

## **Atelier Making Projects**

Introduction to 'The Netherlands in Projects, Design and Politics #7'  
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### **Seven national projects**

In the spring of 2011 the national government of the Netherlands decided to take part in the 5th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam, *Making City*. This it did with seven big projects with which it was involved: Zuidas, Almere, Rotterdam-Zuid, the Rhine-Meuse Delta, the Green-Blue Delta, Urban Nodes and the Olympic Main Structure. These are complex, comprehensive, long-running projects, often lasting decades, all with a key spatial planning issue at their core and each with a galaxy of other players besides the government. The fact is that in the Netherlands 'national projects' are hardly ever the exclusive domain of national government.

Zuidas is the number one central business district of Amsterdam, and indeed of the entire country. The City of Amsterdam is in charge of the project but central government is in there too because of the CBD's national importance and the major investments in its infrastructure. Almere is all about the plans to double the population of that former growth center to 350,000 inhabitants. A municipal issue on the face of it, it is of national importance for the growth of Randstad Holland. It too is closely bound up with investments in infrastructure. Rotterdam-Zuid was only recently promoted to a national project once it had become clear that its socio-economic problems were so great that the question arose as to whether Rotterdam could resolve them unaided. The Rhine-Meuse Delta covers the entire river basin of the Rhine and the Meuse and the project addresses national priority number one in these lowlands, namely protection against the water. And yet not one dyke is built or river widened without the consent of the affected municipalities, water districts and provinces. The Green-Blue Delta is about the low-lying landscape of the Western Netherlands, whose scale alone makes it a national concern. Yet it is here that central government is questioning its own role and calls on other players to take on the responsibility of developing the area. And in Urban Nodes, this issue is at the very core of the concept, namely optimum interaction between modifications to the main railway infrastructure and local developments in the station zones. As for the Olympic Main Structure, a plan to prime the Netherlands for a bid to organize the 2028 Summer Olympics, joint ownership is written all over it, most conclusively in the Olympic Flame

Alliance, whose members represent not only all layers of government but also the NOC\*NSF, employers' and employees' organizations and the world of education.

### **Design and politics**

It hardly needs saying that the wishes, interests, even the views on the task at hand of all those players at all those different scales can be wide-ranging in the extreme. No wonder that working on big spatial planning projects consists for a large part of negotiating, attuning interests and bridging differences. And these projects, it was decided, were to be part of the International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam. Under the banner of 'Atelier Making Projects' fifteen design offices and three architecture schools were asked to make a design study for one of the seven projects. The design program was embedded in the Architecture Biennale as a research program and was to climax in a public exhibition. At the same time, the research by design study was expected to make a real contribution to the ongoing project itself. This saw a substantive survey, done in the free creative space of a studio, hitched to the international environment of the Architecture Biennale and then wired directly into the ongoing planning process. The design exercise was positioned in the heart of the political process of 'project-making'. This is not something that happens automatically. It means that in a project with big interests at stake, many players and often a strongly political and at times highly charged context, there is to be space for creative thinking – conceptual space which (and let's be honest) not everyone welcomes with open arms. For if alternative trains of thought or cutting-edge solutions can be useful in terms of content, they don't always benefit the flow of the process. Certainly when that process is at a negotiating stage, just about the last thing those concerned could do with is another new idea. Lastly, the exhibition itself called for an innovative, focused, even provocative presentation of the study and the design, at the same time being true to the breadth and complexity of the projects, as regards both their contents and the roles of the different players. In other words, it meant making things difficult for yourself.

And yet it seemed to be the right and necessary thing to do. It is precisely because the exhibition latched onto the Biennale's international research program that space was made for the exchange of knowledge, for experiment, debate and reflection on the brief, when that space is often lacking in the dynamic of the project itself. Projects of

this scale are often targeted at the distant future. It is almost never a case of 'get it done tomorrow' and much more often that of 'make it possible in ten or twenty years' time'. 'Project' often means 'program' and is often directly linked to spatial planning policy which by its very nature is targeted at the long-term effect. As the brief was to produce concrete results for the exhibition that informed, illustrated and confronted in the here and now and were not just of value to a process lasting years, it provided an exercise in convincingly communicating that often complicated process of the long term, to a wide audience but also to colleagues and the professional community. So it was an experiment not just in 'project-making' but also in 'process-making' – processes in which design was by no means always in a taken-for-granted or guiding role, in which a range of societal dynamics, varying over time, often determines the direction and the outcome. That said, design can fulfil a key role here. It can do this in a number of ways, it transpires, such as by mapping possible futures, by developing knowledge in a distributable form, by demystifying problems and putting them on the agenda, by having the analysis cut through all the interests and briefs and by widening the view of reality with new interpretations. That way it will always unfold a new narrative that can bind other players to the project and forge new alliances.

### **Design and elections**

Much of this book took shape at the time of the fall of Mark Rutte's first government, the ensuing general election campaign and the forming of a new coalition government of Rutte's conservative-liberal party (VVD) and Labour (PvdA). Rutte's first government had taken office six months before preparations on the Making Projects studio began, and immediately set to radically reforming the policy on nature. It was this that formed the context, maybe even the brief, for one project, 'The Metropolitan Landscape'. In other words, this project was a direct consequence of the election results in the summer of 2010. The in-depth reorientation on the way the landscape is used, on how it contributes to the Dutch economy and competitive position, was unthinkable without the government's change of tack. As work on the book proceeded, Rutte's first government was relegated to caretaker status and post-election negotiations were under way between the VVD and PvdA to form a new coalition government. At that time it was by no means unthinkable that the new government might reinstate what had been the prominent national position of Dutch nature policy, perhaps not

with as much funding as before but with as much respect. At the end of October 2012 the new government presented its coalition agreement and it became clear that another project in this book had reached the end of the line. 'We endorse taking elite sport in the Netherlands to Olympic level without wanting to host the Olympic Games in our country.' This knocked the foundations away from all the Olympic plans and two days later the City of Amsterdam – which after a nerve-racking process lasting several months had been chosen as candidate city – announced that its Olympic office had been closed down. End of project. It's at moments like these that you are made even more aware of just how deeply embedded in the heart of politics all the projects worked on at the Making Projects studio were – and still are. In fact this holds for all projects, although it's not always as apparent. The more advanced the process, the more obvious it becomes how decisive that socio-political context is for what research by design can achieve. This book documents the research by design done for those seven projects. Summaries would be more accurate, for the few illustrations contained within these pages do little justice to the vast quantity of work done at the studio. That said, taken all together they give a varied and rich picture of the fruits yielded by such an exercise. Seven essays devoted to the projects set out to describe the socio-political context in which each brief came about and in which the design offices had to operate: which forces were active there, which issues were chosen to investigate and which were not, and what capacities spatial design has in that position.