

Crosscurrents in Planning: Changes in Land Use Policy in the Netherlands

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At the train station for Bijlmermeer, in the fringe development area of Amsterdam known as Southeast, a landscape comes into view that seems very un-Dutch—a huge enclosed mall, a gleaming new sports stadium, and an oversized boulevard lined with big-box retail stores. How could this be, in a land with such a proud tradition of good design and even better planning; in a country that embraces compact development, density and mass transit; in a place where virtually no land is privately owned but rather is leased by the government and thus tightly controlled.

Welcome to the Netherlands in 2001: experimenting with market forces as never before, and increasingly conflicted about the same development patterns facing the United States. Just as postmodern architecture is all the rage in the Netherlands while a resurgence of modernism washes over the U.S., the state of planning in the two countries is in some respects moving in equally opposite directions. In the U.S., some two dozen states have established growth management plans and many have created regional governance systems to guide development. In the Netherlands, the Dutch are flirting with a kind of free-market liberation and leaving many old assumptions and methodologies behind.

There is still planning, to be sure. The guiding document, known with great reverence as the 5th memorandum (the National Policy Document on Spatial Planning), elegantly organizes relationships between the major cities of the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam. Regional strengths among so-called “polynuclear city regions” or “urban networks” are thoughtfully mapped out to establish interconnections in transportation or housing. And the added framework of the European Union emphasizes connections in transportation and commerce, both within and between countries. Centuries-old national borders increasingly fade into the background as other geographical



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Loeb Fellows explore Amsterdam using pedal-power and trains.

definitions, such as the Rhine River, take on greater significance.

But against that backdrop, other attitudes in the Netherlands are changing, allowing more experimentation with public-private partnerships, a greater sensitivity to market demands, and acceptance of development projects that have a distinctly American flavor. Scholars in university planning departments around the country are candid in their admission: sometimes we do too much planning, they say, and the results are by no means universally acclaimed.

These are some of the comments heard and observations made during a study trip to the Netherlands in May by the Loeb Fellowship Class of 2001. The Loeb Fellowship, based at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, supports mid-career professionals in the design fields to study at Harvard for one year. The year-end trip was cosponsored by the Lincoln Institute and the Loeb Fellowship Alumni Association as part of an ongoing collaboration between the two organizations.

Some of what the Loeb Fellows found was expected: a national rail system and urban tram systems that work so efficiently that climbing into a private car seemed unthinkable; a marvelous system of pedestrian walkways and bicycle paths and an elegant sensibility for sharing the street;

and compact development concentrated in urban areas with a clearly defined edge, and countryside beyond.

The Southeast district of Amsterdam, however, was a somewhat surprising example of a new and different approach—and evidence of perhaps inevitable infection by the global virus. The site overall is badly in need of redevelopment. It is home, on one side the rail line, to Bijlmermeer, the Le Corbusier-inspired high-rise slabs that have been a disaster since inception in the mid-1960s. Across the tracks is the 50,000-seat Amsterdam Arena and Arena Boulevard, lined with big-box retail, a temporary music hall, a cinema complex, and a huge mall devoted to home furnishings and interior design stores. The development team is a consortium including the City of Amsterdam and private development and real estate conglomerates. The thinking behind Southeast, though not explicitly stated, is that the central core in Amsterdam is best left to tourists, and that a shopping and entertainment center will serve residents who don't want to drive into the city anyway. Although a new metro-rail-bus station, due in 2006, can accommodate tens of thousands, 80 percent of the Southeast clientele is expected to come by car.

A similar sense of providing what people want pervades several development

projects around Nijmegen, on the western edge of the country, near Germany. The Grootstal housing project on an infill site outside the city center, for example, is a curious mix of sustainable design and drive-ways at every unit's front yard. Garages, wide roads, easy motorway access and abundant fast-food outlets are similarly encouraged in the Beuningen subdivision, where new suburban homes are fashioned in kitschy 1930s styles. The expansive Waalsprong development area (literally to "spring over" the river embracing the core of Nijmegen) includes plans for 11,000 housing units in a scheme vaguely reminiscent of New Urbanism, though the most notable achievement so far is the slick marketing campaign undertaken by the private-sector partners.

"This is what the Dutch middle-class people want," said University of Nijmegen planning professor Barrie Needham. "People get wealthier and they want more space. Part of the problem with planning in the 1960s was that we didn't ask people what they wanted."

There is no question the Dutch approach continues to be far more iterative than that of the U.S. The Dutch planners choose where to intervene much more carefully, and with much more analysis. They are experimenting with lower-density development in stages, not letting it take over the landscape unrestrained. The Dutch, also, can readily admit when planned development has failed, and set out to fix the things that don't work. Transportation remains at the heart of all planning, and the quality of design remains essential.

While none of the Loeb Fellows on the trip concluded that the Netherlands is tilting towards a wholesale retreat from planning, the challenge of striking a balance between market forces and government control struck many of us as daunting. How much are the Dutch willing to experiment? Is a balance possible or somehow illusory? Is the proud tradition of subsidized and affordable housing in danger of atrophy? In Nijmegen and the Southeast district



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A view from the parking deck of the largest furniture mall in Europe shows the Amsterdam Arena and another shopping mall in the Southeast area of Amsterdam.

of Amsterdam, where one official was late for a presentation because of a traffic jam on the motorway, only time will tell. The current recalibrations could result in the best of two worlds, or the worst of both. **L**

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