Societal Real-Estate, lifebuoy for social neighbourhoods in crises times?

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Because of the expected positive influence of Dutch Societal Real-Estate (Societal-RE) on the social uplift conditions for residents on the neighbourhoods scale, such projects like meeting-places for youngsters and evening schools for foreign people do, have got increasingly more attention over the last five years. This change of focus in neighbourhood development shows a striking number of new projects in several cities as an outcome. Examples are multi-diverse school accommodations multipurpose welfare houses. The capacity of such societal-RE capacity in municipalities seems enormous showing the quantity of the RE in numbers. Still is seems unclear what the real effect of such Societal-RE initiatives on the social uplift conditions of residents in neighbourhoods is or can be.

The interviews done in the years 2009 ad 2010, done by myself and colleague Prof. Hans Beunderman, show that Societal-RE needs a clear definition before people can communicate on the subject. Secondly the examples given in the interviews and literature show that the effect of new and renewed Societal-RE in neighbourhoods is heavily exaggerated. On the other hand, now governmental investments in neighbourhood setting are blocked because of the credit crises every neighbourhood initiative should be welcome. Thereby it’s positive surprising that again new initiatives, post economic crises initiatives are coming-up in society. These projects are of a smaller scale and are initiated by cooperation of welfare organizations and commercial enterprises together mostly. Examples are meeting-places in coffee-corners and creative-city initiatives in empty offices. It is suggested that the increasing number of activities in and around Societal-RE show that these organizations not only feel responsibility to residents and neighbourhood circumstances, they are commercial innovative and societal alert to.

In 2009 at the top of credit crises a Dutch research of scouting behavior on the roles and function of ‘Societal-RE’ took place. The initiative was taken from TU Delft, a commercial RE developer and the Building-Business magazine all from the Netherlands. In four rounds professional people from municipalities, social-housing companies and commercial enterprises were interviewed to talk about, how Societal-RE can contribute to the social conditions of neighbourhoods. In addition to that the insights of some recently publications were connected to the knowledge of these interviews, to find out how Societal-RE can be a new substitute for other socializing programs in neighbourhoods, now society is heading towards a period of lacking governmental investments due to credit crises. To make the situation and the possibilities of Societal-RE more clear, these not yet scientifically published interviews and literature will be reflected and presented. Both will be done to explain why investments in Societal-RE projects should be seen as ‘positive’ for the life of residents in neighbourhoods. Secondly it will explained why these new examples could be seen as examples of new societal responsibility.

Defining Societal Real-Estate,

The 2009 the interviews concerning Societal-RE started-off with a double interview with a Real-Estate developer and a researcher on Real-Estate on both sites of the table (Bijsterveld et al., 2009b). The discussion soon focused on finding the right definition for Societal-RE, for more understanding of Societal-RE. There immediately it was said that Societal-RE concerns Real-Estate owned or paid by government. Adding to that there was said that such Real-Estate should concern ‘public ownership’, from importance to residents and other people acting in a neighbourhood. Also commercial and semi-commercial enterprises could be involved was said, as long as there presence and behaviour have impact on the people living there.

The second interview brought representatives of a social-housing company and a Real-Estate broker together (Bijsterveld et al., 2009a). The conversation focused on the function of Societal-RE, how
such places or buildings actually could contribute to the social life of residents. There was said that meeting places are important for people (Sanders and Dautzenberg, 2010), to socialize with others, to learn from others or to start-off activities that are good for their social and financial convenience. They told from examples in the city of Utrecht and Amsterdam, where initiatives were taken to develop creative places with the effect that people and enterprises brought life into places, with value for themselves and others. 'Adding value to others' could be a basic principle of Societal-RE was said, because social and non-social values are important to people’s life’s. The examples they spoke of had such positive results they said. An example was a ‘House for elderly’ in which a living-room for the neighbourhood was created. People that feel lonesome, residents that want to talk over events and young businesspeople could drink their coffee there. The effect was that isolated elderly got in contact with other people around them, other and younger people that brought energy in their life’s.

Thereby the definition of Societal-RE should be: Real-Estate in neighbourhoods that add value to people’s societal activities and social life, to residents and others, that is paid or sponsored by government, regardless who or what kind of organization or enterprise handles or possesses it.

Quantifying the contribution Societal-RE could make,

In 2008 one of the first inventory on Societal-RE is done (Buitr et al., 2008). It seemed that Societal-RE on the Dutch scale counts a total of 80 million square meters (BNN, 2011). Only 38% of the 59 municipalities that cooperate in the research were aware of the Societal-RE they had in stock. Still only a 50% of these respondents thought that other organizations would be involved with their Societal-RE in future. A 75% of the respondents argued that such Real-Estate is the concern of government only. It’s thereby not surprising that a threesome of leading real-Estate lectors in 2008 said that Societal-RE could be given more output, societal and financial, if this dossier becomes part of strategic governmental planning (Bijsterveld, 2008).

Meanwhile a number of projects showed that such strategic planning can help to manage results. A comparison of four cases of multifunctional accommodations in the city of Waalwijk (Futura, 2006) showed that the optimum of multifunctional use is not easily found, due to lack of knowledge on targeting, spread of using hours and difficulties with maintenance tuning, problems that are called ‘the social and financial puzzle’ of Societal-RE.

Never the less Societal-RE did got more attention over the last years. New projects were started, in a variety of typologies. After a period of the so called broad-schools, in which different type of schools and child services were combined, the MFA’s (multifunctional accommodations) within neighbourhood facilities were built in several municipalities. In addition to that the combination with housing and offices was sought. The development of SOLID building, usable for housing and offices was started in 2010. The other way around, empty offices were reused for student housing by STW Utrecht since the beginning of 2008. Impressive project and growing in number as it likes, but strategically seen it seems to be ‘on loose sand’ projects on the scale of Societal-RE square meters.

Societal-RE in economic crisis times,

Making such Societal-RE project financially successful is not an easy task, was brought-in in this second interview to. Most of the welfare business could only be done by subsidizing was the conclusion. The problem is that the people that need to be taken out of their loneliness are often the ones with low income, they cannot contribute to such initiatives financially themselves. On the other hand they can contribute to others by doing things, by supporting activities with their presence. An example is the ‘Rambler’ initiative in Amsterdam (www.rmlr.com). Here street youngsters were asked to make mood-boards for new fashion lines. Their natural knowledge on how young people want to be dressed is important to the fashion industry. Making such combinations on meeting places could be worthwhile for both, for people without money and enterprises with investment plans.
That search for successful combinations of welfare and commercial activities inspired the setting of the people of the third interview together (Bijsterveld et al., 2010a). They were specialists from local government, financing, conceptual development and a social-housing companies. They talked about neighbourhood examples and actual projects they knew and looked at them from numerous points of view. As they concluded, the problem with starting these projects here in the Netherlands is the fundability more than the efficacy. Most of local government and societal organizations as social-housing companies are tied to governmental frameworks full of rules, they cannot invest in branch deviated activities.

The economic crises made that situation more critical. Fundability became less easy and more complex due to lack of money in society. Secondly, municipalities and social-housing companies lost capital because of decreasing land value. Otherwise, due to this economic tide offices and other building are getting empty without users on the time-horizon for many years. Such buildings could then be used for societal purpose and keep the Real-Estate from degradation.

The fourth interview, speaking the director in charge from the dome organization of municipalities (Bijsterveld et al., 2010b), brought up that new financial creativity will nowadays be needed. Most Societal-RE of municipalities have enormous overdue of maintenance to her opinion. There should lie the key to new successful combinations. Municipalities can reduce costs by finding new societal targets for their buildings. Even in economic crisis times there should be ways to support social behaviour in neighbourhoods when Real-Estate is needed, was the message.

As an example should be mentioned the 'acupuncture welfare' 2011 projects that started in two Amsterdam city-districts. In these districts most of the welfare accommodations will be closed due to cut in the local government deficits. The municipality and a welfare organization started talking with the social-housing companies and commercial RE-brokers to use the numerous unoccupied shops and little offices in neighbourhoods for welfare activities. They started to find new ways and opportunities to residents to make these places their own, with a number of projects as result. Results were: an initiative in which artists used these rooms to attract residents to join them in the they courses offered, and a supermarket that gave free a meeting room for elderly to drink coffee together with testing new food products in the meanwhile. Thereby they found new combinations of societal and commercial targets for the benefit of residents and themselves.

Conclusions and suggestions,
The conclusion is that Societal-RE had and will have an important function for the welfare of residents in neighbourhoods. The old-fashioned neighbourhood houses were already in transition in the period before the credit-crises. The movement was towards greater buildings in which schools and welfare accommodations were placed together for efficiency and expanding the choices of residents. This movement was only beginning seeing the enormous capacity of Societal-RE in Dutch cities. Nowadays with the credit crises coming over society, new inventions are sought. These inventions should be more than before a construct of societal and commercial cooperation, by which accommodation and activities are combined on a smaller scale. The result should be that these activities can last without governmental budgeting, in favor of the welfare of residents and all that are connected to these initiatives.

Literature,
Fred Sanders (1956) finished his Civil Engineering at TU Delft in 1983 and did his MBA at Erasmus University in 1985. After a 10-years period of working in central-governmental projects for schooling and Ministry-Offices he became director of ZVH social-housing company near Amsterdam. In 2008 he started his PhD at the TU Delft faculty of Architecture at the department of Housing. His subject of study is ‘the mutual dynamics of sustainable group-initiatives in the housing area’. Besides this research program he is managing collective housing developments of residents in the Northwest of the country. Secondly he supports sustainable initiatives of all kind form green-gas mobilization to start-up housing projects that are blocked by credit crises. He published a number of scientific publications concerning sustainable real-estate over the last years.