

“Building bridges from movement, not from standstill”

New building locations in Zuid-Holland must be built as climate adaptively as possible to be able to withstand weather extremes as a result of climate change. This is the joint ambition of 35 parties in the province of Zuid-Holland Climate Adaptive Building Covenant. The covenant brings together stakeholders to create a framework that includes climate adaptation requirements in procurement procedures. We talked about this sustainability initiative with Anne Koning, Regional Minister of Zuid-Holland, and Jaap van der Bijl, CEO of Altera and an early covenant member, in The Green Village, the Delft-based Living Lab for Sustainable Innovation.

Zuid-Holland is facing a major building challenge: 200,000 new homes will have to be built in the province by 2025. Climate adaptive building must therefore become the new norm as soon as possible. The Zuid-Holland coalition is taking the lead in accelerating the process together, developing new design principles and standards, stimulating innovations and facilitating more trial locations.

Anne: “Within this context, one of our initiatives is the Housing agenda that aims to: build fast, smart and future-oriented, including climate adaptive building and building for everyone. Against this background, this Living Lab is a unique place to try out new innovations that can later be applied in housing, retail and offices. Climate adaptation is an important aspect, but there’s also sustainability, energy transition, living enjoyment, mobility, etc. All these innovations can be tried out here before being applied in real life, by property investors, for example.”

Long-term perspective

Jaap: “To us as real estate investors, this Living Lab is also a place of inspiration: how can we apply innovations to build faster, better and smarter? Because if your starting-point is a standard environment, you’ll end up with a standard solution, but if you seek inspiration and are prepared to explore and experiment, you’re much more likely to come up with innovations. Our starting point is to make our buildings available to satisfied tenants for many years to come, which is why we always take future wishes and requirements into account, from the environment, from tenants and other stakeholders.”

Anne: “This is a unique aspect. One can comply with the rules and start investing once regulation urges you to, but this leads to inconvenience and increased costs. Altera does things differently and has long-term perspective.”

Jaap: “We take into account the concepts of return and risk and it would be foolish not to, from a risk management or regulatory perspective, but we also take into account new requirements, new regulations and wishes from all stakeholders, including institutional investors, tenants, the environment, neighbours and government. This means that you sometimes try unproven technology, but you do that to keep up with the learning curve. You have to keep moving forward. We have the conviction and the assignment to demonstrate this to our institutional investors by seeking both financial and social return. As I tend to say, building bridges is easier when moving rather than from standstill.”

Why is this Climate Adaptive Building Covenant so important?

Anne: “In Zuid-Holland, we saw the benefits of bringing people and parties together to find out what climate adaptation is about and how you can incorporate this into projects. So instead of ticking the box we present solutions and shape them in a joint effort. I expect more regulatory in the future for the sake of climate adaptive building, but the discussions we have with the covenant members are just as important. Other provinces and bodies have already shown an interest now that they’ve the first results of this cooperation. It was also good to see that Altera was the first real estate investor to sign up to this covenant.”

Jaap: “We have joined this covenant because it would be foolish not to take other stakeholders into account. This covenant brings us closer together by getting things done, by having a better understanding of the differences that need to be bridged which ultimately leads to more power of execution. As a result, as a real estate investor we will be able to realise construction projects faster, better and smarter. That is our task; we are in this together, as a part of the whole.”

Which solutions do we need to realize climate-adaptive construction?

Anne: “I think everyone is aware of the social urgency of acting and building climate adaptively. Climate-adaptive construction should lead to less flooding, less heat stress, fewer adverse effects of prolonged drought and subsidence, more biodiversity. From our perspective as a province, we also find the question important: what does this mean for one’s action perspective and how does one deal with it? As a province, we want everyone to strive for the same goal on a level playing field and we want climate adaptive and sustainable building to become so normal that it’s no longer the question whether climate-adaptive solutions are too expensive. I think that’s also part of our assignment, because it’s not just about technological solutions but about getting things done. The idea of the covenant is to work together and cooperation is the starting point.”

What is your view on the role and importance of real estate investors?

Anne: “Real estate investors can play a huge role in providing this much needed long-term perspective, because that’s what climate adaptation is all about. There is a great sense of urgency, which means that we have to think about tomorrow, the day after and 100 years from now.”

Jaap: “We keep looking for the connection between bricks and social capital as provided by institutional investors, which by nature is long term, and typically we invest this with a low-risk, long-term core philosophy.”

What is your key message to governments and market players?

Anne: “The covenant shows that cooperation pays off. If you tap into that shared energy, you will achieve results together.”

Jaap: “Of course there may be headwinds sometimes. Do not expect instant results, but look at small successes, such as the green shoots that pop up in spring. Also keep looking for inspiration in these small successes. Pay it forward, and one day you will see results.”



Read more

Climate-adaptive construction: www.bouwadaptief.nl

Province Zuid-Holland: www.zuidholland.nl/onderwerpen/klimaat/klimaatadaptief

The Green Village, Delft: www.thegreenvillage.org