

Vacant NL, where architecture meets ideas

Curatorial statement by Rietveld Landscape

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Introduction

Rietveld Landscape has been invited by the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) to make a statement in the form of an installation about the potential of landscape architecture to contribute to resolving the major challenges facing society today.

The installation 'Vacant NL, where architecture meets ideas' calls upon the Dutch government to make use of the enormous potential of inspiring, temporarily unoccupied buildings from the 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st centuries for innovation within the creative knowledge economy. Our starting point is the political ambition of the Netherlands to attain a position among the top five knowledge economies in the world. Last year the Dutch parliament supported this ambition unanimously. The transition to a knowledge economy of that kind calls not only for excellent research, education and cherishing 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 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 & flowers. We focus on the specific conditions for what the government calls the 'key sector creative industry': architecture, design, digital media, games, fashion, 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 was on an island too. Innovation stands to gain from cross-fertilisation and face-to-face contact between pioneers from the creative industry, science and technology. After all, innovation often results from considering the same challenges from different perspectives together with other people.

Moreover, the availability of affordable, 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 job, students of design and architecture graduate without any prospects of employment, many freelancers have started to use up their savings, and the government is preparing unprecedented spending cuts.

How can we invest in innovation at a time of scarce resources? 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, while they can also be used to accommodate the next generation of innovators. The large variety of empty heritage offers all kinds of possibilities for use. Especially in combination with related 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 wants to try out non-regulated zones in which there is maximal scope for innovation.

Vision on vacancy

Although vacant property is often left unutilised, interest in the recycling of existing buildings for a different purpose is growing in the Netherlands and elsewhere. In some cases, such as Tate Modern in London or Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam, that is highly successful. However, as far as temporary reuse is concerned, as a property owner the government opts only too often, for instance in the case of vacancy (or "anti-squatter") management, for a defensive way of filling the void. We call for a more socially relevant and innovative use of these public assets. A few key points of our vision:

- Top 5 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 its aim to attain a position among the top five knowledge economies in the world. If you set out from that national political ambition and strategy, you make different choices. With respect 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 excellent education in digital media or resolving an urgent societal issue. 'Vacant NL, where architecture meets ideas' is thus a call to the national government, and in particular to the future Minister of Innovation, to make use of vacant property for our creative industry's Innovation Programme.

- First use vacant government property

Since the innovation ambition emerged from national politics, we primarily target government property that is vacant for a period between one week and ten years. Of course we hope that the good example (vacancy for innovation) of the government will have a spin-off towards the market. A special feature is that there is a vast number of spaces that are not monotonous, but are very diverse because the buildings were once designed for a specific purpose: 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: the case of Radio Kootwijk in Apeldoorn cost around €200,000 a year. The former Government Advisor on Cultural Heritage, Fons Asselbergs, estimates that the number of inspiring, vacant buildings with a government or public function is between 50 and 80 per medium-sized local authority (of which there are about a hundred in the Netherlands). That means a total of thousands of vacant buildings, not counting 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 nunnery each month. They are all becoming vacant.' (Frank Strolenberg, *Trouw*, 19 June, 2010, p. 4). Temporary reuse can yield exciting labs for innovations, paid for with the money that the taxpayer is now paying for vacant property.

- Temporary use as strategy

We focus on the period (or "meantime") between when a property becomes vacant and its renovation, reallocation or demolition. We primarily target buildings that are vacant for a period between one week and ten years. 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 because of endless consultations and a change in the zoning plan. For example, an unusual location like the Hembrug site with more than 100 buildings in Amsterdam has already been "waiting" many years for reallocation. This is an unnecessary waste of time: there is a "waiting period" for the buildings and a "waiting period" for young creative entrepreneurs, often with scarce resources and limited networks, who are looking for inspiring space.

- Cross-fertilisation and space for experiment

Given the current complexity of cities, landscape and society, the urgent societal challenges call for an integral and multidisciplinary approach. That is why we are explicitly calling for cross-fertilisation between young creative entrepreneurs (or more generally, initiators of projects) and breakthrough science because it is at this interface in particular that innovation is to 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. By offering young, creative pioneers and scientists joint spaces for work and experiment, it becomes easier for them to work together and to share their knowledge, creativity and social networks.

- Interim use as test bed for reallocation

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 can be deliberately deployed as an exploratory stage.

NAI Architecture of Consequence agenda

The link with the societal themes that the NAI is targeting with its Architecture of Consequence agenda is fourfold. First, our proposal is about finding new economic value. Vacancy has an enormous potential for society and for the (creative) economy that is barely used at the moment. We focus on the transition to a creative knowledge economy. Moreover, a flourishing creative ecology leads to a lively climate for the setting up of small businesses, which is important for attracting and holding on to talent. Second, from the perspective of sustainability, the reuse of vacant property is often a wise option. Third, more of the scarce open space in the Netherlands is left untouched and the quality of the urban public domain will benefit. Finally, the urgent issues 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 very many talented individuals from various backgrounds, including young craftsmen, within the creative knowledge economy?

Site-specific team

The Rietveld Pavilion is the ideal location for the Dutch submission. The building itself has stood vacant for more than 39 years. Built in 1954, it stands on Dutch territory and is vacant for around 8.5 months a year. As curator we have put together a multidisciplinary team to design the installation, consisting of people with an interest in the innovative potential of vacant property and international experience in the creative industry: Jurgen Bey (designer), Joost Grootens (graphic designer), Ronald Rietveld (landscape architect), Erik Rietveld (philosopher/economist), Saskia van Stein (curator NAI), and Barbara Visser (artist). Landstra & De Vries and Claus Wiersma (designer) are responsible for the construction of the exhibition.

Ambition

We hope that the installation will inspire people and set in motion a more ambitious way of thinking about the potential of temporary reuse. At the same time we hope that the new Minister of Innovation will see that good spatial conditions are of inestimable value for innovation in the creative knowledge economy.

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