

Podcast Amsterdam Trading Culture: From the Golden Age to Now

Episode 8: Room for change: building the city of tomorrow

In this episode, Hidde Bruinsma talks to urban planner Maurits de Hoog and lawyer Pelin Oztürk about the tension between spatial growth and legal boundaries in Amsterdam. How do you give space to change in a city that already seems full? And what is the role of legislation, planning and vision in that quest?

Hidde Bruinsma: Amsterdam is growing faster than ever, but space is becoming increasingly scarce. What do you see happening?

Maurice de Hoog: We see the city expanding outside the old centre. The Zuidas is a good example of this. What started with a court and a bank grew into a full-fledged urban area with offices, housing, stations and connections to Schiphol Airport. Later, places like Arenapoort and Amsterdam-Zuidoost followed. The idea that a city has one centre has been abandoned. We will have several centres, each with its own function and character.

Pelin Oztürk: That kind of growth takes a long time. You can't just start building anywhere. As a lawyer, I often get involved at an early stage. Then it must first be clear whether it fits in with the municipality's policy. This is followed by investigations into soil quality, air, noise, parking, mobility and sustainability. Everything has to be right before you can apply for a permit at all.

Hidde Bruinsma: What makes this so legally complex?

Pelin Oztürk: It is often in the details. Many plans fail not on the idea, but on what is technically and legally possible. For instance, you need to know whether the soil is suitable for housing, or what environmental standards apply in the area. But also whether there are companies with heavy permits that stand in the way of housing. Sometimes something seems impossible, but when you take a close look at the permits, it turns out there is room.

Maurice de Hoog: We saw this at Sloterdijk. On paper it was an industrial estate, but in practice many companies were no longer using their permits. Finding out exactly what was really happening created space for a mixed urban area. There came housing, cafes, amenities. This literally gave the area new life.

Hidde Bruinsma: The Environment Act was supposed to make it all clearer. Has it succeeded?

Maurice de Hoog: The idea is good, but the implementation is difficult. We used to have 26 laws, now we have one 150-page law. Everything is together, but that does not immediately make it easier.

Pelin Oztürk: You now have to get everything out of the one law. That requires experience and overview. At the same time, it also offers opportunities. Because if you know how the system works, you can be more creative with what is possible.

Hidde Bruinsma: When does cooperation between lawyer and urban planner work well?

Pelin Oztürk: At the beginning. Then you can explore scenarios together and come up with solutions. If I am only called in when there are already objections, it is usually crisis management. Whereas with proper consultation in advance, you can limit risks.

Maurice de Hoog: A good plan starts with shared understanding. Lawyers and urban planners see things differently, but complement each other. That combination ensures quality and avoids surprises.

Hidde Bruinsma: What do you see as major challenges for the coming decades?

Maurice de Hoog: Amsterdam is a dynamic city. Every year, tens of thousands of people leave and tens of thousands more arrive. This constant migration means we have to keep building, keep adapting and keep thinking about how we allocate space. At the same time, we need to be prepared for international shocks, economic changes and climate pressures. We cannot think that things will always get better. We must remain agile.

Pelin Oztürk: I hope we remain a city where quality is central. Where sustainability is factored into every plan, where the legal system is clear enough to help people and plans move forward. We need to make sure regulations help rather than hinder.

Hidde Bruinsma: Thanks for this interview. This was episode 8 of Amsterdam's Trading Culture, with Pelin Oztürk and Maurits de Hoog.