

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

The Netherlands -- Civic Design for the State [Public Service Design Abroad]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k47754w>

Journal

Places, 9(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Rijnboutt, Kees

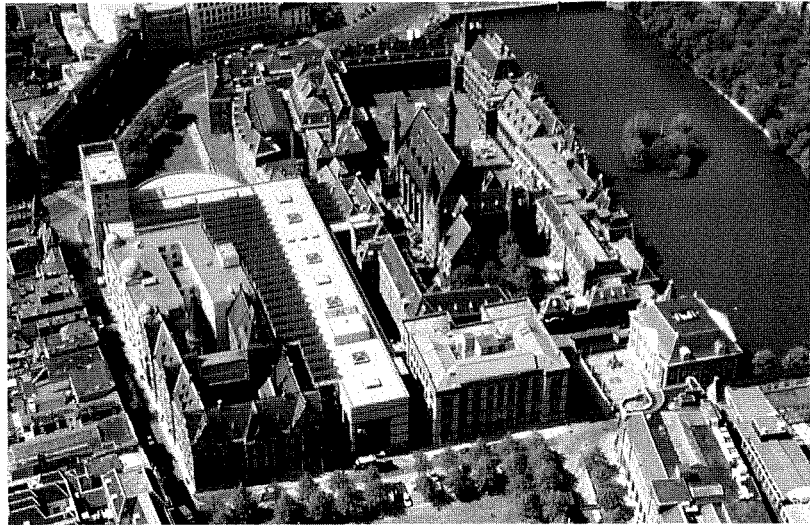
Publication Date

1994-07-01

Peer reviewed

Civic Design for the State

Kees Rijnboutt



The quality of the the constructed environment, the way it is perceived, is an important factor in people's sense of well being, both as individuals and in their interactions with others. This is probably one of the most frequently studied themes in regard to the human-made environment, yet very different views on the question have been held during different periods.

In The Netherlands, for many years, the government was insufficiently aware of its own position as a builder of a physical, architectural environment. This was so in spite of the fact that the complex of buildings housing our parliament and government, the Binnenhof, is an exemplary place — an open and public complex that you can touch, enter and photograph and which you can even walk straight through.

In the last decade, the government has become increasingly aware of its central role in the shaping the quality of that environment. At the same time the government, in keeping with its policy of pulling back in general, is pursuing the development of its own facilities through other parties, namely the open market, or through cooperative public-private projects. (Nevertheless, the government is the The Netherlands' largest commissioner of building construction.)

As the state or chief architect for the government of The Netherlands, I

am responsible for the safeguarding of the urban design and the architectural quality of government buildings, good maintenance of listed monuments and landmarks owned by the government, and the quality and execution of visual art in newly constructed state buildings. Increasingly, I function as an advisor to other departments, such as roads and waterways, and defense, in their activities concerning architecture and urban design.

The strategic plan for accommodating government offices is the Government Housing Plan, revised every four years by Parliament. In addition, in 1991, the ministers of social housing, physical planning and environment and the minister of welfare, health and cultural affairs published a joint document on architectural policy. The policy lays out three aspects to design quality — user value, cultural value and future value. These are the three familiar Vitruvian values — *utilitas*, *venustas* and *firmitas*. The policy document explicitly states that the role and task of the government are to set examples in the area of urban design and architecture, and that, especially in the case of incorporating a building in an urban context, government should be aware of its role as a catalyst.

It is one thing to draw up a policy document in which society accords itself the right to stimulate architec-

ture. It is quite another thing to create appropriate, market-oriented and beautiful or relevant buildings when one is working in such a rapidly changing context.

We only do business with developers and investors when agreement on the choice of architect is reached in advance. The whole process of design is accompanied and stimulated by the state architect and his staff. Needless to say, the functional requirements have been determined beforehand. And the location of the building must meet requirements for accessibility by public transportation.

As to monuments, an extensive and culturally significant stock of important buildings has come under the jurisdiction of the government; about 20 percent of the total area that the Government Buildings Agency has available is in listed buildings or others of equal importance. These buildings include the major examples of state architecture, such as palaces, parliament buildings, the round prisons still in use in Arnhem, Breda and Haarlem, and various court buildings. The care and appropriate use of both these showpieces and some 300 other listed buildings managed and used by the government requires special expertise and, in some cases, extra money.

A listed building is often less efficient than a new office block. On the

other hand, it offers intangible benefits that its users are aware of and appreciate. A good building will continue to function when the agency responsible for the building continues to put itself to the test. By good, I mean that the building is capable of adequately fulfilling its role as accommodation at reasonable cost.

The time is now for us to concern ourselves with the future value of the environment we have built (both the buildings and their contexts). A building can no longer be seen as an object with a static function. Flexibility and adaptability are prime criteria for assessing a structure that must last for fifty years, before a decision can be made about its eligibility to be listed. Future value in the sense of use, of course, much more than the inventive solutions of built in structures, flexible cabling routes or computer floors.

Historic city centers, for example, have shown that they possess future value, which lies in its ability to change without essentially altering its character while at the same time gaining in meaning. Mixing the functions of living and working, environment differentiation and versatility go hand in hand with the atmosphere created by the buildings and the public.

We are experimenting with this more than ever with our new initiatives. As much as possible, government buildings with a public function are located within the existing urban limits in order to benefit from reciprocal effects or to exert a positive influence in terms of openness, liveliness, durability and safe streets. For buildings with a public function, peripheral locations where they tower above motorways are strictly taboo!

I believe it is extremely important to pay close attention to the quality of public space, to the design of the city, as an essential element in a good devel-

opment strategy. Since in The Netherlands the government doesn't actually do the building anymore, you may wonder what the developers who put up the buildings into which we move and the institutional investors who provide the money think about our preoccupation with all these architectural and urban standards. During a symposium one of them said:

When you're dealing with the level, the standard of a project, there are things that are not really necessary — a park, works of art, shops, a square and other facilities. But they are necessary to raise the standard of the development.

The problem is that you cannot recover the costs in the first instance, because when it is first rented the price level is determined by the competing buildings. That's the rub. You pay for something, but you don't immediately get it back. It is a mistake that has certainly been made by some investors. They build cheaply to make a profit in the short term, while losing money in the long term. Going for quality pays off in the second or third rental.

Why is Rockefeller Center in New York so much better known worldwide and so much more expensive than the buildings next to it? Purely because of its quality in architecture, in urban design, in the quality in general for the people who work in it, visit it or just pass by. That is a reputation that has to be earned. Be sure that it does not come overnight; you have to work at it.

(Opposite page and below)
The Hague, extension to the lower house of the States General. Design by Pi de Bruijn, Amsterdam.
Photos courtesy author.

