

Review 10 : Cor Wagenaar, Town Planning in the Netherlands since 1800: Responses to Enlightenment Ideas and Geopolitical Realities

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Cor Wagenaar, ***Town Planning in the Netherlands since 1800: Responses to Enlightenment Ideas and Geopolitical Realities*** (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011, 639 pp., ISBN 978 90 6450 682 6).

A century ago Dutch urban historiography underwent its debut with the publication of *Oud-Nederlandsche steden in haar ontstaan, groei en ontwikkeling* (1910-11), by H. Brugmans and C.H. Peters working in collaboration. It was the first academic attempt to come to terms with the form of the Dutch city in a context of urbanism, history and landscape. The layered complexity of the subject might have deterred later generations from aspiring to write a book of similar wide scope because few titles can be found that mirror the ambition of Brugmans and Peters. Finally in 1993 Ed Taverne and Irmin Visser published a history of the city in the Netherlands from 1500 to the present, but a clear overview of the subject was frustrated by the great variety of contributors and contributions, each with its own line of approach. Indeed, with the city we have an artefact that can only be understood sufficiently when one is prepared to take into account the assembled realities of the technical performance that supports the urban machine, the artistic ambitions connected to buildings and public domain, and thirdly, the political and managerial framework that shapes the urban bureaucracy. Urbanism is by definition a discipline with a curriculum in complexity; no wonder that its historiography tends to excel in fragmentation and specialisation, either focused on the planning bureaucracy, the technique or the artistic design aspects. However now we have the massive volume by Cor Wagenaar, which is a heroic attempt to bring it all together in a single logical overview of the last two centuries. Descending from Ed Taverne's Groningen based academic branch, Wagenaar is not satisfied with only the artistic dimensions of his subject, but interprets the city as a historical document and in the same way he identifies urbanism as part of the humanities more than anything else. The comprehensive ambition of his enterprise becomes clear looking at the table of contents of his book, which needs eight pages only to announce the seven parts of his argument, preceded by a prologue that deals with the Dutch city during the Republic of the United Provinces. With this extended perspective, preparing the book must have been a risky undertaking, depending on a highly selective choice of facts to support the argument, without being able to go into details. Nevertheless, the result is a bulky book: but the philosophical direction chosen by Wagenaar is clear. What happens in the prologue is

symptomatic of the other parts of the book: the core information about the transformation of the city is embedded in a thick layer of historical events and ideological turning points. In doing this Wagenaar is methodologically indebted, as he rightly admits, to a variety of writers, from Karl Schlögel to Claudio Magris. The city is not an artefact on its own, but is connected to an outside world of thought; it is a place in which time is reflected, to paraphrase Schlögel. Deciphering this complex entity of time and place is exactly what Wagenaar has taken upon himself. He has succeeded in his balancing act, although he demonstrates in his prologue a rather chauvinistic preference for Frisian case studies instead of the more usual examples, normally situated in Holland. The 'usual suspect' Simon Stevin, for example, is mentioned only once here, while through the whole of his book Wagenaar tirelessly, pushes the reputation of the eighteenth century Frisian gardener, garden architect and prolific author Johann Hermann Knoop, not always with factual proof of his presumed status.

After sketching the history until the Batavian Republic, Wagenaar's main story starts with the separation of Belgium and the period of Thorbecke. The invention of the central Dutch state and the subordination of the cities, transforming them bureaucratically in municipalities, meant a clear break with the past. Cartography was used for precise registration of the territory, leading to the renewal of the image of the country. New infrastructure – mainly railways – was added to the landscape and, more slowly than with hindsight seems prudent, the Netherlands followed the example of its geographical neighbours in entering the project of modernity. Cities started to redraw their own lay-out after the middle of the nineteenth century. For his case studies in this chapter Wagenaar relies on the well known projects of W.N. Rose for Rotterdam and J.G. van Niftrik and J. Kalff for Amsterdam.

In the following decades urban planning was methodologically 'invented', for example by the German planner Reinhard Baumeister, who published his influential *Stadt-Erweiterungen* in 1876. Baumeister's exemplary theory was based on the acceptance of the programme of the industrial society and the urgency to organise this programme into a general plan. Such a plan should aim at solving the need for housing for the workers and at the same time directed at the traffic problems of the rising metropolises. Zoning of functions and social classes was considered a basic ingredient. In variations and adaptations, these were the contents of early urbanism as it was also practiced in the Netherlands from the end of the nineteenth century until the recently completed project of the 'Vinex'. Wagenaar distinguishes between three different attitudes that were elaborated by the first generations of urbanists, among whom are G.J. de Jongh in Rotterdam and H.P. Berlage in Amsterdam: some accentuated the engineer's perspective on planning issues, others stressed the need of an artistic priority, making the city into a work of art. A third group refused to accept the city as it had developed and aimed at more liveable environmental concepts, with the garden city as an ideal.

In innumerable expansion plans (obligatory after the *Woningwet* of 1901) the Netherlands obtained their own versions of the European urban standard. The Dutch

landscape is relatively compact, with short distances between cities, and that is why the phenomenon of the satellite city was not introduced here until decades after the Second World War, when villages like Zoetermeer started to overflow and grew into real cities. That was also the time when the once fruitful cooperation between the designers and the bureaucrats (personified by the collaboration of Van Eesteren and Van Lohuizen in the design of the *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan van Amsterdam, 1934*) gradually became uneasy and quarrelsome. The diagnosis of this growing friction is one of the most important propositions of this book, by Wagenaar connected precisely with specific moments in planning history. The strength of the book would have gained from case studies that supported this proposition. Wagenaar includes a series of personal profiles and specific projects in his book but they seem dispersed loosely in the story rather than closely connected to the central thesis, and they also seem to underline an unreasonable priority of the *avant garde* perspective. However that is about the only criticism that one may have on this carefully composed and well written book that deserves to become the standard for many years.

Bernard Colenbrander, Technical University Eindhoven