

Shrinkage in Architectural Perspective

Abstract

The changing demographic of our time causes some villages to shrink. In those villages is found that the local amenities are having a hard time to survive because they are losing more and more customers. Therefore it is important to think of ways to prevent shrinkage by using architectural interventions. In this paper a discussion is made on the type of intervention that is needed to prevent shrinkage. First the subject 'shrinkage' is researched and in view of that an adequate image of the problem is made. Then, by researching the state of the art and existing examples, a clear answer is given to the following question:

What architectural interventions should be implemented in an area to prevent shrinkage of its population?

Introduction

After World War II the Netherlands had a long period of population growth, due to multiple reasons. Families were large and the average number of children per woman in Netherlands was around 3. Also a lot of immigrants came to the Netherlands for work, causing a population growth. During the 70s the population growth of the Netherlands already started to decrease. Now the average growth has fallen below the replacement content of the population, causing an actual decrease of the population. An important aspect hereof is the decrease in the number of children that are born. The average number of children per woman is now 1,7 (Jacques van Maarseveen, 2011, p. 16). Not everywhere in the Netherlands a decrease in citizens is shown; in parts of the Netherlands, mostly urban areas, there still is an increase of the local population. As a result other parts of the Netherlands are dealing with a serious problem of shrinkage. These parts can be found in rural areas like the south of Limburg, the northeast of Groningen and parts of Zeeland.(CBS, 2015, p. 1)

Due to shrinkage, these areas are dealing with vacancy, economical deterioration and an ageing population. The severeness of the problem is recognized in society and multiple attempts to counteract shrinkage have been made. In this paper a position is taken on what kind of intervention should be made in the affected regions to counteract shrinkage. First shrinkage is explained and than two examples of interventions to prevent shrinkage are elaborated. IBA Parkstad in Limburg and The Blue City in Groningen are both projects that have failed dealing with shrinkage. It is the opinion of the writer that this has to do with the lack of interest in the social cohesion of the transformed areas. By adding an intervention that respects or enhances the existing social cohesion, this intervention may defeat shrinkage. But by affecting the social cohesion, the shrinkage will not be dealt with. In the next chapters of this paper the position in this matter is elaborated further.

Shrinkage of the population in rural areas in the Netherlands

Shrinkage is a phenomenon in which the population of a region decreases due to certain circumstances. In this paper the subject is limited to the shrinkage of (certain areas in) the Netherlands. As said before, the Netherlands have a declining population, due to a decrease in number of births. This decrease of the entire population will develop gradually, but locally a decline can develop much faster (Schonewille, 2012, p. 7).

Causes of shrinkage

Local shrinkage is caused by multiple phenomena:

After 40 years of observation it can be concluded that there are three main issues causing shrinkage. *Social-Cultural* developments like individualization and emancipation causing people to propagate fewer children. *Regional-economical* developments, like the little possibilities for employment in an area. And the third issue is bad *planning* decisions in dwelling projects. (Schonewille, 2012, p. 7)

The first issue that is described by de Groot and Schonewille has influence on the natural population growth. The last two developments are the main reason for migration movements on local level. As said before, in the Netherlands still areas exist that experience a growth in population. These are urban areas, like the randstad. The decrease in population is mostly found in rural areas like the south of Limburg, the north of Groningen and parts of Zeeland. Here the population shrinks at a fast rate. These areas are suffering from shrinkage due to local migration movements, therefore only regional-economical developments and bad planning decisions are considered in the remaining of the paper. A well known example of a regional-economical problem is the shrinkage of the colliery villages like IBA Parkstad. Because of the coal mines, there was a lot of employment possibilities. However, the coal mines were exhausted after some time, so the miners weren't needed anymore. The employment possibilities of the area went down and people started to move out of the villages (Tegenlicht, 2010b). The approach to counter shrinkage in this village is described later in this paper.

Regional differences in attractiveness can play an important role in local shrinkage of certain areas. The appeal of outlying regions is low, causing young people and families to move out to more attractive areas nearby and less foreign immigrants to establish in this region (De Jong, 2011).

Forms of shrinkage

Shrinkage can manifest in different ways. A distinction can be made in a decreasing number of people, a decreasing number of households or changes in the composition of the population, like ageing. A decrease in the number of households isn't noticed in many parts of the Netherlands, because households are getting smaller and more single households exist. In the rural areas that are discussed here, the problem involves mostly ageing and a decreasing number of people (Schonewille, 2012, pp. 8-10).

Effects of shrinkage

The influence of shrinkage in the form of a decreasing number of people, is first visible in the housing market. People will move away to more attractive living places like the urban areas, which leads to vacancy in the rural regions. Empty houses lead to a decrease in value of the regions entire housing market. Consequently, more people will move out, causing an substantial shrinkage in this region. The effect of shrinkage in the form of an ageing society can be found in an increasing demand for care. On one hand more elderly people are in need of care, because the average age of the society is higher. On the other hand there are less people to provide the care, because of dejuvenation (Schonewille, 2012, p. 10).

Social cohesion

Another effect of shrinkage is the risk that the social cohesion will be touched, which is affected by the likemindedness of the people living in a place. In a more homogenous neighborhood people are more inclined together, keeping social contact and support. (Schonewille, 2012, p. 9) There is a united demand for certain amenities, so the local government has a broad support to provide such amenities. When shrinkage appears, local amenities disappear, because less investments are made in community life. The social cohesion of such a neighborhood will decrease. Less cohesion will lead to a less social place, which will lead to a less attractive neighborhood. This will eventually culminate to more shrinkage. So in case of social cohesion it can be said that it is both an effect and a cause of shrinkage. The two concepts enhance each other.

Thus, the causes of shrinkage are the social-cultural developments, regional-economical developments, bad planning decisions in dwelling projects and a decrease in social cohesion. To defeat shrinkage one of these causes must be dealt with. In the following paragraph is discussed what ways there are to achieve this goal.

Defeating shrinkage in an affected regions

Governments have already tried to find solutions to defeat shrinkage. By elaborating a few examples this chapter shows multiple options to prevent shrinkage.

IBA parkstad in Limburg

The first example is already mentioned in the chapter above. The colliery villages like IBA parkstad in Limburg were subjected to shrinkage due to economical decay of the region. To withstand this problem the following interventions were executed. The original villages mainly consisted of small workers' houses which weren't very appealing. To create a more attractive town that could compete with the surrounding areas, part of the centre was demolished and new luxurious houses were placed there. Also a brand-new cultural centre was added with interesting amenities to attract new target groups. Although this seems to answer the problem that is creating shrinkage, the project can be labeled as 'failed'. (Tegenlicht, 2010b) The existing population wasn't pleased with all the changes that were made, for them the characteristics of the original housing did have a certain value and they weren't pleased with the new luxurious residences surrounding them. Also the amenities that were added didn't meet their needs, so the project knew a huge lack of social base within the villages. The immigration towards the village was causing shrinkage in the surrounding villages, because only people from within the region were moving to the new dwellings. So, instead of solving the problem, the problem was only shifted. (Tegenlicht, 2010b)

To conclude it can be considered that building new dwellings and functions to attract young people is not a suitable solution. Here one can see that the social cohesion of the old villages is affected by the new amenities, dwellings and people, meaning that the former population didn't feel at home in the transformed village. Also, the new buildings didn't attract people from outside the region, but only from within, causing shrinkage in villages nearby.

Blauwestad in Groningen

The Blue City is the prestigious project of the province Groningen and the municipalities of Winschoten, Reiderland and Scheemda (Berg, 2008). The main target of the project was to enhance the economical situation in Groningen by attracting rich people from the cities in the west of the Netherlands (de randstad). In the article it is said that 'according to Gerard Beukema (PvdA-governor at the time of the start of the project) it was high time to put an end to the monoculture of the farmers in the area' (Berg, 2008). The project involved the construction of forests and lakes to make an attractive surrounding. Big lots are created on which rich Westerners could build their new dwellings. Unfortunately the project didn't go as planned. According to plan now thousand people should be living in the Blue City, but there are less than halve. Many of the lots are set aside and the build of new dwellings is stopped almost entirely. What went wrong in this project? The focus of this project was the attraction of a new target group (rich people) into the area, but in the end not many came. The ones that did come, chose Groningen because they were looking for peace and silence. This means that the main reason to come to Groningen was to have little contact with the neighbors, creating almost no social cohesion. Rich people that are in need of social contact are staying in the urban areas where the social cohesion is already matured. The former residents of the area are a uniform group of farmers with a strong social cohesion. The new residents aren't involving in this existing society and will only cause the existing social cohesion to weaken. (Tegenlicht, 2010a)

Again the attraction of a new group of people (in this case rich people) is done too easily, without considering the social cohesion of the region. It is not easy to make people want to live in a certain area. By wanting to attract a certain group, that actually doesn't want to live there, the area is now vacant and the social cohesion that existed before is affected. This is a good example of a bad planning decision, but also again a good example that shows how important social cohesion is.

Conclusion

It seems that social cohesion is an important aspect that is neglected in the architectural interventions that were made in both projects. When a transformation is done to a village to make it more appealing, it is important to make sure that the existing social cohesion is not affected, but enhanced by the transformation. Hereby a larger social support is created for the (architectural) intervention that is done. So, lets rephrase the question that was asked in the beginning of the paper:

What kind of architectural interventions should be implemented in an area to prevent shrinkage of its population by maintaining or improving the social cohesion of the area?

Creating social cohesion

Herman Hertzberger elaborates on social cohesion in the article 'Social Space and Structuralism' and he summarizes here that 'social cohesion arises from places that unite people that have the same communal goal, and without exception this is in a spatial setting' (Hertzberger, 2013, p. 20). With communal places he means 'space where people can meet each other, casually or deliberately and where activities of communal interest can take place'. (Hertzberger, 2013, p. 20)

The building that used to be particularly suitable for this, was a church. This building is a central building in the village where people came together and where they found solidarity. Architects that build these churches designed a place that was a big undivided space that worked unifying. (Hertzberger, 2013, p. 21). Now churches are losing their function, these buildings are sometimes demolished. According to Hertzberger this is unwise, because social structures are demolished as well. In his opinion we have to perforate closed structures that are meant as public space, so people can see what is happening. He calls this physical communication that improves communal cohesion. (Hertzberger, 2014)

Creating space firstly is about the coexistence of people, and about the diversity in which this is reflected. Characteristic of this structuralism is the dichotomy of what has always been true for all people, everywhere on one hand and what is more temporary, more local and more individual on the other. (Hertzberger, 2013, p. 20)

In architectural design both the personal temporary as the general permanent aspects should be integrated to find a true connection with the people that live their.

That is why these spaces ought to be designed as 'open spaces' in order to accommodate the many shifts between public and private interactions. Designers should not prescribe, not restrict, but rather invite social explorations. (Swaan, 2008, p. 33)

Therefore the social structure of a region should be taken into account when adding an architectural intervention there. By creating an open structure with an overview on what is happening, one gets physical communication and this enhances the social explorations. Therefore every architectural intervention should provide an open structure, leading to social cohesion. (Hamel, 2009) (Klaske Havik, 2011)

Conclusion

What kind of architectural interventions should be implemented in the rural areas that suffer from shrinkage, by maintaining or improving the social cohesion of those areas?

In former projects the failure in taking care of shrinkage is done because a new target group or new dwellings didn't coincide with the social cohesion of the affected area. Thus the main importance in future projects that are created to prevent shrinkage in certain areas, lies in creating a good social cohesion. In the rural areas that are discussed in this paper, there are mostly small villages. Here, the public space is limited to a small centre and almost all of these villages will have a church there. Because of the social structure that once belonged to these churches, these buildings are an opportunity to enhance the social cohesion. On one hand churches have an open structure and a central position in the village and on the other hand they are losing their function, because religion has less and less participants. Other interventions should at least be open spaces to accommodate the shiftings between public and private interactions, to enhance social exploration and to create physical communication. The existing social cohesion of a village should not be interrupted and should therefor be the main focus in projects that want to prevent shrinkage.

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