

DENSITY DONE DUTCH

Australia does not stand alone in dealing with urban densification. We learn from urban theories developed in the US and from practical examples in the UK. However, the wealth of experience developed on mainland Europe is regrettably less accessible, partly due to language barriers. There is so much to learn from, if only not to make the same mistakes. Take the Netherlands for example. During the 20th century, Dutch and Australian city planning developed along the same principles of modernist and car-oriented planning. Stemming from a perception that the 19th century cities were unhealthy places to live, unfit for the modern era, both countries focused on modernising their cities based on a separation of uses - with shopping malls, districts for work and spacious suburbs for living, all connected by a transport system that prioritized cars. People moved from the old centres into new, glorified suburbs, that provided for a healthy lifestyle: safe, green and spacious. In Australia, large parts of the old city centres were gradually demolished and replaced according to the modern ideals. The 'town centres' became CBD's. The same happened in the Netherlands, although to a lesser extent because there was too much to demolish. Amsterdam for instance had massive plans to replace large areas of the historic city for car-based modern developments.





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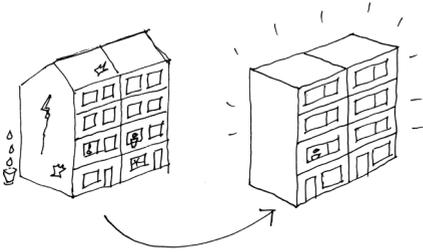
Now it has become clear in both countries that all the car-oriented suburbanisation comes with some serious downsides. There is a lot to say for some walkable density. In the Netherlands this realisation took hold in the 1970s. The oil crisis of 1973 exposed the vulnerability of the car-based transportation system. Meanwhile, town centres had become mono-functional shopping areas that were dead after 5pm. The suburban sprawl consumed landscapes that were highly valued by the public. The suburbs were monotonous and started to show some of the same social problems as the old cities. And on top of that, a flagship modernist urban development project turned into a huge failure. By the 1980s the Dutch changed the focus from suburbanisation to 'compact cities'. This model is now successfully rolled out for over three decades.

So how did the Dutch do this? What were the strategies they used? What were the design principles they discovered? And how did they organise the process to achieve the desired outcomes?

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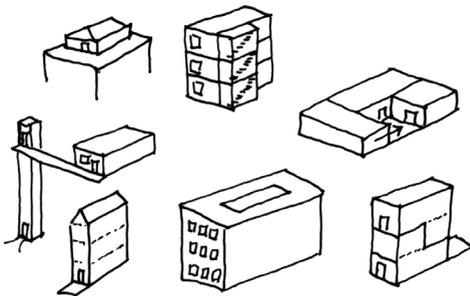
The ways to effectively revitalise cities centres have not been developed overnight. It has taken the Dutch a few decades to develop a range of strategies. You can roughly distinguish six strategies that tend to enhance each other. Dutch cities use them in different combinations and to various extents.

6 STRATEGIES FOR REVITALISING CITY CENTRES



Build for the neighbourhood

The quality of dwellings in the neighbourhoods around the centre was improved to keep people living in the city instead of fleeing to the suburbs. The first generation projects were of an 'evict - demolish - rebuild - repopulate' model. However they led to an increasing resistance of the residents and diminished the social vitality of the neighbourhoods. The model changed into a 'build for the neighbourhood' strategy. Staged redevelopments, including affordable housing, kept residents in the area. They moved to new or renovated dwellings during the upgrade process, while preserving the social and economic infrastructure.

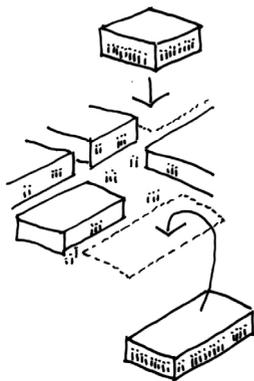


Clean up the city centre

Over time, the public realm of many city centres had become messy and clogged, with a patchwork of materials and a jungle of street furniture, poles and signage from departments that were not communicating with each other. In the late 1980's cities started to 'clean up their living room'. They upgraded the spatial quality of their streets and squares, with a palette of quality materials and by addressing the miscommunication between departments. The palettes were rolled out over years, resulting in a consistent appeal. The cleaned up city centres attracted people, while at the same time offering them space to add their own liveliness to the city centre.

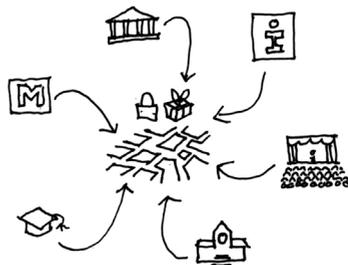
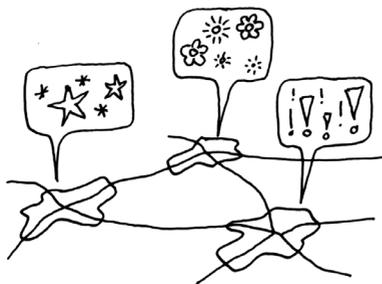
Develop a competitive character

After the first wave of success, cities started to consciously compete with each other based on the character of their city centre, each providing a different experience to attract people. Socially, Dutch people use their city centres like many Australians use their beaches. They frequent their favourite, but also visit others for their different atmosphere and experience. The active competition between the Dutch city centres, raises the quality of each of them, while boosting visits and enhancing the urban economy.



Add people who live and work in the centre

Underutilised train station surroundings, industrial areas, ports, military bases, utility stations and so on, close to the city centre were redeveloped into densified urban districts. Some were mainly residential or commercial; others were truly multifunctional. The dwellings and workspaces added people to the centre or on a walkable and cyclable distance, increasing life on the streets. Access of the developments to tram and train further encouraged walking and reduced the importance of cars.



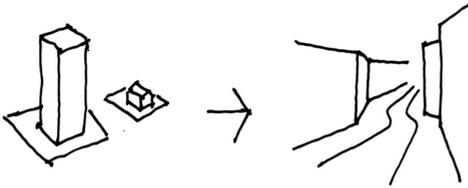
Add a variety of uses to the city centre

Services and facilities, which had been relocated out of the city centre under the influence of modernist planning and the separation of uses, were moved back in. City centres, which had deteriorated to mere shopping centres, were enriched with schools, museums, cultural facilities, supermarkets, council administration, courts, and so on, all adding to the attractiveness, diversity and liveliness of the centres.

Provide diversity of choice

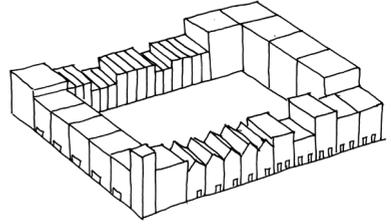
The developments not only increased the quantity of dwellings and workspaces in the city, they also deliver a diversity of dwelling typologies and work opportunities. They intentionally provide choice, for different user groups, lifestyles and personal interests, to support the heterogeneity of people. This diversity was not restricted to buildings, but focused on providing different living environments: inner-city living, harbour islands, urban villa's, car-free living, floating neighbourhoods, and so on. Each project competes with the others and contributes to an urban richness of choices.

The Dutch densification projects display a vast variety of outcomes, related to program, site, context, architecture, etc. Even though, the projects display a few clear urban design principles. They are not derived from theory - modernism, new urbanism, landscape urbanism or the like - but have been developed over time by examining existing urban situations and testing the principles in practice. Five design principles have played a major role in the success of the Dutch 'compact city' projects.



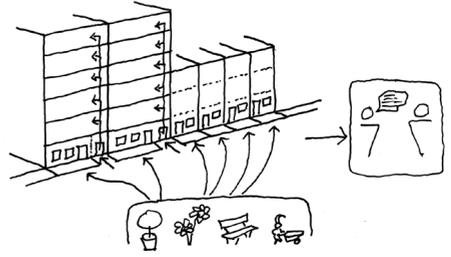
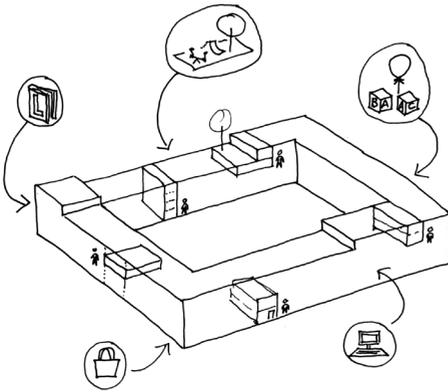
Re-value the street and the closed building block

In analysing the old 'bad' cities, Modernism had concluded that streets aligned by closed building blocks were part of the problem and should be abandoned. Instead, cities should be built with separated buildings in a continuous field, full of air, light and space. However, the result was a public realm that has a diminished interactions with the buildings and is deprived of the vibrancy of people. To create lively compact cities the error of modernism was acknowledged. The new urban development projects express the importance of the street, aligned by the closed building blocks.



Rhythm & character of the street facades

Streets defined by buildings can still be boring to walk down. Attractive streets need a variety of blocks with a small-scale permeability and a fine-grained rhythm of facades, providing a choice of engaging routes. The scale, rhythm and design of the building blocks play an important role in the character of the streets, assisting people in orientating themselves and connecting them to specific places.

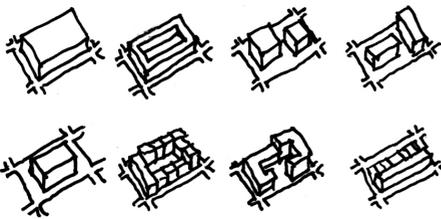


Blocks with a mix of uses and dwelling/work typologies

A combination of uses within a building block – residential with school, office with supermarket, dwellings with work units, etc. – provides liveliness to the street at different times of the day. A mix of dwelling and/or workspace typologies, supporting users with different demands, contributes to a diversity of people on the street. Both components enhance an interesting, attractive street-life and a resilient urban culture.

Interactive plinth

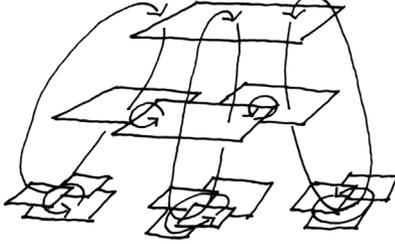
To achieve pleasant streets that stimulate social interaction, the design of the plinth, with front doors and transition zones, is crucial. The more front doors the better, for all uses - shops, workspaces and dwellings alike. Townhouses with street doors and vertically organised buildings produce better streets than horizontally organised complexes with one combined street access. The transition zone between building and public realm is essential. It is in this zone where the ground floor occupant expresses pride and presence to the street, even when they are physically not there. It does not need to be deep, but has to be visually open to the public.



Use all available design solutions

Although the focus changed to creating streets, it does not mean there is no place for modernist typologies and design concepts. But being dogmatic does not help. Cities are always changing, which needs an innovative approach. Every project is different and all design options should be considered to develop the best solution. Most importantly, together they should provide a diversity of solutions, which makes the whole more intriguing.

You can make a good design, but that doesn't mean it gets constructed. Organising the design quality through the process is just as important. Over time, the Dutch have developed a highly organised system to support, enhance and deliver quality design outcomes. Five organisational principles have been critical to the successful delivery of the 'compact city' projects.



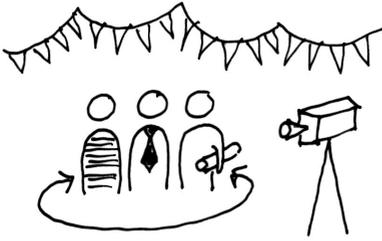
Collaboration of all governmental levels

The Dutch have a tradition in collaboration, born out of necessity to prevent the sub-sea level country from flooding. All three levels of government collaborate in the spatial development. The National Government introduced the 'compact city' model in the national spatial policy that has the status of law. The States worked it out on a regional level. And the Councils implemented it on a local scale. All within a framework of negotiation, dialogue and supervision.



Emphasis on design on all levels

The importance of design is promoted at all governmental levels. The National Government sets the example with a board of Governmental Architects and a National Architecture Policy. This policy includes ten major projects, supervised by the governmental architects, at different scales and of different types, covering individual buildings, urban districts, infrastructural works, landscape designs, re-use of heritage, and waterworks.

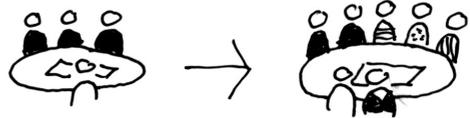


Promoting good 'clientship'

Creating formidable outcomes is not solely the result of thoughtful policies and good designers. Vision and leadership by the client is critical. The best champion promoting clients to take up this responsibility, is the Dutch National Award for good 'clientship'. Each year, the selection process and ruling is broadcasted on national television and published in a book.

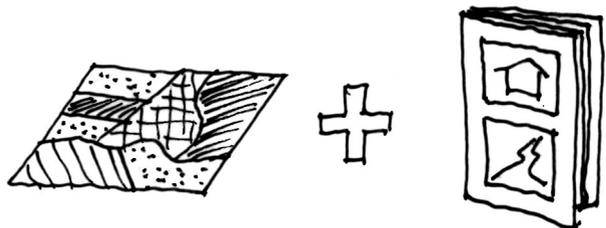
Combining Zoning Plans with 'Visual Quality Plans'

Like Australia, the Netherlands has zoning plans outlining the allowed land uses and building envelopes. However, the Dutch zoning plans tend to be more defined regarding the built form, comparable to 'form based codes'. Furthermore they are complemented by 'Visual Quality Plans'. These are adopted planning documents that include the character of a precinct and its style guidelines. This enables the development and prolongation of distinctly different neighbourhoods.

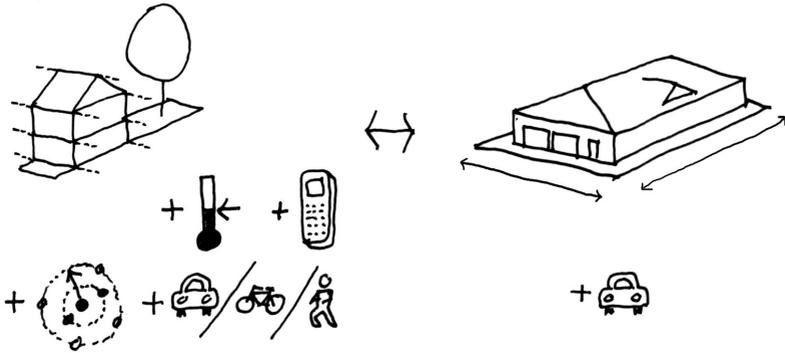


Reformed design review panels

The Netherlands has design review panels since 1910. Practically every Design Application is assessed on its design quality and the panel's advice is binding. This system was almost abandoned in the 1990s. Reviews based on the individual opinions of architects seemed random and met increasing public resistance. However, the system was reformed, to make the assessments more objective and maintain the review on quality. The panels became multi-disciplinary, while 'Visual Quality Plans' provided an objective base for assessing architectural style and character within a precinct.



These strategies and principles are supported by a range of Dutch habits and regulations that are different from Australia. When extrapolating the strategies and principles to Australia, it is important to be aware of these differences, as they influence the outcomes. It might be worth considering the influence of these habits or regulations in order to create more effective outcomes in densified urban developments.



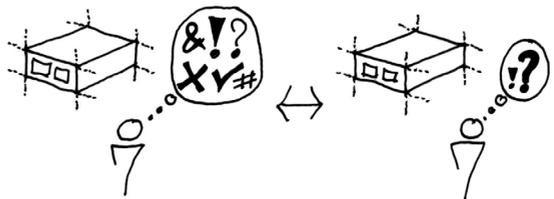
SUPPORTING PRACTICE CUSTOMS

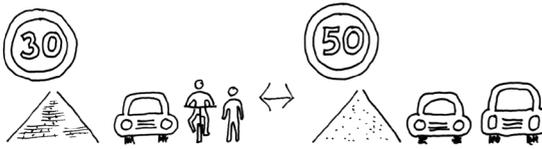
Focus on spatial quality, by the lack of space

Where Australia has an abundance of space in the Netherlands is sparse. The huge dwellings common to Australia would be an enormous luxury in the Netherlands. Instead of concentrating on quantity of space, the Dutch focus on the quality of the space that is available – well insulated, ingeniously designed, smart in technology, with walkable amenities. Even in high-density urban situations, the emphasis on a private backyard and presentable front yard is more prerequisite. In the densifying Australian cities, a focus on quality over quantity might be a way to compensate for the reduced dwelling sizes.

Educated market

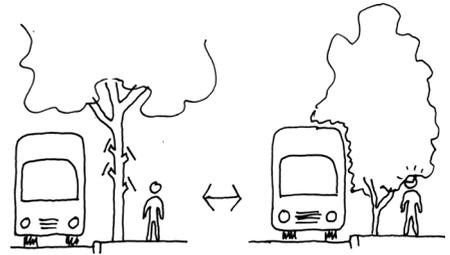
Even though the Netherlands focussed on suburban living for decades, apartment living has always stayed an important ingredient of the market, both in historic towns and in new developments. People are familiar with it. They are well-informed and very demanding in respect to the quality of the apartment lay-out, the architecture and the urban surrounding. For instance, in 2017 first-time buyers in Perth tend to accept apartments that would be difficult to sell in the Netherlands. Most likely, it is only an issue of time before the Australian customer will be as demanding as the Dutch.





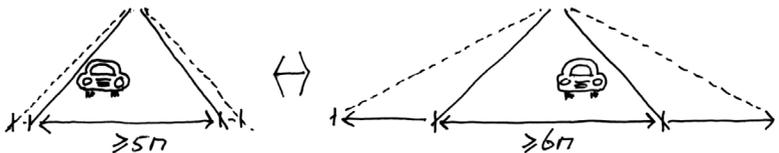
Car focussed vs inclusive streets

Since even the smallest village in the Netherlands is only a few kilometres away from any city, walking and cycling has stayed a common form of everyday transport. Of course the Dutch do drive cars, but they tend to accept pedestrians and cyclists as equal users of the streets. Due to these circumstances, signposted speeds in the Netherlands are a lower than in Australia. Except for a few arterial roads, all streets in built-up areas in the Netherlands are 30kph or less, a speed at which most people would survive a collision with a car. Furthermore are practically all these streets paved in bricks or unit pavers, underlining the street as an environment for people.



Different culture towards maintenance

The Netherlands is a man-made country, conquered from the water. The Dutch are used to manage and maintain everything. Without maintenance the country would not exist and return back into swamp and sea. Even nature is designed and managed. This culture has a direct influence on the public realm. Trees for instance are under-pruned to grow upwards and leave space for pedestrians and buses, whereas in Australia trees only tend to get pruned to protect overhead powerlines, while buses prune them by driving close, and pedestrians? Well....



Different Standards

The Standards for urban streets in the Netherlands are different from the Standards in Australia. For instance, the minimum carriageway width is 5m and rarely wider than 6m. In comparison, a similar street in Australia is required to be a minimum of 6m, while a tarmac width of 12m for a residential street is not uncommon. Parking bays (2.0m wide for parallel parking versus 2.1 to 2.5m) and underground services (2.5m versus 3.1m in greenfield developments) display similar differences in Standards.

Outcome example

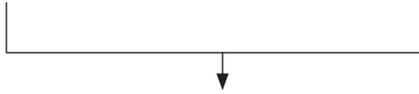
Reading about these principles might be interesting for practice, but seeing the results is more convincing. Of the hundreds of Dutch projects, the Town Centre Redevelopment of the City of Zaandam is a striking example, even though some of the architectural outcomes are quite controversial. The project incorporates 5 of the 6 development strategies outlined in the preceding pages, and is developed using the 10 design and organisation principles. The plan adds work, residence, hotels, cultural facilities, cinema, etc. to the centre. City hall and the administrative centre are brought back to the centre and co-located with the train station to realise a pedestrian overpass. The public realm is cleaned up and the filled in canal is re-opened as central feature in the shopping street. Most eye-catching though is the influence of the 'Visual Quality Plan'. The city derives its character from a combination of the 'Zaanse house' - green painted wooden houses - and big brick warehouses - due to industrial activity since the 17th century. All the new buildings in the city centre need to refer to one of these two typologies. The architects and their clients are free in their interpretation, but have to justify their design to the Design Review Panel. The result is a range of innovative building designs that enhance the city's character and the community's pride, while drawing in visitors from far-and-away and strengthening the local economy.

BASE OF VISUAL QUALITY PLAN



'Zaanse house'

'Industrial warehouse'



OUTCOMES

