

Symposium Public Values in the Built Environment – February 13th 2015

On Friday February 13th 2015 the symposium Public Values in the Built Environment was held. This symposium was a faculty fusion between two chairs of the faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment: Design as Politics and Public Commissioning in the Built Environment, and was titled “Who will take the responsibility for public values in changing public private relationships in the built environment?”. This symposium was held because both chairs deal with public values, but both have different perspectives on this subject.

The programme of the afternoon consisted of six short pitches by practitioners and researchers who dachten na over public values. After those pitches all joined in a debate on the role of public values in the education programme of the faculty.

The first presenter was Marleen Hermans, professor of the chair Public Commissioning in the Built Environment. Public organisations influence the built environment with their decision-making. By fulfilling their public tasks, they use, offer of construct real estate, and by that they establish public qualities. Also semi-public organisations.

The public/private division is not clear, a lot of organisations are more or less public.

Prof Hermans distinguished two types of values: 1. Performance values, and 2. Procedural values.

She states that public organisations have:

1. Specific tasks, which should stay in the public domain;
2. Adhere to social responsibilities and adding to sustainability goals;
3. Add to the quality of public space;
4. Protect the social heritage and social return;
5. Higher standards
6. Involve stakeholders;
7. Democratic processes;
8. Maintain integrity
9. Exemplary role.

Privatisation means the shifting of responsibilities and new ways of collaboration.

Question to MH: what is the biggest threat to public values? Lose public values that are not loosely related to a project. Because of fragmentation overarching principles could be overlooked.

In her function as Managing Director of Haagwonen, Karin van Dreven is aware of the role that housing associations play in the built environment. According to her everybody should take responsibility for public values. This should be a leading principle in every action that is taken. The government can help in this. She also advocates taking interest in people, something that is sometimes forgotten by the top level management. The most important value is trust, a dynamic principle that can be gained by interaction between public organisations and the public.

Allard Jolles, Head of Strategy at Central Government Real Estate Agency talks about the role of the government in the built environment. The underlying principles that drive the Dutch government: effectiveness and efficient, integrity, transparency, equality, responsibility, accountability, legitimacy, participation should be present in all its actions, but also its real estate. Allard named for instance the plinths of government buildings to the street, which connect the government with citizens. In other examples, the real estate of the government is used to enhance the quality of the built environment. In Leeuwarden the old prison was sold to the municipality for a symbolic amount of 1 euro, so it could be transformed to housing. In Winterswijk, a vacant government building swapped functions with the ugliest building in the city, so the latter could be demolished, thus contribute to the spatial quality in the city. The government takes into account broader values than efficiency alone.

Harry Kruiter, Researcher at Institute for Public Values (Instituut voor Publieke Waarden) focuses on efficiency of the government. The institute created knowledge on government austerity. He is also involved in a social hospital, in which so-called “problem families” are aided. The costs to the governments are high, because it is bound by strict rules. He advocates bending some rules a little bit, because they prevent efficiency. To his opinion, government actions sometimes do not have to be 100% legitimised. He ended his pitch with the question: “Could this work in building environment?”.

Tom Avermaete, Professor at Chair of Methods and Analysis, Faculty of Architecture, focused on the academic side of public values. He advocated a change in the education of architects. He views architecture as a *res publica*, an architect as a public intellectual. Architecture students should not be a problem solver, but engage in the public debate. He sees that architects in Belgium are very engaged, but Dutch architect are not. There is however a tension when an architect is working for the state as a direct client, because when he is paid, private values such as efficiency can hamper his task as a public intellectual.

Patrick Healy, philosopher, writer, and senior lecturer at Faculty of Architecture, sees a problem in the sense of well-being. In the old Greece, small goals like the blooming of a flower defined well-being. Nowadays, even in a well-developed country as the Netherlands, people do not have the sense of being born into wellbeing. He also advocates the engagement of architects in the public debate. The more students are prepared for the debate, the more well-being they can create.

Petra Rutten, Director Social Development (Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling) at Heijmans talked about the ways a private organisation can contribute to and safeguard public values. For Heijmans, the future is not about making buildings, but inventing them. They strive for meeting the changing demands which are not even recognised yet. This will be done by incorporating more parties in the decision-making process, such as entrepreneurs and inhabitants. Heijmans focuses at the long term, in trying to be ahead, instead of reacting to the demand.

The debate that followed the pitches concentrated at the roles of the government, the public, and private organisations. With changing roles, the previous responsibilities of the government shift to the other parties. A government that steps back results in larger roles for for instance the public. Architects and architecture students should step up to lead this change. The faculty should focus on this in her education programme.

In the concluding remarks, Wouter Vanstiphout talked about the notion of negotiation, the notion of change, what are public values, who represents these values, and how we can make this part of the curriculum.