



# VERENIGING DELTAMETROPOOL

**Paul Gerretsen:**  
**“Perfect plans simply  
matter less”**

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## What are the main topics in the Deltametropool in terms of projects and processes?

The key projects and other state-investments programs in the city, which are almost two decades old, are now finally being finished. Examples of this are the big station projects, but also the Rijksmuseum. However by far most of state-investment go into infrastructure and particularly the widening of the roads. Since these projects take a very long time to prepare these investments based on challenges of the past are still dominating the investment agenda for years to come. The key-projects were a big trench of projects that had a strong belief in public, state spending in big projects. Some of them are quite spectacular like the Rotterdam Central Station. The Delta-program is the next big investment program that has significant impact on the way this country and particularly the western, urbanized part, will look like. The Delta-program is directed at water management and water quality and it could have far reaching consequences that we can't oversee yet. But could be a chance also for other investments to hook onto. What is interesting to note is the absence of state investment into urban areas. Apart from Rotterdam South, there is no central government spending into cities anymore. Redevelopment of cities and strategic investment like for example the Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam are now almost non-existent. Also investment in spatial economic interventions is absent although some changes in policy are appearing. Throughout the 80's and 90's,

there was quite a large spatial economic policy from the central government in the sub-regions that we are talking about. There was a big shift in Dutch policy, partly because these investments were not effective and partly because the money is being spent on other things at the moment. The FES-fund, income from the gas and oil exploitation in Groningen and the North sea, used to be directed into structural investments of all kind, but has now been stopped as an austerity measure from 2008 financial crises. The income out of oil and gas now flows into the state-budget that can be spent on anything which effectively means it is spent on relieving debt and social security.

## Was that an effect of the economic crisis or a structural political choice?

Both the economic crisis and the political/instrumental shift came at the same moment. It was bound to happen. The concept of using collective income (from oil and gas) for structural investments instead of letting it flow away into anything else, was generally not evaluated very well so was bound to change. Structural changes were unavoidable as other investment, into healthcare and social security where no longer being able to fund without a tax increase. The long term effects of structural investments are harder to pinpoint at the moment. In that sense it is a sign of the time.

## Are the Netherlands losing its unique strength of planning?

The change of policies and the end of centrally steered structural funding has evoked a certain dynamic within the Dutch planning system. Formerly strong instruments lost their meaning and part of the strong negotiational structures lost their senses. Of course there are private funds and investors and also decentralized governmental structures, but they cannot cope with the loss of the impact and size of central government spending. You could say that these are marginal in relation to what was spent before.

## What is the role of the association?

The Deltametropool is a independent, non-partisan, members-association of parties that have a stake in metropolitan development. Within the association, there is room for thinking, planning, designing, negotiation and debate about the future of the urbanized heartland of the Netherlands. It is a platform for exchange and to discuss topics on an independent and informal ground, which brings people and parties together without bringing issues immediately into the 'real' world.

## Was that also the history of the association?

Historically, the association has always been a place for content, knowledge and debate. It started out at the end of the 90's as a vehicle of the four major cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, Utrecht) to influence the central government policies on the spatial development of the area, but based on a strong will to build on planning concepts. In 1998, a common declaration by the Elderman of the cities marked the official start of the association. Its strategic goal was to strengthen the development

## PAUL GERRETSEN

Paul Gerretsen is chief designer in the fields of regional planning, urban planning and architecture. He has studied at the renowned Universities TU Delft and ETH Zurich. He graduated with honourable mention in 1999 at the TU Delft as Master of Architecture.

From 2003 Paul Gerretsen has worked at Maxwan Architects and Urbanists on both urban and regional planning projects. Between 2005 and 2007 Paul Gerretsen was appointed Director of the South Wing Studio for Research and Design of the Province South-Holland. Since 2001 he teaches and lectured at numerous schools and universities.

From 2008 onwards he is appointed director of the Deltametropolis Association. The Deltametropolis Association is a members association that focuses on the development of the Randstad area, consists of the metropolitan area around the four major cities of the Netherlands.

of the Randstad into a European metropolitan area with a strong international position. A central term within that declaration is growth. On the one hand, the development of the Deltametropool was seen as part of an ongoing natural growing process which historically started centuries ago.

## The development of the Deltametropool was seen as part of an ongoing natural growing process

This process got an extra impulse from the growth of the second half of the 20th century and the start of the EU. On the other hand, growth is also seen as a task to deal with in terms of quality, distribution and complementarity. At that moment, there was also a strong tie between the central government and the cities on the field of spatial planning. They were more or less in line and there was no major conflict. The need for lobbying was less important than the aspect of setting a common agenda driven by content.

## What has changed since then?

Orientation towards spatial challenges was always a very strong driver for the association but the way it was used has changed and needed to change, especially if we think about a new generation of projects. As we discussed in the beginning, most of the projects currently being accomplished were based and developed in the 80's and 90's. If we think that we should or could develop a new generation of 'key-projects' just the way these kind of projects were developed and prioritized back then, we would follow the wrong path. To work in a structured method towards the type of investment that needs to be done has become very difficult. Next to the economic situation, the steering aspect has changed, so for me, that period has come to a close.

## What are possible reasons?

One reason is the fact that the area has become a city in itself. This aspect – the process of metropolization- is and always has been our key argument. What is different now is that it is less and less a discussion on how we should 'make' the Metropolis. It is more about how we can act

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smartly in a very complex regional and political context and within a social-economic dynamic in which no one can foresee the future developments clearly. That makes it harder for planners to know 'a priori' what to do. The things you can be more sure of lie within the bigger themes identified like water levels or demographic change. Within these themes, different kinds of investments will definitely pop up. The emphasis should be on the process to change the way different stakeholders act together. For me, the way we organize the processes to act on decisions for budgets and investments is very crucial. We also see the central government dealing with that question by trying to rethink the way the agendas are currently made. There is the ambition to leave and create more space for integral planning and the involvement of all stakeholders.

**How can you adapt to the interests of stakeholders and how important is the link to the daily lives of people?**

The biggest variable is how people use this urbanised region nowadays. We haven't come to terms with that question yet and it is at the same time changing fast. The notion that the understanding of the dynamics of the users of an already existing build-up area is the most important starting point that has not yet touched ground. This means that the way you plan your investments needs to be more adaptive and that has consequences for the projects themselves as well.

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As the changes are often coming faster than the time needed to finish the projects. On the other hand, it is also less important that

they are perfectly masterplanned from the beginning because people will adapt and appropriate processes and projects more quickly than we are used to up to now. In that way, plans would simply matter less. It is our endeavor to find out how to do this and how to possibly coordinate this.

**How do you manage to influence formal processes from an informal structure?**

Basically, we try to have an impact using very soft tools. We are shaking hands, trying to keep a foot in the door.

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We organize public debates and try to deliver content which matters and is of interest for our members or potential new members. A very important aspect is that we try to invest a lot in developing new tools and pilots to set the next step. We are experimental by doing or combining things which have not yet been done or combined before. One of our added values is that we are testing content and methods that could help to cope with actual challenges that could not be developed simply by public or commercial parties.

**How is the Association financed?**

We used to be financed 100% from membership fees. In the last few years, this percentage has willingly and unwillingly dropped to 30%. There are two main reasons for this development. On one hand, the financial crisis forced our members to cut down their budgets, memberships are understandably the first to go. This has meant that we lost a lot

of members. The other reason is that the turnover has more than doubled in the last 5 years because we focus on working a lot more on concrete projects with partners now. In that sense, we made a shift away from discussing big visions, ideas or planning concepts towards more concrete but also experimental projects. When simply tested how far we would come with a basic idea in reality, we see that there is a growing demand for that way of working while the demand for bigger concepts is shrinking.

**Who are your members and parties you work with?**

The association used to be one third public, one third private enterprises and one third from a less commercial sector like NGO or societal organizations and so on. All would have a stake in the area. For us, it was always very important to have this kind of balance. Last but not least, there is also a group of planning professionals which are also members, a group that has been dramatically fragmented since the different government levels cut their budgets for commissions and their own staff. This group is reorganizing itself within the new context we discussed. For them, the task is to function more detached from state and governmental organization structures. We also try to play our role in organizing the input and knowledge of this group.

**How is your agenda for the mid-term formulated?**

We are working with a program covering a time span from two to four years. The program is then worked out further into a plan for each year. It is steered by our board representing members. At the moment, we are in between finishing our current working program and discussing the next steps. Indeed, it is a bit of muddling through, on the other



hand we have to be adaptive and open for fill in the program step by step. Internally we are very careful with this process because we would like to offer the best added value to our members by using our strategic advantages. We are doing that by focusing on content and on themes or scales where we see a gap which cannot be filled in by formal or commercial stakeholders.

**How did the shock of the crisis influence the way the association is working?**

Well, very positively. One could say that we realized even more that we have to work with the existing spatial structure, infrastructure and build up area. The idea that we can redistribute and re-allocate structures and clusters, or simply create and link node A with node B like we did in the past is now gone. It coincides with an interesting societal phenomenon that people and companies are choosing to live and work within cities and urban agglomerations. This demand is a very important challenge for the acting stakeholders in charge. It is a big opportunity and important timing but also a kind of wave we are riding on at the moment. Personally, I see big changes on the level of the users of an area and its infrastructure already by simply looking at how we spend our personal budgets on mobility and housing. Perhaps we want to invest less in new cars and more in a better energy-efficient home. Perhaps we don't need to own so many things anymore as we just use them for a certain amount of time. Developments like that can really evoke rapid shifts in how we use and therefore manage our areas.

**You mentioned the necessity to position the region internationally. What is your impression of the actual actions within the region or within parts of it?**

There is little formal structure on a regional level to support communal action. There are some cities or city-regions who are definitely positioning themselves internationally, but the region as a whole does not have much of a common agenda. The Randstad area, supported by the four provinces, has a small office in Brussels but it is not used in a strategic way. It is more or less used to take the temperature in Brussels. This is a political choice. Also the four big cities have their own Brussels office even though they share the building. In my opinion, due to the crisis and political circumstances, the whole orientation of the Netherlands has become much less orientated internationally than it used to be and sometimes even xenophobic.

I think the sole reason why we are still aware of the necessity of an international orientation is our geo-strategic position as a node within the international flows of goods, people and money. The hub function of the port of Rotterdam and Schiphol is in that sense, iconic. The position of Amsterdam is always more internationally differentiated but even that is, in my opinion, much less than it could be.

**The region as a whole could do much more in terms of thinking which role and which interests it could play**

If you compare our area with other cities or regions of that size and impact, the region as a whole could do much more in terms of thinking which role and which interests it could play out internationally and which investments and people it wants to attract. My personal impression is that the whole idea of attracting instead of rejecting people is very hard to

discuss at the moment. We are still trying to be ‘good Europeans’, but that is something else from positioning your region strategically and thinking about how you want to develop and what kind of role you want to play in international networks.

**How do you see the big economic players acting within that playing field? How does the national economic policy like the top sector policy effect it?**

A large part of the ‘Dutch basics’ like the communication sector, have been liberalized. Also, a large part of the bigger Dutch players have been merged and integrated into bigger international conglomerates. So you could say a lot of this is already international but not necessarily in a positive way – as we can see within the international financial sector, which has basically evaporated within five years’ time. These tendencies are going on a large scale and they are effecting a lot of basic infrastructural elements. The energy sector is a prime example of this. It is actually happening in all regions in the world, however, in my perspective the Dutch were always two steps ahead and beyond it. This could also be due to the idealism and positivism of the late 80’s and 90’s.

**In our project we deal with a large scale, the theme of core periphery and the Rhine area. Can you think of a relevant scale for the players you described, where you can see the possibilities to form coalition?**

Yes definitely, I am unsure to where the scale ends because maybe Deltametropolis as such is too small. I believe there is an idea of a north-western European market which becomes more and more important. There is then a job market which is scaling up to at least the scale of Deltametropolis, which in my view includes parts of Noord-Brabant, Gelderland and Overijssel, in which there are a couple of important focus points. Travel time is very crucial for us. It is very difficult to define the scale in The Netherlands because it is not like in London and Paris where you have the centre and moving outwards it becomes more and more fragmented.

**The idea of a core can also be a misguided belief.**

In The Netherlands, there is a lot of periphery and only a very marginal idea of core. The idea

of a core can also be a misguided belief. That is what you see with our four big cities who truly believe they are international cities. Amsterdam still sees itself as the Amsterdam of the 1960’s.

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There is still a generation in place which truly believes that Amsterdam is a super special place. The idea of uniqueness and being known worldwide can be quite dangerous. The reality is that there is no organizing of any coherence of this whole region in the international context, so therefore it is periphery.

**How do you see the efficiency of the influence of the Dutch planners, designers and architects – who are very successful worldwide - on their own home agenda, spatially and economically?**

Basically, they are not hired at home anymore and are still benefiting from the popular image that is still present in The Netherlands. The growing part of their income comes from abroad. I think that is very much influenced by the space the Dutch municipalities gave in the 90’s for conceptual thinking that has developed the idea of a Dutch architecture community, and which is now very popular and active in South East Asia and China. It was the Dutch government and municipalities who allowed this to blossom initially, but that type of commissioning now seems to be absent. So the Dutch Approach is something that is now particularly found elsewhere and not in the Netherlands.

**What are your favorite European references on how to operate within the playing field of de-**

**sign, economic development and politics?**

Bordeaux is, although small, one of the most beautiful examples. Of course it also depends on the circumstances, it is at the same time extremely French. I think it is a very good example where they learnt a lot from the Dutch approach through the redevelopment of the centre of the city. They moved onto the regional scale and focused on public involvement in the process, the role of integrated design and the way of reusing existing urban structures. It is also tiny, a microcosm, an isolated city and relatively wealthy. But it also did have a period of very steep decline so Bordeaux is a really interesting example.

**Is the steering role of planning and strategic agenda setting always related to growth?**

Well it is much easier of course if you have investments based on speculation, this makes a tremendous difference. However, in a way the challenges are still there and we need to take care of them. There was an idea around 2000 when there was a group of people that believed the country was so to say “completed” and only needed maintaining. Of course it was not like this. The biggest change is the societal change and this is occurring rapidly. It leads to a scaling up of the agenda setting and the problem setting, very interesting, but also needs solutions on that level and there coordination is much harder. So we need more speed in a situation where much less speed is likely. We will have to see how this continues. For example the decline in car usage, it is unbelievable how rapidly this takes place. Of course you can blame the financial crisis and unemployment on this, but that is only part of the answer, there are different forces at play. At the same time, there is also technological development and technologically driven rapid societal changes. When generations are only four or five years apart, and things really change radically between them we can see whole value systems and ways of working change.

**We see a lot of regions dealing with participation of the inhabitants, trying to involve them in agenda setting, How would you say the next generation will set the agenda the ability or the way people communicate?**

I strongly believe there will be a large part of investments done by the public sector itself also in the future and it is problematic that there is no idea who plays a role in the political decision making which could cooperate or be set opposite of this kind of movement. We have a public society and a public body which support this society. We have the structure in place to decide about these things and then we do a referendum instead, based on nothing, with

people handing in ideas based on nothing but their own capacity to organize their support. The ‘Stad-sinitiatief’ Rotterdam, with a budget of 5 million Euro is a tricky example. The approach can appear sympathetic but in a way, it is also endangering the whole democratic structure. Detours can definitely be about ideas and agenda setting, but public investments should be based on their own merits.

**In The Netherlands we see ‘territorial agenda’s’ where the public sector tries to bind parties in a certain region and then be able to prioritise their own investment for the next years. How do you see this instrument developing?**

If people get the impression that it is window dressing they will stop participating. The biggest problem is that all the investment funds for spatial development in The Netherlands have been dedicated already until the year 2030. Because of the financial crisis many investments have been postponed and are dominating the investment agenda for years to come. So, 15 years in advance, everything has been spent already, promises have been made, so what is the point in negotiating if all is already cast in concrete?

**On a political level the territorial agenda doesn’t play a role anymore**

That is why on a political level the territorial agenda doesn’t play a role anymore, because there really is nothing to be gained and only to be lost. There are basically two solutions for that: either we agree to re-evaluate all these investments that are in the pipeline until 2030 which, is smart and possible. It is really not the case that we should plan everything 15 years ahead. Or we re-evaluate the whole way how we deal with the taxing system in The Netherlands and give much more freedom in levying tax on a regional and local level. In reality though at this moment, both don’t seem very likely.

**So what would be your proposal, if you had half of the money to spend?**

I would definitely put it into the existing urban areas in the cities themselves. We only have small cities so I think that is easy, a small city investment fund. It is very important and there is definitely work to be done on the public transport infrastructure as well. I know of at least three projects that are waiting and which are as we speak already decades behind.

*Interview*

*Conducted by Helmut Thoele  
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