

Power & Envisioning: Projective Design as a Tool for Embracing Radical Change

// Henk Hartzema
& Aikaterina Myserli



Abstract

Echoing the argumentation of Superstudio, this project suggests that 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 the ongoing climate crisis, energy transition, and the need for resilient planning. Conceived in a similar way to Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* (1971), which envisions a world rendered uniform by mass culture and technology, a visual essay is presented here, featuring extreme—and sometimes dystopian—images that provide a glimpse of a potential future. Focusing on images of flooded cities, wind farms overtaking polders, and mass afforestation within the Dutch territory, projective design becomes a key for visualizing the redesign of cities and landscapes. The intention is to raise awareness and spark reflection about radical changes that nature and the future hold for the built environment.

Henk Hartzema is a Dutch architect and urban planner. In 2005, he founded Studio Hartzema in Rotterdam and later launched the Studio's research department, FRESH. For more than twenty years he has been involved in projects of urban restructuring and master planning. He has taught in various universities, including TU Delft, the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam and University of Mendrisio.

Aikaterina Myserli is an architect and urban planner at Studio Hartzema where she co-leads FRESH. She has worked internationally in the fields of architecture and urbanism, including in Greece, Argentina, China, and Italy.

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. Somewhere in-between decentralized spatial agendas and strong national planning guidelines, NOVI still asks for future images, calls for change and illustrations of the “bigger picture.”

Leveraging projective design

We do not believe that a reversal of our architecture and planning tradition is possible, certainly not in the short term. But we think that visions of the future can help convey the bigger picture. What is missing from NOVI is an embrace of change and vision of the future of the Netherlands in spatial terms –something other than vague policies and bullet points. Leveraging imagination as a tool to visualize the future of our cities and landscapes might be the final ingredient to a new national plan. Being a polycentric metropolis a priori, Randstad serves as a great test bed for this. [continued, next spread]

Separated into various administrative entities, it calls for the re-evaluation of the problematic links between local communities,

In the light of resource depletion, expected population growth, and an unavoidable climate crisis, various forms of planning and self-organization through municipal initiatives and provincial agendas have emerged in the Netherlands. Due to lack of a coherent framework, contemporary approaches have failed to provide a clear vision for the future. In fact, the Netherlands has gradually moved away from the ambitious, late-1960s versions of national plans and toward an era of weakened national spatial planning that is compounded by uncoordinated interventions at the local level.

Beyond Draft National Environmental Vision, De Nationale Omgevingsvisie (NOVI)

Now that the Netherlands is on the brink of major spatial changes prompted by the rapidly growing cities, climate change and energy transition, it may be worthwhile to examine the national mechanisms of planning. During the summer of 2019, the NOVI was published. For the first time in history, the country developed a full-scale plan, not just for infrastructure or land use, but a vision of the entire living 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



> Flooded Delft in 2038, 2019

municipalities and provinces and for a direction that will unite all these disparate actors. The same way Superstudio used the *Continuous Monument*¹ 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. Rather than wanting to restore the conservative structures of flood defense, 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 become. Similarly, in another envisaged flooded scenario, sacred buildings in the Randstad, being the tallest and most resilient, have been appropriated by technological devices. Telecom towers are paired with cathedral tops and parabolic plates take over churches with domes. Or, aircraft carriers save the last traces of important buildings and urban areas in the Netherlands. These scenarios address the rise and eventual stabilization of the sea level as the definitive step for rethinking our places of worship. The "robotization" of our sacred buildings will destabilize their status quo and will make them active and accessible instruments against a climate catastrophe. Likewise, a gigantic hydropower storage hole in the middle of Zeeland might be the future of our energy transition. Or, the large-scale appropriation and conversion of Randstad's neutral space into vast forests or arrays of wind turbines could also set the foundations for designing energy transition, raising awareness and, most importantly, helping contemporary societies embrace radical change. 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.

Coda

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 towards contemporary urban issues and challenges. In such a condition, experimental planning and architecture 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. The poetic geography of the flooded or repurposed Dutch landscape serves for a while as a fictional field of shared principles, goals, ideas, worldviews and moral values and then it 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 our collective landscapes with meanings, ideas and values.

> Flooded Rotterdam in 2035, 2019
 >> Windfarm overtaking polders in Oudewater, 2035, 2019
 >>> Afforestation in Gurgorden, 2035, 2019
 >>>> Hydropower in Zeeland in 2100, 2019
 >>>>> Aircraft carriers saving Dutch traces, 2100, 2020
 >>>>>> Flooded Delta and the Hague, 2100. Sacred buildings are reused by new technological means, 2020



1. See Peter Lang, William Menking (eds.), [1971] *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, (Milano: Skira, 2003).





