

ReUrbAcongress

report

Two-day ReUrbA Conference in The Hague a Success

'Co-operation to eliminate the need to reinvent the wheel'

'The question for us is not whether to continue, but how to continue.' With these words **Marnix Norder**, member of the Provincial Executive of South-Holland opened the ReUrbA conference Friday, 9 November 2001. The two-day event concluded a period of intensive co-operation on innovative urban renewal among a number of European regions and cities. But the conference did not mean a farewell for the participants. ReUrbA² will probably become a fact.

Some seventy ReUrbA delegates, coming from England, Germany, France and the Netherlands assembled in the morning at the Zuid-Holland provincial hall in The Hague. For the past two and a half years the regions of Saarland, Ile de France and Zuid-Holland and the cities of Newcastle, Utrecht, Gouda and Leidschendam have been working together in the field of urban renewal, in the interreg IIc project called **Restructuring Urbanised Areas** (ReUrbA).

In his opening words Norder aired the opinion of the monitoring committee held on the day before. The co-operation between the partners in the ReUrbA project was so fruitful that continuing this joint project is the intention of the partners. This was a collaboration, as Chairman Norder pointed out in his opening speech, that had a difficult beginning. 'Although the participants were enthusiastic from the start, none of them was in the least familiar with the European programme. No one had the necessary know-how concerning the financial and legal problems that we encountered, particularly in the initial stages. Fortunately, once these initial problems were solved, the co-operation was very successful and now we can only look with great satisfaction to the final results of the collaboration.'

Lessons

ReUrbA produced a total of ten theme studies and eight case studies, within



(Mr. Norder, Chairman of the Monitoring Committee, is opening the congress)

three different pilot groups. In Norder's view, various lessons can be learned from the results of this research. Thus, in the opinion of the Provincial Executive member, 'the organisation, the setting-up of management may often be less than really interesting, but it is necessary. This also applies to the financial basis of the projects in question. If funding is not sound, in the long run, you might as well forget about the urban renewal.'

In his eyes, an important lesson of ReUrbA is the integral approach to the renewal question. Through it, all parties, public and private sector as well as residents are involved. Also timing turned up in the different case studies as an essential factor, “when to involve which party” appears to be a very important question in the restructuring process. 'For residents in particular, there should be a place to involve them in the restructuring plans. Only then can sufficient support be created for the often drastic changes involved.' Norder concluded that for a region like South-Holland it is needed to permanently restructure the existing urban stock to be able to supply to the modern and future needs.

After Marnix Norder's review, Royal Commissioner for Zuid-Holland, J. Franssen, took the floor. His talk was concerned mainly with the need for renewal. 'Eighty percent of our built-up surroundings were realised during the past fifty years. The housing built in the fifties, sixties and seventies in particular needs special attention in regard of restructuring. People are no longer satisfied with the uniformity of typical post-war residential areas. They must be more varied, safer and of a better quality.'

According to Franssen, the international co-operation in the framework of the ReUrbA project has shown that everyone is looking for the right form and method to improve neighbourhoods and districts. 'Each with his own methods and at his own scale, but all with the same aim: to realise better housing in urban areas.

And ReUrbA has shown that we can learn much from each other. The approach will always be different but at the same time be characterised by common features.' The goals are to keep on striving for unity through diversity and by this to improve the quality of the living and working conditions.

Book

The Royal Commissioner was then charged with handing over the first copy of the *ReUrbA Guidebook* to the member of the European parliament, Mr. J.M. Wiersma. He enthusiastically accepted the book, in which all the experiences of the

ReUrbA partners are recorded. He was very positive about the fact a Guidebook was made and not an evaluation, therefore the project looks forward and not to the past. 'I see this book as the manual of the future. Although we discuss urban renewal and the demolition and construction of houses, we are in fact talking about the quality of life. And as my predecessor already pointed out, every city or region is dealing with the same problems. ReUrbA makes it clear that urban renewal can be handled in a creative manner. This manual also eliminates the need for everyone to reinvent the wheel.' Wiersma emphasised further that in Brussels he would ensure that sufficient attention would be devoted to a possible follow-up to ReUrbA.



(Commissioner Franssen handing over the first copy of the ReUrbA Guidebook to the member of European Parliament Mr. Wiersma)

Declaration of Intent

That the participants, after two years of hard work, were unwilling to leave it at that was clear during the monitoring committee meeting that preceded the conference. Representatives of the Province of Zuid-Holland and the regions of Saarland (GIU and Saarprojekt) and the municipalities of Newcastle, Gouda and Leidschendam were charged with the official duty of signing a declaration of intent. This declaration will presently have to serve as the basis of a follow-up to ReUrbA. Close

co-operation in the field of urban renewal through the organisation of international building exhibitions and the establishment of an international knowledge platform are some of the ideas for ReUrbA². Marnix Norder: What is concerned here is more than a mere exchange of knowledge. We are considering the formation of an international team of experts, who can be flown in by participants and involved actively in the resolution of problems.' The aim of the ReUrbA² is to combine innovative thinking with real implementation of examples of transformation principles.



(Mr. Klein (GIU) signing the declaration, in the background Mrs. Wientjes-Van de Velden (ISMH) and Mrs. Dwarshuis-Van de Beek (Leidschendam)

Discussions

The second day of the conference was devoted primarily to discussion. To provide a measure of guidance here, Prof. Dr. Geert Teisman of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, who specialises in process management, gave a lecture on the organisation of urban renewal. He raised the point that in the coming years, local, provincial and national government alike will be obliged to conclude alliances with market parties. 'Not because they are so keen on doing so, but simply because they are not capable of making products on their own that meet the needs of residents.'

In Teisman's opinion, it is a process that above all, demands time. 'The government wants control over renewal and production and relies for this on its internal organisation. But time will show that this is not enough. My view is that, in the application of urban renewal no one is in control and no one can be in control.'

This view was fiercely contested by some of the audience as well as parts of the discussion panel, which consisted of Michel Sudarskis, Secretary General of INTA, Dr. Luuk Boelens, Urban Unlimited and Dr. Jon Coaffee of the University of Newcastle and Prof. Dr. Geert Teisman. In the words of Sudarskis, 'There are already too many people involved in urban renewal, too many bosses. Everyone wants a piece of the cake. The most successful projects in France are those where only one party is in charge.' In Coaffee's opinion as well, someone is always needed to initiate a project and do the dirty work.

In the end the opposite ideas coming from experts with different planning cultures, were more tuned; 'The next step is for partners to be given the opportunity to exercise their influence on the plan-forming process. But I admit this is difficult since, as already pointed out, the authorities want to run the show. The compromise often used today, of having market parties find solutions and look for partners in that quarter, does not work', as Teisman said.



(Mr. Vissers is opening the discussion on ReUrbA²)

Variety

Another discussion point is the variety of the districts. According to Teisman, the high quality of urban areas is based on variety. But, according to the professor, not everything need be uniform. 'Consider the strength of each neighbourhood,



district or region and proceed on the assumption that it is unique.' The forum and the audience partly agreed with this view. Sudarskis said that facilities are necessary in every neighbourhood or district. And members of the audience pointed out that housing differentiation should also be based on fundamental principles.

Those who expected fireworks or at least a fierce debate on the ideas on ReUrbA² were disappointed that morning. Member of the Provincial Executive Vissers, who took the baton from his colleague Norder for the second day, did his best to stir up anything that looked like a smouldering fire, but had no luck. Laughing, he said, 'I'm disappointed. There is no conflict, there is consensus and the conclusions are broadly supported.'

It was clear to him that urban renewal also means growth. 'And there is an antithesis between growth and a quality housing environment. This means that an innovative approach is needed to combine growth and the high-calibre design of an area. And that's why we need to learn from one another and look for solutions together.'



(the panel: Prof. Teisman, dr. Boelens, Mr. Vissers, dr. Coaffee and Mr. Sudarskis)

Experts-team

In these terms Luuk Boelens sketched a picture of what ReUrbA² is to become, 'an international knowledge platform. A team of flying experts who can be flown in when a problem arises. ReUrbA² should have key projects in which the ideas are implemented in the practice of urban renewal. 'The pools of experts can support the application of the ReUrbA ideas. Each year, the key projects can be explained during an international building exhibition. Talking to one another, exchanging experiences, finding new ways to approach the market in combination with implementation of good examples- these are the ingredients that will have to form the basis of ReUrbA²,' explained Boelens enthusiastically.

And this is necessary too, since all participants of the successful two-day conference agreed that there is still a long way to go. Or as Vissers said in closing the conference, 'Urban renewal is a never-ending story.' And ReUrbA² can contribute to this enormous task of permanent adjustment of the urbanised areas of North West Europe.