

**SPEECH OF HENK OVINK, ON THE OCCASION OF
THE EUROPAN 11 AWARD CEREMONY ON 14 DECEMBER 2011**

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Design and politics up for change¹

75-90-3, it is the most efficient model for mankind. 75 % of the world's population, generating 90% of our prosperity on only 3% of the earth's available surface. As a consequence of this ongoing urbanization, the economic, cultural, social and ecological issues we are facing are increasingly also spatial issues. The confrontation of these issues has a maximum spatial impact on our cities and urban regions. At the same time there is a growing disconnect between design and politics. This double crunch asks for an urgent reconfiguration of current planning and design strategies.

Our new architecture and design agenda NL is about this 'what is at stake?' in our urbanized world. It is about how we work, want to work, and want to re-develop our working on this complex of issues. It is an agenda that connects the institutional and performative powers through our societal needs. Design in itself is crucial for the sharp confrontation between the challenges, the issues at stake and 'putting them in place' in our cities. Design ensures the confrontation, the organization and identification. Sharpness in confrontation is necessary to make choices; on the basis of this focus it will catalyze development and dynamics. This design approach confronts the main and specific challenges in the different and specific places. It sets off the alliance of the main actors: governments, developers, industry, designers and scientists working together on this new planning, innovation and development task.

Then spatial planning can no longer be the trade-off of interests, nor should it amount to the allocation of program volumes. Instead, spatial planning must be about giving direction and shape in visions and stories, in laws and regulations, and through programs and projects all contributing to the wider perspective of a social, economic and cultural task. That is precisely what makes planning political, a planning that is socio-economically and culturally driven. A planning that connects with society's demands. And a planning that confronts and resolves the different challenges with the 'power' of the places. It calls for design excellence to make explicit and confront differences rather than finding generic solutions. Then design and innovation become leading in this spatial development process. This makes politics of planning being about the redefining of our tasks in an integral approach. It is about rethinking our instruments, financial, legal, et cetera, with less yet more integrated rules and through smarter governance. About reinventing the alliance, the strong collaboration that enables a breakthrough and focus. It is about the repositioning of design and its political capacity. And it is about the exchange of knowledge, the collaboration through excellence, without assimilation but with adaptation.

An alliance entails strong collaboration where a narrow focus can lead to a successful development. Entrepreneurial attitude amongst partners including government organizations is essential. Alliances start where challenges emerge and facilitate to support direct interests of people (organized and non-organized). Good government must identify them as highly powerful collaborations. Government should participate, facilitate and give them a stage to act on.

The alliance is also a side step out of our blocked condition of pre-defined sets of actors, rules, instruments and politics. This pre-defining comes from

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the hopes we develop on a better future that we can pin down in guidelines, so-called certainties and perspectives that look like idealistic views. It is a search for certainties in the ever-increasing complexity of the world. The changing horizons, the redefining of our basis upon which we built, the fluidness of the development process all ask for a letting go of certainties but tend to reactions that are more strict, more pre-defined, more so called certain. But we mustn't fall in this trap of certainties. There is no such thing.

It is the city, the metropolitan region that can re-set our society. If the collective of making city is the connection and driver for alliances, then what does this mean for the different actors involved? The alliance is the sidestep out of our already impossible or at least too complex configuration of rules and regulations, inertia in society and bureaucracy and the impossibility to act as individual players of developers, investors, designers, researchers and business. If we want to make city it is these alliances that lead the way. If we want to 'change the world' we have to let the alliances cut right through to the heart of the individual actors and help to reform, as change agents these individual and collective powers.

Then the 'change of the world' is about the agenda for the different actors that develop, research, educate, execute, rule, reign and reflect. This agenda is not a blueprint, nor a guideline, nor the prediction how to make the world better. No, the agenda is the process of change. The agenda leads the way to help form alliances concerning and connecting specific places, people and issues. And the agenda in itself should be adaptive, changing with every step of development.

The European condition is so different then that of the rest of the world. We are shrinking and ageing. We do not invest competitive in our knowledge and innovation sector. We protect ourselves as nations instead of collaborating explicitly on the EU level. Most dominantly the issue at stake is the existing city. As building-site the city is under constant change. Looking ahead the planning changes, and so is the way we work, the way we collaborate and engage. So we have to plan, work and collaborate differently. At the same time the role of our nation-state changes. Can it really engage in an urban agenda? In the Netherlands it already makes room for specificity and adaptiveness of rules and regulations, with less mixing of interests among governmental responsibilities. At the same time public authorities are engaging more self assuring in alliances with common interests and letting go for private initiatives to emerge and flourish. We have to do it differently as governments, as developers, investors, designers and individuals.

And what about the designers? Can they shift positions again and again. Doing everything at once for a sharp and strong perspective in process, outcome and engagement? This change of knowledge and experience starts in our schools. In our Academies of Architecture, our centers of practice-excellence, in our Universities and in the engaging of the alliance partners with these educational, practice and research institutes. Looking at the curriculum, the built up, the position within society the schools should more and more enter the field of practice. Not discarding their research objective nor its scientific and academic character or position. But test in practice and by engaging in this testing form alliances with the public and private partners that have to take the same step.

So it is testing and engaging in alliances with the schools and centers of research. Our Academies of Architecture already perform in this alliance-like way.

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And we have to perform and reflect at the same time. We have to make explicit not only what's at stake but moreover how to tackle this, how to present, reflect and discuss the inventions we develop over and over again. Find and form the platforms. Not only in our institutions like the NAI, the Dutch Architecture Institute but also in the world outside the institutions, in our projects, our testing zones like we do with the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam.

So we change our policy on architecture and design, beginning last summer with a reform in organization and a generic budget cut. This reform comes before the content, driven by the Creative Industry. Now the content is at stake, as I described and this is the core of the Design Agenda NL.

An agenda that will describe the issues at stake, the added economic and cultural value of design and the design approach and the process and the roles that are needed. And define these in an long term architecture and design policy with some generic roles as well as in a short term, maximum 4 year programmatic and project wise built up agenda.

On the latter we will tempt and invite initiatives to reflect on themselves, their current institutional situation, the possibilities for changes, mergers and collaborations. And out of this change enroll in these programs and projects.

So what about the competitions? EUROPAN, EO Wijers, Stedenbouw NU! and more. The changing system brings a new challenge as well as insecurities. New opportunities and asks for a next step in creativity and reflection.

Is it role to define in the generic sense? Or should it be more adaptive, more specific, more programmatically attached to the issues and the agenda? We need broad and fair design competitions for innovation, performance and competitiveness. We need them for giving means to the tasks as well as giving the floor to talent. The hidden on both the issues and the designer is sometimes connected in these competitions.

And there should not be the excuse in our professional world of 'cheap ass' assignments. Competitions born out of the lack of professionalism on the side of the contractor. Them being public, private, collective or individual.

Concluding it is about test, perform and reflect, with trustworthy and open public partners, with more room for the specific, the changing perspectives of every place, out of an urban agenda that emerges from the alliances in our cities and with a reflective change agenda for the individual partners in these alliances. Design and politics is up for change.

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