

INHABITING THE AFTERMATH¹

by
Henk Hartzema
Founder & Managing Director,
Studio Hartzema, FRESH Research

Aikaterina Myserli
Architect & Urban Planner,
Studio Hartzema, FRESH Research



In the light of challenging conditions, expected household growth and an unavoidable climate crisis, various forms of planning and self-organization through municipal initiatives and provincial agendas have emerged in the Netherlands. For lack of a coherent framework on a high-level, all these approaches still fail to provide a clear vision for the future. In fact, the Netherlands has gradually moved from the late 1960s' highly ambitious versions of national plans towards an era of weakened national spatial planning and uncoordinated interventions on a local scale. The only moment in recent years when the Netherlands experienced a highly coordinated action of centralized planning was after the North Sea Flood of 1953¹. According to data from Rijkswaterstaat (n.d.) the flood claimed the lives of 1,836 people, whereas more than 72,000 people were evacuated and 47,000 cattle and 140,000 poultry drowned. In

addition, more than 150,000 hectares of land were inundated causing severe damage to infrastructure and farmland. In view of this national disaster, the Rijkswaterstaat initiated the construction of the Delta Works the following year after 1953 (Fig. 1).

In 2013 the Delta Works were voted the most prestigious hydraulic engineering project in the world (Rijkswaterstaat, n.d.) and continue to lead by example in the fields of flood-defense systems today. The question is, what we can learn from the North Sea Flood and the direct response of Delta Works today. Is it valid to say that we need a natural disaster in order to shift mindset towards planning and risk prevention? Would the Rijkswaterstaat have done the same without the North Sea Flood disaster? The conventional wisdom says no. In fact, every natural disaster is a policy disaster in its own. A recent article of

the NRC (Fortuin, 2020)² on the Maas flood in Maastricht 25 years ago mentioned how victims would have preferred a series of dikes similar to the Delta Works than reports on adaptive planning and design with nature who usually fall short when the disaster happens. This observation makes it evident that there is a gap between the current fragmented local planning initiatives in the Netherlands and an authoritarian national plan like the ones of the 60s.

Beyond the NOVI

Now that the Netherlands is on the brink of major spatial changes prompted by the rapidly growing cities, climate crisis and energy transition, it may be worthwhile to examine the national mechanisms of planning. During the summer of 2019, the Draft National Environmental Vision (De Nationale



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Ogevingvisie-NOVI³, was published. For the first time in history, the Netherlands got a full-scale plan, not just for infrastructure or land use, but a vision of the entire living environment. As advertised in its executive summary “this strategy document will enable us to respond to the major challenges facing us. [...] Combining all those challenges calls for a new approach, not imposed from above, but drawn up in careful consultation between government authorities, businesses, centres of knowledge, civil society organisations and individual citizens. The NOVI offers a framework, suggests a route to be followed and, wherever possible, makes choices.”⁴

The special feature of the NOVI compared to previous spatial visions is that it tries to grasp the integrality of elements that together determine the design of the Netherlands. It contains the recognition that in this complex country everything is connected

with everything. Chief Government Architect Floris van Alkemade also emphasizes on these aspects in his Panorama Nederland⁵ and finds a lot of resonance in this. It is the first time that a vision document highlights a common interest for businesses, governments, academia and civil society: the quality of the environment. At the same time however, NOVI still hesitates to address the confrontation between the comfortable, pre-existing structures (fossil fuel dependence, high CO2 emissions etc.) and the extent of change of Dutch cities and landscape (nitrogen crisis, shortage of housing etc.)- which is both inevitable and confusing.

It is therefore both a hopeful fact and an unstable construct. Hopeful because frameworks are offered on a national scale and processes are set in motion. It provides guidance on how to properly organize changes and addresses a wide spectrum of

stakeholders and layers of society. At the same time, it appears to be rather shaky because it is instrumental and without strong spatial imagination to help make those choices. Its extremely wide stakeholders' spectrum is making it difficult to prioritize which challenges should be addressed on the short term too. Somewhere in-between decentralized spatial agendas and strong national planning guidelines, like the Delta Works, the NOVI still asks for future images, calls for change and illustrations of the “bigger picture”.

The Power of Envisioning

We do not believe that a reversal of our planning tradition is possible, certainly not in the short term. But we think that visions of the future can help see the bigger picture soon. What is missing from the NOVI is embracing change and envisioning the future of the Netherlands in spatial terms –not just in vague policies and bullet points. Leveraging imagination as a tool to visualise the future of our cities and landscapes might be the final ingredient to a new national plan. The same way Superstudio used the Continuous Monument (Lang, 2003) [1971] to envision a world rendered uniform by mass culture and technology, we aim at using extreme –and sometimes dystopian- scenarios of large-scale change as a snapshot of a potential future.

A case in point could be flooding the Randstad in the next 80 years (Fig. 2-4). Rather than wanting to desperately restore the conservative

structures of flood defence, polders and dike rings, we could let the Maas further submerge the low-lands and make almost half of the country a natural Delta. This would create a system of aquatic resort towns –which is not far from what Amsterdam has been turned to the last decade. Likewise, a gigantic power storage hole in the middle of Zeeland might be the future of our energy transition. By leveraging imagination as a tool for data-driven experimentation and scaled-up thinking, our future becomes tangible and familiar. Through the psychological rethinking of the Dutch territory as a field of experimentation and not as a settled field of rules and spatial configurations we might be able to see the bigger picture and embrace a radical future.

Inhabiting the sphere of the imaginary can be a way to reflect on the aftermath of our current socio-spatial actions and what will be the future if we do not act and design the transition soon. What characterizes strongly the postmodern era is nostalgia that drives us towards an illusory flight to the imaginary, to the dream of community and the lost common soul. The related loss of any collectivity, the sense of the uncanny, the rise of individualism, consumerism and mass culture of virtual communication systems are some of the characteristics inherited from the 20th century to the 21st. In the introduction of "The poetics of space", Bachelard (1969) examines a mental capacity almost identical to the one that runs through the works of Heidegger: the poetic imagination.

In this psychological exercise, no moralism or skepticism is needed. As architects, urban planners, researchers and designers we should embrace imagination as a key instrument in our arsenal of tools towards contemporary urban issues and challenges. In such a condition, experimental planning has a dual role: (i) to convey the meanings and functions of the community, and (ii) to derive needs, values and expectations from this community. This role evolves through the process of spatial composition and produces space in harmony with both the environment and the place. The value of the collective spirit expresses the urgent need for public space as a common good of the whole community. The poetic geography of flooded Dutch landscape serves for a while as a fictional field of shared principles, goals, ideas, worldviews and moral values and then could provide a proportion of programs and functions for the real space. The concept of the imaginative scenario will no longer be a subjective picture, but to the extent that it is based on shared thoughts, concepts and planning conditions of the place, it could enhance the design of the collective public space of the city with meanings, ideas and values.



Coda

The recent draft publication of the NOVI steadfastly adhered to suggestive policy's potential to reform and rebuild society through advanced technological apparatuses (such as extensive flood defense, wind and solar energy generation etc.), without taking any clear position on how these changes will look like or take place. The eagerness of the practitioners towards the ongoing discussion about NOVI and the changing systems coping with the transitions in spatial planning led us to initiate the aforementioned discussion on imaginative planning and the power of envisioning. We do not see larger scale visions and megastructure as an urban planning panacea. In current design practice in the Netherlands, one group after another start seeing in the large-scale visions the ability to provide an 'open' framework for planning that still dictates the broader means by which its residents respond to and inhabit the landscape. Resorting to the poetics of experimental scenarios and large-scale visions appears to be the only way to draw and enrich a wide variety of stories related to spatial planning systems. This obviously doesn't imply that we need to adopt those scenarios or –even worse– to go back to the highly deterministic national plans of the 1960's. We no longer belong to the era representing a top-down, tech-nocratic view of design and the authoritarian role of the designer as master planner. Simply, we are reminded to take a brave position towards an uncertain future.

Notes

- 1 For more information on the North Sea Flood, see here: <https://www.rijkswaterstaat.nl/english/water/water-safety/the-flood-of-1953/index.aspx>
- 2 Fortuin, A. 2020. 'Jullie hebben de Deltawerken, maar zo'n riviertje als de Maas krijgen jullie niet in bedwang', NRC. Retrieved from <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/02/04/de-kuren-van-de-maas-25-jaar-later-a3989183> on February 4, 2020.
- 3 For more information on the NOVI, see here: <https://denationalaanpakomgeving.nl/default.aspx>
- 4 *ibid*
- 5 Source: <https://www.collegevanrijksadviseurs.nl/projecten/panorama-nederland>

References:

1. Bachelard, G. (1969). *The poetics of space*. (Translated in English by JOLAS, Maria). 2nd ed. Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
2. Lang, P., Menking, W. (Eds.). (2003). *Superstudio: Life without objects*. Milano: Skira

Fig. 1. Delft in 2050. Courtesy of Studio Hartzema and FRESH.

Fig. 2. Aerial photo of the Delta Works. Location: Hoek van Holland. Source: Google Earth Pro.

Fig. 3. Rotterdam in 2100. Courtesy of Studio Hartzema and FRESH.

Fig. 4. Brouwersdam in 2100 with added power storage. Courtesy of Studio Hartzema and FRESH.

