INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE

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Randstad Holland: modernism in a dynamic delta-landscape, and beyond

Abstract

The spatial structure of the Randstad is strongly linked to the logics of the Rhine-Meuse delta-landscape and the technology of water-management and hydraulic engineering. The process of urbanization and densification of the Randstad-area accelerated from the 13th century, when the first dike-constructions provided a relatively safe ‘peat-continent’ between the two large water-structures of the delta: the Southwest delta and the Zuiderzee (now IJssel-lake). During the 19th and 20th centuries large scale hydraulic engineering works (Zuiderzee-works and Delta-works) contributed to a rational organization of urbanization and industrialization of the western part of the Netherlands. Besides, the strong emphasis on major engineering works at the national scale stimulated a culture of state-organized top-down planning. Both concepts, Randstad and large scale hydraulic works, were related with the concept of the Netherlands as a nation-state and with the rise of the Welfare State. The concepts of Randstad and Delta-works both contributed substantially to the conception of The Netherlands as a modern project, intending to plan and control the dynamics of society as well as of nature.

From the start of the 21st century, the concept of the Welfare State but also the concepts of Randstad and the hydraulic works as expressions of a rationalized and engineered urban landscape find themselves in a process of erosion. Changing economic conditions, changing ideas on nature and ecology, climate change and a changing planning-culture, including an erosion of the meaning and role of the nation-state, resulted in the start of a fundamental paradigm-shift. The question is if the new paradigm will be post-modern, or anti-modern, or a more differentiated and shaded variation of modernism.

A total farewell to central planning and large scale engineering will be difficult in this country. Many centuries of engineering resulted in a situation that the survival of the country has become dependent from a continuation of a certain minimum of central planning and engineering.
The National Government initiated a second Delta-program, in order to provide an update of the safety of the densely populated western part of the Netherlands against flooding. This current delta-program can be considered as a new challenge for urban planning and design: to find a new balance between decision-making at the large (national) scale and processes of self-organization at the regional and local scale.

The future strategy for flood-defense and water-management will be of decisive importance for the spatial configuration of the Randstad, which tends to change into two metropolitan regions: the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region and the Rotterdam-The Hague Metropolitan Region. The importance of a reconsideration of the relations between strategies concerning hydraulic engineering and spatial strategies in both regions, will be illustrated with the outcomes of two recent design-competitions organized by the Eo Wijers Foundation, as well as with some results of several design-studies in the present 5th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam.

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