

Episode 291

Having the freedom to build what you want – with Werner Brouwer

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/291

Werner: I'm fifty-eight years old and one of the things that I like very much in Oosterwold, I lived for twenty years in a community where I also built my own home and we also constructed the road and the sewerage etc.

I work at an engineering firm so, it's not so difficult for me because I have the knowledge for it, but I worked for about forty years in development like the traditional ones where we decided how the roads would be designed and what kind of houses people should live in. But for myself, I always built my own houses. So, this was a great opportunity two years ago when they asked me if I wanted to come to work there.

Ben: Well, I know in the UK the developments that you've got, Almere, always gets 'why can't we copy this?' That's what they're always saying. So, can you explain first of all a bit about the wider development that's going on?

Werner: In Almere and Oosterwold the development is made by people themselves. So, there is not a designer or an urban planning office. People are very free to choose whatever they want; we don't have much of regulations, just small ones.

The other side is that people have to decide on everything themselves. So, when you buy a lot to build your own house, if you decide to do so, the road is already constructed or at least you have a drawing where you can see where the road will be constructed, but here you have to talk with your future neighbours, well in what way shall we make it, what will be the cost, and how do we divide the cost.

So, the very special thing is you can choose anything you want, but the difficulty is you have to choose. There is no option where you can lay back and think, 'that's very difficult for me. Maybe another should do that' or 'maybe I will call the municipality and ask them to

please explain to me what I have to do'. No, you have to decide for yourself and you have to find out for yourself.

Ben: Does that mean then that you often get people who have done things like this before because they have more of an idea of what they want?

Werner: No. I think for most people it's the very first time. They're going into a large project for the first time and they have to find out. And it takes a lot more time than they expected. And after, when they've finished it, everyone says it took a lot more time, it was more difficult than they thought.

But the difficulty is not building the house. There is a lot of information; you can call a contractor and he will build your house. The difficulty is the decisions you have to make, but especially you have to make them in cooperation with future neighbours. That's not an easy part because everyone has a different budget, they have different ideas, and still you have to come to one end.

Ben: Do you know who your neighbours are in a given area? Is that how it starts, with a meeting?

Werner: Yes. Maybe the best way to describe it is when you have the first initiative. He starts, and the next one, they also have to follow in a row. So, the first thing you do is, when you think, 'that's a nice plot. I want to live there', you have to contact the one who was there before you.

For example, if one always dreamed of a circular plot, that's no problem but he has to find someone else who wants a concave plot. That's the difficulty because people choose things that are not common, and you have to fit in with other people.

Ben: Does this always lead to diversity or do you actually find that sometimes, people have got the freedom, but they just build something simple? I don't know whether that makes sense!

Werner: That makes a lot of sense. I told you I live in a community that was developed in just the same way. Twenty years ago, there was a lot of freedom for us and I think eighty percent is all traditional. But I think in Oosterwold it's something else. You also have very traditional houses but that also contributes to the diversity.

But people are also making a lot of different choices. We have houses built of used car tyres, straw, wood, steel, shipping containers, all next to each other.

So, if you are very traditionally oriented and you want to be sure that your neighbour will build something you also like, then you have to go somewhere else because you don't know. If your neighbour decides he wants to live in a lighthouse, he can do it.

Ben: Does the neighbour who wants to live in the lighthouse have to wait for the right moment almost? You were mentioning about the neighbours that he's got to size up. So, if he comes along with his lighthouse idea and the neighbours aren't too keen, is there still an opportunity or do you find a place where he can go in?

Werner: No. He can go wherever he wants. People take the initiative, and they call or write to us and then whoever comes first has to choose first. But we don't make a decision of what kind of initiative goes where, except for one: if someone will start a firm or company, then we will look at how much traffic it will attract because that can make a difference and it cannot be done everywhere.

But for the lighthouse example, if it is his turn to choose, he can go wherever he wants.

Ben: Just thinking about sustainability, what can and do people find themselves doing together, not necessarily on their own? How does it become a more sustainable, organic community?

Werner: When you talk about sustainability in terms of energy consumption or electricity, then people do it individually because there are not so many examples of people who want to do it together. But we also do sustainability in terms of circularity.

For example, people have to make their own wastewater treatment, sewerage. That means that wastewater when they come from the toilets or showers, they have to clean it again and it will stay in the area. We don't transport it by sewerage pipe to a large system elsewhere. It's all small systems in the area.

There is an obligation to contribute to city farming for fifty percent of the plot that you have. So, when you have a plot of one-thousand square metres, then five-hundred metres must be used for farming. That can be done with sheep or fruits or something else. We have a vineyard as an example.

The only thing you cannot do, people ask for the agricultural part, 'can we keep horses in it?' The answer is that it has to contribute to food production. So, unless you will eat the horse, it's not an option.

Ben: Why are those factors important? Why is the autonomy of looking after your own water and also your own food important? Why that?

Werner: There's a difference between food production and wastewater, but the main reason is it contributes to the conscience of your behaviour. I don't think the food production will solve the world's food problems, but it makes you aware of the distance food has to travel before you can eat it. It's a silly thing that most food will travel tens-thousand miles around the world before we eat it.

In history, the part where we built Oosterwold was on agricultural land. So, we want to keep this tradition or awareness alive.

Ben: When did it actually start on site, those first few houses?

Werner: The first buildings were made I think about five years ago. At this moment, there are one-thousand-five-hundred inhabitants, more or less.

Ben: Have there been any lessons that you've learnt through the early stages to where we are, five years down the line?

Werner: Yes, there are lessons learned. I think there are lessons learned for the initiatives but also for the government.

For government it's very difficult to let it go. We always think that we know best, that we have a drawing board and there we decide where other people are going to live and the way they will do it. What we have to learn is to make a difference between what is really necessary and the other things well just see what happens. And that's difficult.

Lessons learned for the initiatives are, people must be very aware of what they start, the time it will take, and sometimes you have to come to the conclusion that one of the earlier goals was very difficult.

For example, I mentioned sewerage and wastewater treatment. Lessons learned are it's a very technical solution and at this moment we are preparing for another way where the government takes back part of the responsibility.

Ben: How are people dealing with water on their sites? Is it in lots of different ways? Can you describe some of those?

Werner: I mentioned the circularity of water. Because they also have the obligation for agriculture, they also need water for it. At this moment, with climate change, there is not only very heavy rain but also a lack of water sometimes. So, in what way can we keep it in the area.

People are very aware of the use of water. I think that the water consumption is far lower than the average in Holland in this area because people are going to live here and when they have to treat it themselves, it also creates an awareness.

You don't think when you have a sewerage pipe at your house, and you flush the toilet. It's not a question. But for people in Oosterwold, when they start to build, they have to ask themselves how many times do I flush the toilet and how big will my wastewater treatment be in the future.

So, it's quite technical questions but also questions about in what way do I want to live. People are very aware when they come to Oosterwold.

Ben: When they're storing that water, is that part of the decision-making process, how much do I store? Is it easy to get that calculation wrong?

Werner: For the storing of water, we have regulations about a percentage of the area you have to use for water storage. I think that as a government we don't have to prescribe what we have to do, but I think it's important that we give the information so they can make a well-made decision.

So, we give the information but the way they will do it, they have to decide themselves. But in our information, they know where they can find it, what the different types of solutions there are, and then they can go on.

Ben: In the UK we seem to have a very slow governmental system. I mentioned earlier how we're always shining a light on what you're doing. How is it you have got like this as a government, to be so proactive, to try things, and realise that sometimes it goes wrong. What tips would you have for people in those positions?

Werner: You don't want me to make a joke about Brexit, I think.

Ben: Don't worry. Not all of us are in favour of it. Don't get me started on that.

Werner: Well, I think you can relate it to the city of Almere itself. I think that the government in Holland is not faster or more proactive than in the rest of Europe, but Almere is a new build city about fifty years old. It has two-hundred-thousand inhabitants. So, in fifty years from zero to two-hundred-thousand. It is made of very fast developments.

So, I think it's a sort of pressure cooker in Holland and we have a lot of space because most of the area stayed owned. So, when we decide we want to try another way of development, then we can take a part of Holland where you have stayed owned land to sell and that's easier. And there is a big pressure on housing. We have a lack of housing in Holland, currently one-million houses to be built, especially in the area of Amsterdam and Almere is only twenty-five kilometres from Amsterdam.

So, it was quite easy to make it. You had the area to build it and the experience of very fast development.

Ben: This fast development, I'm assuming it's not all self-build. Is that one of the challenges of giving people the initiative to do it themselves, that you are slowing things down really? Or can they keep up with developers?

Werner: In Oosterwold, developers are not allowed.

Ben: Good. I like it.

Werner: In recent history it was, and we had a lot of problems with it. I don't think you have to think of Oosterwold that it will be changing the developing world. I think it's an alternative. Because not everyone wants to live in a standard home. But there are also a lot of people who get very worried when they have to build their own house. So, it's an addition.

I have to be quite honest that professional developers, maybe sometimes they can do it better. They can do it faster. But it's another group, another product.

Ben: What else should we know about this development then? Are there other aspects that we could bring in as well?

Werner: When you consider as a government that maybe you should give space to a development like this, one thing you have to consider is Oosterwold is very large. It's four-thousand-three-hundred hectares. That's all of the city of Amstelveen near Amsterdam. So, if you start something new, don't make it so fast and big that you have no time to implement the lessons.

One of our main objectives is also to slow down development because when it's new, and people have to start something new, we don't know how it will turn out and you start the same thing, one-thousand at the same time, when there is a mistake in it you have one-thousand mistakes. So, you need time for this type of organic development. People need time to deal with their neighbours and to

decide together how the roads will be constructed. They need time and they cannot do it all the time.

You can have a meeting with ten people but not with one-thousand people. Or you can have a meeting, but it will not give any results.

Ben: That's a very good point. You've always got to go quite local with your community. Do you think there are any common traits in the people that embark on this and want to be part of that community?

Werner: We did an investigation. In the beginning, the expectations were that people who wanted to go to Oosterwold were very idealistic, a special type of person. But it's not true.

The one thing they share is the idea that they can make their own choices and there is not someone who will make the choices for you. So, that's what they share. But also, politically we have people from the far left-wing to the far right-wing. It's all types; liberal, everything together and mixed, but they share the wish for freedom.

Ben: It's interesting. Has there been much interest in the community from people outside in that they're intrigued about what's going on? Maybe that's how you end up getting your new neighbours?

Werner: Well, a lot of people are intrigued. For example, you. You did call me.

Ben: That's true.

Werner: We have a lot of people also from abroad and governments from as far as China, Korea, America, articles in the National Geographic or the New York Times.

I think also we have a lot of attention in the media. They read about it, they've never heard of it, they go and watch and then are intrigued.

But it's very funny. When you drive through Oosterwold there are a lot of people working, for example, in their agricultural part, or building their homes themselves, and everyone wants to tell you about his dreams and ideas. So, they are ambassadors for their own area.

Ben: It sounds like there's a lot of respect for you can have your own castle, but yet at the same time, you have got to somehow link in with your neighbours. How does that work? Where is that line?

Werner: Well, it's the main part because you can only start building when you have a road. And for this road, you are dependent on your neighbours. So, you have to come to a compromise or make a decision together. That creates a bond, but sometimes it creates fights.

And the drawing is one thing, but then there's the financial part. When you have a big parcel then a bigger part of the road will be in your garden, or it feels like that. But you have bought the land. And then you have to divide what the cost of the road will be and how it will be shared. Is it a percentage based on the number of houses, or is it on income, or is it on how many cars you have? It's all possible.

Ben: So, the infrastructure of the road, does it change a lot as it goes around the community in terms of what it's made of? Presumably, you get main roads and then minor roads as you get deeper into the community.

Werner: Yes. We have some regulations about the width of the road because of, for example, fire engines, police cars, or ambulances. You have some regulations not about the way you construct it but the dimensions of the road. So, it doesn't change much.

In the beginning they don't want to build a road because it's expensive but in the end, when the houses are finished – well, we have all types: tarmac, bricks, concrete...

Ben: So, it's like the rest of the development. It changes a little bit.

Werner: Yes.

Ben: What does it mean for you then? What will you be doing today? What's on your agenda?

Werner: I have a meeting about a different sewerage system. I told you that we have some problems with the very small ones. Then maybe we have parts where we will try to build one bigger wastewater treatment. So, that's a meeting.

I have to decide on a legal procedure about people who are fighting about a road.

Ben: It's all about the road at the moment.

Werner: It's all about the road and infrastructure. I think that will be the main issues for today.

Ben: That's quite enough; and getting interviewed all about it as well.

You've mentioned some of the key parts that a government would look after normally: so roads. Are there any other big things that we haven't talked about that you're now giving responsibility over to the community?

Werner: Yes. Normally a large area not only consists of houses and companies but also, for example, of schools, shops and restaurants. When there are commercial things, they will come in the end. When there are enough houses, there is also a supermarket. But for example, schools, who will build the school? Because people are responsible themselves.

In Holland when people want to build a school, the government has to pay for it, but they also have to start their own initiative. That is also for childcare or playgrounds. Who will buy the lot for a playground?

So, there you have to be very careful and decide in what way you think it will be constructed. Does the government have to take the initiative? But then it will be an initiative like all the other ones. It is not that they come from the drawing board and just decide in the beginning, 'we'll make a school over here'. No, when it's their turn, they also have to go in the same thing and they also have to be part of building their own road and making agriculture. They are all equal.

You have to decide upfront and not at the end because if you wait until the end, all logical parts will already be taken, and the school attracts traffic when people bring their children.

Also, for public transport, who will take care of it? In fact, in Oosterwold, the individual initiative is a micro-developer. They have to do everything themselves. And for everything he would normally ask the government, 'how did you do that?' he will get the answer back, 'no, it's not a question of how I would do it. You wanted to do it yourself'.

Ben: It's tricky isn't it with things like that, because this comes back to time. Do you find some people are leading it more than others?

Werner: Yes. In the community as a whole, at the beginning everyone was very busy with their house and their road, but when they've finished it you have a lot of commitment to Oosterwold because people are aware that they have to do it themselves. Some of them will pop up as a leader or with an initiative for one of these services. But it will take a little bit of time. The commitment is very big.

- Ben: Maybe in conclusion then, how would you sum up this whole journey that you've been on, and how much further will it keep going? You're talking about a lot of development; you've done five years. How much more is ahead?
- Werner: In the end, there's room for fifteen-thousand houses.
- Ben: Wow, oh my goodness! You've just scratched the surface.
- Werner: Yes. I have to do fourteen-thousand-five-hundred.
- Ben: You mentioned about having a little moment to breathe and do things perhaps differently. What will you do differently on the next five-hundred?
- Werner: We have an evaluation now, at this moment. We will finalise it in October, in one month, what went well, what went wrong, and what could be done better.
- Ben: It's been fascinating to hear some of the story behind it and how things have gone. So, I really appreciate your time. Thank you.