

## **Structural Vision: Amsterdam 2040**

*The recently published Structural Vision: Amsterdam 2040 is the 10th major plan for the Dutch capital. The first – the legendary General Extension Plan – appeared in May 1935, more than 75 years ago. Since then the city has, on average, produced a new integrated vision for the future for the whole of its territory every seven years. The Structural Vision: Amsterdam 2040 continues this Amsterdam tradition of making coherent plans in a democratic manner, but it differs from its predecessors in one important regard: rarely has a long-term perspective for Amsterdam been so emphatically developed from the bottom up, proceeding from a multitude of interests and drawing on contributions from every section and stratum of society. Thanks to an open approach and making full use of ‘the wisdom of crowds’, many people have contributed to the conception of a liveable, sustainable and thriving city, something which would have been unthinkable without such a breadth of input.*

### **Adaptive planning & storytelling**

Late 2004 the City of Amsterdam’s Physical Planning Department (DRO) instigated an internal process that was intended to inject new life into the planning discipline. The planners practiced implementing the new, communicative planning for two years. The efforts were in the first place aimed at achieving results more quickly. An attempt was made to gain support for ideas through enticement and persuasion, rather than by presenting data. Towards the end of 2005, the idea of establishing platforms that would be open to everyone and which would permanently share insights with third parties was in the ascendant. These interfaces were meant to mediate between the world of scarce resources and that of future cohesion, i.e. a shared vision. The first platforms were established in the autumn of 2006: first Southwards, then Westwards, then Eastwards, followed a year later by the RADAR and ROER (rudder) consultative bodies.

In late 2005, midway through the ‘planning discussion’, a planning story for the future was concocted. It was based on all the ideas which had been generated over the course of the planning discussions and was aimed at stimulating ambition. The ‘Destination AMS’ narrative was released in the midst of the election fever of early 2006.

There was a great deal of interest in this story about the future. The planners told the ‘Destination AMS’ story more than 60 times. And the story itself kept growing, because at each presentation the audience provided new information and suggestions. It seemed that the story was absorbing all the knowledge, experience and insights from different parts of society, and was giving them back to the city. It felt like Wikipedia: thousands of people working on one story, chapters growing not from harmonious thought but from constant scrutiny and emendation.

In the spring of 2007, administrators from the neighbouring municipalities, infected by the narrative, decided to create a regional vision for the future in conjunction with Amsterdam and the provinces concerned. This integral vision was ready barely nine months later. It was launched at a regional congress. The agreement was marked by changing the name of the erstwhile ‘North Wing of the Randstad’ into ‘Amsterdam Metropolitan Area’. The assembled administrators decided to intensify regional cooperation even further.

Not long thereafter, Amsterdam's City Executive made moves to produce a new structural vision for the city's own territory on the basis of the regional vision for the future. This 10th structural masterplan would have to provide a framework for 'a sustainable, attractive and accessible metropolis' in 2040. The planning work proper could now begin.

### **Soft planning**

The achievements in the planning process described above all concern the 'soft' edges of planning: the shaping of a vision, whipping up enthusiasm, getting people actively involved. Interestingly, within the City of Amsterdam's planning practices as outlined above, the story takes the place of the design. The narrative element actually plays a pivotal role. Indeed, good stories confront us with our moral responsibilities and encourage us to act collectively. They provide the best safeguards against 'blueprint thinking' and undue faith in a 'makeable society'. The critical success factors were further determined by experiment, proceeding from the experience gained in the aforementioned platforms. Until then a great deal of attention had been devoted to the set of instruments or toolkit, the organization and modus operandi. Behaviour and attitudes are, however, just as important. Nine practical rules were formulated, and these boiled down to the following: get down to work immediately and establish a platform; start small and exclude nobody; all forms of manipulation (whether power, money or competences) are forbidden; focus on the content and share stories; be succinct in presentations and listen attentively; rein in the emotions, remain curious and never give up.

In Amsterdam stories have been jointly developed by many parties ever since, within the abovementioned platforms that explore the future of an area or sub-sector and place it on the agenda. These platforms are driven by content and have swiftly developed into consultative bodies where knowledge is continually shared, visions shaped and lessons drawn from real-life experiences. This is how 'story-telling' has been fruitfully integrated into Amsterdam's planning practice over the last five years.

### **The Free State**

In early 2008 a start was made with the preparations for the Structural Vision. An atlas was compiled to serve as the agenda for a great many discussions. Conditions and tasks from the so-called regional development scenario were employed as guidelines and appeared as such in the keys to the maps.

The majority of the discussions were conducted a year later, in March 2009. The outcomes were translated into a quartet of spatial developments – these were in fact cast as narratives – which later became known as 'thrusts': a densely developed inner-city milieu that continues beyond the city's orbital motorway, extending into the post-war city; a regional waterfront with dense, functionally mixed development along the River Zaan and IJ waterway all the way into the IJmeer lake; a curved Southern Flank between Schiphol Airport and the Academic Medical Complex, with offices and stacked, high-rise living on either side of the bundles of infrastructure; and the integration of the metropole's circumjacent man-made landscape with its polders, parks and meadows. These four thrusts were in part derived from the professional 'planning discussion', while to a certain degree they also seemed to derive from the 'Destination AMS' directly. As a story about the future, a dream in the making, they did not prescribe anything in advance, but they did offer sufficient foothold to develop a new, grand narrative about Amsterdam's development into a sustainable and

liveable metropolis. It was now the moment to involve the whole of the city in the forward-looking discussion.

An interactive website was launched, so that citizens could make known their wishes with regard to their city. Over the course of 2009, more than 2,000 ideas were collected in three consultative rounds. The campaign's grand finale was a large-scale event in September 2009: the 'Free State of Amsterdam'. This ambitious exhibition programme addressed the future of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. Colossal scale models were exhibited in a new cultural hotspot for a six-week period. The day after the opening, *The New York Times* characterized it as 'Amsterdam's latest buzz-worthy exhibition'. The 'Free State' called upon the city's inhabitants and visitors to share their thoughts about the city. Nothing was predetermined and they could talk about the future in all openness.

Even the nine scale models, most of which were realized at a scale of 1:1000, refrained from establishing the future in fixed outcomes; the models were starting points for novel possibilities. The designers were asked to render the degrees of freedom in their proposals as broadly as possible and embody this in 'living' scale models, thus to reveal the potential outcomes of various spatial strategies to the public in a scale model. The idea was that engagement and individual responsibility are typical of the urban development of the 21st century, alongside freedom, changeability, speed and the capacity to improvise.

### **Open City**

The exhibition was accompanied by a programme of debates. On no fewer than 29 evenings, citizens could unfold their thoughts. All these discussion evenings were open to the public, but were deliberately assigned to interest groups and organizations to allow them to present their own programme, focused on the future of the city, with their own special guests and a broad-based audience. The organizations and groups approached included political parties, the Chamber of Commerce, urban planning bureaus, homeless people, philosophers, expats, students, shopkeepers and secondary school students, and they all took up the invitation. This programme component took the form of story-telling.

Almost 8,000 people responded to the call, including 2,000 schoolchildren from Amsterdam's primary schools.

A week after the opening, a two-day International Urban Planning Congress, entitled 'Morgen/Tomorrow', was staged at the Westergasfabriek. Under the rallying-cry of 'Cities can save the world', the conference offered a programme of lectures and workshops for more than 400 participants. Besides general presentations about Chicago, Pittsburgh, London, New York, Berlin, Moscow, Mumbai and Tirana, the outcome included a whole raft of examples of local practices of metabolism which can mitigate and positively influence global problems.

### **An aggregated Vision**

All these events contributed to the narrative of Amsterdam's *Structural Vision*, which was completed in December 2009. All the material from the website, the fruits of the 'Free State' event and the congress were collated and aggregated by the city's planners. Aggregation is the operative word here, because selection would have meant too many insights being lost; it is the very multiplicity of ideas and stories that makes a structural vision diverse, robust and convincing, and diversity does full justice to the big city's complexity. Aggregation was also called for in order to honour

the many different perspectives in a situation of uncertainty, a means of reducing the possibility of mistakes. By developing the Structural Vision with the help of thousands of people, Amsterdam has managed to tap this collective intelligence. The four developmental thrusts provided the storylines in which the panoply of insights could be processed. The accompanying maps – wherever possible even richer and more detailed than usual – had to seduce first and foremost, but they also had to be legible and at the same time overwhelm the reader. The selected cut-outs were regional. They were angled slightly in order to depict all the municipalities and to position Zuidas, Amsterdam's 21st-century commercial and residential development, at the midpoint of the map, while the 19th-century defensive ring of the 'Defence Line of Amsterdam' was chosen as the boundary for the fleshed-out scenario. Each of the narrative threads played out within this footprint.

One of the spatial trends is that Amsterdam's metropolitan centre is being used more and more intensively and is expanding ever further. Almost all the neighbourhoods within the A10 orbital motorway now display city-centre traits. Living within the ringroad is highly desirable, the parks and monuments are attracting more and more visitors, and for creative and knowledge-based enterprises this area is the ideal business location. However, because of its negative impact on the areas of exceptional value, such as the city centre's protected cityscape and the section of the historical ring of canals that was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2010, high-rise construction is not permitted here. The scarcity of space means that people are always forced to search a little further afield. Now that the city-centre milieu is spreading out across the IJ waterway and towards Zuidas in the south, high-rise construction will be encouraged in such areas from the viewpoint of optimum land use.

A second spatial trend is the rediscovery of the waterfront. The IJ waterway and the IJmeer expanse of water have a particularly high experiential value and offer many possibilities for recreation. The waterfront and shorelines also offer countless opportunities for urban development, especially in the obsolete port precincts and industrial zones. Due to all these developments, the IJ waterway is becoming increasingly central within the metropolitan footprint, while it continues to rank among the busiest inland shipping routes in the Netherlands.

The third trend is the internationalization of the Southern Flank, which involves a succession of massive projects: the expansion of Schiphol Airport, the development of Zuidas, and the intensification of the residential and business areas in Amsterdam-Southeast. Station Zuid, at the heart of Zuidas, will become one of the most important public transport hubs in the Netherlands. In the near future, all high-speed trains – whether from Paris, Brussels, London, Frankfurt or Berlin – will stop here. The main driver of development is the large bundle of infrastructure that links Amsterdam with the other cities in the Randstad conurbation, with the airport and with the rest of the Netherlands.

The fourth spatial trend is interweaving the metropolitan landscape and the city. This landscape penetrates far into the city in the form of wedges of greenery, which increase the city's appeal and presents Amsterdam with the possibility of densification within the existing urban footprint while still remaining liveable. This means that the city is heavily dependent on its immediate surroundings. The ambition

of the Structural Vision is to keep the green wedges green, improve their accessibility, utilize them for the purification of water and the supply of clean air, and make them more attractive for recreational use.

### **Civil society**

In the months that followed, City Council elections were held and political negotiations ensued to form a stable coalition for the governing City Executive. The elected councillors assumed their seats in early May 2010. After everyone had been briefed and shown the ropes, the City Executive could prepare for the final debate. Almost a year later, on 17 February 2011, the Structural Vision was unanimously adopted by the City Council.

To celebrate this, a major conference about the new Structural Vision, which had just rolled off the printing presses, was organized three months later. Everyone who had contributed over the preceding years was invited to participate: city-dwellers, experts, politicians, entrepreneurs. Almost 800 citizens took up the invitation. The message resounded once again: It is not us, but you together who will decide the future of the city. The future is open, but no longer is it undecided. Building on a new civil society is the modern-day task of the planning discipline. Planning is like Wikipedia. It needs thousands of contributions, it improves, it never ends.