

Manifesto for  
the work environment  
as an ecosystem  
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## Introduction

Creative Valley in Utrecht is a repeatedly nominated office building that defies all current conventions: it was built during a deep recession, and stayed within budget. Costs were dealt with intelligently during construction, but no concessions were made on high-quality materials or sustainability. And contrary to all the vacancy figures, within three months after delivery it is already fully occupied. The appeal of Creative Valley is that people feel completely at home immediately on entering and they experience an 'open energy'.

Behind Creative Valley is a team that set the work environment as an ecosystem as a condition of its construction. Each member worked from his or her own discipline: project developer, architect, project designer, and adviser on innovative methods. This manifesto has been compiled by the team on the basis of that shared prerequisite, with a finished building as evidence.

The manifesto is a call to create work environments that people want to be in. The logical consequence is less vacancy in existing office buildings and slowing the construction of new business properties. This manifesto is also an objection to the selective hearing displayed by many architects, urban planners and project developers to the voices of future occupants. It is a plea for evolutionary thinking on the building as well as its occupants and their work. Above all, it is the shared vision that offices must and *can* be built differently. Creative Valley is proof of this.

Casper Schuurung - MONK Feekes & Colijn architects

Laurens van Doorn - NIC commercial real estate

Richard Kaagman - NIC commercial real estate

Pieter van der Laan - YNNO, *the* consulting firm for new ways of working

Arnoud Zweedijk - Desque interior concepts

# 1. The work environment as an ecosystem

Creative Valley is a building for companies who work innovatively. These companies not only consist of creative people working in a breeding ground. They are found in telecom companies, retailers or are ICT consultants. By now there are more than enough breeding grounds for the creative industry, but there are virtually no suitable work environments for small and medium-sized businesses wishing to work innovatively. This really needs to change.

Regardless of the target group for which we are building or configuring an office, we start by seeing the work environment as an ecosystem. The term ecosystem was coined by biologists to indicate that an area functions as a whole, so that a more or less fixed composition of species can maintain itself for an extended period. The work environment is really an independently operating whole in which people work at a certain rate, share certain things with each other and thereby maintain each other. The ecosystem may be very large or relatively small.

Like an ecosystem, a work environment has diversity, mutual dependence, individual growth and movement. This requires a building which adapts to the requirements of the ecosystem.

For an ecosystem to function optimally, the accommodations and everything related to them must be able to move with them and set themselves up cooperatively, so to speak. This ability to move with the ecosystem is essentially the sum of *bits, bricks and brains*. The building (*bricks*) must have a clean climate to prevent illness and be good for the climate as a greater whole. It must offer smart spaces attuned to the pace of work and the various work moments. The high-end technology (*bits*) functions as support: for example, a WiFi network that is also suitable for wireless IP telephony. Workers will then have access to their network throughout the building and their mobile phones will automatically become fixed lines when they enter. The work environment must also be nourishing, both literally (i.e. a restaurant) and culturally, by offering mental and recreational benefits. Creative Valley takes cultural inspiration seriously and exhibits varying work by contemporary artists throughout the premises. The innovative work must also be guarded and protected, both literally (*bricks*) and in a human, guiding sense (*brains*), because the transition from traditional work to innovative work is a journey. Innovative works are therefore helped not only by means of a suitable building but also by suitable technology, suitable configuration and suitable transitional guidance.

Incidentally, we do not believe that the ideal work environment for innovative workers need always be stable and balanced; as stated above, species, relationships between species and even entire ecosystems change in the wild. But the composition of many natural ecosystems proves not to be stable and changes over time. The same is true of work environments: external factors such as recession or new technology and internal factors such as the arrival of a new CEO all have an effect. We must therefore realise that businesses are natural systems that seek to continue functioning in the event of change, while retaining as many services as possible. This is precisely what work environments such as Creative Valley must offer: commercial space for an identity and a range of shared spaces and facilities that feel tailor-made. This is something a small professional organisation cannot fund by itself.

Viewing the work environment as an ecosystem is a function of people's needs. We believe that if CEOs, project developers, municipal officials and architects view the work environment as an ecosystem, they will make difference choices about the location, building, configuration, materials and technology. They will think more attentively, in a more future-oriented and practical way. After all, maintaining the ecosystem is the priority.

## 2. The user profile of innovative workers

The basic idea of Creative Valley is a building for companies that want to work innovatively. Many [Cultural Creatives](#) work at these companies. These are critical people who want a better living / working environment and who have a very good idea of what is real and sustainable. They opt for quality over quantity, both at work and at home. They recognise the value of 'we' instead of the old self-centred way of thinking. They are modern, networking professionals working flexibly, for whom social interaction is a primary life necessity. So we kept a few things in mind: sustainability, no concessions on quality (despite the recession) and building according to the sum of the parts. In other words, we needed to produce a sustainable multi-talented building for multiple companies, each with its own identity yet sharing a certain number of facilities and contacts. This would be an environment in which accommodation and business are merged.

Companies that work innovatively are not virtual offices supported by home offices and telecommuting. They are companies that recognise the value of learning and sharing knowledge. They want interaction between employees and they want to build trust. This cannot be done virtually, so an office remains essential. Innovative workers do, however, place other demands on offices: they must offer a choice of different types of workspaces suitable for different types of activity: conferring, reflecting, writing, calling, brainstorming, relaxing.

The first sketch of Creative Valley – a scribble on half an A4 sized sheet – was a building on the principle of a tree with branches and leaves. The trunk provides stability and nutrition, enabling the branches and leaves to grow and bloom. The architecture of Creative Valley was literally inspired by this natural structure. It has an enclosed midsection with heavy structural elements and materials in monolithic material. Boxes are suspended from the midsection that defy gravity and offer maximum views by means of layered glass façades.

The midsection – the trunk – is the nerve centre of the building. It is accessible to all, with public and privileged spaces. The public spaces are the organic restaurant, the patios, the pantries for coffee and tea, reading tables, quiet areas, lounge, foyer and the public work and meeting places. Many contacts arise there naturally between the various users, as in the kitchen of a home.

The privileged spaces are managed by a single user and accessible to occupants and business from the outside in exchange for payment. For example, one tenant, YOUMEET, has made five meeting environments available. These vary from a multimedia lab to an information living room for reflection, and a fully configured auditorium for 30 people. The parent company of another tenant, Xeed, invests in new companies and uses Creative Valley as a literal starting point: promising startup companies can operate an office in one of their boxes until they grow to a maximum of six employees. They then leave the nest and make room for the next one. The building itself also provides fantastic boardrooms with a view of the A2 highway. This shared way of doing business is an important and reinforcing principle of the work environment as an ecosystem.

The boxes are suspended like floating ribs from the spine of the building. These are the private spaces, to be configured by the various tenants according to their own taste and function. These are large, freely configurable floor areas from 127m<sup>2</sup> to 320m<sup>2</sup> with high ceilings. Occupants can regulate and control the light and climate as they wish.

Doing business in a shared way begins with openness, which is why there are narrowcasting screens suspended in the foyer and around each private box so that the individual businesses can present themselves. The huge open staircase functions as a social nerve centre in the building: employees of all companies in the building encounter each other there. The staircase has an upholstered banister that users can sit back against to make phone calls in a calm manner. The work environment otherwise meets all the target group's needs: from a mobile phone that becomes a fixed line on entry to an organic restaurant offering breakfast, lunch and dinner, eliminating the need to order pizza yet again when working overtime. Employees who work a lot outside the building will still find a home in Creative Valley; they can truly open their laptops everywhere in the public spaces to work wirelessly and make calls in peace, and easily walk in to chat with colleagues or other occupants. The hearing range of the various sitting areas is designed for this, so no one disturbs anyone else. Working in Creative Valley feels like working from home for many occupants, but without being at home.

We selected a target group first when setting up Creative Valley: innovative workers. Then we did a target group analysis: what is the profile of innovative workers? We kept that in mind in developing the building. It functioned as a magnet, because the first aspiring users quickly made themselves known. From that point on, there was continual feedback to and from the user.

What does their organisation need? How do their employees move through a building? Should there be room for experiments? What are their ideas on configuration or the choice of materials and design? How do they work? Early adopters of Creative Valley provided their input on configuration, spaces, technology and interiors. As a result, the environment feels like it fits them and is tailor-made, and the building is completely in balance with its users.

We are calling on municipal governments, project developers and urban planners to never again present a mood board before building or redesignating. Instead, they should have a specific target group and a user analysis in mind: what kind of people want to be in here and what kind of work do they do? What qualities do they demand? Within their profile, think about technology, sustainability and mixed functions. After all, why shouldn't they live in an office building as well as work there? Let future users think with you and decide with you. Sometimes these are difficult discussions, but it is the only way to achieve a building that is time-resistant.

### 3. The ecosystem benefits from evolutionary sustainability

Creative Valley has been designed sustainably regarding both the choice of materials as well as in energy consumption: it is a low-CO<sub>2</sub> building with heat-cold storage and it uses sustainable energy. Furthermore, everything in the building can be reused or recycled in the event of demolition. For example, no mortar has been used in the outer façades, but rather 'click and brick' stones that can be used again like Lego blocks.

The wide central staircase encourages the use of the stairs over the lift. This reduces energy consumption and is healthier for tenants. Energy-saving lights are used throughout the building to keep energy consumption as low as possible. The organic restaurant uses food that is produced organically, seasonally and locally.

Although tenants have their own policies in terms of cleaner transportation, compensation for kilometres flown and waste separation, most of them have embraced working digitally. One tenant, YNNO, has even digitised its entire work process. This means that all documents are available in electronic form to all employees at any location with an Internet connection. Mail received on paper is immediately scanned. The result is substantially lower consumption of paper and toner, and employees who can literally work everywhere, wherever and whenever they want.

But they do not consider the sustainability of materials and energy something special – it is just as it should be, certainly in these times. What *is* special is the fact that the building is characterised by its 'evolutionary sustainability': it can handle change. This is because the work environment as ecosystem is dependent on what is happening in a larger whole. The system in the middle of a city is different to one on an industrial estate, surrounded by empty office buildings. Just as people cannot be viewed separately from their environment, ecosystems cannot be either. There are two ways to place ecosystems in a larger whole. The first is to look at the changes in the work environment over time. The second is to look at the relationship of ecosystems to surrounding areas.

In our view, the currency vacancy situation is largely due to the fact that many offices are introverted work environments without an identity and are not 'evolutionary sustainable': they cannot move with the changes in tenants over time. These types of properties emerge when the future occupants are not listened to. No one wants to work in a rigid environment anymore – it no longer fits this century. We

all know a building that disrupts the ecosystem of the work environment: visiting clients irritated by chatting or smoking employees at the entrance, employees complaining that there is no convivial outdoor area. Middle management is amazed that the departments do not visit each other and stay in their little rooms, while the management wonders why senior managers do not show up at the office more often and hold more and more meetings elsewhere. These thoughts and reflections are quite logical, because only 25% to 45% of work hours are spent in the workplace.

The longer a company is out of balance, the more difficult it is for people to grow, and therefore for the company to grow. The more performance at a company becomes person-dependent, the more important it is to have a work environment that suits the individual employee. After all, it is the results of the work that count, not the time spent on them.

Creative Valley escapes from the old, industrial way of working and is perfectly able to deal with a shrinking and growing number of tenants. Even if all of the current tenants were to disappear due to the recession, the property is a beautiful environment for a hotel, shopping centre, flagship store or academy (such as a design academy). This is because we always aim for a high intrinsic value for the building, as it will then be able to transform itself as the times require. 'Vacancy' is not a word found in our dictionary. We always keep Amsterdam's canal-side houses somewhere in mind: some of them have been there since 1615 and have served as warehouses, homes, poorhouses, schools, offices, galleries, museums or hotels. To this day, they are being used intensively and are beautiful to look at. So the building itself must be 'evolutionarily sustainable' if it is to have intrinsic value.

The relationship between the ecosystem and the surrounding areas is another important factor. In other words, the location determines much of the success of the work environment. Just as organisms move from one area to another, so do people and businesses. They may have different reasons for doing so. Every area has advantages and disadvantages. Creative Valley is not located in a nature preserve or in the centre of town amid shops. It is on the Papendorp site, right next to the widened A2 highway, making it very accessible within the Randstad for drivers, as well as being accessible by public transport. The urban planning design for Papendorp, by West 8 and the Wissing firm, won the Rietveld award. It is a park in which different buildings are spread out over the area.

The whole site has an open feel, mainly because parking occurs out of sight. Papendorp has been developed with the surrounding area and to architecture in mind. It provides good support of its own. This is just as in nature, where support is partly determined by accessibility between areas, the amount of space, places where energy for growth can be obtained, etc. Building in an area with an evolutionary quality and good support is therefore highly preferable.

In addition to the quality of the building and the environment, the configuration of the property must have an evolutionary quality. Achieving this requires continually shifting between welfare, ergonomics, productivity and design; realising that the boundaries between living, working and recreation are blurring. Workers must be able to go from their offices to the outdoor patio in a very natural manner, or from the restaurant to the boardroom. Natural development, liveability, communication and emotion are aspects included in interior concepts that are 'evolutionarily sustainable'. This is because noise and privacy must be considered, while also promoting interaction between people. The interior should be able to adapt to growth or shrinkage without the employees' sense of feeling at home being compromised. And it is desirable, certainly on business estates, for employees to maintain contact with nature and the outside world.

In our opinion, evolutionary sustainability should be a basic principle of future construction/renovation and office configuration. This means not viewing cradle to cradle configuration as a theory but putting it into practice; incorporating heat and cold storage in plans as standard practice. It means viewing the changes that tenants experience as fact, not as fiction. And it means having intrinsic value imprinted on one's view. Only then can work environments be built where people feel at home. Creative Valley is 'the proof of the pudding'.