Editorial

SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITIES IN HOUSING MANAGEMENT AND BUILDING REGULATIONS

As in many other sectors, the government’s role in housing management and building regulations is changing. More and more tasks and responsibilities which traditionally belonged to the government are being transferred to private parties. In this special issue of Open House International we will elaborate on this theme by presenting a series of eleven articles which compare and contrast the trends in various European countries, Japan and Australia.

Market orientation in public and social housing is a policy issue in various countries. Many European governments are transferring tasks and responsibilities to the housing sector. Direct state funding has been reduced and administrative regulations have been relaxed or even abolished. As a consequence, public and social landlords are being forced to operate more commercially and develop new asset management strategies in order to run an efficient, effective and financially sound business.

Although these developments may appear, at first sight, fairly similar in all European countries, considerable variations exist at national and local level. These will be addressed in this issue. The article by Kim Haugbølle and Lars Engberg describes the developments in Denmark and their implications for relations between the parties in the housing sector. Sasha Tsenkova’s paper deals with the difficulties of housing management in the capital of post-communist Latvia.

Market orientation has led to the development of commercial approaches and concepts in housing stock management. Patrick Dogge and Jos Smeets therefore introduce the concept of ‘customer value’ in housing management while Andreas Enseling and Rainer Greiff advocate step-by-step refurbishment as a viable way of addressing financial problems, which have become more frequent since governments cut expenditure on housing. Ad Straub and Geert Vijverberg also discuss new strategies for improving the quality of housing.

The shift towards more market-oriented and commercial housing management could conceivably lead one to expect that (former) public or social landlords will become commercial landlords. Nico Nieboer and Vincent Gruis test this assumption against the housing asset management of Dutch landlords.

The role of government in building regulations is also changing. One internationally discernible trend is liberalization, which aims to reduce the potentially obstructive effects of regulation. Many countries are attempting to scrap or simplify disproportionate building permit conditions and overlapping, inaccurate and sometimes contradictory regulations. Deregulation seems to become a magic wand, especially during economic recessions.

That said, other developments are leading to new and tighter regulations. The worldwide acceptance of the Kyoto Protocol, which sets ambitious targets for the reduction of CO₂ emissions, is increasing the number of regulations on energy consumption and sustainability. Accidents or disasters involving the safety of buildings can also lead to tighter regulations. However, people usually realize that the technical regulations are adequate; it is the implementation and monitoring of the regulations that leave something to be desired.

In many western countries a trend is emerging in which private parties are allocated supervisory tasks. This theme is explored in the article by Frits Meijer and Henk Visscher, who compare developments in eight European countries and Australia. Douglas Fisher offers an in-depth analysis of the Australian situation, concentrating particularly on the legal implications of transferring responsibilities from the public to the private sector. The trends in Japanese building regulations are discussed in an article by Shin Murakawi. In Japan the risk of earthquakes plays major role in the responsibilities set out in the building regulations. The effect of the European Union on increasing regulation or deregulation in the different European countries is presented in the article by Bert Bielefeld and Natascha Meister, who use Germany and Poland as specific examples.

In the last article in this special issue Amarins van der Bos and Frits Meijer describe a new development in the Dutch regulations on the quality of existing housing and focus specifically on
the introduction of an obligatory ‘quality dossier’ for all homes. This will assist home-owners in their responsibility for the quality of their homes. This aim is to make the housing market more transparent and it may eventually lead to greater deregulation for new building. Similar instruments are apparently being developed in many other countries.

We hope that you will read this special issue with pleasure and interest. Despite the often wide-ranging themes, the collection of articles on the diverse countries reflects a clear government trend towards transferring responsibility to the market. Many arguments can be put forward in favour of this trend. However, the articles make clear that such transformations are not entirely without drawbacks. The conditions under which the transfer of tasks and responsibilities takes place are pivotal. In our opinion, priority should be given to monitoring and improving the quality of housing.

Henk Visscher, Nico Nieboer, Vincent Gruis and Frits Meijer