Nature doesn't plan

Urban planning by Favas.net biomimicry inspired

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Amsterdam, Netherlands, February-June 2016 (update: February 2020)

Favas.net uses biomimicry to mimic natural growth in urban planning. This natural growth analogy enriches our work. Instead of conventional top-down planning we prefer the enhancement of relevant conditions that could favour bottom-up and other 'spontaneous' or yet unknown actions, intervention, or the birth of new, unexpected ideas. Still we accept and apply conventional rational planning if necessary, but at the same time we recognise that incremental planning and actions are of great importance in many of our cases.

Our name is derived from the famous fava bean, on the human menu for thousands of years. We appreciate this tough bean as it can withstand harsh and cold climates. As nature doesn't plan complementary (and for that matter also alternatively) to traditional urban planning we love to mimic the natural growth of this bean. The fava-soil is our inspiration for empowerment of citizens. The fava-season makes us aware of the necessity of proper timing, while the fava-climate reflects the conditions of (pragmatic) governance. Moreover the fava bean needs sunlight, in other words energy for our mediation work, bridging gaps and enforcing personal and social interrelationships.

In etymologic sense the name 'fava' is historically close to the name 'Favela'. And sure, it has been no coincidence that the foundation of Favas.net was inspired by our experiences with the Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, that are named by our bean. The 'natural' unplanned, though in many respects successful growth of these neighbourhoods became apparent to us, while we were preparing our 'Penha-case' during 2010. At the end of that year we had a conversation with well-known aid worker Nanko van Buuren who believed strongly in unconventional empowerment of inhabitants in Favelas like Penha. *) We discussed with him the former events in the Favelas. Particularly we addressed the problems related to the government's ruthless top down preparation of the World Soccer Games. Nanko explained us the events when military would take over Penha in a violent way. Obviously local interests were not covered in Rio's urban policies and schemes. From that moment we were convinced of the necessity of citizen´s empowerment and the need of incremental urban planning, reflected ever since in a series of our cases and projects **), like the four examples, mainly post-war housing neighbourhoods we want to introduce briefly (inspired by e.g. Vanstiphout, 2010).

Aarhus (Denmark)

Aarhus, Gellerupparken, Favas.net, March 30, 2011

'Gellerupparken' in the city of Aarhus is a problematic seventies neighbourhood. Like similar neighbourhoods in Copenhagen (e.g. Vaerebro in Herlev) it is considered a negative showcase. Favas.net assessed alignments of a proposed tramway from the city to Gellerup (with Midttrafik, Letbanesekretariatet, March 2011, in co-operation with Lightrail.nl – the first phase of this tramway commenced its service in 2018). Particularly we addressed the question how to optimize future tram users' accessibility in the Gellerup area.

The case Gellerup reveals potential of rail-based public transport to enhance problematic neighbourhoods socially and economically without Masterplanning (though one need a plan for a tramway). However the effect of a tramway as local condition for social and economic improvement is highly dependent from many external aspects like the availability of jobs in the urban area at stake. But also from internal features, notably the way the tram improves local accessibility and regional connectivity (e.g. fast and reliable connections with job centres in the city and around). Moreover, we concluded that it is challenging to really involve residents and local stakeholders with state-infrastructure from 'above'.

Ghent (Belgium)

Ghent, Nieuw Gent, Favas.net, May 29, 2013

Many neighbourhoods in Belgian cities faces severe social problems. Not as harsh as for instance some areas in Brussels (e.g. Molenbeek) the neighbourhood 'Nieuw Gent' (built in the seventies and eighties) has been subject of municipal investigation for many years. Favas.net explored urban and socio-geographic features of the high-rise housing in this area (assigned by the City of Ghent, 2013, in co-operation with Brainville).

We proposed to map systematically life style and living culture of inhabitants (inspired by Saunders, 2011), and generally attitudes and views of all stakeholders, particularly of local entrepreneurs. Then we advised to use all mapped information and knowledge to empower the residents. For example by offering them temporary semi-public space for meeting and gardening in between the blocks of the high-rise. Eventually all our design proposals were fully inquiry based and ready to condition future, yet unknown opportunities for empowerment.

Favas.net continued its Ghent-based activities since 2018 (in co-operation with University Ghent).

Rotterdam (Netherlands)

Rotterdam-Zuid, Favas.net, September 1, 2015

Above average problematic pre- and post-war neighbourhoods in 'Rotterdam-Zuid', a large precinct on the left bank of Rotterdam's Maas river, are widespread. Recently Favas.net got involved in a large 3year programme (2016-2018) that aims on improvement of Rotterdam-Zuid's social fabric. (first phase, in co-operation with Drift, Fietsersbond, Hogeschool Rotterdam and the City of Rotterdam). Instead of considering master planning or establishing largescale social programmes we will try to boost small scale initiatives for tackling one the most serious problems in this precinct, that is 'transport poverty'. We presume that pragmatic enhancements of cycling culture and cycling practice could seriously contribute to the creation of favourable conditions for empowerment. Favas.net still elaborates its 'Rotterdam-Zuid' project (e.g. by research into transport poverty, since 2016).

Grigny (France)

Grigny, La Grande Borne, Favas.net, May 2, 2016

The French sixties neighbourhoods are notorious. Urban planning failed (see e.g. Epstein, 2016). Grigny in the southeast of Paris metropolis serves as one of our prime reference projects. Our case here is the neighbourhood 'La Grande Borne'. Favas.net started a research project to improve the social fabric of this neighbourhood (first phase, 2016, in co-operation with magazine Blauwe Kamer). Complementary to the official urban blueprint plan we want to invent an alternative approach that includes local interest, culture and knowledge and offers residents opportunities to develop themselves socially and economically.
Several site visits (2017-2019) emphasized the importance of this case.

Notes

*)
December 10, 2010, Juliette van der Meijden and Rob van der Bijl.
Sadly, Nanco van Buuren died February 15, 2015 in a hospital in Rio de Janeiro.

**)
Since 2010 a series of cases and projects worldwide were powered by Favas.net: Aarhus (Denmark, 2011), Amsterdam (Netherlands, 2010-2014), Aruba (2010), Barcelona (Spain, 2019), Bogotá (Colombia, 2015), Curaçao (2010), Fukuoka (Japan, 2010-2013), Ghent (Belgium, 2013), Jerusalem (Israel, 2010), Hong Kong (2011), Paris-Grigny (France, 2016), Rotterdam (Netherlands, 2016), Tokyo (Japan, 2018), Taipei & Kaohsiung (Taiwan, 2015-2016), Tel Aviv / Bat Yam (Israel, 2010), The Hague (Netherlands, 2012-2013), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 2010).

Some references

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Arrival city. Cornerstone, 2011.

Wouter Vanstiphout,
De rol van stedenbouw, architectuur en stadsbestuur in de rellen in de Franse voorsteden van 2005.
De architect heeft het gedaan! Crimsonweb, 2010.

A previous version of this text has been published in magazine ViaVIA:
Rob van der Bijl & Renée van der Bijl,
Nature does not plan. Urban planning inspired by biomimicry. VIA Stedebouw, TU/e, April 2016

Part of the content was subject of our presentation at the symposium *Biomimicry in Architecture and Urbanism*, Eindhoven, Netherlands, May 24, 2016.

Contact & Information

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