

DEPOPULATION: AN OPPORTUNITY OR A THREAT TO DUTCH HERITAGE?

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In European history, depopulation and growth went hand in hand. **It's a process of all times.** Actually, it is a reset of demographic, economic and cultural anchors.

Depopulation itself is a **dynamic process.** In every European country it manifests itself differently. In the Netherlands the population grew in the last fifty years with eight million. The fifty years to come it will grow only one million. At the same time people are moving from the peripheral areas to the big cities. Today we witness youngsters from the northern province of Groningen, the southern parts of Limburg and the south western province of Zeeland, leaving their home villages, contributing to the image of an empty countryside. They are attracted to what we call the Randstad, in the middle and western part of the Netherlands. The look of degenerated villages, desolated farmsteads, rows of nailed up dwellings, and industrial parks and fabrics standing empty, makes me sad. All these changing's will have a big impact on our economy.

The Dutch government sounded the alarm rather late in 2006. Recently, reports from our Agency showed that - as a result - heritage is under pressure. Frankly, we don't know yet, in detail, to what extend listed monuments, archaeological sites or landscapes are affected by depopulation. Often, as a reflex, we see heritage as a tool to fight it. Fact is: **we can't fight depopulation! We have to guide it!** A management of change is necessary. We have to accept the concept of 'smaller' instead of 'bigger'. We have to share our losses and start alliances with local municipalities. For example, by stimulating initiatives from private entrepreneurs and by involving local communities. In that way, depopulation can be an opportunity for keeping the area alive and vital. We should not be focussed on a drop in population rates only. A prosperous, regional economy and efficient urban planning are equally important factors. Therefore we should programme more bottom-up instead of top-down.

No doubt, global changes, climate change, regulations from Brussels and a lack of succession, makes farmer's quit their job. They abandon their farmsteads **everyday(!)**, leaving the arable land to be absorbed by neighbouring farmers. Another Dutch trend is secularisation. As less people go to church, **every two weeks a church has to close down** and every month a convent. Maybe you still remember my presentation on this topic in Vienna in 2009, showing pictures of churches transformed into shops, libraries and lofts.

Now, I would like to elaborate on **three examples** of depopulation in different parts of the Netherlands:

The first one, is a small village, called **Ganzedijk**, in the remote north-eastern part of the province of Groningen (dia), close to the German border. Lately, Ganzedijk got a lot of attention in the media, because local authorities had decided that a big part of the village would be demolished (compare to Belgian Doel). The village had no right to exist... From a heritage point of view, the village had no value whatsoever, but the emotional value were underrated.

People started to protest. They are devoted to their properties; their families lived there for ages. Finally, the destruction was cancelled. Now the local community is looking at the government for financial help. But apart from the renovation of several dwellings, this call is in vain. Local, regional and cross border initiatives are desperately needed.

The second example is **Holwerd** in Friesland. The Netherlands is a flat country, until the medieval times there were no dykes. The tide brought water in and out. The inhabitants protected themselves by making dwelling mounds. There are dozens of them squatted around the north of the NL. The 'terp', some dating back even before Roman times, are archeological treasures and contain impressive build heritage and protected townscapes.

Holwerd is one of the small villages situated on a mound (dia). On one hand the area is affected by depopulation and degeneration, which results in lots of deteriorated heritage buildings (especially the small dwellings). On the other hand the area is famous for its density of churches dated from the Middle Ages. This religious heritage could work as an opportunity for keeping the villages alive. Of course, our Agency guides and facilitates the local process of re-use of one or two churches. But we cannot give a new function to tens of churches. Question: Are we letting one listed church go in order to save three others, which can be re-used more easily? Complicated issues.

An appealing approach could be the transformation of these northern provinces into leisure-rich regions. They could act as relaxing and attractive counterpoints to the hectic and overcrowded Randstad. Holwerd is the gateway to the holiday island of Ameland, therefore tourism is a realistic option (a centre for activities in and around the Waddenzee is considered).

Together with local stakeholders (local and provincial government, NGO's, local community), the Agency is developing a vision on integrated conservation that could be implemented. The vision will focus on Holwerd and three other protected townscapes (Ee, Moddergat, Metslawier) in the municipality of Dongeradeel.

In case of depopulation, it is important to explore new functions and vitality, because built heritage with a sustainable function has an economic base to maintain – and therefore preserve – itself. Furthermore, historic features can keep the 'living climate' of the villages attractive for existing and new inhabitants and local ventures. This could decelerate the process of depopulation and gives opportunities for adaptive re-use and rehabilitation of cultural heritage.

The final example is **Parkstad** in the southern province of Limburg (dia). Depopulation is the biggest social and spatial issue in this region; we sometimes call it the 'balcony of Europe'. Since the shut down of the mines, people lost not only their jobs, but also their pride and identity (comparison Austria). After people left, looking for other jobs, villages degenerated quickly and club life came under pressure. Currently the destruction of 12.000 houses in the region is a hot item.

In 2009 Parkstad Limburg started an intense cooperation between the local authorities and local business units and scientific organisations. It appeared to be fruitful, after their minds were reset successfully from growth to depopulation. As this area inherited relics of the mining industry, heritage could be of decisive value while making new urban plans. Recently, our Agency listed three unique neighbourhoods as protected townscapes because of their mining history. This

recognition of monumental values can work as a tool to keep these areas attractive to live in. But in order to keep the local people happy on the long run, we have to act more flexible during renovations of their monumental houses. Moreover, Parkstad is entangled by Germany and Belgium. It is situated in the real heart of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, with good highways and fast railway connections to Liège, Brussels, Paris and Cologne. Limburg has a lot to win with a European cooperation. They should brand their usp's, like cheap housing, lively culture, the hilly landscape and their Burgundian way of life.

To conclude (dia):

1. don't fight depopulation, guide it;
2. don't look at the population rates only;
3. bind and mobilize local people;
4. make regional plans;
5. broaden your local view, look at the horizon.

Meanwhile the Netherlands is coping with the effects of the financial crisis; the building business is in deep trouble. That makes handling depopulation even more difficult. There's a need for new ways of planning, organisation, financing, et cetera.

I am convinced that our Agency should play a role whenever our society is changing and heritage is at risk. Our Agency could:

- disseminate more custom made knowledge – for example about co-creation of value and financial instruments - and inspire property developers;
- stimulate and facilitate cooperation, especially with the provinces, because they are in charge more and more as the state government decentralises;
- link heritage management to creative re use and to urban renewal in order to design a better and sustainable livelihood;
- last but not least, provide subsidies as a directive instrument whenever necessary. Not only for listed buildings but also for buildings and areas that are not listed. Officially this is beyond our responsibility. But we have to broaden our horizon ourselves too and get used to this management of change.

Thank you.

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