastline, genuine areas of tranquillity,

a glass city, high-density metropolitan zones, and so on. Maas's plans exuded the conceptual ingenuity that has been the hallmark of Dutch architecture in recent years, although they also smacked of a commercial and cultural heyday that is now behind us. Each of his plans requires solid economic growth and great faith in the future. However, the reality is an explosive mixture of economic stagnation, inadequate management acumen, even a lack of integrity, and scepticism in the building sector. So it is not unreasonable to wonder whether anything can be done, in either planning or design terms, at a time when the visionary aspect does not necessarily lie in radical change, but in the subtle handling of the status quo or even decline. Perhaps at this particular juncture, the rejection of heroism, whether of the glorious or apocalyptic kind, requires the greatest courage.