

INTERNATIONAL NEW TOWN INSTITUTE

New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries Seminar report

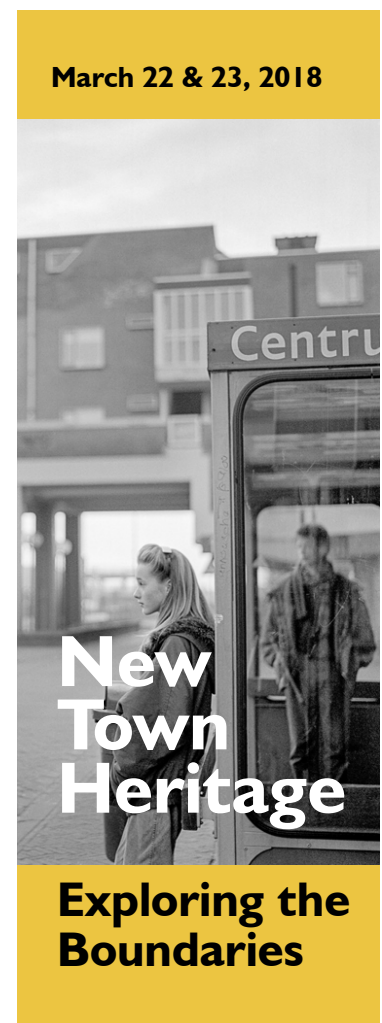


March 2018

On the 22nd and the 23rd of March 2018 the International New Town Institute in Rotterdam hosted the *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar. This two-day seminar discussed the future of New Towns and New Town history in one excursion and a day full panel-discussions and presentations. Bringing together an impressive number of Dutch and international experts from the fields of heritage, architecture and project development, the *New Town Heritage* seminar discussed the central questions: how can we view New Town architecture and planning as heritage, and how can we set the research and knowledge agenda for New Town Heritage management in the future?

The words 'heritage' or 'history' are not commonly associated with New Towns or post war neighbourhoods. Their heritage-legitimacy doesn't necessarily come with age as they are relatively young. Aesthetically speaking, New Town architecture and urban design is often constructed in such a way that their unique character is hard to define and they're often perceived as dull and repetitive. New Towns conjure images of large, top down planned neighbourhoods with mass constructed housing that look like someone used a copy-paste tool: long lanes with medium-rise flats constructed out of grey concrete. Streets and neighbourhoods in which you can't really separate the end from the beginning. Still, many New Towns have good design qualities, such as an often high quality public space, which are in many cases under threat by new large-scale redevelopment projects. Now is the right time to bring New Town architecture and planning under attention and see how we can evaluate these qualities, tangible or intangible, from a heritage perspective.

As with any period in architectural and planning history, it takes some time for both the public and experts to appreciate the particular style and characteristics of New Towns, and some distance to recognize their historical value. Now their historical value is being recognised more and more: in an increasing number of cases, New Town sites in Europe such as Vallingby (Sweden), Nova Huta (Poland) and Milton Keynes (UK) are being designated as heritage on a national level. Many of these places have been designated thanks to their architectural quality, but also because of



what they symbolize, and the ideology that was part and parcel of the original design. The discussion on New Town (or Post-65) planning and architecture is alive and kicking, as was shown in the *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar organised by the International New Town Institute in collaboration with Oxford Brookes and Coventry University. This report discusses the main events and key discussion points of the two days.

DEFINING NEW TOWN DNA

Different ways of looking at New Towns from a heritage perspective have resulted in different ways of urban (re)development in practice, which stood at the centre of the *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar. The excursion of the first day led the participants through two first-generation New Town areas in Rotterdam, Hoogvliet and Pendrecht, which had been redeveloped during the past decade. Tour guide Michelle Provoost showed how the redevelopments in Hoogvliet, originally designed in the late '40s by CIAM architect Lotte Stam-Beese, had a particular joint redevelopment approach in which the focus lay on discovering the area's characteristics and defining its 'DNA'. Many stakeholders were involved in this process, coming from the municipal planning department, local politics, development agencies and housing corporations. These stakeholders evaluated the existing qualities of the original masterplan in search of guiding principles to use for Hoogvliet's redevelopment, instead of applying an all-encompassing master-plan themselves. The guiding principles were formulated in the so called Logica-project.



| New Town Hoogvliet

Different highlights of this redevelopment process were visited during the tour, such as the co-housing project for musicians which aimed at attracting a new target audience to renewed Hoogvliet. This project delivered 38 single-family homes with each their own soundproof music room located in the housing complex courtyard. The roof of these music rooms functions as a communal green space. In this project, the immaterial heritage of the neighbourhood principle was reinterpreted, replacing the former top down approach to community with a small scale and bottom up organized updated version. Another visited highlight was the SchoolParasites project: special temporary classrooms with adaptable functions improving the facilities for the local primary schools. Both projects illustrated the community-focused redevelopment of Hoogvliet in which the changing make-up of Hoogvliet's population was an essential

part. While formerly known as a crime-ridden ghetto, Hoogvliet is now the habitat of a diverse community in class and cultural background.

The second tour of the day started at housing corporation Woonstad Rotterdam in Pendrecht. Pendrecht too was a neighbourhood in Rotterdam which for a long time was known for its low employment rate and poverty. Tour guides Endry van Velzen from De Nijl Architects and Edwin Dortland from Woonstad Rotterdam showed us how Pendrecht had been subjected to 20 years of renovation by means of different projects with their own unique redevelopment approaches focusing on both the housing and public space or the area. The neighbourhood became less car-centric and roads were redesigned into green strips with room for water, cyclists and pedestrians. The large scale redevelopments thus focused on a continuation of the existing qualities of the original master plan of Pendrecht, designed by Lotte Stam-Beese and Van den Broek & Bakema Architects. Also, Pendrecht was one of the first neighbourhoods in which a restorative approach was taken towards 50's housing blocks, notably the Fishbowl flats. Thus, the renovation of Pendrecht shows a deep understanding of the original urban design principles of Pendrecht and a capability of reinterpreting them in the context of contemporary (social) housing needs.



2 Fishbowl Flats, Pendrecht

EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES

The Thursday excursion prior to the *New Town Heritage Seminar*-lectures and discussions illustrated the different sides to the heritage management debate. Even though both areas weren't generally thought of as places with much historical value, both the Hoogvliet and Pendrecht redevelopment projects looked for a considerable continuation of either the large- or small-scale physical lay-out of the original plan. The following Seminar on Friday was set up to discuss these different ways of looking at New Town architecture and planning from a variety of perspectives by inviting representatives from the fields of heritage and architecture history, but also project development and different private and public institutions. Here, too, the question on how to define the New Town DNA and what to do

with it was central to the New Town heritage discussion. This discussion was divided in two parts in which the first part covered large-scale New Town heritage – planning and design.

The day started with two introductory presentations on New Towns in both the UK and in the Netherlands. Sabine Coady Schaebitz started by introducing the New Town Heritage Network and the reason of the series of New Town seminars that have been held in the UK during the past year. She presented the New Town Heritage Network, which has been initiated on the occasion of a renewed debate on the functioning of New Towns in Europe. Many New Towns have been under review during the past decades as they were in need of refurbishment and renewal, and increasingly under threat of demolition. In order to stop this tendency, it is necessary to ease out the qualities of the New Towns in terms of urban design, architecture, public space, and governance. There is a need to address this before it is too late due to demolition - more research, more community engagement, more pro-active planning is required. Sabine concluded on how New Towns across Europe are important to urban and cultural studies because they embody particular built forms and urban designs that are associated with a singular moment in the social and economic heritage of these countries. They are a key element of British and European post-war history and therefore constitute an important heritage asset which needs to be analysed and evaluated as part of the wider heritage discourse. The New Town Heritage Network can be a vehicle to do this.

When exploring the boundaries for post-1965 heritage, can we use the strategies that were developed for the older postwar architecture and urban planning from the 1950s-1960s? Michelle Provoost explained how in the Netherlands the modernist, standardized, orthogonally composed New Towns of the 1950's started to become problematic at the end of the last Century. The dilapidated housing stock was mostly rental social housing owned by housing cooperations. Large scale demolition and new building was seen as the remedy to make these New Towns future proof. Appreciation for the existing qualities of the architecture or planning came only after both civic society, academia and the national government started to highlight the possibilities of combining development and preservation. This approach towards 1950s-1960s neighborhoods and New Towns, in which there is an understanding of their historic meaning and an emphasis on continuity, is now widespread in the Netherlands.

However, the starting situation for possible heritage strategies in the more recent generation of the 'groekernen' (literally: growthcores) of the 1970s-1980s couldn't be more different. Some of these differences reflect the changing concepts of design and organization with which the

groeikernen were built: small scale, labyrinthic urban fabrics with little standardization and a larger percentage of owner occupied housing means that large scale renewal plans led by large institutions such as housing cooperations, become unlikely. The role of residents in renewal and heritage issues will no doubt have to be more significant. The groeikernen were designed with an abundance of single family homes within an urban structure that was strongly car-oriented with lots of asphalt and buffer green. With a growing focus on sustainability, energy efficiency and an increasingly diverse society, these New Towns pose a series of urgent questions; even more so because their location in the most affluent part of the Netherlands leads to densification plans during the present building boom. Is this an opportunity for the living quality of the New Towns or a threat to their most vulnerable characteristic, the green space?

From a heritage point of view, the groeikernen put forward some interesting dilemma's: apart from boasting approximately 1 million houses, the landscape of the groeikernen is dotted with the symbols of the welfare state of the 1970s: buildings for education, health care, welfare, self-development and public services. Many of these buildings are empty, under threat or already demolished. When the intangible heritage of the welfare state is disappearing, what should happen to its physical symbols? A thorough understanding of the meaning of 1970's architecture and urban planning within its social context should underpin our dealings with it.

CURATING THE CITY

The morning program started with two in-depth lectures on different New Town development cases in the Netherlands: Zoetermeer and Almere. Architectural historian Wijnand Galema discussed the challenges Zoetermeer (designated as a New Town in 1962) is facing in light of recent plans to densify the city to be able to house up to 35.000 extra inhabitants. This 'jump in scale' for Zoetermeer will no doubt have an impact on the original layout of the city. The city plans to densify mostly in the city centre, at the city's edge and at infrastructural crossings and not in the existing neighbourhoods since there is no support for this with existing inhabitants. It will be a challenge to both local government officials and private developers to manage this growth in a way that considers the existing framework and green space of the city that have been characteristic for the original design.

The second talk by Hans Venhuizen, artist and PhD researcher on the continuation of history in the urban development of Almere (planned around 1970), discussed a way of managing growth and development with his project *The Game of Continuity in Almere Newtown*. His community-led and participatory approach using gaming methods to interpret and

mobilize phenomena from the past would curate the history of the city with the aim of strengthening senses of belonging through the creation of historical continuity. In this regard, New Town heritage can in fact be anything you want.

Developing a heritage management approach is easier said than done. As Hilde Blank, director of project developer AM Concepts explained in the first panel discussion of the day, the role of private parties in regional development has become significantly more important since the past decades. Often, dozens of different stakeholders are involved in a redevelopment process, making it a complex and time-intensive process. Hilde Blank used the recent redevelopment of the Amsterdam 'Bijlmerbajes' (prison) area, a post-war urban complex, as an example. Here, too, the different stakeholders are looking for the area's DNA and leading characteristics to formulate a strategy for the area instead of using a top-down planning scheme. An approach that transcends the classic conservation-based way of defining and protecting heritage.



3 Zoetermeer



4 Render of the new Bijlmerbajes plan - finding a balance between re-use and new design

HERITAGE MANAGEMENT AS SOCIAL WORK

In the Netherlands, we live in a time in which heritage management has changed from a static to a more dynamic practice adjustable to the development of the city and the needs of its inhabitants. Heritage management, therefore, has grown to be less institutionalised and closer to the public than before. At the same time the existing heritage management institutions are struggling to find the balance between heritage management and continuous change and development, and how to manage the increasing demand for a more democratic and diverse heritage management practice. The different panellists of the Seminar's afternoon addressed these questions from their own professional perspectives.

Since the 20th century, heritage management has in an increasing way been an institutionalised practice. Since the first Monuments Act of 1961, the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE) has been one of the most important and influential institutions in this practice, tasked with listing protected

monuments and making legislation on how to protect monuments and monumental areas. Anita Blom, RCE's expert on Post-war and Post-1965 heritage, explained how the Agency has since the past decades moved away from heritage protection by means of lists and fixed criteria. Instead, they focus on architecture in the context of today's and future challenges. Because it is a difficult task to estimate the importance of the architectural design of such a recent period, she stated that temporary protection would be an option to protect New Town heritage. This way, it would be possible to buy the time needed to be able to put New Town heritage in a clear historical context and put it in the perspective of contemporary urban development. After all, heritage is a dynamic phenomenon – what we value right now might not be what we'll value tomorrow.

The heritage management professionals of today also face the challenge of bringing New Town heritage closer to the public. With the increasing democratization in heritage management public engagement has become an important part. The other panelists, Jouke van der Werf from the municipal Aesthetics Committee of Almere, Anouk de Wit from the Van Eesteren Museum in Amsterdam-West and young heritage professional Teun van den Ende discussed the several ways in which they concern themselves with this challenge. This could be by means of events, participatory planning practices or through the use of for example, social media. Heritage management has, as was stated during the panel, developed into a social practice, in which the role of the heritage expert is in a certain way becoming more like that of a social worker. The heritage expert can mediate between what is to be protected and what the public values most. Thus, it is the role of the expert to develop common ground for heritage. The difficult question that remains and will perhaps in this context always remain, is how to find a balance between the different roles of experts and authority and the wishes of different communities and their capacity to value New Town architecture in a historical perspective.



5 Visiting the Van Eesteren Museum,
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NEXT STEPS

The *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar concluded with a final panel on the research and action agenda for the future. It compared the situation from the Netherlands with that of the UK with input from New Town Heritage Network founders Bob Colenutt and Sabine Coady Schaebitz, and members David Fée and Mike Taylor. Of course, due to its

political history the situation regarding heritage management and urban development in the UK is quite different: less government-controlled and much more privatized. This makes the precariousness of New Town heritage in the UK quite a bit more substantial, as there is little appreciation for 'the concrete stock' and even no possibility to get a mortgage for would-be buyers. Attempts of private developers to actually work with history and heritage are quite scarce, especially concerning New Towns. It seems that if we really want New Town architecture and planning to be recognized on a wider scale and throughout more disciplines, we need to actively engage in promoting it. However, the recent appreciation for brutalist architecture shows also taste in the UK can change.

The *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar focused on New Town heritage by both widening the topic making it a case of not only heritage management but also of urban development and social practice, and simultaneously zooming in to focus on New Town architecture by looking for definitions and handles to define it as a heritage category. A successful example of bottom-up awareness of postwar heritage came from panelist Marco Stout, founder of Platform Wederopbouw (Reconstruction) Rotterdam. He explained how his platform became a successful example of the increasing democratization of heritage, as he as a non-heritage expert successfully promoted the reconstruction architecture of Rotterdam through storytelling on the history of the neighborhood. Only later, organizations such as the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency became interested and involved. The democratization of heritage and bottom-up heritage valuing is a good and perhaps natural thing in light of the changed political and economic situation of today's heritage management practice. An organization like the New Town Heritage Network can possibly help the case for valuing New Town architecture and planning by connecting the worlds of civic society and experts and by making New Town heritage accessible and understandable for all kinds of people.



6 Excursions and storytelling on the Rotterdam reconstruction period. Picture: Platform Wederopbouw Rotterdam

The New Towns Heritage Network has been established with the purpose of sharing research and policy on the architectural heritage value of the Post War New Towns in the UK and Mainland Europe. Even though the contexts of the UK and countries like the Netherlands differ substantially in regard to architecture and heritage management, it is still very useful to share experiences and success stories like the ones of Hoogvliet, Pendrecht, Almere, Zoetermeer or Platform Wederopbouw Rotterdam. The lessons

learned and awareness created can perhaps make up for some of the lack of design expertise in local politics, which was defined as a potential threat to New Town architecture and planning during the last panel discussion.

During the final remarks of the *New Town Heritage: Exploring the Boundaries* seminar the panel concluded that new initiatives based on the combination between bottom-up heritage evaluation and the more institutionalized expert views, in the context of the international New Towns Heritage Network, might prove to be a good action point for the near future to actively make some steps towards valuing, protecting or using New Town heritage. Moreover, the European Heritage Year has provided us with the occasion to make bold statements on New Town heritage protection on a European scale. The New Towns Heritage Network is planning on using this momentum, and is currently making steps towards the creation of a New Town Manifesto. Hopefully, this Manifesto will be the incentive for both experts and public to take action.



