Wytze Patijn, Jo Coenen and Mels Crouwel. Each of these men brought their own interpretation and distinct character to the role of Chief Government Architect. And yet they often gave the impression of being kindred spirits. All three made the observation that here in the Netherlands we have a tendency to build up areas in a hasty, reckless and uncaring manner. They wanted to see greater coordination and clearer vision, in particular from the central government.

The role of the Chief Government Architect became increasingly defined as that of an independent expert who ministers, aldermen and citizens could turn to for a considered opinion. Patijn expanded the remit of the Chief Government Architect. Coenen devised the positions of ‘Government advisor for infrastructure, landscape and national heritage’ that would support the Chief Government Architect during Crouwel’s term of office.

The Chief Government Architects turned their attention to motorways, river landscapes, intensive farming units and wind turbines. They stressed that careful design could make a world of difference, especially if the government were to show itself to be a strong client with a keen eye for quality and clearly defined commission plans.

**Drowning**

In 1995, Patijn succeeded Kees Rijnboutt as Chief Government Architect. Rijnboutt had raised quite a few eyebrows with the Resident, a daring urban project in The Hague. He brought together government ministries, sought collaboration with project developers, and hired international architects, in particular. Though initiated by Rijnboutt, the iconic Resident buildings, were not actually realised until Patijn took office. Patijn believes that one should not serve longer than five or six years as Chief Government Architect. “Otherwise, you run the risk of becoming an institution,” he explains. “Chief Government Architect is a position that confers influence and the key is to get out before you start to view this influence in terms of power.”

When Patijn took office as Chief Government Architect, he initially felt as though he was drowning. “The nature of the work is so different from that of an architect that it took a while before I had a grip on the situation,” he recalls. “There’s no time to acclimatise, however. You have to get down to work immediately.”

The renovation of historical buildings, the
construction of new prisons and courts, architectural memoranda, large urban planning programmes, dozens of commissions from the Government Buildings Agency to visual artists. Upon taking office in 1995, the Chief Government Architect was faced with a considerable number of projects. After graduating from Delft University of Technology, Patijn first worked for the City of Rotterdam for a few years. “But I discovered that central government is a whole different world. Less decisive than a local government body, but more focused on policy and politics.” Patijn received wide-based support from the start: not only from the people in the Chief Government Architect’s offices but also from the Director-General of the Government Buildings Agency, his immediate boss.

In 1996, Patijn commissioned the artist Ria van Eyk to design a carpet for the Central Hall in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam. Inspired by a photo of the Milky Way, Van Eyk created a ‘celestial’ carpet as a counterpoint to the 17th marble maps of the eastern and western hemispheres decorating the floor. The former Chief Government Architect is pleased with the result. “I’m proud of a great many things: for example, the embassies in Berlin and Addis Ababa, by Rem Koolhaas and Dick van Gameren, respectively. And the reconstruction of the 19th century domed prison in Breda.”

His tenure as Chief Government Architect at the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment (VROM) spanned the terms of two ministers and two state secretaries. “The relationship with State Secretary Johan Remkes was not a particularly successful one, but that was largely down to the fact that as a classic right-wing politician he wanted to drastically reduce the government’s role in the architectural field. Whereas Minister Pronk, I felt, clung too tightly to the traditional leftist approach when preparing the Fifth Memorandum on Spatial Planning, which gave the government a very dominant role. This was a great pity, as it made it easier for the government under Balkende’s second term to radically decentralize spatial planning in 2004. The central government relinquished its control over spatial planning and was, therefore, powerless in the face of any ill-thought-out plans that threatened to blot the nation’s landscape.” The government hoped to set a good example by commissioning sustainable government buildings. Under Patijn, for example, this led to stunning new office buildings in Terneuzen for the Government of Public Works and Water Management (rijkswaterstaat). Patijn: “Built using sustainable materials – waste materials from the Directorate General – and still stylish.”

Unfortunately, the Chief Government Architect was unable to exert the same degree of influence over the design for the new high speed rail link between Amsterdam and Antwerp (HSL-Zuid). It had its high points: Patijn once described the HSL bridge (designed by Benthem Crouwel Architects), which arches gently over the Hollandsch Diep river, as “a beautiful example of Dutch engineering art”. Together with Tjeerd Dijkstra - Chief Government Architect in the 1980s - Patijn drew up plans to integrate the HSL-Zuid line into the surrounding landscape. However, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment decided to outsource large parts of the project and, thus, aesthetics took a backseat to economic considerations.

Patijn is a strong proponent of good commissioning practice: a clear design brief is half the work. In 1999, the government, in fact, introduced an annual award, called the ‘Seven Pyramids’, for the best examples of architecture in this field, which was later renamed as the ‘Golden Pyramid’.

Large-scale projects

Shortly before his departure, Patijn and a group of ministers launched what were known as the ‘big projects’, which came to characterise his successor’s (Coenen) term in office. These included the Delta Metropolis, the A12, the Zuiderzeelijn rail link and the New Dutch Waterline. Coenen would soon add ‘cluttering’ to the nine major projects. In a TV programme, he criticized the proliferation of industrial estates along Dutch motorways. He would later conclude that designing for industrial estates presents the architect with intractable problems. It continued to be an issue for his successor, Crouwel. Coenen wanted to thrash out the big projects, which had been split up into a series of separate design briefs, in a new studio in a Jugendstil building not far from the Noordeinde Palace in The Hague. The move was frowned upon by the directorate of the Government Buildings Agency. However, the new spacious studio in The Hague’s city centre soon...
The building of the National Heritage Board in Amersfoort.

developed into a lively design factory and breeding ground for young talent.
Research carried out by Coenen revealed that the maglev line from Groningen to Amsterdam Central Station was not a viable design plan. “You’d have to dig up half of Amsterdam before you could lay down the magnetic rails,” he concluded. The project was abandoned years later. This particular experience gave Coenen the idea of creating Government Advisors for infrastructure, landscape and (a little later) national heritage. They would be affiliated to various ministries. Coenen wanted to break down compartmentalisation.
Coenen received overwhelming praise from left and right for his passion and ability to truly inspire others. A political animal or a cunning diplomat, however, he was not. He tried to repress his tendency to think out loud, which was not always appreciated in Dutch political circles. At the same time, however, his inimitable style sometimes managed to break down bureaucratic barriers. His greatest frustration lay in the government’s lack of a clear vision on spatial planning.

Coenen called on Juan Navarro Baldeweg to design a building for the National Heritage Board. The Spanish architect drew inspiration from a painting by Jacob van Ruisdael: ‘Landscape with a view of Haarlem’. The building, located next to the railway tracks in Amersfoort, was completed in 2009.

**Architecture memorandum**
Crouwel succeeded Coenen in the autumn of 2004. “Probably the best thing about taking up this post at the time was the newly formed Board of Government Advisors. Dirk Sijmons for Landscape, Fons Asselbergs for National Heritage, and Jan Brouwer for Infrastructure. This turned out to be a winning team. The Board – with the Chief Government Architect as chairman – appeared to supply a definite need. “We’ve issued a considerable amount of advice, which has often been heeded.” After 25 years in the business as architect and contractor, Crouwel was keen to sit on the other side of the desk: “I’m interested in all aspects of the profession.” Benthem Crouwel has extensive experience working on major, long-running projects, such as Schipol and the HSL bridge. “We were surprised at how the government organised these large projects,” he remarks. “Many different government bodies were consulted, even during the design phase. Each time a decision had to be made, the government official in question would have to first consult with the ‘home front’. If it all got too complicated, the government would pass the matter onto the council, or someone would call for another study to be carried out. In short: we felt that the whole commissioning practice could be better organised and managed with a project team of professionals.”
Even Crouwel was thrown in at the deep end. On his first day he sat down with a number of ministers and state secretaries to discuss the following...
sound barrier at the A2 motorway. architecture memorandum. “While waiting for the meeting to begin, they all stood around drinking coffee and talking about spending cuts,” says Crouwel, who, in his capacity as Chief Government Architect, presented two architecture memoranda. “When I took office, I was given a document on architecture policy by Bernard Colenbrander, a government official at the time and now a professor in Eindhoven. I and the studio were not particularly happy with it. So, we spent the first year working on this architecture memorandum, putting the emphasis back on best commissioning practices and the importance of an integral vision on spatial planning in the Netherlands.” As Crouwel was soon to discover, everyone wants to talk to the Chief Government Architect. “Before you know it, you’ve got nine meetings planned for the day, with no break,” he says. “So, I had to start making choices. The Government Buildings Agency moved into a transitional phase, which eventually led to the architects disappearing from the organisation – something I wasn’t against, incidentally. I’d devoted a great deal of time and effort to the process. And I noticed that you can sometimes achieve a lot more with one on-site visit than weeks of internal meetings. A site visit may seem purely ceremonial but that’s how you meet the people you’re going to be working with. It’s also a question of making a few good remarks that the media may pick up on.” In his first years working for the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, Crouwel had many dealings with Minister Sybilla Dekker. “She was a minister with a real heart for the building industry,” he says with admiration. “Jacqueline Cramer, who succeeded her in early 2007, was more focused on sustainable energy and the environment.” Having said that, Crouwel and Cramer work well together. They have managed to radically improve relations between the Ministry and the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects (the BNA). “Good personal contact with the Minister and Director-General is much more important than the political colour of a government. It shouldn’t be, but that’s the way it is.” Crouwel is making some progress with regards to the strict application of the European tendering rules in the Netherlands. He believes that “young, promising architects at the beginning of their profession should be given the opportunity to see one of their designs realised”. “Things have slightly improved,” he adds. “For example, the Government Buildings Agency has removed a number of requirements for contractors that were not strictly necessary. This is of interest to lawyers as well, of course.” Another example of Crouwel’s influence as Chief Government Architect is Happy Street, the Dutch pavilion designed by John Körmeling for the Shanghai World Expo 2010, which attracted 10 million visitors. Crouwel was chairman of the selection committee.” As a Government Architect, you’re expected to do what’s best for the country. This must be a heavy responsibility to bear. Crouwel: “You need to be careful you don’t start thinking that you have to solve all the country’s problems. You think you have a lot of influence and that you can determine how the Netherlands should look. That is complete nonsense. You’re better off choosing three or four areas where you would like to see some improvement and harness all available resources to achieve those goals.” ‘Young, promising architects should be given the opportunity to see their designs realised’