Introduction. Lake IJssel - The IJsselmeer

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Publication date
2016

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Delta Interventions

Citation (APA)
Palmboom, F. (2016). Introduction. Lake IJssel - The IJsselmeer. In A. L. Nillesen, B. Kothuis, H. Meyer, & F. Palmboom (Eds.), *Delta Interventions: Design and Engineering in urban water Landscapes* (pp. 52-53). Delft University Publishers.

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LAKE IJSSEL - THE IJSSELMEER

INTRODUCTION

The IJsselmeer, or Lake IJssel, represents the northern flank of the Dutch Delta. In several aspects, this region is quite different from the South West Dutch Delta and the Rotterdam Rijnmond region. For one thing, as a delta landscape, it is less dynamic then the other two delta regions. Also, as an urbanized area dominated by the city of Amsterdam, the northern delta is more mono-centric than the area around Rotterdam. Finally, the IJsselmeer area is less industrialized and serves a less important transport function than the other parts of the Dutch Delta.

Creation of a new, artificial landscape
The former Zuiderzee (Southern Sea) was closed off from the North Sea in 1935 and this large body of water was transformed into an inland lake named the IJsselmeer. The construction of the Afsluitdijk (Closure Dam) signified the end of tidal influences and had two major implications. First, it turned the original salt water sea arm into a large fresh water lake, fed by the Ijssel River. The lake became crucially important for the Netherlands as its central fresh water reservoir, answering the need for drinking water and agricultural irrigation. Second, it created favorable conditions for reclaiming large parts of land in this former sea arm. In the newly won polders, based on the original plan of the civil engineer and minister Cornelis Lely (1854-1929), a completely artificial landscape was created. Several New Towns were designed and founded as a way to reduce the population pressures on the Amsterdam urban area; the new polders created a region for large-scale agriculture that was huge by Dutch standards.

Delta Paradox
These physical changes deeply influenced the environment, a development that can be called the delta paradox. On the one hand, we have the natural system, which originally followed the principles of the 'fluid landscape', with its almost endless gradients, its spatial continuity, its dynamics, and unpredictability. On the other hand, we have population growth, intensive farming, and urbanization, all of which require control, safety guarantees, and minimizing risk as much as possible. The delta paradox leads to an increasingly compartmentalized 'fluid landscape'.

To protect the cities and the agricultural land, we see the continuous construction of new defense lines, which split the landscape into manageable sections. However, this compartmentalization often has a strained relationship with the open and dynamic character of the natural system. A symbol of this phenomenon is the Houtribdijk, a dike (or really a dam) originally intended to enclose the last large-scale reclamation project, Markerwaard. Although the project did not materialize and was finally called off a decade ago, the hard structure of the Houtribdijk remains in place. This leads to an important question for the Delta Interventions studio: Can we give a new meaning to this 'superfluous' dike? Can this line of compartmentalization be softened, can new ecological gradients be created, and can we evolve a more attractive landscape?

Spatial quality
In terms of urbanization, the northern delta is mono-centric. Its main pole of growth and power is the city of Amsterdam, with the old towns along the coast of the IJsselmeer and the new towns in the polders as satellites. These satellite towns are under continuous pressure to grow and develop, while the areas further away from Amsterdam are generally in decline. The historical city Enkhuizen and the new town Lelystad, located at opposite ends of the Houtribdijk, are both looking for new economic impulses: for example, new forms of agriculture, or new energy systems based on wind, water, or sun. However, to adequately adapt this spatial development in the delta landscape to local and national needs, we urgently need designs and future visions that combine these functional requests with enhanced spatial quality at all three levels: that of the city, the landscape, and the water.

Diverting the pressure
Because of its location next to Schiphol Airport, a major European hub, as well as its port, the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region is well integrated in global transportation networks. With its strong historical identity and its excellent cultural facilities, Amsterdam is both a gateway to the Netherlands and a showcase for its culture. Tourism is a powerful economic sector, but has begun to dominate daily urban life and get 'out of hand'. For the Delta Interventions Studio this poses many research and design questions: How can this tourist pressure be diverted to other parts of the region, including the IJsselmeer area as a whole? Could the IJsselmeer function as a space of respite? What hidden potential does the Ijsselmeer's spatial character offer?

Integrated approach
In all parts of the delta landscape, problems and challenges are closely related and are constantly evolving. As a result, Delta Interventions Studio's students have been encouraged to take an integrated approach: to relate their design to different fields of knowledge, and to relate the design for a specific site with the delta region as a whole. The success of delta intervention designs depends on the commitment to follow this integrated approach:
- Combining water management with nature development;
- Illustrating how the design contributes to the attractiveness, the beauty, and the spatial quality of the area;
- Showing how the design builds upon the historical evolution of projects, interventions and approaches;
- Exploiting the IJsselmeer area, as the Blue Heart of the Netherlands, creating a space of respite from the metropolitan stress;
- Offering an untapped range of recreational and economic opportunities, with an eye to relieving the pressure on the city of Amsterdam;
- All the while taking the international attractiveness of the local cultural and natural heritage as an important starting point for design.