

Toespraak/Speech

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(Infrastructuur en Milieu/Infrastructure and the Environment)

Opening IABR-2014-URBAN BY NATURE-

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Mr Mayor, ladies and gentlemen,

The American researcher, political theorist and author Benjamin Barber recently wrote a very interesting book: 'If Mayors Ruled the World'. In it, he discusses the relationship between cities and nations. And I heard Mayor Aboutaleb make a subtle reference to it as well.

Barber also has something interesting to say about the city and nature. 'When planned carefully,' he writes, 'the city will not forget nature. [...] Belief in the power of nature can make the city flourish.'

Barber does not believe that the relationship between the city and nature should be seen as a conflict. And I think he is right.

We cannot live safely in our cities without nature. And our economy cannot prosper without it. We rely on nature to grow food. And we preserve our natural heritage because it adds value to cities and makes them attractive places to live. So when we look at our cities, we should always consider nature and its dynamics.

The best way to prove this point is to look at something they both need and fear: water. Water gives life, both to the city and to nature. But water can be just as deadly to both. Everywhere you look on Earth, water is a very complex system.

The biggest (and growing) Dutch cities are located below sea level, needing constant vigilance and prevention. But regardless of where we live, we need fresh drinking water and efficient treatment of waste water, too. Just like space, water is scarce. And where cities grow, the need for water and water safety grows too.

So how can we combine urban development and the dynamics of nature in the coming decades? This is one of the most important questions the world faces right now.

Later this year, I will make decisions on our water policy for the next fifty years. They are based on comprehensive drafts by the special Government Commission on the future of our delta.

And I am also constantly on the lookout for innovations in the field of water. Like the concept of 'Building with Nature'. We are gaining valuable experience with this in Holland.

And we are also seeing it applied in the rebuilding effort in the United States after Hurricane Sandy.

I am also thinking of the city of Bangalore, in India. A city where almost ten million people live more than nine hundred meters above sea level. A city with a thriving economy: it is the Indian Silicon Valley.

Over the past two years, however, Bangalore has been hit both by drought and by excessive rainfall, causing flooding in the streets. In that city, one engineer has started a small urban and natural revolution. His name is Vishwanath Srikantaiah

He started catching rainwater around his own house. And he started to purify his own waste water. He now grows rice on the roof of his house, generates energy and has his own water management system.

But the beautiful thing about his story is this: Hundreds of people in his neighborhood have followed his lead.

He is changing the way Bangalore lives with water. In fact, he is changing the city's relationship with nature itself.

Both Building with Nature and this Indian engineer prove that we need extensive knowledge of our ecological systems.

Knowledge, not only about water, but also about soil. We use our soil and underground in many ways: as the physical foundation of our cities, to grow food, to extract gas and water, and we run pipelines through it.

To make the most efficient and sustainable use of our soil, we need

a comprehensive vision.

My ministry is currently developing such a vision for the Netherlands, together with local and regional governments, private partners and citizens. Some of the interim results can be seen at this year's Biennale, in the exhibition 'Exploring the Underground'.

The story of Bangalore also proves that Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas may be right when he says that these days infrastructure is much more important than architecture.

Let me show you why, by looking at the future of the Dutch city for a moment. Although urbanisation is currently slowing down in the Netherlands, cities will still continue to grow.

Sixty per cent of future urbanisation will affect the three or four biggest Dutch cities, including Rotterdam. How do we handle that growth? And how do we use the available space as efficiently and sustainably as possible?

I believe that the rapid development of new technologies can play a revolutionary role in the future of the city, its infrastructure and its relationship with nature.

With 3D printers we may be able to produce anything we want at home. That will have major consequences for urban logistics, distribution and sustainability.

Smart phone apps and e-learning can also revolutionise the way we live and do business.

Suddenly, a website like AirBNB is a powerful rival to hotels.

Suddenly, an app like Uber is a powerful rival to taxis and public transport. And the iPad could even lead to far fewer school buildings and university campuses in the future.

And if this happens, what will it mean for our transportation and energy needs? And what kind of raw materials will we need in the future? What will it mean for the city's relationship with nature? We need to explore these questions, for example here at this Biennale. And we need to be able to adapt our thinking and our policies to the answers we find along the way.

There will be growing differences between cities. And thanks to modern technology, people are increasingly able to shape their own

environment. This fundamentally changes the relationship between governments and citizens.

So local problems increasingly require local solutions. And citizens, cities and urban regions all want the freedom to respond to their own needs. They need flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

That is why the responsibility for urban development in the Netherlands has been transferred to local and regional governments over the past years.

And why people in neighborhoods and cities are increasingly organizing themselves, with support from their local municipality. To safeguard this, I am currently leading the biggest law-making project in the Netherlands since the Second World War. Next month, I will present its draft result to Parliament: the Environment and Planning Act. The new bill will replace sixty current laws and hundreds of regulations. It offers freedom and flexibility, but also gives us the choice to protect what needs to be protected.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although we cannot know the future of our cities in detail, we can still explore it. This Biennale helps us to explore and to see the future a little more clearly. So I urge you all to make good use of it. And to design answers to the questions of today and tomorrow. Design plays an essential part in helping us envision the future. And it clearly presents the consequences of policy decisions. Design helps us to understand abstract matters. It looks for practical solutions and helps us clarify difficult processes.

So I very much look forward to your harvest: a fresh perspective on the future, and a possible new relationship between nature and the city.

Thank you.