

THE NETHERLANDS

Historic farmhouses at risk

Historic farmhouses play a significant role in our cultural heritage, particularly in an open and flat landscape like that of The Netherlands. However, these cultural landscapes are an aspect of our heritage which is now at risk. Alarming figures highlight this problem: of the approximately 200,000 farmhouses that existed in the Netherlands in 1940, over 50% have been demolished. Consecutive inventories of historically interesting farmhouses in 1988 and 2000 indicate that 18% of these disappeared in just twelve years. Every day eleven farmers close down their businesses.

Year of the Historic Farmhouse

In order to raise awareness, The Netherlands celebrated in 2003 the 'Year of the Historic Farmhouse' (*Jaar van de Boerderij*). A special project agency, The Year of the Historic Farmhouse Foundation, was set up by representatives from cultural heritage organisations, farmers' associations and organisations for the preservation of farmhouses. This foundation received financial support and encouragement from three government departments, the regional governments, cultural funds and sponsors.

Already five years in advance, the Foundation started its work in order to involve and to inform relevant parties such as the national and regional governments, local authorities, public servants, architects, private organisations, and so on. In that period the Foundation has organised a wide range of activities like courses, workshops, expert meetings, publications and publicity.

Publications

The Foundation took the initiative in three publications which were important to illustrate various aspects of the preservation of historic farmhouses.

The first report was published in 2001. It was an inventory by SHBO (Dutch Institute for Historic Farm Research) of the number of existing farmhouses, how old they are, whether listed or not, their agricultural use or other functions, their condition and deterioration etc.

The second report (2002) was an inventory of governmental policies, laws and regulations, problem areas and recommendations for the improvement of policy. Quite often, the policies and regulations of the various authorities are in contradiction and do not always serve historic farmhouse preservation.

The third publication was an illustrated book for owners of historic farms with best practice on how to alter their buildings for new functions in respect towards heritage values. It is important to find new uses for the farmhouses that lose their original agricultural one. At this time it is a critical moment in the life of the farmhouse. Architectural solutions to serve re-use can destroy the values and appearance of the historic farmhouse in a severe and decisive way.

In addition to these publications 150 others were published in the framework of the year, varying from scientific studies to walking or cycling itineraries.



The flag of the theme-year

Public events

In the year 2003 itself, a large number of events attracted general public participation. In total about 600 activities and events were organised by the Foundation and various other parties:

- In all twelve provinces of The Netherlands there were committees with their own programs focussed on their region's typical agricultural heritage;
- During twelve weekends from May to July, the Foundation offered activities all over the country which took place at historic farmsteads. The themes of these weekends included architecture, literature, music, visual arts, film, regional cooking and youth;
- A number of yearly events like the Dutch Heritage Days and the Week of the Countryside incorporated the topic of the threat to historic farmhouses in their program;
- As well as this there were also many exhibitions, conferences and workshops, and there was a competition to choose a 'Farm of the Year'.

International scientific conference

In co-operation with the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture (CIAV), a conference was held from 21 to 25 October 2003 in the city of Amersfoort. There were interesting lectures from various parts of the world, workshops and excursions. The results of the conference were presented at the closing conference of the Year.

Evaluation

The Year of the Historic Farmhouse aimed to increase interest in the historic farm in the Netherlands. This must lead to:

- An increased knowledge of the historic farm in its regional differentiation and its context within history, agriculture, architecture and the landscape;
- A greater involvement of owners and others who might contribute to a better preservation of historic farms;
- A wider public support base for the conservation of historic farms.

The results of the year are especially encouraging. The public and governments are now certainly more aware of the historic farm. There was an impressive interest by the media during the year, about 1,500 articles being published in newspapers and periodicals.

It is hoped that fewer historic farms will be destroyed out of ignorance or by a lag in information or effective policies. A number of private organisations working in the cultural heritage field are encouraged to continue their work. However, given the developments in agriculture, the historic farm is still at risk!

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A farm in reconstruction, showing the traditional structure. Will the result of this building activity meet the standards of the Venice Charter?



A traditional Dutch farm in its natural environment