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From 0 to 100: Balancing multigenerational spatial needs

It's fantastic to see you all in person. Two and a half years ago, I gave a talk here in Groningen, the W.J. van den Bremen lecture, organised by Ibn Battuta. 11 September 2020, six months later than intended. Due to Covid-19, of course. But it was largely online in September too, as very few people we're allowed to attend in the Remonstrantse Kerk. How different the situation is now. Anyone who heard that talk will recognise some aspects in my talk today. There's a certain continuity to my line of thinking, that's why. And yet there will be enough new stuff to talk about, as so much has changed in the interim. The pandemic is more or less over, a devastating war is being waged, so uncomfortably close to our home, and plenty more besides... Of course, relevant to the present conference is the fact that spatial planning is now being seen in a very different light. Indeed, it's in the centre of attention right now. A little late, perhaps... Too late, or better late than never?

Back in time. February 2017. I started as director for the NOVI (in English the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment; in Dutch de Nationale Omgevingsvisie). At first at the ministry of infrastructure and water management, but a few months later at the ministry of the Interior. Because the government decided to shift all spatial planning and the Environment and planning Act (in Dutch: Omgevingswet) to another ministry. Did that help? The Environmental and Planning Act received ample political attention, but the National Environmental Vision (NOVI) was comparatively neglected. There was scarcely any political debate and ministries were not that active at that time. The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment had been disbanded several years before. The political stance was that spatial planning could be left to local and provincial authorities. Meaning the Government's role could be minimal. It was assumed that the Netherlands was complete... Something went wrong there! Spatial planning is about the long-term perspective. About thinking ahead. About preventing problems. This was far from being the prevailing mindset.



Making political pronouncements is always a tricky business in my role, but Mark Rutte's cabinets were mostly busy solving all kinds of problems. Looking at the long term, a preventive approach wasn't a high priority. A very bad example is here in Groningen. Shortsighted focus on short term gains and overlooking the effects in the long run. Which in this case, by the way, also applies to other cabinets.

At this moment the word 'crisis' is overused a lot. There's often a spatial component to that so-called crises. But crises? A crisis comes out of the blue, but all the spatial planning crises that we're faced with at present have been entirely predictable. Climate, housing, mobility, biodiversity, nitrogen, energy. These could have been averted with long-term vision and policy.

Let's consider that in more detail. What state of affairs is our nation in? From a spatial planning perspective. I'd then like to look at the response offered by the NOVI and what's currently being done at the national level. Last but not least, I'll provide some insight into what we're doing at our regional level within Metropolitan Region Amsterdam (MRA).

There are big developments to consider. Rendering uncertainty comprehensible has always been a major issue for planners. These are uncertain times, all over the world. At the same time, we can't just keep putting such a strain on the planet, the only thing that can sustain our existence. Climate change is a drastic one and therefore calls for equally drastic decisions to be made. The other so-called crises will require genuine, open discussion and tough choices too. In line with the theme of this conference, this is a multigenerational issue.

The climate problem is obviously a silent killer. There's no immediate risk, which takes the pressure off to act directly today or tomorrow. But that attitude can perpetually postpone the necessary measures. We've seen that in more case files... (such as here in Groningen).

We need to act now, at an international level, and in the Netherlands too. In spatial terms, adaptation is the key word, though it comes at a price, in terms of both money and space. That's something we have to confront. Whilst remaining alert to the fact that we need space for other developments too.





What kind of country do we wish to be? What's possible? What will be the drivers in our future economy? An economy that we're keen to make circular. In a country in which we know that spatial pressure has reached unprecedented levels. Just look at housing.

For people starting out on the job market—as many of you will be after completing your studies—it's impossible to find a normal home in some places. Supply does not match the demand. Simple economics for higher prices.

One that isn't being helped by another crisis: the nitrogen crisis. Two crises, closely interrelated. Be honest: how many of you had heard of the programmatic approach to nitrogen (PAS, Programmatische Aanpak Stikstof in Dutch) a couple of years ago? And yet we could have predicted it... I'll come back to that.

We've got to build another million homes (which in some places will mean adding 1 property for every 5 existing homes). Think about the knock-on effects this will have on the mobility system. We can't and don't want to solve this with more roads. Instead, we need to scale things up, particularly in terms of public transport. And we'll have to reinvent ourselves as a nation of cyclists. Electric bicycles will double opportunities to travel by bike.

What is the Netherlands' journey so far? That has everything to do with our geographical location, which we've managed to capitalise on. Indeed, we've exploited it. A country created by planning. We managed to overcome nature. Although, that makes us vulnerable, particularly in view of current climate developments.

You only need to turn the map of the Netherlands 90 degrees and you'll feel our vulnerability looking at this image. We are literally the well trough which a lot of water has to flow away. In a rising sea.

Our location on the water is also at the base of our outward-looking nature. This made it possible for us to look beyond our own shores and borders, opening up the rest of the world to us. It's this outward-looking mindset that has enabled the Netherlands to always punch above its weight. In my opinion, we're still doing so today. I will try substantiate what I mean.





We're one of the happiest, most prosperous countries in the world. I firmly believe that the careful planning of our nation is a contributing factor in that regard. We've reached a high standard, and there's a lot that needs to be done if we're to at least maintain that standard.

Until now we've excelled at optimising sectors. For example, our national Airport Schiphol and our ports. We used to sail across the globe, and we still do. But now we fly too. A lot. Separately, we're in the vanguard, and our airport and ports are many times bigger than needed based on our population.

There's a cost attached, though. More than ever before we're pushing things to their limits. And over. The capacity of the land to support life is under threat. Consider in this regard the trade-off, in economic terms. Decisions have consequences.

Our economic performance is, of course, great. Take agriculture. No country is as efficient as we are. But for all that efficiency, do we really need to be the second largest exporter in the world? Does that standing befit the size of our country? To ask the question is to answer it. The world's number 1 is the USA... and positions 3, 4 and 5 go to Germany, Brazil and France. Again, we're punching above our weight. Do we need to produce for the rest of the world, as such a small country? Farmers might not agree with that assessment, but why would they? I understand their individual interests off course, their livelihoods depend on farming. But is that something to which we should aspire as a country? All those developments, space is scarce (and I haven't even mentioned renewable energy yet)... could we not give other functions more space by scaling down agriculture? For a long time that question couldn't be asked. We've taken this sector to its limits, forgotten to make decisions. Forgotten to confront developments with one another. With all the consequences that this entails. Debate is now underway, but it should have been underway much sooner. Which would have been much fairer to farmers too.

By acting within sectors, we created the nitrogen problem ourselves. Through continuous optimisation, without looking across borders to other interests. Ans let me emphasize: this problem has not been caused by agricultural activities alone. Industry, traffic and aviation also contribute a lot.





I used this example to stress what I mean by punching above our weight. There are other spheres in which that's the case: some industries, international headquarters, logistics, data centres. We're doing exceptionally well. Economically. Again, our location is a crucial factor in this respect. Our infrastructure is entirely geared towards facilitating this, with excellent hinterland connections and the benefit of some superb rivers (where low water levels are increasingly becoming a point of concern).

I don't know how we've managed it, but even two of the most important overseas Internet cables come ashore in the Netherlands. One near Amsterdam and one here to the north of Groningen. It's for good reason that Google has a major data centre here. But there's a downside to all these industry, headquarters, logistics centres and data centres. Big factories and boxes, which are hard to insert into the landscape. Where's the limit? What can we accommodate? What are we willing to accommodate?

And I haven't even touched on the most significant new development yet. The new kid on the block: renewable energy. Fossil energy generation takes up relatively little space. Obviously the high-voltage cables do, but the production sites themselves take up relatively little space. Our shift towards hydrogen will take a lot more space.

All those developments are putting pressure on nature, on our landscape and on our open space.

Riding a wave of conservatism, vast parts of the population are averse to changes. For some people, the pace at which our country and our living environment are changing, globalisation, growing uncertainty, are threatening to change the Netherlands beyond recognition. Symbols are disappearing rapidly or are under pressure. Within the compass of these developments, preserving the typically Dutch landscape is an aspect that unites conservatives and progressives.

Admittedly for different reasons, but the goal is the same. Is the Netherlands up to the job of accommodating all these developments in a landscape that will remain recognisable without too much of an adverse impact on nature?





It's not only the quality of our landscape that's in jeopardy. Economic growth has some severe effects on nature. We really need to reverse the decline in biodiversity. And not just for nature lovers; that decline will eventually be tangible in the economic sphere too. Ecological balance is also a production factor, after all. We use nature for economic gain. But we've reached a point at which this is threatened.

We're putting strain on nature's capacity to recover. It's a form of abuse. The effects won't be felt sufficiently by humanity in the short term, but they'll overwhelm us in the long run. Other generations will feel the effects.

We're faced with some huge tasks: housing, mobility, agriculture, sustainability, nature, landscape... And we're also faced with considerable uncertainty. But we need to be bold. Bold enough to debate, bold enough to decide. And to acknowledge that we can't keep all the plates spinning at once. Growth, in all sectors, will not be feasible if we want to have a habitable country for the long run.

What's the response enshrined in the NOVI? I'm a little disappointed. As the director, I wanted to achieve more. As I said, it's not all that long ago that there was scant political attention being given to this issues compared to today. Unsurprisingly, the NOVI doesn't contain the necessary decisions. But it's a step in the right direction. Times have changed. There's now a great deal of political and societal attention. We might not have a Ministry of Spatial Planning yet, but we do have a Minister for Spatial Planning. Decisions are in preparation, under high pressure and subject to tighter central control. It is very busy, with plenty of NOVEX regions (I hope you heard of this term, otherwise google it) and 22 national programmes. The central control has yet to prove itself adequate. However, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management's recent letter on making water and soil the decisive factors in spatial planning is an example of something that can give us hope that there will be a greater degree of focus in due course.

Obviously the NOVI contains some good elements too. The tasks with which we're faced are intertwined. What this implies to me is that the solutions also need to be formulated in a much more markedly cross-sectoral or integrated fashion. The same goes for the way of working and the budgeting/financing. We need genuine cooperation. With central government fully engaged in the discussion and delivering as and when required. Making decisions on topics that they are responsible for and



making funding available too. And cutting through knots if things get stuck. That's what taking central control is all about. A better model than overly zealous efforts at decentralisation. No separation of work, but integration. And with trust amongst the parties involved being fundamental. The NOVI underlines this and has thus paved the way for the current approach.

Another important element in the NOVI is the need to create more spatial combinations. We've long carved up our country into small plots. Separated functions, sometimes right next to each other. Functions we thought were incompatible.

To that way of thinking, a plot of land is either for nature or is assigned the function agriculture. But that's not a distinction that a bird is capable of making. Separation of functions is a phenomenon that is also firmly entrenched in many of our urban environments. Until now, a plot of land is either residential or working space. Despite the fact that these days our economy and lifestyles require a greater degree of functional mix.

We can be much more inventive. We're leaving space unused. There are far more possibilities in terms of creating combinations of functions.

The NOVI is rightly focusing on making those combinations.

- There's plenty of scope for increased integration of nature and agriculture, particularly if the latter is to become circular.
- Solar panels on roofs should be standard.
- Residential and commercial functions don't have to be mutually exclusive.
- District water boards were often against the combination of dykes and wind energy, but it

turns out that there's no technical obstacle .

- We can build above railway tracks and stations too.





- Water can also be used for heating purposes.
- Et cetera...

Hence more is possible, but combinations aren't always possible, of course. That doesn't relieve us from our obligation to make decisions.

The most neglected aspect of the NOVI and in fact the most important one is the adage that, when it comes to spatial planning decisions, we must not pass the buck ("we moeten/mogen niet afwentelen" in Dutch). Not over time, not to subsequent generations, not to other spatial planning functions. If this is developed seriously in the current plans, then we'll genuinely be able to keep on top of problems by looking at short and long term consequences better and more honestly, across sectors and boundaries.

Let's move to the regional level. The Metropolitan Region Amsterdam (MRA)—what actually is that? This merits some scrutiny, as I believe fleshing out the solutions at regional level will be key.

MRA encompasses 30 local authorities, 2 provincial authorities and the Amsterdam Transport Authority, all working together. 2.5 million residents (14.5% of the Netherlands), on 6.2% of the land we produce over 20% of the GDP.

It's an informal alliance, in which agreements are made on topics in the spatial planning sphere which go beyond the boundaries of individual municipalities. And that goes for all the topics I'm broaching here. As far as I'm concerned this region is the scale on which we need to be identifying solutions. The scale of the daily urban system.

This is what we need: horizontal collaboration. With central government directly involved. Which is the case in regional planning nowadays. In conjunction with the Government, our region fleshed out the NOVI in the urbanisation concept. The name was the Government's idea, but I'm sorry... actually it's misleading. After all, emphatically this isn't just about urbanisation. Rather, it pertains to all aspects of social and spatial economic policy. This is our collective response to the major challenges we face in terms of the MRA's future development. Never before have we



worked together so closely from day one – as government authorities at local, regional and national level, and with the water boards – to create a story for this region. Until now. We urgently need to pool resources in order to effectively tackle the future tasks facing our society and communities. None of us can do this alone. So we have decided to join forces in order to develop the MRA.

Our urbanisation concept is a good piece of work. Anyway, I can't say anything else, do I?

But I have to be honest. It provides direction, we've made some solid agreements with the Government, it's clearly more concrete than the NOVI, and yet: follow-up entailing proper decisions is still required in many areas. Although the NOVI stipulates that combinations should be sought to the fullest extent possible, it will also be clear that certain spatial planning decisions preclude others in the same place. Moreover, money will be needed. This Cabinet has earmarked plenty of funding, but everyone knows that this won't suffice for the requisite transitions. Hence the next Cabinet will really need to deliver. As a region, we've already managed to make some very decent agreements with the current Cabinet on the metro package around Amsterdam as well as on the development of many residential property construction sites throughout the region. Taking the urbanisation concept as the foundation. Some decisions have already been made. But many more need to be made going forward.

I'll offer some more detail on the urbanisation concept's content.

In recent years the MRA reaped the economic benefits of its magnetic attraction on the international stage. But that economic growth does not take place at the same pace everywhere, and not everyone benefits to the same extent.

The socio-economic disparities within the region are increasing. This is undesirable - because where you live should not affect the opportunities open to you, but also because practically trained and middle-skilled workers are indispensable for a smoothly functioning metropolitan region.

We aim to be a world class metropolis on a human scale. We embrace the richness of diversity. It determines the strength of the Metropolitan Region Amsterdam. From the centuries-old centres of Amsterdam and Haarlem to the green districts of





Hoofddorp and Almere; from metropolitan to suburban and village settings; from the beaches of Zandvoort and Wijk aan Zee to the moors of Hilversum and Bussum. All closeby. Few metropolises in the world can offer so much diversity in such a relatively small area as the Metropolitan Region Amsterdam.

All the nationwide developments outlined are occurring in our region, often to the most extreme extent even. Take residential property construction, or the future of heavy industry and aviation. The transition to sustainable energy. Everything gets concentrated in our region. Creating a marked degree of urgency.

The solution paths for the various tasks do not all point in one direction. Choices must be made from a coherent, integrated and MRA-wide perspective.

The urbanisation concept introduces new priorities: more than ever in the past, the entire metropolitan region will be involved in building a multi-core metropolis with focus on the human scale, that ensures balanced economic growth for our towns. We are building a region that offers opportunities for everyone and for each individual geographical part. A metropolitan region where people can live in good health, with adequate housing, amenities and employment opportunities. With convenient connections to get from A to B. With adequate space and opportunity for business activities. We are developing a region that will be ready for all the unavoidable changes heading our way, such as climate change, measures supporting our commitment to preserving the landscape and biodiversity, and the technologies and locations for generating our renewable energy. We are looking at the development path in context, with due consideration for the consequences of the proposed choices.

This urbanisation concept determines the direction our future development will take and at the same time allows adequate freedom for responding to uncertainties such as the corona pandemic or action to make our economy more sustainable. But we are not there yet. We must also make some difficult choices in the coming years. For example, in the North Sea Canal area, where there are a number of major spatial tasks, where the steel factory of TATA is een big issue. Or in the South Flank, where the quality of life around Schiphol Airport is a major task. I can't make those choices as a civil servant, but we will give our politicians the options so they can make those choices. The coming 2 years we want to stimulate an open and honest discussion,



also with the central government. To create a breakthrough in making the necessary choices.

Our spatial planning concept differs from other metropolises, sometimes with biased focus on the central city. Urbanisation in the MRA is more diffuse. Which is a strength. This polycentric model is being bolstered. For example, we're distributing the potential growth better and drawing on the strength of the subregions. Which is necessary, because the spatial pressure on Amsterdam is so pronounced that the city will never be able to accommodate it on its own.

Balanced growth / general prosperity (brede welvaart in Dutch) are our starting points. Not a biased approach focused on economic growth, but a future-proof approach geared towards fostering a healthy living environment and a good quality of life. In terms of health, there are more opportunities for prevention, and the role that spatial planning can play therein. Space that encourages people of all generations to exercise close to home. With more opportunities to cycle to work and other destinations.

It goes without saying that economic development remains important. The Metropolitan Region Amsterdam aims to be the most inventive region in Europe with the best-educated population. We need to keep space for industry. Moreover, the transition towards a hydrogen economy also requires space. The desire is to grow towards becoming the world's greenest industrial zone in a future-proof economy.

Of course, I'd heartily recommend that you all read the concept. I can't give a comprehensive account of it here, obviously. In addition to the multi-core development, the development of the green and blue networks in and around the city is really good. The attention devoted to landscape, with the arrangement in keeping with climate-adaptive, water-resistant and nature-inclusive principles. The future-proof developments have been included for water, ecology, mobility and energy.

Crucially, even more measures are now being incorporated into a concrete plan, including the phasing of the implementation. That's what we're working on at present. Things are going to get exciting, including when it comes to the willingness



internally and in Government to make decisions that we were sidestepping until recently. It should be clear that we no longer have the luxury to do so. Just yesterday the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (a sidestep: in my opinion not a full translation, which is hard for the Dutch word Leefomgeving), anyway... they came out with a study that underlines the role of the central government in making choices.

These are extremely interesting times. Spatial planning is back and here to stay. To those students here in the auditorium: I envy the choice you've made. I studied public administration, but if I'd had a crystal ball, then I would definitely have chosen differently. The ability to look ahead – that's obviously the crux of it.

It's great that the debate has been revived now, as it makes the profession of planner – which has kind of become mine too – so much more enjoyable! Are we too late now? I don't think so. I'm an optimist. We could and should have started sooner, but we can still ensure we're heading in the right direction. For the sake of all generations, but above all for every inhabitant of the planet and of our small, beautiful yet vulnerable country after the twenty-first century.



