

POTENTIAL OF VACANCY

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Our project 'Vacant NL – Where Architecture Meets Ideas' calls on the Dutch government to make use of the enormous potential of inspiring, temporarily unoccupied buildings dating from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries for innovation in the creative knowledge economy. Rietveld Landscape first presented this vision as part of the Dutch contribution to the Venice Architecture Biennale 2010, and we have been developing it further since then. The starting-point for this is the Netherlands' political ambition to attain a position among the top five knowledge economies in the world. A few years ago, the Dutch parliament passed a resolution supporting this ambition unanimously. A transition to a knowledge economy of that kind calls not only for excellent research, education and nurturing of talent, but also for specific spatial conditions. Partly due to a one-sided focus on traditional economic parameters, so far little attention has been paid to the spatial conditions required for innovation.

Five key sectors have been identified in the widely supported Dutch Knowledge and Innovation Agenda: water, high-tech systems, creative industry, chemical industry, and food and flowers. We are focusing on the specific conditions for what the government has called the key sector of the creative industry: architecture, design, games, fashion, app-makers and other Internet companies, graphic design, etc. The creative sector can make a relevant contribution to the complex challenges facing society. Cooperation between creative industry and scientists is crucial in this respect.

Design and architecture have remained isolated from other disciplines for too long, and science has been on an island too. Innovation stands to gain from cross-fertilization and face-to-face contact between pioneers from the creative industry, craftsmen, science and technology. After all, innovation often results from considering the same challenges from different perspectives together with other people.

In addition, the availability of affordable and inspiring places of work is very important for young talent precisely now. As a result of the current economic crisis, many of our colleagues have lost their jobs, students of design and architecture are graduating without any employment prospects, many freelancers have used up their savings, and the government is executing unprecedented spending cuts.

How can we invest in innovation at a time of scarce resources? First of all, it is important to see that we are not asking for public money, but just for the keys to vacant government properties. Secondly, the large number of vacant public buildings means that the government is failing to make use of an enormous potential. These vacant buildings are costing society a lot of money at the moment (€ 200,000 per year for one building is not exceptional), while they could also be used to accommodate the next generation of innovators. The wide variety of empty buildings from the country's architectural heritage offers all

kinds of possibilities for use. Especially in combination with more flexible regulations, interim use can challenge creative entrepreneurs who are starting out to come up with innovative experiments. Temporary locations are excellent laboratories for a government that says it wants to try out non-regulated zones in which there is maximum scope for innovation.

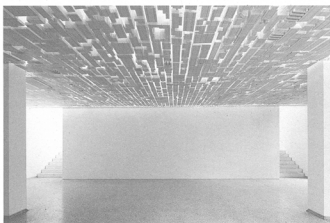
Vision on vacancy

Although vacant property is often left unused, there is growing interest in the Netherlands and elsewhere in recycling existing buildings for different purposes. In some cases, such as the Tate Modern in London or the Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, this has been highly successful. However, as far as temporary reuse is concerned, as a property owner the government opts only too often for a defensive way of filling the void – for instance, in the case of vacancy (or anti-squatter) management. We are calling for more societally relevant and innovative usage of these public assets. A few key points in our vision are listed below.

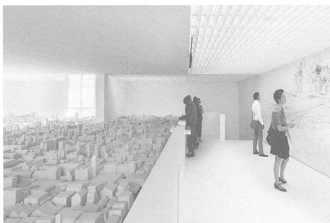
Top five ambition for the Dutch knowledge economy. A novel feature of our project is its link with the Dutch Knowledge and Innovation Agenda. We take seriously the government's aim to attain a place among the top five knowledge economies in the world. If you are starting from this national political ambition and strategy, you make different choices. With regard to reuse, this could mean, for instance, not just filling up spaces that are empty, but using attractive vacant places first of all for people who are stretching the boundaries of the design and architecture disciplines, or for creative initiators who are dedicating their efforts to providing excellent education in digital media, or resolving an urgent issue for our society. 'Vacant NL – Where Architecture Meets Ideas' is thus a call to the national government, and in particular to the newly appointed Minister of Innovation, to make use of vacant property for our creative industry's innovation programme.

Use vacant government property. Since the ambition to innovate emerged from national politics, we are primarily targeting government property that has been vacant for periods of between one week and ten years. Of course, we hope that if the government sets a good example (in using vacant premises for innovation), it will have spin-off effects on the market. A special feature here is that there is a vast number of spaces that are not monotonous but very diverse, because the buildings were once designed for different specific purposes: lighthouses, hospitals, water towers, factory buildings, airports, hangars, offices, forts, bunkers, schools, swimming pools and many more.

Thousands of vacant buildings are not privately owned but are state property. In principle, they belong to us all. It is often forgotten that vacant property costs the taxpayer a lot of money – around € 200,000 a year in the case of the Radio Kootwijk building in Apeldoorn. The former government advisor on cultural heritage, Fons Asselbergs, has estimated that the number of inspiring, vacant buildings with a government or public function is between 50 and 80 per medium-sized



The Dutch Pavilion in Venice itself stood vacant for more than 39 years. Built in 1954, it stands on Dutch territory and is unused for eight or nine months a year. Leaving the ground floor completely empty enables the visitor to experience the building as it is for the rest of the year – vacant.



The installation on the left is '4326 potential laboratories' and Barbara Visser's 'Placebook Panorama' is seen on the wall to the right. The latter shows the relations between buildings, individual designers and scientists, and realized projects with value for society.



Sea of vacancy. As the curators, Rietveld Landscape put together a multidisciplinary team to design the installation: Jurgen Bey (designer), Joost Grootens (graphic designer), Ronald Rietveld (landscape architect), Erik Rietveld (philosopher/economist), Saskia van Stein (curator, NAI), and Barbara Visser (visual artist). Landstra & De Vries and Claus Wiersma (designer) were responsible for the construction of the exhibition. Commissioner: Ole Bouman, Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI)

1 Frank Strolenberg,
Programme Manager for
the National Redevelopment
Programme (*Nationaal
Programma Herbestemming*),
quoted in the Dutch daily
newspaper *Trouw*, 19 June
2010, p. 4.

local authority (of which there are about a hundred in the Netherlands). That means thousands of vacant buildings, not including around a thousand military objects and hundreds of state-owned vacant lots. And Vacant NL is growing: 'A farm a day, two churches a week, and a convent every month. They are all becoming vacant.'¹ Temporary reuse can create exciting laboratories for innovation, paid for with the funds that the taxpayer is now paying for vacant property.

Temporary use as strategy. With Vacant NL, we are focusing on the interval between the moment when a property becomes vacant and its renovation, reallocation, or demolition. If the right people are in the right place, even a project that lasts only a week can make a difference. At the moment, reallocation takes up an enormous amount of time, due to the endless consultations and changes in the zoning plan. For example, a location like the Hembrug site in Amsterdam, with more than 100 buildings, has already been waiting for reallocation for many years. This is an unnecessary waste of time, with waiting periods both for the buildings and for young creative entrepreneurs, often with scarce resources and limited networks, who are looking for inspiring space. Not everything has to be designed for eternity. Good architecture can be temporary too.

Cross-fertilization and space for experiment. Given the current complexity of cities, landscape and society, the urgent challenges facing society call for an integral and multidisciplinary approach. This is why we are explicitly calling for cross-fertilization between young creative entrepreneurs (or more generally, initiators of projects) and breakthrough science, because it is at this interface in particular that innovation can be expected. Online social networks have by no means made face-to-face contact redundant; on the contrary, the two forms of interaction complement one another (see also the example of Appsterdam, discussed below). Offering young, creative pioneers and scientists joint spaces for work and experimentation makes it easier for them to work together and share their knowledge, creativity and social networks.

When it comes to temporary use of vacant buildings, fire safety is one of the major obstacles that has to be overcome. A truly multidisciplinary approach would ideally involve a creative firefighting expert who could challenge designers proactively to come up with innovative design solutions and try out novel materials.

Interim use as a test bed for reallocation. Buildings from earlier epochs often provide a unique potential for action, due to the way they were constructed or the materials that were used. Often the facilities are non-reproducible, simply because of their material structure and the fact that we do not build in that way any more (in the case of palaces, Gothic churches, or castles). Buildings like these often provide surprising potential for action and experimentation. In addition, the interim and experimental reuse of buildings can offer valuable insights into the longer-term potential of a location – as the interim use of the Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, for instance, has demonstrated. So the interim period can be deliberately used as an exploratory stage.

Educating specialists in the temporary use of vacant buildings for innovation

Thousands of inspiring vacant buildings in the Netherlands have the potential to be reused for creative entrepreneurship and innovation. With a new two-year master's degree programme called 'Vacant NL', the Sandberg Institute and Rietveld Landscape are implementing a plan to train designers, craftsmen, legal specialists and scientists to become specialists in temporary usage. The programme started in September 2011 and focuses on design research on the potential of vacant buildings for innovation. Insights and solutions from different fields of knowledge are being combined to address the topic in an integrated manner. Several unique buildings are available for experimentation and for carrying out site-specific design interventions. There is no doubt that what the Netherlands needs in the coming decade is a multi-disciplinary team of talented specialists in temporary reuse who will be able to design and build the impossible. The challenge posed by 'Vacant NL' calls for a range of visionary and unorthodox interventions.

The students have founded a practice called 'Studio Vacant NL', and the ambitious project they are working on during the first two terms is called 'Vacant Appsterdam'.

Vacant Appsterdam: unlocking the value of vacancy

To illustrate the economic potential of temporary reuse, Studio Vacant NL and Rietveld Landscape are collaborating in a project called 'Vacant Appsterdam'. Appsterdam was founded by Mike Lee, who used to work with Apple, where he was involved in the early development of iPhone apps. Appsterdam is a community that aims to make greater Amsterdam the capital of the app industry worldwide. Lee's motto is: if you want to make movies, go to Hollywood; if you want to make fashion, go to Paris; if you want to make apps, go to Appsterdam. About two thousand young app-makers might come to the capital of the Netherlands if he succeeds in implementing this vision. This would shift the centre of gravity in the app industry from Silicon Valley to Appsterdam.

All of these young app-makers will need places to work, live and share knowledge. We are not talking about multinationals, but about small businesses primarily consisting of young Europeans (typically in their early twenties) who are starting up and do not have funds for expensive offices and houses. Vacant buildings could play a key role in realizing this. For instance, behind Amsterdam's Central Station there is the former Shell tower, which is now owned by the city government. The building has been vacant for years and is in an excellent location. Interim use for the purpose of implementing the Appsterdam plan would make a significant contribution to Dutch ambitions for innovation.

The main challenge is to develop design solutions that match the enormous number of vacant buildings and the potential they hold. An ability to attract young people will become more and more important in the near future. All over Europe, countries are having to face the problems arising from ageing populations. A country that is able to attract youngsters, housing them, educating them and accommodating

their needs for work and relaxation will have an important advantage. In 'Vacant Appsterdam', we are focusing on innovation that will strengthen the Dutch economy. Our dream is that the economic and creative potential of temporary usage will eventually be unlocked and that innovative nomadic exchanges will develop between many of the inspiring vacant buildings. We have already seen this happening in Amsterdam on a much smaller scale. Many creative entrepreneurs were allowed to use the former postal building, Post CS, for four years. After that period, many of the people who had to move out of the building decided to move collectively to another temporary space in the centre of Amsterdam, called Duintjer CS. They wanted to stick together because of the community and collaborations that had emerged.

Conclusions

We would like to conclude by highlighting the value of Vacant NL for some important issues society faces. Firstly, the proposal is concerned with finding new economic value in a period of deep economic crisis. Vacant buildings have an enormous potential for society and for the (creative) economy that is barely being used at the moment. We are focusing on the transition to a creative knowledge economy. We have made a start by using inspiring vacant buildings to attract young European app-makers who want to be part of Appsterdam. In addition, a flourishing creative ecology can lead to a lively climate for the setting up of small businesses, which is important for attracting and holding onto talent. Secondly, from the point of view of sustainability, reusing vacant property is often a wise option. Thirdly, this means that more of the scarce open space in the Netherlands will be left untouched and that the quality of the urban public sphere will benefit. Finally, all of the urgent issues that society is facing today call for innovation, and not just a little, but plenty of it – in fact, for a culture in which design and innovation play a key role. An important question is: how we can activate large numbers of talented individuals from various backgrounds, including young craftsmen, in the creative knowledge economy?