The 22nd century starts now
The Board of Government Advisors Agenda 2021 - 2024

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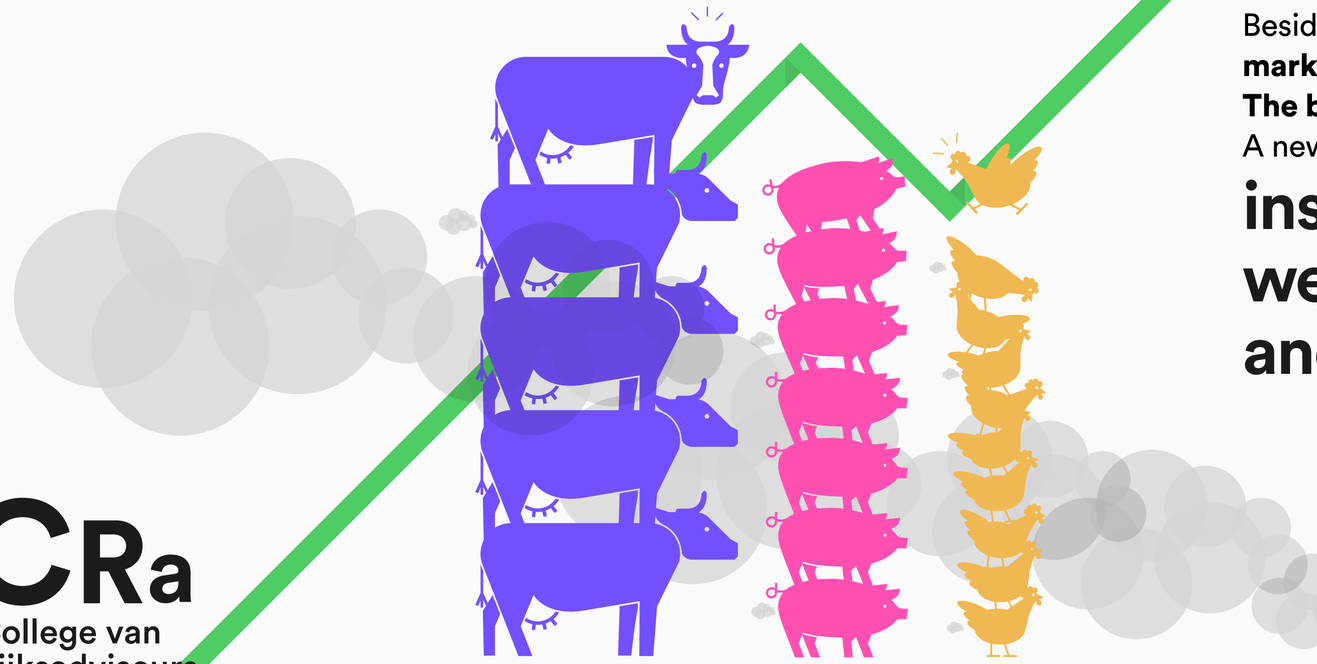
The Board of Government Advisors is using the period between 2021 and 2024 to look ahead towards the next century.

Not in search of interesting vistas, but rather to work backwards in time and identify what action needs to be taken now according to broad-based design studios..

So, let's get down to business. Whether we're talking about climate, energy, mobility, the economy, agriculture, water or social justice:

we are facing massive challenges.

The sixth IPCC report again underlines what previous studies had already highlighted: we cannot delay the transition any longer.



Besides all the positive aspects, **our focus on growth and market forces** has produced too many negatives.
The balance has gone; the narrative has run its course.
A new narrative must take its place;

instead of more and bigger, we need different and better.

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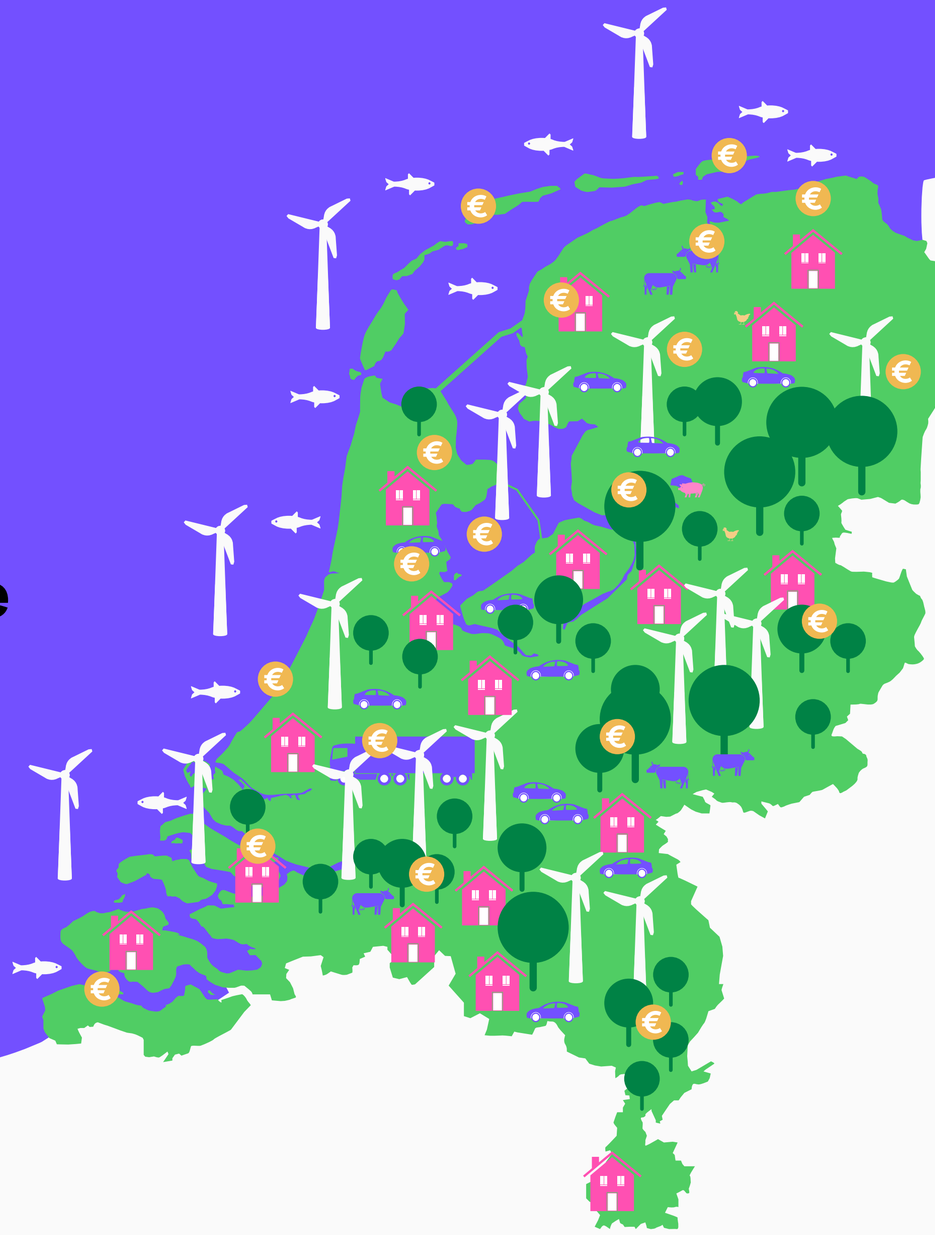
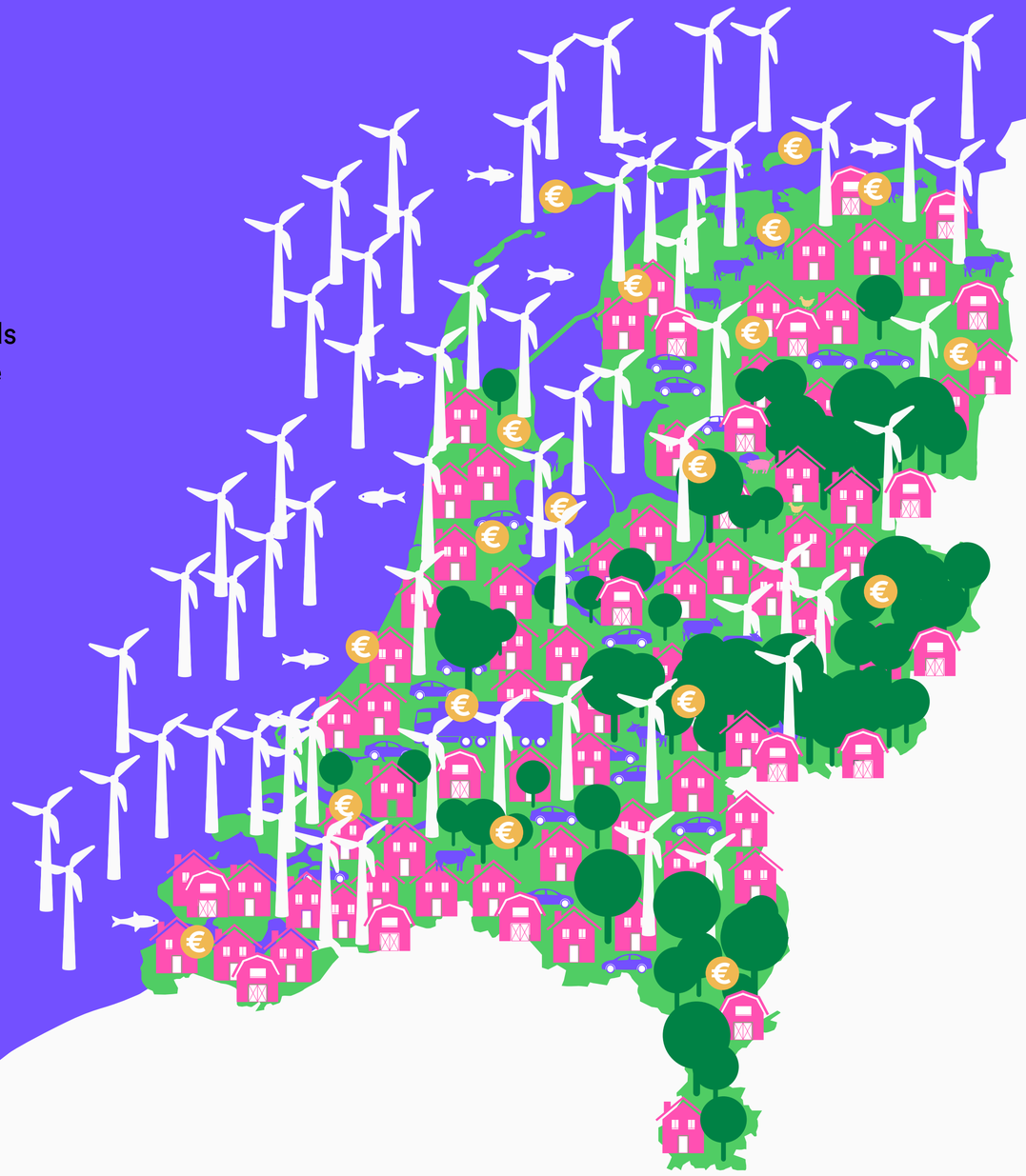
The required measures will affect all facets of our country:

where we live, work and play,
our energy generation and mobility,
the food we grow and where we make space for rewilding,
which public values we pursue and how we earn our money,
who will need to make sacrifices and how we share the pain fairly.



All this in a country that is bursting at the seams.

Our many claims and demands simply don't add up; we must manage our space differently. The Netherlands needs a new plan, we might quickly conclude, but that would be underestimating the extent of the issues and challenges.



The blueprint as a way out was scrapped a long time ago;
not many designers still support it.
A spot on the horizon is the current buzzword,
but even that does not seem to provide the answer demanded by these complex and turbulent times. Five years ago, we would have placed a different spot on the horizon than today, as will be the case in another five years.

Not just a spot;

we need to scan the entire horizon with various scenarios.

And not just for the next twenty or thirty years, but for at least a hundred years. **Sounds a long way off?**
Well, the structure of what is now the Netherlands was largely determined at the end of the nineteenth century. Not that there was a comprehensive plan, but the decisions about rivers, canals, railways and roads taken then still define the backbone of our country. Patterns literally get worn in.

We can learn from that past: **a culturally inclusive approach** helps us rediscover ‘old’ solutions. Landscapes, heritage and proven historical practices allow us to trace the lines from the past.

The combination of looking far into the future and learning from the past allows us to find out what we need to do now. And above all:

what we must not do.

Using broad-based design studios, we want to train ourselves in ‘slow thinking’ that will enable us to act quickly. By expressly introducing the dimension of time, we can learn to keep pace with the constant changes. Which approaches will embrace uncertainty and therefore provide dynamic grip? Which roads will we need to avoid because, in the long term, they are dead ends?

Not only do we want to design the transition, we want to create the conditions for it too.

Sounds abstract?

From our **‘design-based thinking and acting’**, we will explain how we plan to do that, and with whom. But first, let’s look at the **system in which we operate**, because that is the only useful way to look at our space.

The system: three layers

1. Vital soil water system

2. Organisational networks

3. Rural and urban environments: liveable and fair

Fifty years ago, it was landscape architects who started considering the processes that determine our environment. In the Netherlands, this led to the three-layered approach in the 1990s: **subsurface, network** and **occupation**. An emphatically hierarchical order: the natural situation is the starting point, then come the infrastructural networks and finally the way we use the land, whether for housing, business parks, farms or nature reserves.

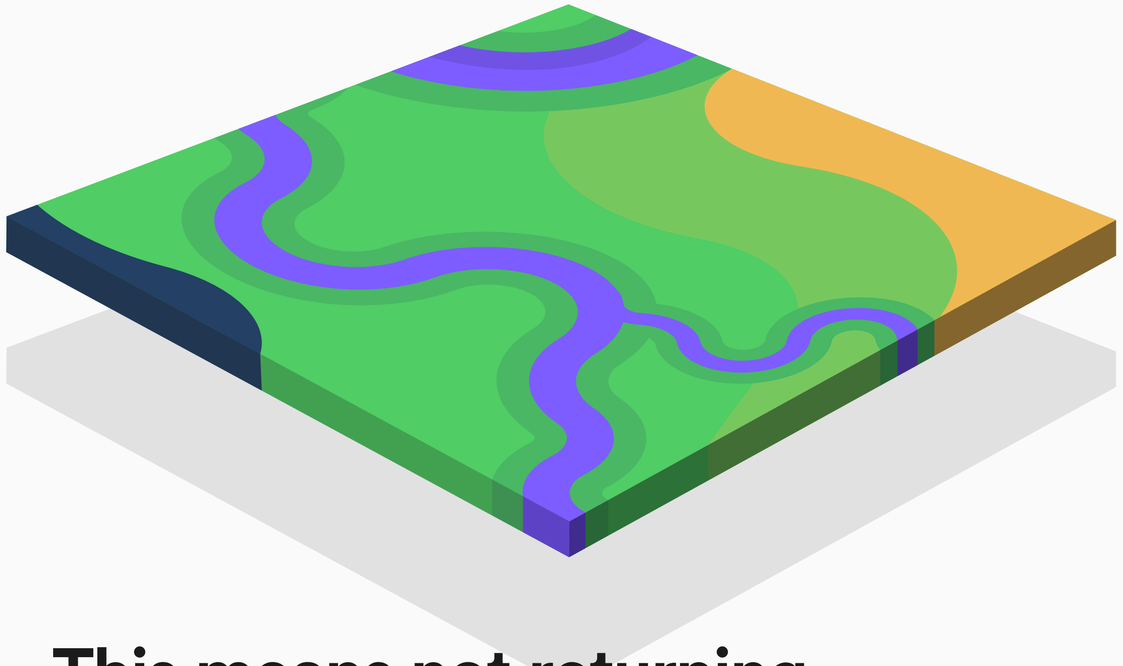
1. Vital soil water system

We are part of a delta:
a system of rivers, streams, sandy soils and polders.

'Everything starts with the soil,' wrote researchers from Wageningen University & Research (WUR) in their *vision of the Netherlands in 2120* – they too are looking a century ahead.

This is the slowest layer, developing over millennia and impacting everything. Even in our democratic way of thinking and acting, the influence of medieval village polders and regional water boards is still apparent.

The soil and water system not only consists of physical and chemical processes, but also biological ones.
In the Netherlands, the first two aspects have prevailed for a long time; however, we have lost sight of the third.
To make the soil and water system safer and more vital – a healthy soil structure and clean drinking water, for example – we need to link our acquired knowledge with ecological insights.



This means not returning to the past, but taking a giant leap forward.

Use our technical ingenuity to work with the force of nature.

Take the Afsluitdijk, which has protected us for almost a century whilst turning the Zuiderzee into a murky freshwater lake (the IJsselmeer). Projects like the Marker Wadden help repair the environmental damage, as does the controlled breach of the Afsluitdijk.

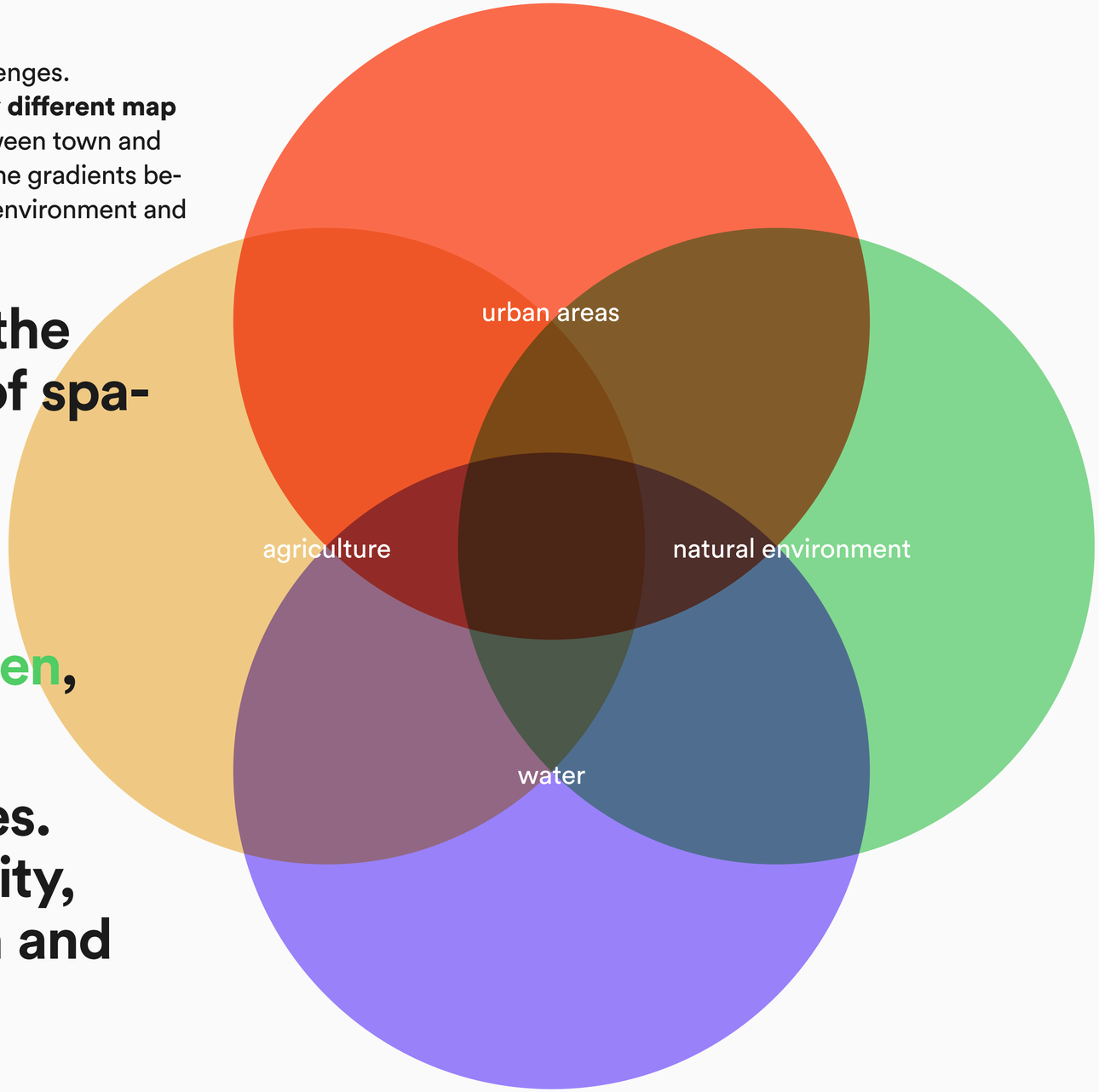
Marker Wadden. Photo: Ben Kuipers.

Vital soil is part of the solution for many major challenges.
By working on nature based solutions, an entirely different map of the Netherlands emerges: the hard division between town and country becomes an exciting transition zone, as do the gradients between water and dry land, and between the natural environment and farmland.

By combining features, the classic visual language of spatial planning -

urban areas red,
agriculture yellow,
natural environment green,
and water blue -

takes on many more hues. And thus greater flexibility, dynamism, stratification and quality.



This growth process will take many generations, but we can start tomorrow by building in the right incentives: each spatial development must also **make the soil and the water system more vital and resilient.**

Nature and agriculture

Classical thinking is binary; we opt for either nature or agriculture. This blocks innovations and the proper coordination of the natural soil and water system.

Combining green and yellow creates forms of agriculture that benefit agricultural and natural biodiversity and the climate. Examples include agroforestry in the form of food forests and strip cropping in conjunction with canals.
We want to help create a new visual language for rural areas by designing area-specific, nature inclusive, multipurpose and future-oriented agricultural systems in spaces around nitrogen-sensitive natural habitats. Our involvement in the new style of National Parks offers a good entry point for this.

Photo: Agroforestry Forward.

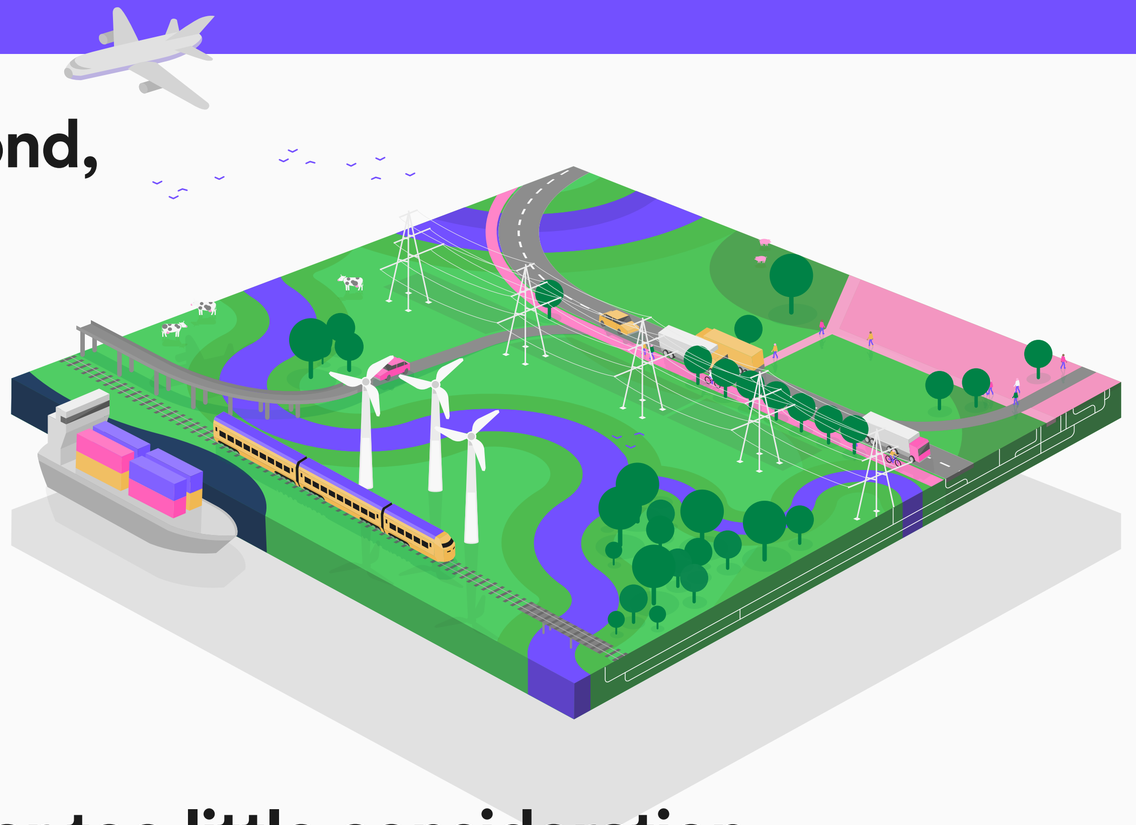
2. Organisational networks

Above the soil, we find a second, faster layer: the networks.

These are the flows of people and animals, goods and raw materials (now often called waste), nutrient flows, manure and food, energy, water and data. Overground, underground and digital systems connect us to each other and to the rest of the world.

The network layer calculates in terms of hundreds of years, and sometimes even longer. The layout of medieval settlements can still be recognised in the street plans of many old towns and cities. A wild path can become a footpath, later a dirt track, an urban road, a trunk road and even a motorway. This is literally the origin of the concept of path dependency, by which economists refer to the self-reinforcing mechanism of a beaten track.

It is the network layer that we have neglected most in our deliberations relating to the future. In recent decades, networks have obviously been extended and new ones installed, like the mobile phone network and undersea internet cables. However,



far too little consideration is given to the driving force of these networks.

What paths will they trace for the future, and will they be the right ones?

Take the **energy transition**: energy companies are scouring the Netherlands for unused land on which to build solar power plants. Not a problem, is the argument, because the solar panels are only there for twenty years. Yes, but power lines are being connected there and transformer stations being built at great expense. Once those twenty years have passed, there will be a network attracting new activities to the site. Not because anyone wants them there, but because of 'network logic'.

Too often, networks are still a blind spot for spatial planners: they draw districts and business parks, playing fields and shopping areas. And, oh yes, some lines to connect them. But the fact that these 'lines' exert an independent power is often overlooked. It is comforting to believe that the Green Heart area has been preserved through clever spatial planning. In truth, this is mainly due to the lengthy postponement and eventual scrapping of the planned A3 motorway from Amsterdam to Rotterdam. Had it been built, there would have been no holding back with the business parks and urbanisation.

Main Energy Structure

The Main Energy Structure Programme (Dutch: PEH) sets out the preconditions and directions for the development of a national energy infrastructure.

The programme uses a horizon of 2050, the year in which the Netherlands has committed to being virtually carbon neutral. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior asked the BSA to identify the common ground between the main energy structure and other long-term spatial challenges.

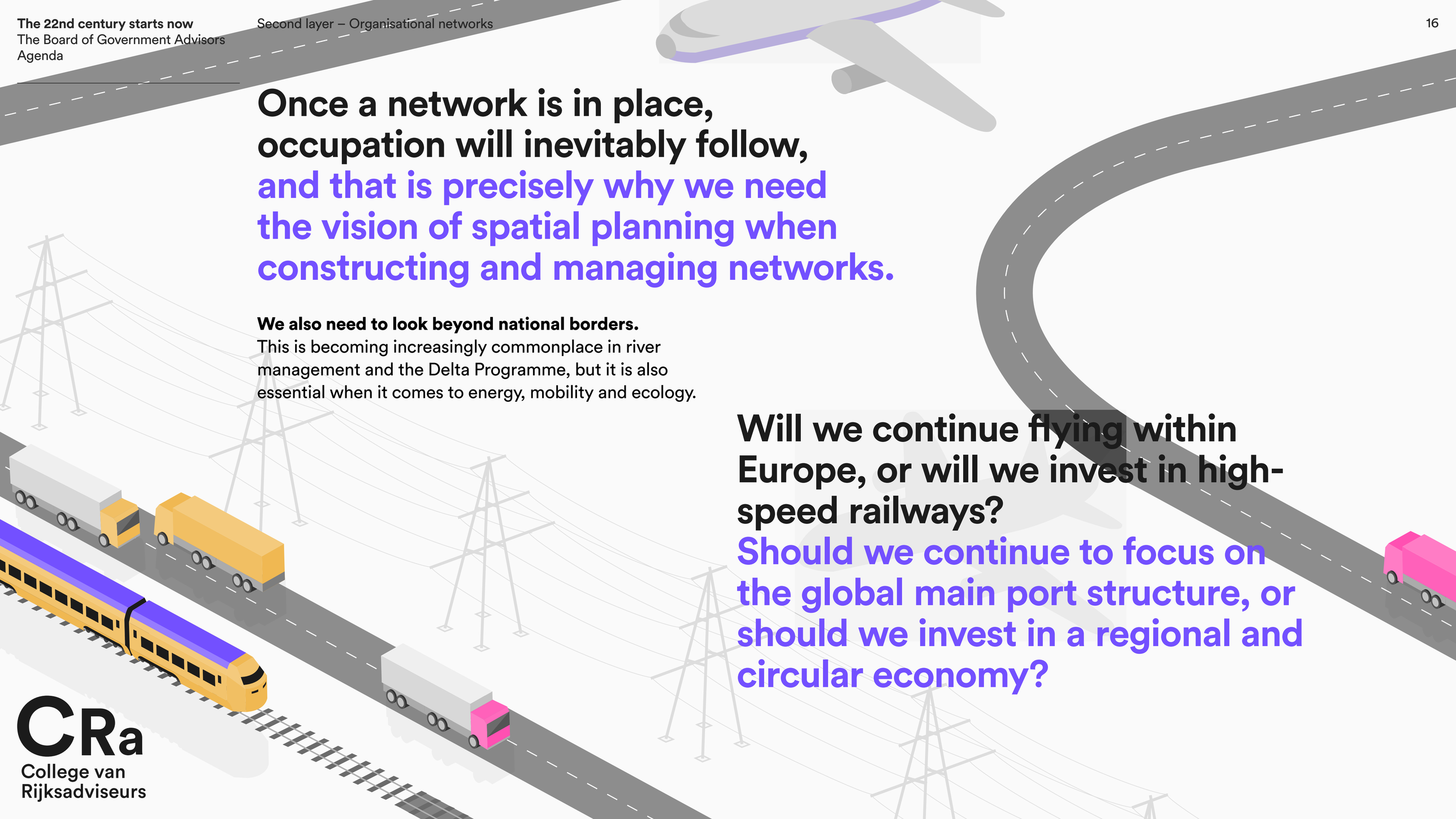
We advise on the spatial development of the alternatives, the Integral Impact Analysis and which directions to choose for developing the main energy structure.

Delfzijl-Weiwerd. Photo: Saskia Koers.

Windpark Fryslan. Photo: nnax.nl

Once a network is in place, occupation will inevitably follow, and that is precisely why we need the vision of spatial planning when constructing and managing networks.

We also need to look beyond national borders.
This is becoming increasingly commonplace in river management and the Delta Programme, but it is also essential when it comes to energy, mobility and ecology.



Will we continue flying within Europe, or will we invest in high-speed railways?

Should we continue to focus on the global main port structure, or should we invest in a regional and circular economy?

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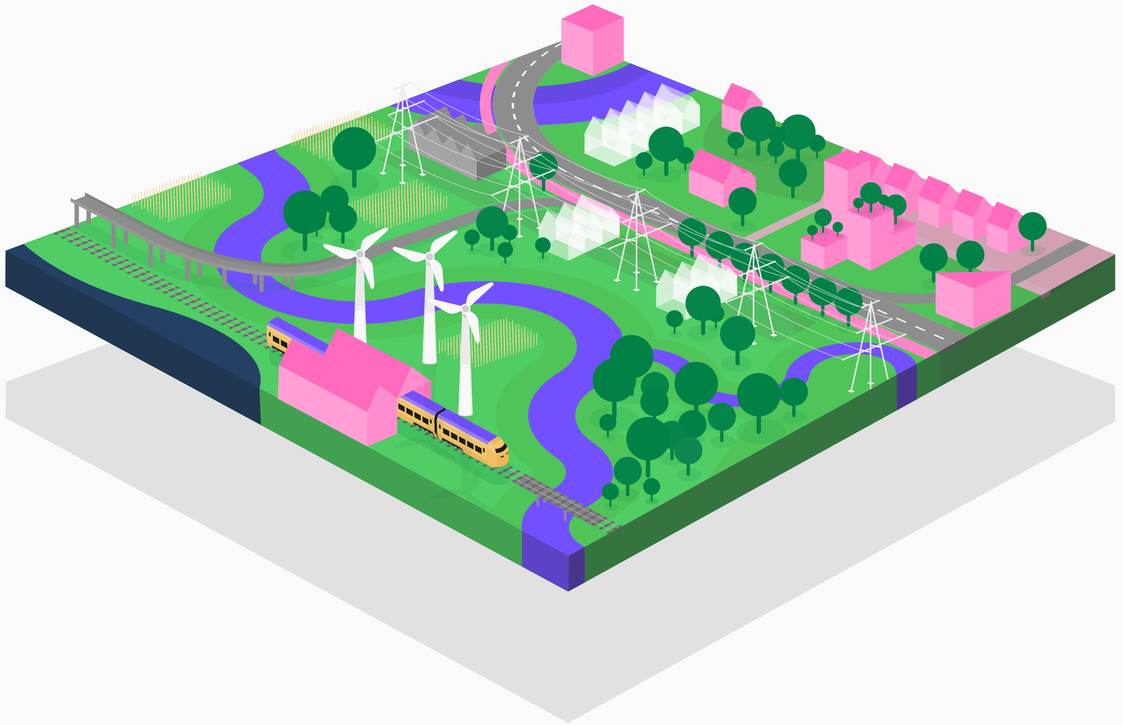
3. Rural and urban environments: liveable and fair

The final layer is that of occupation.

Flats and farms, leisure centres and stations, shopping malls and wind turbines, factories and greenhouses, nature reserves and recreation parks. **The occupation layer has the shortest lifespan.** Although many traces go back to the Middle Ages or earlier, most of what we see in today's landscape dates from the last hundred or even fifty years. This layer is the most changeable, but the subject of the loudest debate.

To take a current example: some people say that we need a million more homes. So shouldn't we simply get on with building them as quickly as possible? If we take a closer look, we discover that the Dutch have an average of 64 square metres of living space each, whereas the Germans and British have almost a third less. At the very least, there is an issue of distribution. And as for the soaring house prices, the financial system plays a role that is hard to overestimate.



Apart from that, however, we do not think that the debate should – or at least not only – be about the homes themselves, but about the countryside and the cities of the future, and about **the contribution that homes can make to them.**

Housing challenge

Housing has always been an urgent topic for the CRa. Making the best use of existing buildings is our motto, and our aim is to achieve fairness.
Examples of activities: together with the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, we published a catalogue of inspiring flexible and sustainable solutions to building density under the title Flexwonen; we use building density narratives to showcase good practices for the revitalisation of existing neighbourhoods; we are involved in regional urbanisation strategies, including the use of the Dashboard Urbanisation; we are working with the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the Dutch Central Government Real Estate Agency (RVB) on housing for resident permit holders; and we are working with the RVB to create homes for young people in vacant Central Government-owned property.

Serie Buurtbanden. Photo: Rufus de Vries.

Countryside and cities are two sides of the same coin: in **the villages and small towns**, too – and perhaps especially there – housing can be a boost to the quality of life and vitality. The organising principle should therefore be proximity rather than accessibility by car or other means. It is now up to the national and regional governments to make wise choices for housing locations in their regional urbanisation strategies and area-oriented accessibility programmes.

Groningen

The CRa is a member of the Environmental Quality Team for the Groningen earthquake area.

The Eemsdelta municipality was hit hardest by the earthquakes caused by fracking, and we are supporting this merged municipality in particular in the restoration and reinforcement operations.

The Repair with Gold programme is one example of connecting the short term with the long term. The reinforcement effort is intended to provide a safe living environment for the affected residents as quickly as possible while at the same time offering the opportunity to address a number of other major issues and therefore to work towards creating a more social, sustainable and attractive area. This way, the required short-term interventions will help to create an attractive long-term future.

Eemsdelta. Photo: Manon Poliste.

Rural and urban environments can be liveable and fair so long as people are given the opportunity to develop and influence them.

It is about trusting the citizen and finding the role that governments should play. It is about equal opportunities and the freedom of choice. And about how one person's freedom restricts another person's choice.

It is essential that we make the best use of our existing towns and countryside, not only embracing our protected landscapes and monuments, but also our heritage across the board.

Serie Buurtbanden. Photo: Rufus de Vries.

We must manage what we have sensibly and economically – in the sense of not being wasteful.

Covid has revealed how vulnerable our society is. And that it is not just about human health, but also the health of the ecosystem around us. Besides the climate crisis, there is also a biodiversity crisis that threatens the vitality of the planet. This demands a different kind of economy, an economy of circularity, reuse and **bio-based, nature-inclusive construction.**

New building culture

Bio-based and nature-inclusive construction, resting on a foundation of our living soil and water system, must be taken out of the pioneering phase so it can become the new normal.

We want to use the programme *A new building culture* to promote bio-based construction throughout the supply chain, from the cultivation of crops to their use as building materials. We are challenging designers and builders at three different building sites to submit design plans for a sustainable, inclusive and aesthetic living and working environment in order to set a new building culture in motion. Using competitions, research by design and pilot projects, we will also demonstrate that nature-inclusive building with bio-based materials is feasible, affordable and scalable.

Strawbuilding neigbourhood Iewan, Lent. Photo: Niek Michel.

Agriculture will play a major role in production, landscape and nature. In fact, its role will be crucial. This will require a transition: the focus must shift from the race that has made the Netherlands the world's second-largest food exporter to an agricultural system that produces healthy food and other circular raw materials, whilst contributing to biodiversity, climate adaptation, meaningful work and landscapes. The kind of agriculture that helps resolve problems rather than exacerbate them, by closing loops, storing carbon, and creating natural production landscapes and soils that can buffer water. The watchword **growth** is making way for **revitalisation**.

Strawbuilding neigbourhood Iewan, Lent. Photo: Niek Michel.

New style of public works

Central Government as steward

Central Government's control over spatial planning is relatively limited these days. The municipalities and provinces have direct control, and land and buildings are often privately owned. However, the Government can make its own decisions about **properties** belonging to bodies like the Central Government Real Estate Agency (RVB), the **Dutch Ministry of Defence**, the Dutch Forestry Commission and the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management (RWS), and can thus influence the subsurface and the network layer. Public property therefore has the potential to be a formidable lever.

Deployment of Central Government-owned property

The CRa proposes setting up a *Community of Practice using Central Government-owned property for the common good.* The central question that needs to be answered is: which principles and frameworks for assessment do we use across the government when deploying land for social challenges?

Cooperation between executive organisations and policy ministries will be needed to get questions and insights on the table, to practice together and to learn from real-world examples. *Learning by doing* will ensure that the Community of Practice becomes a strong network that feeds the inside and outside world with new insights and lessons learned.

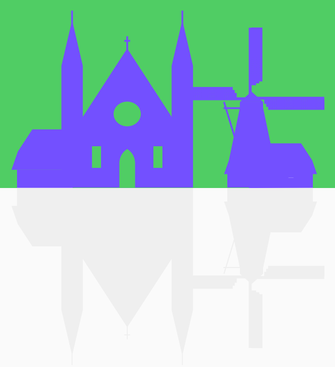
Area Vision. CCSA.
Illustration: NONHIK.

Defence property

Together with the Dutch Ministry of Defence and the RVB, the CRa will investigate how added social value can be created on and around MoD sites. This can create public value and spatial quality for the long term, while respecting military heritage.
The Ministry of Defence's property offers an excellent opportunity to transcend single interests, encourage innovation and connect the short term with the long term.

Klein Heidenkamp Schaarsbergen.
Photo: Gelders Archive Henri ter Hall.

In recent decades, public property has been increasingly subjected to market logic and the RVB has been forced to focus on profitability. Although this has maximised financial returns, it has also resulted in missed opportunities and even to social collateral damage.



We want to use public property: from heritage ..... to nature reserves

not primarily **for short-term financial gains**, but rather to

create long-term public value and environmental quality.

We need to focus on what unites departments rather than on isolated departmental goals.

It is precisely the government's own property that offers an excellent opportunity to transcend unilateral interests, encourage innovation and connect the short term with the long term. Central Government can and must free itself from its self-imposed passive stance that inevitably opens the door to the highest bidder, and seize the opportunity to set a good example itself.

Because these times call for a proactive government, not in terms of trade but action..

Area-based work

Examples of area-based challenges on which the CRa and the RVB are working together are the area around The Hague Central Station and Marineterrein Amsterdam. This is where challenges such as housing construction, mixed use, accessible public spaces and a green, healthy and climate-adaptive environment come together.

As a large property and land owner, Central Government can set a good example in these locations and encourage qualitative area development that will give ample scope for public value.

Marineterrein Amsterdam. Photo: http://marineterrein.blogspot.com/2018/06/

Design-based thinking and acting

Looking back whilst looking a century ahead to know what we need to do now.

This would be an impossible task task if we did not have the skills of designers.

Not with the aim of planning what should come where and how, or even to discover new opportunities, but to explore the numerous potential scenarios and how to approach them today. In other words, we see design as a way of thinking and acting.

Twentieth century designers and engineers analysed goals and preconditions, then solved the puzzle. This approach is no longer sufficient; reality has become too complex and chaotic (and perhaps always has been). The goal should not be efficiency but anti-fragility: systems must not only be robust enough to absorb change – they should preferably become stronger as a result. What we need are designers, engineers and creative thinkers whose work is based on uncertainty, monitoring and permanent adjustment.

In spatial planning, claims, interests and demands can clash. Design-based thinking extends the playing field in terms of time and space, asks uncomfortable questions, challenges frameworks and offers ideals and perspectives.

This **design-based thinking** is linked to design-based action: concrete pilot schemes and projects that create breakthroughs, rapid advancements and openings.

Guided by the soil water system

Vierwaarden is a pilot project that falls within the scope of the Integrated River Management Programme.

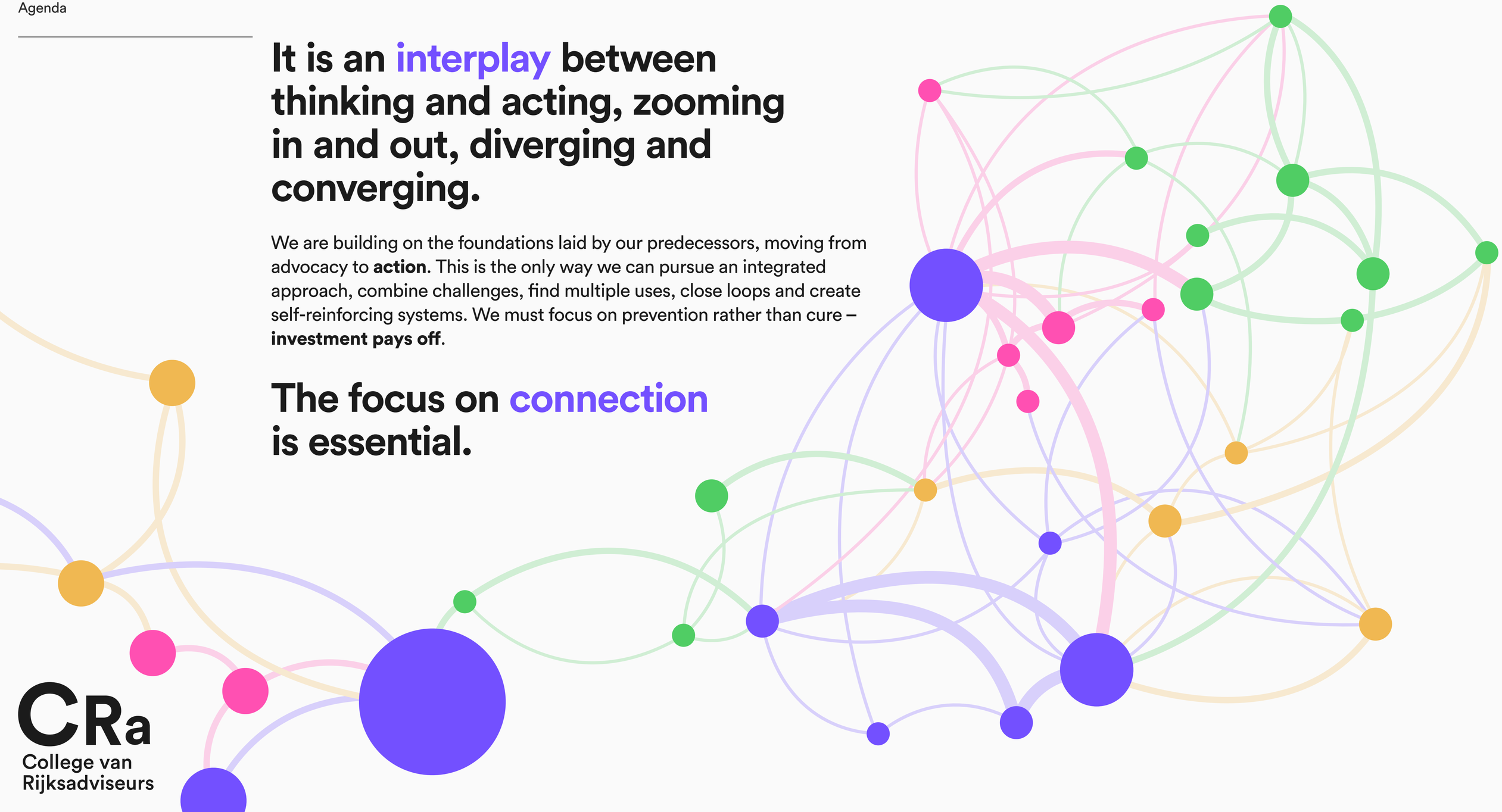
For the area on both sides of the previously undyked River Meuse, we are helping with the development of design variants that will improve water safety as well as spatial quality. Among other things, this requires thinking about sediment management, raw material extraction, system operation and the broader context of spatial development in the Meuse valley. It allows us and our partners in the area to learn what it means to have the soil water system guide our spatial planning decisions.

Project Vierwaarden. Photo: Ilse Verkaart.

It is an interplay between thinking and acting, zooming in and out, diverging and converging.

We are building on the foundations laid by our predecessors, moving from advocacy to **action**. This is the only way we can pursue an integrated approach, combine challenges, find multiple uses, close loops and create self-reinforcing systems. We must focus on prevention rather than cure – **investment pays off**.

The focus on connection is essential.



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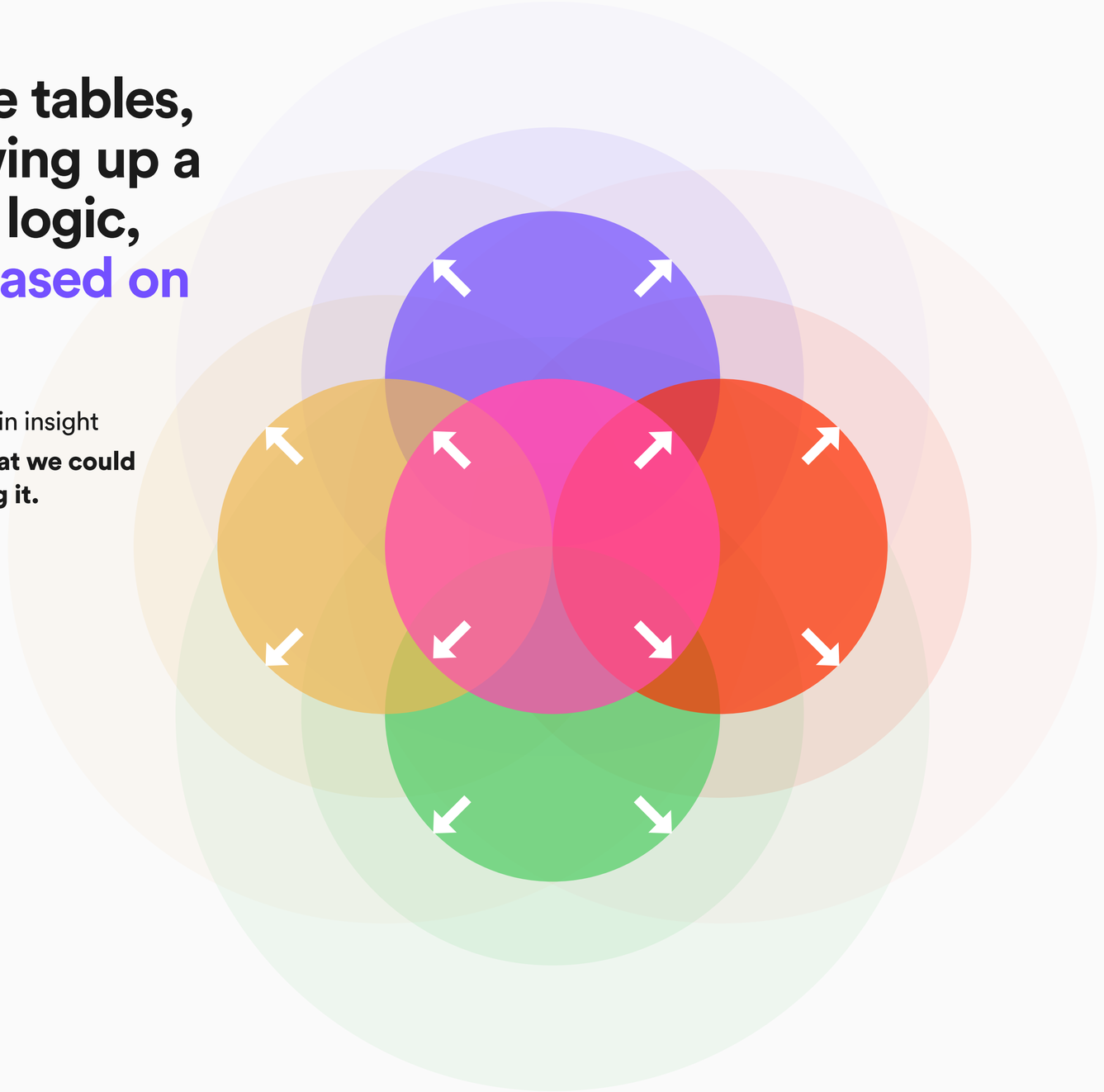
So no separate climate tables, with each sector drawing up a plan based on its own logic, but a joint approach based on the system logic.

Design-based thinking and acting will help us gain insight and explore new directions. **Once we know what we could want, we can start to work towards achieving it.**



Broad-based design studios

Space defines us. It is where we meet, where our lives take shape. Space belongs to us all. Laying the foundations for the twenty-second century whilst embarking on systemic change to make the country fairer will require participation and co-production.

Design studios are our most important tools: places where people can meet and inspire each other, where craftsmanship and design culture can develop and where visions and insights can converge.

Design Studio Region of the Future Photo: Ties Blaauw.

We invite designers, civil servants, scientists, people from civil society, administrators, entrepreneurs and citizens to share ideas, make calculations and draw our common future. And we specifically invite **young generations** to the table.

Design studios are a school for us all, in which we work closely with parties who, like us, look several generations ahead.

design schools

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Young Innovators

We use our Young Innovators programme to stimulate young designers, linking innovative design power to urgent social issues on the CRA agenda.

The young designers are given a specific design assignment and are supervised by the CRa. The 2021 edition started with six assignments. Joint clients are the Architects' Register, the RVB, the province of Noord-Brabant as part of the De Peel NOVI area, the province of South Holland and the municipalities of Dordrecht and Leeuwarden.

We also involve participants of the soil and water traineeship in our Future Studios.

Young Innovator Day 2021.
Photo: Wouter Veldhuis.

To make the leap from design-based thinking to design-based action, we test the studio's findings in society by linking up with other initiatives around the country. This allows us to continue feeding each other with new perspectives and mindsets, gaining insights that will enable politicians and the business community to make informed long-term decisions whilst pressing ahead with specific projects.

We are tackling urgent occupational issues such as urbanisation and agricultural development, which we will obviously be examining in conjunction with the networks and the subsurface.

The showpiece is Future Studio NL2100

a long-term design studio aimed at articulating action perspectives for a futureproof the Netherlands and setting out the strategic choices that will help us achieve this goal. This future studio builds on the Panorama Netherlands and the perspective it offers for a better future.

During the first year, the focus will be on the **network layer,** because thinking about the spatial implications and their correlation has lagged behind. Six networks will play key roles: **water, energy, people, flora and fauna, goods and raw materials and data.**

NL2100

Future Studio NL2100

Over the next few years, billions of euros will be invested in the major challenges we face. By looking far ahead to the Netherlands at the turn of the next century, we can investigate and imagine which choices and investments will help most towards making the Netherlands futureproof.

The CRa intends the Future Studio NL2100 to foster dialogue, knowledge development and imagination about the long term. The Future Studio is a free thinking space, where knowledge, design, policy and society are linked together. It is not just about knowledge; it is about a new way of thinking that focuses on dealing with uncertainty.

The Board of Government Advisors

What you can expect from us

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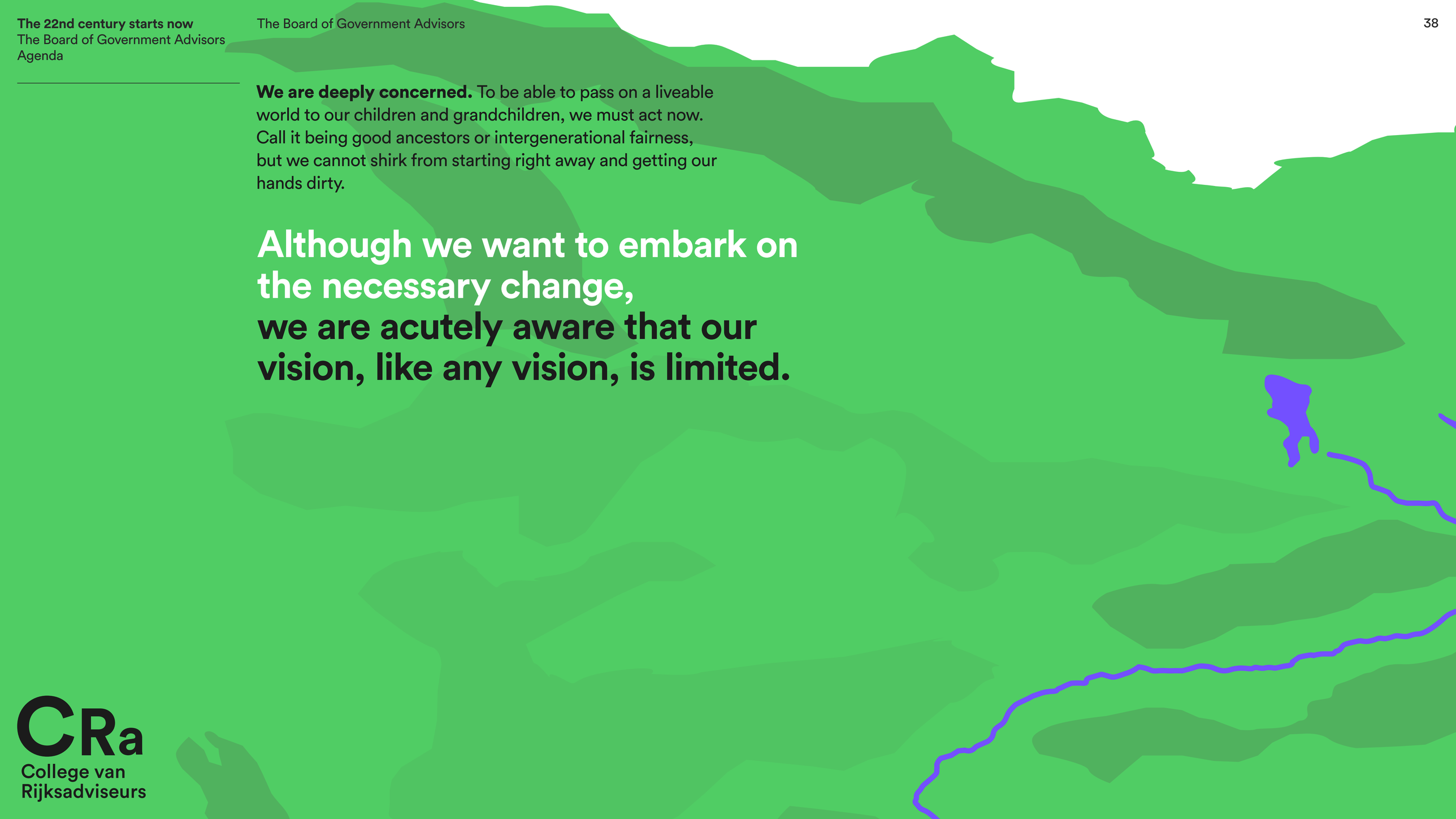
We are deeply concerned. To be able to pass on a liveable world to our children and grandchildren, we must act now. Call it being good ancestors or intergenerational fairness, but we cannot shirk from starting right away and getting our hands dirty.

Although we want to embark on the necessary change, we are acutely aware that our vision, like any vision, is limited.



So the focus is not on a plan, but on the process of design-based thinking and acting, and the search for a shared perspective.

We are convinced that this will enable us to bring such a vision closer, and build up knowledge and understanding of the system. We firmly believe that we can trigger a shift from cynicism to optimism, from distrust to trust, from setting ourselves above nature to thinking and working with nature, of which we are all part. As a New European Bauhaus partner, we are working with **European partners** to shape more harmonious, sustainable and inclusive forms of coexistence.

European cooperation

Together with the Flemish Government Architect Team, we are exploring the possibility of a studio on the future of our shared delta and, in particular, on the ports of Antwerp, Ghent, Vlissingen and Rotterdam.
We will be sharing information with the German Federal Ministry of the Interior about future-oriented, integrated spatial thinking.
In addition, we are preparing an international Future Studio linked to the New European Bauhaus Festival.

We are certainly not taking a detached, neutral position: we will ask questions that chafe, prod at painful pressure points, stress responsibilities and directly challenge rash decisions.

There are no more easy answers; we need tough decisions.

So who are ‘we’?

We are the Board of Government Advisors (CRa) comprising the Chief Government Architect and the two Government Advisors on the Physical Environment.

We are a team that prioritises connection: connecting disciplines, sectors, interests and actors. And that connection obviously starts with us. Which is why, rooted as we are in architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture, we consider ourselves a **collective** board.

The sense of connection can also be found in this agenda: for the first time ever, our advice on Central Government-owned property forms an integral part of the CRa's plans. Because this is the only way to capitalise on the opportunities that Central Government-owned property offers in terms of creating links and cross-connections and boosting the quality of the environment.

What unites us is the belief that spatial designers can help create a joint perspective and bring the desired future closer.

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