

Learning from ecologists

Zef Hemel

When you are angry, you wish disaster down upon someone. When you look out over the sea of featureless row houses in the delta of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt rivers, you might wish a powerful storm flood would wash down on it – a cruel north-westerly, a true spring tide, swelled by the high waters of the rivers that flow into our country near Lobith. The deepest reclaimed polders would vanish under the waters: near Nesselande, Pijnacker, Woerden, Alphen, Zoetermeer, Gouda is where things would go wrong – at precisely those places where people irresponsibly bought their family homes in the past fifty years, as far as possible away from the cities, riding through the traffic congestion en masse to work every day, burdening the country with nasty environmental problems, afraid of the neighbours, spoiling the lovely delta landscape.

In that rage that wells up nearly every day, you read a report by the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research (RPB) that characterizes the market demand for rural residential neighbourhoods as nearly insatiable, and in which that institute moreover identifies locations where that market demand could be met, as if it were a project developer with a land marker. You yourself were working to develop a city like Amsterdam and encountering problems almost daily. It is no easy task. And ‘The Hague’ and ‘Europe’ are not especially helpful. Nevertheless, you try to build 50,000 homes within the city limits, often in difficult places, abandoned by industry, on polluted ground. You build urban environments, which means mixed neighbourhoods where people learn to live together all over again, where they see each other on the street, where they take the metro, tram or bicycle to their work. In fact, your goal is to create the most beautiful city in the world, just as your distant ancestors did. Your role models are the architects of the seventeenth-century ring of canals and the people who came up with Plan Zuid, Berlage’s ambitious redesigning of the south of Amsterdam. And you see signs that it will succeed. Agreements have been reached. Municipal

funds are released. Small businesses are springing up. Former gas factories are given a cultural purpose. New theatres open their doors. Cyclists predominate the public areas. People voluntarily give up their cars. Old streets regain new life. Working-class districts flourish. Parks are refurbished and attract new visitors. Living in the city starts becoming popular. People discover that you can raise your children very well in the city. Yes, thanks to perseverance in policy, the city is blossoming, after decades of the politics of slum clearance and regional deconcentrations and in defiance of the so-called trend toward suburban living. Project developers that own land in a wide band around the city angle after their prey like vultures, awaiting the urban decline. Let them wait.

Rage, you realise now, solves nothing. Increase your faith in the cooperation between spatial planners and ecologists in urban development. Since the publication of '*Haringen in het IJ*' (Herrings in the IJ River, 1991), it is gradually becoming clear that nature is doing just fine in the city and that the city will – in the end – clean up its mess on its own. In some ways, urban nature often turns out to offer an even greater wealth of diversity than the green countryside around the city. So what are we worried about?

Large-scale intervention in spatial planning to turn the tide of suburbanisation is unnecessary.

Cries for a delta plan for urbanisation, in which the struggle between nature and suburban culture is decided in favour of the former, are thrown about far too often and too easily in this country. Let's not follow the Delft water board engineers and the Wageningen cultural technicians with even more engineers. Powerful intervention by an Ecology Corps of Engineers, as suggested by Mr. Lerup, would destroy more than it would repair. The suburban dream would only become more intense. No, the solution lies in the little things. The way in which the ecologists of the city of Amsterdam deal

with such issues as the extremely polluted Diemerzeedijk offers infinitely more perspectives. They understand that nature is as dynamic as the city. When the toxic belt on the Diemerzeedijk was closed in 1998, isolated from its surroundings and covered by a thick layer of sand, and when the islands of IJburg were created by pouring sand just in front of the dike, they already knew that the ring snakes would definitely have to be saved, but that nature would recover its balance, even if in some other form. The Diemerzeedijk has always been the area of Amsterdam that was home to the most species. Dumping dredgings for years, criss-crossing the region with high-tension power lines, burning chemical waste, covering the belt in thick layers of sand, building a complete residential neighbourhood (IJburg); none of it betrayed the trust of the ecologists: the fresh decontaminated sand of 2000 already showed the footprints of stoat and fitch. A veritable explosion of rabbits took place in 2002, the foxes made their appearance again. And 2002 was the best year for field mice on the Diemerzeedijk in many years. “The dike,” wrote the ecologists almost jubilantly in 2004, “has entered a new era.”

Just imagine that we could raise that whole suburban sea of houses from the soil, as E.L. Doctorow describes Manhattan in *The Waterworks*, “like a scab from new skin underneath, how seedlings would sprout, and freshets would bubble up, and brush and grasses would grow over the rolling hills (...). A season or two of this and the mute, protesting culture buried for so many industrial years under the tenements and factories would rise again ... of the lean, religious Indians of the bounteous earth, who lived without money or lasting architecture, flat and close to the ground – hunting, trapping, fishing, growing their corn and praying ... always praying in solemn thanksgiving for their clean and short life in this quiet universe.”

It would be wonderful. In fact, it is already happening. Just take a look. The grass is already worming its way up through the paving tiles of Hoofddorp. It won't be long before the water comes seeping through the dike.

References

Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research, (October 2005), *De Landstad*.

Landelijk wonen in de netwerkstad, The Hague.

Martin Melchers, Geert Timmermans, (1991), *Haringen in het IJ. De verborgen dierenwereld van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam.

Martin Melchers, Joris Weitjens, (2004), *Diemerzeedijk zand erover*, Amsterdam.

E.L. Doctorow, (1995), *The Waterworks*, New York.