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Lambregts B, Zonneveld W *Polynuclear Urban Regions and the Transnational Dimension of Spatial Planning*. *Eurbanet Report 3* Delft University Press, Delft, The Netherlands, 2003, 107 pages, EURO25.00 paper ISBN 90 407 2462 8

Zonneveld, W and Trip, Jan Jacob, *Megacorridors in North West Europe. Investigating a new transnational planning concept*, *Housing and Urban Policy Studies 27*, 2003, 92 pages. ISBN 90-407-2472-5, € 20,-

Over the last two decades, policy-makers and academics have adopted a different perspective on the link between space and economic development. In the past, space was seen as indirectly related to economic development, functioning as a stage or container facilitating economic interaction. In the present view, the actual spatial configuration of economic activities is considered as a key factor of economic success, as well as for the way specific socio-economic goals can be achieved. Beyond the realm of economic ambitions, appropriate spatial arrangements are considered helpful for balancing economic, social ('quality of life') and environment ('sustainability') needs. As a result, we have seen a mounting interest in spatial concepts such as 'clustering', 'science parks', 'waterfront development', 'spatial networks' 'corridors', and 'gateways'. In Europe, this trend has acquired an extra dimension under the flag of the EU. An increasing part of the structural funds subsidies is devoted to spatial development projects, notably through the Interreg programme supporting cross-border collaboration. Moreover, although formally spatial planning is not part of the EU's remit, a series of voluntary intergovernmental negotiations has resulted in various spatial perspectives, such as the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) and the *NWE (North West European) Spatial Vision*. Both developments have led to a spate of work in the field of *transnational* spatial planning.

It is within this context that we should place two publications stemming from OTB, a research institute on housing, urban development and mobility based in Delft (The Netherlands). The first contribution focuses on the concept of 'polynuclear urban regions' (PURs); the second one on 'Megacorridors'. The geographical context for both concepts is North West Europe, and both stem from Interreg-funded European projects, EURBANET (together with four other researcher covering Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, and the UK) and CORRIDESIGN (involving seven centres, from the same countries plus France).

The key ambition of the EURBANET project was to explore "how the knowledge and ideas developed during the comparative study of the four polynuclear urban regions could be put to use for the greater good of transnational spatial planning in North West Europe as a whole" (p. 1). The project involved the following four PURs (polynuclear urban regions): Randstad, RheinRuhr, the Flemish Diamond and Central Scotland. 'The greater good' is primarily associated with boosting competitiveness

and improving the quality of life. Through promoting a regional approach, polynuclearity may help multi-nodal urban areas to gain capacities and advantages on par with the 'classical', monocentric urban powerhouses like London, Paris or Madrid. In addition, PURs are considered to provide vehicles to stem the negative consequences of on-going suburbanisation, to counter inner-city decline, and to address mobility problems, both short and long-distance. For CORRIDESIGN, on the other hand, the main aim was to examine to what extent the concept of '(mega)corridors' could help to foster transnational interaction between major economic agglomerations.

The two projects share a number of observations and results, none of which comes as a surprise given the actual context of European spatial planning. The project and other participants – CORRIDESIGN involved an extensive series of in-depth interviews with policy-makers and parishioners – label the concepts as 'nebulous' and 'vague'. While it is generally recognised that the concepts fit in the broader spatial development perspective such as the ESDP and NWE Spatial Vision, they do little to bridge the gap between these rather abstract compilation of the ideas and principles promoted by these allegedly visionary documents, and the concrete dilemmas of spatial planning and land use development 'on the ground'. To a large extent, indeed, the elaboration of PUR and megacorridors tends to replicate the politically imposed undecidedness typical for European spatial planning. Most characteristically, instead of 'real' maps indicating actual geographical boundaries, or at least spatial reach of spatial concepts, purely symbolic maps are used that illustrate basic ideas without tying them to 'real' space. Yet, while the authors attribute much of this to the political sensitivities and tensions that seem to hinder strategic cross-border activities, later they also come up with a 'grand' spatial socio-economic explanation: "The latest trend of internationalisation and globalisation of culture and the economy, going hand in hand with the ICT-revolution, make mapping extremely difficult, with natural networks relatively easy to map so it seems and urban networks well-nigh impossible" (p. 80).

So what scope is there for transnational spatial planning? At present, it seems that spatial visioning processes have come to a standstill, or even reached a stalemate. This problem is compounded by the fact that these processes remain far removed from more concrete forms of planning, while the EU is increasingly pressed for 'concrete' deliverables. "So while the situation is not entirely hopeless, the picture painted above is also still far from the perspectives drawn, for example, in the ESDP" (p. 43). In addition, the contended rise of the 'network society' strongly curbs the possibility for longer term strategic planning anyway. On top of that, as both studies repeatedly stress, any attempt to coordinate spatial policies within a wider region or along a corridors suffers from endemic and seemingly incurable forms of institutional and technical fragmentation, already within countries but certainly in cross-border projects. Indeed, although the authors emphasise the potentially imaginative and mobilising power of spatial concepts (through 'naming, framing, spatial positioning, eventually mapmaking', p. 24), they also express deep scepticism about the contribution spatial planners can actually make: "our guess is that clusters of cities in close proximity will not choose to engage in regional forms of cooperation just because of they are propagated in the ESDP or the NWE Spatial Vision" (p 24), despite the fact that there seem to be 'new, regionally defined, potentialities with respect of competitiveness and quality of life' (p. 84).

So what is the agenda? The little hope there is left stems from the potentials the authors see in two sets of activities: building new forms of governance and nurturing interregional learning. The EURBANET study calls for more interactive, multi-level and interurban forms of planning, nurturing a regional discourse, increasing organisational flexibility, the use of new (economic) incentives, all to be induced by a 'simple start' and without the establishment of an involve and extra administrative layer. Transnational activities, in addition, should be geared to nurturing mutual learning and the exchange of good practices. CORRIDESIGN, on the other hand, puts forward a strategy of communication, with the aim to change the 'frames of reference' of stakeholders, to further develop and debate spatial concepts, and to encourage mutual networking. Interacting and learning should thus unlock the present gridlocks and deadlocks plaguing both spatial development and spatial governance.

Whether more interactive governance and 'intelligence' will bring about more effective forms of transnational spatial integration remains however doubtful. In effect, despite their rather broad stance, the two reports hardly manage to escape from the technocratic perspective that has deeply penetrated both the practice and discourse of European spatial planning. But when they do, by considering, in a fairly critical way, the wider political, institutional and social context of transnational planning, they make clear that the challenges for transnational planning do not rest primarily with thinking up and communicating visionary concepts. There is a whole trajectory before that also needs to be addressed, involving deeper issues of spatial identity, the meaning of borders (cultural and administrative), national political, institutional and bureaucratic frameworks, and the way spatial rhetorics is used by a variety of agents (from the EU to local authorities) to pursue specific, often non-spatial goals. However, rather than reflecting such concerns in the concluding sections, both reports finish with rather 'happy ends, but this may understandable given the practical context in which the publications have emerged.