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Bienefeld, J.

Published in:
History vs architecture : Rotterdam seminar 2003-2004

Published: 01/01/2004

Document Version
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Dutch Delta works

By Joop Bienefeld, Technical University Eindhoven

The value of architecture for the creation of a national identity.

It is commonly known that the Netherlands have a special relationship with water in general and the Sea in particular. To clear this out I checked that our accommodation Nova Zembla is 2.3 meters below normal sea level. How is this possible? What are the consequences? Why is this unnatural situation? And are the huge structures of the Deltaworks responsible for this?

The so-called “disaster” of 1953, when a quarter of the nation flew under water and 1836 people found their death, is an important breaking point in the (daily) lives of the people who lived then in the delta of the rivers Rijn, Maas en Schelde. This was the direct cause for taking the enormous security measures; the Delta-works. In this presentation, 50 years afterwards, I would like to analyse the symbolic function of the Deltaworks now and in the future, for the inhabitants of the area and the country in foreign affairs.

What is the symbolic function of the Deltaworks for the Dutch society and abroad ?

Goals for this presentation were;

Explain more to the foreigners about the Lower countries.

To discuss in which ways the Deltaworks are or were symbols of Dutch society.

The structure of this paper is divided in three parts. The first one is about the direct reason and facts of the Deltaworks. The second part describes from historical view the relationship with water and Dutch society. In the last part there are interpretations of the writer, and therefore open for discussion. The comments which were given during the seminar are partly integrated into this paper.

De Ramp
(The Disaster, 1953)

In a big February storm in 1953 the delta area of the Netherlands flew under water and 1836 people found their death. About more than fifty places dikes broke. The disaster got for the first time in history a lot of media attention. Television was just invented, and therefore attention and help came from all over the world.

The sea is unpredictable; no one could foresee this disaster. This was the explanation of the Government and the inhabitants. On the other side it was seen as an episode in the ever-lasting struggle against the Sea. A national common sense arouse that once and for all, we must win this War against Water.

Deltaworks

The most important elements of the Delta Act

Statistically based calculation of the maximum waterlevel, now and in the future, leads to the taken
measurements.

The Delta Plan involves the construction of large primary dams (30 kilometres in length) in four sea inlets between the Western Scheldt and the New Waterway, together shortening the coastline by 700 kilometres. No dams are to be built in the New Waterway and the Western Scheldt, as the seaports of Rotterdam and Antwerp must remain freely accessible. The retaining dikes are to be reinforced.

The Delta Plan also provides for three dams further inland to facilitate the construction of the primary dams. In addition these dams have a water management function, dividing saltwater and freshwater delta lakes and separating waters with varying water-levels. All couldn’t be realised at once; the strategy was to start with smallest and most far from sea lying waterways. Experience and development of techniques made every dam different and more complex.

An addition was made in the late nineties. With the New Waterway Storm Surge Barrier, nearly as long as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the waterfronts of Rotterdam were also secured.

Delta area

Around 5000 years BC the landscape of the Netherlands arose, his coastline was closed by sandwalls divided by exits of rivers into the sea. That situation changed around 500 BC when the sealevel was rising and rivers became bigger. In 275 AD the landscape was completely changed, it existed of large inner seas and swamps. People were likely to live in the Delta area of the rivers Rhine and Maas where they could fish and trade.

The reaction came after 1000 AD when several grounds which lay dry when the tide was low, ‘shores’ were been surrounded by ground walls; dikes. These polders were not very safe and were often destroyed. A lot of little disasters in the late Middle Ages were the result of that.

In the inland, were the huge swamps made accessible by drainage of the grounds. Because of all these initiatives the ground became dryer and decreased in volume, therefore the whole landscape became lower and lower compared to sea level. Therefore it became more and more difficult to make the land useful for (modern) agriculture. New techniques like windmills and steam machines were needed to solve these problems.

Holland was divided in different ‘waterschappen’, governmental organisations that were in control of all the waterbusiness. They controlled whether every inhabitant was doing his duty to maintain the dikes. Nowadays they still exist, land and housowners in the district have to pay taxes to keep the dikes in good condition and keep the waterlevel low.

In the Dutch golden age a new type of landscape arose. The inner seas became very dangerous for the surrounding (lower) land. Secondly, there was also a need for land for agricultural use. It was therefore a profitable enterprise to surround the lakes with dikes and after that to pomp out all the water. The biggest projects were the Haarlemmermeer (seventies century), nowadays place of the national airport, and the Flevopolders (twenties century).
After the economical crisis of the thirties and World War II the priorities of the national government led by making the countries economically healthier. Although there were some signs of decline of the dikes, no measures were taken to prevent.

In the seventies of the twentieth century the ordinary people became more aware of the value of natural environment. In the mid-nineties of the twentieth century the rivers Rhine and Maas went out of their normal track in the middle and East of the country because of extreme rain in France and Germany.

At the end of the decade the Prince of our Kingdom told the public that he was studying water management.

In the extreme dry summer of 2003 a small dike moved up aside under the pressure of water. Probably because of the dry the dike became very light and therefore lost its strength.

**What do the Deltaworks symbolise?**

Symbol during the realisation

It was seen in the tradition of making land out of sea. As Descartes said; God created the world and the Dutch created Holland.

It symbolises the power of a modern society with her knowledge, the idea that society rules nature. The fear for the sea was turned 180 degrees in being in control of nature. Here is in control the water, the moon, the tide and us. Therefore the Deltaworks could be seen as a symbol of the last battle. Here we finally won the war against the Sea!

The symbol was needed for realisation

It became a national project, with a lot of prestige. The gigantic project cost an enormous amount of money and needed the help of industries, universities and workers. To get that enormous corporation for decades long of all the Dutch inhabitants the government needed a common spirit. Every school in the Netherlands educated the relation with water and the importance of the Deltaworks. To see the realization of the Delta works as the final battle in the long tradition of making land and danger, was therefore needed for his realisation.

Nowadays

It represents also the highest peak of the social-security state, where problems of individuals or minor groups were solved on an national scale and therefore by all the people.

Because of the duration of the realisation it also shows how society in the Netherlands changed. Were first only security and economical aspects important for the design, later was a major environmental lobby for the preserving of the ecological value of the Delta area involved.

When the realization ended and the lives were secured it was used as a image-building to other nations; the Deltaworks became an export product, in which the Dutch society showed a leading position in watermanagement. It shows the power of our society in spite of that half of the country is at or below sea
level. A lot of references are recovered to impress even more:

like the Chinese walls, some parts are seen from space. The New Waterway Storm Surge Barrier has floating drivers even bigger than the Eiffel Tower.

Symbol for the inhabitants?

The disaster of 1953 came very unexpectedly. A lot of people speak in their lives before and after the disaster. Compare to 9 11. About the event itself, not very much was told

The disaster itself was the direct cause of the realisation of the Deltaworks, but the Deltaworks do not symbolise this tragic event. The big Deltaworks aren’t built on the places where the tragical individual events happened. The people died tens of kilometres away, in their own houses or on their own land. Therefore everybody has his own individual places where they are remembered of there lost families and friends.

The influence on the normal live of younger people seems to be very low. If you ask them, they are glad that they can shop easily here in Rotterdam. But the disaster changed a lot and the Delta works played a major role in normal live. The relation economically developed fast because of the better links to the rest of the country.

Nowadays is it is still in function, and hopefully for my family will be for a longer time.

If the water is further rising because of melting of the poles, the dikes and deltaworks won’t be secure enough. Therefore they have to be improved or replaced, there is no doubt that function is above monumental value.

As an archaeologist it would be interesting buildings to see this civilisation over thousands of years. Probably they will conclude that the society at a certain degree of technical development and organisation. Hopefully they will also conclude that with the biggest acts in water management and the war against Water, the relation with water in normal live practically was over.

It could be the cause that quite not dangerous situations with water involved have a big impact in the public opinion.

Conclusions

Each of the Deltaworks was a picture of technological level and the needs from the public opinion. Although still in function, they become already symbols of the past. It is evident that they represent a big change in approaching the control of sea. But in the long history of how nature and culture created the Dutch landscape we can see the realisation of the Deltaworks as an important episode in a continue process in the relations between (modern) society and water.