

EVA-Lanxmeer: Living Lab



The EVA-Lanxmeer project in Culemborg began as a private initiative in the early 1990s. The goal was to develop a sustainable and environmentally-aware society. Since that beginning, EVA-Lanxmeer has grown into a national and international example of sustainable urban planning that also focuses on social and societal developments.

EVA-Lanxmeer is a co-production of the Municipality of Culemborg and Stichting E.V.A. (Ecologisch Centrum voor Educatie, Voorlichting en Advies, or 'Ecological Centre for Education, Information and Advice'). The design and development of the urban plans were based on the following principles:

- *'identifying the Genius Loci: the existing qualities of the location that must be retained and/or can be enhanced;*
- *maximising the closed substance and energy cycles and making natural cycles visible;*
- *optimising the link between landscape elements and architecture;*
- *optimising the incorporation of a sustainable water system and a sustainable energy supply in the urban design plan; and*
- *designing "meeting places" and creating conditions for initiatives put forward by resident participation groups of future residents and users in the design for and management of the district.'*

[EVA-Lanxmeer, 2012]

SUSTAINABILITY

EVA-Lanxmeer surrounds a water extraction area with a handsome old water tower. In the protected water extraction area, a green zone is formed by ancient tall apple trees and poplars. Old landscape features and ecological qualities were incorporated into the urban design. The district includes sustainable water and energy systems. One of the principles was that the quality of the built-up environment should contribute as much as possible to the wellbeing of the people living and working there. The built-up environment is an important teacher and plays an important role in how children are raised and how they mature. As such, participation by future residents and users was part of the interdisciplinary planning process from the start.

The ambitions were very high, comprehensive, and innovative in terms of technology and resident input. In addition, the residential phase (residents' conduct) was an integral part of the concept and EVA-Lanxmeer is a model project for gathering and sharing information.

PROCESS

The project was an initiative of Marleen Kaptein. Early in the 1990s, she developed the basic idea for the planning concept. She was part of a broad network and sought out partnerships with designers, architects and scientists. A foundation was later set up with an impressive managing board and recommendations committee. That foundation helped Marleen Kaptein to monitor the quality of the project, while being a continual source of inspiration.

Feasibility study

The feasibility study was never officially completed but more or less went over into the actual plan development. The initial scepticism was eliminated when the concept and process became increasingly clear through the input of experts and because the plan received additional support from various outside sources. The decision-making process was accelerated when calculations showed that the still rough schedule of requirements was having a favourable impact on the land exploitation budget. A great deal of effort was put into generating support, and meetings were conducted with authorities involved directly and indirectly.

Programme and design phases

The programme phase formally ended when the schedule of requirements was adopted. In practice, however, the project's development continued, and chances and opportunities were identified and seized that had not been seen when the schedule of requirements was adopted. This was a specific and pre-planned feature of the project ('voyage of discovery rather than a rapid march').

Another and completely different feature of this phase of the process was the continual interaction between programme (tracks), input from residents and the translation into urban design concepts. An iterative process emerged, in which the job was to match theory to practice.

Plan supervision and assessment

The ambitions defined in the schedule of requirements and the general philosophy behind the project were assessed per project by a specially formed project group. That municipal project included an external project leader, the municipal urban planning expert, the municipal clerk, the external urban planning supervisor and the external landscape architect. The project group compared each project with the EVA principles up to the moment that the planning application was submitted. Only then could the land be handed over. The project group had made arrangements about the relevant criteria with both municipal assessment departments and the buildings aesthetics committee.

This project structure ensured that the EVA principles could be upheld without the regular building plan assessment process becoming a delaying factor in the development planning.

Implementation

In its search for possibilities for financing the wide range of ambitions, the municipal authorities made the unique decision to prefinance the development costs of the home designs (up to and including the specifications). As a large group of prospective residents had already signed up, the risk for the municipality was minor. Once the deeds of purchase had been signed, the construction phase risk was assumed by the contractor. The actual building of the homes took place in four phases. Five steps can be distinguished in the consultation process about the first phase:

- Input from the future residents about the parcelling of the land and about home types, to allow people to get in touch with their atmosphere and feel, visits to the area were also organised;
- Residents' evenings to discuss the provisional design;
- The choice of a basic design (for financial reasons) with optional variations (such as balconies, sunrooms and solar cells);
- Meetings with the architect about individual modifications (after registration and payment of a guarantee); and
- Residents' meetings to discuss the organisation of courtyards (supervised by the landscape architect).

Private initiatives

In addition to the serial projects, the project explicitly allowed for private initiatives, both individual and collective. Several of those private initiatives were realised. See also the results described below.

PARTICIPATION

Input from residents on ideas, designs, decisions and eventually management is a concept that runs through the entire planning process. After the moment that Culemborg could be studied as a serious possibility for a location (feasibility study), the number of interested residents increased quite rapidly, in part because the planning concept had drawn the attention of the professional and regular press from the start. In the summer of 1997, a design team set about, in a series of workshops, designing a schedule of requirements for the urban design phase and translating those requirements into a plan. The results of the workshops and the residents' workbook were used as the basic information.

An important insight was that a balance needed to be found between a continual focus on the ambitions and the hard reality of construction. Finding that balance was the essence of the organisation. The EVA foundation played a decisive role in upholding the idealistic basics of the concept.

PARTICULAR PROCESS CHARACTERISTICS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Sustainability as an element of connection and

incentive;

- Acquisition of all land by the municipality before the project;
- Step-by-step generation of support from authorities and organisations involved (including utilities companies);
- Attraction of residents to the planning concept, creating a sense of kindred spirits. The decision to start from a concept (rather than from the residents) was one of the defining principles;
- Top-down/bottom-up: realising, by trial and error, a highly ambitious design concept while at the same time allowing the residents as much input as possible were two important and contradictory motives. This project succeeded relatively well because a large majority of the residents subscribed to the goals of the project; and
- A design process that was defined by the search for cohesion (integration) and new technologies.

The organisation was characterised by the following:

- The conjunction of private and municipal initiatives;
- Possibilities for private initiatives that ensured a high level of ambition and dynamism;
- A broad project organisation, with dynamic administrative control and a broadly defined mandate for the project group;

- Joint principal (the foundation and the municipality);
- A process organised around broad input of expertise, collaboration with the authorities involved;
- Input from residents, mutability (open and dynamic), acquisition of expertise and experience, step-by-step improvements. Resources including workshops, expert meetings, residents' meetings, an actively participating residents' association;
- An externally organised planning office;
- The municipality as the risk-bearing principal for the residential construction plans (until sale);
- Large numbers of external specialist professionals, selected according to expertise, innovative capabilities and like-mindedness;
- Formally recognised role of the residents' organisation in the plan development and residential phases; and
- Transfer of responsibilities to manage public space to residents.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The following success factors were distilled from the process:

- Quality as the defining principle and precondition for EVA-Lanxmeer;
- Boldness on the part of the administration to realise ambitions for sustainable development;
- An expert and investigative project organisation;
- Opportunity for people to put forward their own projects, though the decision about quality was made by the project team;
- Complementary and multidisciplinary teams;
- Sensible and firmly grounded schedule of requirements;
- Strong overall vision with a good explanation to carry the process; and

- Continual explanation and communication of the story.

[Goed Management en Advies, 2002] [Struben, Goed, 2011]

For more information see:

www.EVA-Lanxmeer.nl