

The Government Architect's agenda

Preface

In September 2015 I, Floris Alkemade, became the Government Architect. With great commitment and in great depth, I began working at a smooth running studio consulting on current projects based on a number of specialities. In addition, the *Board of Government Advisers* (consisting of the Government Architect as well as the Government Adviser for Landscape and Water and the Government Adviser for City and Infrastructure), which by virtue of my appointment I became chairman of, is a fine, parallel-operating institute, a think tank that brings a variety of themes to be examined in more detail to the table.

My hand-over dossier included an overwhelming seventy-four projects in progress. Being dropped into that by parachute and immediately diving in at full speed is a fascinating experience. Various roles had to be strung together to pull it off.

Those roles comprised a rich mixture of activities: consulting on transformations and disposal of government real estate; redesigning monuments; various art applications; new construction projects; architect selections; judging contests; area development; meeting with educational and union organisations; giving lectures and interviews; and, as at the Lakenhal in Leiden, sometimes offering an additional view as an arbiter when there are conflicting opinions.

The professional architects group also expects the Government Architect to be a standard bearer for the profession and to take the lead in the discussion on new positioning of architects.

The spectrum is exceptionally broad: from consulting on renovating and redesigning Royal Palaces to discussions with the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) on how to properly accommodate the growing stream of refugees.

The quality and relevance of the Government Architect are indubitably embedded in this rich diversity. I can be approached on many areas when design quality and the contextual issues associated with it are concerned. The question naturally is how can one bring direction to this multitude of activities: what must we dedicate ourselves to, what are the leading themes? The choice for a focus on the content characterises the position of the Government Architect.

This is one of the reasons why I participated in a large number of introductory talks within and outside of the departments. It provided me with a fascinating image of the mental capacity that can be put to use for the spatial agenda, as well as of the opportunities to work together. I also obtained an overview of the Government policy, in which many different interests play a role.

Having been on the job for half a year now, the lines for a new agenda that should serve as a guide to make a maximum impact on the role of the Government Architect in the near future are becoming clearer and clearer.

Various coordinating, current themes and assignments are being presented to this end, and, in the main, cover the relationship between the dynamics of Government Real Estate and the social objectives that need to be considered in the process.

As an adviser to the State, the Government Architect acts independently, and his tasks are clearly described: 'The Government Architect stimulates and monitors the urban development suitability and architectonic quality of government buildings. He focuses particular attention on monuments and on the use of the visual arts in government buildings. Solicited or unsolicited, he also advises the government on the architectural policy.'

No matter how clear this description is, it only has an indirect connection with the social relevance of the task of a Government Architect. Now that the Central Government is posed to dispose of a great deal of real estate, the Netherlands Court of Audit was one of the bodies that, in its report '*Housing by the Central Government Real Estate Agency; Efficient and effective management of government real estate,*' called for a transparent framework of balancing financial and social returns in the actions of the Central Government Real Estate Agency.

The demand for social added value is strong enough to serve as a starting point for the agenda of the Government Architect. In this document I will show how I want to provide more direction and coherence to the diversity of work.

First I will identify the themes that describe a number of drastic social changes. Next, using maps in an atlas developed especially for this purpose, I will show what developments are taking place where. And then a number of projects will serve as an introduction to how I want to tackle my job as Government Architect in concrete terms.

My ambition is to show innovation inside and outside the world of government real estate using the strength of design and imagination.

First the themes. At this time the Central Government is examining a number of clearly defined themes. The following are salient: water; care, healthy living environment and ageing healthily; reinforcing the urban network; energy transition; new technology; recycling, transformation and demolition; agricultural production in balance with attention to the food chain; circular economy; international position of the Netherlands.

These themes are very relevant and thus it is not by accident that they overlap to a significant extent with the ones the *Board of Government Advisers* is working on. A board which is furthermore set up in such a way that it reinforces my job as Government Architect and safeguards my connection with the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment and the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

One of the themes presented in direct relation to the dynamics of government real estate is embedded in the Government's task to dispose of nearly three million square metres over the next five years. Some of this will occur through a typical sales process, but, after additional study, some of it will also take place through possible re-use, transformation or, in the last case scenario case, demolition. The social impact of this disposal of government real estate is related to the already existing high vacancy of real estate in the Netherlands.

A number of matters are notable here. For example, the vacancy of offices is primarily a phenomenon in the Randstad and can in part also be explained by the speculation strategies of developers and investors. Vacant offices outside the Randstad are more quickly converted for other use. Ownership there is less in the hands of large investors so there is much less speculative vacancy involved.

There are in total 8.5 million square metres of office space vacant in the Netherlands at the moment, which amounts to 17% of the total office surface area. Even though wasting all that available space is painful, society is not otherwise inconvenienced by it very much.

In contrast, vacancy of shops is more manifest outside the Randstad and has far greater social consequences. Entire towns and communities are seeing the last vestiges of public programmes leave along with the shops. The amount of shop space available is clearly greater than the rapidly decreasing demand. Not only are small shops closing their doors, but large shopping chains are failing as well.

Approximately 9% of the shop surface area is vacant at this time: 2.5 million square metres. This is a type of vacancy that is very visible and has a large direct impact on town and city centres.

The Central Government's real estate disposal programme comprises 2.8 million square metres through 2021. Converted, this means that on average more than 1,500 square metres must be disposed of per day over the next five years: that's the surface area of a sizable sports accommodation, every day.

The share to be disposed of makes up 22% of the total portfolio of the 13.2 million square metres of government real estate. A significant percentage, but this is clarified in light of the task for the government to function more efficiently and by the introduction of flex time working.

It is quite conceivable that the consequences of flex time working will have further impact. The employee will in fact be nomadic, so that rooms outside government offices can also be used. Working at home will become easier and more attractive. The Central Government will also eliminate tasks, so it will need less real estate itself. This is the beginning of a process in which the required number of government offices will presumably be reduced even further.

Over the past few years the market has clearly recognised the necessity to transform vacant buildings and has made it its task to do so. 700,000 square metres of vacant office space was transformed in each of 2013 and 2014, which is more than 8% at a total vacancy of 8.5 million metres. Of course the offices that were relatively easy to transform were tackled first, but this is really quite an impressive development.

For example, 11,000 new housing units were realised in existing buildings last year. In comparison to the 40,000 new construction units, this means that 1 in 5 new residences were realised through transformation projects.

The conclusion is clear: the extensive vacancy has resulted in the market adapting quickly, which enables new uses for empty buildings through smart transformations.

This is a hopeful development that does require continued support now that the more difficult and poorly situated buildings are up for transformation. We should also keep in the back of our minds that demolition is also a possible form of transformation, in extreme cases. Half a million square metres of office space have been demolished in the past five years.

The recent publication *Groei en Krimp* (Growth and Shrinkage) of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis describes a study of which regions of the Netherlands have a higher market price for new construction housing, land not included, than the construction costs. In other words: in what regions can new construction housing be made cost-effective from an economic point of view? This study shows that this is only the case in the Utrecht-Amsterdam-Haarlem-Leiden-The Hague-Delft 'banana.' With a few exceptions, the construction price is higher than the market price outside of this area.

Outside the growth zone delineated, innovation in housing construction can no longer obviously be new construction and will thus mostly have to be created in transformation projects, as the square metre price for this is considerably lower.

The transformation must not only be examined at the building level for this. The many expansion neighbourhoods so abundant in the Netherlands also qualify for transformations that go beyond just making them more sustainable through remodelling and insulation. In combination with changing conditions such as the

ageing population, a different demand for care and an increase of single-person households (an increase to 40% of all households), transformation of the expansion neighbourhoods should also be explicitly regarded as an urban development task.

Current programmes of the Government Architect Studio such as *Oog voor de Buurt* (An Eye for the Neighbourhood) and *Nederlandwordtanders* (The Netherlands are Changing) can focus more on these transformation opportunities. We are also looking into the possibilities of continuing this in the form of *Citydeals*, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

Transformation projects will thus become an increasingly more important alternative to new construction projects. Builders and designers are quickly becoming aware of this. Now that the more difficult buildings are up for transformation, we need the strength of design and imagination of architects more than ever. The more difficult transformation projects are exactly the ones that present opportunities to take more daring and radical action.

In this light, the enormous vacancy provides a wonderful amount of experimental space just at the time when change is necessary. The Government Architect Studio is going to set up a number of example projects based on this vision, with a Government Architect who innovates on behalf of the government and, together with the market and local administrators, explores and realises new possibilities.

The present times appear to be characterised by ever faster and more radical changes which furthermore are manifesting on various planes simultaneously.

Political tensions are forcing old power blocks to confront each other again. The asylum seeker stream from war zones is causing new social unrest. Increasing temperatures herald a climate change that will have huge effects, and in the economics sector there is a global crisis and it is not yet clear whether it has actually ended.

The impact of the constantly accelerating technological revolution is also taking more shape all the time. The once so clear and comfortable borderline between the real and virtual world is fading. According to an Oxford University study of 2014, 47% of the present jobs run great risk of disappearing due to automation over the next twenty years. While the industrial revolution replaced muscle power, the present automation and robotising is also replacing brainpower.

Of course some of the jobs that will now disappear will be substituted by new, more interesting ones, but without a doubt there will also be a growing group of people who will be completely eliminated from the game due to technological developments. Machines will do their work better, faster and cheaper. In a 2015 study, the Advisory Council on Government Policy (WRR) emphasised that robotising

will have a far-reaching effect on our daily existence.

Nevertheless we have never lived as comfortably and safely. Various studies show that the Dutch are some of the happiest people in the world. According to a study by the United Nations, the Netherlands takes 7th place worldwide. In comparison: Belgium is in 18th place, Germany in 16th.

However, the chances of a high quality of life do differ quite a bit per social group. A CBS report in 2015 which measured prosperity in combination with wellbeing for the first time, shows that people with a higher level of education unreservedly have the best chance of a high quality of life.

Factors for achieving happiness are within hand's reach to them: a high combined income; the financial security of a steady job; private property; good health; social contacts; and having a high degree of control over their own lives.

Single people with a lower level of education form a more vulnerable group, on the other hand, with a much lower chance for a good quality of life. Unemployment for people with a lower level of education is 12%. More than half of those receiving benefits have a poor quality of life, while that is 75% for those entitled to social security.

According to a recent study, one out of nine children is now living in poverty in the Netherlands. That number is expected to increase due to the annually rising costs.

The advancing social divide is referred to in the past study *'Divided Worlds'* by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research and the WRR among other sources. One of the most important questions asked in this report is the one regarding what places still have common meeting spots. Segregation can be countered, among other ways, by providing physical integration and meeting opportunities.

Special attention for that shared public space is directly related to the social role played by central government real estate and will thus have a significant place on the Government Architect's agenda. The Central Government can serve an exemplary function by reinforcing the public nature of the government buildings: inside the buildings by providing public access to more rooms; outside the buildings by involvement in the layout of the public space around the government real estate: the domain where the public interest can be defined in the most direct way.

Shared public space will also be given special attention in the above-mentioned theme of transformation at the neighbourhood level. It is a wonderful handle to set innovation on its course.

Many of the social and technological developments seem to be taking place outside

the domain of the Government Architect, but they certainly do affect his work when they have visible impact on the built environment.

As mentioned, the Dutch are amongst the happiest people in the world, but that does not mean that they view the future with a great deal of confidence. The studies cited above also show that people are generally afraid that the present quality of life will be difficult to maintain.

Using positive strength of design and imagination can be important here: it is not up to the Government Architect to predict the future, but he can point out relevant questions and appeal to the world of design to search for solutions.

An initial step is a careful analysis of the places in the built environment where dynamics are most apparent in the present conditions: places with strong growth or shrinkage, with vacancies and transformation. A search for the places where the change is being manifested and thus innovation is necessary and also possible.

Over the past few months the Studio has tackled the ambitious task of producing a *Strategic Atlas* which shows the spatial dynamics in our country from various lines of approach. We have been working on maps of the Netherlands that visualise the dynamic spatial patterns.

I will explain eight of these collective maps briefly here.

Vacant real estate, subdivided into vacant offices, shops, housing units and agricultural buildings presents spatial insight into how varied the impact of vacant real estate throughout the Netherlands is distributed.

The population will still be growing in the Randstad and East Brabant, while shrinkage is starting to show in other regions, as can be seen on this map *Population*.

This map (*Economy and mobility*) very clearly shows the A2 corridor, a zone that is developing strongly in an economic sense, running through the country diagonally, roughly between Amsterdam and Eindhoven. The population density in this zone varies significantly from high to low areas.

Despite the strong economic growth, a large number of offices are also vacant in a part of this A2 zone. More accurate knowledge of the market could further substantiate the decision to either dispose of central government real estate or keep it in the portfolio.

The *Liveability and facilities* map shows that a belt with a highly valued living climate runs more or less horizontally through the middle of the Netherlands. East Brabant also scores well in this area. Relative calm, plenty of green space, a high level of

facilities, and, as the population maps show as well, an above-average number of senior citizens.

This belt includes a number of surplus barracks, which may be a reason to examine more innovative types of housing for the elderly. The buildings are eminently suitable for this purpose and the demand for a new type of housing for the elderly is high.

Employment and un-used work potential - maps that show where employment is still growing and where more work is provided than there are homes available.

Information that can play a significant role in a number of assessments, such as searching for places new refugees and asylees with residence permits can be accommodated.

The domain of *New economy and computerisation* is developing vigorously in the Netherlands. The virtual world only exists thanks to a physically available high tech infrastructure. New top sectors are being created and with the data centres they also provide a clear spatial component that forms new spatial patterns in the Netherlands.

Energy - one of the themes that will have an exceptionally high spatial impact in the near future is the energy transition. The underlying logistics and infrastructure are covering the Netherlands with a very different structure.

However much new developments appear to be 'footloose,' the extent to which the land continues to control the spatial patterns remains surprising. The nature of the land continues to be a determining layer, also for the modern developments, as the map *Landscape dynamics and use* shows.

These eight maps can easily be linked to a series of maps that present the numeric spreadsheets of the five-year plans of the Central Government Real Estate Agency. Where is the government real estate situated, how big and how old is it, what will be used and what will be disposed of?

Making the comparison between financial and social objectives in taking real estate decisions is, as mentioned by the Netherlands Court of Audit, a basic assumption for further elaboration of the Government Architect's agenda. It is not easy to define a social interest in concrete actions or measures, in part because the government must not operate in a competition-disruptive way in the real estate market.

Therefore we will have to search for a role in which the Government Architect sets socially innovative developments in motion without acting as the developing party himself.

Linking the maps of the dynamics of the government real estate to the broader social developments of the eight theme maps in the atlas provides insight into spatial relationships, making it possible to acquire strategic insight and select essential projects that are worth an effort.

As the largest real estate owner in the Netherlands, the Central Government itself can be an important and initiative taking party. But it is especially the underlying strategic visions that can be developed that form a powerful means to begin working jointly with local parties and governments.

The idea came up to select a number of typifying example projects from the great number of projects presented to the Central Government Real Estate Agency (including new construction, transformation, disposal and demolition). The Government Architect Studio is focusing special attention on these *Ambassador Projects* so they can serve as models, not only for future projects in government real estate, but also outside that sphere and as a contribution to a broader social debate: the agenda of the Government Architect Studio is explicitly optimistic, ambitious and directed towards innovation.

Nine *Ambassador Projects*, from small (4.1 square metres) to large (13,501,050,000 square metres) give an idea of the various tasks ahead of us in the near future.

The former building of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) is vacant and has a new purpose. The structuralistic building designed by architect Herman Hertzberger, handed over in 1990, was set up as a city with streets, squares, districts and neighbourhoods. The fact that it has one entrance makes the building inward looking.

The city of The Hague decided to use SZW as housing for asylees with residence permits. The Studio had the idea of using a built-in unit to show that an office can be converted into a housing unit very quickly, with a minimum amount of resources.

Pieter Stoutjesdijk (EConnect) used a new milling technique to design and build a *comfort cabin* consisting of sanitary installation, kitchen and cabinets. The technology enables great flexibility in dimensions, shape and use of materials, so that more than one target group can be served.

The Central Government Real Estate Agency is the biggest sponsor of monumental art in the Netherlands. The Government Architect Studio intends to reinforce the contextual aspect of this sponsorship. Architecture teaches us that we have good sponsors to thank for good buildings. So why are we leaving artists to dance their own dances alone? In the framework of the *visual arts percentage scheme*, painter Heleen Verhoeven was commissioned to make a painting depicting the High Council.

In a rare, intensive process between the artist and the arts committee, which consisted of four members, the painting was developed step-by-step in two years.

A visitor to the Council can stand before the painting and feel a part of the centuries-long history of dispensation of justice in the Netherlands.

One of the most important monuments of the Golden Age stands on the Amsterdam Kloveniersburgwal: the Trippenhuys, where the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences has been accommodated for over two centuries.

The Academy consults the government and, with 500 members and 15 research groups, is the public image of Dutch scholarly work nationally and abroad. An ever growing number of guests from the Netherlands and abroad visit the Trippenhuys, but the existing reception facilities are not designed to accommodate the large flow of visitors.

Under the chairmanship of the Government Architect a team of architects was selected in 2015. That team is now working on a plan to do justice to the significant cultural historic values in the complex as well as to the new requirements that have emerged in the area of logistics and technology.

In areas where there is shrinkage, the task is to shift the use of buildings in such a way that the least useful building is ultimately earmarked for demolition. It would be nice if such a building would be subjected to scrutiny one more time. A building earmarked for demolition always conjures up new ideas. American artist Gordon Matta Clark created an enchanting oeuvre by cutting conical holes and radical cross sections through vacant buildings.

And at the Venetian Biennial in 2013, Lara Almarcegui created an installation of the exact material equivalent of the Spanish pavilion in piles of sorted rubble on site. It would be a good competition, reprogramming and/or redesign from an unexpected angle, possibly also for alternative types of demolition or as transformation into a temporary or permanent work of art. Perhaps the building is so terribly unsightly that the demolition could be celebrated as a celebration. Shrinkage as a form of liberation.

There will be four major projects in The Hague station area in the near future: the change in use of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs building; the renovation of the Royal Library; the development of a hotel and housing at the Grotiusplaats; and finally the Haagse Loper.

In addition, there will be a new terminal for the metro line to Rotterdam, extensive new construction will be developed in front of the Central Station at the Koningin Julianaplein, and construction on the station side of the Rijnstraat.

The quality of public space is at issue in the mix of this diverse programme. Clear routes must be created through the area to connect with Koekamp and Malieveld.

On the initiative of the Government Architect, the KCAP agency was commissioned to provide an urban development vision for the area.

In 2019, the last marines will have left the Van Braam Houckgeest barracks to move to their new home base in Vlissingen. The barracks, sports facilities, workshops, storage buildings and offices will then be left abandoned in an enormous green space next to a prosperous municipality with a considerably older population. The central location of the land and the relative closeness of facilities make the former Doorn barracks eminently suitable to study what new types of housing for the elderly could look like.

Can the existing buildings be adapted to this type of new function or should one begin entirely from scratch when designing and building? Now that we are living longer, staying healthy longer and since over time less work will be required due to robotising, the phase of life after retirement is taking on its own identity even more rapidly, resulting in its own demands in the area of health care, sustainability, financing and sense of purpose.

The current test circuit of the Dutch National Road Administration (RDW) is located near the Lelystad airport. Due to expansion of the airport, the Central Government Real Estate Agency is searching for a new site for the RDW in the province of Flevoland. Two workshops were held to flesh out the search criteria, producing new insights.

For example in the area of optimising the logistics of the desired test site, but also in the area of the RDW operating efficiently as a unit, through possible combination with other RDW components such as inspection stations and meeting facilities.

Furthermore, the development of *Intelligent Transport Systems* (ITS) has great impact on the future testing and inspection work of the RDW. Innovation and development in the area are essential to RDW.

The Central Government owns 28 objects in Arnhem. A large number of these are fully operational; others are awaiting a new type of use. For example, the panopticon prison is presently used by the COA to receive refugees. In the long term, the task is to have a new market party as yet to be found connect the monumental value and architectonic quality of this building to new types of use.

Immediately next to the brand new station towards the Museum of Modern Art there is a big central government office that needs some work. What functions are

desirable there in the near future? The interests of the municipality and the Central Government, problems of urbanisation and public space, the demands of the market and needs of the citizen are all intertwined. It is up to the Government Architect to look at the city from his own point of view on shared space and strategically reflect on the government buildings in this framework.

The highest scale level on which the Government Architect consults as the chairman of the *Board of Government Advisers* is with respect to the 13,501,050,000 square metres of land and water owned or managed by the Central Government. People live, work, drive and sail on these square metres, they grow food there and that land is habitat for many plants and animals.

This use is not static. The Netherlands is changing constantly and this is certainly also expressed at this large scale.

There are big tasks ahead of us that require surface area. For example the energy transition that will significantly determine the appearance of the land: generating energy will be visible again. Extensive areas are required for the vast energy harvest, such as windmill parks and solar fields. Room must be made for water in the process of making our country climate proof, while at the same time we also have to take potential long periods of drought into account. All this in the context of a country that is sinking. The water task has obvious spatial consequences and is manifested throughout the country. For food provision, the biggest challenge is making the sector more sustainable.

We are focusing special attention on the *Ambassador Projects*, but the Government Architect can also consult on policy level and bring developments together there.

For instance, an acute demand for accommodating refugees and asylees with residence permits can be combined with a study on the transformation of vacant offices. The open appeal *A Home away from Home* is one example of this. Development of small, flexible and inexpensive housing units in vacant buildings for this group can result in new typologies and the development of principles that can provide a solution for a much broader group.

Central government property (real estate, land AND water) can be used to bring our social objectives closer. The description of the themes and tasks, the *Strategic Atlas* and the *Ambassador Projects* show the lines along which the work of the Government Architect will be substantiated in the coming years.

1. Searching for added social value in every task.
2. Systematically examining tasks as part of a bigger spatial context.
3. Searching for relevant new tasks and putting them on the agenda: what are the trends?

4. Defining clear ambition, involving external parties and collaborating with them.
5. Addressing erosion of the public domain: what does living together look like?
6. Rendering the Central Government Real Estate as public as possible, including outdoor space.
7. Vacancy as an opportunity to experiment and innovate.
8. Dealing with government real estate as guiding, innovative.
9. Designating projects in concrete terms and using them as ambassador projects.
10. Seeking out and initiating debate, visible presence of the Government Architect.

I find it extraordinary to be the Government Architect. It is a position that, introduced at the time of Napoleon, has been in existence for more than two hundred years.

Architects are not only in conversation with the present, in which conflicting wishes often are and must be united in a building and its surroundings, but they are also part of the continuous dialogue that takes place over generations. Through a strange twist, lost generations are still actively participating in the debate. In our progress-oriented culture, antiquated knowledge loses its value quickly, while in contrast antiquated architecture gains in value.

Cities live by the grace of natural rhythms of changing generations that continue building by wanting to do everything differently. In that sense, a Government Architect is part of a long tradition.

I too stand on the eve of drastic changes that will turn many self-evident truths upside down. Our modern lives have become so improbably comfortable that future outlooks chiefly seem to be aimed at preventing imminent loss.

It is my task to have the new generation reflect once again on the future in terms of gains.

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Colophon

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