THE GREEN HEART DEBATE

ANDREAS FALUDI* & ARNOLD VAN DER VALK* versus HAN LÖRZING**

* Faculty of Environmental Sciences and Amsterdam Study Centre for the Metropolitan Environment (AME), University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130, 1018 VZ Amsterdam, The Netherlands
** Eindhoven Regional Government (SRE), Department of Regional Planning, P.O. Box 985, 5600 AZ Eindhoven, The Netherlands

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PREFACE

In the 1950s the Dutch government decided that the area between the cities of the Randstad Holland should, as far as possible, remain open. Later the name Green Heart was given to this open space. Figure 1 shows the Randstad cities and the Green Heart as they are now. Figures 2, 3 and 5 provide information about the Green Heart as presented in a report drawn up by consultants of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (Van der Cammen & M'itsen 1995).

Ever since the concept was devised, the Green Heart has been an object of debate. Protagonists disagree not only about Green Heart policy, but even about what is actually happening in the Green Heart. This Window feature article presents two views on the Green Heart – though not, perhaps, as contrasting as aficionados of heated debate might wish. The authors are professionals, not mavericks.

The reason for paying attention to the Green Heart debate at this particular moment is that in 1995 the Minister of Spatial Planning organized discussions concerning the Green Heart policy. The postscript following the two essays provides information about these discussions.

PLANNERS COME OUT FOR THE GREEN HEART

by

ANDREAS FALUDI & ARNOLD VAN DER VALK

The Green Heart is the most pronounced Dutch planning concept. It refers to the open area surrounded by towns and cities forming the 'Randstad', or rim city, an urban network in the Western Netherlands long before that term became fashionable. Ever since the mid-thirties, planners have conceptualized urban development here in these terms. The founding fathers of Dutch national planning assembled in the Commission for the Western Netherlands (1950-1958) conceived of the Green Heart as the essential complement of the Randstad. There is an underlying metaphor, that of the country as a body, the wellbeing of which vitally depends on the health of its heart. Together, Randstad and Green Heart are at the core of what we call Dutch 'planning doctrine' (Faludi & Van der Valk 1994).

Seminal trends, such as an increase in spending power, the more prominent role of the market and the commensurate decline of the role of the state put question marks behind traditional doctrine. The consensus around the Green Heart seems especially precarious. There is persistent demand for housing in the Western Netherlands. New housing should go to sites which for environmental reasons are being developed at great expense under the Fourth Report on Spatial Planning Extra in and around the cities (cf. Duinkerken & Menger 1992; Van Staaldhuine & Drexhage 1995). The flanking strategy is to restrict development...
more effectively in the Green Heart. However, communities in the Green Heart are wary of caps on their development being enforced. They can count on the support of a diffuse coalition, including mavericks holding up Los Angeles as a shining example.

It sometimes seems as if foreign observers (Burke 1966; Hall 1966) were more appreciative of the Dutch doctrine than the Dutch themselves. At the same time, foreign observers with an intimate knowledge of the Netherlands are amazed by the careless attitude of the Dutch to open space. In national policy, development usually has the upper hand, and on the local level people do not oppose growth either. Needham (1995) writes about a 'Dutch puzzle' and surmises that this comes from the age-old tradition of reclaiming land, giving the Dutch the idea that land is not a given but a product of human labour. However, in a book-size statement of her beliefs, Minister De Boer (1995) argues for attitudes to change. To preserve open space is one of the three keys to achieving sustainable development, the other two being preservation of energy and biodiversity. Now, it is evident that the Green Heart plays an important role in preserving open space, reason enough for the Minister to turn attention to it, her aim being to put an end to any wasteful practices.

The Commission for the Western Netherlands (1958) already painted the doom scenario of a sea
What is the Green Heart?
The Green Heart is the open area in the centre of the Randstad Holland. It is a highly diverse region as far as landscape and land use are concerned, it derives its identity from the fact that it is surrounded by a girdle of urban areas: the Randstad ring. This consists of four large city regions (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) and six smaller ones (Haarlem, Leiden, Dordrecht, Amersfoort, Hilversum and Almere). These cities and the Green Heart form one whole; for instance, approximately 150,000 people commute between the Green Heart and one of the Randstad cities. The Green Heart has some 670,000 inhabitants, about 10% of the population of the Randstad area.

Fig. 2. The Green Heart; a brief description.

What is special about the Green Heart?
The Green Heart is special, because in spite of its close proximity to the Randstad it has remained ordinary. In many respects it is an average Dutch region. Rural land use predominates. Density of population is 470 persons per km², as against 1,680 in the surrounding city regions. Nowhere else in the world can such a combination of a large urban area with a rural, green area right in the middle of it be found. The Green Heart is also special because it is one of the oldest man-made landscapes in the Netherlands. Originally it was marshy and almost inaccessible. In the Middle Ages the cities developed on the dry rim. Only later was the marshland reclaimed, mainly for agricultural purposes. Finally, the Green Heart is special because it is an abode for flora and fauna enjoying international protection, such as meadow and water birds.

Fig. 3. The Green Heart: special characteristics.

Ideal and reality – Concepts like Randstad and Green Heart did not spring to the planners’ minds ready-made. They are the result of a long-standing planning ideal, which is to contain urban development, and in particular to prevent ribbon development, so as to preserve nature and open space. The ideal is to battle against the sea of houses, like in London or Paris. Clean, compact, well-appointed towns and villages had been the ideal of the planning elite already between the wars. When it came to it after the war, London’s Green Belt provided the example to aspire to. We, too, can do that, the planners on the Commission for the Western Netherlands must have thought. Since then, the professionals have watched over and propagated the notion of the Randstad around the Green Heart.

However, there has always been a gap between the ideal on the one hand and developments on the ground on the other. This relates to the inherent limitation of planning as we know it. Planning can restrict development, but in order to initiate development it has to cooperate with others. For too long, the Green Heart policy has been seen exclusively as a matter of the former, in spite of the wealth of experience Dutch planners have with...
the latter. For instance, the growth-centres policy has been extremely successful in harnessing the resources of others in achieving orderly new development. The current aim as regards the Green Heart must be to prevent developments from following the path of the least resistance. This will inevitably be the outcome if market forces get a free hand. The latter allow themselves to be guided mainly by land prices. Agricultural land with a collateral use as nature area fetches four guilders per square meter. Land designated for urban uses ten times as much. This can increase to hundredfold, depending on the intensity of proposed use and the location in relation to roads, public transport, and so forth.

All these problems notwithstanding, it is as well to note that the Green Heart has served us well, and by that we mean not only the planners. Thanks to the Green Heart, the country still has some amenity left. Internationally speaking, the Netherlands is seen as a shining planning example. Has the reader ever asked him- or herself what the country would look like without the policy of 'concentrated deconcentration' having been successful? He or she should try and visualize our cities and towns without the investments made under the 'compact-city' philosophy. Would the covenants concluded under the Fourth Report on Spatial Planning Extra ever have come about without planning doctrine being what it is? Surely, in the eyes of a foreign observer it is nothing short of a miracle that the four large and a number of smaller city regions have been willing to enter into voluntary agreements with the government entailing commitments previously unheard of. They receive less financial government support in exchange than before!

Towards an open doctrine—The term 'doctrine' conjures up the idea of rigidity, of a dogma. This is why many planners are suspicious of, and even hostile to the concept. Critics are prone to overlook the dynamic element in planning doctrine. Doctrine has a 'protective belt' of concepts which are subject to change, like city regions, green stars, buffer zones and the like, around a more stable core. Concepts come and go, but Randstad and Green Heart are here to stay. It seems paradoxical, but is nevertheless true: planning doctrine shows a degree of flexibility, even ambivalence which sustains it over time. The work of Korthals Altes (1995) has enriched our understanding of doctrine as something malleable, so that it may change. In the fullness of time, Korthals Altes shows that doctrine may even become something entirely different, but without the revolutionary upsets which Kuhn (1970) wants us to believe are inevitable in the case of paradigm change.

We appreciate national planning doctrine as a valuable asset, as the common thread in the development of national spatial planning. However, in order to sustain it, doctrine needs to be applied flexibly. Elsewhere we have argued for an 'open doctrine' (Faludi & Van der Valk 1994). This implies a less rigid attitude to the long-term development of the Green Heart than many would think. Justified demand for development needs to be considered, implying a re-thinking of the entire concept, what it really means, what it is really designed to achieve other than putting a cap on development.

In the short-term though, there is no alternative to soldiering on with the Fourth Report Extra. This implies sticking to the restrictive policy. It also implies implementation of projects agreed upon within the framework of the further elaboration for the Green Heart of the Fourth Report. Note that this elaboration is at the same time one of the 'ROM' projects, 'ROM' being the Dutch acronym for spatial planning and environmental policy. ROM areas are designated for concerted efforts to improve the quality of the environment. Since there are all these policies in place, it is too late for interpreting doctrine flexibly. The Key Planning Decision on National Spatial Policy, drawing a firm line around the Green Heart (cf. fig. 1), has already been approved in Parliament. Such approval for the boundaries around it, something unheard of before, means that the Green Heart has become something of a national planning shrine. In pursuance of this policy, the government has concluded agreements with the Randstad provinces to maintain the cap on development through planning control, specifying the number of houses that the provinces may still allow.

A contingency plan can pay heavy dividends. This is why we argue for rendering the concept of the Green Heart more flexible, precisely when the signal is 'all hands on deck' and consideration of alternatives seem a luxury. However, we realize that this cannot be done overnight. Current policy must be allowed to run its course before changes can be contemplated. At the same time, preparations must be made for the period thereafter. Ren-
dering the Green Heart more flexible can lead to consensus about it encompassing more groups. At present, there is little in the restrictive policy in the Green Heart for the 600,000 people living there. The inhabitants of 'the rest of the country' outside the Randstad, too, should care for the Green Heart. One way of achieving this would be the formulation of new, appealing planning concepts.

In this, the organic metaphor underlying the Green Heart can continue to form a source of inspiration. The 'heart' beats in the 'body'. This 'body' is the whole of the territory of the Netherlands. Through green 'veins', the 'heart' services all parts of the 'body'. We are immediately reminded of the ecological infrastructure. The 'veins' branch out into 'capillaries' to reach all 'organs'. Relevant elements are the so-called Randstad Green Structure, combining various parks and areas of open space, the green fingers and corridors in municipal structure plans, and the Vision on Urban Landscapes of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries. A heart has ventricles, and so does the Green Heart. Each ventricle has its distinct function. We suggest dividing the Green Heart up into zones based on their true value, and differentiating policy accordingly. A healthy heart is made up of firm tissue. What is wrong about some of this tissue being urban?

Planning doctrine comprises not only substantive concepts, but also notions as regards the organization and procedures of planning. This brings us to the administrative infrastructure of the present policies for the Green Heart. The Randstad threatens to become balkanized. We think of Randstad and Green Heart as forming the 'Green-heart Metropolis' as Burke (1966) has described it in one of the first books in English on Dutch planning. At some stage there was indeed talk about a Randstad Province being formed by amalgamating three or four provinces, or parts thereof, into one powerful province. The new province was supposed to hold its own in a Europe without borders. Since then, developments have gone in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, the reorganization of government follows considerations other than planning. Still, we submit that from a planning point-of-view, two requirements are on the table whichever turn government reorganization takes. These are, firstly, that central government, city regions and/or the provinces of the Randstad share responsibility for the Green Heart. Secondly, communities (alongside with their inhabitants!) in the Green Heart, subject to whichever form of restrictive policy, need to be compensated. The form of such future measures is a matter of urgent concern.

We hold that the planning community must think carefully about its attitude to national doctrine. Its future and that of doctrine are closely interrelated. Bear in mind that, in the competition for space, the enemies of spatial planning are many, and the friends few and far between!

**IT'S TIME TO REDEFINE THE GREEN HEART**

by

HAN LÖRZING

In Dutch regional planning, the Green Heart represents everyone's dream of the unspoilt countryside, untouched by the effects of harsh, modern civilization. The essence of its value is not just the fact that it exists; equally or even more important is its location right in the middle of a self-proclaimed conurbation of six million people. For generations, planners have been telling the world that this unique, endangered landscape deserves to be saved from the ever-spreading urban monster. Since the fifties, large segments of public opinion and national politics have been on their side. It is time to raise the question if all this effort is really worthwhile. Are we not simply repeating the same old clichés over and over for more than forty years? Is it not about time to admit that what we so adamantly seek to preserve has actually made way for a new phenomenon, full of potential in itself? Let us try to view the Green Heart in a new light, avoiding the cul-de-sac policies that for so many years blighted our vision of reality.

*A helicopter view of the Green Heart* – For the innocent outsider, the essence of the Green Heart lies in its omnipresent rural character. A foreign visitor, dropped in the middle of the area, will stare
with disbelief at the seemingly endless green pastures. He will notice the abundance of black-and-white cows, grazing along as if the days of Ruysdael and Hobbema still are not over (fig. 4). Beautifully preserved windmills, gently curved canals with flowering water lilies, thatched-roofed farmhouses and a majestic Rembrandtian sky do not fail to create an almost unreal atmosphere. But this is certainly not all there is. When our imaginary visitor takes a closer and more objective look, he will discover some disturbing deviations from the bucolic picture. Suddenly factory chimneys, power lines, dual highways and silos are everywhere. They simply come with the old, revered landscape. They have not been built overnight; many of them have been part of the Green Heart even before the term was coined. They are the result of a long history, almost as old as the romantic paintings that made the Green Heart world famous.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in fact some of the oldest industrial strips of the Netherlands (and perhaps of the world) can be found within the Green Heart, e.g., the banks of rivers like the Oude Rijn (an old course of the Rhine between Utrecht and Leiden) and the Hollandse IJssel between Gouda and Rotterdam. These and other waterways served as a basis for linear developments, dating back to the fifteenth century. Although the once-abundant breweries and cheese warehouses have been replaced by chemical plants and cattle feed silos, the idea is still the same. The so-called Green Heart is an ideal place for the allocation of a multitude of industries and services, simply because of the fact that it is conveniently situated at equally short distances of the largest and most important cities of the country. This was true in Holland’s Golden Age as it is true in our times.

Much the same goes for residential and leisure developments. Waterways like the Vecht (between Amsterdam and Utrecht) and the Vliet (between The Hague and Leiden), flourished as background for the stately homes of well-to-do city residents. Also, their teahouses and beer gardens made them favoured places for the holiday outings of less well-to-do townspeople. Is there really much difference between these ancestors and today’s suburbanites and daytrippers?
The Green Heart as a planning disease – For decades, the Green Heart has been an established phenomenon in Dutch planning. It all started half a century ago. Legend has it that one day (no doubt a bright one) the aviator Plesman, founder of KLM Airways, flew over the West of the Netherlands and suddenly realized that all the towns and cities together made one big semicircular metropolis (which he called the Randstad) around a large open area (later to be called the Green Heart). This modern-time Eureka was tempting indeed. National planners almost immediately adopted the idea. Since the report Development of the Western Netherlands (1958) Randstad and Green Heart have been inseparable twins that survived all changes in policy. With the concept came an elaborate system of restrictions, to be applied on almost every kind of development in the Green Heart.

After forty years of imposing and dodging planning rules, it is time to admit that the Green Heart concept is becoming a dead end. What was really achieved was that politicians and public believed in the myth that somewhere in the middle of an urban area of six million people one could enjoy the serenity of endless open spaces, unmarred by the visible presence of modern human activities. What was not achieved was the preservation of the Green Heart as a predominantly rural countryside. What really happened was that the Green Heart got its fair share of the postwar construction boom. The old villages grew bigger and bigger. In spite of all the imposed regulations, they managed one way or another to build their own new residential and industrial estates. They got their own by-pass roads, their own civic centres and, in a last effort to preserve their rural character, their own feed silos and refrigerated warehouses. What they actually did was to keep pace with the rest of the country, no more and no less. We should take this by all means literally: at this moment the density of population in the Green Heart as a whole is exactly the national average for the Netherlands with 460 residents per hectare; not a figure that conjures up endless open space.

Still, the national planners persist in their respect for the imaginary Green Hole in the centre of the Randstad. Recent maps, like those figuring in the Fourth Report on Spatial Planning, leave out most of the towns and cities in the Green Heart in order to keep the idyllic picture alive. One of the most intriguing features in this report is the ‘Green Heart Boundary’ (see fig. 1), which is meant to define the Green Heart as the rural counterpart of the Randstad. For those who know the West of The Netherlands, the boundary is nothing more than a randomly drawn line on the map. Within its limits we find cities with populations up to 60,000; clumps of factories and distribution centres and all kinds of services, scattered along main arteries. What some call the Green Heart is in fact a continuation of the Randstad with different features: a vast urbanized countryside, a suburbia unique in its kind.

Operating on the Green Heart – For many reasons, the Green Heart concept is obsolete. The Green Heart is not just ‘rural’, nor is the Randstad as a whole per se ‘urban’. The contrast of Randstad and Green Heart is not as absolute as planners like to believe. We find large transition zones at the fringes of the Randstad, transforming it into a vast urban landscape covering most of the West of The Netherlands. There is no ‘hard edge’, a borderline of the dense city and the open landscape. What we have is a blurred transition zone that is slowly but inevitably on the move.

The beloved Green Heart concept has thus become outdated and unnecessary. In fact, it is downright detrimental in modern planning practice because it denies the constant transition in land use and the giant potential of the area it so desperately tries to conserve. By now, far from being the solution, the concept has become the problem.

In my opinion, we can and should do without the Green Heart concept as it has evolved in the last forty years. Still, we do need an approach to steer developments in the west of the country. One of the possible ways to rethink this long-established planning problem is to redefine the nature of the area we are talking about. What is actually going on in the centre of our largest conurbation? If you keep away from planners’ drawings and study a road map or an atlas instead, you will find that the cities of the Randstad are reasonably well interconnected. And I do not mean the links between the subsequent cities on the urban ring, but those connecting one point on the ring with a point on the opposing side on the ring. They cut their way through the so-called Green Heart area.

These links are not necessarily highways.
Sometimes they are much older than the automobile: several centuries ago already, Western Holland enjoyed a network of waterways, enabling travel by boat between all major cities on a regular timetable. This network consisted of natural waterways, completed by man-made shipping and drainage canals, and it made a lot of places in the heart of the country very highly accessible. Now there is something strange about the landscape of Western Holland, caused by the condition of the soil. The areas between the rivers have subsided over the centuries because of the accelerated agricultural drainage of the thick peat layers. On the other hand, the clay soils of the zones directly around the rivers resisted the effects of drainage much better. The result is a landscape where the rivers lie substantially higher than the surrounding countryside; a rather unorthodox situation.

The early settlers and their successors turned this situation into an advantage. They built farmhouses, roads, factories, villages and towns on the narrow strips of land on the banks of the Vecht, Hollandse IJssel, Gouwe, Oude Rijn, Lek and lesser rivers. What they developed was a perfect example of the urban strip, precisely located on the only spots suitable for linear development. Urbanization is thus no strange phenomenon in the Green Heart if only it sticks to nature’s conditions.

Later, railroads and highways followed the old settlement pattern wherever possible, again taking advantage of the best soil conditions. In cases where a shortcut route was preferred between two rivers, the construction consequences were enormous: those who watched the reconstruction of the A12 highway between Gouda and Woerden have seen how a provisional canal was filled with endless truckloads of sand, in order to provide a more solid foundation for the road. It will be obvious that the Dutch will not think lightly of building a new highway (or high-speed train link) through the Green Heart if they have to cross the peat bogs.

The interesting thing is that most recent developments have followed and even enhanced the old linear pattern. The river banks have become relatively densely populated areas, full of activities. They stand out in the more open and quiet meadowlands as separation walls. Actually, the Green Heart is made up of a number of ‘chambers’ between the rivers. Studying the maps, we find a large northern chamber between the Amsterdam Area and the Oude Rijn; in the central part a succession of chambers between Utrecht in the east and Leiden/The Hague/Rotterdam in the west; and in the south three chambers connecting in the southeast with the River Country that stretches out towards Arnhem and Nijmegen. Many of these chambers are subdivided by small streams with their own modest settlement pattern. Altogether, this proliferation of chambers suggests the metaphor that could take the Green Heart’s place as a cornerstone of the planning system: a Green Archipelago, islands separated more by linear developments than by water, but nevertheless islands.

Doing away with the planning myth – Once we have redefined the Green Heart as the Green Archipelago, we will see the obvious advantages of the new concept. The riverside strips can still be the bases for new developments, with easy access from the surrounding Randstad cities. The approach is historically correct, as all that is suggested is the continuation of a five hundred year-old settlement pattern. New roads and railways should stay clear of the ‘peat islands’ as much as possible; given the extreme cost of construction this should be an acceptable restriction. Having honoured the potential of the linear system, we can save the remaining islands. This gives us a much better chance to succeed: we are not trying to freeze a vast, industrious and (on average) well-populated area, the Green Heart as a whole; but we focus on the smaller, less populated islands. In terms of nature these ‘chambers’ are the richest areas in the Green Heart. They can be developed into unique ecosystems where cattle farming and bird sanctuaries go together, where visitors from neighbouring cities and abroad can enjoy the openness and quietness of the landscapes of the past, adapted conscientiously to modern needs.

A lot is changing in Dutch planning, but the concept of the Green Heart seems as alive as it was back in the fifties. Still, concept and reality have grown so far apart that the differences can no longer be overlooked. It is time for a new, challenging concept that serves present-day needs better: a concept that acknowledges the potential of the area and, at the same time, preserves the values of its countryside. The Green Heart is too big and too diverse to be preserved in its entirety; we should concentrate on the essence and preserve its ‘chambers’ instead. Let us learn to stop worrying about the Green Heart and love the Archipelago.
POSTSCRIPT

In December 1995 Minister Margaretha de Boer provisionally outlined the conclusions to which in her opinion the Green Heart discussions she had organized gave rise; though it was not until the summer of 1996 (that is, after the above essays were written) that such conclusions were officially presented to the States-General (the Dutch Parliament).

These Green Heart discussions had been talks between, on the one hand, officials of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, and on the other hand representatives of: the three Western provinces; municipalities and district water boards both in the Green Heart and in the Randstad ring; housing corporations; private enterprise in various sectors, i.a. agriculture, transport and tourism; voluntary organizations in the fields of nature preservation and recreation; and spatial planning professionals. By and large, all participants supported the Green Heart concept. However, municipalities within the Green Heart, housing corporations and industry representatives advocated a less stringent building policy, at least for the larger towns in the Green Heart (Gouda, Alphen a/d Rijn and Woerden).

The opinions of the Randstad and Green Heart citizens were gauged by means of a survey. The results showed that the Green Heart is highly valued and quite popular for recreational purposes. A large majority of respondents supported the restrictive building policy. The outcomes were similar to those of other surveys, both past and more recent ones.

The Minister concluded from the discussions and the survey that in the main, the Green Heart policy (see fig. 5) should be continued. As to the elements of this policy she arrived at the following statements.

- Urban development should continue to be concentrated in the Randstad ring, and the restrictive building policy in the Green Heart should stay in place. Restrictions should however not, as they were in the past, be applied to the numbers of dwellings municipalities are allowed to build, but to development contours. Within these contours municipalities should be free to decide upon the type of development.
- The stimulation policy for the Green Heart should be intensified. Ideas are being developed for further improvements to green functions and, most important, for financing such improvements. One idea is allowing the development of ‘new country estates’ (a house within 5 ha of woodland) in parts of the Green Heart. In general, plans are being made for quality improvements in agriculture, water management and small-scale recreation.

Meanwhile, in the media and in professional circles the Green Heart debate rages on – as, no doubt, it will do for many years to come.

What is the Green Heart policy?
The common spatial policy of the national and provincial governments for the Green Heart consists of two elements: restrictive policy and stimulation policy. The goal of the restrictive policy is to restrain the spatial expansion of housing and industry. The goal of the stimulation policy is to sustain and improve the green qualities of the area: nature, landscape, recreation, and agriculture (mainly dairy farming). The policies are outlined in the Fourth Report on Spatial Planning (Extra), the regional plans, and various other policy documents.

Fig. 5. The Green Heart: policy goals.


Notes

1. Preface and postscript by the Windows Editor.
REFERENCES


