



# A masterplan for Utrecht railway station area

For the last fifteen years Utrecht has been busy working on two major extensions to the city (Leidsche Rijn and De Uithof). But until recently, attempts to transform the railway station area in the city centre remained stalled amid controversy and political turmoil. Now that building has finally begun, the city hardly seems to realise the scale of its achievement.

Impression of the new terminal at Utrecht Central Station. (source: Utrecht/ProRail 2006, illustration: Benthem Crouwel Architecten)

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In 1997 the Dutch Government embarked on an ambitious programme to upgrade the nation's High Speed Train (HST) stations and develop the adjacent areas. These areas, like airports and city centres, are perceived as key sites for attracting international service industries. The government investment programme consists of six New Key Projects (*Nieuwe Sleutelprojecten*) for the HST stations Amsterdam South, The Hague Central, Rotterdam Central, Utrecht Central, Arnhem Central and Breda.

The Utrecht project is one of the most controversial of these schemes. More than twenty years in the planning, the redevelopment of Utrecht Central Station and the surrounding area can finally begin. Although the project is a unique response to the Utrecht context, we believe that the approach developed in the masterplan is generic enough to be reproduced in other complex HST station areas.

The current masterplan for the Utrecht station area is the outcome of a lengthy process that started with the Utrecht City Project (UCP). The UCP masterplan received the green light back in 1998, but was abandoned in 2001 following a tumultuous municipal election in which *Leefbaar Utrecht* (a local political party) won a landslide victory. In fact, the UCP was hamstrung before the election by the fundamental problem of creating a fully shared land development bank, based on the false (or far too optimistic) assumption that the public and private parties could have equal interests and complete the various parts of the plan over the same time period. The private partners found themselves bearing risks in the realisation of a new public transport node over a period of ten or twenty years. All those involved initially believed in this construction because it seemed to be working for the huge Leidsche Rijn extension to the west of the city. But the difficulties there proved to be much less complex than they were in the city centre, not least because restructuring an existing environment has much more impact on people than a greenfield development.

More than twenty years in the planning, the redevelopment of Utrecht Central Station can finally begin



- Legend**
- Pedestrians / cyclists
  - Cycle path / City Corridor
  - Motor vehicles and public transport
  - Rail tracks and platforms
  - Water
  - Bridge, exact location to be determined
  - Building area, incl private open space
  - Study area
  - Pedestrian area
  - Public space, building permitted on part of site
  - Centre Boulevard pedestrian route
  - Other pedestrian routes
  - Underground vehicle access

## An additional element is the restoration of two major historic waterways

Grid Map 'Rasterkaart'. (source: HKB)

### REFERENDUM

The winner of the 2001 election, Leefbaar Utrecht, declared that the city would solve the problems around the station by itself, rejecting the idea of a public-private partnership for the overall scheme, and announced a referendum offering a choice between two schemes. To run the referendum a small municipal project office was set up with representatives from the relevant local authority departments. In addition, communication agency Total Identity made an important contribution to the communication of the referendum.

The choice in the referendum, held in 2002, was between two schematic plans, 1 and A. In our opinion these plans differed mainly in the role to be played by the city council. Scheme 1 comprised a compact development with a large volume of real estate to be realised around the station by NS (Dutch Railways), owners of the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre, and Royal Dutch Jaarbeurs, owners of the large exhibition and conference centre to the south-west of the station. Because the city council owns just a small part of the area of this scheme, it would be dominated by the private parties. Scheme A covered a larger area and involved a more extensive reconstruction of public space, especially the area around Westplein, the 'square' at the head of the small-scale nineteenth century Lombok neighbourhood to the north-west of the station area. Although this scheme was described as green and spacious, the building programme in both schemes was the same. The outcome of the referendum was a convincing endorsement for Scheme A, which then became the basis for the next step: the design

of a masterplan for the railway station area. Before discussing the contents of the masterplan, it is important to stress that this was going to be the fourth round of plans for the area. As well as addressing the general questions of urban redevelopment of this type and scale, the City of Utrecht was determined that this time the plans could be implemented. They would have to incorporate both public and private interests in a realistic and transparent way. The resulting masterplan is a strategic document that contains the following elements:

- the Grid Map (*Rasterkaart*), the new development framework defining the basic spatial scheme for this part of the city and clearly distinguishing between public and private areas;
- the Programme Map (*Programmakaart*) allocating the different types of development;
- the Public Space Map (*Openbare Ruimtekaart*) indicating the types of public space and the overall traffic scheme.

The first map can be seen as the basis for the zoning plan that will provide legal certainty to all parties. The second map is the prelude to the implementation agreements between the city council and the private parties. The last map shows what the citizens of Utrecht and the investors may expect from public space and traffic management.

### DEVELOPMENT SCALES AND DESIGN RULES

An important goal of the Grid Map was to provide a clear framework for a plan consisting of realistic units for development in the wider





Masterplan 'Visiekaart'. The red arrow indicates the City Corridor; the green arrow indicates the Centre Boulevard.

#### DEVELOPMENT AXIS

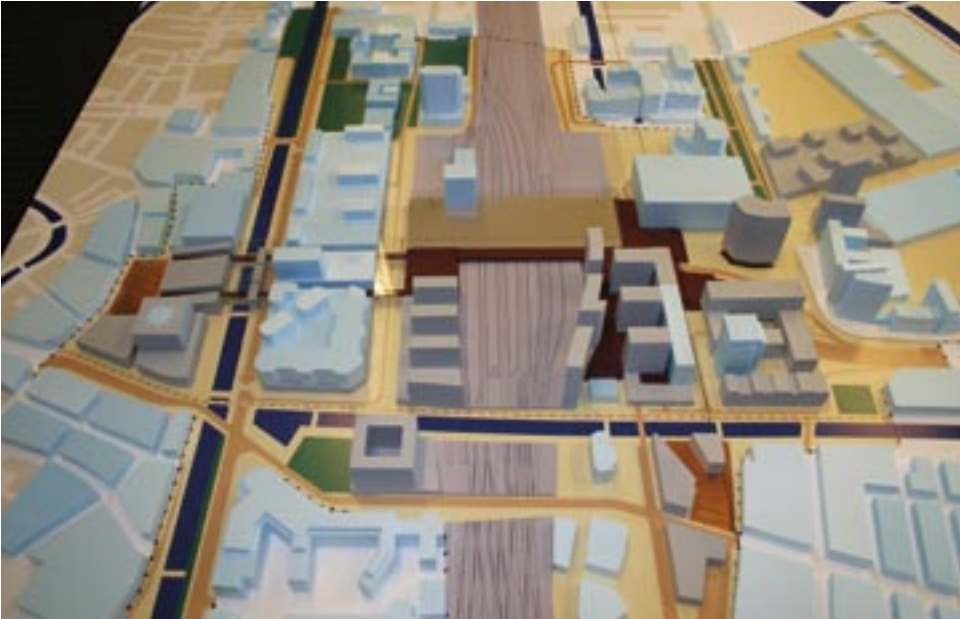
Two lines form the spine of the plan for Scheme A: the Centre Boulevard and the City Corridor. The most difficult nodes and the biggest investments are found along these lines. On the Centre Boulevard these are the connections between the elevated level of the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre and the new Public Transport Terminal with the surrounding floor of the city. On the City Corridor a solution has to be found for the traffic 'jungle' around Westplein, the tunnel under the railway yard and a water connection between the Catharijnesingel and the Leidsche Vaart.

The Centre Boulevard is the development axis that connects the Jaarbeurskwartier (Trade Fair Quarter), the Jaarbeursplein and surroundings to the south-west, through the Public Transport Terminal and Hoog Catharijne to the Vredenburg square to the north-east. Because the new urban extensions of Leidsche Rijn and De Uithof (university, working and living areas) significantly increase the scale of the city, the centre needs to be enlarged. The available space to the west of the railway allows for this enlargement while respecting and not disturbing the historic city centre. The scale designations add to the possibility to relate the transformations to their surroundings in a careful way.

The City Corridor is the improved route for cyclists and pedestrians between the centre and the western parts of the city (the Leidsche Rijn extension). It is part of one of the most important east-west connections in the city and forms the border between the large scale of the railway station area and the small grain of Lombok.

It connects to the historical east-west line in the inner city that links a series of the most important public buildings: the Municipal Theatre, the Janskerk (Church of Saint John) as a cultural centre with its public churchyard, and the Vredenburg music centre, which is to be renewed and extended to become the Music Palace. The city is also looking into the possibility of locating the new City Library in the railway station area.

The Programme Map defines and locates the different types of development. The minimum area of floor space was fixed right at the start. Although the possible amount of permitted additional office space has for a long time been maximised in the region, the masterplan has been made as independent as possible of any high expectations regarding the proposed development mix. Nothing is less certain and more vulnerable to fluctuations in the economic climate than a development programme. The rules and regulations contained in the masterplan are therefore restricted to the type of development programme and the desirability of certain functions in specific locations. For instance, the plan allocates an area to the west of the Public Transport Terminal for the largest scale (XL), provided that public spaces are realised at ground level: entrances, public functions (like the Sony Centre in Berlin, for example), passageways from one street to the next (like the Town Hall in The Hague) and so on. The maximum height has been fixed by the City Council at 90 metres.



Scale model of the future railway station area. (source: HKB)

#### MEANING OF PLACE

The Public Space Map indicates the desired sense of place for the public spaces and the design principles for achieving this. Our vision is that in this type of planning an understanding of the 'meaning of place' is a basic planning principle and essential for the design of public space. The map also depicts an outline of the traffic structure, which influences the whole set of urban networks and could therefore not be drawn up before obtaining some clarity at the higher scales for the city as a whole. The intention is to reintroduce lines of trees

The Leidsche Rijn extension being built to the west of Utrecht will eventually add more than 100,000 inhabitants to the city's population. For the first time, a majority of the city's residents will live west of the railway. With a new connection to the centre of Leidsche Rijn and the A2 motorway both to the west of the city, it makes sense to orientate the station more to the west. The Jaarbeursplein will serve as a square for public events, something that Utrecht has lacked so far.

## Nothing is more vulnerable to fluctuations in the economic climate than a develop programme

along the main avenues (Croeselaan and the extension of the Laan van Puntenburg) and along the reopened Catharijnesingel canal. The remainder of the area will consist of normal streets. The gems in the network are three public squares: Vredenburg to the east of Hoog Catharijne – renewal; Jaarbeursplein to the west of the station – metamorphosis; and Westplein at the head of Lombok – the regained square. The first is seen as the living room of the city. The second will become the large entrance space to the Public Transport Terminal (around 100 million travellers per year) and the transition space to the Jaarbeurs exhibition and conference centre (around 150,000 pedestrians per day). The third will restore the connection between the city centre and the Lombok district, which has been cut off from the centre by major road arteries for 40 years. The most expensive element of the plan for the City Council is a tunnel under Westplein to create a public space free of cars.

#### PUBLIC TRANSPORT TERMINAL

An important motor for the masterplan is the Public Transport Terminal. Central government funding for the construction of a new terminal, designed by Benthem Crouwel, reflects the national importance of Utrecht Central Station, which is also a stop on the route of the new High Speed Train service connecting the Randstad to Germany. The concept of the planned station is simple and very strong: the new terminal will integrate all modes of public transport and treat them all in the same way. The concourse provides direct access to train, tram and bus services. The transfer system is particularly complex, not only because Utrecht is the central node in the main railway network, but also because it is the core destination and departure point for numerous regional and urban bus services, which fan out in all directions. Despite this multitude of movements, the scheme for the overall terminal is stunningly clear and organises →



Impression of the new station concourse. (source: gemeente Utrecht / ProRail 2006, design by Benthem Crowwel Architecten)

all the flows very effectively. To the east, the terminal will have to be connected to the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre and the Nieuwe Stationsstraat (New Station Street), and to the west to Jaarbeursplein. To free Westplein from all through traffic, the light rail from Nieuwegein will be moved to the western side of the station, parallel to the railway.

After the final assessment of the masterplan by the City Council in December 2005, the spatial ambitions were fixed. Parallel to the political process, contracts were drawn up with the three largest private parties: NS-Poort, the privatised development company of NS; Corio, the owner and developer of Hoog Catharijne; and Royal Dutch Jaarbeurs as the developer of their own land. These contracts, known as bilateral agreements of intention (bilaterale intentie-overeenkomsten or BIO), are the bases for further cooperation. They were signed on the 3 March 2006, just ahead of the local authority election, and are the first in a series of agreements: intention, development and project agreements that are to be signed with each party and eventually for each individual building project.

A statutory structure plan was also drawn up in parallel to the political process for the assessment of the masterplan. Unfortunately, a detailed zoning plan (bestemmingsplan) proved to be a step too far because of the new European rules for particulate matter (PM<sub>10</sub>), which are currently blocking planning procedures throughout the Netherlands. This problem will have to be solved largely by central government. Because Utrecht has been chosen as a pilot project in the search for solutions to this problem, some projects can go ahead. At the moment, mid 2007, work is proceeding on the detailed plans for projects on both sides of the railway: on the city side the new Music Palace and a retail block on the Vredenburg square; on the west side the Holland Casino, a hotel, a multiplex cinema complex

and the new tower extension of the Rabobank headquarters. Not bad at all, given the regulatory situation.

However, it is proving difficult to find an equilibrium between public and private interests along the Centre Boulevard that everyone can agree to. The crossing of the extension of the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre with the Catharijnesingel is burdened by the constant pressure of sky high expectations of financial yields by the owner and a laborious design trajectory involving the City Council. The ambiguous analysis of the problem and the resulting unclear concepts are not bringing the process any closer to a favourable outcome.

#### COMPLEXITY

Another notable development is that the complex planning strategy of integrating different functions for different clients has been reintroduced on the west side of the terminal. There is a proposal for a new municipal office building with its main entrance on the level of the terminal hall, a large volume over the hall itself and a public route through the middle. This has uncovered an issue that we intended to avoid while working on the masterplan: this kind of complexity is directly related to building costs and rental levels. A particularly intelligent architect (Dirk-Jan Postel of Kraayvanger) has been appointed to produce a synthesis for complexity, good design and feasibility within the Utrecht context. His task will not be an easy one.

What gives us hope is that the plan as a whole is not collapsing under the strain of such problems. They can be solved 'locally' by analysing them within their own specific context of either the existing environment or the situation proposed in the masterplan. The credo of the masterplan – repair, connect and give meaning – is holding up well.