

Interpreting territories: urban design's purchase on Holland's urbanizing West.

1. Multiple dimensions.

To plan on a regional level - giving guidance, maintaining qualities and achieving coherence - design has to be specific. Only then, regional planning and design truly begin. That's exactly what we do as an office nowadays: we make explicit designs, and tell people that it's not a plan, that it's merely 'a possibility'. But then we make use of that same design to derive many other things: to acquire knowledge, to establish communication, to determine paths of implementation, and to devise executive instruments for local administration. The end-image of that design – the plan, if you will – is only there to help us, to determine these things as designers. It can never be built in that particular shape or form, nor does it critically depend on such particular outcome. – excerpt of interview with Pepyn Godefroid, LA4Sale office, Amsterdam, February 2nd 2008.

When describing design activities as in the quote rendered above, picking one's words has become a delicate activity, especially in a regional planning environment. Like this designer's particular choice of words, the way designers phrase and talk about their own designs reflects the actual position these designs are in. Urban designs, and large scale designs in particular, run into many uncertainties: how to operate and how to communicate, how to read and how to explore opportunities in today's (extensive) urban territories. Holland, some of whose design projects this paper focuses on, is no exception to this predicament. This paper originates in a series of interviews conducted with a selective number of urban designers in Amsterdam's wider urban environment. They are part of an ongoing investigation which seeks to highlight urban design's critical assignment in today's urban territories. With this paper, I merely intend to juxtapose some of the large-scale design efforts that have recently focused on the city's urban fringe, either as an effort to reclaim it for public planning concerns or as a means to investigate and test out a variety of other agendas. Hence, it is not so much these design's specific content or any of its designerly strategies which informs the content of this paper, as much as it is their role and function within ongoing debates – debates that revolve around the chances, the 'threats and opportunities' that might govern the future of these territories.

The following designs thus all share a focus and a field of interest that, in terms of its scale and extent, commonly - though not necessarily - coincides with the so-called 'regional scale'. To this scale also corresponds to an arena: a multiplicity of interests, actors and concerns. Together with the arduous size and the characteristics of the chosen sites or territories, the 'regional' arena imposes its own set of demands and restrictions to the skills of the designer. The argument explored in this paper, is that the characteristics, opacities and incongruities of these territories (geographic, institutional or otherwise) cause their designs to work on several dimensions simultaneously. In exploring alternate conceptions of the territory, they often address different audiences (deliberately or not), while functioning on different levels of planning and public debate.

Current 'regional' designs, I will argue, therefore often take up and investigate more than a single dimension. With varying degrees of credibility, these urban designs not only talk about *what* to construct or to plan spatially, but also on *how* to realize these actions or how to *maneuver* people into doing so. In the same vein, these large scale designs can be successful tools in acquiring additional knowledge about the terrain, but they can be just as helpful in establishing communication and organizing debate.

Throughout this paper I will try to highlight some of these dimensions, as they clearly also govern the ways in which the territory is being rendered and re-imagined. While it should be possible to draw up a genealogy of the expertise developed in recent 'regional' designs, this is not my intention here. I will merely try to contrast a number of these designs through some of the interviews that have been carried out so far.

For this purpose, I have, somewhat arbitrarily, selected three separate sets of designs, which differ in location, in authorship and in timing, but also in intent. The first couple of designs share a common location and a timely focus on Amsterdam's urban fringe. These 'plans' underscore design's rather constrained use within the capital's regional planning debate. Nonetheless, they do try to develop a certain kind of working that corresponds to their perception of this arena.

Contrasting with those designs is the legacy of a five-yearly manifestation in urban design, called 'AIR', which has been taking place up until 2003. During each of its episodes, this design manifestation tried to stretch urban design's assignment to include different issues at different scales of the urban spectrum. In doing so, it repetitively switched over from one kind of working to another, thereby changing the purpose of the designs it would commission. The last set of illustrations is really just one design, be it that it goes under the guises of a 'housing survey'. As it goes by specific assessments of what planning instruments to adhere to, the on-site knowledge it develops during design marks out a different territory altogether.

As I gloss over all these designs, I will merely sketch some of their predominant dimensions, and put forward some of the issues that unite them or put them apart. While I'm particularly interested in these design's knowledge acquiring practices, such investigative dimension isn't necessarily the common denominator which they all equally share. From a more organizational point of view, what does unite all of the following designs however, is the fact they are all sort of in the dark about how to function in today's multi-level regional arena. Accordingly, they engage into different 'workings' that invariably go beyond the usual spatial dimension of a plan, and beyond ideas on how to physically construct it.

2. Amsterdam's canal and harbor area.

"I think it is kind of special to have a map this time, since there's a lot of talking in the region about the region. But very few of this talking was ever plotted onto the region's map. Drawing things into a map requires a weighing-up of actions, especially in this regional setting. [...] [Up until now,] this whole debate has never been more than a verbal discussion conducted in the broadest of terms." – John Breen, Urhahn Urban Design, Amsterdam, April 11th 2008.

For over half a century, Amsterdam's canal and harbor area has mainly been looked upon as an industrial harbor zone: planned through zoning plans, administered by provincial authorities and seven local communities, and controlled by environmental contours. Its perimeter lined with recreational areas shutting in the industry's future territorial claims. As an area onto itself, it has successfully warded off any issues of public accessibility and housing, and until recently has remained virtually untouched by any designerly (public) interest. Nonetheless, a number of recent players and designers have come to share a designerly interest in the area. The area still accommodates a range of seaport activities - dock industries that are viable though not too vibrant - which are unlikely to disappear but invite speculation nonetheless as to the future program and purpose of these docklands. While there's increasing pressure from various sides to accommodate more housing and recreational developments, the current pressure of dock-related industries is unlikely to subside.

The map referred to in the quote just above ('Vergezicht 2040')¹ represents the tensions and limitations imposed upon design in this context. Only distantly resembling a 'true design', the map is very much informed by the context in which it came about. It resembles the traditional format of a zoning plan, yet also contains clearer elements of design which are inspired by the topography of the site itself - its former dikes, polders, bulwarks and defenses, which explain the position of public recreational facilities and different points of outlook introduced onto the site.² Being commissioned by the Port Authorities itself,³ the plan seems to be more convincing however, in warding off the increasing public interest for this area by taking up the initiative onto itself. It merely draws out a physical outline for some of the actions that have often been debated about, but which have hardly ever been drawn in on any map. It thus encapsulates the Port Authority's vested interest – that is, safeguarding its future areas of development – into a planning vision that speaks of combined actions uniting both the harbor's and the broader public's planning concerns. The plan's intention then, is to build on the current momentum of this unlikely and unusual assignment. It aims to stimulate discussion while preserving consensus for as much as it can.

The second plan ('Perspectief Noordzeekanaalgebied')⁴ is less explicit about immediate planning opportunities. The plan stems from an individual initiative⁵ to highlight the strategic opportunities of an area whose potentials it sees as having remained 'critically underexposed' within the region. Consequently, it talks in much broader strategic gestures (grand gestures that connect the harbor to the airport, transform it into a mixed-use office park, and raise a line of dunes into the sea to accommodate the displaced harbor) and remains largely unconcerned about any roadmap to get to the planning vision ahead. The plan is of lesser interest, therefore, for its designerly gestures than it is for its intended use: a networking tool that should help to put the area on the agenda of some major economic stakeholders in that particular region.

While both plans remain somewhat indistinct in spatial terms – either they're being too cautious to be articulate or their target dates are lying too far ahead to be relevant – one might wonder as to why they're being deliberately inarticulate as designs. One plan calls itself a 'growing plan', trying to pick up consensus as it inches along towards a final map. The other merely calls itself a 'long-term strategy' or 'a perspective', and effectively sidesteps currently opposing points of view. While none of both really have any official planning status that might qualify them as a sort of planning instrument, there is little in their way of devising things that might label them as real designs either. Nonetheless, both anticipate on a kind of working that is closely linked to their (cautious or inarticulate) way of formulating things.

Another way of putting this, probably, might be to say that this other kind 'working' which both plans anticipate on, focuses rather on a dimension of gaining support and stimulating debate, than on any spatial dimension. Rather than expressing different spatial solutions, it is more like they both have different compasses of the institutional road ahead and the hurdles to be taken.

3. The AIR legacy: 'Architecture International Rotterdam'.

"Our approach started with the 'Kop van Zuid' manifestation and has become ever more refined since, that is in the way we prepare an architectural manifestation and constantly try to broaden and push back the limits of design.

¹ 'Vergezicht' translates into something like 'wide view' or vista.

² John Breen. Interview April 11th 2008.

³ The 'Vergezicht 2040' study was commissioned by the 'Masterplanbureau Noordzeekanaalgebied' as well as the 'Havenbedrijf Amsterdam' (Amsterdam Port Authority) itself.

⁴ Perspective on the North Sea Canal Area.

⁵ For which it received a grant.

It is about not seeing these limitations as limitations anymore, and about bringing about an integral design strategy: integral in terms of its design program, and integral in terms of its historical and cultural definition. We wanted to make those dimensions debatable and subject of discussion." – Anne-Mie Devolder, former curator and managing director of AIR, Rotterdam, March 7th 2008.

Quite different to the previous set of examples, is the inheritance of the AIR manifestation which took place in Rotterdam from 1979 to 2000. As an independent institution, AIR (Architecture International Rotterdam) aimed to crank up debates on the contemporary urban and architectural development of the city. It aimed to bring designers' views towards public administrators, commissioning parties and the broader public by informing and engaging them in a polemic.⁶

Two elements are of interest here, I think. First of all the expertise of the manifestation itself, which allowed it to cross from one kind of *working* to the next, pushing the invited designers to adjust their designs to a changing purpose and function. I will just briefly retrace some of these key changes without going into too much detail about each individual edition. Within this line-up of editions, the 1998 edition merits some individual attention. AIR Southbound investigated the island of *Hoeksche Waard* to the South of Rotterdam, a predominantly agrarian area that started to feel the city breathing down its neck. AIR invited designers to develop strategies, visions and concepts as a way of investigating a different planning and design assignment in these areas. This research brief was dictated by discussions at the time, concerning the extending development of the city, the shrinking of the countryside and large-scale changes in the fields of agriculture, recreation, nature conservation, traffic and transport.⁷

On a secondary note, contrasting individual designs to a 20-year manifestation might come across as an unequal comparison. It's not so much the functioning of the individual designs, however, that I want to put into relief here, as much as it is the function of design as a practice. Within its 20 years of history, the AIR manifestation took on a gradually shifting role and function, in which design had to look for a changing application. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to summarize the work of 20 years of debate and design into a few paragraphs. In view of this paper's intention, it would lead me too far astray to describe any of the invited designs in detail. Air's legacy can be boiled down however, to some of the following observations:

- AIR organized the urban debate and repetitively sought to extend the urban planning assignment, either through architecture, through landscape or through urban design.
- In investigating the potential assignment of planning, design proved to be an appropriate tool, though not the only tool. (AIR became increasingly inter- and multidisciplinary towards the end of its history)
- AIR never had the intention to arrive at a final plan, let alone to point out the means to physically carry out such a plan.⁸
- AIR went through a learning process that, as a manifestation, allowed it to develop different kinds of working in which design and its wider application would be central. This process allowed designers to apply design differently, and to work on different dimensions in their designs. Designs were put into action as a tool for investigation, as a vehicle for public support and as a panel of discussion.
- By and large, AIR thus went through a three-stage transition:⁹

⁶ Devolder, A.-M. et al (ed.). *De Toekomst van de Hoeksche Waard*. AIR Zuidwaarts Southbound, Rotterdamse Kunststichting, 2009, p. 3.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Anne-Mie Devolder. Interview March 7th 2008.

- *One* - Readjusting the framework in which to conceive of the city (*Kop van Zuid* 1982).

The 1988 episode rediscovered the force of the architectural image and imagination. This imagination adjusted the local framework in which to conceive of the city and to define the project of the city.¹⁰ The episode marks the local transition to a tradition in planning that sees the 'inspiring qualities' of the city's former docklands and the poetical force of architecture as being specific and tangible starting points for a 'discontinuous and partial transformation of the city.'

- *Two* - Specifying partial planning research and putting blind spots of urban planning onto the agenda. (*Spoortunneltracé* 1988, *AIR-Alexander* 1993).

These episodes would gradually see much more precise applications of architecture than the preceding episode of 1988. Blind spots which were being focused on include: the repair of urban tissue around removed lines of infrastructure, revaluation of post-war settlements in the city's periphery and their cultural revitalization.

- *Three* - Offering a stage for research and debate (*AIR-Southbound*, 1998).

AIR's penultimate edition decidedly looked towards the regional scale and sought to engage polemic on how to achieve a synthesis between historical, cultural and landscape values on one side and new functions on the other.

During its 1998 episode (*Southbound*), AIR anticipated on issues which it perceived as upcoming: the extending development of the city, changes in agriculture, recreation, and alike. It prospectively surveyed these through the designs that it invited. At the same time, the designs allowed AIR to rephrase these issues, to put them into relief and to qualify them.

When asked what had influenced AIR to redefine its goals and purpose each time and what had influenced its decisions, its former director Anne-Mie Devolder argues:

*"The choice of architects was never strategic but was based on their content and profile. The purpose here was to get different answers to the same question. If we chose too many designers of the same breed or kind, it wouldn't benefit our actual goal, which was basically to open up this initial question."*¹¹

While this 'initial question' was explored and opened up by a series of parallel designs rather than by any individual design itself, it also led to a series of different perspectives on the same territory. Skimming through results of its 1998 *Hoeksche Waard* edition, the designs that prove the most convincing, are the ones that seem to tap into new realities, thereby bringing into view a completely different territory.

Design here, one might argue, becomes a *medium* through which questions can be brought up and investigated. Arguably so, in the case of AIR (and its *Southbound* edition in particular) it is therefore not so much any spatial dimension or any dimension of realization that draws attention, but rather their investigative dimension, which seems to have come about on a double level. First, as a manifestation, AIR redefined the use of the invited designs for each of its editions to fit the purpose of that edition and the general question it was hoping to raise. While individual designs could be oblivious to this general intention, collectively each would add to the knowledge being acquired. Second, on a the level of individual designs, designers would be pushed to develop alternative images of the territory as a way of investigating the question that each was asked to raise. Addressing this 'investigative dimension' led to convincing images of the territory in some, and to less convincing renditions of the territory in the other. The point being that the designerly investigation of certain preceding interests and questions instills the territory with an alternative view, which can be convincing or less

⁹ While there were eight episodes of AIR in total, I'm referring primarily to 'Kop van Zuid' (1982), 'Spoortunneltracé' (railway tunnel line, 1988), 'AIR-Alexander' (1993), and 'AIR-Zuidwaards/Southbound' (1998).

¹⁰ Anne-Mie Devolder. Interview March 7th 2008.

¹¹ Anne-Mie Devolder. Interview March 7th 2008.

convincing depending on whether the question being posed really relates to the actual terrain or not. It corresponds to an investigative dimension, which seems to have spearheaded many of AIR's invited designs, thereby feeding debate and acquiring public support.

4. The territory re-interpreted.

"When looking at our map, people get confused because it seems like the map's strategy is to avoid all urban features, as if anything we propagate nowadays has to fit within this new-arcadian image, as if we would think that people's remaining demand today is for such rustic idyllic housing only. That's not what this strategy says however. It is not an answer to 'the' housing demand in general, but it's just a specific answer to a very specific question concerning the preservation of rather the creation of landscape qualities." – Pepyn Godefroid, LA4Sale office, Amsterdam, February 2nd 2008.

Returning to the first set of designs at the beginning of this text, the debate in which they figure is quite limited compared to AIR's legacy described above. AIR however, was strongly backed and supported by local administrations as well as being thoroughly embedded in an independent cultural organization (Kunststichting Rotterdam). Questions as to whether any of its knowledge would eventually seep through in plans and end up being carried out, did not matter greatly in AIR's intentions. Nonetheless, AIR fulfilled a clear role in pulling local debates, something which is largely missing in Amsterdam's current 'regional' debates. While this lack of a critical, independent and pulling institution, doesn't account for the Harbor Area's rather limited focus on design-led investigations, it obviously does account for the differences with AIR (which remains a rather exceptional *deus-ex-machina* to date).

At present Amsterdam's Canal Area maps have only a limited focus on acquiring extra designerly knowledge, shaped as they both are by organizational concerns of consensus or by their sidestepping of today's factual points of contention. While both plans obviously still maintained an investigative dimension, their strategic strengths seemed to lie more in rallying support or in maintaining it. It seems to stand in the way of a more focused investigation of the area and its qualities. This is not an inevitable outcome, however, as the following example goes to illustrate.

'Waterlands Wonen'¹² focuses on the rather pastoral, agricultural North of Amsterdam, an area that is predominantly defined by individual houses and farms which combine into a range of townlets and villages of varying sorts and sizes. It's a design that comes under the guise of a housing survey, commissioned by the Provincial Authorities. It seeks to simultaneously investigate the different types of settlement at hand, while defining these settlements' limits of extension with reference to the area's predicted housing stock. The survey's main goal lies in trying to lay down criteria of verification as to how much a street, a settlement or a village may extend without fundamentally altering the settlement's cultural and historical image. As a prospective 'survey', this study is particularly design-infused as it tries to define and formulate these criteria in spatial terms, for which it needs to investigate and determine the essential spatial qualities of the Waterland landscape. The final map of the survey thus paints up an image of a territory, that is particular colored by the question its authors sought to resolve on it.

For all the considerations it makes, LA4Sale's design is formulated on a local, small-scale and mostly individual housing agenda. It sees the small-scale building envelope as a pivotal means in organizing and controlling Waterland's living environment (as opposed to larger-scale construction efforts which have been the rule rather than the exception).

¹² Living or housing in *Waterland*. Sporting a lot of pastures, waterways, and canals, Waterland is a rather bucolic agricultural area to the North of Amsterdam.

Correspondingly, the territory comes out as a patchwork of small centers sporting individual typologies and customized sets of local planning criteria.

The assessment to do so, Pepyn Godefroid (one of the scheme's authors) tells us, was both spatial and organizational. Design was the instrument that allowed them to define the right criteria for local planning authorities: it allows them to assess individual building permits and to weigh up correct policy decisions on a local or provincial planning level. Such stringent criteria had to be tested out prospectively, for which design came in as a pre-eminently appropriate tool. Simultaneously design also allowed them to survey the Waterland landscape in terms of the area's individual settlement typologies and to check its overall coherence when increasing numbers of building plots would be allowed. Thus, while the scheme (or 'survey') itself is still very much regional in scale, its instruments of control are not. The scheme draws on local planning competence rather than on the authority of a regional *plan* as an instrument of control. As the scheme tested out this assumption and chose on which instruments of control to use, other degrees of freedom surfaced, and led to a different conception of the territory altogether. However, whether this newly conceived territory is advisable or even desirable is a question that probably goes beyond the input of this individual design.

More conclusively speaking, by juxtaposing these somewhat disparate designs, different dimensions could be distinguished. These dimensions cannot be seen separate from each other. In some instances, like the last, one dimension constructively fed into the other. Here, investigative and organizational ideas informed the schemes spatial understanding. At other times, such as in the Canal area's designs, the focus on one dimension seemed to impede a clearer strategy in the other (the organizational blocking the investigative). Throughout this text, the focus progressively turned towards the investigative. The way particular questions or assumptions are being tested out and investigated in a design, can lead to different understandings of the terrain - to different constructions of its make-up, to new maps, to new representations of the territory. At worst these can be read as mere justifications of a planning agenda that needed to be resolved on the land.

What can be called into question, through one individual design goes only so far. As a local design manifestation AIR built a legacy in focusing attention on particular urban issues. Its debates were spearheaded by designs that allowed it to fine-tune its starting questions and to recalibrate the role of designs, adding new dimensions and instigating new traditions. Whether those changes were really strategic changeovers or resulted out of a combination of circumstances, remains open for debate. Nonetheless, the matter invites us to speculate on whether a different assessment of design, its purpose and its various dimensions, could lead to a more structured debate on the large-scale areas and the many questions that might, could, should or should not be resolved on it. If we all think that Waterland is indeed such a beautifully arcadian place, how should we keep it that way. By what means, but also: at what cost?