Editorial

In October 1998 the Dutch Federation of Aesthetic Control¹ held a one-day conference in Rotterdam to explore how aesthetic control was developing in Western Europe. They invited 'experts' from each of seven countries – Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom to present their country's recent experience with design controls, policies and guidance, and to compare them with Dutch experience. The representatives of each country were joined by a number of Dutch experts who both set the scene for international comparisons and produced a synthesis of Europe-wide trends. Time was set aside for discussion between each international expert and a small group of Dutch practitioners of aesthetic control. The audience for the conference was composed of about 140 members of the Dutch Federation of Aesthetic Control representing many of the 130 aesthetic committees who provide aesthetic advice in the rural communities, towns and cities throughout The Netherlands.

The organizers of the conference set a very precise brief for the international speakers in order to ensure that each responded to the same set of questions.

- How is high achievement in design stimulated?
- How is policy organized?
- How does policy and practice compare with that of The Netherlands?
- What is the role of government in the process?
- How is the independence of the assessing body guaranteed?

Key questions were also identified for subsequent discussion.

- Which responsibilities are best allocated to governments and which to private parties in the process?
- Should there be an examination of building plans and how detailed should this examination be?

- Should government be able to refuse a building permit (planning permission) on the grounds of architecture and/or contextual fit?
- Is it desirable/possible to establish a binding policy framework for the review process?
- What forms of policy are effective?

As is common in most international conferences, speakers interpreted the brief liberally and their papers reflect personal interests, the particular role the expert plays in the aesthetic control process, and the nature of the system and design/planning culture they operate in. So despite the best efforts of the organizers, the key points were not always addressed. Second, there was not adequate time for discussion and it proved difficult to focus and resolve the wide range of issues that Dutch practitioners wanted to debate, particularly when the descriptions of other European systems raised more questions than they answered. Despite this, for anyone interested in issues of environmental aesthetics and design control, it was a privilege to be part of such an event, and fascinating to be in the audience as successive speakers explored the characteristics of their national systems.

Given the barriers of language that prevent non-continental Europeans from understanding such matters, and because the conference was conducted in English, it was felt that the various papers and speeches would be of great value to an international audience. So what is presented in this issue of the journal is a full record of the introductory speeches, lightly edited to improve continuity; a complete set of printed papers, most of which were 'pre-circulated' to the conference delegates, again lightly edited by each participant; and summaries of the discussions that focused on each country's potential contribution. Two syntheses have been provided: the first the text of the closing speech by Professor Nico Nelissen, the key expert behind the organization of the event, delivered as an instant summary of the day and

against the clock; the second my own reflections on the papers and supporting documentation, having had an opportunity to digest the detail of the proceedings and to identify some of the subtleties and nuances of each country's approach.

The editors of the journal, and myself as guest editor of this volume, are grateful to the Federatie Welstand for organizing the conference and for providing permission to use all the conference papers as the basis for this journal issue. Particular thanks should go to Jan Laan, the chairman, and his organizing committee, and to Carry van Weert who played such an important part in making the conference a success and accessing all the printed material and references. Maurice Bogie at the University of Nijmegen also prepared summaries of the group discussions. The editors, and especially the conference organizers, wish to acknowledge the financial assistance

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¹The title of the Federatie Westandstoezicht was shortened to Federatie Welstand early in 1999. The term Welstandstoezicht has been conventionally translated as aesthetic control, but Welstand is probably better translated as aesthetic care. There have been many writers who have argued that 'control' is an overstatement of the process in all countries; but the change of title came after the conference took place.