

Date: 1 September 2023

By: Saskia van Stein, General and Artistic Director Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR)

Discussion paper in preparation for the roundtable discussion on architectural policy on 6 September 2023 with the Standing Committee on Home Affairs of the Dutch House of Representatives, with regard to the questions:

What lessons can be learned from the rich Dutch tradition of social housing?

In the past, the Housing Act, postwar reconstruction and various spatial planning policy documents (administratively) supported the development of quality social housing in the Netherlands. The government, strong and well informed, (ideologically) promoted socially relevant issues and urgent (spatial) challenges. Architects, urban planners and landscape architects subscribed to their socio-civic views. Out of their commitment, designers realized public housing, skillfully used available financial and material resources, and ensured the urban embedding of architecture in the public realm. In this way, designers co-created and integrally shaped the 'togetherness' of our society.

Since the postwar period, the (spatial) quality of our built environment has received national attention and has been given form and (cultural) content in a local context. A first policy document entitled 'Ruimte voor Architectuur' (1991) combined the practical and the cultural side of architecture on behalf of the two ministries of VROM (Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment) and WVC (Welfare, Public Health and Culture). This created a lively architectural climate in the Netherlands, with room for designers, the exploration of new ideas, practical experimentation and attention to the quality of the living environment of all citizens. The policy focused on the involvement of the market in public projects, which also created economic support. However, this valuable infrastructure, in which architecture culture and the market found each other in a common building chain, crumbled when political interest in architectural policy disappeared.

The European public procurement directives of 2008 are characterized by a strict and conservative approach and offer young architects in particular fewer opportunities. The dissolution of the Ministry of VROM in 2010, the reform of the cultural policy document system since 2005, and the subsequent substantial cuts by Halbe Zijlstra (State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science in the Rutte II cabinet 2010-2012) are to blame.

Since in 2014, the policies of Stef Blok (Minister for Housing and Public Service in the Rutte II cabinet) have ensured that the focus on social housing has given way to support for the real estate market.

Dutch architecture and housing became an export and investment product, a 'commodity'. The introduction of the so-called 'landlord's tax' clipped the wings of the housing associations. Although this administrative decentralization was based on democratizing (and austerity) ambitions, it required a control effort by decentralized administrative bodies – municipalities and provinces – that did not always have the necessary expertise.

These developments resulted in a highly motivated and capable, but also highly depleted and fragmented landscape of architects, architectural institutions, training courses, and a hollowing out of architectural critique, lacking the desired link with national, regional, or local policies, 'crossovers'

in the various ministries and 'governance' towards the increasingly dominant market.

The most important lesson to be learned from the rich Dutch tradition of public housing is that it was embedded in a culture of administrative vision and control, with spatial planning as the basis for a multilayered and interwoven chain, and an emphasis on good commissioning, both by governments and by the market. Architects were able to apply their design expertise and integral knowledge to public housing. Today, we live in a global force field that requires a reinterpretation of the lessons of the past.

What tools can the House of Representatives use to strengthen the position of Dutch architecture, to ensure that it produces not only a lot of buildings, but also beautiful buildings? What should the House do and what should it not do?

It is a misconception to believe that promoting a culture of building will lead to more housing being built. Housing is not an isolated issue. The big, complex social issues such as climate change, energy transition, nitrogen problems, circular economy, food security, and public health and accessibility all have spatial implications and cannot be separated from the creation of sufficient, equitable and affordable (public) housing. Creating the conditions for a socially inclusive, climate-resilient city and a fair housing market requires recognizing and engaging with a changed narrative. The policy sector and the discipline of architecture face the challenge of harnessing the power of design and imaginative for the sake of this change and linking it to (integrated) spatial planning.

Designers are uniquely placed to analyze complex issues and visualize alternatives that can help bring about the necessary systemic changes – transitions or rather fundamental transformations – our society is facing.

Designers tend to be intrinsically motivated to serve the public good.

The Dutch government ought to facilitate the administrative and cultural space for this upcoming transition, to enable collective clout for changed thinking. Knowledge development, knowledge sharing, collaboration and research by design are fundamental to the forming of the collective logic we need to move beyond the current accumulation of impasses. It ought to explore and support precisely those initiatives, places and/or platforms that present, put on the agenda, and facilitate dialogue, reflection, and education – in other words: explore and support the cultural space in which citizens are involved in the discussion about (upcoming) changes in their living environment. It ought to implement policies and develop tools, such as (progressive) regulations that encourage culture change, so that we can collectively create a sustainable and (circular) economic (growth) potential, strong, inclusive and healthy cities and regions and future-proof rural area development.

New Opportunities, a New Architecture Culture

This new culture requires a new narrative and new imagery. While society is changing, policy and the building sector are slow to change with it. The government ought to strive for clear, consistent regulations, conceiving of the extractive (fossil) economy and toxic materials as things of the past. It ought to make room for research by design, encourage circular building and promote inclusiveness to reverse the loss of social cohesion.

The government ought to encourage technological, standardized solutions, but combine them with architectural and spatial quality, to ensure the spatial and social quality of both our urban and rural areas, also in the long term. The existing cultural network of architecture institutions, and the way in which this network can connect social challenges with local policymakers, architects, administrators,

initiators, residents, and students, provide an indispensable link in this chain.

Administrative Ambition, Experimentation and Perseverance

All public housing is related to land positions and land politics, which means that the spatial quality of our built environment is linked to payback models, which is reflected in how, what and where we build, and which materials and floor plans we use. If we want to promote integrated quality (and quality assurance) in addition to quantitative solutions, we will have to promote good and consistent commissioning, that is, promote collaboration with the developing parties and with the various partners involved. The developing parties currently have a position of power and (financial) strength due to their land positions. They largely determine how we live and for what target groups we build. The government can make more room for design and experimentation. It can move beyond buttoned-up bureaucracies by allowing citizens to contribute to the city, by believing in 'temporary' solutions or by developing test zones addressing heat and biodiversity. It is up to the government to take back the reins here – not by encouraging discord, but by working as equals with administrators, designers, citizens, and developers (no longer privatizing the joys and democratizing the burdens) on healthy and equitable housing. Also, by keeping an eye on the non-human entities. The role of architecture culture is not to build more housing, but to stimulate the debate about the (spatial) organization of our society. Housing policy starts with a coherent policy, which can lead to good commissioning, followed by good design.

By opting for knowledge building and sharing, research by design and supported administrative ambitions that come together in experimental (cultural) programs, the Dutch government can support the spatial sector by putting issues and projects on the agenda, discussing them and initiating them, to help the Dutch spatial sector move forward.

The renewed momentum of current national programs, such as Water en bodemsturend, Mooi NL, and the Nationale Omgevingsvisie (NOVI), will require administrative perseverance if they are to be successfully implemented. The government will need to focus its policies on a long-term vision, coupled with practical measures that can be implemented in the short term to support this vision.

This administrative ambition and vision for the future development of the living environment in the Netherlands must transcend the political electoral arena. Especially with regard to the elements we share – air, water, and land – it is more necessary than ever to establish an integrated collaboration: to pull together.

Lessons from the Ministry of Make!

One example of integrated thinking and collaboration was presented by the Ministry of Make!, a cultural initiative by ZUS, MANN, and the IABR, in which 100 designers and experts used their collective knowledge and imagination to create new designs for the Netherlands. The main goal was to approach various social challenges from a spatial perspective, keeping in mind the consequences of climate change, land subsidence, sea level rise, the nitrogen problem, and the energy transition. In very concrete terms, the Ministry of Make! wants to work responsibly on the housing challenge of building 1 million additional climate-proof homes. In addition, it aims to find solutions for conflicting regulations and meet the need for alternative forms of society and financing. After analyzing all of the submissions, we recognized the following lessons. 1. Think in terms of *living spaces* rather than *dwellings*; 2. Encourage nature-based planning and 'biobased' building; 3. The polder is changing: develop landscape, agriculture, and housing hand in hand; 4. The big challenge is not to construct new buildings, but to make the existing city more sustainable; and 5. Create exemplary projects and provide test sites.

The plea, in other words, is to facilitate space for experimentation and to explore and test methods for coping with societal systemic changes such as climate adaptation, biodiversity loss, and the energy transition. The existing cultural infrastructure combines enormous knowledge, thinking, and organizational power with the ability to discuss spatial challenges at different levels, both (inter)nationally and locally, and merits the support of the government. In the current context, this network can make a valuable contribution to the design culture and dialogue in the Netherlands and in the European Union, thereby also strengthening our international position.

Saskia van Stein, General and Artistic Director Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR)
1 September 2023