Holger Gladys: Don’t trust the idyll. Meritorious objectives and arguable substance in Dutch suburbia.

In April 1995, beneath the arcade of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam, students of the Delft University of Technology set up a vast model of a ribbon city to the scale of 1:300, consisting of 800,000 houses with a density of 60 houses per hectare, and thereby producing a housing tapestry of 13,500 hectare or a city of 60 x 2.25 kilometer. The provocative outdoor exhibition lasted only one hour and was the opening event to the main exhibition ‘Adriaan Geuze – West8. In Holland there is a House’. The actual exhibition presented a range of 500 pictures with comparable day-to-day situations, systematically taken in more than 100 suburban neighborhoods. According to the landscape architect and urban designer Geuze, the show was an unbiased photographic record of the Randstad suburbia anno 1995. The architecture critic Hans van Dijk probably felt vertiginous when he commented: “It is a sobering look at the cacophony of banality” (van Dijk 1995, 9).

The seemingly abstract number of 800,000 referred to the amount of houses that according to the 1992 national governmental “Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning Extra” (in Dutch: Vierde nota over de ruimtelijke ordening extra or with its acronym “Vinex”) was to be realized between 1995 and 2005 in the Randstad conurbation and elsewhere.

Fig1: 800.000 houses, exhibition at the NAi (photographs Hans van Dijk)

Even though Geuze’s show was ostensibly set-up as an even-handed view on the Dutch suburban condition, the exhibition was a critical, passionate statement and a severe call to reconsider the decisions made to create this flooding spread of houses. The professional concern was with the uninspired spatial and political

organization of the Vinex implementation. The legitimate worry was about questions of how and where to realize these new developments in an already densely populated, sprawling Dutch environment. There was also concern about the Dutch landscape and particularly the green heart as a cultural property, which would be put under pressure. The discomfort with Vinex consolidated with the notion that the open green areas in the heart of the Randstad would be partially built over and that characteristic rural qualities, counterbalancing the urban environment, might be lost forever.

In anticipation of the following discussion, it can be said that, what had been intentionally introduced as a distinct break with the anti-urban developments of the 1960s and 1970s policies, in fact turned out to be the continuation, if not the acceleration in the production of suburban landscapes. The physical appearance of the newly build areas split the professional world of politicians, architects, planners and users. While some lauded the new textures as honest and legitimate answers to the posed questions on urbanity, others disapproved the new neighborhoods as unimaginative and tedious. The developing consortia were criticized for their lopsided market-orientation. The overconcentration of one single kind of land use and the esthetic monotony of the housing patches caused irritation. Whether the Vinex housing districts were built on greenfield or brownfield sites, or on newly claimed land, most of the brand-new neighborhoods had no urban character whatsoever. Apparently, there was a tremendous gap between intention and implementation. Cor Wagenaar got to the heart of the issue:

> “Apart from the intention to promote the so-called ‘compact city’ there is nothing ‘metropolitan’ about the last wave of large-scale housing estates that washed over the Low Lands since the middle of the 1990s. Although the density of the new neighborhoods is usually higher than was common in the 1950s and 1960s, their character is decidedly suburban. … One look at the map of the Netherlands makes clear that the compactness that is officially part of the program is entirely fictitious; in practice, suburban sprawl never ceased (Wagenaar 2011, 541).”

Although there is immense professional talent present in the Netherlands, the Vinex policy and implementation brought the low lands on the verge of losing its

international reputation in urban planning and design. Throughout the twentieth century, the Netherlands developed a highly sophisticated and efficient planning regime that gave control to the upper- and lower-tier governments and its public housing corporations. The planning culture proved to be original and capable of allowing architects, planners and politicians engaged alike, to create innovative and sensitive plans for new neighborhoods and city expansions. Famous examples of large-scale plans of the first half of the century include the 1915/17 Plan Zuid (Plan for the expansion of Amsterdam South) by Hendrik Petrus Berlage and the 1934/35 Algemene Uitbreidingsplan AUP (General Expansion Plan) for Amsterdam West by the Town Planning department of Amsterdam (dienst Publieke Werken, afdeling Stadsontwikkeling) under guidance of Cornelis van Eesteren. During the past hundred years, the Dutch planning system always worked hand in hand with the building industry. And particularly during the post-World War II period, this intense tie added importantly to the financial well-being of the country and consequently established the building industry as an economically and politically powerful force.

Suburban landscapes

The concept that guided the process of renewal during the post-World War II period up to the 1970s aimed at progress and welfare, combined with the ideal of the collective. The moral concept of the welfare state is rooted in the understanding that the state plays the key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. The comprehensive political model aims at producing socially inclusive environments based on the principles of equality of opportunity and equitable distribution of wealth. [1]

According to this moral concept and political model, governmental policy focused on a nationwide dispersion and decentralization of settlement and prosperity. The Dutch researcher and advisor on spatial planning Jelte Boeijenga explains the two arguments that figured prominently, "the desire to achieve equal opportunities for

[1] Website of the Encyclopedia Britannica: Welfare State http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/639266/welfare-state

all and the fear of excessively large concentrations of people in the cities, particularly in the west of the country (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008, 11)."

Since the late 1950s, the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (Ministry of VROM) in an irregular rhythm of approximately every five to ten years released policy documents that gave direction to the developments planned.[2] The 1966 and 1974 memorandum aimed at relieving the pressure on central cities, to support cities in coping with growing environmental and social problems, and to absorb or redirect the predicted urban growth. "In the urban core zones, congestion and environmental degradation were the major problems. In the peripheral areas, connections were inadequate. Both problems needed to be addressed. … Polycentric development was the preferred method reflecting this view." (Černe 2004, 91)

The ideal conception was given form by spreading houses and businesses, services and commerce, governmental facilities and educational institutions throughout the cities, regions and provinces, thereby organizing the new Dutch urban landscape. The policy of concentrated deconcentration, "this oxymoronic term referred to allowing people to live in suburban environments, but concentrating new developments in and around existing towns and cities and in a number of

[2] Since 1958, Dutch spatial planning is organized by a series of policy documents that each establishes a national perspective on how to facilitate and develop the country's built environment. In 2006, the Balkenende III Cabinet broke with the centrally organized and controlled spatial planning policy. With the last report, the ministry decentralized the subject matter and empowered the municipalities and regions to conduct spatial development policies from regional and local perspective.
1958 – Memorandum Development of the Western Region – Nota De ontwikkeling van het Westen des Lands
1960 – First Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Eerste nota ruimtelijke ordening
1966 – Second Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Tweede nota ruimtelijke ordening
1974 – Third Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Derde nota ruimtelijke ordening
1976|1978 – Urbanization Policy Document – Verstedelijkingsnota
1988 – Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Vierde nota over de ruimtelijke ordening
1992 – Supplement to the Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Vierde nota extra (Vinex)
1999 – Update Vinex, appointments until 2010 – Actualisering Vinex, afspraken tot 2010 (Vinac)
2001 – Fifth Memorandum on Spatial Planning – Vijfde nota ruimtelijke ordening (Vijno)
2004|2006 – Memorandum on Space, a policy framework for municipalities – Nota Ruimte, een beleidskader voor gemeenten

designed overspill centers. … Concentrated deconcentration was to take place within the framework of city regions comprising both donor cities and overspill centers. So the city region became the complement of concentrated deconcentration.” (Faludi 1994, 133ff) The spatial organization of this new environment created two kinds of patterns, many small-scale scattered dwelling units and some medium-scale nuclei, creating points of reference and structural support.

During the mid-1960s and up until the mid-1980s, the Netherlands built sixteen medium-sized new towns as areas dedicated to receive developments. The measures for the implementation of the growth scenario were established in the Urbanization Policy Document from 1976. The share of these overspill centers in overall building production grew from seven percent in 1972 up to eighteen percent in 1982. Until 1990, nearly 230,000 dwellings were built in polycentric developments. Latest since the 1960s, the production of large numbers characterized the day-to-day practice of the efficiently top-down organized Dutch planning and building industry. National governments coordinated the main sectors and interests, provinces translated land claims in provincial plans and municipalities, armed with subsidies and proactive land policies, implemented the plans, and finally, developers and the building industry realized whatever number was to be build.

Thus, the 1995 Vinex task of building 800,000 houses may have felt ambitious to begin with, but looking at the successful production rate of production in the second half of the last century, it didn’t seem overly ambitious. From the mid-1970s to the 1990s, the building industry produced annually more than 100,000 houses with a peak around 1975, realizing throughout a period of three years around 450,000 homes in total. The rationally organized Dutch building industry worked extremely efficiently and the production of numbers at this scale were considered normal. In 1985, the housing stock counted for approximately 5,400,000 houses, in 1995 it grew up to 6,200,000 and reached by 2005 6,900,000 - which is a growth of 800,000 houses for the first decade and 700,000 houses during the Vinex decade.

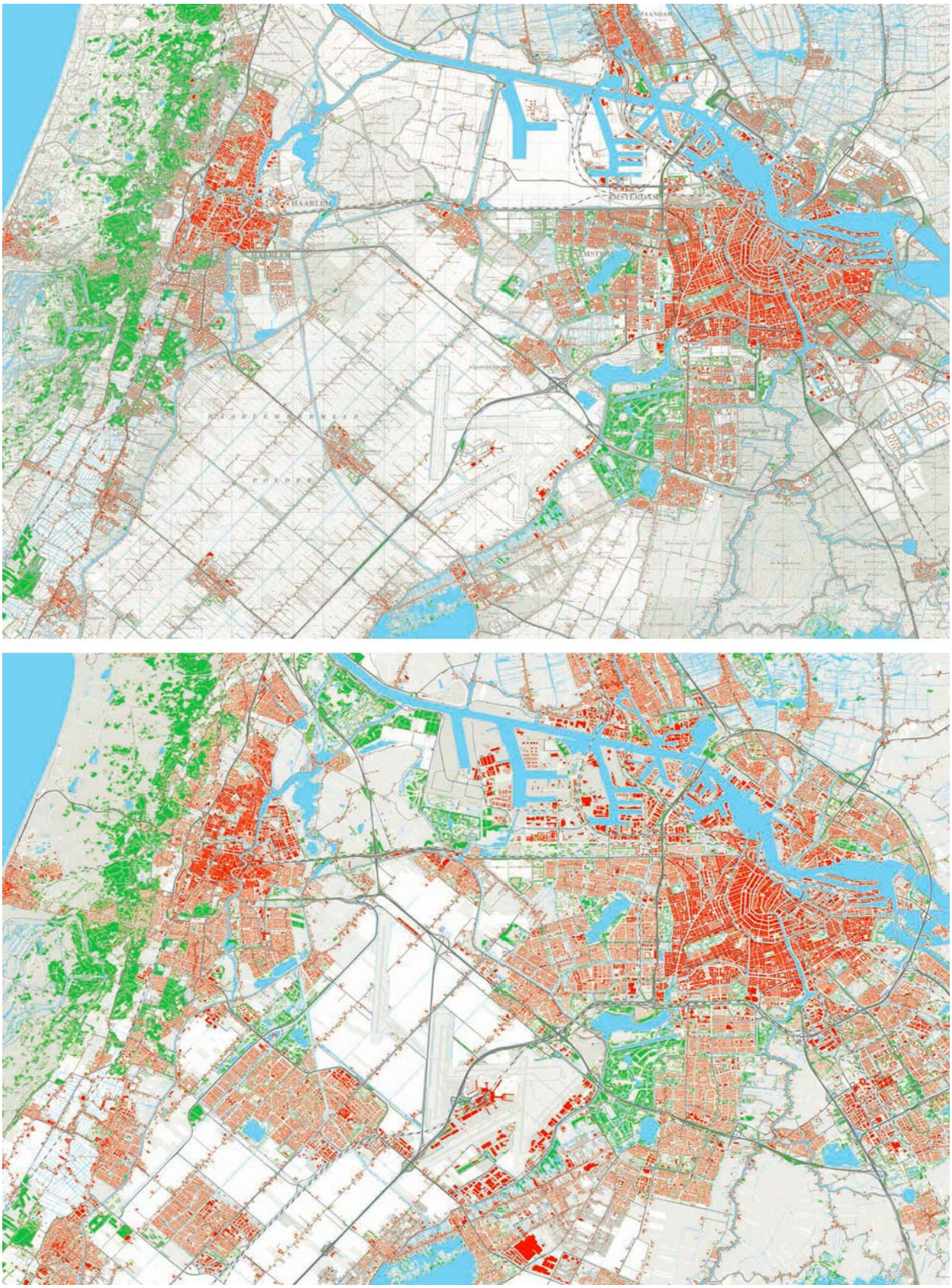

Fig2: The south-western part of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area including Schiphol, Haarlem and Haarlemmermeer in 1970 and 2011 (maps Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, PBL Den Haag)

The building production from the mid-1980s on to the mid-1990s was in retrospect even larger than that of the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.[3] While the post-World War II paradigm was still defined by a centralized planning system, this top-down approach significantly transformed during the 1970s to the 1990s into an intricate, decentralized planning system with many different stakeholders and participants involved. (Brands 2010)

New markets

“Over the past two decades neoliberalism has been the dominant discourse in the formulation of housing policies in Western societies. Across national boundaries, state intervention in social affairs has been reduced, especially in North America and Western Europe.” (Sleurink 2012, 7) Both, privatization and deregulation aims at downsizing state control. Privatization and deregulation is the process of transferring government interest and responsibilities towards private interests and opportunities. Classical liberalism and neo-liberalism, thus politics of privatization exists as early as the industrial revolution, starting in England at the end of the eighteenth century. Already the classical liberalism and the neoliberalism in the 1930s and 1940s called for a widespread retreat of the state from the economic activity. Countries such as England and Germany, with a strong industrial past and present, were particularly receptive to this argument. Privatization policy is often justified by the economic liberal conviction that the share of the public sector has to be pushed back or curtailed in favor of the private sector; as private sector performance, as being governed by market forces and laws of the market, is basically more efficient than any other.

Similar to most Western-European countries, the Dutch political climate in the 1980s and early 1990s was fairly conservative. Cold war politics and the economic recession of 1979 to 1984 had left their marks. “During this period, policymakers and politicians tried to define what spatial planning could contribute to an economic recovery. The central theme of the Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning was internationalization, economic perspectives, opportunity

[3] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2011

development and improving existing qualities.” (Netsch and Kropman 2013, 1093) With campaign slogans such as ‘more market, less government’, Ruud Lubbers, the Prime Minister from 1982 to 1994, prepared the ground for a policy shift towards the withdrawal of the welfare state that entailed extensive cutbacks in public spending, and the liberalization of market with far-reaching deregulation and privatization programs.[4]

Until 1990, governmental housing policies generally focused on the supply, with the production of homes and particularly social rental housing. “Social rental housing in the Netherlands expanded from twelve percent of the housing stock in 1945 to forty-four percent in the early 1990s.” (Willem Korthals Altes 2008, 15) From the 1990s onwards, the proportion between home ownership, private rental and social rental of the total housing stock changed significantly “with neoliberal politics stimulating home ownership by providing easy access to mortgages, loosening regulations and sometimes by providing tax benefits for home buyers. Government schemes and regulations brought purchasing a property within reach for a growing number of households.” (Sleurink 2012, 8)

Along with the human geographer Marijn Sleurink, it can be stated that the increased commodification has a strong impact on the spatial development and the living environment. The share of private housing property increased from eight percent in 1982, to forty-six percent in 1990, and to more than sixty percent in 2010. At least for the period between 1982 and 2001, home owners could count on a year to year increase in real-estate prices, with a total increase of approximately three hundred percent for the period of thirty years. “This had led to a situation where, on average, housing were being sold every five to ten years after buying it. The profit made on sale of the house was then used to buy a new and more expensive house. This process has been the engine behind the strong real-estate market for at least two to three decades, but the engine is no more.”

[4] During the twelve years of the Lubbers’ government (from 1982 to1994), three cabinets were formed by the CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal) and the conservative-liberal VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), with the VVD being replaced in 1989 by the social-democratic PvdA (Labour Party). Ruud Lubbers was regarded by many during his time in office as an ideological heir to Margaret Thatcher.

(Netsch and Kropman 2013, 1093) In general and official language of municipalities and developers, homeowners became consumers; in market terms, people would go for a housing career, or according to the omnipresent Dutch term, for ’wooncarrière’. Armed with bold slogans, government housing policy would seduce the middle class homeowner sector to engage parallel to family and job careers into a consumer mobility of moving from small to medium to large to extra-large, from affordable starter units to costly up-market homes. This newly developed career path became substantial to the realization of Vinex. Marijn Sleurink further explains the spiral movement that led to the burst of the bubble:

> “The flourishing economy during the 1990s and the increased household incomes also intensified the demand for owner-occupied housing. This combination of factors together with the low interest rates, which contributed to the attractiveness of borrowing large amounts of money, resulted in a large pool of potential home buyers. The massive inflow of capital into the real estate market drove up the prices. Purchasing a property became an interesting investment because of the assumption that real estate prices would rise indefinitely. Up till a certain point in time, large increases in house prices indeed led to financial benefits for buyers. However, the commodification of housing goods and the speculation on the housing market has pushed up prices to an unbearable level, which in the end contributed to the bust of the housing bubble.” (Sleurink 2012, 8)

Many studies from the early 1990s anticipated a reorientation of the real-estate market, away from the grand planning narrative towards individualization and diversification. Building in large numbers has always been connected to serial production, and especially in the Randstad, there was hardly any space reserved for individual architecture with private clients. With so-called housing experiments, such as the 2001 BouwExpo ‘Gewild wonen’ (Wanted Living), the municipality of Almere aimed at the weaned consumers (and aspirant residents) to express their personal preferences and have a voice in the layout, size and appearance of their homes. One might expect that the most recent developments in suburban Netherlands would have taken up these timely issues and engage into polyphonic models, eventually incorporating the diverse cultural qualities present in suburban conditions. However, though appreciated in the media, most liberating proposals stayed on paper. Instead, the market-driven competition

played the game according to its economic principles and continued the unbroken tradition in mass production, the reproduction of sameness.

The Grand Projet

In many ways, the 1990s were politically, economically and culturally a challenging period. The collapse of socialism in the late 1980s and early 1990s had been a most crucial geopolitical event, and since that very momentum “the free market has achieved worldwide dominance (Cor Wagenaar 2011, 510).” In a short lesson on global economy, Wagenaar reminds us on the fact that globalization is an ongoing process, “which departed in the sixteenth century (mapping and colonization), radically intensified in the nineteenth century (new infrastructures and technologies), accelerated in the 1950s (air traffic) and increased in the 1980s as a result of the revolution in communication technology.” (Cor Wagenaar 2011, 510) In short, what changed over time, is first the pace of communication that at some point last century was even able to replace physical traffic, and secondly, the increase of competition on regional and international scale. Recent trends in globalization are very much connected to the consolidation of neoliberal politics, and the Netherlands, like most welfare states, attuned to the international trend of increasing deregulation and privatization. Wagenaar describes globalization as political phenomenon:

> “What is new is not the scale of the economy, but the retreat of national governments. For ideological reasons, the nation-state has delegated part of its authority to lower administrative levels (provinces and municipalities), to higher administrative levels (for example the European Union) and, most importantly, to the market. Global space became an open field of business opportunities (Cor Wagenaar 2011, 510).”

How did all this effect physical planning? With the 1988 Memorandum on Spatial Planning, the Dutch government anticipated the cultural change from territorial to translocal, from orthogenetic to heterogenetic, and from inward to outward looking. Without anybody having been able to foresee the 1989 political bang and its economic consequences, a changed point of view towards renewed perspective on urban culture was in the air. In the light of an international economic and

cultural perspective, politicians and planners desired strong cities and the ongoing depopulation and the shrinkage of the urban base was recognized as being unsatisfying and counterproductive to take up the expected competition between cities and regions. Consequently, the Memorandum prepared an armamentarium of opportunities. The politicians and planners involved reconsidered in general lines “the role of the Netherlands in a changing world and to the Dutch economy in particular, envisaging the country as a distribution hub, thanks to Schiphol and the port of Rotterdam, with Amsterdam as a financial center.” (Boeijenga 2011, 27) The policy document designated a series of thirteen urban nodes for places of preferential treatment. Next to that it introduced the massive task of building approximately 800,000 houses to fight the existing and estimated housing shortage until 2010.

Due to political circumstances, the fall of the second Lubbers government and the forming of new political coalitions, the fourth report got revised in the years between 1989 and 1992 and published as the ‘Supplement to the Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning’ or shortly ‘Vierde nota extra’, the ‘Vinex’. The main revisions of the Vinex concern the topics of environmental awareness and the limitation of growth in automobile traffic. Importantly, the Vinex put an official end to the earlier policies and abandoned the policy of dispersal and new towns, thereby promoting the compact city.

Quo Vinex?

How is the Vinex implementation realized? In 1994 and 1995 the State authorities signed individual agreements on implementing the Vinex program with the seven largest city regions and eighteen smaller urban regions (each represented by the provinces. Since the implementation was meant to happen on regional level, the national authorities were counting on cooperation between the municipalities. The covenants specified for large parts the locations and numbers of houses to be built; 455,000 at assigned places, plus 190,000 elsewhere in the provinces, a total of twenty percent less than imagined earlier. Out of the total of 645,000 houses, only twenty-five percent were to be built on inner urban sites. For each region that

committed itself to the national target, the national government pledged itself to financially support land purchases, soil remediation, and public transportation infrastructure. Boeijenga knows that although many topics were highly fixed, the covenants decisively left space for alternative routes and loopholes in building dispersed settlements without losing national funding: "It never quite came to that, but even so, this high degree of freedom reflects the primary goal of Vinex and the covenants, namely, to ensure the construction of as many homes as possible within the urban regions. Less importance seems to have been attached to the principle of building in the city if possible, and otherwise adjoining it, and further away only after that." (Boeijenga 2011, 29)

The Vinex Atlas specifies that within the given timeframe of ten years, the initial amount of 830,000 houses were realized, with 290,000 houses on inner urban sites, thus the percentage of inner urban developments increased to thirty-five percent.[5] Although the general numbers per region is published, the survey particularly stays vague on what has been considered an inner urban site. The Region Amsterdam (ROA) together with Almere[6] for instance claims that they have built 31,500 of the 34,500 houses appointed on inner urban locations. Knowing the low-rise and low density of the Almerian fabric, however it seems rather unclear, what is described or understood as being urban.

The commodification of the home

In his article "Design Dispatch; The Dutch Retouch Suburbia" Christopher Hawthorne critically remarks on Vinex developments:

> "The Netherlands, a country that has set the international design standard for everything from glassware to corporate headquarters, made its first comprehensive attempts to grapple with suburban sprawl. ... Along with a few real-estate scandals, the guidelines have

[5] The Vinex Atlas offers detailed tables on the agreed and achieved numbers of housing.

[6] Almere is the new town in the southern Flevoplolder, 30 km away from Amsterdam. The city has been built in the 1960s on reclaimed land, in 1984 Almere became a municipality. The city has around 200,000 inhabitants and its fabric mainly consists of suburban districts, vying with Amsterdam for the favor of the inhabitants.

> produced plenty of unremarkable architecture. … the new houses look for the most part like those in a conventional American suburb, with rows of reassuringly old-fashioned homes and patches of lawn.” (Hawthorne 2004, 1)

Out of the approximately one hundred Vinex locations that had been agreed upon for implementation, Leidsche Rijn is one of the better rated places. Leidsche Rijn is a large scale extension in the west of Utrecht and planned around the existing villages Vleuten and de Meern. The urban plan by Riek Bakker (BVR) and Rients Dijkstra (Maxwan) was originally meant for 30,000 houses, which later had been adjusted to 20,000 households. According to the survey in the Vinex Atlas, approximately half of the program has been built until today and the construction period is extended until 2020 and beyond. The planning of Leidsche Rijn is subdivided in four sectors with a central park as the fifth sector. The urban plan basically defines the building zones and landscape areas, incorporating at its best existing landscape elements, archeological places, existing villages and particular farms, thereby creating a potentially rich landscape for living. Particular attention received the motorway at the edge of the Vinex area towards Utrecht, a barrier that partially has been covered to better connect with the old city. The plan missed out to determine the atmosphere of the various places, possibly hoping that the introduced framework would be sensitive and strong enough to stimulate diversity in building and neighborhood. The master plan was presented in 1995 and execution started in 1997. Beside all the interesting ingredients, Leidsche Rijn doesn’t differ from other Vinex locations and contains all the typical Vinex properties, similar to others one would mostly find places of great uniformity, too much of the same.

Each sector in the huge area of Leidsche Rijn is again subdivided in easy-to-supervise projects of a few hundred houses, and each patch is usually executed with the same or similar types of houses. In their colorful marketing brochures, municipalities and developers alike pretend to be sensitive and build what people want. Basically, it is the other way round, the market system tells the developer what commodity sells, and the choices for people are limited to what the market produces.

Fig3+4: Housing at Leidsche Rijn (photographs Holger Gladys)

The landscape architect and urban designer Bart Brands summarizes the difficulties in planning and building urban areas:

> “In the 21st century, it is still difficult to fit unplanned elements into our urban plans. The Dutch urban planning tradition is deeply based on control, commitment and contracts. To reduce each party’s risk over time, programmatic and spatial agreements are fixed legally and financially. Before a project starts, most decisions are made and contracted among the stakeholders (housing types, density, program, exploitation), or are indirectly and unconsciously defined by the (sometimes conflicting) regulations of different governmental levels. Essential changes or fresh insights are at some stages of the planning process difficult to incorporate. As one can imagine, changes might affect liabilities and commitments and might demand revising contracts; a process could easily become a political, and strategic game rather than a discussion about spatial qualities, and developers mostly have better lawyers. ... The spatial appearance of the Netherlands is eventually more defined by an intricate network of private developers, builders, (semi-)public organizations, rules, market mechanisms and politicians, rather than by urban planners and designers. For those working in the field, it might be obvious, that this process in most cases leads to simplification and standardization and to a loss of diversity and complexity in urbanism and landscape architecture.” (Brands 2010, 274)

Out of the little more than 80 Vinex locations mentioned in the publication ‘Via Vinex’, forty-five percent of the designs have been produced by five urban planning offices only (van’t Hoff et al 2006, 121). The average size of a Vinex location covers 3,700 houses with a density of thirty-six houses per hectare, ranging from fourteen to eighty-two houses per hectare. Clearly, the realized low densities belong to suburban or rural developments. There are only a few areas that work with higher densities. In that respect, eighty-two houses per hectare are very exceptional. But not only density, the type of houses is decisive for the character of the development too. A particular weakness of the Vinex program is that it mainly is targeted at young families longing for starter houses with small gardens. The average Vinex-spread of housing types is ten percent single-family houses, twenty percent detached family-houses, fifty percent row houses and twenty percent multi-family houses. Interestingly enough, Leidsche Rijn exactly reflects these average numbers (van’t Hoff et al 2006, 114f.).

Fig5+6: Housing at Leidsche Rijn (photographs Holger Gladys)

As anywhere else in the building sector, houses are mainly executed with standard construction bays of 5.40 or 7.20 meters. What happens behind the façade hardly seems to be of interest. The housing typology offers a limited palette of floor plans only, variations are organized per cluster and differentiation is a matter of style and decoration. Traditional, conventional, revival-style, neo-eclectic architecture, generic building styles, supermodern types and façades, anything goes in Vinex-land. Apparently, the commodity Vinex-house sells through its skin. “Since most houses were built to be sold, their architectural finishing was part of the developer’s marketing strategy.” (Wagenaar 2011, 451) The national institute for strategic policy analysis in the field of environment, nature and space, the Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving and the Amsterdam School of Real Estate recently published an astonishing study, stating that neo-historical styles of any kind sell best. According to the report, neo-style houses are most wanted and have per definition, depending on the amount of façade details, a significant higher value than others. (Buitelaar 2014, 6) The same study addresses the issue of a conspicuous rising market concentration in the Dutch, but particularly in the Randstad housing market. The study quotes a survey done by Property NL and the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek dating from 2006, revealing that thirty-four percent of the housing production is developed by the top five developers[7]; in 2004 the share had been thirty percent.

All Vinex estates mainly offer standards and little space for neighborhood facilities such as shops or cafés. Only larger Vinex districts explicitly serve central city functions with mainly shopping. Work places are hardly provided, thus the daily work-home commuters keep contributing to the motorway congestions with the seemingly unavoidable consequence of being the traffic jam twice a day, in the morning and in the evening.

One of the few highlights found in the Vinex at Leidsche Rijn is a series of small bridges, designed by the office of Maxwan. The very individual look and the

[7] The top 5 mentioned are Bouwfonds, AM Vastgoedontwikkeling, Heijmans, Dura Vermeer and Rabo Vastgoed.

delicate finish of these simple artifacts create a sense of joy in an otherwise uncharismatic environment.

Desires for a compact city

In 2010 the Dutch state architect Liesbeth van der Pol invited an illustrious group of fourteen business men, politicians and university teachers to engage into a debate on urban densification.[8] The round table talk was introduced to elicit common positions, fresh statements and critical remarks on the desire of compacting urban fabrics. Liesbeth van der Pol was in search of a jointly supported agenda as a basis for meeting the incessantly rising housing demand and qualifying Dutch cities as livable places. Beside all the commonplace and aspiring opinions and assumptions that were expressed during the meeting, the most fascinating part concerns some remarks on the financing and the realization of urban plans relating to the Vinex-period and to urban planning after the 2008 economic crisis. To some extent, the statements offer alternate insights to the question, of why the housing production during the past 20 years happened mainly in greenfield sites instead of working on inner city developments. During this round table, Apeldoorn alderman Jolanda Reitsma briefly elaborates on the financial trouble her municipality is facing.

> "Fifty-five percent of the new housing stock should be created within the inner city fabric, but the situation is getting more and more complex. Actually the biggest profit is made with greenfield sites. The municipal development company (grondbedrijf) is now hopefully close to being financially stable with a zero balance. In the past year, 60 million Euro profit forecast evaporated. Now that the State support is shrinking as well, I have no idea from where to take money for inner city developments." (Werkgroep Binnenstedelijk bouwen 2010, 117 - own translation from Dutch)[9]

[8] The transcript of the round table talk is published in Prachtig Compact Nederland

[9] "Wij willen 55 percent binnenstedelijk bouwen, maar het is wel steeds ingewikkelder aan het woorden en: wij verdienen het geld in uitleglocaties. Het grondbedrijf staat nu hopelijk op nul. In het afgelopen jaar is 60 miljoen winstverwachting verdampt. Nu ook van het rijk weinig geld komt, heb ik geen idee waarvan wij het geld moeten halen voor binnenstedelijk locaties."

It seems to be an astonishing fact that to build on inner city locations is more expensive and therefore less attractive than greenfield developments. How does this come? According to Reitsma, the assumption that with building in inner city districts, infrastructure doesn't need improvement or adjustment, is a great misunderstanding.

> "Compaction has major implications on traffic planning. The difference is: with inner city developments, infrastructural costs are paid by the municipalities, with developments outside the city fabric, infrastructural costs are passed on to the State." (Werkgroep Binnenstedelijk bouwen 2010, 117 - own translation from Dutch)[10]

Reitsma's statement might be a key in understanding the general motivation to build on the edge of cities rather than in inner cities. In the discussion, Henk Ovink, at the time the director of National Spatial Ordering at the Ministry of VROM, spontaneously objects whether it shouldn't be reverse: "… to recognize intra-urban costs as societal costs and to pass on investigations outside the city fabric to private parties". The discussion suggests that there is a distortion of competition between greenfield and brownfield developments. Did the national governmental financial support for land purchases, soil remediation, public transport and general infrastructure during the VINEX-period influence the choice for building at the fringes of cities? Were municipalities in planning and executing Vinex properties more cost-effective or profitable, just because of national governmental subsidies received?

The issue touched upon might come down to the critical question of where in land development and real-state business the big money is made and where subsidies are spent. The actual problem might suggest that the dedication and distribution of state subsidies during the planning and execution phases goes pretty much along with traditional, rather defensive patterns of decision-making and vested interests, not necessarily related to commonly recognized long-term goals, but as

[10] "Verdichting heeft grote consequenties voor de verkeersplanning. Het verschil is: binnenstedelijk draait de gemeente op voor de kosten, buitenstedelijk worden de kosten afgewenteld op het rijk."

a lubricant that keeps business-making in the comfort zone of criteria previously used and affirmed problem solving strategies.

After the game is before the game

Since the early 1990s, we are witnessing new forms of commercialization in urban developments. And this commercialization comprises suburbia as well. The story of the Dutch suburbia is very much the story of the neoliberal thinking and practice. Neoliberal politics is not just a short firework of a ruling elite, but a system that implies and builds on commitment and cooperation of the masses. Neoliberal politics caused significant shifts in the perception and expression of cultural values, away from the collective towards the ideal of the individual, of the self. In the interview, "Only Losers Cooperate" ("Nur Verlierer kooperieren"), the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk contours the changes and concomitant consequences as follows:

> "Neoliberalism had the ideological merit, to let down the bashful mask in front of consumerism, it has been very frank in declaring consumerism a central life-motive." (own translation from German) [11]

And Sloterdijk continues his evaluation of what politically happened during the past fifteen to twenty years:

> "We have been entangled in a large-scale experiment on psycho-political frivolity – but what was on the menu, was not any more aristocratic frivolity, but mass frivolity, carelessness and selfishness for everyone. During this period it has been argued that common-interest-thinking had failed. So there was the anti-social, which we politely called individualism, to commit ourselves with better feelings to it [neoliberalism]." (own translation from German)[12]

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[11] „Der Neoliberalismus hatte das ideologische Verdienst, die schamhafte Maske vor dem Konsumismus fallen zu lassen, er hat ihn geradewegs zum zentralen Lebensmotiv erklärt."

[12] „Man hat uns in ein psychopolitisches Großexperiment über Frivolität verwickelt – aber was auf dem Programm stand, war nicht mehr aristokratische Frivolität, sondern Massenfrivolität, Leichtsinn und Egoismus für jeden. Man hat in dieser Zeit behauptet, Gemeinwohldenken sei gescheitert. Also blieb

And despite or because of the ongoing economic crisis, the neoliberal swing is not at its end. Just last year, the Rutte administration confirmed its position in the first throne speech of King Willem-Alexander and proclaimed that the welfare state is at its end and will be substituted by an undefined "participative society".[13] The governmental call for a "participative society" might be an interesting challenge in economically steady times, but in the midst of the economic crisis, it might be considered a doubtful move. Therefore it is not surprising that the announcement attracted immediate critic and became the buzzword of the year. Among others, it is feared that in the long run, private initiative and engagement becomes a surrogate for considerate politics and planning.

Politics before and during the economic crisis keep moving in one direction: demounting and redistribution of what had been called state responsibility. It is very much standard that financial cuts and redistribution of responsibilities in first instance hit the vulnerable health, social and cultural sectors. But national governmental rearrangements do not halt here. In October 2010, after almost 65 years of integrated housing and spatial planning, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) has been dissolved and the tasks got distributed between the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment (IenM) and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BKZ).

In the revised set-up, the ministry only organizes and structures the general building process. The actual planning of land development since 2006 is fully in the hand of provinces and municipalities. It is striking that the national government decided to reorganize the responsibilities of the ministries at a time, where lower-tier structures were very much pressured with severe financial shortcomings and with limited means to keep an eye on interregional developments.

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der Asozialismus, den wir höflicherweise Individualismus genannt haben, um uns mit besseren Gefühlen zu ihm zu bekennen."

13 "De klassieke verzorgingsstaat verdwijnt" (The classic welfare state will disappear), The first throne speech of King Willem-Alexander as head of state. Dutch daily newspaper De Volkskrant September 17, 2013

The urban planner Stefan Netsch particularly addresses the financial situation of municipalities: “As a result of the economic crisis combined with the financial risk governments took on the Dutch real-estate market, there are now roughly sixty municipalities facing bankruptcy.” (Netsch and Kropman 2013, 1095) According to Netsch, municipalities miscalculated and invested during the strong economic period in land development that today needs to be considered as risky activity, due to the uncertainty of the market in changing economic conditions and long project life spans. Investing within the economic stable Randstad under regular circumstances isn’t considered to be risky, but especially in economic weak areas in the periphery of the country, this might be problematic. Netsch and Kropman recognize that the crisis produced a country of two speeds: the conurbation of the Randstad versus the rest. The economic imbalance between the Dutch regions can’t be considered a new phenomenon, but especially in the todays situation, it might be a central factor for completed urban and suburban developments that took place outside the Randstad, and it might become a crucial issue in the decision-making of any future development.

Though some developments such as Leidsche Rijn are not completed yet, and others are even built out, according to the current political situation, the Vinex implementation was most likely the last state-controlled housing program in the Netherlands.

During the past five years, the entire Dutch building sector is under the impression of the economic recession and the housing production significantly slowed down. When in fall 2014, some Dutch banks announced a light recovery of the global markets, the mood rose up again and the real-estate sector with its many investors, developers, architects, operators, builders, and realtors prepares to continue business as usual: producing more of the same kind of houses for the urban and suburban buyer’s market. After the game is before the game. Without wanting to over-simplify the matter and insinuating lack of interest, it feels as if the market hasn’t learned much from the previous years. The production of arbitrariness and insignificance continues. The unbridled consumption lives on.

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Synopsis: Considered to be sub-ordinated and sub-prime to the city, sub-urban areas receive little attention by researchers and designers. However, it´s the rapidly growing areas outside the central cities that pose the biggest questions of the urban millennium: How can the scattered patchwork of urban areas and social spaces linked by networks of highways and public transportation function as a sustainable and livable urban environment? Answering this question requires understanding suburban spaces as heterogeneous urban areas with distinct local characteristics, qualities, and problems. Following this path, Variations of Suburbanism explores formation, characteristics, and trends of suburban areas all over the world. It provides insights on common features and differences of suburban governance, design, and infrastructure and discusses strategies to understand and design suburban areas in an increasingly sub-urbanizing world.

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