

ARCHITECTUUR

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As an **appendix to the Governance for Urban Quality** I would like to add another aspect in the Netherlands. This concerns the rise of local architecture centres, starting with three separate initiatives in 1993, to 46 professional organizations nowadays. This, in the context of 16 mln inhabitants, in 480 communities. That is about one to 350.000 inhabitants, and 10 to 480 communities.

In 1999 Architectuur Lokaal produced the book POKON, a compilation of 28 portraits of architecture centres spread around the whole country – as I said, today there are already 46. The centres are as different in characters as the different towns and regions they are located.

In organizational terms, there has been national cohesion for years. In 1993 the *Overleg Lokale Architectuurcentra (OLA)* was initiated, with the new national foundation Architectuur Lokaal in a co-ordinating role. There is no statute, no formal status, no chairperson, no programme. There are no spokespeople or representatives. OLA is simply a moment of gathering, an informal network for co-ordination and exchanging ideas and information. OLA acts as a breeding ground for centres starting up and a sounding board for more established centres. The gathering is open to all organizations that, as formulated at one of the first OLA meetings, 'focus attention on architecture in a structural and public manner'. For outsiders, OLA offers an opportunity to meet members from as many centres as possible and discuss collaboration.

Initially OLA had no separate budget, but now it is a permanent item on the budget of the national agency Architectuur Lokaal. Through OLA, Architectuur Lokaal has given the local architecture centres a national face as an interest group. They featured as a group in the second government policy document on architecture, *De Architectuur van de Ruimte* (The Architecture of Space) in 1996, recognition of their status in the architecture debate, a status they have earned through daily practice.

An important asset of the centres is that they have risen 'from underneath'. The initiative came from private individuals, local councils or regions. The centres, in other words, have not been 'brought about' through government policy, but have now acquired an important place in it. That status is expressed in other ways. Centres are currently an automatic item in diaries, they are discussed in the newspapers and specialized press, and they develop initiatives like *Architecture Day*, competitions, events and exhibitions. A number of winning designs in competitions held by centres have been realized.

Intensive contact is maintained with the National Architecture Fund. Also, the ministries for culture and housing and the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), are kept informed of activities. Or sometimes, involved.

The word 'local' in the designation 'local architecture centres' unjustly suggests a concern for developments in the particular town or region only. By far most programme events are of course related in some way to the area immediately surrounding the centre, but activities often have a broader perspective. Improving the local architecture climate is an important aspiration. Allied to that is involving the local population in local developments in architecture, informing and encouraging those within the profession, keeping a critical eye on local politicians and building clients in order to stimulate a well-considered planning process, and raising the quality of policy on architecture wherever possible.

Placing local developments in a broader context is a prerequisite to achieving this. Architects and urban designers from around the country are invited to give lectures, and projects in other towns are spotlighted as examples for projects in the area. A measure of tactfulness is required when dealing with municipal or provincial plans. All centres claim an independent role with respect to their most important subsidizer: the municipality or province. They all aim to be 'a critical voice', to let proponents and opponents have their say, yet all emphatically deny they are a pressure group.

Each expresses it differently, but the essence is the same: the centre stimulates discussion but avoids taking a (political) stance. That leads to a permanent jousting between the centres and the world of politics. Just as all the centres were not created through government policy but are now recognized by the government, many centres do not owe their origins to municipal policy but in most cases are policy instruments at local level now. They are required to create debate about architecture and involve citizens more closely in architecture policy. The centres themselves are careful not to become merely an outlet for municipal policy and not to have to perform the ritual function of sweet-talking the population into accepting municipal plans. They value their critical, independent role. In many cases this succeeds, and centres have the opportunity to provoke serious discussion, which can lead to a plan being put under pressure, put on hold, or even put off altogether.

Where local officials (for example in **Breda**, **Groningen** and **Helmond**) are directly involved in organizing activities, that sought-after independence is not a matter of course. There is the self-imposed pressure to not be too critical, pressure from colleagues working on the projects that are under review, and pressure from the local authority because of its political or economic interest in seeing a project completed. A complex minefield of conflicting interests can ensue.

In **Groningen** and **Breda**, where the original initiative came from local officials, carefully worked out attempts are underway to gradually loosen the local authority's grip on the architecture centre. The centre in Breda started at an office at the town hall and moved later on to an old monastery building. In Groningen a new, independent co-ordinator guided the transformation to an independent foundation.

The peculiar thing about local architecture centres is that although most are alike, each has its own characteristics, which can lead to significant differences. And this is not in

terms of the degree of professionalism; usually that simply indicates how long they have been in existence. The background to their foundation and the singularity of local culture produce differences.

The odd one out is **Nagele**. It is primarily an information centre about the village itself, but it also stages travelling exhibitions on architecture. It contributes little to local debate simply because there are no projects in the region upon which to reflect. Yet as a monument to Dutch Functionalism, Nagele has sufficient appeal to make it a unique local centre. 80 volunteers out of the village are participating in this centre.

In **Hilversum** too, architecture tourism is an important aspect for the centre, though there is much more scope here for serious debate about issues in the city.

It is clear that the local architecture centre is an emerging phenomenon. Most of them have now been in operation for a few years and they are working to expand with a larger budget, better accommodation, or better personnel arrangements. The start-up phase is completed, the founders have put all their energy into setting up the centre, and it's time to reap dividends. Often, so much time has gone into getting the centre running and keeping it running that programme aspects and new activities have tended to suffer.

The aspirations are sizeable. Centres like ARCAM in **Amsterdam**, ABC in **Haarlem** and the BAI in **Den Bosch**, have shown that an architecture centre not only is viable but also can play a crucial role in the local and sometimes even national debate on architecture. And moreover, municipalities have discovered the educational potential of centres and have become more generous with funding. Co-operation with local tourist information offices also occurs in some cases.

More generally, public interest in architecture in the Netherlands has risen significantly. This rich and fertile basis offers potential - and many centres now take advantage of it - but it also means that small-scale initiatives established on the basis of enthusiasm must develop into mature organizations run by professionals, preferably in a full-time capacity. This demands much from the initiators, and from subsidizers like municipalities.

The ideal situation is where the municipality or province draws up a policy document on architecture or culture that creates room for an architecture centre, and provision for a realistic budget. Such an ideal is in many cases a distant hope and centres depend on uncertain agreements reached with local officials or aldermen. A change in political fortunes can threaten funding. Many centres therefore seek sponsoring and subsidies elsewhere.

One source of funding that has played an important role in the financial housekeeping of centres from the start is the Netherlands Architecture Fund (SfA). The popularity of the programme subsidy rose fast, the number of architecture centres is still rising, and existing centres are expanding. This sharp rise in the number of centres is putting great pressure on the SfA's available budget. The number of applications granted can almost no longer be met with that budget, about half of which goes towards programme subsidies. The Council for Culture, an advisory committee of the ministry of Culture, recently advised to enlarge the SfA budget to be granted to the centres.

And moreover, it is natural that municipal authorities also provide some funding. But there are municipalities that (as yet) haven't done that.

Whereas the first architecture centres were mainly private initiatives that maintained no contacts and operated independently of one another, the professional world is gradually becoming a factor for many centres. An increasing number of regional branches of the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects (BNA) are represented on committees and programme boards, and centres themselves also collaborate with one another.

Initially, that was limited to staging the same travelling exhibitions or hiring the CASTMobiel from **Tilburg**, designed by the artist Joep van Lieshout. Later on there was the project *Ontwerpen aan Brabant 2050* (Designing on the Brabant region 2050), a collaborative undertaking by the centres in **Den Bosch, Eindhoven, Tilburg** and **Helmond**. The province was looking for ideas about the future development of the region in light of the ongoing rapid pace of urbanization. Four teams of architects were asked to draw up a future scenario. The study results have been discussed through the four centres.

This illustrates the status that architecture centres have acquired in recent years. They have become the obvious location for discussion and debate when important architectural or urban plans in the region become an issue. It is also clear that the government views the centres as fully-fledged instruments for communicating ideas to the public.

That the architecture centres in Brabant collaborated is a logical consequence of the contact they have maintained with one another over the years. It could be viewed as a regional OLA circuit.

There is much less evidence of this in other provinces. Het Zeeuwse Gezicht is itself a provincial initiative, embedded in the country's first provincial policy document on architecture, and the architecture centre in Leeuwarden is developing into an architecture centre for the province of **Friesland**. **Twente** too has become a regional centre. It incorporates foundations out of **Almelo, Hengelo, Enschede** and the **Diepenheim Arts' Society**.

This architecture centre is heavily involved in education and works together with the University of Twente. They hope that other local architecture centres will collaborate in the project by producing websites about their own town or region. Education is a prime area for many architecture centres. Activities range from guided tours and excursions to courses and school projects. This last item includes a request from the Netherlands Architecture Fund asking architecture centres to come up with ideas for the course on cultural education given in secondary schools. A number of the centres are now collaborating on this project

The potential influence of local architecture centres is substantial, but it is precisely the ambitiousness of the various organizations that could really form an obstacle. Although professionalism is on the increase, budgetary and personnel limitations are still a factor. Setting up a centre is itself a difficult endeavour. Despite the successful emergence of local architecture centres in recent years, not all of them manage to survive. In various places (**Ede, Oss**) attempts have been made, but such initiatives have stranded owing to lack of time or money or political backing, this in spite of support from OLA and Architectuur Lokaal. In the other way, the first initiative in **The Hague** that stranded a few years ago, recently made a new start.

Architectuur Lokaal maintains records of all programmes and statutes and reports of the various OLA gatherings and yearly international excursions. We've been to IBA Emscherpark and to Berlin, to London, Flanders and France. Those considering setting up a centre are welcome there for information and ideas. In the meantime, international contacts have been established, often through Architectuur Lokaal, but occasionally directly.

During the London excursion, we organized a gathering at the RIBA to learn more about British architecture centres and the Ministry of Culture, which was preparing a first national policy document on architecture at the time. Like their Dutch counterparts, the centres in both Belgium and Britain originated at grass-roots level but the network is coordinated by professional bodies, the Flemish *Orde van Architecten* and the Royal Institute of British Architects respectively. That is a fundamental contrast with the Dutch situation, where individual members of the regional branches of the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects are involved in some centres.

A clear policy on architecture is coming up in surrounding countries too. In Britain there is the *Urban White Paper*. In Belgium too, discussions between the centres and the Ministry of the Flemish Community are well underway. In the Netherlands, we have a national architect since 1917; Belgium and Scotland also have a national architect. Scotland defined its architecture policy recently, Germany just started on a national level.

Architectuur Lokaal has published an international address book on architecture centres that we could find all over the world on its website, www.arch-lokaal.nl. So you can print the French page when you go to France etc. Although at the moment I only know them by name, in Norway we found some organizations in Oslo: the Norsk Arkitekturforlag, The Norsk Arkitektur Museum, Norsk Form, RAM Galleri and Galleri ROM for Arkitektur. I would invite anyone to inform me on institutions that should be mentioned in the address book, but not listed yet.

Finally, the book POKON that was updated last year, showcases the range of possibilities in the Netherlands. Yet it also reveals where difficulties arise, where local authorities are too non-committal, and where budget and personnel constraints limit genuine effectiveness. The portraits of the architecture centres serve as a source of information and hopefully inspiration for centres that already exist and municipalities and other parties considering establishing a centre.

It is a period document, an evaluation after the wave of local architecture centres that has emerged over the last ten years. None of the centres offers a blueprint for how a centre should be run. Local circumstances are too influential for that, not to mention the importance of the personal ambitions of the founders.

It is precisely the variety of individual qualities is intended to reveal.