

The urgency of maintaining The Netherlands

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The consequences of global warming give rise to a different perspective on the question of sustainability. This is a new reality of the 21st century, but ecological disasters have destroyed whole civilisations before in earlier phases of human history. I can only guess at whether these were just “acts of God” or the result of neglecting the impact of urban societies on nature. At present, urban planning discipline generally addresses the issue of sustainability at a lower scale: a single city or a single project. We’re not used to dealing with sustainability at a national, continental or even global level. This interest in small-scale, “holistic” sustainability in a fragmented world is well in line with the outcome of recent research by the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP) underpinning the construction of scenarios for future development to be used for long-term policy formulation by various ministries. The scenarios are designed based on two distinctions: global versus regional, and efficiency versus solidarity. Most people in The Netherlands place themselves in the regional-solidarity quadrant of the matrix. Apparently we don’t see, or don’t want to see the global dimension and the competitiveness of the modern economy. This outcome is not only achieved in these types of surveys; it is also seen in the programs of political parties as well.

So in The Netherlands metropolitan development, which of course is a typical outcome of global forces, seems to be an autonomous process rather than the subject of conscious action in the public domain. At the same time multinationals, quite a few of which are headquartered here due to our geography, our seaports and airport and our highly industrialised agricultural production, are fully operational on a world-wide scale. There is a growing contradiction, perhaps even schizophrenia, between our actual consumptive behaviour in the way we use our space or the way we move around – reflecting global tendencies – and our regional/solidarity preference

in the way we look at the history and topography of our physical environment. It should come as no surprise that we as a nation find ourselves in an identity crisis.

Another symptom of this crisis is how we react, in The Netherlands in particular and in Europe more generally, to immigrants from poor countries. We're confronted with painful scenes at Europe's outer boundaries, where the police fight pitched battles with immigrants scaling the border defences and people drown in their attempts to reach the Promised Land, which we already possess. Immigration is frightening because we are unable to place this phenomenon in a proper global context and cannot grasp the consequences for our culture and economy. This incomprehension produces the negative bias that presently dominates the political discourse. We can see immigration only as a threat, rather than an opportunity to infuse our economy and culture with renewed vigour.

Let's turn back to the spatial planning agenda. In The Netherlands we've seen drastic changes due to urbanisation and increasing mobility, changes that were rapid and penetrated to the core of society. Perhaps the specific situation of a precarious balance between land and water, combined with a high population density, makes us much more acutely aware of the impact of these changes than would be the case in far bigger, less densely populated and geographically more robust countries. Whatever the cause, we feel that the traditional ties between city and countryside have been undermined. And we see the function and meaning of our landscape slipping through our fingers. This is what explains, for instance, Adriaan Geuze's struggle for the preservation of our landscape (Second Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, 2005). We're at a loss to determine how to continue our history of man-made landscapes contrasting nicely with compact middle-size cities located in close proximity, and that's why we seek refuge in a quest for sustainability

at a very low level. Of course, what we discuss at that level is completely out of tune with the real problems of our world. The national government in particular has an ongoing tendency to interfere with local details, while important national questions remain unanswered.

I would like to mention some of the more important developments:

- fundamental changes in the landscape due to maximising agricultural production, through all of the 20th century, and still continuing into the 21st;
- the increase of mobility and of individual space consumption;
- the way in which we cover the country with new urban settlements, industrial estates, greenhouses, recreational projects, without compensating for the consequences by means of equally large-scale reinforcements to the landscape and ecology;
- soil subsidence and rising sea levels, higher peak discharges of rivers that change flow from glacier rivers into rain rivers, intermittent periods of excess water and water shortage, all of which threaten our cherished polder system.

We lack the ability to adjust our age-old balance between occupation and physical conditions, between culture and nature, to present global conditions, in a way that fits the scale of the problem. Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods – even if these mainly occur elsewhere as yet – confront us with a reality that we cannot translate into a new concept of sustainability on the proper scale. Our present outlook on sustainability is naïve in its small-scale focus and will be overrun by global economic and climatic developments. We are failing to regain the lead in managing our environment.

The core of this failure seems to be our orientation towards personal wealth. That is our only context for viewing developments, in relation to a permanent

worry that we might lose individually. The specific nature of The Netherlands, however, requires collective action if we want to keep it safe and liveable in the long run. Once we rediscover this truth, working from this collective responsibility, it will give rise to a renewal of our culture. The question is: how long will we have to wait until this can be reintroduced in the public debate? How long will it take to make new, structural arrangements for our polders, our coastal defences, the management of mobility and the growth of our cities, industrial and agricultural production, and so on?

Relying on market forces alone may seem efficient, but a great deal of work still remains for the government, for public parties making up this country's society. These things once made us justifiably famous in the world, with our cities and landscapes, our polders and Delta. But now our State Secretary of Water Management, confronted with budget problems, tells us without any shame that it isn't the duty of her ministry to make our country beautiful. Why is it that we're no longer proud of the way we create and permanently re-create our country?