

Alternative strategies for urban development

Hoograven is an area in Utrecht with about 15,000 inhabitants of different cultural background. In the Dutch policy normally these urban environments are restructured from time to time to improve the quality of living. Main intervention is to demolish some older buildings and replace it by apartments and housing for relatively richer people, hoping to increase the differentiation in the area.

Now, this policy has the disadvantage that as soon as a building is designated as 'restructure zone' no more maintenance is undertaken. Secondly the replacement by new apartments ruins the social structure of the area. This kind of top-down policies neglects the opportunities, wishes and needs of the inhabitants.

Under the umbrella of the organization 'Hoograven Invites You' students from the Postgraduate School of the Arts Utrecht (MAHKU) participated in the project to find alternative strategies for urban development.

In the bottom-up approach of Brillemburg and Klumpner (Urban Think Tank) and their students from Columbia University New York, urban development should start from the acceptance of the social and cultural structure at hand. The aim is to find the most of the time hidden or unseen capacities and vulnerabilities of the communities. Fieldwork survey reveals the reality, needs, potentials and opportunities- from the perspective of the MAHKU students, a perfect opportunity to mediate the local wishes and needs for the plans of the GSAPP students

For us as designers the task will be to map these facts and potentials and translate them into provocative interventions. These interventions then will serve as a scenario that generates a position or assumption. By checking these scenarios in the existing context, i.e. the daily life practice, the richness of feedback will increase, and plans for intervention can improve and become more realistic and appropriate for the particular situation in Hoograven.

One of the aims of this project eventually will be to create an alternative strategy for the current Dutch urban development policy. Main point is to encourage the potential social activities. The idea is that if you give an obvious place to these activities they cannot be neglected anymore. These facilities will even invite people to join in. To take it one step further, facilitating them can actualize even under-matured potential activities.

How can we create an alternative restructuring of the area? When we take wishes and needs serious and expand them into structural interventions, new layers are created and improved through feedback. These layers influence each other and by combining and adapting them well they will constitute an overall plan for the area containing a diversity of ideas.

The assignment for the group of MAHKU students was to create such an alternative restructuring strategy that could transform the mental institutional mindset of current policymakers. Layers that should be addressed are:

- Interaction of private and public zones;
- Economical activities, also informal and small scale;
- Transformation of old buildings;
- Re-functioning of the empty living environment;

- Impermanent but regular events;
- Community enhancement.

In a bottom-up process a huge amount of ideas come up. To be able to enjoy and cherish each plan on its own merit, we initiated a matrix. In the matrix plans were identified according to phase, subject and strategy. Especially the three designated phases: ideas, scenarios and designs, were meant to understand the intention of the plans well. Simple ideas are impulsive and ask for elaboration. Consequently elaborated scenarios may be rigid but hope to find good feedback. And finally designs are more fine tuned plans that look for support to be realised. All these kind of plans are crucial in a social development strategy to challenge fantasy, initiate discussion and create commitment.

A second aim to this matrix was to generate a communication system whereby plans with parallel ideas could be linked. For this purpose all plans were labelled by subject. The system worked in two ways: on any subject an overall question came up like: 'How to treat the present water in a more functional way?' Even more interesting was the enrichment of ideas by adding up the different subjects to well layered scenarios. Commercial plans and waterway designs for example fused into plans including boat shops.

A third category reflected on the demanded strategy to realise the design. So far we discovered four different ways: Centres are plans to transform existing buildings, most of the time into new typologies for specific target groups. Networks are urban infrastructures to improve transportation or connections. Acupunctures are a set of small-scale interventions like benches, well-related spread over the area. And finally events are temporary projects mostly on regular basis.

The question of strategies guided interesting discussions like: 'should the boat shops be located on fixed places in a network or only function in summer as an event?'

Already while the process is still in progress and nothing has been built yet, an unseen reality is revealed and settled in the minds of all participants of the project, and this includes social workers, policymakers, scientists and not to forget, the inhabitants of Hoograven themselves. What more could a designer wish as a social objective! The approach of the GSAPP in this project shows that social engagement is not just a matter of altruistic result but even more a process in which inhabitants are involved and empowered to their own wishes and needs.