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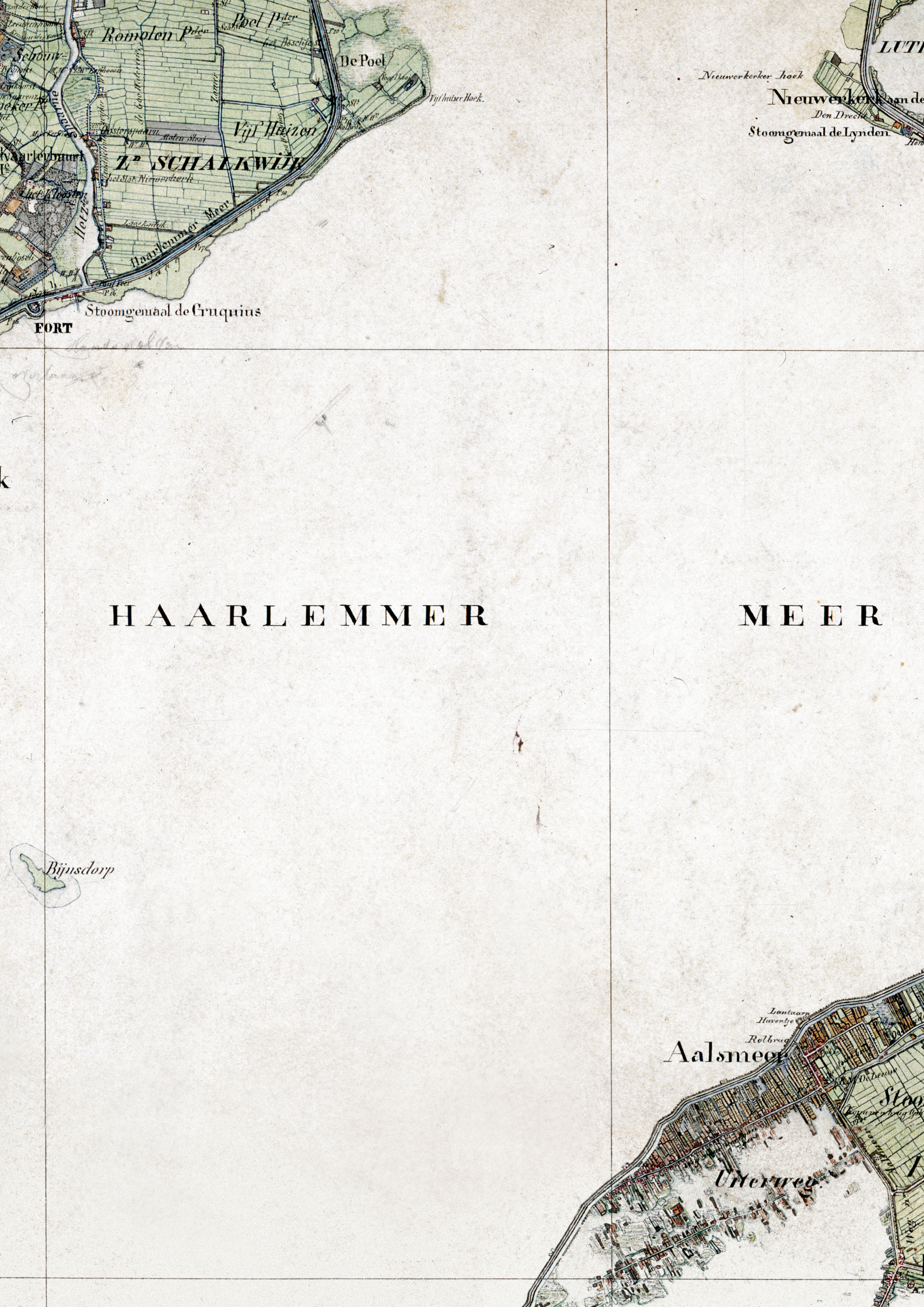


DU

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Dialogues

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Longue durée: Aided self-help and sites & services in the delta?

According to Gerald L. Burke, an English geographer, settlement layouts during the expansion of 17th-century Dutch cities were consciously planned; rather than stemming merely from ‘chance growth’, their development followed several key steps. This planning was the logical result of dealing with the difficult delta conditions, due to which settlement was only possible through cooperative effort. Burke writes:

It [Burke’s book] gives a brief account of urban and rural evolution in a country which, endowed initially with the poorest of natural resources, stood in constant danger, throughout the ages, of losing most of them to the depredations of the North Sea. There is so much to be admired in the manner in which those results were achieved. The qualities of courage and tenacity, ingenuity and faith ... are those of a people with deep and abiding attachment to their homeland who sought from earliest times, and still seek, to extend its area by winning new territory from sea and lake, marsh and bog, instead of casting covetous eyes upon the lands of their neighbours.

The Dutch have made their vulnerability profitable, and this shift constitutes an important mental aspect of the ‘fine Dutch tradition’, or the ‘dynamic tradition of making urban plans using the parameters of the natural system – linking in an efficient way the hydrological cycle, the soil and subsurface conditions, technology and urban development opportunities’ (Hooimeijer, 2014). This tradition facilitated the aforementioned; it is the foundation of the Dutch planning culture, in which the ‘public cause’ is not only dominant but fundamental.

Considering this tradition as the cultural *longue durée*, the question arises how, after two centuries of a welfare state and two decades of ‘participation society’, the nature of this cooperation in the delta between public and private conditions has changed? To answer this question, Simone Rots and Jacqueline Tellinga were invited to discuss the role of self-organisation – bottom-up meets top-down – in this culture, alongside the concepts of ‘aided self-help’ and ‘sites & services’.

Aided self-help in the Dutch Delta

Simone Rots

About Simone Rots

Dr Simone Rots is a partner at Crimson Historians and Urbanists and the managing director of the International New Town Institute, an international platform facilitating the exchange of research, education and knowledge pertaining to new towns. Her research interests include the housing policies and instruments applied in developing South American countries from the 1950s to the 1970s, when government policies and urban planning facilitated self-organised building. Through this aided self-help policy, relevant actors sought to respond to rapid urbanisation by considering the capacities of residents to build their own homes and develop their own public spaces. As part of the aided self-help policy, the government implemented the 'sites & services' planning tool to facilitate the self-organised housing by the public implementation of urban utilities like infrastructure, gas, water and electricity. In 2021, Simone received her PhD from TU Delft with her research, 'The Squatted New Town: Modern Movement meets Self-organisation in Venezuela', which draws valuable lessons from mid-century Latin American urban development. These lessons highlight the importance of integrating the needs and wishes of residents with commitment from local authorities. More importantly, her results demonstrate the opportunities presented by the aided self-help housing policy, an effective alternative that extends beyond the habitual use of modernistic ideas and concepts.

This research addresses the question of whether the policy of aided self-help and the planning tool of sites & services are worthwhile in modern Dutch urbanisation, amid the rising prominence of citizens' initiatives, self-organisation and self-management.

AIDED SELF-HELP

'Aided Self-help is a policy in which organised aid from the government facilitates and stimulates the residents' capacity for self-organisation. The central reasoning is that the government provides for the planning of infrastructure and facilities, and that the residents themselves build their homes based on progressive development'. This policy aims to solve housing problems by facilitating public self-organisation, trusting in residents' economic potential. Aid ranges from financial support to technical aid for the (re)construction of a single-family home, to the creation of an urban grid with basic facilities – 'sites & services' – which form the basis for urban expansion. The government is responsible for designing and implementing urban-development projects, but the occupation of the plots and their habitation is organised by the residents themselves in a progressive way of development. In this way, the projects are only carried out when they are feasible for the residents, either through financial or material resources.

TWO FORMS OF AIDED SELF-HELP

The policy of aided self-help was first promoted in the developing world during the 1960s and 1970s. Rapid urbanisation put pressure on cities via a lack of housing, resulting in widespread informal urbanisation. Governments simply could not build fast enough to keep up with rising demand for shelter. Thus, residents built informal housing in unsafe and unregulated locations. This lack of shelter called for a new type of housing policy – aided self-help – one that boosts the capacity of people to build by them self. Furthermore, through the sites & services scheme, governments regulated urbanisation by providing plots and infrastructure facilities. Such a policy approach requires a committed government to properly distribute land and provide technical, financial, logistical and social assistance. In this way, residents are supported in their housing needs while, at the same time, developing new building skills with which they can aid their family or neighbours (mutual aid).

While aided self-help has been successful across many instances, the policy boasts a significant requirement: alongside a strong government, residents must wield a central position in the implementation of aided self-help. Such a position facilitates mutual aid, in which a collective of families, friends or neighbours cooperate and which greatly strengthens the overall policy. Thus, for aided self-help to function properly, a strong, skilled community is essential. Without such a community, it is

Cities made by people

Jacqueline Tellinga

About Jacqueline Tellinga

Jacqueline Tellinga has been an expert in self-build urbanism for over 20 years. She has published numerous books on citizens' initiatives in the spatial domain, including *Heilige Huisjes* (2001), *Burgerlijke Stedenbouw* (Civil Urbanism, 2002), *De Grote Verbouwing* (The Big Fix up 2004), *Zelfbouw is Remedie Tegen Groeiende Ongelijkheid* (Private Building is the Remedy to Increasing Inequity, 2018), *No Choice Over Our Heads* (2019) and *Klein Wonen* (Small Homes, 2019). She works as an urban planner for the municipality of Almere and serves on the expert team of the Living of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, advising municipalities on issues related to housing. In 2021, she started the pilot *Bouwen door de Buurt* (Building by the Neighbourhood).

Bouwen door de Buurt relies on a simple principle: if residents see a potential building site in their own neighbourhood – for themselves, friends or family – they can call on her team to help them navigate the tightly regulated Dutch planning system. The first edition of the pilot is Almere's *Kruidenwijk*, a neighbourhood developed in the late 80s and early 90s, the time that the largest building stock has been realised in the Netherlands. Two aspects are essential: the residents must find their own building site in the existing urban fabric, and they must organise support for their building idea within their neighbourhood. Surprisingly, there were no Dutch precedents for this mode of development. Consequently, Jacqueline decided to start small. Her team is currently investigating how residents' building ideas can be made to comply with the Netherlands' strict planning system. It will become clear whether the current initiators have gained enough support within their neighbourhoods to continue later this year. Other local residents get the chance to voice their support or objection through a process known as 'inspraak' (literally 'speak-in').

CITIZENS ARE NOT A FULL-FLEDGED FORCE IN THE HOUSING MARKET

Dutch housing development is dominated by developing landowners rather than residents. Jacqueline argues for equal and fair access to land, including for private self-builders. Something that certainly hasn't been realised by the contemporary planning system so far since development rights are fully tied to land ownership. Whoever acquires the land also acquires the building rights. This is why professional developers make pre-emptive land purchases to secure their business case. Even for land owned by the government, tenders have been established in such a way that the same developers can join immediately, strengthening the oligopoly.

In this respect, the Netherlands differs significantly from Belgium, dating back to political decisions from last century. Belgian housing policy focused on the individual rather than the collective. The very first Belgian hous-

ing law (*Loi sur les Habitations Ouvrières*, 1889) primarily stimulated individual property, whereas the Netherlands focused on collective housing through the Housing Act of 1901. This focus only began to shift amid 1980s-era neoliberalism, the motto being, 'make pace, make mass, and the market must do it'. However, 'the market' in the Netherlands has become closely intertwined with the larger institutional parties. Citizens are not admitted to the land and housing market as full-fledged players. They are allocated the passive role of 'customer' – not that of the initiator. Unintentionally, this role division is firmly anchored in Dutch zoning policy. Development percentages vary by area, but they generally fall along the following lines: 30% social housing, 40% middle segment and 30% expensive purchases. Thus, there is no room for self-builders. It is important to consider this when looking at Dutch housing programs and zoning plans – they serve the landowners, as is the current lobby for the new town 'Eemvallei' in Flevoland: a carefully considered form of self-interest on behalf of landowners.

Thus, governments and city councils that genuinely want to empower citizens – who stand for real freedom of choice, who value end-user ownership – must implement change with regard to land allocation. Land should be offered to citizens' initiatives regardless of whether they want to build individually or collectively. Incidentally, the United Kingdom recently introduced the Right to Build for this purpose. Local authorities keep track of who reports as private self-builders via a mandatory register, and these individuals must be offered plots. Amsterdam is also a good example, as it allocates 20 per cent of available building lots to housing cooperatives. Other municipalities consider this development method to be too bureaucratic despite its significant social return. In truth, however, it simply requires a strong commitment.

OOSTERWOLD

The government owns a lot of land in the Flevopolder, enabling to allocate land to individual self-builders. This has been done at a large scale and with great diversity in *Homeruskwartier* (2007) and subsequently in *Oosterwold* (2012). In *Oosterwold*, the municipality of Almere decided to facilitate organic growth along the lines of a structure plan (*Structure Plan Oosterwold*, 2013) instead of making a rigid urban plan. The municipality abides by principal rules of development pertaining to land use, density, road systems and water system. However, the municipality does not directly engage, or at least does so as little as possible. There is no grid paid for with collective resources. MVRD was subsequently commissioned to translate the principle of organic growth into a spatial plan. Self-builders must organise infrastructure systems on their own. For example, they can decide on streetlight frequency and name streets all on their own. These residents are generally people with a pioneering sense who love the

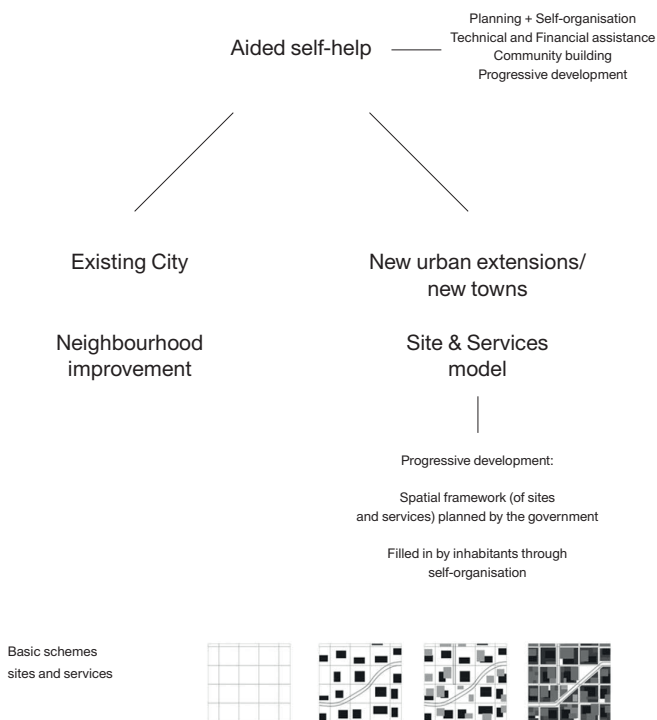


figure 1 Two forms of aided self-help according to the location of the site (Rots, 2021)

easy for professional project developers – market actors – to take over. Commercial participation scales up quickly, raising prices and making local development inaccessible, even for those in dire need of housing. This lowers the quality of neighbourhoods and hinders the development of a desirable public space. Governments must be able to ensure that the local housing-construction process remains resident-led, avoiding the deleterious effects of market actors.

There is always an interaction between self-sustaining citizens and the government supporting their efforts through professional aid. The market can play a role if it is 'allowed', leading to a triangular relationship.

MARKET INTERFERENCE: TIME

The concept of aided self-help emerged in the 1960s and 1970s; in fact, it was the most important theme at the UN Habitat 2 conference in 1976. However, the concept was already abandoned by the late 1980s, in large part due to the fact that, in many cases, the associated funding models proved to be inaccessible to the lowest-income groups. Aided self-help became increasingly criticised, resulting in new openings for the market. Unsurprisingly, this shift aligned with the rise of neoliberalism.

One interesting question presents itself in the Netherlands: in a context with strong public governance and a dominant private-developers market, how can

there be a triangular dynamic among the public sector, the private sector and residents? The answer is that government investment in aided self-help is not purely financial; investment entails community support, structure and organisation. It requires efficient development in a brief time span, as Dutch people would not want to live in a new area that still lacks proper facilities. Swift development is crucial, meaning the slow crawl of private development would be inadequate. This cultural dynamic largely stems from the fact that chance growth has been incredibly uncommon in the Netherlands.

Of course, aided self-help is a progressive development process; it takes time, and it must be assessed in the long term. The issue is thus that if you want to combine urbanisation with self-organisation the factor time must consciously be included, to let the city grow in a progressive way.

My research assessed the Latin American planning context using the cases of Ciudad Guayana and 23 de Enero (Caracas), both Venezuelan new towns built in the 1950s and 1960s. In El Gallo, a part of Ciudad Guayana, the sites & services scheme was implemented via grid expansion, entailing land and infrastructure development. Construction progressed from simple huts to – depending on the availability of money and materials – proper homes, some of which were capable of housing businesses. This process took up to 20 years.

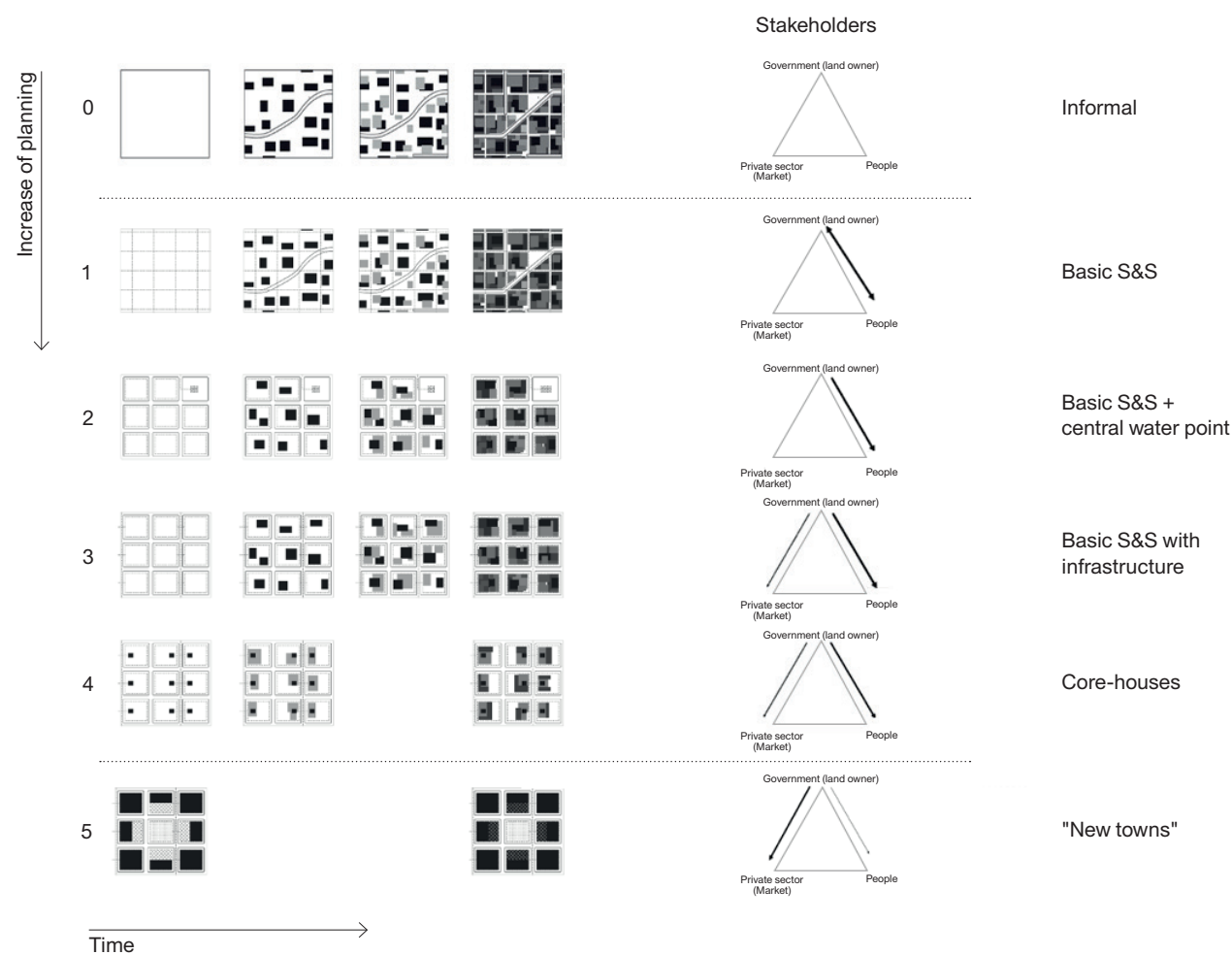


figure 2 Role of stakeholders (government, market, people) within different types of sites & services (Rots, 2021)

outdoors, appreciate a sense of community, and are not without means. In Oosterwold, the government took the radical step to leave the entire area layout to the residents.

Aside from the fact that people make their own home and living environment, I think, two forces make Oosterwold excel as a development: 1) the ability to determine the shape and size of one's own lot and 2) the requirement to use 50% of one's lot for urban agriculture. These two municipal ingredients form the basis upon which the self-builders create a fantastic and unique landscape. Meandering roads rich in colour and scent with all kinds of plant and animal life. This landscape would never have been conceived – let alone executed and maintained – by a municipality or professional developer. Oosterwold resulted from a principled and political choice. As with the previously developed Homeruskwartier, it stems from the idea that people can effectively create their own living environment.

TIED FREEDOM

All governments – be they liberal, socialist or conservative – enact regulations to achieve collective goals and prevent unnecessary risks. State planning and construction laws serve societal goals. Achieving these goals, however, costs



figure 1 In Oosterwold the government took the radical step to leave the entire area layout to the residents as long as 50% of one's lot is used for urban agriculture. (Photo: Adrienne Norman, 2020).



figure 2 The government of Almere enabled individual self-builders at a large scale and with great diversity in Homeruskwartier. The neighbourhood under construction in 2010. (TopShot.nl).

money. It is an idee fixe that they are spontaneously realised by citizens or companies. For example, the private market does not voluntarily build houses with a high insulation value or monitor sufficient living space for bats. While there may be some examples of small-scale societies that are highly self-governing, on the scale of a region or country, I do not see how citizens and companies would effectively regulate without a state authority. Oosterwold shows what can be achieved by allowing and facilitating planning freedom in a low-density settlement. Conquering freedoms in a swathed-in Dutch legal system is intensely innovative and brutally complex. The pilot 'Bouwen door de Buurt' in Kruidenwijk even takes a step further.

Burke (1956) praised the Netherlands for its consciously planned settlements. He was impressed by the ingenious way in which the Dutch protect their country against water and collectively plan urbanisation. Anyone with a building idea must have a plan to handle water. The state will not distribute environmental permits to building proposals that do not pass the water test. In Oosterwold, residents organise their own rainwater and wastewater, training themselves to be experts. This is crucial, as public-private collaboration on water issues will only become more important as climate change worsens.



figure 3 In the BouwEXPO Small homes in Homeruskwartier the smallest home measures 18 m2, the largest 50m2. (Photo: Adrienne Norman, 2021).



figure 3 El Gallo, in Ciudad Guayana, in 1969 (Caminos et al., 1969)

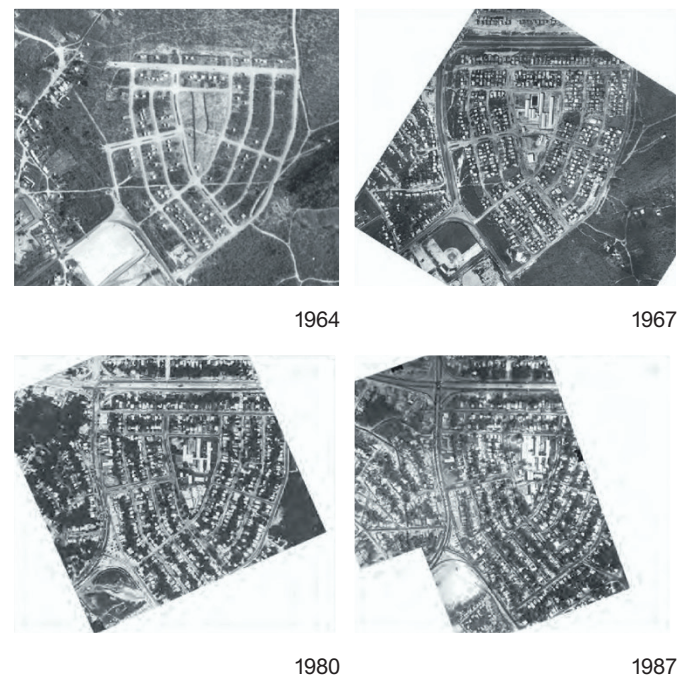


figure 4 Consolidation of El Gallo from 1964-1987 (Sigus, 2002)

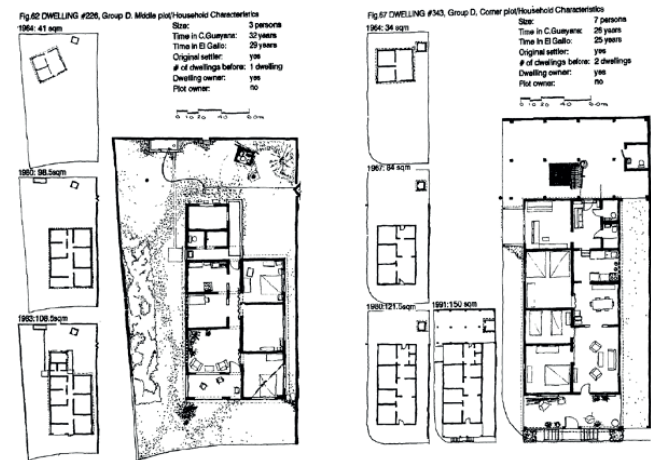


figure 5 Examples of the gradual consolidation of two plots in El Gallo (Reimers, 1992)

PEOPLE'S DURÉE

At the Department of Building Management – particularly the ‘Public Commissioning in Construction’ (TU Delft) – we have done extensive research into citizen-government relationships. What does the government do to facilitate or stimulate participation in the built environment? One urban-development project made it clear that citizens can only constitute equal stakeholders when they are organised in a way that enables them to speak as an organised group. This indicates the need for an additional actor in the ‘public-private partnership, an additional p; the people must bear an equivalent status in order to be operational in development projects. While various citizens’ councils have been established to achieve this end, none of them constitutes a proper institutional entity.

How can we facilitate this dynamic without institutionalising self-organisation while giving citizens a voice in urban development? The hypothesis could be that

Oosterwold represents aided self-help 2.0 – perhaps the original Dutch welfare state has laid the foundation for a new form in which the market and self-organisation can both be operational at the same time.

Considering the cultural *Longue Durée* of this public-private cooperation in the delta, the Netherlands boasts significant potential. It already wields a fertile humous layer through a committed government with established the technical and logistical assistance, crucial for the successful implementation of aided self-help with sites & services, especially in this specific deltaic condition. This potential is clear in Oosterwold, where residents building their own houses without any regulation by the government have a lot of questions about soil and water conditions. Here, the sites & services instrument could have a knowledge-provision function as well.

RESPONSE BY JACQUELINE TELLINGA

The question of whether the sites & services planning tool, one of the subjects of Rots’ study, can be used in modern Dutch urbanisation is an interesting one. If so, we must enact a major de-privatisation of utilities and be willing to live in unfinished streets – but why not? It would mean that governments would again invest in energy, electricity, water and data networks. I cannot imagine private companies like Vattenfall waiting 20 years for their return on investment. It is also an exciting idea that people would be allowed to continue building as soon as they have money in the bank, meaning a general acceptance of the fact that new neighbourhoods are not completed within a short period of time. Governments would need to be prepared to pre-invest in both above- and below-ground infrastructure. Self-builders would receive advice and support pertaining to the construction of their home, and houses would grow in tandem with the money that people have in the bank. It is a truly

Evidently, the residents of Oosterwold have succeeded. In Homeruskwartier, self-builders bought plots ready for construction, as the city of Almere carried out preliminary research and prepared the site for building. That is just another example of bottom-up urbanisation. Kruidenwijk could advance this even further.

RESPONSE BY SIMONE ROTS

There are examples of both versions of aided self-help in the Dutch Delta if one looks to the city of Almere, which is situated in a deep polder –reclaimed land from a former inner sea. The first example of Oosterwold is closest to the original version for new city expansion. The instrument of sites & services is important, as it effectively regulates urbanisation without the need for direct government engagement in building the houses.

The version of aided self-help for existing cities could be applied to Kruidenwijk, an existing area in Almere in which planning and self-organisation – the dynamics between citizens and the government – are changing. In this version, according to Jacqueline Tellinga, the government could take the supporting role, helping them with regulations for example.

My results from Venezuela are not fully generalisable to the Western world due to economic and political differences. However, they can be used as a lens through which to look at Oosterwold, which boasts similar policy approaches. Still, there are some key differences between the Dutch and Venezuelan cases. In Oosterwold, there was no social support, as all of the involved residents are self-sustaining. In Ciudad Guayana (El Gallo) there was a need to provide people with a basic living condition and specific stimulation for social cohesion by building for example a community centre. What is interesting though is the combination of housing and agriculture on the plots, as part of being self-sufficient, as applied in Oosterwold, which is also often seen in the infill of the sites & services examples worldwide. In both cases it remains clear that self-organized urbanization needs government interference.

interesting thought. Of course, it would require a fundamental cultural change in our planning system and building legislation. The question is whether this will match our general dedication to legal certainties. Regardless, it would be a godsend for people with a modest income who are eager to embark on a DIY adventure.

Regarding the question of whether self-organisation on the scale of complete area development is possible, I would say: certainly. Oosterwold proves that sites & services can be achieved by residents, including the creation of an urban plan and road construction. For cross-border decisions (e.g., public transport), a government is useful. However, the Netherlands are still not accustomed – spatially or financially – to urban development with citizens as investors. The interests of citizens’ initiatives remain also poorly represented in strategic decisions like drafting new planning policies and distributing development rights. Apparently these initiatives lack sufficient lobbying power. Professional builders – developers, housing associations and investors – are organised and wield dedicated government lobbies. It is discouraging that a civic lobby is even necessary, as citizens’ interests should be represented via the Netherlands’ democratic order.

Regarding the question of whether Oosterwold can be regarded as a Dutch example of aided self-help, I would say not. Oosterwold is subject to very different societal and financial conditions than the urbanisation of South America. In Oosterwold, the government has taken the step – knowing that health and safety are controlled by legislation – to leave the financing and development of a complete area to its residents. The government does as little as possible. In that sense, Homeruskwartier is a better comparison to the sites & services planning tool in Simone Rots’ study. Private DIY-oriented individuals, earning less than € 36,000 a year, could buy affordable and ready-made plots in Homeruskwartier between 2009 and 2015, and the municipal investment costs for sites & services were recouped through land revenues. The houses needed to be finished within two years; we did not introduce a phasing on construction depending on people having money in the bank. But – who knows. As the housing shortage becomes more poignant, perhaps this will become a model for the Netherlands. The question is whether this would be a good sign. In other words, is the choice, in the absence of any alternative, a negative choice?

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