

# ARCHITECTUUR

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## LOKAAL

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### ARCHITECTURE POLICY IN THE NETHERLANDS

#### **Architectural quality in the Netherlands architectural policy & definition**

To explain something about the Dutch architecture policy I first have to go back a little in history. With architecture, I include also the town planning, landscape architecture and infrastructure.

In the post war years, from reconstructing the cities, the building production put a firm mark on architecture.

In the seventies followed a period of re-orientation. Variation and accommodation became central items. This led to a kind of socio-functional architecture; later on scornfully called 'self knitted housing'.

In that atmosphere at the beginning of the seventies, a remarkable exposition took place in a museum for visual arts. The theme was the history on Dutch architecture, that was quite forgotten in that time. Under the title *Building 1920-1940, The Dutch contribution to Modernism*, the attention was focused on the heroic period of the pre-war Dutch architecture. A remarkable, very different sound in those years.

The Year of the Monuments in 1975 focused the attention to Dutch architecture even more. In four large art museums, four expositions on architecture around the former change of the century were organized. One of the expositions attracted at least 40.000 visitors, that was absolutely unusual at the time.

These expositions can be interpreted as forerunners of a better architecture climate in general. The grown interest for the cultural dimension of building in the eighties can be seen as a result from different factors, that reinforced one another: a young, active generation architects; the presence of some discussed, cultural inspired aldermen and their civil servants, and architecture historians and journalists who published. Besides that, in a few cities private persons started to organise discussions in this period of squatting and vacancy. Now they can be seen as the source of the later local architecture centres.

In that, already strongly improved architecture climate in the eighties, the ministers of culture and housing took the initiative for a national architecture policy.

You can call that smart - or just wise. Developing a policy against the stream, might be doomed to fail. So more effective was, *to strengthen already started movements in society*. And that's what happened at the start of our architecture policy. With a broad coalition between policy makers and people who were directly involved to architecture as a result. And that founded a solid base for the first national report on architecture policy, Space for Architecture, 10 years ago.

The report brought together culture and building policy, and aimed for architecture and urban design. Spatial quality was defined as the sum of the concepts Venustas, Firmitas en Utilitas from Vitruvius – it was referred to this morning. You can translate these themes as usefulness, reliability and beauty. The definition

*architectural quality* in the report, became broader. The meaning of Firmitas was replaced by the richer concept cultural value, since this implies not only the reception by the user, but for instance also that what an architect wants to express with his design. And so, the historical aspects are also included.

The policy document enlarged financial space for architecture from both ministries. Its character was mainly favourable and it founded an infrastructure of organizations. Not only the NAI, but also new organisations like Architectuur Lokaal, a Fund for individual subsidies for architects and a Fund for special projects on architecture. Also the organizations European and Archiprix, that aim to give young architects a chance, became part of the national policy, as well as Berlage Institute and the national architecture website ArchiNed. The national government concerned intensively on architecture from that time on. In general, not only with their own buildings. Now we are used to it, but ten years ago it was absolutely stunning.

The necessary second architecture policy report in 1996 was titled The architecture of Space. It broadened the attention to the larger scale: landscape architecture, planning and infrastructure. Also private clients were attended to their responsibility for good design for the built and rural environment. The ministries for landscape and traffic were involved too.

At the end of 2000 the third document was there: Designing on the Netherlands. There were three main items: (1) continuing the existing favourable policy, (2) more attention tot the public aspects of architecture: architecture is a public matter and (3) the introduction of 10 Major Projects. As a guarantee for the progress, each of these projects is politically adopted by a Minister

### **Architectuur Lokaal**

So far the national policy – eventually everything has to get its shape on a local level, since decisions are made on a local level: that's where the building permits are granted.

Off course the communities have a lot of tools for their policy, like regional plans, local zoning schemes, structure plans, and in special cases they have a supervisor or a city architect. But in general politicians have no education in architecture or architecture policy. That's the main reason why Architectuur Lokaal was founded: as an independent, national knowledge and information centre for clients: local governments, private market parties or private clients who want to built their own house.

Our organization erased nine years ago from the national policy as an experiment, with one employee and a budget of 100.000 euro. Now the organization has 13 employees, the budget increased to 800.000 euro. About half of the budget is subsidized by the four ministries on architecture policy, the other half we earn with special projects like study trips, investigation, developing tools for local architecture policy and so on. We developed models for competition programmes (to be downloaded from our website [www.ontwerpwedstrijden.nl](http://www.ontwerpwedstrijden.nl)) and we set up a helpdesk on competitions for local authorities.

Our advisory function to local communities is an independent one, and that we do for free. We work pragmatic and try to give as much information as needed, to give local politicians arguments as a basis for their own decisions. We are always

aware of the fact that they are the politicians, and they have their own responsibility to make their own decisions. Like CABE, we are not interested in style.

In architecture policy, a local community not only has to deal with functional, technical or financial matters, but an important task is *to express that architecture is a cultural activity*. Architecture policy should make a connection between building and cultural values inhabitants and local politicians are attached to.

Local architecture centres are important platforms for the local communities and for the involved parties in the building process to exchange knowledge and experience. Most of them raise out of private initiative, sometimes in cooperation with the administration. It always, and on each level, depends on people who feel involved, who really want something.

So the architecture centres are not a product of architecture policy, but a product of the people, and the Dutch always have an opinion on everything. That's what we cherish, and that's back to the basis of the first architecture policy document: *to strengthen what's already there in society*.

The centres, with their so-called 'bottom-up' function, gained a special place in the architecture policy, for instance as the centre of a local network. They organise expositions, discussion and excursions. They publish quarterly's or catalogues, they have websites and newsletters. At the last elections for the local councils in march, some of them organised courses for the candidates.

Architectuur Lokaal coordinates the meetings of these centres and yearly international study trips, where we meet foreign architecture centres. Almost all European countries know comparable initiatives. In June the Architectural Foundation in London and the UK architecture Centres Network organize an international conferences on local architecture centres.

## The results

Now I get to the question, whether architecture policy is worth while. Especially the cultural infrastructure in the last ten years played a crucial role for the attention to the design. The public interest increased enormously. NAI has 100.000 visitors a year, Architectuur Lokaal plays an intermediary role, the Foundations on Architecture make numerous projects possible. The amount of articles on architecture in national and regional newspapers increased in the last years, and the relation with the architecture policy to the publication of an large amount of books on architecture can undoubtedly be proved. And the culture of well organised design competitions is strongly improved.

One can conclude carefully that the answer to the question whether architecture policy is worth while, must be 'yes' - although it is never really to be proved. No building party is *not* aware of the existence, and more and more of the importance, of architecture policy nowadays.

The question, whether the architecture self is improved is harder to answer. What can be established is that more is *tried*, compared to the last 15 years. And these temptations are supported by the policy. Trying harder makes architecture more adventurous – which does not always means the same as better.

The period of the so-called 'kilometre' architecture in housing is left behind; freedom in form has absolutely increased. But many floor plans and measures in the houses remains quite poor.

Architectuur is neither applied art, nor a technical or utilitarian discipline. It should be judged to its character. It is the old ideal of uniting form and function. When this succeeds, a miracle has happened. Sometimes you see an example where this ideal is nearly approached, and then you realise that it is possible.

The question, whether architecture policy has brought architecture on a higher level must be 'yes' again – although also this is never really to be proved.

## **Panorama Europe**

Finally, the international policies.

An international network on architecture policy is also an item in the Netherlands architecture policy notes. Our organisation took the initiative, since the international contacts we built up the last years showed that we can learn from another.

We all have to do with the European rules. We found out that in the different countries, everyone deals in a different way with the same themes on architecture. That leads to interesting comparisons, exchange of experiences, cultures and most of all: discussions on architecture and architecture policy. Of course, not only the Netherlands but f.i. also Scotland and England formulated a national architecture policy; Germany started the first discussions on a national level. Last year, Germany did a study on architecture competitions, France did a study on the organisation of architectural consultation. And in Belgium a seminar on young architects in Europe took place last year in Antwerp. Its is happening everywhere, but within its own national borders.

Panorama Europe is a program for structural, thematic exchange of ideas and experiences on architecture policy and building culture *on a national level* in Europe. The program is meant for the involved parties in the development of policy on architecture on all levels in the European Union: national politicians, ministries, national design and building organisations. In the last years, we discussed this with partners in Germany, Scotland, England and Denmark, and their reaction was positive.

Panorama Europe is about bilateral exchanges and can be built up gradually. There is no formal structure. The internet will play an important role. Later this year the Panorama Europe website will be presented.

A first activity in 1997 was the international architecture address book, that is still on the site of Architectuur Lokaal. A first bilateral, national exchange will take place in the fall, between the Netherlands and Germany. You can see it as a workshop. We agreed upon the themes architectural policy and the commissioning of private housing. This meeting is called Panorama NL < > D. And when other countries want to organize bilateral meetings on common subjects, that might be a Panorama project if they like.

The results will be published on the website. In a few years we hope to have an inspiring source of information for further development. You will hear from us.

Text Cilly Jansen, Ton Idsinga 2002