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PAST AND FUTURE CHALLENGES OF URBAN PLANNING, AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract. This article describes the urgent issues of contemporary urban planning from economic, social, political and medical point of view. Discussion about urban opportunities and threats is accompanied by examples and historical cases from the Netherlands.

Key words: urban planning, Netherlands, sociology, economy.

1. Introduction

Discussing urban planning during the heydays of neo-liberalism resembles writing about the rise and fall of the Roman empire: urbanism once shaped and reshaped the spatial framework of millions of people, but now the very notion of planning appears to be incompatible with neo-liberalism (a term that, like ‘globalism’, obscures its true contents and represents a philosophy that in many ways is the exact opposite of liberalism; it destroys rather than enhances equality and civic liberties, and ridicules the notion of shared interests once summarized as ‘brotherhood’). Planning implies interventions in the so-called free market, sometimes even forcing people to leave their hometowns and move somewhere else. This history of urban planning begins with a history of changing justifications for these interventions, and culminates in a wide range of spatial strategies. Invariably, urban planning targets urgent problems that were believed to threaten society as a whole. By nature, therefore, it is linked to the public realm, to politics and administrative bureaucracies. The Netherlands is no exception, though few other countries can boast a planning tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. Already then, the need to keep out the sea and prevent the polders from flooding called for collective measures, a financial infrastructure to cover the costs, and administrative bodies to decide which steps to take (these ‘water boards’ are credited for being the oldest democratic institutions in Western Europe).

2. Basic Theory Part

Although in the Netherlands, urban planning is always linked to what is now often dubbed hydraulic engineering, it developed independently from it, its object being cities and settlement patterns rather than canals, drainage systems and dikes. The first problem urbanism addressed were the disastrous hygienic conditions in the cities. In the nineteenth century, medical geography drove the point home: there was a direct and undeniable link between the places where people lived and their health conditions: the effects of cholera epidemics proved to be much worse in some parts of the city than in others. Although the scientific explanations were not always correct, the solution to the problem it inspired was immensely effective. The introduction of sewage systems (often associated with the work of Joseph Bazalgette in London) and the provision of pure drinking water improved public health in ways never surpassed since. In practice, this required a subterranean infrastructure that could only be realized underneath streets, parks and squares. Designing public space is the object of urbanism, and that explains why urbanism developed into the most powerful tool of the hygienic revolution. In only a few decades this revolution reversed the traditional health relations between town and countryside: for the first time in history, cities were healthier than rural villages. Urban planning also played a dominant role in the next phase: improvement of the housing stock, especially for the urban poor. Here, building codes were the principal instrument; the one developed for Berlin became exemplary.

The late nineteenth century enriched urbanism, until then predominantly a technical profession run by engineers, with artistic ambitions that were also justified as instrumental in counteracting imminent dangers: the beautification of cities should help to ease social tensions and restore the urban community, repairing the damage attributed to the industrial revolution and the chaotic urbanization processes it unleashed. Again, building codes

proved an effective tool. When public housing was introduced urban planners could actually fill in the plans they designed, provided they managed to get a hold on public housing institutions. The Netherlands issued its public housing law in 1901; it provided the framework for H.P. Berlage's expansion plans for Amsterdam, which became famous for the exuberant architecture of the so-called 'Amsterdam School'. Working for the municipal housing department of Rotterdam, J.J.P. Oud designed what appears to be the opposite of this buoyant style: the sober brick blocks in the district of Spangen, and the white, modern buildings of the Kiefhoek, for instance.

In the 1920s, the scale of urban planning increased beyond the borders of the city. General expansion plans invaded the environment, anticipating the concept of the regional city. Shedding its original anti-urban tendencies, the Garden city movement merged with the technically oriented and the artistically inspired brands of urbanism at the International Town Planning Conference in Amsterdam in 1924. The design of a traffic infrastructure and largescale zoning schemes provided the backbone of most regional plans. W.G. Witteveen General Expansion Plan for Rotterdam, completed in 1927, represents the modern town planning ideals of those days: the central district (the 'city') is dominated by offices, administrative buildings and cultural facilities. Surrounding it, the urban tissue opens up to the countryside in a fan shaped pattern that is permeated with green wedges. Inspiration for them came from the United States; Werner Hegemann, possibly the most influential urban theoretician between 1910 and 1930, introduced them in Europe. They provide easy access to greenery in a city that remains remarkably compact, in spite of its projected 2.5 million inhabitants. Housing for the working classes is located next to the zones of factories: back then, long working days and low wages prevented the workforce to spend time and money on public transportation – most working men walked to work... In the 1930s, the scale of planning increased even further; planners dreamed of national and ultimately even continental plans. When these ambitious were incorporated in totalitarian regimes – Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union – these plans developed into powerful political instruments, and ultimately provided the utopian perspectives that represented the goals the Second War was fought over.

In the reconstruction years that followed the Second World War, urbanism was closely linked to the social and economic planning machines that aimed at the realization of entirely new societies: the Welfare State in the countries west of the Iron Curtain that split Europe in two since 1948, socialism in the countries to the east of it; the latter were forced to participate in the political experiments that had started with the emergence of the Soviet Union in 1917. However different both models were, they shared the ambition to be rational and scientific – a managerial approach that was hard to reconcile with urbanism's artistic aspects. These were now discarded. This trend is clearly manifested in several urban plans that were designed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Whereas Witteveen's reconstruction plan of 1944 still treated the city as a work of art, the plan of Van Traa, his successor, is primarily geared to the need to speed up production – the second dimension (functional zoning and the infrastructure) is virtually cut loose from architecture and thus from the third dimension, a separation that ultimately destroyed much of the urban design vocabulary built up since the late nineteenth century. Another break with pre-war years was the modular approach to urban expansion ushered in by the introduction of the neighborhood unit concept. In the Netherlands, this marked the beginning of the suburbanization of a large part of the country, notably in the so-called 'Randstad' in the Western provinces. Suburban lifestyles developed that are characteristic for the 'megalopolitan' concepts that separated urban form from urban life, spatially fragmented urban life between mono-functional zones, and reduced public space to traffic and communication devices between these zones and the homes of the citizens (which witnessed an invasion of electrical household appliances and, another link with the outside world, the television set).

One of the most successful episodes in the twentieth century Dutch architecture and urbanism, at least in terms of the international attention it attracted, is the movement around Jaap Bakema, Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger, who on the eve of what proved to be the last CIAM-conference in Otterlo in 1959 managed to get hold of the journal *Forum*. They completely changed its template and turned it into a platform for the ideas of Team X. These were triggered by harsh criticism against post-war architecture and urbanism in general, and specifically targeted its devastating effects on inner cities and the complete failure – in their eyes – of the new housing estates. Promoted as healthy (low densities implying lots of greenery) and a catalyst of social cohesion (their spatial setup allegedly coinciding with social bonds), suburban settlements were already heavily criticized for having the opposite effects: numerous medical conferences identified them as catalysts of stress, and sociologists soon condemned their alleged community enhancing qualities as a myth. *Forum* celebrated man as a social animal with psychological needs that could only be accommodated if their living environment was infused with artistic meaning. Literary fragments, poems, sculpture, the visual arts and images of African tribes allegedly not yet corrupted by modern life filled the pages of the journal between 1959 and 1963; in that year a new editorial board inspired by N. J. Habraken shifted attention to the urban tissue and the ways it changed over time without the city losing its identity – a theme Aldo Rossi explored in the same period. In practice, the ideas of the Dutch Team X group

revolutionized urban renewal, which moved away from the traditional *tabula rasa* approach and emphasized the need to maintain as much of the physical substance and the social structure as was deemed feasible. Inner cities should no longer be sacrificed to the car, streets and squares should be returned to the citizens. They should be transformed into theaters of modern life, a spectacle where passersby were actors and audience at the same time; in order to show the 'wholeness' of life, public spaces should show a multitude of functions – Team X wished to break away from the mono-functional ideology usually associated with the Athens Charters (arguably the least innovative document in the history of urbanism). New housing estates were now designed as so-called 'cauliflower neighborhoods' with intricate street patterns and numerous dead-end streets that forced the car in a straightjacket. Although these estates manifested the impact of new ideas on urbanism, the *Forum* generation was completely dominated by architects and their work lacked the broad perspectives that are the heart and soul of urban planning.

The economic crisis of the 1980s destroyed the basis of Europe's post-war recovery. Industry died, the Netherlands lost most of its textile factories and many shipyards, to name but two of the most deplored casualties. The crisis also destroyed the economic principles of the recovery: the idea, associated with J.M. Keynes, that investments in social security and the redistribution of wealth towards the lower income brackets results in economic growth. Now, investments were channeled towards promising economic sectors and the so-called 'main ports': Schiphol international airport and the port of Rotterdam. Neo-liberalism began to affect politics. Subsidies in public housing were reduced, in the new housing estates, owner-occupied housing became the norm. Urbanism faced new challenges. Though these cover very different fields, many of them involved the need to reconstruct already built-up areas. The economic power that made their transformation possible was provided by the emergence of the personal computer, the internet, and a service economy that promised unlimited growth; this opened job opportunities that supported the growth of what at the time was dubbed 'young urban professionals', yuppies, who showed a marked preference for living in cities – and found living in suburbia boring and distasteful. They ushered in processes of gentrification that, especially in Amsterdam, gradually changed depressed nineteenth century neighborhoods like De Pijp in the most popular districts in the city. Urban planners didn't need to intervene – processes like these were entirely market driven. Since many of the lost industries occupied terrains nearby city centers, these now abandoned areas offered excellent opportunities for redevelopment. Here, urbanism faced the need to design attractive urban districts – attractive implying that they should offer something more than decent, car accessible housing. The new challenges called for a re-invention of urbanism, notably the re-introduction of design work with artistic intentions at the urban scale – the approach that was ousted immediately after the war and, even though the *Forum* group had called for a return of the artistic dimension, was still largely ignored. Inspiration came from landscape architecture, where design at the very large scale had never disappeared... Sjoerd Soeters' plan for the Java island in Amsterdam is exemplary, but the first experiments in this field took place in Rotterdam, where the reconstruction of the so-called 'Kop van Zuid' started with a competition that introduced, among other novelties, Aldo Rossi to the Netherlands. The post-war housing estates provided the next big reconstruction challenge. The epitome of modern ways of living in the time they were built, they were now seen as obsolete and desperately in need of upgrading; according to the now dominant idea that the market should play a primary role. This implied the introduction of owner-occupied housing for middle income groups. Ideally this should result in a population mix that was capable of solving its own problems (many of these problems were associated – sometimes with good reason, often without – with the influx of so-called guest laborers from countries like Turkey and Morocco). Amsterdam's post-war housing districts in the so-called 'Western Garden Cities' witnessed reconstruction processes that eliminated many of the original qualities of Van Eesteren's master piece, the General Expansion Plan of Amsterdam that he completed in 1934 (and that were modified to fit the requirements of both the neighborhood unit concept and industrial building technologies in the late 1940s). It proved to be particularly difficult to renew these areas without impacting their most innovative aspects. A uniquely successful project in this field is De Nijl's reconstruction of Haaglanden near the Hague; here the interplay of volumes and open spaces pays tribute to the neighborhoods original design intentions...

3. Results and Discussion

What is the predicament of urbanism in our days? Is the discipline really reaching its final stages as we suggested at the beginning of this article? Even though the need for urban planning may very well be more urgent today than it has been in years, changing perspectives are threatening its survival. Its rise to prominence coincided with continuous and very rapid processes of demographic growth in the countries where it originated – now these countries face the *shrinking* populations and the problems of aging. Technology, notably the prospects of the Internet of Things, promises instant satisfaction of personal needs that are – literary – broadcasted whenever people browse

the internet, either at home or on the road, and complemented by the messages almost all electrical gadgets, household appliances sent off. There is no way to control this constant flow of information, which have become the monopoly of a small number of companies (Google, Facebook). Using the data of millions, maybe already billions of people, businesses accumulate financial power even they bill them for very minor sums of money (selling 'apps', for instance). Often, the financial links between companies, for instance newspapers that pay for investigative journalism, and companies – for instance news sites – that have a much bigger outreach, is lost: the latter collect income from advertising that is not benefiting the actual producers of the product they offer. Ultimately, this may lead to the disappearance of these products – in this case professional journalism – and its replacement by 'infotainment' which is bound to destroy one of the major pillars of democracy: well-informed, critical citizens. Automation and robotizing, appear to rob large layers of what since times immemorial has been one of their most important assets: the power to produce – machines promise to do a better job. Since this implies that many can no longer earn a living, it ultimately reduces their purchasing power, without immediate effects on the profits of businesses built on selling low-cost digital products. Nevertheless, economic growth has become very low and there are no signs that this will change any time soon. Moreover, the new economic realities favor extreme forms of social segregation and growing levels of inequality, creating a small class of the superrich, and vast numbers of people who face the prospect that their children receive lower levels of education (allegedly compensated for by the internet), lower incomes, less leisure time, and growing difficulties getting access to the few public amenities that survived. Thus, technological innovation appears to result in a form of disempowerment that, obviously, is bound to have economic as well as political implications: the public domain that is a *conditio sine qua non* for democracy is disappearing. Though there is no direct relation with fears caused by terrorism, the latter appears to enhance growing feelings of insecurity, creating audiences that are increasingly susceptible for populist rhetoric (resulting, among many other things, in the re-emergence of all kinds of nationalism, which promise illusory ways to re-empowerment with the help of digital infotainment that ignores or denies the devastating effects of these sentiments in the twentieth century Europe).

4. Conclusions

Are the public (the masses of citizens who benefited from the economic and demographic growth since the mid-nineteenth century) and the public domain withering away? In recent years, private clients have become increasingly important, some of the design objects that used to be a public monopoly – streets, squares – have become privatized, and with few exceptions the large scale – regional and national infrastructures and settlement patterns – present only a marginal part of the work of urbanists. In neoliberal times, nothing seems to justify the persistence of a discipline that serves public goals. Maybe, however, the first public threat that justified its emergence will also cause its revival: public health. In the last decades, however, the conviction gains ground that it is becoming imperative to address suburbia and the phenomena now associated with it: inefficient, relatively chaotic and completely car dependent settlement patterns that result in pollution, sedentary lifestyles, inaccessible public spaces which are poorly designed (if designed at all) and are wanting of 'positive distractions', densities that are too low to allow affordable public transportation and result in unwalkable and often even uncyclable distances to the facilities that support everyday life, among them nearby restaurants, bars, clubs and other social hubs. These spatial characteristics are concomitant with unhealthy behavioral patterns that result in obesity and stress. Thus, the contribution to healthy cities might trigger a renaissance of urban planning after all...

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Кор Вагенаар

МИНУЛІ ТА МАЙБУТНІ ВИКЛИКИ МІСТОБУДУВАННЯ НА ПРИКЛАДІ НІДЕРЛАНДІВ

Анотація. Описано актуальні питання сучасного містобудування з економічного, соціально-політичного та медичного поглядів. Аналіз містобудівних можливостей та загроз супроводжується прикладами та історичними зразками з Нідерландів.

Ключові слова: містобудування, Нідерланди, соціологія, економіка.