

If the people want change

A brief taxonomy of populism

By
Ole Bouman

AMSTERDAM, JAN. 14 – It is nothing new, of course, but seldom has the call to heed what the people want been quite as vociferous. Whether it be politics, culture, health care, public space, education or the media: wherever one turns one hears the same appeal to ‘the people’. Society, one is told, must be given back to ‘the people’. But that’s not all. The gulf between people and experts must also be bridged. And there’s an even deeper gulf between the people and the so-called elite: the faceless power brokers with their backroom politicking, the professionals with their impenetrable jargon, the academics with their smug self-satisfaction, the connoisseurs with their tyranny of good taste and so on. Dissatisfaction with that gulf, whatever form it takes, is growing. Only wealth can still count on a modicum of respect, but for how much longer, one wonders?

Is this a genuine shift in criterion from quality of supply to quality of demand and take-up, or is it no more than a shift in rhetoric, a mere pandering to the *Zeitgeist* on the part of the opinion- and taste-makers who are under pressure to deliver the goods in circulation numbers, sales figures, viewing statistics and political opinion polls. A bit of both, probably. And so, yet again, The People is reborn – as voice, as touchstone and, not least, as target. S.P.Q.R. (the Senate and people of Rome) was the motto of the Eternal City. Wisdom and the people are one. And it seems that this unity is destined to turn up at regular intervals throughout history rather than being an integral insight.

But who exactly is The People? As with so many generic concepts, the sky’s the limit. The (wo)man in the street, Joe Average, the articulate citizen,

the calculating burgher, the floating voter, the members of people’s parties – they are all versions of The People and they have very little in common. As soon as one is asked to be specific, all that remains of the whole people idea is a mixed bag of individualists, which is why populist rhetoric prefers to eschew specifics. We see the same thing in Architecture. Property developers delight in appealing to the will of the people, which in this case is usually equated with the will of the consumer. Neo-traditionalist urban designers hark back to familiar stylistic elements and urban ensembles in the belief that they are thereby catering to the collective sense of cosiness and security. Even the few remaining public housing advocates, who once prided themselves on putting objective needs above subjective wishes, are nowadays wont to produce arguments derived from their social engagement.

Let us be specific for once and see just how diverse this engagement is. On the following pages you will find a number of very different versions of architectural and urbanist engagement with ‘what people want’. As in every form of populism, three fundamentally different stances can be discerned: architecture of the people, with the people and for the people. The first is essentially anarchistic, going its own blithe way and to hell with the rest. The second is paternalistic. It bases itself on popular support and develops concepts together with future users and residents, but in the end it knows best. The third is despotic: everything for the people, nothing by the people. Presented with great fanfare as an expression of popular will, it is in fact a put-up job. Anarchism, paternalism and despotism: three forms of populism and all three destined to fail. But such failure can be very instructive...



'Rietvelden' residential neighbourhood

Waterwijk, Ypenburg
1998–2002

Claus en Kaan Architects

The 'Rietvelden' neighbourhood in the Waterwijk ('Water District') of Ypenburg falls within the bounds of MVRDV's master plan. The 222 dwellings in Rietvelden are distributed over six dikes, reached via a central roadway that runs right across the middle of the dikes. The length of the dikes is about 250 metres. Each house stands on a plot that spans the entire width of the dike, from bank to bank. Each resident therefore owns a complete slice of the cross-section of the dike. The living room with terrace is located on one bank, the garden on the other. The houses stand with their front facade facing the street and they have a garden on the opposite side of the street with a storage shed and parking space.

The five house types vary in width and depth. Because of these differences in size, the buildings appear to stand quite naturally in the reed beds.

In principle, each house has two storeys. The owners may opt to have an extension built on the roof. The number and location of permitted rooftop extensions for the entire neighbourhood is laid down in an overall plan.



For the

Park Boswijk residential neighbourhood

Ypenburg, 670 dwellings

Design: RBOI

Purchase price: 450,000–800,000 euros

A completely new residential area, Buitenplaats Ypenburg, is currently under construction between The Hague, Rijswijk, Delft and Pijnacker-Nootdorp. Between now and 2008 about 11,000 new homes will be built here, occupying a total area of about 600 hectares. Five neighbourhoods will be arranged around the central area with its park and lake: Singels, Boswijk, de Venen, Waterwijk and de Bras. The neighbourhoods are clearly separated from one another and each neighbourhood has its own distinctive character.

Winding avenues, groves of trees and a lake surrounded by greenery determine the ambience in Boswijk. Located to the north of Singels, Boswijk will have the character of a wooded villa park. About 670 houses will be built here.

Nearly all the houses have generous front gardens, about 17 metres wide, which face directly onto the two tree-lined avenues that wind their way through the neighbourhood and intersect at various points. Detached houses on spacious plots and semi-detached houses are in the majority. Cars are kept off the public roadways as far as possible, with residents parking their cars on their own property. An undulating earth wall protects the neighbourhood from the traffic noise of the A4 motorway.

PEOPLE



SUMMER VILLAGE

'HEERLIJKHEID HOOGVLIET'

client: **WiMBY!**

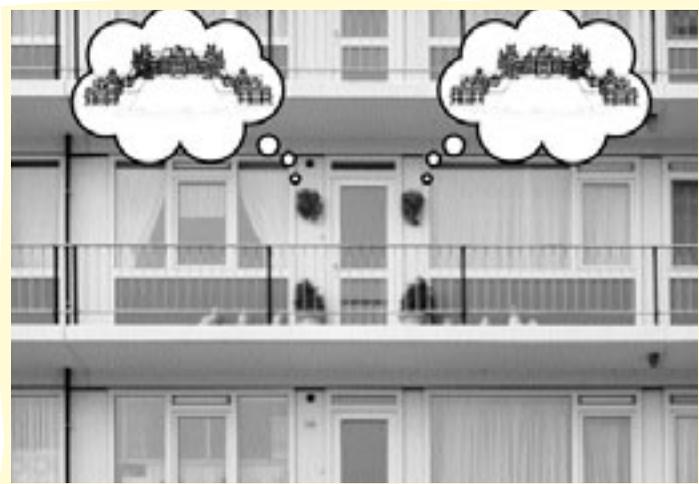
design: **FAT, London**

'The Heerlijkheid Hoogvliet project is a design for a summer village on the northern edge of Hoogvliet: a lively park with all kinds of little buildings, hillocks, ponds, grottoes and islands where people can party, practise their hobbies, play sports, train dogs, fly homing pigeons, make and exhibit art, play music, and watch films while sitting on the grass. The Heerlijkheid is for and by the residents of Hoogvliet.'

Source: Heerlijkheid Hoogvliet project brochure.

The transformation of the postwar satellite town of Hoogvliet, near Rotterdam, is one of the projects in the International Building Exhibition Rotterdam-Hoogvliet (2001-2010). Under the slogan 'Welcome into My Backyard (WiMBY!)', the IBT aims to enrich the transformation of Hoogvliet with projects that make Hoogvliet more beautiful and more attractive and that have an international appeal.

The Wimby! core project team, consisting of Felix Rottenberg, Nikkel Reinhoud, Wouter Vanstiphout, Michelle Provoost, Simone Rots and Margreet Andrea, asked the London-based architecture practice FAT to design a summer village that could easily be rendered operational for a few months each year. They were also asked to look for the Hoogvliet of people's dreams, as reflected in the gardens and building entrances in Hoogvliet, and to use their findings to devise a typical Hoogvliet architectural style.



'Laakse Werf'
residential neighbourhood
Vathorst, Amersfoort
Van Herk & de Kleijn Architecten
in association with Heilijgers
Projectontwikkeling

The highly personalized dwellings are built on the basis of a construction 'kit'. The kit is the result of an interactive, market-oriented design process. After the provisional design was made, a market research bureau defined various target groups, and six relatively poorly served groups were selected. Six basic designs were then drawn up, with each concept being linked to a specific target group.

Concept 1 downstairs living, upstairs sleeping

Target group: standard

Concept 2 downstairs sleeping, upstairs living

Target group: standard

Concept 3 downstairs workspace, upstairs living and sleeping

Target group: homeworkers, home office or studio

Concept 4 ground-floor living, first-floor sleeping, second-floor living/sleeping

Target group: parents with a child living away from home

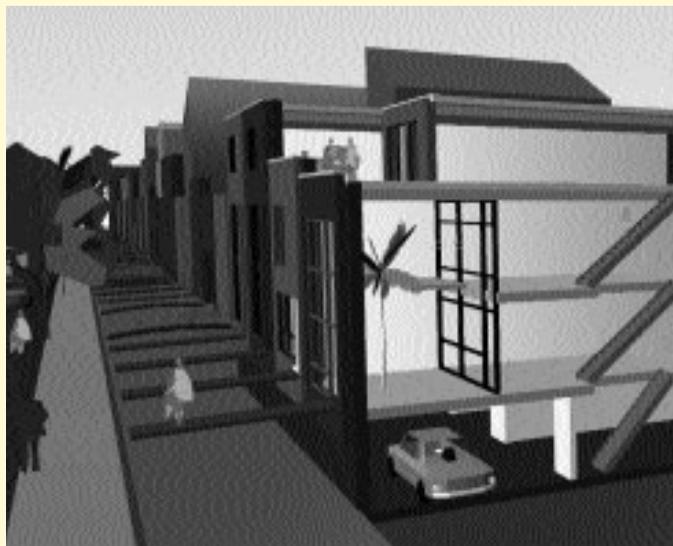
Concept 5 ground-floor living/sleeping, first-floor living, second-floor sleeping

Target group: family with grand-parent living in.

Concept 6 ground-floor shared living and living/sleeping, first-floor living/sleeping, second-floor living/sleeping

Target group: commune, sheltered housing, student house.

For each basis design there are several variations in floor plan, outside space and facade available. Potential buyers have every opportunity to vary and deviate from the packages offered. Although the market response to this project has been somewhat hesitant, construction is expected to commence in the autumn of 2003.



Fitland sports centre, Mill, Brabant
Client: M. van Kempen

Alderman Jacobs-Aarts had refused to cooperate and was shown the door. Daandels, mayor of the Municipality of Mill, subsequently pressurized the provincial government into granting planning permission for an unprecedentedly large expansion of Fitland sports centre. The owner of this renowned sports centre was able to go ahead and enlarge his company premises, albeit illegally. While the municipal and provincial council continue to ponder legalization, there are more newbuild plans on the table.

'Among ourselves, we aldermen always talked of this being Mayor Daandels' project. We don't interfere in that,' explained former alderman C. Berends when asked why Mill's municipal council had not halted construction of an enormous sports centre in the rolling village landscape around the Peelkanaal in August 2000. Local officials had established that this expansion of Fitland would end up being much bigger than allowed in either the planning permission or the separate development plan for this famous sports and fitness centre. The hall was 5.5 metres too wide and

the new catering facility behind the existing complex – a former secondary school – was also much bigger than had been approved. The extra space was estimated to amount to 10,000 cubic metres.

Moreover, Fitland's boss, M. van Kempen, announced that after the construction industry's official vacation he would carry on building illegally. Why did the mayor and his municipal executive allow him to get away with it? Berends: 'Daandels had previously informed us that the provincial government was prepared to work on a revision of the development plan in order to legalize Fitland's infringements. He had arranged this officially with the provincial authorities in 's-Hertogenbosch. Then, of course, you are in no position to take action as a municipal council.' In 1993, while still an ordinary councillor, Berends had implored the municipal executive (the mayor and aldermen) to call a halt to the construction of three squash courts at Fitland. Van Kempen had started building before he had either planning permission or the deeds to the land. The leader of the Algemeen Belang '90 party thought this was unfair vis à vis 'private individuals who want to build a garage and must wait patiently for planning permission.'

Source: Brabant Dagblad, 28 June 2002

By the p



The Fitland sports centre in the village of Mill. Only the church tower is taller.

PHOTO JAN VERHOEFF



**City Mine(d) –
see also www.citymined.org**

Founded in 1997, City Mine(d) supports, initiates and/or produces projects of a socio-cultural nature, chiefly in the public open spaces in areas and neighbourhoods which are characterized by problems typical of a large city, such as poverty, exclusion and weak identity. The organizational structure is flexible, network oriented, and its interventions temporary. The following statements serve as its starting point:

- The privatization of city space has made public open space a marginalized left-over in the present day dynamics of market oriented city development.
- Socio-cultural initiatives in the public, collective fabric can stimulate the creation of a positive image.
- Weak or non-existent participation of residents from vulnerable social groups in the official institutional channels makes it especially difficult to realize collective interventions. Public open space is ideal for the mobilization of

non-institutionalized residents.

- The public interventions are non-paternalistic, independent, activating and image-enhancing.

'Limite Limite' is one of the projects realized in collaboration with City Mine(d).

The idea for this 'beacon' arose in response to three derelict lots on Dupontstraat in Brussels. Neighbourhood (residents, a school and small businesses) demands were twofold, namely a solution to the illegal dumping of garbage and the creation of a neighbourhood meeting place. Architect Chris Rossaert took up the challenge: 'We needed to do more than set up a bench in the middle of a green space ... and then we had the idea of constructing a beacon. The advantage of such a tower is that it will be visible from a distance.' The construction of this 'tower' established a meeting-place and served as a stimulus for the improvement of the neighbourhood's image. The EHSAL college, which had

seen student numbers decline due to the area's problematic image, participated in the project and decided to stay in the neighbourhood. At the same time, a local network developed to promote communication in the neighbourhood. The project was conceived as a temporary event, and the simple construction kit could also be set up at other neglected spots in Brussels. 'Limite Limite' was inaugurated on 9 October 1999 and was realized with the support of the King Baudouin Foundation and Euroclear Bank. The bank's participation introduced, in the shadow of the Noordwijk business district, a completely new relationship between grass-roots concerns in the city and the financial sponsors. The project has spawned a foundation (vzw Limite Limite) that initiates socio-artistic projects in the neighbourhood.

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