

RE: letter to the IABR–2020–DOWN TO EARTH Curator Team

Amsterdam/Rotterdam, November 2019

Dear George, Sarah, Robbert, Rianne and Jurgen,

Thank you very much George for the invitation and great to hear from all of you, Sarah, Robbert, Rianne and Jurgen, that you are accepting the challenge.

The International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam holds a special place for me. In 2003, with some fellow architecture students from Eindhoven University of Technology I participated with a small video in the first IABR: *Mobility, A Room with a View*. Taking part in that international network and feeling the momentum of that cultural event was an important push for me to pursue a career in architecture and urbanism. Therefore, it is an honour to be invited to take up the role as one of the curators of IABR–2020–DOWN TO EARTH. So, invitation accepted!

Not without obligations

Times have changed. In 2003, the IABR was a celebration of car mobility as a cultural act. A better celebration of petro-culture wouldn't have been possible. Now, more than fifteen years later it all seems very obsolete. Already for decades we know the devastating impact of the extraction, distribution and use of fossil resources on our planet.

Recent reports of the IPCC show us that the window of opportunity to prevent a higher than two-degree temperature rise is very limited.

So, the energy transition is not an exercise without obligations. And with having kids, preventing catastrophe for future generations has become a personal matter.

From what to how

This necessity to reduce CO₂ emissions is acknowledged worldwide. The signing of the Paris Agreement by 195 countries is the legal evidence of the awareness of the challenges we are facing. But how are we going to put the paper ambitions into practice? Somehow, I sense that governments are struggling with this question. It is a question to which there is no single answer. It is just too complex. That complexity and the incapability to act *now* partly have to do with the way fossil fuel is so engrained in current society. Our political-economic system is a product of cheap and readily available fossil fuel, as Canadian climate-writer Naomi Klein is pointing out in her latest books. We cannot expect that system to put an end to the fossil fuel era.

So we need an alternative. With his book *Down to Earth*, Bruno Latour is pointing us into the right direction. The paradigm he describes is about reconstructing society, not just decarbonising it. Reconstructing its economy, its values, its politics, its laws and codes. For him the energy transition is connected to employment, education, local ownership and being rooted, of course, in culture. Can we use the energy transition then as *leverage* and start shifting towards that new paradigm?

Leverage on different scales

On the scale of the neighbourhood, using energy transition as leverage is obvious. Energy relates to almost all daily routines, it claims an ever larger part of our monthly budget and it also defines the way our buildings and public space are used. In recent years much knowledge on the spatial-energetic system was developed by designers. If we want leverage on the scale of the neighbourhood it requires us to connect it to the social-energetic system. On other scale levels, the energy transition can also be used as the necessary leverage. Recent debates on the size of the livestock in the Netherlands confirm the importance of a transition of the countryside from an industrial area for the production of meat and dairy to a productive landscape for healthy food, bio-based materials and of course sustainable energy.

On the smaller scale, the energy transition can be used as leverage for adapting our buildings to future needs. While making the housing stock more energy neutral, we can, at the same time, make it more suitable for the changing household size and requirements. And what about new building typologies? Storage and distribution of energy in the neighbourhood requires a new type of public facility, like for instance the bathhouse in earlier periods.

Can the energy transition also act as a lever for radically changing our building industry? What if we use the renovation operation of seven million houses and a million other buildings – in The Netherlands only – to develop a bio-based building industry?

As a curator of the IABR I want to address all these scale levels and different ways of using leverage. And last but not least, I want to know what we can learn from other, international practices to build the narrative of *Energy Transition as Leverage*.

Transition of ownership

For this kind of energy transition to succeed, I think we also need a transition of ownership of our energy system. Sustainable energy is a collective resource, it belongs, one can argue, to the *commons*. It would follow that the energy transition is not a negotiation process between private energy corporations and public bodies but that it should be a collective project, with a direct impact on our shared future. Our energy system should be a public asset, not a private one.

I would like to use IABR–2020–DOWN TO EARTH to jumpstart working on the energy transition as a collective project. Can we imagine an alternative future? Can we build an alternative set of routines, codes, values? Can we think about a post-fossil culture? Can we imagine a post-fossil neighbourhood? And what laws, tools and (digital) technologies do we need to increase the speed of the energy transition itself and at the same time be able to put the effect of leverage into practice?

Workshop BoTu at IABR–2020

The host of IABR–2020–DOWN TO EARTH–ENERGY TRANSITION AS LEVERAGE will be the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Bospolder-Tussendijken, locally known as BoTu. This neighbourhood has been selected as one of the first five districts in Rotterdam to be disconnected from the gas network. BoTu is a poor and culturally very diverse neighbourhood that can very well use some leverage to become spatially, economically and socially more resilient.

It is my ambition to take the pioneering position of BoTu as a starting point to program a workshop in the neighbourhood that actually builds the leverage. By building we start doing and at the same time learn from it. By performing concretely, we learn about materials, technology, energy, craftsmanship and collaboration. And a workshop needs tools, instruments, instructions and so on. These can all be related to the work in Bospolder-Tussendijken and the project of *Energy Transition as Leverage* in general.

Learning from other neighbourhoods

What can we learn from neighbourhoods in other parts of the world that have taken ownership of the energy transition or another major transition in terms of sustainable development? What tools and instruments did they use? How has it been translated into urban design, or hasn't it? Based on desk research, interviews and study visits, I want to identify four or five neighbourhoods worldwide that can become our partners in the workshop and help us co-developing a learning module bringing their own practice as input.

A first approach could be to look at different organisational models like the Community Land Trusts in the UK, cooperatives in Austria and Switzerland, Green New Deal projects in the US, Poble Nou in Barcelona, examples from Canada and maybe from Latin America, Africa and Asia –although I have to admit I have a blind spot when it comes to projects on the scale of the neighbourhood in these three regions of the world. So, Sarah, I think I want to tap into your network there. In an ideal scenario, I would like to see if it is possible to also visit the neighbourhoods we want to collaborate with.

Presence in Bospolder-Tussendijken

The Workshop BoTu we want to launch should first and foremost help Bospolder-Tussendijken and its fourteen thousand inhabitants to realize the transition. And I think the workshop is also a way to collect, curate and distribute experiences and knowledge from and for professionals on how to use energy transition as leverage in the various domains that are dealing with energy transition.

The energy transition requires a societal paradigm shift. To make visible that energy transition can act as a lever, i.e. to make such an effect imaginable in order for people in Bospolder-Tussendijken to believe it is actually doable, we need to do interventions that contribute directly to the needs of the neighbourhood. That being said, it is also important to involve the professionals and the general audience in our Workshop. In short, it is about a combination of action, research, education and culture.

Which interventions can we use to address and achieve this?

George, I think your suggestion of the murals could work really well. The murals could depict stories of other neighbourhoods that used the energy transition as leverage and took ownership of their resilient future. We will need to start looking out for talented artists, preferably from the neighbourhood, that can deliver artworks on this scale and of such complexity.

Another very strong element could be to visualise in real life the size and spatial impact of the energy system. Currently it hides underground but can we bring it to, or above the surface? Could these infrastructural installations be the entrance portals into Bospolder-Tussendijken? Can we realise an Energy Square in reference to the Water Square by De Urbanisten?

Together with Robbert de Vrieze, the embedded co-curator in Bospolder Tussendijken, I want to elaborate the plans for such physical interventions and how to involve the neighbourhood in designing and building them.

And I also want to connect 'my' Rotterdam Academy of Architecture and Urbanism (RAVB) to the IABR–2020 Workshop in Bospolder-Tussendijken. By programming one or more design studios on the topic of *Energy Transition as Leverage* the master students of the RAVB can contribute to the process in this neighbourhood. At the same time, I believe the lessons that are being learned here, are a necessary part of the education of a 21st century urban designer. Therefore, already in September 2019 a group of students has started to analyse the underground infrastructure of Bospolder-Tussendijken, the future transformations in the underground and the relation to public space above ground.

Team effort

I am thrilled that we are embarking on this journey together. We are, and will be for some time, in the process of learning how to 'read and write' together but the first signs are hopeful. I look forward to working with Robbert, I'm hoping we can bring together his insights and experiences from the practice of working in Bospolder-Tussendijken and my research into practices in other parts of the world, and, of course, bring *Energy Transition as Leverage* to the public spaces of Bospolder-Tussendijken.

And with you, Sarah, George, Rianne and Jurgen, the challenge is to look for the connection between Water as Leverage and Energy Transition as Leverage, both physically in the connection between M4H and BoTu and mentally, so that they become the two essential and interlinked elements of IABR–2020, helping us to come to terms with the challenge that Bruno Latour has defined as DOWN TO EARTH – what politics do we need for the new climatic regime?

Again, it is an honour to be part of this great adventure.

With my best regards,

Thijs