

Economic, political, social and cultural importance of Zuiderzee Works as contemporary Dutch spatial and geographical development

It could be argued that the enclosure and drainage of the Zuiderzee, to reclaim land in the form of polders to create an entirely new province, has been the most progressive and ambitious example of Dutch spatial planning and development since World War I. This can be seen not only by the sheer scale of the operation, but also by the diversity of fields impacted. Due to the protracted timescales of the project and events during the period, we are able to track changes in spatial planning trends in relation to the project, which ultimately provides insights into Dutch societal attitudes and community life at the time.

Although the Zuiderzee Act was only passed by the Dutch government in 1918, interest in the Zuiderzee area actually began in earnest around 1900¹. This could be seen as a response to the situation in Europe at the time. In the wake of the 'Spring of Nations (1848)', Europe was undergoing rapid democratisation and urbanisation; elements often debated as intrinsic to Modernisation Theory². The Dutch Golden Age was some two hundred years prior, and The Netherlands would need to be seen to be keeping up with its contemporaries. For example, the modernisation and nation-building efforts of the German Empire and France.

There were in fact numerous modernisation activities taking place elsewhere in The Netherlands, some of which drew specific attention to the Zuiderzee region. A once bustling trading route, and birthplace of the Dutch East-India Company, the importance of the Zuiderzee waned with

¹ Ben de Pater, 2011, 'Conflicting images of the Zuider Zee around 1900: nation-building and the struggle against water'

² Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political man: The social bases of politics* (1963), p41

the construction of the North Holland Canal and North Sea Canal. The growth of other cities and the affordability of sub-urban migration³ saw a drastic population decline to the Zuiderzee area.

Whilst the initial plans for the area were mainly pragmatic in nature, such as solutions to issues of flood damage, overpopulation of available farmland and agricultural production shortfall, it is interesting to note that the debate concerning the Zuiderzee in the period before World War I was focused upon identity; of special note, the projection of regional identity onto national identity.

On the one hand you had the supporters of the Zuiderzee works, who were keen to create an image of the Zuiderzee region as a relic, living in the past; a collection of backward communities that no longer represented the modern Netherlands, and an embarrassment on the world stage. The counter to this argument was a very strong image of the geographical heart of The Netherlands as the authentic cultural heart of the Dutch people. The use of imagery was an important element. Traditional dress, such as that of the 'Volendam lass', was successfully used, as still is to this day, to portray the authentic cultural heritage of the region, and by extension the nation as a whole, and thus worthy of conservation.



The Beatles, 1964 , Schiphol Airport⁴



Traditional Folk Costumes⁵

³ M.A. Bontje, 2001, *The challenge of planned urbanisation* (2001), p102

⁴ DMBeatles, 'The Beatles 5 June 1964 at Schiphol Airport Netherlands'

⁵ Holland.com, 'Folk Costumes'

Imagery and metaphor played an important part during the final acceptance of the plans for the Zuiderzee in 1918. There were a number of economic and political factors that influenced The Netherlands at the time. The devastation caused by the Zuiderzee flood of 1916 brought the situation to the fore. As well as historic concerns over gradual salt-water erosion, the economic clean-up cost of this most recent disaster was an exemplar reason to close off the Zuiderzee and turn it into a more peaceful fresh-water body of water. During World War I, The Netherlands continued its proud history of taking in refugees⁶. This did however place additional strain on the country, both financially and due to population density, as over a million refugees were estimated to have flooded The Netherlands from Belgium in the first few months alone⁷.

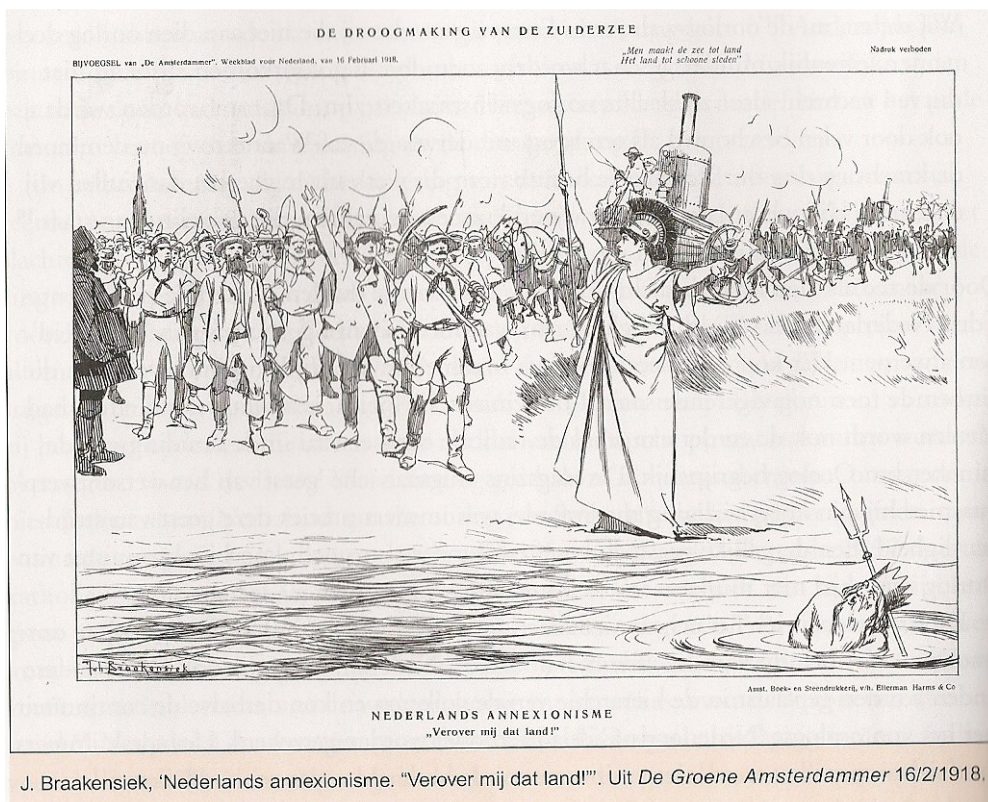
Whilst these factors alone were sufficient to warrant the Zuiderzee works, the use of war as a metaphor was a useful device to rally support for the works, both internally and internationally. Whilst The Netherlands had remained neutral during the war, this metaphor was an ingenious method of creating empathy with its neighbours and building upon an imagined community; that The Netherlands had also been fighting a war – a war against the sea. In the image below from *De Amsterdammer* newspaper in February 1918 this metaphor is used to good effect to simultaneously make two political statements. Firstly, that The Netherlands were able to provide a peaceful solution to overpopulation and the need for territorial expansion, and secondly that there were employment opportunities for an army of willing workers. Thus, with this pioneering act, The Netherlands were able to alleviate some of their ongoing concerns that they were becoming the ‘smallest of the big powers’⁸ and reinforce their pre-war position within the hierarchy of ‘Nederlands-Gidsland’ [Netherlands-Guiding Country / pioneer / world leader]⁹.

⁶ Zum.de, ‘A Haven for Refugees : the Dutch Republic’

⁷ Menno Wielinga, ‘Refugees in The Netherlands during the First World War 1914 – 1918’

⁸ VNG, ‘Local Government in The Netherlands: Chapter 1 - Small but influential’, p5

⁹ Tom Sintobin, 2008, *Getemd maar ruteloos: De Zuiderzee verbeeld – een multidisciplinair onderzoek*. p81



Nederlands Annexionisme¹⁰

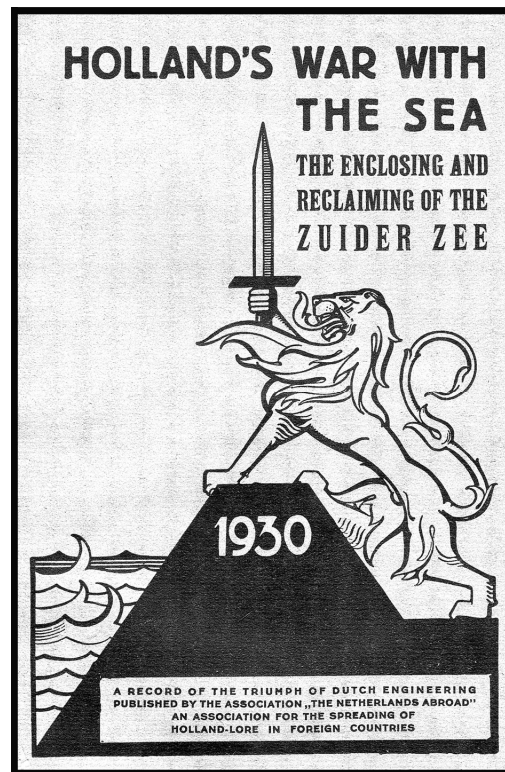
This metaphor was again used to good effect after successes with the Wieringermeer and Afsluitdijk.

By using the national symbol of the Dutch lion to invoke pride, a national unity is being created against the enemy that is the sea.

The Zuider Zee and its conceived transformation formed an intrinsic part of what John Short has called the 'national environmental ideology'. By that he means the entirety of images attached to the habitat, cultural landscape, and natural environment that are created and employed for building the nation and cultivating a national identity. The foundation of the Dutch environmental ideology lies in the 'struggle against the water', a fight against internal (rivers, lakes) as well as external bodies of water (the North Sea, Wadden Sea, and the Zuider Zee)¹¹

¹⁰ Tom Sintobin, 2008, *Getemd maar ruteloos: De Zuiderzee verbeeld – een multidisciplinair onderzoek*. p82

¹¹ Ben de Pater, 2011, 'Conflicting images of the Zuider Zee around 1900: nation-building and the struggle against water', p83 [see also: J.R. Short, *Imagined Country. Environment, Culture and Society*, London and New York, 1991]



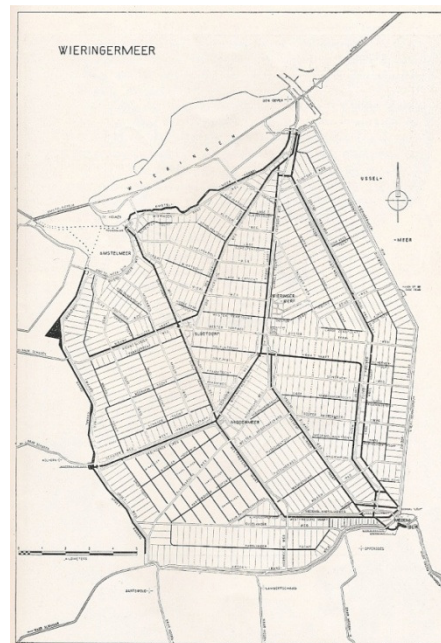
Holland's War with the sea¹²

The timing of the successful completion of the Wieringermeer was fortuitous as it coincided with the Great Depression of the 1930s. The designated use of the new polder for agriculture softened the blow as it helped create new employment and additional food supply. Whilst the primary use of the new polder was to be agricultural, the government expected that organic migration to the area would also occur. When this assumption did not come to pass, the Dutch government had to intervene in order to create the towns and foster communities. Here we can see a shift to a more formalised need for social planning during geographical and spatial developments.

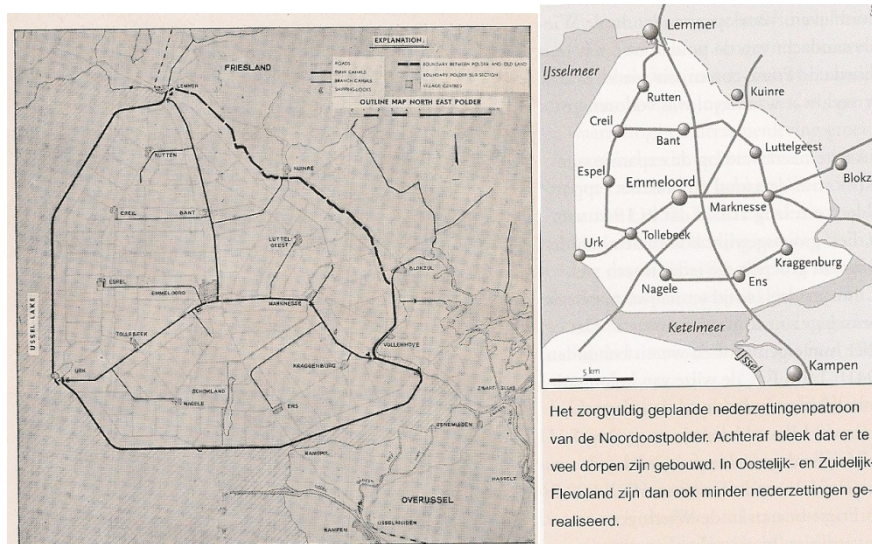
These lessons were learnt when it came to creating the North East Polder. The need for both town and social planning was an integral part of the vision. With the bicycle as the preferred method of transport at the time, a hub-and-spoke arrangement was devised as the underpinning structure. A larger central hub that could provide central services for trade and municipal functions that were

¹² Ben de Pater, 2011, 'Conflicting images of the Zuider Zee around 1900: nation-building and the struggle against water', p91

easily reachable from the smaller communities that serviced the local farmland. By looking at the plans of the Wieringermeer and the North East Polder we can see this shift of focus from a purely pragmatic agricultural layout to that of a more social setting. Gone are the regimented, small farmland plots covering the entire region, replaced by the more pluricentric town arrangements which better ally themselves to a more diverse range of use.



Wieringermeer¹³

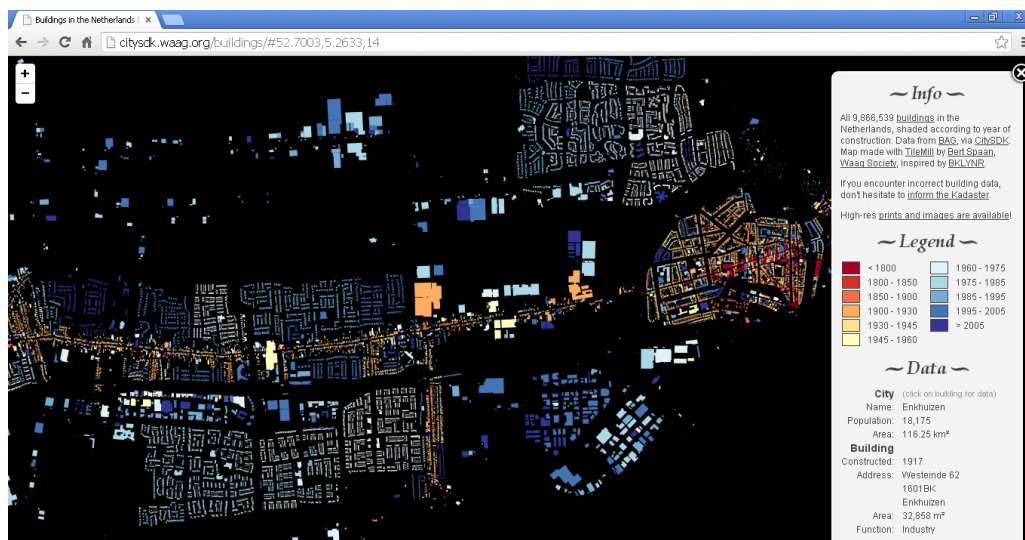


North East Polder¹⁴

¹³ Netherlands Abroad (Association), 1955, *Fresh fields and polders new: The story of the Zuiderzee works*, p35

With the intervening period of WWII delaying the start of the South East Polder we can again see a change in focus in planning. With the post-war population boom, increased use of automobiles and automated farming techniques, together with the trend for larger urban and associated suburban living, we can see a move to larger urban centres that are geographically further apart than the earlier hub-and-spoke design. With better transport links these new commuter towns also incorporate many more features of recreation than the previous predominantly utilitarian polders.

The population growth and trend towards suburban living was a trend across The Netherlands. Whilst the coastal Zuiderzee towns were, at the start of the project, provided with subsidies by the government to alleviate concerns over negative impact of the Zuiderzee works, these towns have also seen a resurgence and suburban sprawl. Whilst the map below cannot show us which properties were demolished and aren't there anymore, it can however show us a trend in expansion from the 1960s onwards. Population growth is a likely cause, though the popularity of 'authentic region' tourism¹⁵ cannot be underestimated as a contributing factor.



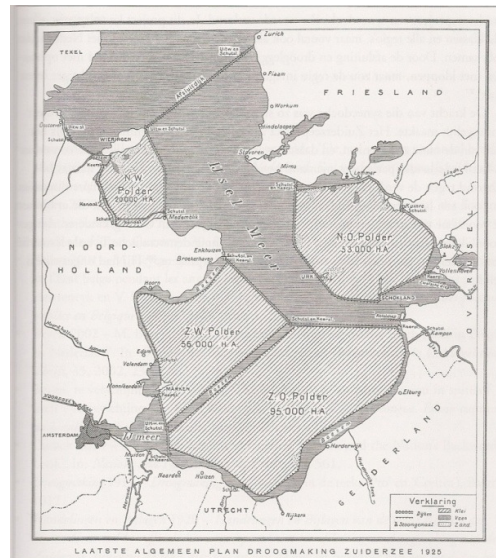
Enkhuizen via CitySDK and Waag Society¹⁶

¹⁴ Netherlands Abroad (Association), 1955, *Fresh fields and polders new: The story of the Zuiderzee works*, p48
Tom Sintobin, 2008, *Getemd maar ruteloos: De Zuiderzee verbeeld – een multidisciplinair onderzoek*. p146

¹⁵ Holland.com, 'Authentic Holland'.

¹⁶ CitySDK and Waag Society, *Enkhuizen*. < <http://citysdk.waag.org/buildings/#52.7003,5.2633,14>>

As with the map above, the interesting part of the Zuiderzee story for me, is what isn't there. By that I mean when looking at the original plans, there is an additional polder in addition to those we see today.



Plans for the Drainage of the Zuiderzee 1925¹⁷

Why was work on the (South) West Polder not begun after the creation of the Houtribdijk? The 'war against the sea' was originally used to support the Zuiderzee works, however with current extreme population density and fear of increased immigration, the use of the water metaphor, this time 'Code Oranje'¹⁸, doesn't appear to spur on activity to reclaim the land suggested in the original plan which would assist with these problems. Suggestions for an additional airport, military land and numerous other politically and financially viable options¹⁹ have also been proposed for the area and are compelling reasons to revisit the current use of the region and the needs of the wider society. I believe that this area is an interesting spatial development in the making, and an area whose history may yet provide further insights into Dutch spatial and social planning developments.

¹⁷ Tom Sintobin, 2008, *Getemd maar ruteloos: De Zuiderzee verbeeld – een multidisciplinair onderzoek*. p87

¹⁸ Europa.nl, 'Nederland waarschuwt voor 'code oranje' bij arbeidsmigratie (en)'

¹⁹ Dave Huitema, 2002, *Case Study 1: IJsselmeer Basin*

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