Dying on the job

Saskia Bonger

A quarter of a century ago, Emeritus Professor Hugo Priemus was one of the founders of the OTB Research Institute for the Built Environment. “We may not have developed any fantastic new theories, but we do contribute to the political decision-making process.”

What is the legacy of a quarter of a century of OTB?

“The OTB delivers scientific work of the highest quality and forges links with the latest issues in policy and practice. Research institutes are often set up as independent legal entities. Even in Delft, people used to ask: isn’t it rather masochistic to try to juggle everything within the university when you can actually be independent? I’ve always fiercely resisted that idea and never hesitated to actually seek out that masochism. I believed that scientific work could find its inspiration in topical issues. And equally, that you can make a major contribution to solving current problems if you are backed up by trenchant scientific research.”

What actual influence has the OTB had on the built environment?

“There is a great deal of stupid policy that we’re powerless to resist. Nowadays, there is a surge in populism that we can do little to oppose. But in the end, civil servants and politicians tend not to rush into things; they base their policy on firm evidence. This is probably best reflected in the role we’ve played in three Parliamentary inquiries.”

Can you elaborate on this?

“When I heard, in the mid-1980s, that there was to be a Parliamentary inquiry into subsidies within the construction industry, I modestly put myself forward. There were suggestions that property investors were playing fast and loose with the conditions for awarding housing subsidies. It was also thought that some civil servants were behaving unethically. We conducted two major inquiries. The most important result of all this was that politicians began to question the effectiveness of making such significant capital injections. This in turn led to a major restructuring of housing subsidies.”

This was then followed by the construction fraud scandal?

“That’s right. Competition is something that the construction industry finds difficult to handle. Construction companies do not want to be taken advantage of by their clients. Consequently, for decades the companies would decide amongst themselves who should take on a particular project. It was something that had almost become automatic, a tradition. Strangely, it was often actually inspired by good intentions. Construction companies are keen to create continuity, yet, in their view, clients are not interested in this.”

It was primarily the faculty of Technology, Policy and Management (TPM) that contributed to the Parliamentary inquiry into the role of government in major infrastructure projects from 2003 to 2005.

“The inquiry was instigated when I started as the new Dean at TPM. I was approached to lead the inquiry, but actually couldn’t spare the time. I put forward seven TPM researchers for the job. We conducted a superb analysis and helped kill the Zuiderzeelijn [a proposed rail link from Groningen to Amsterdam – ed.].”

Have you never had any Parliamentary ambitions of your own?

“Yes, I do. There are regular roundtable meetings of the permanent Parliamentary committees for Housing, Communities and Integration, Spatial Planning and Environmental Management or Transport, Public Works and Water Management. My input is often needed for those. The OTB has become extremely experienced in all this. Although there may be other similar institutes, we are reasonably unique in the successes we have achieved. We may not have developed any fantastic new theories, but we are able to make a contribution to political and social decision-making by providing input at the right time and in the right forum.”

Your influence on national politics is significant.

“Very soon after achieving my doctorate I was considered to be an expert in the housing market. But the housing market is an economic principle. As a discipline, architecture is capable of achieving a lot and modesty was never something that troubled me too much, but I was hardly an expert in economics. In order to save myself embarrassment, I took an evening course in economics at Erasmus University Rotterdam during the 1970s. I was keen to avoid whistling in the wind. Even now I still always ask myself: what evidence do I have for making this claim? I want to be able to express my ideas in soundbites. This approach may seem very similar to politics, but everything is always based on my own or others’ research.”

Do you still often find yourself in The Hague?

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Interview

Have you never had any Parliamentary ambitions of your own?

“I’m happy to leave that burden to others. Personally, I was born to be an advisor. I do not believe that researchers need to be overly secretive about their voting preferences, but you must remain independent. You need to have no qualms about questioning the ideas of the party of which you’re a member. Why the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA)? I have no time for religious inspiration in politics. And slavishly following the market, like the Liberal party (VVD), is something I find too simplistic. The more effectively the housing market works, the more people actually need to sleep under bridges. It is necessary to correct the market in a number of ways in order to ensure that minimum opportunities >
‘The more effectively the housing market works, the more people actually need to sleep under bridges’
are guaranteed. That way of thinking soon places you on the centre-left.”

Social Economic Council (SER). You were a member of the committee of socio-economic experts that published a report about reforms in the housing market in April 2010. This included a proposed revision of mortgage interest tax relief. The new Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Mark Rutte, has failed to take your ideas on board.

“It’s actually a waiting game. The new coalition agreement is very much wanting, so certain problems will only worsen in the years to come. Mr Donner (Minister of the Interior, responsible for public housing, ed.) has intimated that he is open to suggestions from the field for the establishment of a National Accord on Housing. You only need to ask the Homeowners Association (Vereniging Eigen Huis), property investors, the Aedes Federation of Social Housing Institutions, the Netherlands Union of Tenants (Woonbonds) or the construction industry trade organisation (Bouwend Nederland) whether they are happy with the current housing market. None of them have a good word to say about it. If Donner is listening to them and preparing reforms, some good things could still emerge from this dismal period.”

But surely Donner is committed to the coalition agreement?

“A high-ranking civil servant who addressed the OTB anniversary event said that it is important not only to consider the contents of the coalition agreement itself, but more especially what it omits. It’s in these areas that ministers have room to manoeuvre. Nowhere in the coalition agreement is there a prohibition on considering changes to the housing market.”

In your view, what is the problem with the market?

“The basic problem lies in the fact that home buyers and tenants are treated as completely different categories. Consequently, making the leap from renting to buying or vice-versa is a risky undertaking. In the owner-occupied housing sector, there are built-in incentives to enter into debt. Thanks to such fiscal measures as mortgage interest tax relief, the average house price is about 20% higher than it otherwise would be. All of this needs to be subjected to gradual and consistent changes during the period from 2015 to 2040. But you will need the time between now and 2015 to create the social and political will and establish the necessary legal conditions. The United Kingdom has shown that it is possible.”

You have been an emeritus professor for three years now and still remain extremely active.

“Dying on the job doesn’t seem too bad an idea to me. I enjoy flying the TU Delft flag, carrying that badge of neutrality. I work full-time but adopt a very flexible approach, because I’m no longer directly responsible for anything. I choose to do the things that I enjoy and notice that I’m becoming increasingly selfish in this. I don’t plan ahead too much. A lot will depend on my health. I don’t want to revisit old ground, but I am keen to link up different areas with each other.”

Why didn’t you become an architect?

“When I started studying architecture in 1960, I was beset by serious doubts. It all seemed so arbitrary. I thought: this will get you nowhere, is this really academic education? However, later in the first year of my studies I had my first housing assignment. In those days, the idea was to cover housing in the first year, because later you would be too advanced for the subject. Yet this was the area that I found especially interesting. A lot was already known about housing preferences, the construction costs of housing and how to calculate rent levels, and about the incomes of the people who would live there. Technically it was also quite straightforward; system-building was the approach generally adopted at that time. It presented a puzzle with a series of different dilemmas that needed solving. That grabbed my attention. I was able to focus the rest of my studies on housing construction.”

If you had the opportunity to re-plan the Netherlands, what would it look like?

“I do not have an ideal image of how the Netherlands should be. Rather, it’s more about decision-making regarding the challenges you face. In the old days, people would just reclaim more land if it was needed. We now know that this damages the flora and fauna. The Netherlands is finite. You cannot want it all. In order to accommodate the needs of all our citizens, we need an area fourteen times the size of the Netherlands. The ideal Netherlands for me is a country in which we cut our coat to fit the cloth. We need to look not only at economic growth and demographic dynamism but also at how you can accommodate this in a way that enables everyone to develop to the full.”

Who is Hugo Priemus?

Professor Hugo Priemus studied architecture in the 1960s at what was then known as TH Delft. He then became a (head) scientific staff member at the faculty of Architecture. From 1969, he was also director of the RIW Institute for Research in Public Housing. In 1977 he became Professor of Public Housing at TU Delft and remained in that position until 2003. During that period he served as Dean of the faculty of Architecture. From 1985 to 2003 he served as director of research at the OTB Research Institute. From 2003 until his retirement in 2007, Prof. Priemus was the Dean of the faculty of Technology, Policy and Management. He also has countless other ancillary positions and publications to his name. Prof. Priemus has been awarded various distinctions and awards. In 1989, he was appointed Knight in the Order of the Dutch Lion and in 2008 he received the Golden Medal from TU Delft. In November 2010, he received the Hudig Award, which has been presented thirteen times since 1935 for services in the field of public housing and spatial planning.