

Restoring the balance between city and country

The word ‘healing’ is central to Amsterdam’s green vision. Plans to bring Floriade 2022 to the Amsterdam South-East district supports this vision. It would be the showcase of a restored relationship between city and country, in which both sides benefit. Zef Hemel of the City of Amsterdam is one of the masterminds of this plan.

SERVY BRULS

Less than hundred years ago, Amsterdam was the largest agricultural municipality in the Netherlands. The surrounding area largely provided for the city’s food requirements. Until right after the Second World War, Amsterdam was almost fully self-sufficient in terms of food supplies. Right now, like many other cities, Amsterdam is reflecting on the role and importance of green space in the city. Zef Hemel, Deputy Director at the Spatial Planning Department in Amsterdam, believes that green spaces in large cities are key to restoring the balance between city and country. Amsterdam’s application for candidacy for Floriade 2022 is a translation of that vision. As Hemel explains, “The idea is for a Floriade in the Amsterdam South-East district. Despite all our efforts, public space is not functioning properly here. But the district could potentially have a fantastic green structure, relevant to the inhabitants and providing opportunities for the horticulture sector. To make use of that space for the city’s benefit would be genuinely sustainable.”

Technological innovations play an important role in Amsterdam’s vision: using smart grids, empty office buildings and parking garages which are on the demolition list, for growing vegetables, developing green roofs and facades – everything is being investigated. Energy, waste and water consumption could also be organised in a far more sustainable way. Therefore, Amsterdam is collaborating with cities such as Vienna, Hamburg, Genoa, Copenhagen and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston.

Amnesia

The annexation of several surrounding villages around 1920 brought large areas of agricultural land within the city’s boundaries. That Amsterdam was indeed con-



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Zef Hemel will be keynote speaker at the last Floriade Dialogue on 3 September 2012: The Self-supporting City.

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Vegetable and schoolgardens are still widely used in Amsterdam

scious of the importance of green space and the city's dependency on the countryside became clear when, in 1934, the General Expansion Plan was presented: the western garden cities were implemented. "The new districts had an urban allure," explains Hemel, "but with village-like designs, including allotment garden complexes and school gardens within cycling distance. True to the vision of teacher Jac. P. Thijsse, education and gardening had to prevent the townspeople's alienation from nature." The expansions pushed the agricultural land further out, but an integrated network of waterways and the construction of the central market hall in the 1930s led to efficient food supplies. By the early stages of post-war reconstruction, Amsterdam had become self-sufficient, owing to the implementa-

tion of garden cities. However, this would only last for a few years.

Mechanisation and better transport facilities led to expansion in the agriculture and horticulture sectors. The direct relationship between city and country disappeared. Zef Hemel speaks of 'amnesia': "By the late 1960s, people had forgotten that Amsterdam was once self-sufficient. With the development of new housing estate Nieuw-Sloten, in the mid-'80s, Amsterdam's last horticultural areas disappeared as well. Food and livestock markets in nearby villages such as Aalsmeer, Purmerend and Alkmaar detached themselves from Amsterdam and served global markets." From then on, strawberries came from Spain, and people in Madrid had tulips from Hillegom on their tables.

On top of that, many families left Amsterdam from the 1960s onwards. 'Old Amsterdam' was replaced by terraced houses, enormous infrastructure networks and second-rate facilities in spaciouly designed satellite towns such as Almere, Purmerend, Hoorn and Lelystad. These were 'the new garden cities', established by the government. The result was that, until the 1980s, there was little support for green structures in the city.

A green variation on Occupy Wall Street

But yuppies and students recaptured the city in the 1980s. Since then, there has been a revaluation of Amsterdam and the city's green structures. The new owners have taken possession of the green space, and allotments are flourishing more than ever. Even the school gardens have survived. "However, urban agriculture can no longer play the role it did before, says Hemel. "Amsterdam's menu has changed. Because of the many nationalities in Amsterdam, there is a much broader demand for products. Existing small-scale initiatives cannot begin to meet this demand. These activities should be seen as a positive appeal, a green variation on Occupy Wall Street. But one that needs to be taken seriously!"

This marks the beginning of the thought process on Floriade 2022. "Straightforward urban gardening is not the answer: this would be an under-appreciation of the horticulture sector. But things clearly need to change. City and country should join forces in order to achieve more sustainable food production and to prevent people's alienation from nature. As our forebears did in the 1930s, we should bring city and country closer together, but this time in collaboration with the horticulture sector. The outcome may not yet be clear,

but we need to initiate a dialogue. Small initiatives and a few patches of land are definitely a start, but ultimately action will go much further and become more radical."

Hemel was closely involved in the development of Amsterdam's Structural Vision. In this process, full use was made of 'collective intelligence' and dialogue. In 2009, for a period of six weeks, the Free State of Amsterdam event was held at Tolhuistuin. This event was a platform for residents and experts, totalling nearly 8,000 people. Everyone – from homeless people, philosophers, school children, architects, city planners and students – was invited to share their ideas. Amsterdam also collaborated closely with the city of New York. An exhibition of scale models helped to kickstart discussions about living, food, green space, water, and so on. It resulted in the Structural Vision for 2040, the new open-city plan for Amsterdam, which was ultimately accepted unanimously by the board, with a standing ovation."

'Healing' the city and green space

The same principle applies in the bid for Floriade 2022: participation and collaboration of residents, small businesses and other interested parties. This ensures a very heterogeneous group of people working towards a common goal: "The broader and larger the group, the more result and more support it will get," says Hemel. There are many similarities content-wise between the Structural Vision 2040 and the Floriade bid: "It is not about creating more green space, but about optimally using the green space that is already available. City and country are off balance and need to be healed. The Structural Vision is just a concept. But Floriade 2022 can be a great showcase, generating international interest to create change." ●

Floriade 2022

Almere, Amsterdam, Boskoop and Groningen are in the race for Floriade 2022 Candidates. The winner of the bid will be announced in September 2012.

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