

# DENSIFICATION? BETTER MANAGEMENT PLEASE!

The compact city as the solution for urban growth? At best, this can only be part of the solution, say architect/professor Kees Christiaanse and BPD CEO Walter de Boer. Both believe there should be more consideration for the densely populated areas between cities. And more centralised management. "If design isn't properly managed, urbanisation will get out of hand."



“IT’S AN ILLUSION TO THINK THAT YOU COULD OR SHOULD HOUSE EVERYONE IN COMPACT CITIES”

OVER 20 YEARS HAS PASSED since the first meeting of architect and urban planner Kees Christiaanse and BPD CEO Walter de Boer. It was during the first workshops for Leidsche Rijn, the current ‘Vinex’ new-housing district near Utrecht. But they’ve kept in touch ever since. KCAP Architects&Planners, Christiaanse’s Rotterdam-based firm and BPD have teamed up on projects and sometimes even competed with one another on tenders.

In his work, professor Christiaanse primarily focuses on urban planning issues in complex urban situations and on the management of urban processes. He is an expert in the development of campus areas, waterfronts and airports, and the revitalisation of former industrial, railway and port sites. Walter de Boer has set himself the objective of creating residential areas with the kind of high user-, experience- and future-value that will generate sustainable returns for all stakeholders, in other words *creating living environments*.

**Given their respective visions of the industry and how they approach projects, collaboration is**

**a clear driver of success. How would they like to swap positions?**

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “It would be great to have sufficient funds available to initiate project developments myself. I would be apprehensive about working with a large organisation and – potentially – the associated fixed conventions. Above all, I’d want to prove that excellent-quality projects have a positive effect on their surroundings and can simultaneously generate high profits. Take, for example, total concepts for urban planning, architecture, social programming and sustainability.”

**WALTER DE BOER:** “I would revel in the large scale and complexity of your projects. Increasingly, the existing city or conurbation, together with its existing spatial and social structures, is serving as the building environment. I see urban planning more as a strategy and the urban planner as the link pin between the vision developer and programmer. This is also the creative part of our industry, but it’s all-too-often snowed under complex spatial planning processes and procedures. It’s also why our people view what you do with a certain

sense of envy. Maybe a fusion of our disciplines would be desirable ...”

#### DESAKOTA

**Worldwide, people are flocking to the cities and these are growing, in Europe too. So what should we do, how can we manage this growth properly? As soon as the compact city is raised as a potential solution, both men clearly feel the need to add a little nuance to the mix.**

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** Fifty per cent of the world’s population may live in cities, but half of those people don’t live in the cities themselves, but in the areas between them. The regions with the highest population densities often boast the highest agricultural production. This is as true for Java in Indonesia and the Mekong Delta in the southwest of Vietnam as it is for the Po Plain in northern Italy. These regions have networks of cities and villages, with many people living in and between the links and nuclei. Densification manifests itself in two ways: through the densification of the nuclei and the decentralised development between

the nuclei. Both ways are abundantly evident in Asia, where the intermediate areas are referred to as *desakota*.

Desakota comes from the Indonesian words ‘desa’ (village) and ‘kota’ (city), and so literally means ‘village-city’. These village-cities are situated 20-30 kilometres outside the peri-urban zones, from where people can still commute to and from the nearby city centres. They are densely populated and characterised by intensive agricultural use. However, they differ from densely populated rural areas because they have more urban-like features, such as developed transport networks, increasing activity levels outside of the agricultural sector and more female participation in paid labour.

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “Closer to home, you can see such urbanised peri-urban areas in the Dutch Randstad (the greater metropolitan areas of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and the Ruhr in Germany. It’s an illusion to think that you could or should house everyone in compact cities. Those peri-urban areas have



KEES CHRISTIAANSE

Professor Kees Christiaanse (1953) studied architecture and urban planning at Delft University of Technology. Afterwards, he joined the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), and from 1983 he was a partner. In 1989 he founded KCAP Architects&Planners in Rotterdam, which later opened offices in Germany, Switzerland and China. Throughout his career he has continued to combine his work as an architect and urban planner with research and education. From 1996 to 2003 he was a professor of architecture and urban planning with the Technical University of Berlin and he has chaired the Institute for Urban Planning at the ETH in Zurich since 2003. Christiaanse has been Programme Leader with the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore since 2010. He is also an International Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an honorary member of the Bund Deutscher Architekten, a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and chairman of the advisory board of the Singapore University of Technology and Design.



WALTER DE BOER

Walter de Boer (1958) has been CEO of Bouwfonds Property Development (BPD) since 2008. He read civil engineering in Delft University of Technology, majoring in architecture and urban planning. Between 1982 and 1987 he worked as an independent architect with Van Latum in the Dutch city of Alkmaar. In 1987 he joined the Brink Groep (as project manager) and PRC Netherlands, where he became an organisational consultant. In 1991, he started as a development manager with Bouwfonds Nederlandse Gemeenten in the Central Netherlands Region. In 1997, De Boer was appointed director of real estate development with VOF Bouwfonds Fortis, and in 2003 he was appointed director Bouwfonds MAB Ontwikkeling BV in the Central Netherlands Region. He held this position until 2008, when he was promoted to CEO of BPD Europe and appointed managing director of BPD Ontwikkeling Netherlands. Walter de Boer is also a member of the executive board of Rabo Real Estate Group.

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high agricultural and industrial outputs. They are productive landscapes and, as such, are very interesting. It's important not to build on undeveloped land, unless you offset this by simultaneously improving it. In Switzerland this is called *Ausgleichflächen* and in Singapore the rule for new buildings is *one hundred per cent green replacement*.

All this applies to densification in the city and the urbanised peri-urban areas, which face enormous infrastructural challenges. To prevent the ensuing chaos, it's crucial that adequate strategies and affordable structures are developed for logistical water management, waste disposal and mobility.”

#### POOR DESIGN

**WALTER DE BOER:** “We call desakota polycentric cities or agglomerations. I don't understand why the agglomeration isn't given more significance. The Randstad in the Netherlands and the Ruhr in the Nordrhein-Westfalen region of Germany could even be considered agglomerations. Both are practically empty! This can prove to be a major asset. But let's not limit the discourse to momentary architecture along port wharfs. Fixating on the inner-city is not necessary, especially not for high rises above 100 or 150 meters. High rises are symbolic and they stimulate manifestation. True, you'll probably make the newspapers, but it leads to architectural icons that have little to do with quality. It has more to do with quantity, and even that's debatable. Urbanisation is not the issue; it's how to manage it properly.”

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “Both forms of urbanisation - the compact city *and* the urbanised landscape - warrant equal attention. They are complementary. That said, the impact of poor design is more pronounced on landscape than it is on cities. This is why I'm a strong advocate of the return of a more rigid, centralised spatial planning system in the Netherlands, for example, by means of a revitalised State Planological Service (RPD - Rijksplanologische Dienst - ed.). Inner-city transformations are fairly autonomous processes; they need little steering. Urbanised peri-urban areas are a different story altogether, they cry out for management.”

**WALTER DE BOER:** “I agree. What's more, a few weeks ago Minister Blok of the Dutch Ministry of Housing paid us a visit. A return to more centralised management, such as the RPD that you just mentioned, is exactly what I proposed. Currently, in terms of the ideological long-term vision, there's no leadership culture to organise our wishes and needs.”

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “Without proper management, the peri-urban areas will be overdeveloped, without taking into account essential issues such as mobility and CO<sub>2</sub>-reduction. Urbanisation poses a threat to our planet. This is painfully clear in JaBeBeKa, the agglomeration surrounding Jakarta, with its overpopulation, subsidence, the sinking water table and drinking- and waste-water issues. These have become uncontrollably huge

problems there. And while there is some difference with the rural areas in Western Europe, it's principally the same. This is why urbanisation should always be subject to design management. Architecture is beautiful, but not a political prerequisite. Design management is indispensable to urbanisation. The social ramifications are simply too great.”

#### POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM

Christiaanse is a fervent advocate of *inverse design*. This entails determining the existing qualities of an area first: watercourses, biotopes, vegetation, avenues lined with lovely trees, older buildings, and so on. These qualities define a fixed framework with which you can then consider how to incorporate new developments. It's all about achieving a well-thought-out balance.

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “In the relatively new Dutch cities of Lelystad and Almere, for example, we started by designing a forest and *wetlands* in the urban growth plan, as a template for future development. Subsequently, during the process, we replaced parts of the forest and wetlands with new buildings.”

Another *inverse design* tool that helps to safeguard the spatial quality of densely populated peri-urban areas is regulations, which have a braking effect. By way of illustration, Christiaanse refers to part of the Swiss Mittelland, a less densely populated version of the Netherlands' Randstad, extending from Geneva to St. Gallen and fenced in by the



## 10 THINGS WE CAN LEARN FROM SWITZERLAND

Zurich-based architect/professor and urban planner Kees Christiaanse highlights 10 factors that contribute to spatial quality and protect long-term area development in Switzerland:

1. *Fruchtfolgeflächen*: a mandatory minimum surface area of agricultural land must be maintained to be able to feed the population in times of war.
2. *Waldgesetz*: all forests are protected.
3. *Ausgleichflächen* or surface offset: building on greenfield land is prohibited. In exceptional cases the surface area that is developed must be offset with greenery or the income is subject to taxation.
4. Fragmented land ownership and a great respect for private property make the dispossession and sale of

land more difficult. Consequently, there are few large-scale developments.

5. The original railway systems in small towns are used for S-Bahn trains so that commutes from the agglomeration to Zurich central station never take longer than 30 minutes. This leads to minor densification in the municipalities that are served by the S-Bahn trains.
6. *Landschaftsinitiative*: a political movement that actively preserves protected landscapes.
7. *Richtplan*: a type of zoning plan at provincial level that dictates to municipalities which areas may and may not be developed. According to the Richtplan, there is hardly any available building land left in the canton of Zurich. Consequently, nearly all permissible developments

are on brownstone (previously developed) land and none on *greenfield*.

8. People's rights to object to and petition against building plans are quite well developed.
9. Legislation pertaining to water-catchment areas, noise requirements and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is strictly enforced.
10. The importance of responsible building is carefully considered by communities and the virtue of the 2,000-watt society ideal is broadly accepted. This ideal stipulates that no more than 2,000 watts per capita should be consumed. And to put this into context, in Europe average per capita consumption is some 6,000 watts and in the United States it's approximately double that.



“OUR INDUSTRY IS IN A STATE OF FLUX, MOVING FROM THE GRAND GESTURE TO BIG MAINTENANCE”

Alps and the Jura mountains. The part he means is the Limmat Valley between Baden and Zurich, where some 10 factors play an important role in protecting against over-urbanisation and matters such as political opportunism [see the panel on page 27]. For this project, a website (Limmatstadt.ch – ed.) was created to provide a common concept and awareness for the various villages and towns there. And it’s had an amazing effect on the sense of community.

**WALTER DE BOER:** “We urgently need new quality management. Our industry is in a state of flux, moving from the grand gesture to big maintenance. We currently develop on the basis of sustainable management and economic feasibility. Against this backdrop, the huge demographic strain felt in our three core countries poses a major problem. The grain is becoming smaller and the significance of neighbourhoods and streets is becoming more important. This is partly due to the emergence of different lifestyles. The city as a campus and as a catalyst and the diversity of the population composition are forcing us to take a very close look at the development of a new type of urbanity.”

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “We are conducting research into urbanisation with the Future Cities Lab in Singapore, which is an institute for sustainable urban planning of the EHT-Zurich. We’re researching what kind of impact urban planners can and cannot have. If you

don’t know this you’ll be nothing more than the coordinator of everyone’s poor taste. The main obstacle in complex inner-city projects is team continuity. For example, in about half the projects in Amsterdam’s Zuidas and London’s Olympic Legacy the urban planner is no longer part of the equation at the end, either because of political changes or the sheer duration and difficulty of the project. People come and go in every stakeholder- and project-management team; there is little continuity assurance and initial fundamental principles fall by the wayside. This makes the processes too fragmented. There is a real need for strategic management that safeguards urban quality in the long-run, a system that can respond and adapt to changing circumstances, but doesn’t depend on individuals.”

**There are, of course, outstanding examples of quality to be found in urban development. If they could single out one of their own projects to inspire urban planners, which one would it be?**

**KEES CHRISTIAANSE:** “For me, that would have to be HafenCity in Hamburg, for which we designed the master plan. It has an enormous diversity of types, programmes and scale and its success is primarily down to the partial contracting per block through competitions or tenders. No large area segments were issued to a single developer.”

**WALTER DE BOER:** “Op Buuren, just south of the Dutch town of Maarsse, was a major success. It’s the beautiful

transformation of a new village on the Vecht river, reminiscent of the old villages along the river. Op Buuren arose on a former factory site of pharmaceutical company Organon. There’s no standardisation. Together, the approximately 650 homes have an excellent grain size and are truly adapted to meet individual residential needs. The entire project retained the original plot structure and does justice to the landscape and cultural-historical values of the region.”



#### FURTHER READING

Limmatstadt.ch

The Swiss community website, that aspires to achieve a unity of awareness in the area between Baden and Zurich.



kcap.eu

The website of Kees Christiaanse’s firm, KCAP Architects&Planners, with particular attention for design philosophy and it includes an exhaustive project overview.



bpdeurope.com

The BPD website, which includes market information for potential investors about Germany, France and the Netherlands.



## INSPIRATION

Recommended reading from Kees Christiaanse: *Cities by Design: The Social Life of Urban Form* by Fran Tonkiss of the LSE-Cities in London and *Garden City/Mega City* by WOHA Architects in Singapore (read the interview with WOHA architect Richard Hassell on page 34).

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Walter de Boer: In addition to his 'airport literature' such as *Wired* and *Brand eins*, he finds inspiration from presentations such as the one by Paul Hawken on YouTube entitled *Blessed Unrest, Wiser Earth*. And from many others too, because that's what he sees as the beauty of YouTube: "It's as though the world is at your fingertips."