

PRESERVATION AND TOWN PLANNING: NEW ELEMENTS IN AN OLD FABRIC

Policies and achievements in the Netherlands

By Dr. Roger A.F. Smook, architect and town planner

I SUCCESSFUL PRESERVATION NEEDS GOOD PLANNING

1. Emphasis first placed on individual buildings

The tradition of preservation work in the Netherlands is one that is now over 110 years old. At the outset, those keen to preserve valuable features of the built environment focused their attention above all on individual buildings. This is to some extent still the case today: not only the legislative framework, but also the system of finance and subvention and the way in which preservation work is organized all take the preservation of individual buildings as their starting-points.

2. Consideration later also given to context

In the fifties, more and more people started to agree that it was not enough simply to protect individual historic buildings, and that it was more important to preserve also the surrounding area providing the building in question with its context. The 1961 Monuments and Historic Buildings Act took account of this broader view, making provision for the designation of 'protected townscapes'. By this step, a link arose between preservation and town planning.

3. Functional and morphological aspects

Two aspects play a major role in the preservation of historic buildings, sites, townscapes and streetscapes. Firstly, there is the functional aspect. If a historic building may be considered as forming part of a greater whole, and the whole itself is part of a larger overall structure, the question then arises as to the function of the historic building in this framework. Historic buildings should have a place in a society that is in a continual process of renewal. Buildings and sites must be able to retain a purposeful position within this context of change. Buildings without a purpose are doomed to disappear.

Secondly, there is the morphological aspect. The form in which buildings or sites are preserved is an important factor in any attempt to give them a meaningful place in society. A changing society should take heed of the specific requirements which a historic building imposes on its environment. A number of planning guidelines can be formulated to assist this process.

4. The need for urban policies

In order to be able to pay sufficient attention to both the functional and the morphological aspects, a comprehensive policy plan must be drawn up for the physical development of the area in question. Preservation thereby explicitly becomes part of the town planner's job. Town planning itself, as a discipline, draws widely on social and political views on what society and the physical environment should be like. And since, as we have already said, historic buildings need to be preserved within a town planning framework, it becomes clear that the preservation of historic features of the built environment is a political responsibility.

II FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS ARE IMPORTANT

1. Preservation needs a sound functional basis

A historic building that is unable to fulfil any meaningful purpose in a changing society will be unable to survive in it. Almost 80% of all historic buildings in the Netherlands have melted into oblivion because it proved impossible to adapt them as times changed. Both buildings and urban structures have lost their purposes in this way.

Those buildings which are still standing and which have been preserved because of their historic value are, in other words, buildings which have been successfully adapted to new uses and functions. In many cases, this has been due to certain peculiar characteristics, such as an outstanding architectural or symbolic value, or to the fact that they were simply large or flexible enough to allow easy adaptation. In a sense, these are characteristics with an economic value which has been retained in a changing society.

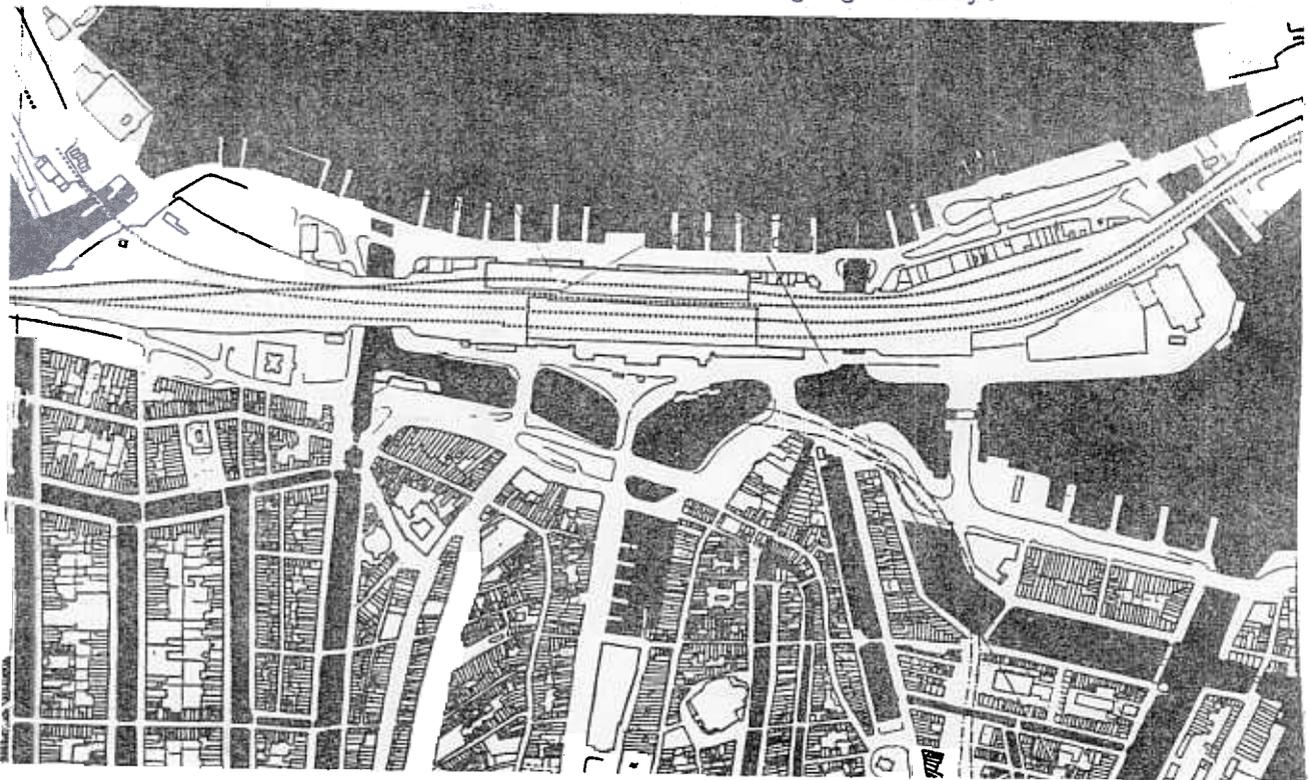


Figure 1. The site of the central station in Amsterdam

An early example (around 1880) of the deliberate economic revitalization of a historic inner city. The station was built on an artificial island next to the old city wharves. In the olden days, it was ships that brought riches to the town. Today, it is trains that provide the economic stimuli.

2. Study of the socio-economic context

In order to gain some idea of the purpose which historic buildings and sites could fulfil in the future, an in-depth socio-economic study needs to be carried out. The aim of such a study, embracing the disciplines of town and physical planning, should be to assess the viability of the area surrounding the buildings or sites which are deemed worthy of preservation. An indication could be given, in the form of an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, of the purposes for which each individual historic feature would be suited.

3. Town planning

Against this background, the preservation of historic buildings should be regarded as a matter of town planning that should be tackled with the means and instruments open to planners. There is a wide range of planning instruments available: within the broad context of a structure plan, a meaningful place and purpose should be identified for the building or site in question. A more detailed land-use plan should define its legal status. Finally, urban renovation and implementation schemes should make clear how any necessary restoration work is to be financed and scheduled.

4. 25 years' experience in the Netherlands

When the Monuments and Historic Buildings Act came into force in 1961, it created a legal basis for preservation in the form of the provisions made for the official designation of historic buildings and protected townscapes. An inventory has in the meantime been performed of buildings and sites deemed worthy of protection, and the results recorded in a register. Work is now in progress on an accurate description of the architectural background of the listed buildings. Similarly, a detailed record is also being made of the topographical history of protected townscapes and streetscapes.

Listed buildings may not be demolished, and their owners qualify for subsidies on restoration work.

Townscapes and streetscapes are protected by means of a planning procedure obliging local authorities to draw up a land-use plan. At the moment, there are some 330 listed townscapes in the Netherlands, some of which have been given effective protection in the form of a land-use plan stating explicitly that they are to be preserved in their present form. Preparatory work on land-use plans for larger urban entities, such as entire inner cities, is a highly complex matter and has for this reason failed to get off the ground on a broad scale.

Generally speaking, the financial side is much less of a grey area. Urban renovation schemes have been a hot political issue since the seventies, and a large number of such schemes have been planned and realized. Although the emphasis has been placed on housing and the revitalization of neighbourhoods, the preservation of important historic features may also be said to play an important role in them. As a result, preservation work has become less obviously recognizable as such. At the same time, there is no longer any doubt that it has become one of the many elements at the centre of successful physical planning. And that can only be good news for preservation.

III URBAN DESIGN: CLAIMS AND POTENTIAL

1. The significance of morphology

Just as historic buildings and townscapes have to blend into a larger whole from a functional viewpoint, it is equally important that their form and structure fit in. Preservation cannot work effectively if insufficient attention is paid to the morphological relationship between historic buildings and the area surrounding them.

As historic features cannot themselves be made to change, the structure and form of the area surrounding them must be adapted to them. In other words, the treatment given to the vicinity will to some extent need to be based on the historic feature in question.

When deciding how to deal with the surrounding area, town planners have three options open to them. They can decide to repair the urban fabric, to add to the fabric by making use of historic features, or to add totally new features.

2. Mending the urban fabric

If there still exists a large number of original features, and only relatively small areas have been lost as a result of demolition and change, the best solution is to repair the original urban fabric. In doing so, great care must be taken to follow the original historic pattern when designing the overall structure, selecting building lines and fixing the dimensions and scale of new buildings. There is no need for the latter to be built as 'historic lookalikes': the important point is that they should match the structure, dimensions and scale of the historic features.

3. Adding to historic patterns

In situations where a relatively large part of the original street pattern has disappeared, or where there is a need for a historic area to be extended, the

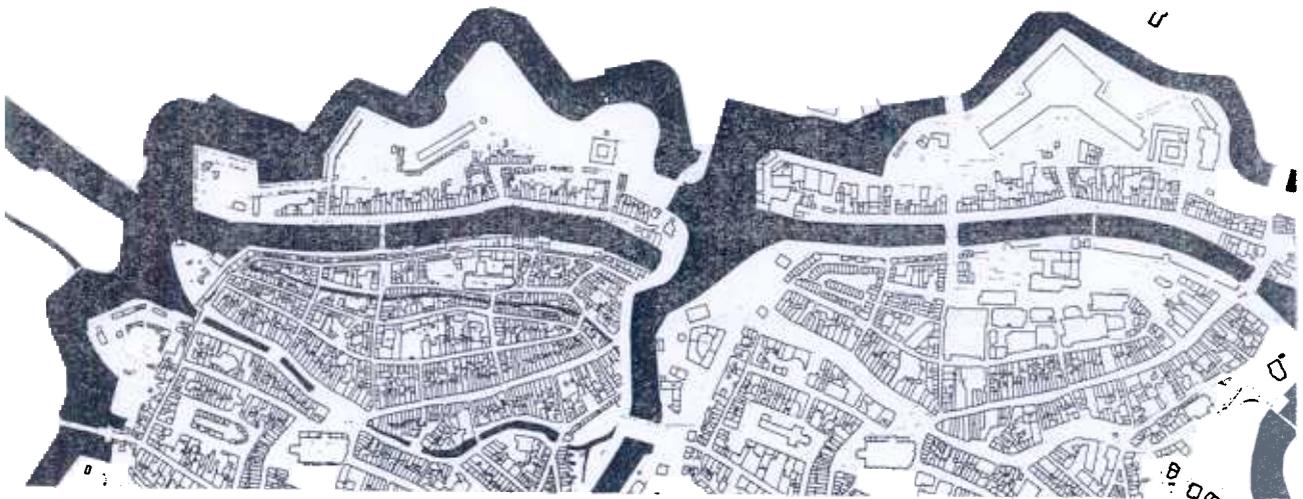


Figure 2. City centre shopping precinct in Zwolle

A vast new shopping centre has been created in the town's historic centre. The new area forms a reasonably successful match with the original street pattern. The boundary of the new area is highlighted by the restoration of old buildings and a high degree of compatibility between new buildings and old. Left historical situation 1822, right present situation 1980.

plan selected will have to be one in which the existing historic fabric is extended. Only the most important features of the old street pattern are transposed, and particular attention has to be paid to the points of transition to the fabric that is to be retained. As both old and new are designed on the basis of the same framework, confluence is guaranteed. It is important, though, that the right choices are made with regard to building designs and the detail of the new structure.

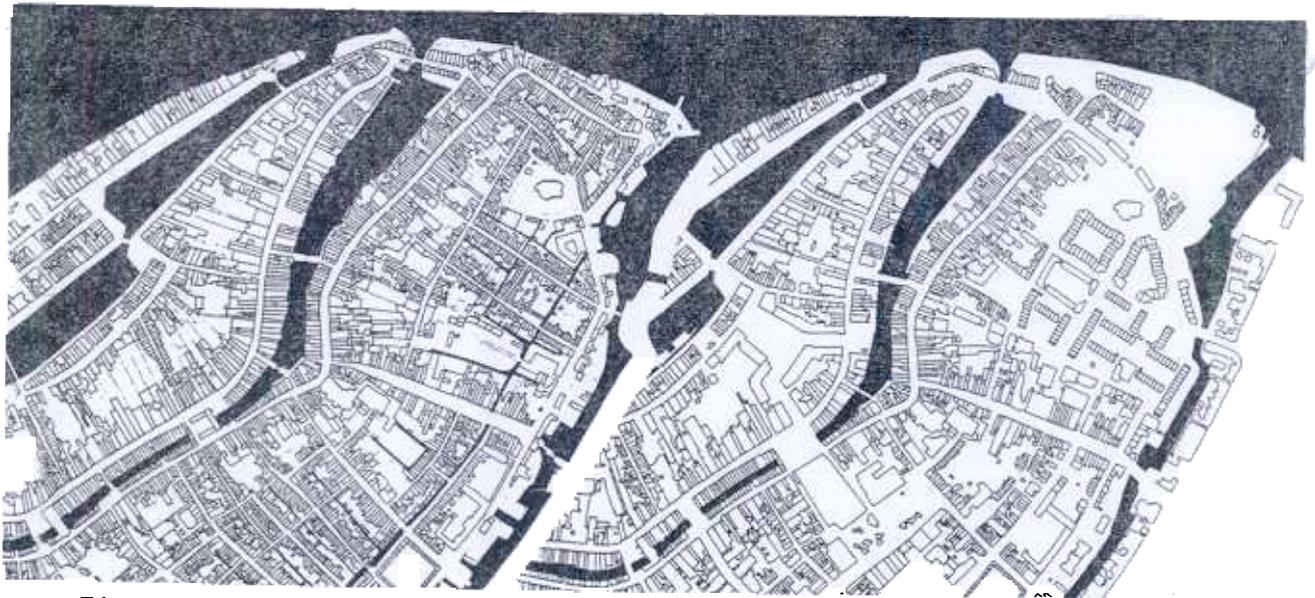


Figure 3. Dordrecht in 1823 and 1981

The northern part of the inner city had ceased to fulfil any useful function and needed to be revitalized. However, the new buildings are incompatible with the historic structure of the town. There has been a failure to regenerate the area as a harmonious whole.

4. Adding new patterns

Historic features can also be regarded as autonomous entities. The character of the area surrounding them may be completely different in both structure and function. In such cases, therefore, the aim is not to achieve an integration of old and new, but rather to highlight the historic features as what they are: part of the local cultural heritage. This sort of approach is particularly appropriate to situations where the historic features that need to be preserved are relatively small in scale compared with the area around them. The vicinity is by no means required to mesh in with these historic features; instead, the important thing is that the quality of the surrounding area as a piece of town planning should be at least equal to that of the historic artefact.

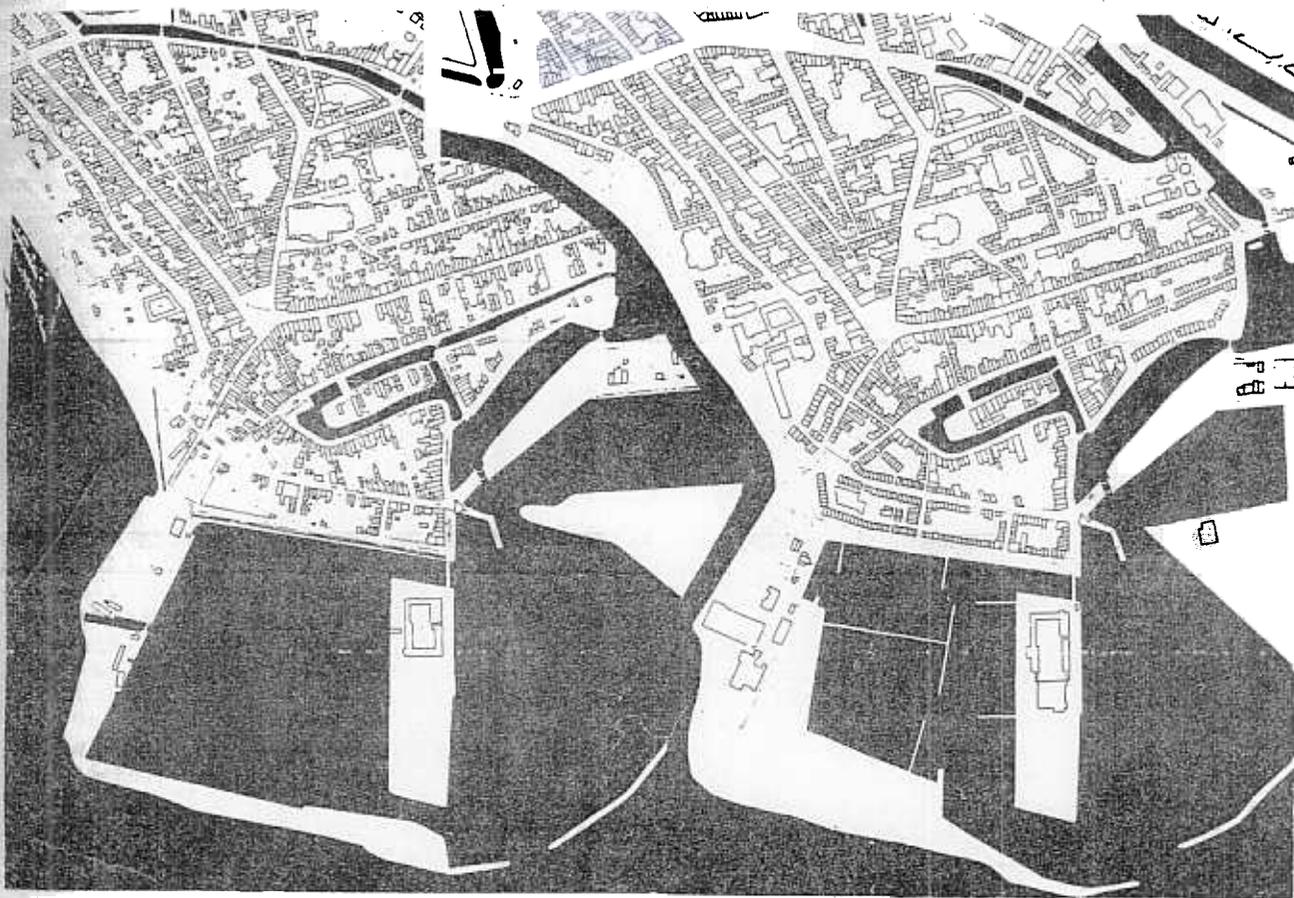


Figure 4. Hoorn in 1825 and 1980

As a part of an urban renovation scheme, the 'Italiaanse Zeedijk' area was designed to be totally congruous with historic patterns. Old and new are in close harmony.

In town planning terms, the aim is to create a situation of conflict that has an intensifying effect on both the historic feature in question and the new area. Unfortunately, the experience seen in many towns is that there is a disparity between the quality of the old features and that of the new. This means in some cases that this particular approach to the conservation of historic buildings and sites fails to achieve its goals. It remains a difficult planning problem.

5. Some guidelines for planners

Where provision needs to be made in a town plan for historic buildings or a historic urban fabric, the following points should in any event be taken into account.

- A Every town or village is able to 'absorb' only a certain number of functions. Urban capacity should be regarded as a sort of floor-space index that is specific to each town or village. It has to do with the average building density and the average building height locally. If there is to be a harmonious blend between historic features and new elements, it is essential to work within the limits of the urban capacity established for the town or village in question. This also has the effect of ensuring that old and new are broadly matched in terms of dimensions and scale.

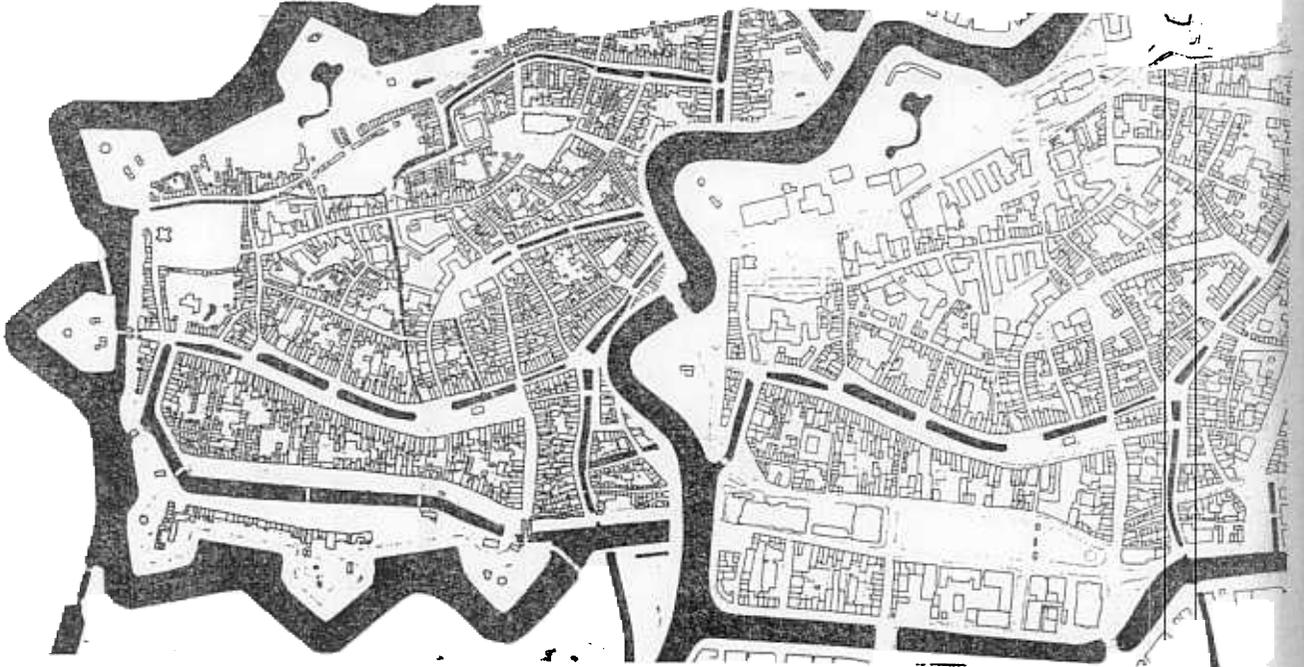


Figure 5. Leeuwarden in 1825 and 1980

In the period following 1850, the southern part of the historic inner city was rebuilt to totally new dimensions and in a totally different scale. Thanks to the presence of a number of large new features, there is nevertheless a close harmony with the historic inner city.

- B The basic structure of the historic feature that is to be preserved should act as the basis for the design of the area surrounding it. This is particularly important with regard to the way in which the basic structural lines of old and new are linked up with each other. Departing from the basic structure of the historic feature means jeopardizing the opportunities for preserving it.
- C In the light of the potential offered by the old and new structures, a careful examination needs to be made of suitable sites for the various functions which need to be incorporated. Assuming that each town has its own particular urban capacity, the choice made in most cases will involve concentrating high-grade, small-scale functions in the historic part of the town and locating large-scale functions outside it. Generally speaking, any modern traffic schemes will have to be operated in the new area.

It is in all cases vital to ensure that a sufficient amount of resources and attention are devoted to the town plan for the area surrounding historic features. If insufficient resources are invested in the planning process, this will ultimately weaken the possibilities for preserving any valuable historic features in the town in question.

Reproduced townplans on scale 1:10.000 from 'Changing Urban Structures' 1984 by Roger A.F. Smook

SUMMARY

Preservation and town planning

New elements in an old fabric: policies and achievements in the Netherlands

Successful preservation needs good planning

In the Netherlands preservation was first focused on the single object. Later the monument was considered as being a part of an urban context. Preservation is seen as a goal embedded in urban policies. The results achieved by preservation activities in historic sites depend on the quality of the specific town planning policies for the areas in question. Such policies should embrace not only the historically important parts of the urban environment, but also the urban entity as a whole.

Functional aspects are important

Good urban policies, laid down in preservation plans, master plans or land-use plans, should concentrate on the functional aspects of urban life. If the functional underlay is poor, then so too will be the results of preservation work at the end of the day. It is considered as important first to reinforce the urban functional patterns before starting the physical renewal.

In the Netherlands, the law states that a comprehensive land-use plan considering in detail all aspects of town planning, must form the basis of preservation schemes in protected areas. The experience of over 25 years is testimony to the benefits of this careful approach.

Urban design: claims and potentials

Alongside the functional approach to protected areas, it is most important to pay attention to the morphological aspects of town planning: Urban Design. In most cases, a historic town plan will be made up of very clear structural elements. Where the original fabric has been damaged, repairing historic features is the preferred solution. In other cases a careful addition, using basic elements of the historic urban structure, can be made. Where, however, the original fabric has been lost in its entirety and new elements have to be added, contemporary morphological insight may - and indeed should - be used as a means of avoiding characterless pastiche. Only if they are well thought-out new urban structures will be able to absorb historic features and glue together the old and the new to form a single, unified entity.

In the Netherlands, this morphological approach has generated a number of interesting schemes, thereby demonstrating that the rehabilitation of decaying neighbourhoods may justifiably be regarded as a contemporary cultural activity.

Some guidelines can be described to reach the best possible results. In all the cases the preservation-task is seen as an objective in a careful urban policy.

Instruments in the field of town planning are primarily used (land-use plans, financial-urban renewal plans). The emphasis on the town planning aspects and the "results" of this policy can be used as an example for other situations and countries.

Dr. Roger A.F. Smook/architect townplanner

RESUME

Rénovation et urbanisme

L'introduction de nouveaux éléments dans un tissu urbain ancien: une politique efficace aux Pays-Bas.

Une rénovation réussie suppose une bonne planification

Aux Pays-Bas, la restauration a d'abord concerné les constructions individuelles. Plus tard, on a pris en compte le contexte urbain du monument à sauvegarder. La rénovation constitue à présent l'un des objectifs de toute politique urbaine. Les résultats obtenus par les actions de restauration des sites historiques dépendent de la qualité de la politique d'urbanisation appliquée aux zones concernées. Une politique adéquate devrait englober non seulement les zones urbaines d'intérêt historique mais encore la totalité de l'agglomération.

L'importance des aspects fonctionnels:

Une politique urbaine de qualité, pratiquée à partir de projets de restauration, de plans d'urbanisme ou de plans d'occupation des sols devrait s'intéresser en priorité aux aspects fonctionnels de la vie urbaine. Si l'infrastructure fonctionnelle s'avère inadéquate, les résultats des travaux de rénovation seront en fin de compte peu satisfaisants. On considère comme primordial le fait de renforcer les systèmes fonctionnels urbains avant de s'attaquer à la rénovation proprement dite.

Aux Pays-Bas, la loi spécifie que c'est un plan d'occupation des sols global, prenant en compte tous les aspects détaillés de l'urbanisme qui doit constituer la base des projets de sauvegarde des sites classés. L'expérience acquise pendant plus d'un quart de siècle du bien-fondé d'une approche aussi prudente.

Projets d'urbanisme: objectifs et potentialités

Outre l'approche fonctionnelle des sites classés, il faut également privilégier les aspects morphologiques de l'urbanisme: c'est là le rôle des projets d'urbanisme. Dans la plupart des cas, un plan de la ville historique sera conçu à partir d'éléments structurels très clairement définis. Là où le tissu originel a été endommagé, la solution sera de restaurer les éléments historiques. Dans d'autres cas, on pourra bâtir des constructions nouvelles bien intégrées, à partir des éléments de base de la structure urbaine historique préexistante. Néanmoins, dans le cas où le tissu original a complètement disparu et où l'on a dû rajouter de nouveaux éléments, une conception contemporaine de la morphologie peut (et à vrai dire, devrait) être appliquée afin d'éviter le pastiche sans caractère véritable. Ce n'est que dans l'hypothèse où elles seront bien conçues que de nouvelles structures urbaines pourront absorber les éléments historiques et fondre l'ancien et le moderne en une entité harmonieuse.

Aux Pays-Bas, cette approche morphologique a donné lieu à nombre de projets intéressants, démontrant en cela que la réhabilitation des quartiers anciens peut à juste titre constituer un objectif culturel contemporain viable. Il est possible de poser les principes directeurs pour l'obtention des meilleurs résultats. Dans tous les cas, l'oeuvre de restauration est abordée comme un objectif primordial par toute politique urbaine de qualité. On exploite en priorité les instruments du domaine de l'urbanisme: plans d'occupation des sols, plans de financement de la rénovation urbaine. L'accent est mis sur les divers aspects de l'urbanisme et les résultats de cette politique peuvent servir de modèle pour d'autres situations et d'autres pays.

Dr. Roger A.F. Smook/architecte-urbaniste