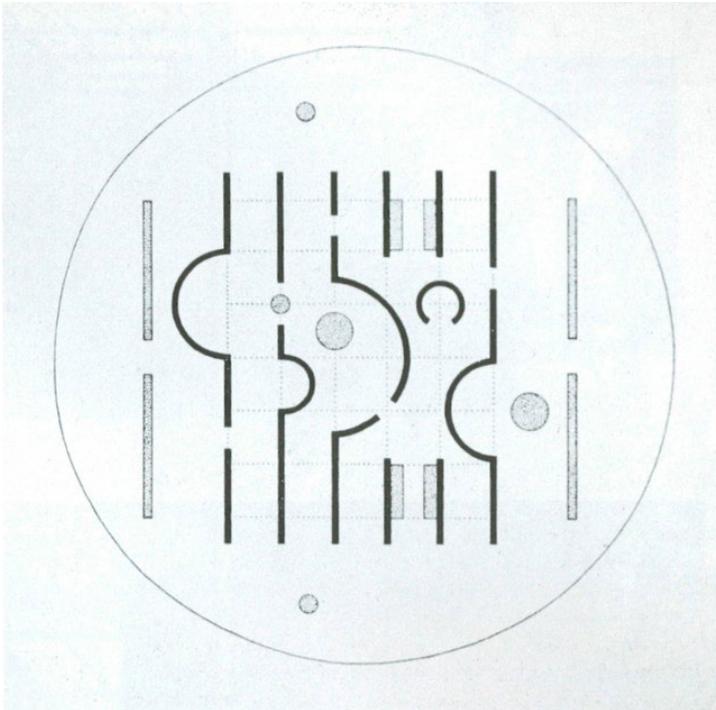


Floris Alkemade

# The art of changing direction



“The landscapes that are sometimes disclosed are those of the mind. And like the mind, the dream and the city, they are kaleidoscopic and labyrinthian.”

Aldo van Eyck

Sonsbeek pavilion,  
Aldo van Eyck

## Welcome to the labyrinth

This is uncharted territory for us. A global pandemic threatens lives, shuts down large parts of the economy and limits our social contacts. We do not know how long it will last and whether the current situation is a temporary abnormality or the new norm. We feel around to find our way as though in a labyrinth. Are we making progress, should we take a left or double back? Uncertainty about the chosen direction is not an avoidable form of weakness, but that which determines the play of our movements.

Even when this pandemic is over, doubt will remain. How should we tackle climate change, the decline in biodiversity, the sustainability of agriculture and housing, the energy transition, an ageing population and loneliness? These are far-reaching transitions, with an uncertain outcome. What will the future look like? We have not yet formed a tangible idea of where we want to go. What we do know, however, is that

every crisis holds hidden opportunities. It is not the catastrophe that determines history, but our response to it. Our task is not to get bogged down in doom, but to create space to dream.

So to start with, we need imagination and new stories. Artists, scientists and designers can do that: they think up ways to do things differently and can evoke a longing for change. The threat might be huge, but so too is the irresistibility of the idea that this could be the moment that we adopt a different lifestyle and no longer leave a trail of destruction behind us. So our time offers us an opportunity, as urgent as it is unique, to change direction.

## Adapt or retreat

The Netherlands adapts. If there is one thing that characterizes our culture, it is the insight that it is necessary for reasons of self-preservation to accept constant change. Climate change has increased the role water plays in our lives: ninety percent of all global disasters are water-related, and as early as 2025 water scarcity could affect half of the world's population. The geographical position of the Netherlands and historic management of this have made water our speciality.

We could seek shelter, raise the dikes or, as in Japan, erect towering walls. We can either battle against an overpowering natural phenomenon or unite with its force. The choice we have lies in the search for a better balance between nature and culture. Inevitably certain areas will have to be returned to the water. No easy process, but in return dazzlingly beautiful Dutch water landscapes will replace them, strengthening the ecological cycles on which we depend. If we get it right, these innovations will lead to something better. *A renovatio in melius.*

flood sensitive area in  
the Netherlands



There are places in the Netherlands where this innovation is already visible. The national programme *Ruimte voor de Rivier* (Room for the River) is an excellent example of how water safety can be combined with an improved environment. Within the Embassy of Water and with designers, water authority De Dommel, Brabant Water, the municipality and province, we are exploring a more sustainable, circular use of water, both in the city and in the countryside.

## Exploring new directions

As humans, we have focused all our efforts on organizing growth and in this respect have achieved awe-inspiring results. *Accumulation* as a result of insatiability, our *condition humaine*, while we can also employ *limitation* as a logical definition of virtue. The fascinating thing about our time is that it has now become necessary to build a bridge between these two opposing convictions. In practical terms, how can we reduce the adverse impact of the way we live?

But good intentions alone will not suffice. There is still no tangible connection between what we know we ought to do and what we actually do. Together with social and commercial partners, the Embassy of Sustainable Design is investigating the possibilities of the transition to a more circular economy. With the basis being that sustainable design becomes the norm, and that we abandon a model in which we deplete finite resources. This requires boldness and leadership too. Existing examples include Amsterdam which recently announced its plans to be the first city to adopt the circular doughnut economy model.

Simone de Beauvoir



## Seeking connections

Solidarity can be defined as an awareness of the responsibility we have to take for what is vulnerable, an awareness of the causes and consequences of our actions. In her book ‘*La Vieillesse*’, Simone de Beauvoir states that the way in which a society deals with the elderly reveals its true intentions. The French writer and philosopher offers us a mirror: our dealings with vulnerable groups, whether elderly, refugees, poor or children, show us who we are and what we stand for. The corona crisis magnifies the values we uphold.

**‘The way in which a society deals with the elderly, unequivocally exposes – often carefully disguised – its true principles and objectives.’**

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Simone de Beauvoir,  
*La Vieillesse*, 1970



*Protect me from what I want,*  
Jenny Holzer, Times Square  
New York, 1985

To put the issue of solidarity on the agenda, each year together with the Board of Government Advisers, we organise a major design study in the form of a competition in which we link social questions to the strength of design. Working in this manner, in the real world, these huge questions lose their abstraction and the practicability of proposed changes can be tested. The competition ‘Who Cares’ called for new forms of housing, care and support. How can you use the strength of design to organise better neighbourhoods for the elderly? No fewer than 174 entries were received, with ideas for accommodation clustered around courtyards to public meeting places and shared neighbourhood responsibilities.

Another splendid example of combining care with housing needs is Xenia, a hospice for young people with limited life expectancy. This hospice is nestled in the heart of Leiden. Caring for young people with a limited life expectancy is a difficult subject, but Xenia accommodates this naturally and comfortably in the city. Enriching and touching urban society.

As a result of the corona crisis, we will have to redesign a number of systems. The Embassy of Health investigates the values that should be central in a ‘new’ society. The embassy reflects on utopian examples from the past, now more topical than ever. With a visionary approach, designers show how care can be shaped to focus more on people. They present different perspectives and make it possible for us to experience new futures.

## Changing insight

If we reason on the basis of principles of solidarity in the social and spatial domain, very different directions of development emerge. In order to respond to the urgent issues, we do not have to sacrifice qualities, but rather we can win them. The underlying principle lies in integral, spatial and long-term thinking. Thinking in terms of interdependence, in other words solidarity. The spatial planning of the country is the means; the goal is the society we have in mind. In this way the Embassy of Mobility also looks at mobility as a means and not as an end: what kind of society do we want to live in and how does mobility contribute? The Embassy does not focus on technology, but on quality of life, and uses Brainport as a testing ground.

We can look at our living environment in the same way. According to the latest forecasts, one million new homes need to be built. But where and for whom? If you link factors such as loneliness, population growth due to foreign migration, an increase in smaller households and the rapidly ageing population, it is clear that for that million extra homes we should not just look at unspoilt countryside. We could build them in existing built-up areas as much as possible, in the vicinity of public transport hubs. It is not simpler, but it is more logical, more socially responsible, more sustainable and certainly more efficient in the longer term. In this way we can spare the rural areas as much as possible and also avoid having to rebuild many new roads.

Moreover, the Netherlands has many weaker neighbourhoods that find themselves in a downward spiral. Renovation should not systematically be sought outside the city, but also in these existing neighbourhoods. By *expanding internally* rather than *externally*, we can immediately improve our existing housing estates with the upcoming construction wave, which we have to tackle anyway now that our homes will have to bid farewell to natural gas.

The competition Panorama Lokaal addresses this task: how can we make neighbourhoods around the periphery of the city, built in the 60s, 70s and 80s, future-proof again? If we make good use of the transformation now needed, we can break through boring monocultures in our neglected suburbs. It is now their turn to become more interesting and have their quality of life raised. Approaching tasks from different perspectives sometimes results in surprising insights. In Rotterdam-Zuid, for example, we looked more specifically at safety and tackling subversive crime, but now from a spatial, programmatic and social perspective.

The Embassy of Safety focuses on social subversion and data collection, combining a technological with a political and social angle. At neighbourhood level, the Embassy poses questions such as: Where are the boundaries between security, privacy and technology? What does this do to the relationship between state and citizen? What power do you entrust to the police, and to what extent are citizens prepared to hand over data or inform the police when they see suspicious activities?



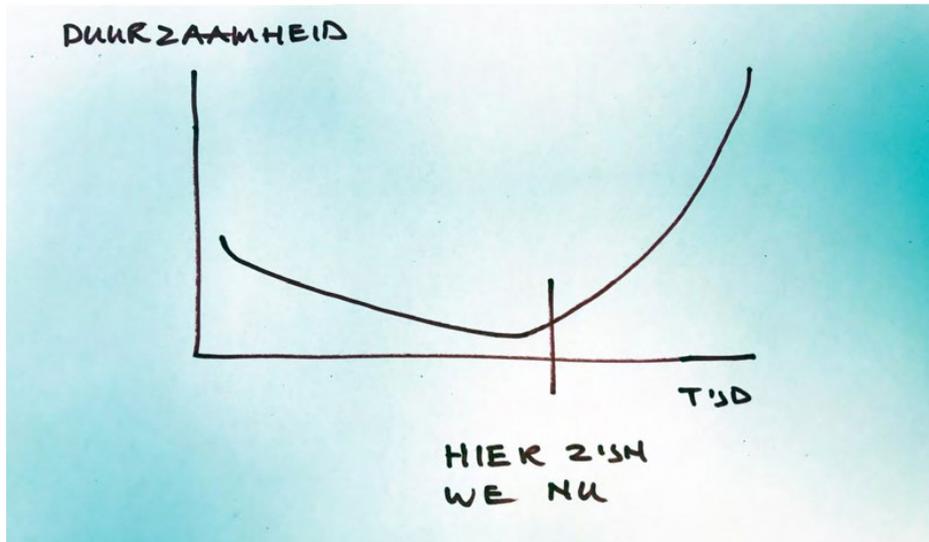
Board of Government  
Advisers, *Panorama Lokaal*  
Competition, 2020

## Moment of reflection

The trick is to link what we need to change to what we want to change. If the current pandemic continues for a long time, we may travel less, we may continue to work partly online, we can live differently. Perhaps less in an apartment in the Randstad, and more in a converted farmhouse in the Achterhoek, in contact with nature. If ten percent of the population goes that way, that will be the beginning of an entirely different Netherlands.

Given the shifts in demographics and housing preferences, it would be preferable to add a flexible layer to the city. Fully-fledged dwellings that can be added quickly, but which can also be moved if demand changes. This is virtually impossible in the existing building culture where houses are cast in concrete. If these houses were made of wood, this would be possible. For example, in Cross Laminated Timber (CLT), with light, native wood species such as poplar and pine being glued together to form beautiful solid slabs of up to 17 by 4 metres, which can be used to build extremely comfortable homes up to about six floors high.

You can prefabricate them almost entirely, so that they can be placed in existing neighbourhoods without much inconvenience from construction work. In desolate suburbs, you can quickly build residential communities that are set up in such a way that the informal contacts for the new and existing residents are more obvious. There is a whole range of natural building materials, such as hemp, which can be used for many purposes. The technical knowledge about circular and biobased building is there. The challenge lies in its broad application. Unknown makes unloved. The Embassy of Circular & Biobased Building therefore uses storytelling and the power of imagination.



Sustainability,  
Floris Alkemade

Imagination has the ability to create cohesion and structure in chaotic conditions. A well-designed image can evoke an irresistible desire for change. As chief government architect, I base my work on this conviction: the story forms the world, not the other way around. Even now that it seems to be difficult, we are not powerless, thanks to our imagination we still have options.

### Finally, the pleasure of changing direction

Medieval churches often have a labyrinth incorporated in the floor tiles. According to the realm of thought at that time, desire was cut loose from reason and the world therefore takes the form of a moral labyrinth. Not something that was only regarded with a melancholy gaze. Gardens from the Renaissance, but also from later times, often have a labyrinth. The place where allowing doubt and constantly changing direction becomes a game. The great uncertainty we now experience makes us anxious, but can also purify us when we surrender to it and let go of the illusion of control.

The question that also arises now is not only which direction we should choose to avoid impending catastrophes, but also how we can derive the pleasure of changing direction again if we get stuck.



*Pleasure garden with maze,*  
Louis Toeput, c. 1579 – 1584