QUALITY TEAM (Q-TEAM) ENSURES DESIGN QUALITY OF ROOM-FOR-THE-RIVER MEASURES IN THE NETHERLANDS

BY FRANS KLIJN

In the 1990s the Netherlands changed its policy on river flood management, away from recurrently raising embankments and towards making more room for the rivers. In 2006 it was decided to implement 39 measures, which should not only lower the design flood levels, but should also enhance the spatial quality. In order to ensure that this goal was met a Quality Team was established, commissioned to coach the planners, to peer review the designs, and to report to the minister.

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Room-for-Rivers programme

In the 1990s two major floods triggered a policy change with respect to dealing with river floods, partly inspired by a re-valuation of natural and cultural heritage, but also attributable to the fact that arguments related to sustainable flood risk management were being introduced into the debate, and that alternatives for reinforcing embankments were not only being proposed but also proved feasible (cf. Van Heezik 2008).

After elaborate studies (Silva et al. 2001) 700 individual measures along the three Rhine River branches were solicited and analysed in a consistent manner. These measures were all incorporated in the 'Planning Kit Room-for-the-Rivers'. This supported the authorities and stakeholders to jointly select 39 measures, which lower the flood level over the whole length of the three river branches by about 30 cm. Based on this joint planning effort, the national authorities in 2006 formally decided 1) which measures were to be implemented, 2) what their individual hydraulic effect should be, and 3) that each measure should also enhance the 'spatial quality' of the area.

For the next planning stage the national government preferred local, regional or private parties to take the initiative for the detailed planning and design. Thus the local interests might be better taken into account, the commitment to the plans greater, and the support for implementation larger. Such decentralization, however, also calls for strict constraints on hydraulic effect and budget, and it requires a certain supervision concerning the achievements on enhancing spatial quality.

Therefore, the minister appointed a programme director and staff, and established a Quality Team for the formal supervision concerning enhancing spatial quality. This so-called Q-team

Q-team members assisting the local design team

Nijmegen dike relocation, past (left) and future situation (3-D computer visualisation right). Courtesy: City of Nijmegen & Royal Haskoning DHV

was given the assignment to produce independent recommendation on enhancing spatial quality. The team is chaired by the State Advisor for the Landscape (in the beginning Dirk Sijmons, presently Eric Luijten) and consists of five specialists of different disciplinary backgrounds, all with many years of working experience in the Rhine River delta.

Detailed planning and implementation

The detailed planning started in 2006-2007 and the implementation of all plans is scheduled to be finished by 2015-2016. This means that the role of the Q-team is coming to an end, and that we can evaluate the results both in terms of the quality achieved in the detailed designs, and in terms of the merits of having a Q-team in the planning process.

For us, as team members, this was a reason to share our experiences from an inside perspective in behalf of other flood risk management or landscaping programmes in a paper in the Journal for River Basin Management (Klijn et al., 2013). In that paper we elaborate on our approach and way of working, go into the question of how to understand the concept of spatial quality and explain how we dealt with the issue of design assessment. And we discuss a number of recurrent issues and give recommendations based on over 70 visits to the individual projects. Below, we only briefly reflect on our approach and the merits of having a Q-team.

Informal coaching and formal judgement

As spatial quality, like many other qualities in arts or crafts cannot be measured quantitatively in a satisfactory way, we decided for a combination of coaching and peer review. This approach is common in many arts and crafts (cf. Sennett 2009), which can only be mastered by sufficient practice under the guidance of a skilled tutor. Our first aim therefore was to assist the local project teams and designers in their endeavour. This informal approach requires a good relationship with mutual trust and for a joined purpose: good plans.

In contrast, the Q-team was also commissioned to judge the achievements of the local project teams and to recommend on the acceptance and funding of the plans to the national authorities. This called for a critical peer review and sometimes austere judgments. This is very similar to the process of peer-reviewing of scientific papers, which is the best we can achieve to secure a certain quality standard. This formal approach involves criticizing the work of colleagues, but is always aimed at improvement.

Reflection on the merits of a quality team

Spatial quality is a difficult to understand and to define concept. And assessing the spatial quality of a plan before implementation takes a good deal of imagination, which requires ability to read plans and design sketches. Such skills may be present among experienced people from the same guild or profession. Putting them in a quality team is therefore a good means of achieving design quality.

A quality team can only play the intended role if a number of requirements are met. First, spatial quality should be made an explicit objective. Next, the team should be able to work fully independently with a clear task: of securing spatial quality, and nothing else. This requires that a formal role and competence must be attributed to the team, otherwise it is toothless. The authority responsible for the programme should therefore fully trust the quality team and should always back its judgments and opinions on design quality or spatial quality. This does not preclude that each recommendation should be followed, for authorities obviously have multiple and different responsibilities; they may decide otherwise, for example for reasons such as funding, timely delivery or as a result of negotiations with certain stakeholders.

Most importantly, delivering spatial quality is primarily a matter of the right people. People who are dedicated, have the capability to explain a design to people with very different backgrounds, and are prepared to enter into the long-term commitment required for a complex project. Installing a quality team may help to make that happen, as it supports what one might call a community of practice. It was our experience that in practice the informal coaching produced more design quality than only a formal procedure might have, but that on the other hand this may not have been the case without the formal procedure sustaining it. This double approach thus pays off in the high quality of the designs that are now being implemented.

References

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