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From the field - BVR

BVR is a consultancy for spatial issues. The work varies from integral and spatial plans to specific designs, accommodated with a realization-or development strategy. In every project the process and design are cross-linked, and new spatial-programmatic opportunities are generated. BVR has extensive experience in regeneration projects in post-war neighborhoods in the Netherlands. We talked about this with Bernadette Janssen, partner at BVR and expert in regeneration projects, who stresses that one should always take the strengths of a neighborhood as a starting point. Liliane Geerling, project leader and expert in the area of sustainability and innovation talks about the 7UP project, a strategy for the '70s and '80s neighborhood of Zevenkamp in Rotterdam. This projects shows a different and inspiring approach to regeneration.

What are the major challenges when regenerating a city that will constitute a future portfolio for an urbanist?

Bernadette Janssen: 'In general, regeneration projects are very concerned with the problems in a neighborhood, with finding the social, spatial and/or economical weak spots. This can be seen, for instance, in the Vogelaaar approach - which has now actually been revoked by the central government which is a great loss for the so-called problem neighborhoods within the Randstad. But to my mind, regeneration projects should focus more on the qualities within a neighborhood. We notice in our projects that sometimes people forget to look at the places where everything is going well. Take care of these places and try to improve the neighborhood on the basis of these

strengths. The 7UP project is an example of this approach. Too often it is only the problem areas that are highlighted. But prevention is better than cure. This is especially the case in neighborhoods that were built in the '70s and '80s, which comprise the largest housing stock in the Netherlands. Approximately 30% of our stock was built between 1970 and 1985. At present, these neighborhoods function quite well, but decline is looming. We see that slowly the awareness is growing that regenerating these neighborhoods is becoming urgent. Many of these neighborhoods are now functioning quite well, but the problems are becoming more visible. The shortage on the housing market makes these dwellings rentable and sellable. But this could change when there is more space on the housing market and the unilateral housing of approximately 75% of all one-family houses cannot fulfill the needs anymore. Especially in shrinkage regions, the least attractive dwellings will foot the bill. The pre-war stock and the redeveloped '50s and '60s districts, located close to the city centre that are easily accessible, will become more valued than '70s and '80s neighborhoods. These family neighborhoods will also have to compete with new developments on the perimeter. But for years these problems were underestimated. Moreover, at the time that they were built no attention was given to sustainability. In that sense, the biggest regeneration assignment to come is transforming this large amount of housing stock into a sustainable environment. Eighty-five percent of the housing stock in 2020 will consist of dwellings which are already being built. We find that recently more people are beginning to see the necessity for management, sustainable transformation and betterment. One can see an increasing awareness and interest in retaining or, more to the point, improving the vitality and attractiveness of existing neighborhoods from the '70s and '80s.'

So regeneration of '70s and '80s neighborhoods will be a major assignment now and in the future. But it is not really 'cool' for a designer to deal with this. On the contrary, we see a boom in the design proposals for '50s and '60s districts. When looking at the digital repository of the Urbanism Department of the last three years, it can be seen that many student projects deal with restructuring post-war '50s and '60s districts. Is there a difference between the '70s and '80s assignment and the transformation of the '50s and '60s districts?

'Urbanists and architects detest the formless structure,



Figure 1. Zevenkamp under construction

"85% of the housing stock in 2020 will consist of dwellings which are already being built"



Figure 2. Three different dwellandscapes: suburban forest, canals or extremely enlarged gardens.

the 'coziness', and the small-scale of the '70s and '80s. On the other hand, hardcore modernism is cool. But we are seeing a shift in this Calvinistic profession. Under the influence of consumer-orientated building, modern traditionalism and the popularity of collectivity, a revaluation of these neighborhoods is visible. Today they are sometimes even used as a source of inspiration. The inhabitants have valued their environment quite highly for years, but this is declining. There are problems, but there's a lot of quality as well. But you have to be willing to see that. However, the real love for the '70s and '80s neighborhood clearly still has to grow among designers. We found it typical that during a recent debate organized by BVR, none of the more than fifty designers present claimed to live in a '70s and '80s neighborhood. 'Oblique' and 'brown' were the often heard associations; With the musty smell of boiled sprouts. Designers and opinion formers do not live in these places. As for the differences regenerating neighborhoods from the '70s and '80s is structurally different from regenerating those from the '50s and '60s in a number of ways. The '50s and '60s neighborhoods do have a clear urban structure and the task generally lays in finding ways to transform the bad building blocks. The problem is their preconfigured setup which does not relate to the scale of the city: they are autonomous, mono-functional entities based on relationships within the neighborhood. For this reason, they lack the physical connection between the neighborhood and the city and are comprised of many dispersed strips that need to be connected, to say nothing about their social and economic connections with the city. In neighborhoods from the '70s and '80s the assignment is actually reversed, so the tools developed in the approach of the '50s and '60s neighborhoods can't be applied directly. The '70s and '80s neighborhoods tend to be better connected with the city and have a richer diversity of dwelling typologies. The quality,

constructional aspects and living aspects, of the dwellings themselves are quite good. They are one-family dwellings with a garden, a popular type of course. There are often separate bicycle routes, free bus lanes, space for collectivity and district facilities. And, important, it is also possible to become homeowner. The concept of 'woonerven' (pedestrian priority areas) is actually an internationally successful concept. On the other hand, the threats found in these neighborhoods are mostly concerned with (an excess of) public space: the lack of maintenance, too much pavement and unused green, unsafe routes and subways, backstreets with storages on the street, parking problems, bad orientation, unclear transitions between public and private areas. But also social problems like a decrease in income, aging, and a lack of social control. On the urban level the neighborhoods have an unclear identity and an intermediate scale is missing, between the lowest scale of the 'wooner-ven' and the highest city scale.'

Designers tend to have a proactive attitude. At times when it is more difficult to develop new big projects, what can they undertake to get this new, different and 'uncool' assignment of regenerating the '70s and '80s neighborhoods, more on the map?

'Recently we are seeing an enormous change in the field and this is clearly reflected in the type of projects. There is less budgeting, a much shorter time span for the process and the project is cut up into many different steps to minimize project risks. Big developments like Almere Duin (p.58) are rare. Nowadays the assignments are fewer. Especially financial feasibility has become more prominent than before, with specific attention being given to the maintenance, management and life cycle of a project. Strategic projects are no longer configured in such a way that a preconfigured set of requirements is given

which will then be handed to a design office and elaborated upon. Rather, it is the designer himself who needs to look for promising combinations of partnerships and to define or propose the program. This organizational aspect is becoming increasingly important in our field with the urbanist taking on the role of some kind of relationship broker. What is particularly important in this establishing of new original connections is the speed with which one accomplishes a successful combination. This will be a distinguishing skill of a successful designer. Today there is a depressing atmosphere that reigns in times of crisis. Everybody is blaming everyone else for the bad situation we are in, whereas it is a part of our profession to cope with such setbacks and be creative in finding solutions.'

The 7UP project is an example of this. It is a project conceived in collaboration with Ruimtelab2, bureau Krill, Paul de Graaf and the Urbanism department at TU Delft. So different areas of expertise are brought together. Did this lead to a different approach than the other 'post-war' redevelopment approaches?

Liliane Geerling: 'Our research has shown that there can be no general solution to the transformation assignment of the neighborhoods from the '70s and '80s. However, we think that we did come up with an interesting and tangible approach to the whole concept of sustainability. This new approach is necessary, since the field of urbanism lacks a good toolbox for the sustainable transformation of the existing housing stock. What sustainable development is, is not specifically defined in urbanism. Different projects are called 'sustainable urbanism'. But approaches often take one-angle views. It is mostly either an unilaterally numerically technical approach or merely a people-orientated approach. In a research-by-design case study carried out in Zevenkamp, a big '70s and '80s neighborhood in Rotterdam, we integrally put three different approaches in practice.

"Hardcore modernism is cool. But we are seeing a shift in this Calvinistic profession."

The first approach considers the neighborhood as one environmental technical system (flows-perspective). The emphasis lies with energy, water, materials (including food and waste) and traffic. In sustainable development cycles are locally closed. This approach is common in urbanism. A good example is REAP, the Rotterdam Energy Approach and Planning. But for inhabitants, and

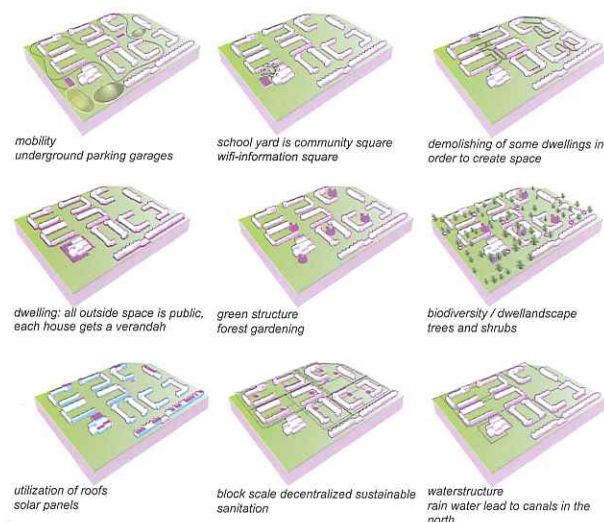


Figure 3. Each dwellandscape is subject to all priority goals

even for designers, this approach is rather abstract. Furthermore, this techno centric approach requires strong authority. The second approach is an anthropocentric approach ('eye-level' perspective). It is the well-being of human beings that has priority, think of a healthy and safe environment. This approach doesn't look further than the short-term and loses track of large scale urgency. The third approach (which is not commonly used in the Netherlands) views the neighborhood as one ecosystem. Ecology researches the spreading of dominant species. In a neighborhood, the dominant species is comprised of humans with all their artifacts like buildings, roads etc. These artifacts and natural soil take care of gradients, for a greater diversity of conditions and for a living environment for other species. Ecology as an approach, as a set of relationships in a clearly defined context, gives clues on how to cope with designing for an uncertain future. But it might be too static.

However, when combining these approaches and seeing perspectives of different stakeholders in cohesion, this gives guidelines for making existing housing stock sustainable. In our research, each approach is worked out by a different team. Of course only taking one approach is quite paradoxical. Looking at a neighborhood from an 'eyelevel' perspective is promising, but in the design process the 'ecosystem' and the 'flows-perspective' needs to be integrated. From the integration of three approaches a set of priority goals is composed, which can function as an inspiration for making an existing neighborhood more sustainable.' (JB & JN)

Atelier 7Up / BVR adviseurs / Krill / Leerstoel Environmental design Urbanism TU Delft (Machiel van Dorst) / Paul de Graaf Architecture and Research/Ruimtelab2 / March 2010 / Pictures from Krill, architecture, urban planning, research ©