

Landscape under control

As part of our special edition of *Topos* about the status quo of the Wageningen Landscape Planning and Design education, there has been a discussion between the chairs of socio-spatial analysis, landscape planning and landscape architecture about some major issues in our field of study. For spatial analyses, Henk de Haan, vice-professor of the chair, took part in the discussion. Professor Arnold van der Valk participated on behalf of the chair of land use planning and Professor Jusuck Koh was to show his point of view as the head of the chair of Landscape Architecture. This article is a reflection of the discussion. The discussion was about the meaning of landscape and how to deal with the landscape now and in next decade. So read how our future landscape will look like, or is it impossible to predict this...

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Heads of chairgroups in discussion

Planning on European scale

As Europe is becoming one, a need for agreements concerning some major political topics at European level arises. Many of the plans, regulations and laws that are the result of this European policy have an indirect influence on the environment. For example the definition of the main infrastructure, the subsidizing of some areas, the protection of biodiversity and the creation of nature reserves all change the landscape, or offer possibilities to change it. Next to this indirect influence, nowadays attempts have been made to develop spatial plans at European scale. And therefore it is now the moment to ask ourselves what we think of this development. Is the making of spatial plans at European scale beneficial for the environment? For the landscape we live in? Is it even possible to make spatial plans at European scale?

Jusuck Koh thinks that it is neither feasible nor desirable to design a landscape master plan at European scale. But he goes even further; as he states that the same applies for landscape plans on the metropolitan scale, which is a hot item in the Netherlands now. Instead of a master plan, Koh believes that at this scale an acupuncture design combined with an open end approach is more desirable. One could design master principles or

only design on strategic locations which he calls footprint design.

Henk de Haan believes that regulations at European scale will have a lot of impact on national and regional landscape. Often this impact will be indirect and difficult to predict. Making plans at European scale more explicit would therefore be favourable, because it allows us to have more control over the changes in our landscape. When we know how regulations for a higher scale will change the landscape at a lower scale it would be possible for people to choose either for or against this change and this would be more democratic.

On the other hand, De Haan believes a landscape policy at European scale to be impossible. There can be some agreement on the preservation of biodiversity or the protection of species. But the way we use the landscape, the way we built in our landscape are all cultural values and not possible to regulate at European scale. This for example is a reason why Norway is not part of the European Union. They fear that by the power of the majority the use and appearance of their landscape would change and lose its regional character and identity. Yet the fact that countries are becoming more aware of the value of their own landscape when facing the urge to think more global is something that De Haan sees as something positive.

Arnold van der Valk thinks that creating a Landscape Framework at European scale can be quite useful. Like the others, he rejects the idea of an actual master plan or blueprint. To have regulations or laws at European scale that prescribe countries how to deal with their landscape would be regarded as a too strong intervention and even a form of oppression. Nonetheless, Van der Valk does see a great advantage in the discussion with other countries about landscape planning. As each country has a different perception of the landscape and another way of dealing with it, a lot can be learned from each other. The Netherlands for instance, is a country which has a long tradition of spatial planning. Other countries, often underdeveloped, have no rules or systems to protect cultural or ecological landscape values. Therefore they might learn from the Dutch way of dealing with the landscape. Already several European symposia about landscape have been organized, and there even is an European landscape convention especially concerned with this topic.

Constructions of reality

When discussing plans for the landscape at European scale, one would think that the large scale would be the reason why making plans or regulations at this scale is not possible, or at least difficult. Yet when the discussion between different countries started, one finds the true reason; communication. In each country landscape has a different definition as well as a different role within its culture.

Arnold van der Valk: The word landscape is a problematic concept. It is a social construction of reality and carries different meanings in different countries and in different moments in time. We should therefore be careful in using the word. It was first used in the Netherlands when the government realised the loss of cultural and natural values because of the reclamation of land for agriculture and the expansion of the cities. From this time the government started to intervene in the way the land was developed. This was the task of the local government; later

the provincial and national government became responsible as well. Nowadays we are searching for a justification of our intervention in the landscape, while the reasons for this are determined long time ago.

Jusuck Koh sees landscape as a key concept. Landscape is more than land or space, which are scientific geographic terms that can be measured or counted. Landscape has more to do with cultural, psychological and emotional values. It is not a quantitative but a qualitative concept. In his point of view landscape is not static; landscape is a process, a dynamic living organism. When we deal with the landscape, we should keep this in mind and be more careful with it.

Henk de Haan: Landscape is a word that is being used by people who discuss the landscape at a more distant, reflecting point of view, like politicians, landscape professionals and artists. People, who live or grow up in a landscape, do not use the word landscape. They use the word land.

Another difference can be seen between countries. "Landscape" has a different meaning in different cultures. For instance in South European countries where civilization took place in the cities, the rural landscape is seen as a lesser, even hostile place, while in North European countries, the rural area was the centre of civilization, and carries an almost sacred, holy meaning. Because of these differences it is difficult to make an European language of "Landscape". People relate different to "Landscape" in different cultures but also over time: Landscape can be seen as an utility for production or as the expression of power, but the aesthetic experience, the maintaining of biodiversity and the landscape as a tourist attraction are new functions we see for the landscape. With all these differences, what is the "right" way of looking at the landscape? How should the future landscape of the Netherlands look like?

Dutch landscape goes international

What is the Dutch landscape in the eye of the other countries and can we even speak of a Dutch landscape?

Henk de Haan brings up the idea that from an international perspective the Netherlands is not an overcrowded country, on the contrary: it is a very thinly populated large city. Looking from the perspective of other countries can help us moderate our own view. Instead of hopelessly trying to protect the countryside and seeing our country as being too full, a more positive attitude towards it could be taken. Then we can be open to more creative, problem solving ideas.

Arnold van der Valk believes that in the midst of all these different conceptions about landscape, it is not possible for a professional planner or architect to tell what the future development of the landscape will be. The view of the professional is a private one, and just as valid as any other idea from a different perspective. It is therefore important to keep discussing about it. And not only within the Netherlands, other countries should have their say as well on how the Dutch landscape should look like in the future. As the Dutch landscape is partly their possession. This feeling of ownership over other countries than your own has been the result of travelling and studying landscape in neighbouring countries. Think for instance about your favourite holiday destination. You would not like it, when this landscape would change in a dramatic way, and you would like to have something to say about the changes or plead for the conservation of it. The same can be said of foreign people that visit the Netherlands. This is a private opinion of a would be European citizen. The question is of course, whether the majority of the people in the Netherlands and other EU member states can relate to this sentiment. Van der Valk fears they can not.

Jusuck Koh states that the borders we still imagine around our country are not legal or valid anymore, since we have become part of Europe and have opened our borders. We should not try to keep control over what and who comes in and goes out of the country. Yet we are so used to think of the Netherlands until the borders that we don't look beyond. Koh illustrates this phenomenon with a story:

There was a community of a village that wanted to buy an elephant together. They bought one and put him in a cage. They enjoyed the animal, but after a while they started feeling sorry for the animal, because it kept walking back and forth in his cage. The community raised some money and bought the elephant a bigger cage. But to everyone's surprise the elephant being so used to the small cage kept walking back and forth in the same place. This story is an illustration of how the way of thinking in past limitations can be a cause of missing many opportunities.

About the rural landscape

From the Dutch landscape in international perspective to a more practical search for the future function of the rural landscape. Now that agriculture has become a struggling sector in the Dutch landscape, the question who will take care of the landscape in the coming decades arises.

Arnold van der Valk holds the opinion that market forces could be helpful in the conservation of open space. In fact this is happening already. Schiphol paid, by way of compensation for the construction on new landing strips, large amounts of money for the conservation of green space in Haarlemmermeer. And banks are sponsoring sheep herds and nature conservation organisations. The image of the ugly capitalist smoking a big cigar is no longer valid in these days. Leisure for example, is major business. In many rural areas leisure industry has taken over traditional agricultural activities as a source of income for the local population. Preservation of ecological and cultural values in the landscape is not charity but prudent economic investment.

Jusuck Koh agrees that we should not always think of the consumer as if he is selfish and irresponsible, this is just one scenario. The consumer can also be intelligent and responsible. Selfishness is not a threat as long as it is balanced with the community. The market will strive for a good landscape environment, as a healthy landscape means a high quality of living. This can be a reason why companies move to the Netherlands, the landscape

in this way becomes a commodity. Conserving the landscape can be done by development. From our Dutch tradition we are used to think of the rural landscape as being permanent and we are afraid of too many changes in the landscape, yet change is inevitable in life.

Henk de Haan is in favour of giving more power to the market, but mentions that most dynamic developments are taking place in the city. These changes are the reason why cities are vibrant and interesting places. The rural landscape has its own dynamics, but with the decline of agriculture and its new functions as a consumption landscape, it is in danger of becoming a reservoir for politically and ideologically defined traditions and identities. If we want to develop the rural area and make place for innovation, we first have to move away from the cultural paradigm of the rural landscape. This change of perspective might take many years.

Under-planning

We are searching for answers and solutions to define our future landscape. But should we? Maybe the one thing we need to do, is to let it go and let the landscape evolve itself.

Jusuck Koh thinks that there is enough planning in the Netherlands, there is even too much planning. Everything in the Dutch landscape is planned. Maybe it is time for the government to choose for underplanning and leave more possibilities for the population to create the Dutch landscape themselves. This under-planning is not the rejection of control, it is only another way. Instead of imposing rules, the government points us to our value, norm system. Like a father that decides not to tell his son to be home at a certain time, but to tell him to act responsible. Control is sometimes needed. You can see this in less developed countries that just start to develop. There is a great need of control and rules in this country. Other countries that are more developed need less control, the system keeps itself working. In his opinion, the Netherlands is such a country with a mature planning-system. Yet the country is also unique

because of its density. And when a place is more crowded, more rules are needed to avoid inefficiency.

Henk de Haan argues that Dutch planners and policymakers are afraid that underplanning will cause "verrommeling" or chaos; as we see in Belgium. He believes that this fear is based on a lack of confidence in people's self organizing capacities. Planning is based on a long tradition of disciplining behaviour, creating order and purification of the environment. In order to really understand the issues and conflicts, there should be an in-depth debate on the boundaries of "in- and out-of-place" objects and behaviour.

Arnold van der Valk believes that this fear for disorderly and unruly land development was the reason why spatial organisation was brought into live by the government in order to control the development of the cities as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Although the need to impose order to the environment is something that is seen in many countries or cultures, Van der Valk thinks that this is valued higher by the population than in most other countries. That is why we cherish an elaborate system of spatial planning.

Image of the Netherlands

In the beginning of the discussion the three participants were asked to draw what they see as the typical image of the Netherlands and describe it. All three of them drew a typical by engineering controlled landscape. This supports the last mentioned statement by Arnold van der Valk that control over the landscape is typical Dutch. Yet during the discussion the talk went in the opposite direction: we should stop controlling the landscape and start practicing underplanning. One could argue that this new direction is seemingly contradictory to the Dutch character and landscape. The actual achievement of this new attitude could therefore be a cause of a long breath...