Mind the gap

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MIND THE GAP

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This Pamphlet vividly shows what young landscape architects have to offer when it comes to the enormous task ahead to make our watersheds "climate proof." It also shows how professionals from upstream can master the specific problems of their downstream fellow Europeans in a way that makes one curious as to how Dutch landscape architects would cope with a specific mountain assignment. The ETH Zurich-based Desingn Studio of Christophe Girot worked on the "Dutch Mountains" and, as the chair of the "Room-for-the-River" Quality-team, I must say I'm impressed by the quality of the work. The internationalization of the research scope of this discipline is further enhanced by the work on the Mekong Delta (Kelly Shannon and Bruno De Meulder) and the Elbe Estuary (Antje Stokman). And, most importantly, this booklet makes it possible to make some comparative and general observations.

The problems we have encountered in exhibiting the work , however, show that the role of the landscape architect is not quite yet to be taken for granted in that it was rated as "politically touchy," because some of the solutions might, if executed quite literally, remotely influence farm land. This shows that "research by design" – as one might characterize the results of the ETH – is sometimes completely misread by policy-makers. Meant as instruments to show politicians "what they might possibly want," they are instead interpreted as "plans" or rejected as "unsolicited architecture." Of course, our professional ability to evoke a virtual reality and the need to work out "research by design" in great detail, in terms of trying to identify the crucial details, no doubt helps rub policymakers the wrong way. But even if these communication difficulties were removed, there would seem to be a more fundamental gap between politics and design, between the worlds of governance and architecture, of which this incidence is just a symptom. Moreover, one can also observe similar gaps between the worlds of architecture, survey, and science, just as one can between science and politics. This is serious, because close relationships between these three have, historically speaking, proven to be the hallmark of periods of successful and meaningful planning and design culture.

This is a gradual cultural process, underway now for some three decades, which moves with the slow determination of plate tectonics. In abstract terms, as these three segments distance themselves from each other, develop their own language, and their own rationality and perspec-

tive, it makes it harder and harder for each of them to understand each other properly. Although all three are worth elaborating on, for the sake of being concise, I will focus on the widening gap between politics and design.

Politics in the Netherlands over the last two decades has left the path of voluntarism and entered a world dominated by bureaucratic trade-offs, fragmented sectoral thinking founded on detailed knowledge of dossiers and soundings out of the Planning Agencies. The outcomes of Societal Cost Benefit Analyses and Environmental Impact statements are mistaken for quality in the plans. The possible effects of interventions are analyzed meticulously and seem to dominate the decision making completely. It might not be completely representative, but in one case (the Schiphol extension) I calculated that, for every euro spent on the plan, more then seventeen euros were spent on deconstructing the plan into its possible effects. It should come as no surprise that, in the same period, preparatory costs of large projects went sky-high. In forty years, these costs have gone from some 10% to more than 30% of the total project cost, due to more spending on juridical aspects, permits, impact statements, etc. Despite this increasing complexity, the share of "design" and "survey" (!) in these preparation costs has gone down. In this slow and gradual process, we politically seem to have formalized the "distrust" at the expense of the position of the "plan."

So, as a design community, we have to be aware that the political juncture has changed. We have to develop new positions and be active on the common ground between politics and architecture. One frontier that must be reopened is that of cultural policy agenda. The very un-healthy balance between "syntheses" and "distrust," between design and evaluating, must be critiqued and gradually turned around.

It is this very cultural policy angle – in the form of architectural policy – that, in the same period I have described, has proven to be a counterforce to be reckoned with. The effect of architectural policy (a successful mix of stimulating funds, starting grants, a National Architectural Institute and local Architecture Centers, helping non-professional commissioners, an International Architecture Biennale, etc.) has been able to punctuate these conjunctional tendencies. A positive design culture has been rolled out based on the firm foundation of a long tradition of design on every level of scale. "Dutch" design has been successfully staged and made into an economic export product that has even been

able to charm our neo-liberal administrations. Architectural quality and spatial quality at large sometimes have been included as policy goals.

The best strategy for us as designers, of course, is to show the power of design in practice for those opportunities that present themselves. I have been privileged to be involved in the "Room-for-the-River" project that offered one of these rare opportunities. The project is focused on making the river area fit so as to facilitate a river high-water level of 16,000 m3/sec before 2015. It consists of 29 subprojects and a budget of 2.4 billion euros. "Room-for-the-River" has safety as it central goal but "spatial quality" as its secondary main goal; leaving behind an even more beautiful river area than we found it before the project(s) was the aim. Architects and landscape architects worked side by side with technicians and hydraulic modelers to do the job. A quality team was established that followed all 29 projects from the beginning to the start of their execution phase. It is, of course, too early to tell, but the results so far are very encouraging. The periodic sparring sessions between the project workers and our multi-disciplinary team – consisting of an ecologist, an urbanist, a hydraulic engineer, a river expert, and a landscape architect – have not only significantly increased the design quality of every sub-project, but also the quality of the project as a whole has increased if we compare it with similar projects. It is often stated that aiming at "quality" will in the end make a project more expensive and/ or will increase procedure time; however, the contrary proved to be true in the "Room-for-the-River"case. Research by design during the project planning phase was partly responsible for the successful bottom-up process structure of the project, which speeded up the process instead of slowing it down. Moreover, by advising on the spatial quality of the projects at different stages, the Q-team saved the Dutch taxpayer, roughly estimated, between 40–100 million euros, mainly by streamlining the projects, removing superfluous elements, battling against safety-upon-safety-upon-safety demands from the regions, and generally steering the designers in the direction of a more sober idiom which would thus blend the measures better in terms of the functional river landscape.

I sincerely hope that these experiences will be used in the Delta Program that is to be responsible for further "climate-proofing" the Netherlands. But we should not take that for granted. "Room-for-the-River" can also prove to be a White Raven (or a Black Stork in this case). It

still is an uphill process, due to the conjunctional tendencies I sketched above. Research studies, such as Christophe Girot's dealing with the problems of the Southwestern Delta, Kelly Shannon's and Bruno De Meulder's with the Mekong delta, Antje Stokman's working on the Elbe Estuary, result in making politicians look beyond their short-term interests. Regional design in my opinion is a unique product which we have to offer and is by far the most promising way to conduct future research, as it can include "free will" as a formative element in shaping the future, unlike more technical prognosis techniques and scenario building. Studies likes the ones shown in this booklet could prove of pivotal importance to this ongoing emancipatory struggle to move landscape architecture closer to center stage in policy processes such as this one. In the meantime, as I (and the London Underground before me) said, "Mind the gap, folks!"

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