

Translated from

Rik Hoekstra and Marijke van Faassen, '1973: Hoog Catharijne en het Sydney Opera House', in L. Heerma van Voss et al. (eds) *Nog meer wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland*. (Amsterdam Ambo|Anthos, 2022) pp. 619–624.

1973

Hoog Catharijne and the Sydney Opera House

Within a month of each other, in 1973, Utrecht's shopping center Hoog Catharijne and in Sydney, Australia, the Sydney Opera House opened. These image-defining projects symbolized the new public-private partnership after World War II. The Dutch emigrant Dick Dusseldorp stood at the cradle of these concrete structures.

Dick Dusseldorp (1918-2000) led the Australian branch of the Dutch concern Bredero and would achieve almost mythical status in Australia. He became known as the leader of Lend Lease, a leading Australian property developer since the 1960s. In the Netherlands, however, hardly anyone has heard of him. In the fifties and sixties, a few articles did appear in various newspapers about the man from Utrecht, who changed the face of Sydney by constructing the tallest building there, but since then all attention has disappeared.

Dusseldorp's first name was Gerard(us) Josephus, but Dik ('fat' in Dutch) was his nickname as a child when he was apparently quite stocky; it stuck, although he always looked slim in later photographs. He had known a childhood of varying prosperity due to the bankruptcy of his father's grain business in 1929. After an aborted schooling, he had briefly sailed with the merchant fleet and had been employed in the German *Arbeitseinsatz* during the war. Shortly after the war, he was hired by Jan de Vries, who had succeeded Bredero as director of Bredero's Construction Companies in 1947. The company had a lot of work in the housing construction and received subsidies for it until 1950 from the NV Maatschappij tot Financiering van het Nationaal Herstel, also called "the Recovery Bank", that was renamed to National Investment Bank in 1963.

Cultural differences

Dusseldorp was one of about two hundred thousand Dutch people who emigrated to Australia after World War II, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1951, at the age of thirty-two, he was sent by his company Bredero's Construction Companies. His story, however, is different from that of most other emigrants. Not only did he always retain his Dutch passport, but he also maintained close contacts with the Netherlands from the beginning. Most migrants left with government subsidies through one of the Dutch-Australian migration agreements. They often had to work for the Australian government for two years in return.

Both governments encouraged the fullest possible assimilation into Australian society, with the result that now people with a Dutch migrant background in Australia consider themselves to be the 'forgotten migrants'. They feel that, under the influence of Australia's assimilation policy, they are so well integrated into Australian society that they are no longer recognizable as a group, unlike many other ethnic groups. In practice, many do keep the memory of the Netherlands alive, by visiting each other, speaking Dutch, eating *kroketten* and licorice, and following Dutch-language radio and TV broadcasts. Conversely, the

Netherlands - despite the many TV programs that reunite families - has little regard for its emigrants in Australia.

Still, against the government's intentions, a third of the migrants returned to the Netherlands permanently sooner or later. Homesickness was often given as a reason, if only because the return trip was subsidized, but for a fairly large group migration turned out to have been a temporary adventure. From the mid-sixties both governments responded to this by organizing programs of working holidays, in which young people could work under supervision in Australia for two years. Australia's underlying goal was that for some the stay would become permanent. The working-holiday program proved a great success and continues until today.

Public-private projects

The reason for Dusseldorp's transfer was that in 1950 Bredero had managed to get an order from the Australian government to build prefab houses for the workers in the large hydroelectric project in Cooma in the Snowy Mountains. The Snowy Mountains project involved migrant workers of thirty-one nationalities, including Dutch. Dusseldorp had previously built neighborhoods in the Netherlands during reconstruction using the prefab house system developed by Bredero during the war, in which the concrete blocks used were modern and production-enhancing.

In Australia, Dusseldorp founded a construction company, Civil & Civic, which started with the construction of prefab houses but soon expanded its activities in other housing projects. For the financing of construction projects, the company Lend Lease was founded in 1958. It would always work closely with Civil & Civic. Both were subsidiaries of Bredero's Bouwberijven and Bredero's director Jan de Vries was on the board until the end of the 1950s. Bredero remained a shareholder in Lend Lease until 1973 and thus also kept influence on the company's course.

Dusseldorp soon emerged as a charismatic and visionary. Australia wanted to increase its population of over seven million souls in 1945 with preferably European migrants, until 1973 when the "White Australia" policy was abolished. There was a severe housing shortage in Australia, a problem exacerbated by the annual influx of 200,000 migrants. They usually initially ended up in relief camps, of which Bonegilla was the best known. Many complained about the lack of houses and poor housing.

Civil & Civic began its construction projects in the capital Canberra at the foot of the Snowy Mountains, but soon shifted its activities to Sydney and other cities as well. Canberra was a small town in 1950 but was growing rapidly, making constant construction of homes and facilities indispensable. In Canberra, the company specialized in building houses and shopping centers, often in close cooperation with local governments. In Sydney, activities began with the construction of residential areas on previously undeveloped land, which was soon followed by urban renewal in existing neighborhoods that had fallen into disrepair. Dusseldorp himself settled in the neighborhood, as did many of the other directors of Civil & Civic. His own house even figured as a model home in women's magazines in 1959, as part of a clever PR campaign.

Most notable, however, were the major business projects Lend Lease carried out with Civil & Civic in central Sydney, which transformed in the process. Construction began in 1957 with the headquarters of Caltex, which at the time became Sydney's tallest building.

This was followed in 1959 by the contracts for the foundations of the Sydney Opera House, which experienced the necessary struggles with the Danish architect during construction and was not completed until 1973. Another important project was the landmark Australia Center which, with a business center and adjacent plaza, became Sydney's tallest skyscraper in 1967.



Joseph Cahill, Prime Minister of New South Wales, signs the contract to build the Sydney Opera House, watched by Jan de Vries and Dick Dusseldorp, 1959.

Socialist or entrepreneur?

In both business and residential construction, project activities were increasingly integrated. This was a consequence of Dusseldorp's habit of involving organizational obstacles in his project organization. For example, the city of Sydney was slow in realizing sewage facilities on the still vacant sites destined for housing, so Dusseldorp took the realisation of these into his own hands in consultation with the city infrastructure department. In the development of urban expansion in Campbelltown near Sydney, Lend Lease hired an economist to respond to economic development and even financed a station to expedite and direct the development process.

The close connections between Dusseldorp's Civil & Civic and Bredero's Construction Companies manifested themselves in several areas. Dusseldorp initially had great difficulty in obtaining financing for large construction projects and therefore appealed to the Recovery Bank as late as 1959. The bank was intended for reconstruction in the Netherlands and the director could only be convinced with great difficulty under prospects of large profits.

There were also agreements between Bredero and Lend Lease in the management of the company. Postwar Dutch labor relations were characterized - marked by government intervention aimed at wage moderation and harmonious labor relations. Dusseldorp propagated the need for harmonious labor relations in Australia. This was unusual there, as relations between employers and employees were characterized by tensions and labor unrest, resulting in delays in (construction) projects. Dusseldorp emphasized the need for a company not to be solely focused on profit but also to function in and contribute to society.

To this end, he always worked closely with local government. The relationship with the unions improved considerably when he proposed that employees should collectively share in the profits. In Australia, this led some to refer to him as that Dutch socialist, although to others he was considered 'Australia's shrewdest entrepreneur'.

Controversial shopping mall

Dusseldorp's way of doing business also had its influence in the Netherlands. Like Lend Lease, Bredero's Bouwbedrijven developed into an integral project developer, concentrating everything concerning a construction project in one hand. Both Lend Lease and Bredero emphasized a scientific approach and the quality of their projects. They attracted very diverse experts. In housing and urban renewal with business and shopping centers, they had to deal with local governments in Australia and in the Netherlands. In these public-private partnership projects, the companies had more financial possibilities and a longer planning horizon than the politicians they were dealing with. In many cases they exceeded the politicians, as the responsible politicians and administrators often had a completely different occupational training and were in any case much less familiar with the subject matter. Dusseldorp even interfered with the regulations on property and urban planning, which he helped reform from an Anglo-Saxon emphasis on private property to a more public law-oriented approach. The presentation of the projects to administrators and the general public emphasized the scientificity and rationality of developing and modernizing a city; all politics seemed to have disappeared from it.

The Hoog Catharijne project was the most important example of this public-private cooperation in the Netherlands. In the early sixties, the plan was received with great enthusiasm by local politicians in Utrecht as an urban renewal project. But during its realization, more and more concerns arose. The shopkeepers in the city were worried about the effects of a large shopping center on their clientele. There were also struggles about the consequences of Hoog Catharijne for the existing neighborhoods in the old city center where demolitions would be necessary. The plan to replace old canals with freeways, met with so much resistance that it was only partially carried out. (And half a century later Catharijnesingel was restored to its former glory.)

Around 1970 there was also increasing resistance to the large amount of concrete from which Hoog Catharijne would be built and Brederode director Jan de Vries was not very accommodating. In the protest movement, he was nicknamed 'Jantje Beton'.¹ In this respect, the intransigent De Vries was unlike Dusseldorp, who, when objections arose in the center of Sydney against the demolition of the Victorian theater building, included the construction of a new and more modern theater in the project plan, with which he succeeded in calming tempers.

Concrete witnesses

After the 1970s, the Australian company Lend Lease grew under Dusseldorp's leadership into a multinational company that also realized business and shopping centers in the U.S.,

¹ literally Johnny Concrete after the proverbial modern child that was raised in a concrete environment, but also referring to his intransigent character

Southeast Asia and Great Britain. For Bredero's Dutch construction company, opposition to Hoog Catharijne rather seemed to announce its decline. After De Vries' retirement, mismanagement led to the holding's downfall in another ten years.

Hoog Catharijne and the Sydney Opera House are the concrete witnesses to the urban renewal with public-private building projects that Dusseldorp and De Vries had developed in both countries. Few and certainly not the backpackers who travel to Australia for some time for their working holiday will be aware of the connection with the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, Hoog Catharijne did not get a direct follow-up and urban renewal with lots of concrete got out of date. In the Netherlands, Australia and even worldwide the public-private cooperation projects continued to flourish in which Dick Dusseldorp, construction companies and governments realized large construction projects in close relationship and interdependence.

Rik Hoekstra and Marijke van Faassen

Read more

L. Clarck, *Finding a common interest. The story of Dick Dusseldorp and Lend Lease* (Cambridge 2002).

Harfield, S. and Prior, J.H. (2010) 'A bright new suburbia? GJ Dusseldorp and the development of the Kingsdene Estate', in *Green Fields, Brown Fields, New Fields: Australasian Urban History, Planning History Conference*. Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne

H. Buiters, 'Naar een internationaal bouwconcern 1947-1986', *Rozenberg Quarterly. The Magazine* [<https://rozenbergquarterly.com/naar-een-internationaal-bouwconcern-1947-1986/>, geraadpleegd 28-02-2022].

T. Verlaan, *De ruimtemakers: Projectontwikkelaars en de Nederlandse binnenstad 1950-1980* (Nijmegen 2017).
