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we make space – dutch planning in transition

Peter Ache and Gert-Jan Hospers look at changes in Dutch planning and how they are being worked out on the ground in a case study of town centre revitalisation



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Looking over the Erasmus Bridge in the city of Rotterdam

Over the past few years, Dutch spatial planning has changed: its institutional set-up and legal framework have been reviewed and adjusted. The general aim of this transition has been to accelerate planning processes and decentralise planning responsibilities. At ground level, Dutch planning culture has changed as well:¹ an organic and negotiated development approach is emerging. The intention is to produce easier, more effective and more streamlined planning processes that simultaneously deliver quality. This article addresses this transformation by discussing the National Spatial Agenda and experience of how the changes have impacted on the ground – in Doetinchem, a town where new planning approaches have recently been implemented.

The 'Year of Space'

The Dutch planning system has been going through a phase of fundamental change, especially since the introduction of the new Spatial Planning Act (WRO) in 2008. The latest turn is the formulation of a new

general environment law (with the term 'environment' used in its broadest sense), to be finalised with the official introduction of a new Environment and Planning Act (*Omgevingswet*) in 2018. Official sources indicate that 26 different laws will be integrated into the new Act, tidying and streamlining environmental legislation and, for example, introducing kinds of plans required from various bodies. The new Act will run to 350 paragraphs in total.

The goal here can be summed as rationalisation, acceleration and decentralisation. As Zonneveld and Evers see it,² the comprehensive integrated approach in the Netherlands is moving towards an economic development approach, using classifications from academic discussion.³

Activity within this change process peaked in 2015, the 'Year of Space', which also saw the launch of the *Agenda Stad* (Agenda City) initiative, formulated by the Dutch Government and aimed at enhancing growth, innovation and viability in Dutch cities.⁴ The 'Year of Space' initiated a public debate on the

guiding principles for the coming decades, resulting in the *Wij Maken Ruimte* (We Make Space) manifesto,⁵ designed to inform the National Spatial Agenda (NOA) and the National Spatial Vision (NOVI), which will sketch out a horizon until 2040.

The Agenda City is official government policy, formulated within the national investment programme aimed at promoting growth. It sees cities as engines and incubators for economic growth, stimulating national innovation and competitiveness. For example, the Dutch Government 'top sectors' programme combines a focus on specific economic sectors, such as health, nutrition, and logistics, with translation to specific locations in the Netherlands – a typical example being provided by Eindhoven, home of the multinational Philips, which is now labelled a 'Brainport', an innovation hotspot in the field of high technology and design.

In short, national level spatial planning in the Netherlands is no longer comprehensive: responsibilities and actions have been decentralised to cities and towns. At the moment, there are only indications of the direction in which the new National Spatial Vision will go, but many observers see a narrowed-down geographical scope emerging in the Netherlands – effectively there is an absence of an overall 'spatial' agenda.

The starting point in looking ahead is the *We Make Space* manifesto⁵ that was the outcome of the 'Year of Space'. The manifesto sets out seven 'unavoidable' tasks of a spatial agenda, five collaboration principles, and examples of innovative methods and projects.

The 'inevitable tasks' include the improvement of urban networks, energy transition, water as a quality driver, a balance between agriculture and environment, a healthy living environment, the anticipation of new technologies, and finally a building culture that makes flexible use of space. The collaboration principles foster so-called 'area coalitions', more room for civic and private initiatives, rules that serve action, conservation of environmental qualities, and learning by developing (with the great Dutch subtitle 'curiosity pays off!').

The innovative experiments concern new knowledge in practice (for example a learning network on cycling), new examples of area development (for example the transfer of the IBA Emscher Park idea to Parkstad Limburg, one of the demographically shrinking regions in the Netherlands), and new professional perspectives that should change the image of planning.

One metropolitan space

The *We Make Space* manifesto starts with a call to develop the country together: '*We willen dat Nederland in 2040 de gaafste metropool ter wereld is*' – 'We want the Netherlands to become the coolest/most intact metropolis in the world in 2040' (the Dutch word *gaaf* can mean both cool and intact). Interestingly, the Netherlands is regarded

here as one metropolitan space, which contrasts with the spatial division in the nation that can be seen between the Randstad and the rest of the country – and within the Randstad between the North (Amsterdam, Schiphol and Utrecht) and the South (Rotterdam and The Hague).

Another intriguing element in the manifesto is the new view on *ruimte* (space). In contrast to the common view that sees space as an economic asset that is produced for certain target groups, the manifesto argues for a perspective in which quality plays a more important role. There is also a proposal for a revised relationship between experts and non-experts: '*Ruimtelijke ordening is ruimtelijke activering*' – 'spatial planning and development is an activating rather than determining task' (although not when it comes to spatial qualities, as noted above). Planners should become *verbinders* (connectors) and initiate networks between actors dealing with spatial development.

In fact, the manifesto is closely linked to other trends in the Netherlands, such as an increasing emphasis on easier planning processes and citizen participation. The revised Dutch perspective on spatial development can also be observed in the EU-wide urban agenda, set out in the Pact of Amsterdam,⁶ which was drafted under the Netherlands' presidency of the EU in 2016 and was received with much acclaim by public institutions.

The message of the Amsterdam Pact is rather straightforward: against the background of the urban millennium (for a critique see recent work by Gleeson⁷) urban areas are the main drivers of future sustainable development, with 'urban authorities' playing a crucial role. The Pact introduces the term 'urban authorities', thus addressing the diversity of 'authorities' responsible for the governance of diverse urban areas, in particular amorphous metropolitan regions.

Within the agendas considered above, urban authorities and urban areas are considered as the engines of development. The Pact of Amsterdam exhorts all institutions outside the urban authorities to provide support, money, legal frameworks and expertise, while urging urban authorities to come forward with experiments and solutions, basically under a *carte blanche* that covers elements of broad co-operation if not co-creation. In the section on 'effective' urban governance, both citizen participation and new models of governance are emphasised. Governance should cut across administrative boundaries, be they local, urban-rural or cross-national. Furthermore, 'sound and strategic' urban planning is proclaimed, i.e. planning in connection with regional layers and starting from a place-based and people-based perspective.

Finally, the Pact urges that, to be effective, governance should be integrative, participative, innovative, adaptive, internationally oriented and,



Left: Citizens evaluating proposals to revitalise the town centre of Doetinchem. Right: A ‘walkshop’ along the river with a group of policy-makers learning from Doetinchem’s approach

last but not least, aimed at providing services of a general interest – no more and no less.

Co-creation in Doetinchem

The remainder of this article focuses on the five ‘collaboration principles’ in the *We Make Space* manifesto – ‘area coalitions’, more room for civic and private initiatives, rules that serve action, conservation of environmental qualities, and learning by developing. Recent town centre development policy drawn up in Doetinchem (a medium sized-town of 56,000 inhabitants, located in the demographically shrinking region of the Achterhoek in the eastern part of the Netherlands) provides an example of how these principles may be put into practice. The case study can be seen as a kind of local experiment for what will be national policy in the future.

Early 2015, Gemeente Doetinchem, the municipal government of Doetinchem, started a participation process along the lines sketched out in the *We Make Space* manifesto. The process was initiated with the aim of revitalising the town centre, which consists of a compact shopping and recreational area. The municipality considered town centre revitalisation necessary in the wake of a reduction in visitor numbers, an increase in shop closures, and demographic change.

From the start, intensive efforts were made to draw citizens and retailers into the process. This was a break with the past, since traditionally Dutch urban planning has been a government-led, hierarchical process in which private parties have become more and more involved.⁸ In the slipstream of the general Dutch decentralisation and participation trend, other municipalities in the Netherlands have also started to engage civil society in their spatial development plans, using terms like ‘participatory planning’, ‘bottom-up development’ and ‘co-creation’.⁹

The participation process in Doetinchem started with a state-of-the-art study undertaken by a nearby university, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the town centre and sketching three scenarios for its future on the basis of the town’s identity.

‘Walkshops’ (walks with local experts and groups of citizens and retailers) and public meetings were organised as a follow-up to this report. This resulted in more than 500 ideas for strategies that might reinvigorate the heart of town. Large areas of overlap allowed the number of proposals to be reduced to 63 unique ideas.¹⁰

After this stocktaking, an online resident panel, *Doetinchem Spreekt*, consisting of 1,600 citizens, was asked to score these 63 revitalisation ideas on their attractiveness, which resulted in a kind of bottom-up vision for the town centre. The vision defines the ambition as ‘to develop a hospitable town centre against a background of public green and water’.¹⁰

This bottom-fed ‘choice’ for the future of the centre area motivated the municipality to facilitate 12 working groups through which local parties (a mix of citizens, retailers and employees of the municipality) would jointly come up with an implementation plan. Each of the 12 working groups – which can be regarded as mixed ‘area coalitions’ in the new Dutch planning terminology – dealt with one individual theme within the future vision, such as more green space in the town centre, setting up a food hall in a large vacant store, more moderate car park prices, and better connections between the nearby river and the town centre.

Obviously, many of these ideas call for far-reaching spatial interventions, with associated financial and legal obligations. For example, fulfilling the popular desire to better link the river with the town centre would require a tunnel, overpass or some other massive infrastructural investment. Before such decisions are made, temporary solutions are being tested in Doetinchem (for example closing parts of the road for cars in summer) to see how future investments might work out in reality – an example of the experimentation principle stressed in the new Dutch planning perspective.

At present, the Doetinchem working groups are at the start of the implementation phase. To finance the plans that they have developed, the municipality

has provided an annual working budget of 1 million euros for the next few years, requiring co-financing from the private sector (for example investors) and other stakeholders (for example local retailers). The approach to revitalising Doetinchem's town centre is gaining more and more attention in the Netherlands, with media coverage and 'policy tourism' from other municipalities.¹¹ It is not so much the co-creation aspect as such that makes professional parties interested (elements of co-creation are applied in many Dutch villages and neighbourhoods in, for example, running a library or organising local festivities), but the fact that this 'soft' approach deals with 'hard' issues: the working groups in Doetinchem are in charge of tomorrow's spatial development, deciding on what will be built in the future, and where.

Concluding remarks

The Dutch spatial planning system is in a phase of transition as planning processes are simplified and streamlined. The principles of the new planning philosophy are formulated in several nation-wide documents. The aim is to make planning more decentralised and participative, with the inclusion of many stakeholders and with ample room for experimentation. But does such an approach work in practice? The case of Doetinchem provides some lessons, although it is as yet too early to draw definitive conclusions. So far, we can say that town centre revitalisation in Doetinchem is a clear case of both 'co-governance' (local stakeholders setting priorities and developing plans for the provision of public services) and 'co-production' (with services in part produced by the citizens who will also use them), with all the associated promises and dangers.¹²

For one thing, the degree of interest and energy shown by the local community in the development of 'their' Doetinchem is promising. There is a great deal of enthusiasm among stakeholders to work on the revitalisation of the town centre. But to what degree are they representative of the rest of Doetinchem's population? Are they a passionate minority, or do they take action on behalf of the silent majority? It also seems that the time horizon of the 'area coalitions' set up to implement plans is quite short – there is more focus on what can be realised in the here and now (the food hall and more moderate parking prices, for example) than on a co-ordinated vision on the town centre for the long term.

At the same time, one might argue that long-range spatial planning is becoming more and more complex in today's fast changing society. In Doetinchem, planning for the town centre can be seen as an 'emergent strategy'¹³ without clear intended consequences: the journey seems to be as important as the destination – it is largely an open-ended process.

Here, an interesting question remains unanswered in all the decentralisation and participation rhetoric:

how to determine the spatial quality of city and town planning? And who is in charge here? Can the Dutch Government rely on the credo 'let a thousand flowers bloom', or should spatial criteria be formulated at the national, regional and/or local levels? Can we leave the definition of these criteria to civil society, or should it be a matter for planning experts? Other Dutch commentators have identified this dilemma – and not only planning experts. Once the first full draft of the National Spatial Vision is published (expected before the end of 2016), we will have more insight into the path the Dutch Government wishes to follow – and thereafter, in 2017, a new national government will be elected.

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Notes

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- 4 See the *Agenda Stad* website, at agendastad.nl/
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