

IABR 2024 THE NATURE OF HOPE

Our landscape is the battleground on which many fundamental changes have been fought. *Polderen* – which means diking polders, but also solving problems through dialogue – stands for both the technocratic and rationalized genesis of the Netherlands and its democratic foundations. In other words, the notion of social engineering is deeply rooted in our history. However, both these areas are under pressure as a result of the changing social and environmental climate and the ensuing transitions.

In the context of change, we can do one of two things: dig in our heels – pretend nothing is wrong and carry on as before – or embrace the uncertainty of the future. The social engineering paradigm paves the way for both reflexes: in all corners of society, parties are locked in public battles based on seemingly opposing perspectives, rather than (collectively) moving toward solutions.

While many agreements have been made in good faith, including the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the commitments and targets set out in these agreements are generally not being met. There is still little consideration of soil and water systems and the long-term impacts of the climate crisis when choosing new locations for housing projects.¹ An estimated 820,000 new homes are planned in flood-prone areas, areas with subsidence, and wetlands.² These are places that are vulnerable to inundation, flooding, and sinking, as well as drought and heat. Their vulnerability will increase with global warming: we will continue to face more extreme weather events, peak river flows, and rising sea levels. At the same time, national programs such as Mooi Nederland and the Cabinet's proposal to make water and soil a guiding principle in spatial decisions are ushering in a new era in which impending changes will affect existing cities and underground forces will influence aboveground phenomena; an era that calls for a different design attitude, for listening and asking different questions, for using different materials, for employing different ways of working together and different forms of knowledge – a time to arrive at more integral and adaptive design solutions.

A good indicator of this impending change is the fact that pension funds, insurers and financial markets are now making their voices heard in the climate change debate. Recently, Aerd Houben, director of financial markets at De Nederlandse Bank (DNB), wrote that investors continue to underestimate the impact of climate change; due to information gaps, climate risks are insufficiently taken into account in financial market investments.³ It is also becoming more difficult to finance (housing) projects outside the dikes or to secure mortgages for dwellings built well below the Amsterdam Ordnance Datum (NAP). This, in turn, raises fundamental questions about interests in and the devaluation of existing land positions. Of course, a small vanguard is experimenting with alternative models of earning and organizing, such as co-creation and other forms of value, but constant growth and short-term returns still dominate the playing field in the construction industry.

The Dutch government subsidizes the fossil industry to the tune of 30 billion euros a year (directly and indirectly).⁴ It could also choose to use these resources to create the conditions for a sustainable economy in which regulations and standards, preferably at the European level, can become the drivers of change. Nevertheless, major financial players can no longer avoid joining the debate on the climate crisis and taking a stand on the future of the world. After all, change makes people anxious and financial markets restless.

Where governments retreat, (right-wing) populism grows. The overwhelming success of the political newcomer BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) in the recent provincial council elections shows that there are political gains to be made from the impending changes. And: in times of change, the strong lobby for leaving things as they are is never far away.⁵ Its 'plain language' appeals to many citizens. But it unfairly oversimplifies complex issues such as the nitrogen and carbon crises, which are often couched in abstract language, and can lead to them being shelved once again.

In the recently published *Atlas van afgehaakt Nederland* (Atlas of Dutch 'Drop-Outs'), René Cuperus and Josse de Voogd explore the ways in which social differences between people are manifested on the 'electoral map' of the Netherlands. They show how, in many cases, multiple differences in educational attainment, income, and health translate into sociocultural preferences and political choices, and how these are distributed across the country. Real or perceived social deprivation can lead people to give up on the traditional system.⁶

What will it take for us to deal with the uncertainties of the future in these times of multiple crises – what will it take to remain hopeful? It is no coincidence that questions about (post-)truth, lies, and 'fact-free' opinions are emerging in the public debate after decades of cutbacks in precisely those sectors that had the expertise to deal with multiple different ideas and interests. It is embarrassing, to say the least, that in the midst of a nitrogen, housing and climate crisis, the Netherlands no longer has a Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM was abolished in 2010), and that the knowledge of the Rural Area Service (DLG), which was closed down in 2015, has disappeared just when farmers are starting to revolt. The erosion is not limited to government ministries. The number of public facilities such as primary schools, hospitals, public transportation, courts and libraries has been declining since the 1980s, especially in rural areas, reported *De Groene Amsterdammer* and *Follow the Money* at the end of 2021.^{7,8} On the one hand, spatial designers contribute to the creation (or demolition) of the kinds of public facilities that make it possible for people to live together. On the other, without the right clients, even architecture seems to lack the conditions to be open to the changes that the future demands of us – and the possibilities that the uncertainty that this entails offers.

Our specification of social engineering is inextricably linked to our history of extraction. The discussion of our own histories of land or (the exploitation of) someone else's land is slow to begin. Historically grown dependencies will have to be acknowledged before a substantially different etiquette in matters such as climate justice can germinate. The Dutch way of managing water and landscapes is an important export product. At the same time, the proliferation of polder landscapes is part of a long colonial tradition in which the logic of social engineering, productivity and extraction was implemented in Suriname, for example. Socioeconomic and cultural inequality in the Netherlands itself is not unrelated to the way we treat the land – it is not without reason that the former peat colonies and other extraction areas such as Oost-Groningen and Zuid-Limburg have the highest levels of deprivation and dissatisfaction. The unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens of extraction is the cause of inequality of wealth and social disruption.

In the past we have taken this way of thinking beyond national borders, but currently humanity is taking it beyond planetary borders: even the Moon and Mars are being mined for raw materials to be used on 'our' Earth. Conversely, the rationalization and

economization of land and landscapes now together form a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon that has become an integral part of Dutch (commercial) identity and is referred to with pride. This can be seen, for example, in the declaration of the (spatial) structure of the *Maatschappij van Weldadigheid* in Drenthe, with its basis in the Java plantations, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.⁹ Clearly, the paradigms of social engineering and extraction are not separate from the past or the present. How can we use new knowledge and technology, based on evolving insights and critical reflection, *for the benefit* of the planet and all beings that live on it?

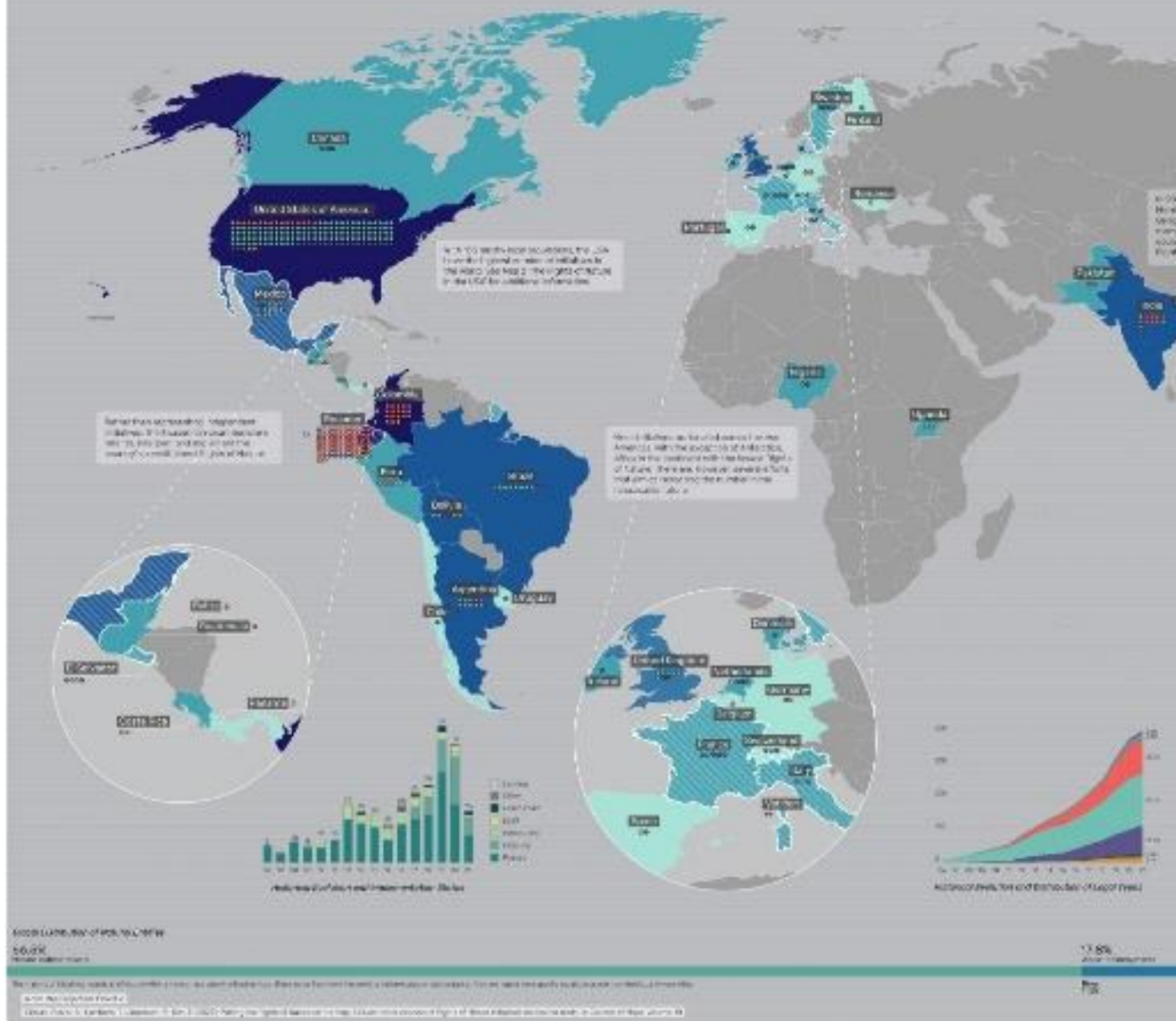
Due to human activities, including pollution and changes in land use and climate, global biodiversity – the variety of living organisms – has declined dramatically in recent years.¹⁰ Our current food system and associated modes of production and consumption pose the greatest threat: a recent United Nations (UN) report shows that modern, monocultural agriculture further endangers 86 percent of species already threatened with extinction.¹¹ Biodiversity and climate are inextricably linked to each other and to the future of humanity. According to a recent IPCC and IPBES report from 2021, almost all biodiversity actions contribute to climate actions, but not vice versa.¹² The UN is currently working on a series of nature-based agreements; after 17 years of intense discussions and negotiations, the Convention on the High Seas of 4 March 2023 is the first concrete outcome. These figures are worrying, especially when we relate them to erosion and land degradation – to the fact that land that will become infertile in the foreseeable future.

The overlapping crises of ecology, climate, and social relations demand answers that are hard to come by, given the paradigms of social engineering and extraction that exhaust people, ecosystems, and the Earth, and that have also trapped architecture.

Hope

Amid all the conservative movements mentioned above, there are also some hopeful signs of cultural change in our interaction and relationships with nature. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than 400 natural entities have been granted rights in at least 39 countries. This may indicate a significant shift in humanity's relationship with nature – toward coexistence with nature, design with nature. Another issue is that of human beings as nature, as living metabolisms: the human gut flora, for example, contains hundreds of different species of bacteria that greatly influence how we feel and think. It is striking that many of the natural phenomena that have been granted rights exist in the Global South, in the countries of peoples who have different histories and different relationships with the land, with different relationships between generations and with situated knowledge, with the mystical and with storytelling.

THE RIGHTS OF NATURE MAPPING & GROWING MOVEMENT



Source: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17445647.2022.2079432>

The current Anthropocene makes it abundantly clear that the effects of human activity are visible in the deepest layers of the Earth and that our behavior, at least that of the West, is responsible for the climate crisis. This planetary catastrophe has extreme humanitarian consequences. Since we have come to realize this, voices have been growing louder saying that human beings should not place themselves above nature, but rather consider themselves part of it – taking into account that nature is not a neutral or romantic sanctuary, but has its own cruelties and logic. They call for a new understanding of the human role: a new language, different relationships between and among humans, other beings, and the environment in which we all live together. This requires an awareness of the

reciprocity of our existence with everything around us, as an integral part of the 'natural' balance on Earth.

If the environment in which we find ourselves is not separate from what we can think and make (if, as thinker and writer Donna J. Haraway states: 'It matters what thoughts think thoughts, what stories tell stories'), we cannot separate process from outcome, nor human from nature.¹³ *We are nature, we are the land, we are materialized stardust.*

Human beings, as part of nature, have contributed greatly to the complexity of the problem, but they are also intrinsically part of the solution. As the Jamaican writer and philosopher Sylvia Winter writes: 'Human beings are magical. Bios and logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities.'¹⁴

Change, however, will only find fertile ground if it comes with the lure and hope of a new dawn.

IABR 2024

The upcoming research period, which will result in an exhibition with the (working) title 'The Nature of Hope', is a continuation of the 10th IABR: IT'S ABOUT TIME. As stated in the IABR Policy Plan 2021-2024, the focus of the Biennale during this period of cultural planning will be on the role that architecture, landscape and urban design have to play in the current challenges of transition, from planetary to humanitarian. The central aspect of the next edition is our relationship with nature in general and with landscapes in particular. Human beings can no longer place themselves above nature. We are in, alongside, between, and an interwoven part of nature. Although much of today's rhetoric remains focused on symptom control, the aim of this IABR is practical change.

Spatial designers have an important role to play in representing this potential and embodying these changing relationships. Not only through creative processes, the materialization of necessity and conviction in design, but also by creating a perspective that can take shape in the near future. It is about designing hope – not as a naive position or as a binary choice between optimism and pessimism, but as a conscious confrontation with reality and the discovery of its potential for improvement. Architectural reflection can be an engine for change.

And there is much to be hopeful about. Worldwide, more and more architects, policymakers and citizens are responding to the ecological and social crisis at a systemic level, with innovative initiatives and integral designs, hopeful ideas and proactive actions. They are working towards carbon-positive built environments, (re)using local materials or focusing on non-extractive architecture, promoting circular projects with existing material and energy flows, working with (or on) alternative forms of economy and regulation, restoring the subsoil and densifying communities, working with or in commons, optimizing and/or interrogating data, and/or applying biomimicry in their designs.

Creating Conditions

In the lead up to IABR 2024, we will focus on exploring and changing the culture of architecture and strengthening the conditions for an architectural practice in which extractive practices are no longer the norm. The choice of the combination of hope, land and nature as central themes for IABR 2024 stems from the recognition that everything begins with the ground and the extraction – or rather the depletion – of the soil.

It is intrinsic to the profession of architecture that it will be part of the solution, but it is by no means a given that spatial designers will play a positive role in it. Non-extractive architecture can only move from the margins to the center through systemic change. Despite the fact that architecture can be seen as the best possible standard-bearer of imagination and the fabricator of alternative environments, the elbow room that architects have to actually create conditions for (climate-positive, equal and more than human) coexistence seems limited at this point in time. The neoliberal policies of the last 30 years have not only led to the closure of physical places – from community centers to ministries – while the online environment has become increasingly commercialized, but also to the evaporation of knowledge and experience with local and participatory ways of working (such as ecological design and urban renewal) and to the impoverishment of our imaginations. And yet, in these times of multiple crises, this is what we desperately need.

Focusing on the conditions for hope, IABR 2024 aims to contribute to the restoration of the social and knowledge infrastructure to the extent that problematic ways of working are no longer the first choice, alternative ways of working are strengthened, and new forms of architecture are made possible and advocated. Creating conditions for hope and desire and using them as drivers for (social) change will enable architecture to embrace a new agenda. Relationships with nature are currently defined primarily by other disciplines and fields such as philosophy, politics, conservation practice, and/or anthropology. There is an opportunity for architecture as a discipline to embrace the stewardship of multiple values. How can we think about spatial metabolism? What can regenerative urbanism look like? How can we build a circular economy? What can be the impact of technology and data, that is, of other mobility systems and their spatial consequences? How can climate-smart design influence issues such as landscape or building aesthetics? What are the strategies or frameworks? At what scales? What are the tools? What is the story? Developing new relationships with nature in rural and urban settings involves a layering of aspects: physical, biological, energetic, ecological, economic, technological, cultural and/or metaphorical, to name a few.

After a period of reminiscing about a past-in-which-everything-was-better, the future is becoming increasingly popular. Making that future desirable is the challenge and the driving force through which the necessary change can manifest. As German philosopher and atheistic theologian Ernst Bloch says of hope: 'The work of this emotion (hope) requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.'¹⁵

Let's do it. Or, as architect and writer Hans Hollein said earlier: 'Alles ist Architektur.'

Notes

- 1 <https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/klimaat/ramp-catastrofe-of-crisis-hoe-noemen-media-klimaatverandering>.
- 2 As Delta Program Commissioner Peter Glas said in the second advice on housing and climate adaptation to the Ministries of the Interior and Infrastructure and Water Management in late 2021:
<https://www.deltaprogramma.nl/nieuws/nieuws/2021/12/06/advies-deltacommissaris-houd-bij-woningbouw-rekening-met-het-klimaat-van-de-toekomst>.
- 3 <https://www.dnb.nl/algemeen-nieuws/nieuwsbericht-2022/betere-beprijzing-klimaatrisico-s-op-financiele-markten-versnelt-de-energietransitie>.
- 4 <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/03/23/onderzoeker-corrigeert-zichzelf-fossiele-subsidies-bedragen-niet-173-maar-30-miljard-a4160305>.
- 5 Agrifood communications consultant ReMarkAble, which has huge agribusiness players (such as Monsanto and Bayer) as clients, for example, is one of the founders of the BBB. Source: <https://remarkable.nl/opmerkelijk-nieuws/remarkable-maakt-opmerkelijke-boerburgerbeweging>.
- 6 <https://www.kennisopenbaarbestuur.nl/documenten/rapporten/2021/12/17/atlas-van-afgehaakt-nederland>.
- 7 <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/hoe-den-haag-uit-nederland-verdween>.
- 8 <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/verschraling-platteland>.
- 9 Berteke Waaldijk, 'Personeel van sociale instituties: over het verband tussen de vrouwenbeweging en maatschappelijk werk', *BMGN Low Countries Historical Review* 130/2 (2015), 61.
- 10 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/nl/headlines/society/20200109STO69929/verlies-aan-biodiversiteit-waarom-is-dit-een-probleem-en-wat-zijn-de-oorzaken#:~:text=De%20laatste%20jaren%20neemt%20de,in%20landgebruik%2C%20overvuiling%20en%20klimaat>.
- 11 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-02-03-food-system-biodiversity-loss-benton-et-al_o.pdf; p. 7.
- 12 https://www.ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021_IPCC-IPBES_scientific_outcome_20210612.pdf.
- 13 <https://www.dukeupress.edu/staying-with-the-trouble>.
- 14 <https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/wynter-sylvia/>.
- 15 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bloch/hope/introduction.htm>.

About the IABR 2024 curator team:

In selecting the curatorial team, we explicitly considered rejuvenation and sought to bring together individuals with complementary areas of expertise and focus, as well as diversity of ethnic background.

Saskia van Stein

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NB. This tekst is written in dialog with Janna Bystrykh, Catherine Koekoek and Patricia Reed.