

Productive Space By Design–

IABR–2014–CONFERENCE

June 12, 2014, Rotterdam

Conference Report

On June 12, 2014 the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam held its international conference **Productive Space By Design–**. The conference was part of IABR–2014–URBAN BY NATURE's public program of events parallel to the exhibitions at the Kunsthal Rotterdam.

Intended as a 'collective thinking exercise' rather than a series of speeches and round table discussions, its goal was to explore the consequences of the paradigm shift that is identified by URBAN BY NATURE –the irreversible blurring of the urban and natural systems and planning worlds– on the practices of design and of urban development.

Hence the conference's foremost question was: *Can design help us find an alternative model of urban development, one that does not capitalize on the exploitation of land and natural resources, but on the productive capacity of people and space?*

In his welcome address, **George Brugmans**, IABR's Executive Director, began by emphasizing that the notion of urban development has been a common thread through earlier editions of the Biennale.



Brugmans invited the diverse range of speakers and participants (from the worlds of research, design, economy, non-governmental organizations, cultural platforms, policy making and activism) to actively contribute to the conference and make it a really collective thinking exercise in order to help formulate

new approaches and methods for urban development.

Brugmans called for the conference to point to crucial fields of work to be further explored in new partnerships and ateliers during the next two years leading up to IABR–2016–THE NEXT ECONOMY–.

“Urban development is a key issue. We do not just need a new paradigm of what cities actually are, what their position is, and how we make and run them –new policies and new methods, new models of organization and governance. We also have to explore new models of financing and development. And we are convinced that design can help us explore these new models.”

— George Brugmans

Joachim Declerck, Director of Architecture Workroom Brussels and conference chair, started with demonstrating how our dominant visions of and policies for urban development have become both untenable and ineffective. Rather than producing answers to our major contemporary challenges, the current model of development is producing more problems for the future and adding to already existing ones.



With examples from urban regions and metropolises around the world, Declerck sketched the urgency and focus of this conference: how can we rethink and redesign the engine of urban development itself, rather

than of the surface, the 'look-and-feel' of future urbanization?

“Development is something that seems to have rules, principles, and an engine that we do not control. Governments are inclined to submit to this system, rather than to intervene from within. In the current framework, designers can produce answers to given questions, but they are excluded from the necessary process of redesigning the question itself.”
— Joachim Declerck

“One of the real messages of this biennale is: We can't go back in time! There is no new frontier! We have to solve our problems in the urban landscapes that are our natural habitat. This is where we have to do it, and we have to do it now. This is not meant to be a gloomy idea, on the contrary, we have to look forward to the new adventures ahead.”
— Dirk Sijmons

Landscape Architect and Curator of IABR–2014–, **Dirk Sijmons**, was invited to explore how URBAN BY NATURE–, as a thought-provoking new perspective on the relation between our environmental and our urban problems and futures, is also a call for a new practice in terms of design and policy-making.



In his keynote lecture, Sijmons argued that, if we want to make sure urban development helps build solid responses to climate change, the scarcity of resources, and social and environmental problems, we urgently need to break the central code of urbanization. It is the difference in land value between urban uses (the highest), agriculture and nature (the lowest), that still is the dominant logic underneath the on-going consumption of landscapes. Sijmons used the three IABR–2014–PROJECTATELIERS– in Rotterdam, Brabant and on Texel to illustrate how strong proposals for alternative developments can break this code: new forms of cooperation that lift the barriers between the planning worlds of water, agriculture and urban development in BrabantStad; innovative explorations of the urban metabolism translated to urban policies and planning in Rotterdam; and new allotment plans that make tourism the lever for a more natural, resilient development of Texel.

SESSION 1: REINVENTING DEVELOPMENT

At the start of the first session, addressing methods and principles that would reinvent urban and spatial development, keynote speaker **Samuel Carter**, Associate Director for Resilience at the Rockefeller Foundation, presented why and how this world-renowned philanthropic organization spotlights the resiliency of cities.

While gathering knowledge and developing a scientific framework for resilience on the one hand, the foundation promotes resilient urban development in both deep and broad ways. It co-organizes programs to build resilient solutions for concrete challenges in specific metropolises (i.e. Rebuild By Design), while it also set up a global platform for multiplying the number of city governments that engage in a collective transition towards resiliency, 100 Resilient Cities. Each of the actions and programs helps produce a fundamental paradigm shift.



The foundation aims at gathering all separate actors and actions in one dialogue, and around one vision for a resilient future. By working together with the dominant institutions that make the big plans and investments in cities and regions, and by rethinking traditional methods and working instruments such as cost-benefit analyses, its long term ambition is to help change the behaviour of all these

actors. By making it concrete, pragmatic and practical, the Rockefeller Foundation does everything to avoid that resilience merely serves as the new global buzzword, its use required in all policy documents.

“The United States Army Corps of Engineers have the mandate and responsibility to manage and build the coastal protection structures. This means that the way we have been protecting ourselves from floods really is driven by the approach that they take to defining risk and what structures can help mitigate those risks. There aren’t a lot of opportunities that open this process up for innovation. The ‘Structures of Coastal Resilience’ project tries to build what IABR calls a ‘sabbatical detour’ into the Corps’ comprehensive study process. The Rockefeller Foundation has the capacity to fund a design competition that runs parallel to the comprehensive study, and that will surface innovative ideas that the Corps can pick up for future projects.”

— Samuel Carter

The points of departure for an alternative model of development and the concomitant behavioural change were further explored in the **first roundtable conversation: For A New Development Model.**

Pierre Bélanger, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, opened the conversation by signalling that we need to acknowledge that not designers but natural forces that we can never design, like storms and hurricanes, will increasingly do the planning work for us.



The modern design tradition that is now spearheaded by the Corps of Engineers still believes that strong and optimized infrastructures will provide protection against

these forces of nature. This is evidently not the case. The knowledge that can help us to survive these forces can be found somewhere else, as for example in the local solutions that Haitians had developed to survive dramatic climate conditions. These principles survived until the West imported its modern technocratic methods: centralized forms of urbanization and agriculture replaced the very productive, agronomic and decentralized pattern of the original civilization. We must learn to ‘un-design’, to unravel the logics and forces that we cannot control, to understand and dismantle the automatic pilot of development that is installed in policy frameworks and regulations, and to learn from the capacities of soft elements (sand, plants, habits, etcetera). Only when we understand these systems will we be able to recombine them – by design – in new and meaningful ways.



Roelof Bleker, Dike-Warden, i.e. Chair of the Rivierenland Water Board, subscribed to this analysis. He sees a major design challenge in trying to inscribe the planned, large investments to secure The Netherlands in a broader project that entails the future of urban development, that provides a platform for recreational activities and natural systems, or that helps realize the energy transition.



According to **Eric Frijters**, Architect and Partner of .FABRIC, the work that lies ahead of us is indeed to collect information on the systems that are sustaining urban life. .FABRIC’s work for the IABR–2014–PROJECTATELIER ROTTERDAM was

essentially to visualize such information, so that it becomes accessible and convincing for policy makers, politicians and other actors.



Having spent most of his career working for a large corporation, **Fred Van Beuningen**, now the Managing Director of Rotterdam Partners, the agency that develops and promotes Rotterdam's economy, confirmed the importance of these insights and of

'transformative knowledge' as crucial levers to establish 'pragmatic coalitions' around shared risks and goals, bringing the public and private sectors together.

Precisely these 'pragmatic coalitions' can truly change the course of development, according to **Floris Alkemade**, Architect and Urban Designer. He reads the work he co-authored for the IABR-2014-PROJECTATELIER BRABANTSTAD as groundwork for such potential coalitions.



After exploring the possible interactions between different systems and planning traditions together with the different actors (water, nature, agriculture, urban, industry, etcetera), the design proposals of the Atelier re-assemble these logics and systems, and highlight potential synergies for the redevelopment of the urbanized landscape.

Dirk Sijmons formulated the crucial question that was to be picked up in the second round table: how come that, while we are making these types of plans since the mid eighties, the dominant development pattern is not changing course? How can this argument and this alternative development logic break through what seems to be a glass ceiling?

As a conclusion to the first session, keynote speaker **Maarten Hajer**, Director-General at PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, zoomed in on new forms of cooperation, even a new contract, between state and society as a condition for a successful revolution in our development model. Urban and national leaders cannot shift course alone, and neither will the necessary 50 trillions of dollars of high-tech investments in new ecological infrastructures do the job for us.

Governments tend to fix both what and how goals should be met. But rather than overregulating the development and evolution, they should dare open up the field to local coalitions to find their own solutions to shared problems. Taking out one line of regulation and policy can be enough to do so. The necessary revolution will only take place if governments succeed in mobilizing the capacities and the energy of civil society.

Hajer's appeal is for an *'enabling government': a government that sets the direction and the goals, and that functions as an expert facilitator for local and pragmatic coalitions.*



SESSION 2: INNOVATING PRACTICE

In his keynote *Redesign Policy*, **Peter Swinnen**, Government Architect of the Flemish Government, explored the rich history of spatial development in Flanders, Brussels and other European cities and regions.



Swinnen prefers 'proactive' to 'reactive' policy programs, and deplores the fact that we seem

to have lost the capacity and belief in bold and proactive building programs. These proactive programs short-circuit broad ambitions and goals with concrete building projects; and they engage private actors and developers in finding solutions to urban, regional and national challenges. Doing this, they mobilize the different capacities of design all at once, and they prevent that architects and urban designers get stuck, either in vague policy studies or in specific designs for singular buildings. Four years into his five-year mandate as the Government Architect, Swinnen now for the first time can look back at the programs he launched together with several ministries, departments and agencies of the Flemish government. His first conclusions are that the new experimental programs do act as possible enablers of creative building programs (i.e. pilot projects), in which design plays a crucial and two-pronged role: it nurtures and innovates policies, and it makes these policies concrete in terms of physical environment.

The **second round table *Changing Practices: Design & Policy*** further examined how the practices of policy making and of design both need to evolve in order to radically change the current 'mechanism' and direction of urban development.



Having directed 'Design for London' until 2013, Architect **Mark Brearley** illustrated the specific capacities of designers that are exceedingly relevant to urban policy making and development by explaining the *High Street Program*.



Firstly, design identifies subjects and spaces that have not yet been studied, but that do

have enormous relevance for the future development of our cities. Secondly, it makes both the importance and the potentials visible and tangible. And thirdly, it can offer convincing arguments and programs for action – strong stories or 'pitches' that convince politicians and policy makers to lead, communicate and finance urban development.

Hans Tijn, Director for Spatial Development at the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, underlined the important role of design as the interface between vested interests and different sectors of policy within the government. However, to break through the glass ceiling Sijmons mentioned, Tijn argues that the design world can and must 'break out', and raise a public debate. Only when its arguments and convictions become public concerns, will politics rally behind an alternative development model.

Platforms such as the IABR, which function as independent partners of the government, play a crucial role in connecting the different sectors and levels of policymaking, the design world and the public.



Kristian Koreman, Landscape Architect and Partner of ZUS, recognizes the interface role the designer has in his own practice and in the way the IABR–2012–Test Site Rotterdam has been developed.



Koreman sees three main domains each with their own discrete working platform: policy

makers write in Word, developers do the sums in Excel, and architects visualize in Adobe and AutoCAD. To unleash the Test Site's alternative development model in the Rotterdam Central District, one of the main tools proved to be the capacity to work in all three languages. It is by decoding speeches and policy documents, translating them into excel sheets, and ultimately linking these to a provocative visualization, a design vision of the transformation of the physical space, that we can really connect all vested interests in new ways and create a meaningful coalition.

In order to foster these new connections, it seems that cultural platforms that embrace innovation are necessary, not just the IABR in the Netherlands, but everywhere, also in São Paulo, argued **Guilherme Wisnik**.



As the Chief Curator of the previous and next São Paulo Architecture Biennial, Wisnik's focus is on strengthening the biennale's role as a platform for innovation. By avoiding the museum as the traditional central exhibition space and engaging with real world issues on specific locations in São Paulo, the biennial is transforming itself into an instrument that can test alternative coalitions and developments – a process very similar to and partly inspired by

the IABR's 'sabbatical detour'-method such as for instance used at the Test Site Rotterdam.

Patrick Janssens, the former Mayor of Antwerp, concluded the conference. Janssens knows the importance of urban development and of design, but as a mayor also noted that many of his colleagues do not see or use this strong instrument to make policies concrete and tangible. The crucial step is for all of us to abandon the linear process, from the problem, the analysis, the briefing, the design, to the execution, the evaluation and the feedback. It most probably never actually functioned well, but it is until this day still taught in schools and 'business as usual', especially among policymakers.



We need the creativity of designers to enable the necessary paradigm shift in the world of policy making. But we must simultaneously realize that also design is changing: from a very specific activity that had its place in the chain of the linear process, to an activity that keeps the complete chain together. Designers have to make sure to be ready for that new practice.