



A Genealogy of Spatial Concepts of the Dutch National Landscape Het Groene Woud

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Abstract

Het Groene Woud (GW), a rural area in the Dutch province of Noord-Brabant, is designated as National Landscape by the national government. Consequently, the region has to develop a coherent vision for future decisions. This includes the identification of key spatial characteristics of GW. This is complex due to diverse, often conflicting, spatial developments and initiatives, concerning nature, agriculture, recreation, urbanisation and cultural heritage. How to come to a set of 'shared' spatial characteristics? Among other answers, this paper presents a genealogy of spatial concepts, being an overview of spatial concepts for GW of the last three decades. The story of concepts represents geographical and political knowledge; namely, concepts contain the observed and (un)desired spatial characteristics - based on the situation and ambitions of a specific group, at a specific moment and at a specific scale. To construct a genealogy we investigate spatial concepts in several planning and policy documents. We emphasise the context of these concepts in order to distinguish trends and breakpoints in conceptualisation. Spatial concepts range from pattern-concepts to branding-concepts. Above all, most regional spatial concepts are as abstract as national concepts. We also question the use of a genealogical method and the functions of spatial concepts for planning rural regions. Finally, we discuss the use of 'empty' concepts.

Keywords: spatial planning, conceptualisation, interpretative analysis, Dutch National Landscape

1. Introduction

1.1 Het Groene Woud: a unique and dynamic rural landscape

Het Groene Woud (GW)¹ is a diverse rural landscape in the Netherlands. A rural area is an area that has both urban and rural characteristics (www.aesop2007.napoli.it). GW includes several nature areas and rural activities; besides, it is influenced by other spatial developments from the surrounding 'urban triangle' of the cities Tilburg, Eindhoven and 's Hertogenbosch. GW is situated in the South of the Netherlands in the province of Noord-Brabant. According to a European urban-rural typology GW is most urbanised in comparison to other European regions, typified by 'high urban influence - high human intervention' (Schmidt-Seiwert et al., 2006; p. 33). Moreover, GW is part of a European region with a 'high share (60% and more)' of intensive agriculture (*ibid*, p. 33). GW is a dynamic area in European context; meanwhile, it is a unique landscape in Dutch context. In actual Dutch spatial policy GW is defined as a 'National Landscape', due to its distinctive combination of cultural heritage and nature elements, as such 'telling the story of the Dutch landscape' (www.minlnv.nl). GW consists of 32.000 hectares, with a core of nature of about 7.500 hectares, including forest, marshland, heath land and agricultural cultural-landscapes; it is one of 20 Dutch National Landscapes, which together cover about 20 percent of Dutch total surface (*ibid*, www.groenewoud.com, Provincie Noord-Brabant 2006a&b).

¹ The English translation of the Dutch 'Het Groene Woud' is The Green Forest, abbreviated in this paper as GW.

1.2 Consequences of the National Landscape designation

The Dutch government has designated GW as a National Landscape, which will influence future planning activities in the GW area. Some consequences of the label National Landscape, considering spatial developments and responsibilities, are defined in the Dutch National Spatial Strategy document. This strategy, adopted by the Dutch government in 2006, provides the method of governance of national spatial planning of spatial developments in order to contribute to ‘a strong economy, a safe and liveable society and an attractive country’ (Ministerie VROM, 2004a, p.2).

National landscapes are areas that have internationally exceptional and nationally characteristic qualities of landscape, cultural history and nature. These qualities must be preserved, sustainably managed and strengthened where possible. The basic principle here is preservation through development: as long as the core qualities are preserved or strengthened (...), then spatial developments are possible within national landscapes (MinVROM, 2004a; p. 19/20).

Provinces are responsible for elaborating and implementing the policy for National Landscapes (Ministerie VROM 2004a & www.nationalelandschappen.nl). So far, June 2007, the province of Noord-Brabant, responsible for GW, has made a temporary-decision about GW’s geographical boundaries and has produced a draft implementation plan (Provincie Noord-Brabant 2006a&b). In the implementation plan is written down how the province deals with its key spatial qualities (www.nationalelandschappen.nl). The National Spatial Strategy identifies some key qualities for GW (box A). The identification of these basic spatial qualities is in line with the task of the national government to ‘guarantee proper spatial quality standards at the national level’. Subsequently, ‘[l]ocal and regional governments have the same responsibility at their own scales’ (Ministerie VROM, 2004a; p. 6).

We argue that the responsibility of guaranteeing qualities at regional scale goes beyond the question *how* to secure national defined qualities. Rather, if regional planners firstly step ‘back’ and consider the details or images of these key qualities at regional level, then planners obtain an idea of why and what to plan. In this paper, we distinguish between spatial qualities and spatial characteristics: qualities are established at national level and characteristics are typified at GW (regional) level. Which spatial characteristics are significant at regional scale? To identify which spatial characteristics planners have been talking about at GW scale this paper enlivens the key qualities of the GW of the national governments by searching for ‘homegrown’ spatial characteristics in planning documents at regional level.

Box A. Key qualities of The Green Forest

The Green Forest

Key qualities

- The green character;
- Small-scale openness;
- A connected complex of brooks, open and closed fields, forests and heath land.

(Ministerie VROM, 2004b, p. 124)

1.3 A range of spatial characteristics

A ‘constructor’ in his specific context defines spatial characteristics, based on his specific perspective and ambitions (cf. Hajer, 2004; Van Assche, 2004; Jensen & Richardson, 2004). Subsequently, the identified spatial characteristics are re-interpreted by a following ‘reader’ in his specific context (cf. Barthes, 1957). In other words: each representation of a landscape is culturally and historically dependent and individually and momentarily variable; therefore, a spatial representation is no simple mirror of the world (Barnes and Duncan, 1992). In our search for spatial characteristics of GW, we use this context-dependency and continuous variability in definitions as theoretical starting point of this paper (see also 2.1; cf. Coenen et al., 1988). The definition of spatial quality in the National Spatial Strategy can be positioned in this theoretical approach. In the National Spatial Strategy spatial quality consist of ‘use-related value, experience-related value and future value’ (Ministerie VROM, 2004b); ‘use’, ‘experience’ and ‘future’ are now situated and explored in the creative context at GW level.

To identify spatial characteristics of GW we draw on *a variety of documented ideas on GW level*. Frouws (1998) considers spatial quality as a leading principle of a ‘hedonist’ discourse of Dutch town and countryside; there is a *variety* of criteria and different values. We want to justify this heterogeneity of characteristics for the GW so that diverse regional planning ambitions are acknowledged. Secondly, we use *documented* knowledge to re-use the wealth of existing, previous and actual, ideas, prior to introducing ‘new’ or ‘ideal’ characteristics. Thirdly, we

argue that the *GW level* is an appropriate level to obtain an overview of ‘homegrown’ characteristics, searching for specific but integrated ideas, as such avoiding distant or narrow ideas.

We search for characteristics in a range of policy documents that have been concerned with the GW area or parts of the area. These documents include a strategy or vision. To translate these abstract stories into particular characteristics we detect spatial concepts as useful ‘items’, i.e. issues that define characteristics. In part 2 we elaborate how we produce this *genealogy of spatial concepts*.

1.4 Questions

Aim of this paper is to give an overview of ‘homegrown’ spatial characteristics of GW. Additionally, we position these findings into a broader planning perspective about spatial conceptualisation of rural areas:

1. Which spatial characteristics have been used to typify the GW area in the last three decades?
2. Do we observe spatial trends or breakpoints in the characterisation of this rural area?

In part 2 of this paper we introduce the use of spatial concepts in Dutch planning, explain the genealogical approach and define which policy documents are studied. In part 3 we present the results of the genealogy of the GW. In part 4 we conclude by answering the research questions. In part 5 we discuss one typical aspect of the nature of spatial concepts.

2. Approach

2.1 The use of spatial concepts in planning

The diverse spatial developments and related spatial ambitions concerning the GW create an interesting spatial planning case. Overall, planning is about dealing with space with the intention to (re)make this space (Perry in Campbell & Fainstein, 2003). ‘Making space’ is rooted in a complex ‘will to order’ (Jensen & Richardson, 2004), like spatial ambitions. These ambitions are based on spatial ideals as well as a drive or task to help, prevent, create, rule, protect or connect, within certain rules and possibilities. In the case of GW, there are many organisations that deal with the ‘same’ GW space; however, organisations have a more or less different picture of what GW space looks like in future and at present.

The complex process of spatial planning in the Netherlands is often supported by spatial concept (Zonneveld and Verwest, 2005). As proposed in part 1, we search for spatial concepts in documents about GW, as signs of spatial characteristics. A spatial concept is like a ‘package’ with an appealing, often metaphorical, ‘label’. Concepts are ‘presented’ in diverse planning documents and ‘unpacked’ for diverse planning activities (cf. ‘planning concept’; Zonneveld, 1991; Van Duinen, 2004).

A concept is like a ‘gathering’: ‘A thing [...], in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an *issue* very much *in* there, at any rate, a *gathering* [that...] designates matters of fact and matters of concern.’ (Latour, 2004; p. 233 - in reference to Heidegger; cf. ‘discursive construction’ Hajer, 2004; see 1.3). We describe a spatial concept as a ‘package’ of spatial understanding (cf. ‘facts’) and spatial ambitions (cf. ‘concerns’). Spatial understanding refers to spatial features like scale, position, function and development. Spatial ambitions refer to the colour or direction of a concept, such as possibilities and dependencies of the spatial features (in this case, cf. use-, experience- and future-values). Each use of a concept is characterised by a *different* mix of spatial understanding and spatial ambitions, depending on the creative context it is used in. Likewise, the story of the ‘same’ concept can differ per situation. In this case, we are the ‘readers’ of the spatial concepts that are presented in several documents, and consequently present our interpretations.

2.2 A genealogy of conceptualisation

We study spatial concepts *in* their creative context instead of as detached concepts. Namely, we want to understand how the concepts have been used and in which settings, including for example the state of the art of policy ambitions and movements in spatial analysis. This kind of reasoning fits a genealogical research approach, in line with Foucault (1977, 2003; and cf. part 1.3). The genealogy-researcher gives an overview of the developments of an issue by producing a genealogy. He explores trends and breakpoints of the developments; ‘randomness, discontinuity and power’ are central issues (Foucault in Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; p. 224). In our case, we look for ‘surprising’ situations in spatial conceptualisation, which are rooted in the ‘will to order’ of planners in combination with their expression of spatial understandings.

The collected planning documents have different roots, but some common features are present in all documents. Therefore, we present some selecting criteria:

- The actual geographical GW area is completely or partly referred to, so that the regional scale is dominant;

- A spatial vision about ‘future space’, in broad sense, is a main part of the document;
- The document integrates some spatial functions, implying combinations or priorities of land use functions;
- The documents are not directly related to the designation of GW, so that ‘new’ conceptualisations are presented instead of repeating conceptualisations from within National Landscape policy;
- The document includes some spatial concepts.

3. Results

Results of the genealogy are presented per cluster of related documents. The order is more or less chronological; however, many documents overlap in time of publication and performance. Each cluster is based on a shared policy background, which is firstly explained in order to contextualise the concepts and their meanings. Then we list the labels of the concepts². Furthermore, we summarise to which spatial understandings and to which spatial ambitions the set of concepts refers to. Whereas these two aspects are always ‘gathered’ into one concept in a mixed way, these two descriptions closely relate to each other. Lastly, we interpret and conclude per cluster by taking together the former aspects.

3.1 Landscape Management Plans

Policy context

The Landscape Management Plans include prescriptions for reserve- and management areas on local level [1-6]. Adjusted farm management can enlarge the actual and potential values of management areas. Landscape Management plans are rooted in the national policy of the Land Use Interaction Report from 1975; here applied to the areas ‘De Scheeken’ [1], ‘Het dommeldal en het breugels broek’ [2-3] and ‘De Geelders’ [4-6]. The Land Use Interaction Report supports an important policy shift in the Netherlands in the seventies of the 20th century. That is the shift from the, at that moment disputed, processes of land consolidation, rationalisation and modernisation in agriculture, towards protection of nature, landscape and recreation in rural areas, for example established by compensation agreements with farmers (Raad Landelijk Gebied, 2002; p.21). Because of the inclusion of other interests than agriculture into policy we consider these plans as the ‘first’ integrated area descriptions of some parts of the GW area.

Labels

In the descriptions of the aims of nature- and landscape management reference is made to: ‘Varied Diversity’ of forest, meadows and wooded banks; ‘Connected’ forest; ‘Enclosed areas’; ‘Transition areas’ and ‘Border areas’ referring to biological values; ‘Small Scale’ landscape; and ‘Poplars’ and ‘Brabants’ loamy soil’ as characteristic elements.

Spatial understanding

The conceptualisations are mostly used in reference to material, spatial patterns.

Spatial ambitions

The concepts are mostly based on nature-scientific qualities, referring to the ecological functioning of the landscape.

Taken together

Through lack of appealing labels the concepts of these Landscape Management Plans are hardly spatial concepts according to our definition; however, they are included into our study since we consider them as ‘starting’ spatial concepts or as ‘factual’ spatial concepts. Likewise, the ‘packages’, or rather the adjectives, mostly focus on spatial understanding. Summarised, we consider the concepts of this cluster as *pattern-concepts*. Furthermore, within this cluster we also observe a minor transition from plain spatial descriptions towards the inclusion of imaginative elements, such as the reference to the ‘poplar’ as image-carrier of the landscape [5, 6]; the spatial ambitions behind these imaginative elements are again rooted in ecological scientific values.

3.2 Regional plans

Policy context

‘The Province deals with those matters of importance which transcend the borders of individual councils. It encourages collaboration between councils, represents the region before central government and controls the distribution of various government funds.’ The province of Noord-Brabant produces regional plans as well as

² All documents are written in Dutch. The translations are my own.

revision of these plans [we study 7-10]. The plans are in line with the National Spatial Strategies and include guidelines for spatial development on provincial level. Local spatial strategies have to take account of the regional plan (www.brabant.nl).

Labels

The actual GW, is part of an ‘Open area’ on provincial level, a ‘Buffer Zone’ on regional level, and a ‘Joint Zone’ and ‘Stretch Out Zone’ on city-regional level; the Oisterwijkse area of small moorland lakes are a ‘Large Nature Reserve’ [7]. In the revision [8] of former plan, the category of ‘Large Nature Reserve’ has changed into ‘Large Unity of Nature-area’ and ‘Large Unity of landscape’. In the following plan [9] these categories are changed into a ‘Green Main Structure’. In the last regional plan [10] GW is bordered as ‘Regional Nature- and Landscape Unity’. The motto of this plan is ‘Brabant in Balance’ or ‘Balanced Brabant’; other concepts include for example ‘Wet Nature Pearls’, ‘Layer Approach’, ‘Balanced Land Use’, ‘Multiple Land Use’; Brabant fears ‘Rim-city features’ of uniformity and urban spatial claims at the cost of valuable open spaces; Brabant is ‘one of the most ‘dynamic’ provinces of the Netherlands.

Spatial understanding

Most concepts refer clearly to a specific land use function as well as to combinations of land uses.

Spatial ambitions

The concepts refer to, and differ by, the extent of accessibility for recreation and the kind of combining nature with other land uses. Roughly, the concepts have become more integrated; although, that is partly because reference is made to larger area-units.

Taken together

GW is covered by a bunch of overlapping concepts, even within one document, often based on different scales and on different land use functions, i.e. policy sectors. This is inherent to the policy character of the regional plan. These *policy-concepts* are rather strategic and authoritative than referring to spatial characteristics. Nevertheless, the development of the different landscape and nature concepts is interesting for our genealogy. It is only in the last document that GW is explicitly pictured as a unity of nature and landscape, whereas before it was for example the ‘Dommel catchment area’ that was described as one entity.

3.3 Reconstruction plans

Policy context

The province of Noord-Brabant has formulated plans in response to the Dutch legislation of 2002 for ‘reconstruction of areas engaged in intensive livestock farming’. ‘The purpose of this legislation is to reach a new balance between various functions in the rural areas’ (Driesen & De Gier, 2004, p. 2). We study ‘reconstruction plans’ of the Meierij [11,12], an area that nearly overlaps with GW.

Labels

‘Brabant turns soil’, ‘Diversity’ of landscapes, zones of ‘extensifying areas’, ‘intertwined functions area’ and ‘agricultural development area’; ‘Wet Nature Pearls’; protecting against large-scale ‘Building-up’ [urbanisation]; threats of ‘Levelling out’, ‘Fading’, ‘Fragmentation’ and ‘Cluttering’ of the ‘Green and Rural’ landscape – so ‘De-fragmentation’ and ‘De-building-up’ is necessary; ‘Blue Junctions’; ‘Buffer Zones’ to protect vulnerable areas; ‘Green-Blue Veining’ as a ‘Plaiting’ of landscape elements; ‘Green Main Structure’; ‘Layer Approach’.

Spatial understanding

Many concepts refer to spatial processes and developments; although, the kind of development is often not specified. Other concepts refer to the extent of activities within an area, like agriculture or urbanisations. Other concepts refer to the functioning of one or two specific land uses, such as ‘Green-Blue Veining’.

Spatial ambitions

Many concepts refer to threats, i.e. undesired developments. Others present desired combinations and workings of land uses.

Taken together

The documents entail a mix of different concepts. Some are *policy-concepts*, often coming from the regional plans (see 3.2 for details). Others are similar to the *pattern-concepts*, as described by Landscape Management Plans (see 3.1 for details). Other concepts are *spectre-concepts*, making the reader shock by presenting an undesired development. Some other concepts specifically refer to the functioning of a land use function, for example, ‘Blue Junctions’ are a *functional-concept* in explaining a strategy of water management.

3.4 BrabantCity

Policy context

The most recent document that is included in this genealogy is produced by BrabantCity [13]. BrabantCity, in Dutch 'BrabantStad', is one of the national urban networks of the Netherlands. The activity of conceptualisation starts from its introduction on the website, in which BrabantCity is described as an 'A-brand', i.e. a top-quality brand:

The administrative cooperation of [five] cities and Province aims to extend BrabantStad further as a green urban network and to put Brabant firmly on the European map as a leading knowledge region. With 1.4 million people and some 20% of the industrial production, BrabantStad is the second largest urban network of The Netherlands. The urban network has powerful trump cards with both its positions in the centre of Europe and the knowledge profile of Eindhoven combined with the full range and economic diversity of the other cities. In a way BrabantStad is "Europe's Heart of Smart Solutions" (www.brabantstad.nl).

Labels

'Brabant-Mosaic' or 'Metropole-Mosaic' as main concepts; three future scenarios are presented: 'Bourgonic Brabant', 'Lively Brabant' and 'Booming Brabant'; 'Brainport' and 'Springboard' for innovation; from rural area towards 'Green City'; Brabantcity as 'Network' including 'Brabant DNA'; the map of Brabantcity is a 'Starry sky of cities'; villages as 'Notting Hills'; 'Fine-meshed Mosaic' in the sandy landscape, with a 'Kaleidoscopic' image of different small areas; a dispersion and diversity of 'Green Pearls' instead of a rigid contrast as Rimgcity versus Green Heart in the West of the Netherlands; 'Camelisation' of the rural landscape as superlative degree of 'horsification' of the landscape, i.e. used as a positive metaphor in reference to the typical urban culture of the landscape; from 'Production Landscape' towards 'Practical Landscape' as 'Stretch Out area'; there is a fear for 'Fading' colours within the 'Mosaic', i.e. a fear for 'Uden-isation', in negative reference to the settlement Uden in Brabant which is neither village nor city; instead of 'Fading' the 'Mosaic' should include a widespread 'Palette' of colours; a fine-meshed mix of functions, for urban vanity, and as the 'Gold' of Brabant City; 'Mosaic' like the 'Victor Boogie Woogie' of Piet Mondriaan; there will be 'Forest Carpets', like red-carpets, from the heart of the city directly to the centre of GW.

Spatial understanding

A lot of attention is paid to the desired mixture and interaction of urban and rural areas, yet both areas should keep their unique character. Can 'scale' answer this seeming paradox of mixture and distinction, i.e. is this rural-urban combination mixed at regional scale but separated and unique at local scale? 'Mosaic' is used in the document in reference to a small landscape scale, which corresponds the small 'scale' of Brabant's society. So can 'Mosaic' integrate different scales? Most concepts refer to identity instead of to material features.

Spatial ambitions

'Brabant-Mosaic' is presented as the distinctive quality of Brabantcity. 'Mosaic' is the starting point for a new type of urbanisation, which goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of urban-rural and as such shapes spatially and economically 'Mixes' of cities and villages. Obviously, this document is written from an urban perspective, so that the mix of urban-rural is also justified from urban perspective; for example, the authenticity of GW is promoted *in order to* serve as a central park of Brabant's cities. Following sentence is the most typical characterisation of GW in the document: 'The romanticised image of the farmer on his tractor in an almost pastoral landscape is cultivated and sublimed' [13, p. 71].

Taken together

This document has a striking and rich mix of spatial concepts, being inventive jargon. Notwithstanding the specific labels of most concepts, the concepts are not supposed to provide fixed details but possible ideas. Concepts are a package of spatial features of landscapes, but especially include the ambitions of, mostly urban, users. Therefore, we summarise these concepts as *branding-concepts* (cf. Flowerdew, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

The stories behind the concepts in the document consist of some innovative ideas, which we therefore elaborate into more detail. Firstly, we discuss the conceptualisation of GW in relation to the rural-urban debate. Secondly, we position the branding-function of the concepts in the Dutch planning tradition.

GW, beyond the traditional rural-urban dichotomy?

Again, the concepts are used in reference to a mix of urban-rural functions yet mainly from urban justification³. Despite the attention for nature and landscape in general, the GW area itself is only mentioned a few times. GW plays a main part in the ‘Bourgondic Brabant’ scenario, which focuses on the development of the authenticity of Brabant as well as on green qualities. Here, ‘a strongly enlarged GW area develops itself towards the central park-like landscape of Brabant, which is more authentic than ever’ [13, p. 58]. Interestingly, the document also defines the Brabant area by defining what the area is *not* or should *not* become. For example, Brabant is based on ‘family ties’, which is ‘better than the footlose society of the Western part’ of the Netherlands [13, p. 35]. Likewise, the mixture of different areas makes Brabant city ‘essentially different’ than the Rim City and other urban networks in the Netherlands [13, p. 53]. We argue that the aversion against the Rim City and Green Heart concepts is grounded on the one hand but confusing by the presentation of GW on the other hand; namely, GW is presented as a central park-like landscape that, in our view, tends towards being like the Green Heart that was initially disliked.

The complexity of ‘Mosaic’ in Dutch context

Dutch concepts in planning are well-known as ‘guiding’ concepts and ‘target images’ (Zonneveld & Verwest, 2005), fitting in the twentieth century’s Dutch planning doctrine of ‘rule and order’ (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994). Contrary to this ordered tradition, ‘Mosaic’ can be defined as a disordered concept in a perchance context in which complexity itself is sometimes promoted as goal. GW is part of this ‘Mosaic’; therefore, it is part of a perchance outcome of a set of perchance developments. Some responses to the document also illustrate how the unusual, sometimes exaggerated, vision is ‘wrongly’ understood as it is an unambiguous and well-ordered vision. For instance, the future scenarios in the document are intended to progress the debate about future decisions, yet they are interpreted by some people, like the media, as fixed decisions about the development of for example infrastructure; “the main message was hardly ever understood so wrongly” (Slabbers at www.brabantmozaiek.nl). Apparently, a disordered and flexible concept like Mosaic has not yet been accepted or does not yet fit the established Dutch planning tradition. Should planners use ordered concepts or change ordered traditions instead? Which direction or combination of direction serves the protection of characteristic of the GW area?

4. Conclusion

4.1 Abstract conceptualisations

Which spatial characteristics have been used to typify the GW area in the last three decades?

Aim of this study was to identify spatial characteristics for National Landscape GW that are more detailed and more own than the spatial qualities defined by the national government (see box A). However, a majority of spatial conceptualisation that we have encountered also concern abstract or open concepts, like ‘Diverse landscape’, ‘Cluttering’ or ‘Green Pearl’. On the one hand, we conclude that the national defined qualities are in line with regional characteristics and vice versa. On the other hand, we conclude that spatial conceptualisation at regional level is just as vague as at national level – at least in this case.

Different types of areas are united by the spatial concept of Green Forest (GW) itself, as well as by the policy concept of National Landscape. The ambition to present this area as one entity does not emerge from the concepts in the older documents, although some policy labels in the regional plans, and for example the national concept of Ecological Network, do refer to shared characteristics of functions within the area. In fact, the word ‘Forest’ is partly misleading in the case of GW since only part of the area is forest, whereas other parts are village, open fields or heath land. Recently, there have been some other concepts, which do refer to the Green Forest area as one space; for example, Sustainable Triangle is used in reference to an initiative for sustainable development, and Growth Diamond in documents related to the process of designation of GW. Does the use of such concepts mean that there is a will to order the area as if it is ‘one space’, or is this not self-evident? We advise policy makers to be aware of the risk of one label for an area, especially *if* unity is undesirable and if the concept hides the diversity of an area.

The adjective of ‘Brabant’ to some spatial concepts and other references to Brabant show that regional characteristics are relevant, like the poplar as element and the liveliness as atmosphere. Interestingly, the document of BrabantCity partly shows the meaning of this identity by showing what it is *not*, i.e. the ‘fast’

³ Kuyper and Horsten (2007 – document not yet on hand), have also written a document about the disappearing boundaries between city and rural areas in Brabant; however, they take the ‘countryside’ identity as starting point instead of an urban perspective. Therefore, they use BrabantVillage as alternative concept for BrabantCity. What are similarities and differences in these two projects, considering spatial visions, guiding principles and outcomes?

Western part of the Netherlands. Jansen (2006) also presents the construction and imagination of Brabant, in his case by provincial planners concerning the Southeast-Brabant countryside from 1920 to 2000. '(...) at the same time that the recognition of the characteristic rural and small-scale Brabant emerged, this image faded ever faster into the background (ibid, p. 269). Jansen explains this fading image by the 'the paradox of planning', a practice that has been rooted in the modernisation of society: 'It is the same modernization that initiated the break with the old Brabant' (ibid, p. 270). Seven years later, the 'old Brabant' is promoted even more. Therefore, we argue that *because of* the disappearance and threats to 'old Brabant', planners focus even more on retaining this 'ideal' image. In line with most encountered spatial concepts, also the adjective of 'Brabant' is an abstract concept.

4.2 Different conceptualisations

Do we observe spatial trends or breakpoints in the characterisation of this rural area?

The set of concepts of each cluster of document has been characterised. We distinguished pattern-concepts, policy-concepts, functional-concept, spectre-concepts and branding-concepts. So, in very broad sense, we observe a trend of conceptualisation from spatial patterns to spatial branding, in which the focus has changed from matters of understanding to matters of ambitions. The drive or knowledge behind the concepts has changed from scientific knowledge to the promotion of an area. Instead of a trend, however, we rather talk about the existence of *different* concepts that are present simultaneously, depending on the activity for which the concepts are used for as well as on the background of the users. More specifically, it is not simply the concepts that are different, but rather the *conceptualisations* that are different. Namely, even 'one' concepts can have different meanings based on the activity it used for and the packed values within the concept. For example, a Green Pearl, can be 'green' for ecological or recreational reasons (cf. Van der Windt et al., 2007). In this way, possible 'conflicts' behind a concept sometimes only come up later in a process, after which it is either too late to solve or no problem to solve because of some common vision on space. Conceptualisations differ from being a designation to subject under discussion; from referring to the material to imaginary; from realistic to creative; from focussing on now to then; from catching to justifying spatial complexity. The latter issue is especially relevant for Dutch National Landscapes and rural area, which are dynamic, varied and complex spaces. Mosaic is an example of a concept that justifies complexity, whereas, for example Layer Approach catches the complexity of GW. These different approaches to complexity each have different consequences for future decisions and developments.

In the genealogy of GW, the role of spatial concepts in showing spatial ambitions has become more advanced than their role in showing spatial understanding. This focus can be used in practice. Then, the use of spatial concepts is not exactly aiming at being accurate or complete in spatial references; spatial concepts can just refer to exaggerated, provoking or anti-ambitions. The concept of 'Camelisation of the countryside' is a remarkable example of a concept that can trigger people to express their own feelings and visions, and can therefore be useful in debates about future landscapes. Then, we need other tools than concepts to present spatial understanding of the area.

4.3 More insight

Additional research is helpful to sharpen up our genealogy and conclusions. Firstly, we can study more documents, for example national and local policy plans, to better 'ground' or 'disground' the described differences of concepts and the characteristics of GW itself. Secondly, we can broaden the kind of material used in the genealogy. For example, information about spatial characteristics of GW can also be obtained from local 'lay' views or popular media analysis (cf. Van der Ziel, 2003; Haartsen et al. in Haartsen et al., 2000). We think that this is a promising option, due to the possibilities of obtaining other insights from other contexts. Thirdly, we can produce another genealogy of a Dutch National Landscape or rural area in order to compare results considering the working of concepts. For all options, we can question to what extent spatial *concepts*, at regional level, are a useful tool to provide information about spatial characteristics. Other possible tools to 'detect' spatial characteristics of an area are photos, advertisements, speeches and news paper reports.

5. Discussion about 'rich' or 'empty' concepts

We concluded that many spatial concepts at regional level, like on national level, are abstract or vague concepts. The concept of Green Forest itself is a good example. According to our definition of spatial concept, by the metaphor of 'package', this 'hiding' feature is in the nature of a concept. Is it possible or desirable that spatial concepts offer a more detailed overview of the spatial characteristics of an area?

There are theories that promote the 'emptiness' of issues. Some semiotic and discursive theories explain the use of 'empty signifiers' in fulfilling a new direction of actions or a new discourse (Laclau, 1996; Howarth and Kavaratzis, 2000; Chandler, 2002). Empty signifiers are issues that are implicitly accepted because of their

presence, but which do not directly refer to a known issue. The use of an empty signifier goes beyond the possibility of attaching multiple meanings to the signifier. Namely, empty signifiers are like nodal points or ideals that evoke new actions, like defining and achieving that ideal point (ibid). Roughly translated, we can consider the concept of Green Forest (GW) as a 'rich' empty signifier. It seems to be a vague concept yet offers the possibility for organisations in the area to identify and link their ambitions to the concept - and as such to take on, or reject, the self-made ideals behind Green Forest. The use of 'empty' signifiers seems, often unnoticed, common practice. Then, we should better reflect on the working and consequences of empty concepts. Under which conditions does empty conceptualisation happen, and when is it successful? First of all, are people willing, or forced, to fill a concept? There is a complex world of enabling and restricting powers behind the seeming simplicity of the entrance of a spatial concept in planning practice.

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