Natural building materials

The question

Two observations:
The construction sector is among those in great difficulties at the moment. The traditional builders and construction companies generate 40% of all waste material in the Netherlands.

High time for a different way of building, you would say. In Germany and Belgium the percentage of construction at the behest of private individuals is much higher and the materials used are more often recyclable. It has been shown in Germany that using natural building materials has a positive effect on the indoor climate. It is also clear that building with natural materials reduces the use of exhaustible resources and generates less troublesome waste material.

Yet very little ecological construction takes place. And this despite the fact that sustainability is much discussed and advised upon, and a great deal of material is made available.

Question: What is so different about the Dutch situation that so little building is done with natural materials compared to in neighbouring countries? Is this because we were used to leaving building to developers and thus have less private initiative? Or is it because we don’t work as much with architects in the Netherlands and architects in the Netherlands provide less supervision during construction? Are there any other causes?

J. Halbertsma, Marum

The answer

The question contends that in Germany and Belgium more recyclable building materials are used. However, we are not aware of any research reports stating this is indeed the case. As a result, our answer contains a number of arguments that need further study.

In the first place the possibility exists that ‘sustainable construction’ does take place in the Netherlands and that we do not focus so much on the aspect of ‘using recyclable materials’ to tackle issues surrounding the indoor climate and waste, but more on various other environmental aspects, such as energy use and the related greenhouse gases emissions when the home is being lived in. If we consider this ‘sustainable construction’ approach, it does not appear to us that the Netherlands is lagging behind. International and national integrated environmental/sustainability certification for buildings such as BREEAM (website mainly in Dutch) is required more and more often by Dutch commissioning parties, or offered by Dutch designers and builders.

The following source indicates that the Netherlands is not falling behind in this regard, given the actual number of certifications: BREEAM meest uitgegeven duurzaamheidscertificaat van Europa (BREEAM the most often awarded sustainability certificate in Europe).
In the second place, the concept of ‘ecological construction’ could in part have to do with the perspective. Could it be that from our vantage point we only notice the spectacular building projects abroad?

According to an expert from a major Dutch construction company, ecological construction in France and Belgium is not further advanced than in the Netherlands. However, in Germany they are making greater strides. Germany also has a programme training people to become Construction Ecologists. Does the programme generate more interest, or is there a programme because there is more interest? We don’t really know.

Perhaps subsidy and grant programmes influence matters, and in Germany these are often generous and long-running, showing government commitment (this is also the case with regard to energy). Another construction company expert discerned a relationship with the ‘Dutch mentality and price consciousness’: ‘I see a strong relationship with economic motives. If sustainability has a good influence on the bottom line, people in the Netherlands are interested. The sustainable energy policies in Germany have cost the government a fortune.’

In the third place, the situation in a country regarding its resources could play a role. In Sweden, for instance, there is a great deal of forest and plantation forest, so it is logical that this (recyclable) material is widely used in construction. The Netherlands has relatively few recyclable resources which are suitable for construction. The fact that we are a ‘natural gas’ country has also influenced construction practice regarding the (type of) energy supply in buildings.

In the fourth place, in the Netherlands we more often build homes in a collective enterprise (we have a great stock of homes for rent owned by housing corporations, while the construction of new houses is dominated by developers). This leads to standardization (you see the resulting difference with other countries the moment you cross the border) and the tendency to build ‘average’ homes (not overly innovative, not overly conservative). This, however, is also conjecture.

Kind regards,

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Translated by Anniversary Project Group