Ecological restoration and place attachment

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Abstract
The creation of new wetlands along rivers as an instrument to mitigate flood risks in times of climate change seduces us to approach the landscape from a 'managerial' perspective that threatens a more place-oriented approach. What are the possibilities of providing ecological restoration projects with a broader cultural context? How can we prevent that the ecological restoration will lead to the production of non-places? How can one prevent that these landscapes become strange non-places, devoid of meaning and with no real connection to our habitable world. This paper discusses three possible alternative interpretations of the meaning of places and place attachment in these 'new nature' projects and address the tensions between them.

1. Introduction

A large part of the Netherlands lies below sea level or below the high-water level of the major rivers. To protect the land from floods, as early as the mid-14th century, a nearly completely connected system of dikes arose, which determines the image we have of the landscape of The Netherlands up to the present day. However, precipitation levels are expected to rise due to climate change, causing increased peak discharges on the rivers. The traditional approach to flood control – dyke reinforcements – has shown serious downsides, because it causes the peaty soil to dry out and the land to subside; whereas peak water levels are increasing. A breach in the dykes will have increasingly serious consequences, especially because the nation's most vital economic sectors lie in the lowest areas.

In 1996, the Dutch government therefore decided to abandon the traditional water policy of dike reinforcements. Reinforcing the dikes is only considered if other measures are too expensive or inadequate. The new policy of flood risk reduction is aimed at creating more space for the river and lowering high water levels, by means of deepening the forelands of the rivers, displacing dikes further inland, lowering of groins in the rivers and enlarging of summer beds. Ecological restoration plays a key role in the new policy: former agricultural areas are transformed into wetland reserves (so-called 'new nature') to reduce the risk of floods. An accessory objective of the plan is the creation of ecological sound, robust nature reserves and the improvement of the 'spatial quality' of the river region.

Implementation of these projects sometimes runs into problems due to lack of support among local residents. Some of these problems relate to fundamental interpretation differences with regard to the meaning of place within these projects. Many local inhabitants regret the loss of many old (agri)cultural landscapes that disappear in the process of giving room to the river and feel that their sense of belonging to the landscape has suffered from the restoration practices. In the public debate, restorationists (or 'nature builders') are often blamed for failing to recognize people's meaningful relations with the landscape. Some even hold that the new policy of 'room for the river' actually diminishes the 'place for the people'.

How could we prevent that the ecological restoration forces us to adopt a purely functional managerial perspective on the land? What are the possibilities of providing ecological restoration projects with a rich cultural context, a context that could help prevent these new landscapes becoming strange non-

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places, devoid of meaning and separated from our habitable world? How can we prevent that the ecological restoration will lead to the production of non-places?

In this paper, I want to discuss three possible alternative interpretations of the meaning of places and place attachment in these 'new nature' projects, and address the question if and how the difference between these perspectives can be reconciled. But first, let me briefly go into the dominant water management perspective in more detail.

2. Place in modern water management

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the Dutch river landscape was the locus of a political clash between adherents of different visions of river nature. The immediate cause of the conflict was the intention of the Dutch Directorate for Public Works and Water (Rijkswaterstaat) to heighten old embankments along the major Dutch rivers (Rhine, Waal and Meuse). River discharges were expected to rise due to climate change in combination with established water management policies. As a result, the old river dikes would be too weak for adequate flood protection in the near future. It was decided that the dikes had to be reinforced as cost effective as possible: the plan was to replace the often century-old, small-scaled, heavily winding dikes with higher, more robust and straighter ones. The plan provoked a lot of opposition. Landscape activists and many local inhabitants considered these plans disastrous for the traditional typical Dutch river landscape, made famous by the works of 17th century landscape painters like Jacob and Salomon Ruysdael. Eventually, the protesters succeeded in stopping these plans, partly because of a paradigm change that had simultaneously taken place in water management thinking.

In the years following the above-mentioned debate, river managers more and more realized that reinforcing dikes would not provide an adequate protection against floods forever. With the land subsiding and water levels rising, building ever-higher dikes ceases to be an option. In stead of restricting rivers in straightjackets of dikes, we should enable them to occupy the floodplains in times of high water. The 'Room for the river' plan provides the framework for this transition in river management. In order to give the rivers more space, human activities such as agriculture will have to disappear from the floodplains and the riverside meadows will be transformed into wetland nature reserves. The plan does not entirely discard human activity from the floodplain: new technologies, such as floating houses, roads, factories and glass houses, allow the river to flood without coming into conflict with vital human interests.

The reasons for giving the river more room were primarily utilitarian: to insure economical functions (transport, water supply, and agriculture), safety (flood protection), recreation and leisure, but also biodiversity / habitat protection. Ecological restoration reduces flood risks, but also creates large recreational sites for hiking and cycling, for which there is high demand in a heavily populated area such as The Netherlands. A less anthropocentric motive for 'Room for the river' is the preservation of biodiversity: reinstalling natural dynamics in floodplains provides new habitants for several species and the new wetlands function as corridors in an ecological network that enable animals and plants to migrate and spread out.[1]

The old technological approach to of dyke reinforcement has been abandoned, but this does not mean that the new water management paradigm can prevent drastic changes of the traditional river landscapes. Many of the traditional water meadows will be transformed into swamps and marches, traditional summer dikes will be breached, old clay depositions removed from the floodplain and ancient river branches uncovered, all this in order to reinstall natural water dynamics.

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[1] Note that fragmentation of natural areas is the single most significant threat to biodiversity in The Netherlands. The Dutch government has committed itself to the protect biodiversity, through the European Birds and Habitat Directive and the Natura 2000 ecological network.

These plans will drastically disrupt the old traditional agricultural landscape that Holland is famous for. The authors of the 'Room for the river' plan recognize this and ensure that certain sites and features (so-called "keep off"-areas) will have to be excluded from nature development "because of their cultural-historical importance". But still, overall, the room for the river plan will drastically change the layout and feel of the river flood plains.

Proponents of the new 'ecosystem based water management' nonetheless believe that the 'Room for the River'-plan presents an opportunity to also increase the overall 'spatial quality' of the river landscape. The term 'spatial quality' is introduced to give voice to place-based concerns within the overall framework of the room for the river plan. In a process of public participation[2], the local population is actively involved in the renovation design process of the river landscape, and special attention is being paid for the interests of local inhabitants (quality of housing, possibilities of recreation, and involvement of local entrepreneurs).

But although terms like 'spatial quality' and processes like 'participatory spatial planning' are meant to address issues of place, they do not give voice to feelings of place directly. Most water managers believe that their primarily concern should be 'objective' issues such as safety, economics (house prices) and biodiversity. The new developments may also present a chance to improve the 'spatial quality', but that is considered to be a side issue. The 'sense of place' is usually considered to be such a subjective feeling that it will be hard to take into account in government plans.

For that reason, many believe that the new water management paradigm will remain dominated by purely functional motives, and that the managerial perspective on the landscape will eventually outflank other ways of looking at and dealing with the landscape.

In 2003, a survey was conducted into the changing public perceptions and appreciations of riverine landscapes in response to ecological reconstruction projects in the floodplains (Buijs 2004). The investigators interviewed local residents, holyday-makers and people without a specific relationship with the river landscape, and asked them how their experience of the landscape had changed due to the recent changes.

Almost all respondents reported that they considered the new areas to be an improvement. They believed that the new wetlands were visually more attractive than the old water meadows and appreciated the increased accessibility of the areas (for recreation and the like). Most people also believed that the 'nature value' was higher then before, but some of the local respondents disagreed because they considered the traditional landscape just as 'natural' as the new one.

The most important difference between the local respondents and non-local respondents, however, related to the feeling of connection with the landscape. Understandably, non-local respondents did not value this aspect very highly, because, as occasional visitors, they had no consistent connection to these places. The local population, however, clearly said that their feeling of place attachment had clearly diminished.

Many feel that place-based concerns are not given their proper due in the dominant water management perspective. They believe that the whole idea of renovating or restoring the landscape in times of climate change tempts us into a 'managerial' perspective on the land in which place-related concerns are considered merely 'subjective extra's'? The question, therefore, is what are the possibilities of providing ecological restoration projects with a cultural context, and prevent that these landscapes become strange non-places, devoid of meaning and separated from our habitable world?

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[2] E.g. the project Waalweelde (http://www.waalweelde.nl), that provides a digital environment in which local inhabitants along the borders of the Lower Rhine (Waal) can actively contribute ideas into the spatial design process and a river simulation computer program that enables them to immediately see the effects of their alternative plans on high water levels.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss some alternative interpretations of ecological restoration along the river that try to take place-based concerns more seriously. I will also show, however, that these alternative interpretations will raise new and challenging questions.

3. Sense of Place end the legible landscape

Even though the new government policy recognizes the value of particular historical sites, many believe that the preservation of those features in the landscape that are spectacular enough to be considered sites of historic importance will not be enough to maintain the overall place identity of the landscape. According to many critics, the new policy justifies large-scale interventions that will eventually endanger the old legible cultural landscape, and thus undermine the experience of being connected to the land and being at home in the landscape.

The Dutch riverine landscape is many centuries old. Remains of former human inhabitation are abundantly present and in plain sight for those who know where to look for them: wooded banks, terraces, dikes and mounds ('terps') all testify of a long history of human habitation. Some features of these landscapes, such as some ancient hedges along the river Meuse, even date back to Roman and Germanic times. Remnants of other past events are still visible as well, such as the traces of previous floods (deep ponds called "wielen"). The landscape is covered with remains of past human-nature dialogues: a mix of traces of historic events and natural events, and of past land use remains. In this ancient, small-scale landscape, culture and nature more or less organically merged into a meaningful whole; biodiversity and cultural diversity go together. The riverine landscape reflects the (past en present) socio-economic efforts of people trying to survive in a land where river floodings are a threat, but the resulting clay depositions make fertile soil for local farmers; meanwhile, winding dikes and small ponds provide a habitat for many species of animals and plants. Indeed, according to many biologists, the traditional Dutch cultural landscape has more biodiversity than purely natural wetlands.[3]

According to landscape activist and nature writer Willem van Toorn[4], the Dutch river landscape is a 'pictorial book of our memory' – as indeed are *all* landscapes –, but the Dutch landscape is perhaps even more so, because "it would not have existed if people had not had the idea that it could be made form all this water. Nearly everywhere you stand in this Dutch landscape, you stand within the thoughts of people, neatly disguised as nature, and everyone is pretending it has to be like this." (Van Toorn, 1998: 9) The Dutch river landscape therefore can be read as an archive containing the history of The Netherlands, and its inhabitants. The 'legible landscape' tells a story about how humans have dwelled in these places and how they related to the world and to each other, who they were, how they thought and how their successors have become what they are now. Van Toorn:

> "These landscapes remind us along complicated and sometimes unconscious lines that there is a past, that people who lived in that past had to deal with the world just as we have to, that they had to protect themselves against nature and at the same time use its resources" (Van Toorn, 1998: 66).

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[3] This view, usually labeled as the 'traditional conservationists view', has dominated conservation thinking in the Netherlands up to recently. Nowadays, it is being challenged by those in favor of ecological restoration as being too anthropocentric. Cf. section 4.

[4] Poet and novelist Willem van Toorn was one of the spokespersons of the *Foundation Save the River Landscape* ('Stichting Red het Rivierlandschap'). As a child, he spent many a holiday with family in the Betuwe, rustic areas in the centre of The Netherlands. As a result, he became familiar with the landscape of large rivers, which often appears in his work. In his novels *Een leeg landschap* ('An Empty Landscape', 1988) and *De rivier* ('The River', 1999), he expresses his anxiety about the corrosion of the river landscape. He also wrote several essays about the theme (cf. Van Toorn, 1998).

According to Van Toorn, we have a responsibility to take care of the old 'signs' in the landscape, out of gratitude towards our predecessors who, by living in it and with it, made the landscape what it is now.

> "We have to stay in touch with this past – not because the past is better than our present, but simply because we owe it our existence, our identity, our vision of the world, and because we can only think about the future by making use of our past experiences. A landscape that does not contain enough 'signs', or where too much of these signs have disappeared, cannot tell us much. […] It is telling, that exactly dictatorships that deny and despise the past, often destroy landscapes in a bewildering fashion, as if they want to rob people from their memories." (Idem)

The signs in the landscape make up a narrative that reflects the history of the place and the relations people have (had) with it. For Van Toorn, we should not protect these old landscapes because of some 'intrinsic' feature of these landscapes themselves, but because the legible features enable humans to have a meaningful relation with place and history. These signs make the world habitable; they help us to dwell here.

Many old signs in the landscape follow a specific structure that is often repeated over again in a certain region, but differently in other regions. Careful attention for the specific details of local places, will reveal that there are subtle regional differences in style of dikes, fencing, architecture of the farmhouses, land use, that all help to distinguish one regional place from another.

Some of these regional differences in style are caused by basic geology. Glacier rivers like the Rhine and Waal are broad and sometimes impressive stream that steadily flow through the landscape. In contrast, precipitation rivers like the Meuse are far more fickle: what appears to be a small tranquil stream in summertime can become a fearsome wild river in spring. These differences are reflected in the landscape surrounding these rivers too: in the height and shape of the dikes, the character of land use in the flood plain et cetera.

The narrative of the landscape depends not solely on the material traces in the landscape, but also because people tell stories about it and *invest* it with meaning: it plays a role in novels, poems, movies and other 'genres of imagination'.[5] Many of these histories differ from region to region as well, and add to a specific regional character of certain places.

Removing the old dikes would erase these regional differences, and would result in alienating local inhabitants from their own neighborhoods. From this perspective there is hardly any difference between the threat posed by heavy dyke reinforcements and by the creation of wetlands. Whereas the former will transform the 'habitable, meaningful world' into a uniform, merely functional landscape dominated by straight lines; a 'systematized' or even 'medicalized' landscape (with artificial veins, bypasses and heart valves) devoid of meaning, the latter will have a similar result. By removing the human signs and imprints in the landscape, nature development will eventually wipe out all traces of human history in the landscape, and thus transform the legible landscape into an a-historical, monotonous and mute landscape.

According to Van Toorn, ecological restoration rests on a typically technological type of thinking:

> "the type of nature that nature builders aspire does not have anything to tell to humans […] humans are strangers, merely visitors in their own landscape. […] The one danger to the Dutch landscape is that is will be crushed between two ways of technological thinking: that of large scale dike reinforcements and that of 'constructing nature'. […] I fear that journalists, artists and writers will have to keep on explaining, that one can create something like nature,

[5] The collective experience of the Dutch landscape has been influenced to a large extend by the works of writers like Hendrik Marsman and Nescio, or more recently by the works of Willem van Toorn and Koos van Zomeren.

> but that one can never restore a cultural landscape that has been built in a process of many centuries, once it is destroyed." (Van Toorn, 1998: 77-78)

The commitment with the old cultural river landscape, at least as expressed by Van Toorn, clearly has an ethical side to it. One could say that the landscape activists represented an ethics of place, in which the ability of inhabitants to 'read' the signs in the landscape provides them with a 'moral measure' and a sense of belonging. The narrative of place provides them a broader context – the land is an *ethos* in the sense of ηθος, if you will – that gives its inhabitants a sense of what it means to dwell in this place appropriately.

Van Toorn and others' resistance against large-scale disruptions of the traditional river landscape by nature development testifies of an ethics of place that rejects the managerial perspective and opposes the proliferation of uniform space and the equalization of place. Its central aim is to recognize the specific ethos of each specific place; its ideal is a harmonious intersection of nature and culture in which the landscape is saturated with meanings and signs and populated by those who can and who care to read these signs. In this view, the land is a place where one can belong, and the sense of place can adds to ones feeling of identity.

They oppose the view that sees the landscape as a blank slate that can be rewritten at will, and people are free to decide whether to organize a landscape with purely functional considerations in mind, or take into account considerations of 'spatial quality.' What is at stake here is a radical issue about the place of ethics[6] in a human life: are places interchangeable, manageable and can they be reorganized at will by humans?; or do they have an internal structure that humans have to adapt to?

4. Restoring Nature and Sense of Place v. 2.0

But there is another perspective that is equally interested in the legibility of particular places, but more favorable to the idea of ecological restoration. Many restoration biologists agree with the critics in their rejection of a purely technical approach of 'building nature' and the idea of nature as malleable. Ecological restoration should be about the attempt to reach a more sensitive relation with nature and landscape.

Wouter Helmer, restoration ecologist and director of a major Dutch nature development organization ('Stichting Ark'[7]), is one of the strong defenders of the ideas behind 'Room for the river'. Together with landscape architect Willem Overmars, he has argued against the aspiration of 'building' particular 'goal type nature'. In stead of *'constructing'* new nature, we should 'liberate' nature. Nature developmers should start with a meticulous examination of those structural features on a particular place that are already present: the "genius of place" or else we will end up with "fake landscapes, a fake geomorphology and a fake history".[8] What has to be respected are the (non-anthropogenic) natural processes and underlying geomorphologic structures that are characteristic of a certain place, the (anthropogenic) historical developments of a certain landscape as far as these contributed to the specific character of that area, and the societal functions that enable people to interact with these natural processes in ways that are both physically and economically sustainable. Respecting the genius of place implies that nature developers have to take into account the deeper geological structures of a particular place. The construction of embankments made forelands silt up rapidly with clay. Respecting the genius of place in a floodplain could mean that instead of digging side channels to help the water discharge, one decides to 'peel off' old clay depositions and thus uncover ancient river branches (even though this is sometimes possible only by disrupting more recent legible layers).

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6 . The idea that an ethics of place is actually about the place of ethics is borrowed from Bruce Janz (Janz, in preparation).

7 cf. http://www.arknature.nl

8 Helmer & Overmars, 1998: 3. Also see: Higgs, 2003.

Some of these projects can even help vitalize local communities. A few years ago, residents of Juliana-avenue in the city of Arnhem discovered that there had been an old creek in their street that was buried under the pavement almost hundred years ago. They started a cooperation and re-designed a creek through their front gardens. Now, each year they celebrate a 'Juliana creek party', starting off by drinking water from their own well (which is very exceptional in place like the Netherlands). Such a party celebrates both the restored relation with nature and the rejuvination of the place-based community.

Ecological restoration can thus be seen as an attempt to complement of the anthropocentric narrative that the cultural landscape activists refer to: not to eradicate human traces, but rather to – literally – dig up legible layers that precede habitation. By showing how the landscape must have been like before humans dominated the landscape and releasing the natural forces that early inhabitants had to deal with, we can deepen the scope of our sense of place. Restoration can thus provide human place-history with a broader context. In that sense, developing wetlands along the rivers could be understood of as a broadening and deepening of the ethics of place, rather that a destruction of it.

Restoration ecologist Frans Vera, one of the most influential individuals in Dutch nature policy, defends this view of nature development with reference to the so-called 'shifting baseline syndrome'.[9] In the history of human cultivation and domestication of the landscape, people almost always were aware of the difference between cultural landscapes and 'pure' nature. The contrast between these two types of landscape helped humans to understand the workings of their human centered landscape form within the broader context of the surrounding nature. In our present historical situation, however, there is no original nature left and therefore we do no longer posses a clear baseline. As a result, people have all kinds of unfounded ideas about how 'real' nature looks like. This is the so-called "shifting baseline syndrome"[10]: people do not perceive the ecological decline because their ideas about nature change together with the deterioration of nature. According to Vera, nature development is necessary, because it can help humans establish a new baseline.

In its core, this demand for a new baseline seems to be a moral argument. It is aimed at providing us with a non-anthropocentric moral measure with which to look at ourselves critically. Nature development could give us a sense of how the natural world would have looked like if humans would not dominate the scene – it could help us regain a sense of what is 'normal' and 'in tune' and what isn't.

Developing nature then is not the eradication of human history, but – on the contrary – the *placing* of human history within the broader framework of earth history. Each inhabited place has a narrative that predates that of habitation. By allowing the older layers in the landscape to surface again, one can deepen our sense of place. If people are confronted with the way in which a river has changed its course during the past millennia, they can start to recognize what it means to live along a river. It can also help them connect with the first inhabitants of the land, who had to deal with natural forces that were much stronger than they have been during the past centuries. Such an awareness can help people to recognize again the dynamic nature of the river and learn to live with that dynamism instead of simply trying to control it.

One could say that restorationists like Helmer and Vera want to *morally* deepen our sense of place into a "sense of place v.2.0" if you will. Like the defenders of the cultural landscape, they, too, want to provide our human world with a context that can give us a 'measure' of normality. Seen from this perspective, by confronting us with a 'measure' that can limit our cultural appropriations of place, restoration could complement and correct, broaden and deepen our sense of place.

Proponents of this idea of 'regrounding' our sense of place criticize the defenders of the old cultural landscape both for their anthropocentrism and for their conservatism. In the idealized traditional

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[9] Cf. Vera 2006. Vera himself does not actually use the term place but rather speaks about our 'view of nature'.
[10] The term was first coined by marine biologists Daniel Pauly (Pauly 1995).

cultural landscape narrative, nature does not really have voice of its own. Nature development helps correct this human-centeredness. The legible signs inscribed by humans are not the only ones that tell a story: nonhuman beings and processes left their traces as well. All kinds of natural processes, from ecology to geology, made these places into what they have become. Humans are merely co-authors of the landscape, the first chapters of the narrative of each place were written by nature itself.

Helmer cautions us that the emphasis on a new baseline should not amount to a dualism that would forbid any human interference: we do not have to choose between purely cultural and purely natural landscapes. Instead, the new nature areas could be seen as cultural landscapes themselves: as new dialogical human-nature practices that enable both nature and humanity to express themselves in a particular way. According to Helmer we should acknowledges that what is there, but at the same time 'revitalize' the landscape by allowing new developments. If we recognize that signs and traces add to the meaning of a landscape, why then should we not also be allowed to leave meaningful signs in the landscape ourselves, provided they are in tune with the land? [11] Maybe it is possible to reinterpret the new nature development not just as a uncovering old tests, but also as writing new meaningful traces in the landscape?

5. Towards a Palimpsest Landscape?

The two alternative views presented above differ considerably, but reconciliation between them is – at least in principle – conceivable. Both are interested in acknowledging the past, they mainly differ in their time horizon. It may very well be possible to reconcile the 'emplaced' view of restoration as the art of uncovering old traces with a view that is concerned with the legibility of the landscape. A common ideal could be a multi-layered landscape in which one can witness different legible layers on top of each other. Archeologists speak of multi-layered texts as 'palimpsests'. The term palimpsest originally refers to recycled parchment documents. In the Middle Ages, parchment paper was expensive to such an extent, that people took older documents (often from the antique Greek times) and bleached the old ink, so as to re-use the parchment for writing new texts on top of old ones.[12] Archeologists use the term, because they are concerned with reading different legible layers in the soil, and are trying to find ways to read the older layers without destroying the more recent 'texts' on top.

If we conceive of ecological restoration as the uncovering of ancient layers, and the cultivation of the lessons learned form reading the older text, then the palimpsests landscape could be a landscape ideal worth striving for: a multi-layered legible landscape that reflects human history and 'grounds' our sense of place in an understanding of the earlier and deeper layers. The big challenge is, of course, how one can uncover deeper layers (for instance clearing older river channels) without destroying more recent depositions on top.

Some experiments with such multi-layered landscapes start from a pragmatic perspective: those signs that still manage to convey a meaningful story about the landscape or that enable a meaningful interaction with it are cared for; those who don't are allowed to disappear. In the Groenlanden project (along the river Waal near the city of Nijmegen), for instance, restorationists allow agricultural land to become wetland again, although remnants of defensive works from the cold war are actively maintained and the structural features caused by a 19th Century waste dump are considered to be an interesting diversifying 'gradient' for future natural developments.

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[11] Willem van Toorn admids that we should not turn our landscapes into museums. He praises the modern highways in Tuscany, because even they somehow mirror ancient Roman pathways. The new should take into account the old, not by deifying it, but by somehow paying tribute to that which already exists while creating something new.

[12] Nowadays, historians use new imaging technologies to decipher the ancient texts without having to destroy the newer texts. In this way, a few years ago, a hitherto unknown text of Archimedes was discovered, hidden under the text of a medieval prayer book.

But often it will prove difficult to acknowledge both time horizons: old wooded banks that get trampled underfoot by reintroduced Konik-horses, road remains that have to yield for old water channels et cetera. Nevertheless, there seem to be opportunities to creatively combine the two perspectives on the legible landscape within the overall policy framework of Room for the River. If we succeed in dealing with the palimpsest problem of how to uncover old layers in the land without destroying the more recent layers, we may indeed reconcile place concerns and new nature development.

We should, however, be cautious not to hasten to the conclusion that all tensions can be solved. Despite the obvious similarities between both approaches, underneath the conflict between the cultural landscape activists and the restorationists lies a cultural divide that is not so easy to reconcile. Willem van Toorn rejects the ideal of nature development, because the new managerial landscape view represents a view of life and of history that he despises:

> "The cultural landscape does not have a lobby. It is, at least in The Netherlands, protected by a small group of artists and intellectuals. They protect it against a light-hearted kind of postmodern form of thinking in which history is just a grab bag, from which one can carelessly throw away anything that is not fashionable. […] I consider it to be a dangerous development that with nature construction, people aspire to create landscapes, in which human are only present as tourists – and no longer as a resident for whom the signs and the narratives of the land are food for his spirit." (Van Toorn 1998, p.76-77)

Van Toorn seems to distinguishes a model inhabitant – capable and willing to read the signs of the land – from an equally exemplary version of the postmodern 'visitor of the landscape', who is not connected to place in any way, neither to the landscape itself nor to history[13]. Where the place-dweller passively receives the meaning of his life from place and history, the postmodern city-dweller (who merely visits the river landscape for leisure) sees himself as a self-invented, autonomous being.

The real worry for those worried about the corrosion of the river landscape is about ourselves: the real trouble is that *we* loose our ability to read the landscape. According to critics like Van Toorn, the new sense of place v.2.0 will, to a large degree, be dependent on experts, historians and ecologists, to provide people with a credible narrative that makes that particular place legible again.

> "The type of nature that nature builders aspire does not have anything to tell to humans – that is why these newly created nature areas have to be provided with information pavilions, signposting, treasure hunts along tree species and ponds with half domesticated otter; humans as strangers, as a visitor in his own landscape." (p.77)

Ultimately, the new restoration narratives cannot make up for the lost feeling of belonging, because they do not flow from a genuine connection to the landscape. The traditional sense of place and sense of belonging relied upon a specific knowledge of what was appropriate, what was 'in place'. The traditional landscape somehow provided its inhabitants – those who knew how to read the signs of the land – with a 'moral measure'. In contrast, the deeper textual layers that interest restoration biologists are not legible to most of us: we need experts to explain them to us and draglines to bring them to the surface. It is not the land, but the 'nature experts' that provide us with a new sense of measure or baseline.

[13] Although, one might ask, this postmodern will in some sense probable feel connected to his own city – a type of place attachment Van Toorn does not seem to consider.

6. Non-place in Supermodernity

At this point, it can be helpful to look at the work of the French anthropologist Marc Augé. Following the definition of Maus, Augé starts with the idea that place is culture localized in time and space. Augé distinguishes three aspects of place: (1) place are historic: inhabitants of places do not make history but find themselves in it (2) all places constitute the identity of those living there, and (3) places define relations: places link one person to others living there (Augé, 1995: 52). However, according to Augé, we live in an era of 'supermodernity', in which people have a different relation to history, to themselves and to each other. Therefore, more and more locations lack the three features of anthropological place: 'non-places'. Supermodernity is determined by three figures of excess. The 'overabundance of events' refers to an acceleration of history: history ceases to be a stable point of reference. As a result, the feeling of being a successor of our predecessors is more and more strange to us.

The second excess of our time is 'spatial overabundance': due to increased mobility, we are able to visit more places than ever before in history. Augé points out that, paradoxically, this spatial overabundance leads to a shrinking of the planet, because different places in the world more and more resemble each other. Due to our increased mobility, we are unable to really connect to specific places. Finally, the third figure of excess in the relation to place refers to the rise of individualism. According to Augé, we do no longer collectively share places as a shared frames of reference, but in stead, all of us have our own 'trajectory' in space.[14]

Net result this threefold abundance of supermodernism is that more and more places in the world lack the aspects of place that enable people to integrate place in their lives in a meaningful way.

Typical examples of non-places are airports, service stations, supermarkets, malls, hotel chains. Most non-places have been especially designed to optimize the thru-flow of people: no one is at home there; everyone is just passing through. Furthermore, most airports and shopping malls did not organically grow, but were designed and redesigned solely for purposes such as efficiency, prestige et cetera. These non-places do not contribute to anybody's feeling of identity. According to Bruno Bosteels, poeple in non-places are typically "passengers or customers or as both at once [who] immerse themselves in the chance anonymity of an empty space without history, as if trapped and immobilized in a time without events. What people usually do in such places […] would seem to involve little more than waiting, remembering, or shopping while passing through" (Bosteels, 2003).[15] Non-places "do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory,' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." To be sure, non-places *can* be filled with meanings, but because all people occupying these locations are either at work or just passing through, the meaningful signs in non-places will probably be the result of advertising campaigns, corporate identity projects and the like. No one is really at home in these non-places: only a very narrow part of people's lives takes place there. Non-places do not reflect a genuine history or define a person's identity; neither do they genuinely help to define the relationships that people have with each other.[16] Non-places make up a purely functional, sanitized landscape. Such an

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[14] Some will argue, in contrast, that many people are actively involved with their place, today more than ever. However, a conscious effort to collectively invest meaning in place – to which many local communities indeed seems to commit themselves these days – could be interpreted as precisely a symptom of the erosion of place, that apparently does no longer come about spontaneously.

[15] Although one could also give a more positive description of the relation between passengers and non-places. Some people even appreciate non-places such as airports precisely because being stuck there enables one – for instance – to read a book without being called away for all kinds of societal demands

[16] Although, of course, we should add, that all non-places tend to be filled with meaning by people using them. Augé, too, acknowledges that there are hardly any 'pure' non-places – people are investing meaning in new places constantly. In the 2004 movie The Terminal, Viktor Navorski, an eastern immigrant finds himself stranded in JFK airport, and must take up temporary residence there. He is forced to make his home in the airport terminal – the pivotal non-place. As Viktor is trying to find his way around, however, we gradually come to know the terminal as somehow a place of its own. Both perspectives collide in a brilliantly funny scene.

arrangement of space misses the specifics of a regional place that enable people to feel connected to it.

At first sight, Augé's notions of anthropological 'place' seem to resemble Willem van Toorn's remarks on the old river landscapes. Nevertheless, the concept of non-place should give us serious reason to reconsider the idealizations of the old cultural river landscape, and the place-attachment of its inhabitants. According to Augé', as soon as we consider certain places as 'places of memory', we already start transforming them into non-places. Should that not make us a bit more suspicious about the simple opposition between emplaced old cultural landscapes and the new landscapes as non-places?

Underneath the pleas for the cultural landscapes along the rivers is the assumption that its inhabitants all share a certain sense of place and know how to read the signs in the landscape. Maybe we should allow ourselves to seriously question whether this assumption is actually justified. But should we not admit that, today, hardly anyone really feels connected to a location in the sense that Van Toorn is expressing? Of course, we all feel connected with a particular place every now and then. Moreover, most of us feel connected to more than one place. I feel connected to the village of my childhood, to the nature reserve that I spend most of my holidays in my youth, to the neighborhood where I have lived for the last 20 years, to my university campus, to the forest and hills close to my home town. But I also feel connected to the breathtakingly beautiful Restonica valley in inner Corsica, where I spent two summer holidays, to the Eiffel mountains in Germany, where I like to go hiking every now and then, to St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, where I attended some environmental philosophy meetings.

However, the reasons that I value the Restonica valley have more to do with me and with the shortcomings of modern-life in the Netherlands, than with the actual place itself. Although as a visitor I can somehow 'sense' the old signs in the landscape, I dare not to pretend to be able to read these signs as someone actually living there could. Furthermore, the places that I have a special connection to are probably very different from those of my neighbors or my colleagues (although we will share some of them). Of course, to some extend some places still are shared reference points that partly determine peoples relations to each other,[17] but places are no longer the taken for granted background shared by all people.

My point being that we seem to be far more supermodern than Van Toorn would like us to be.

If Augé's diagnosis of our age as supermodernity makes any sense and we are indeed to a large degree individualized and determined by the overabundance of place and history, then most people are already distanced from their roots to a degree that is far beyond repair. If so, then non-places are everywhere, albeit not in a pure form. In that case, whatever new senses of place we will be able to come up with, will always be 'provisional' and, in a certain way, far more superficial than we would like them to be. If Augé's diagnosis is accurate, then our new sense of connectedness to the land will always be accompanied by a profound sense of estrangement – perhaps we supermodern human *are indeed* to a large degree destined to be "only present as tourists"

But if this is indeed the case, then the traditional place ideal merely expresses nostalgia. Although we all *like* to feel connected to a place in the deepest sense every now and then, and conceive ourselves "as a resident[s] for whom the signs and the narratives of the land are food for his spirit", most of us can no longer pretend to have a primordial bound with the land. We use cultures of place – like (reinvented?) folklore, local history, and "information pavilions, signposting, treasure hunts along tree

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Viktor is shaving in a public restroom, when a worn out business man comes in and asks: 'Ever feel like you're living in an airport?'

[17] When my colleagues and I recently moved to a new building, we shared that experience of being simultaneously forced to re-invent some of our daily routines, making the building into a particular place as a common point of reference.

species and ponds with half domesticated otter" (cf. Van Toorn) – to provide us with a temporary feeling of meaning, but in the end most of us will indeed remain (to some degree at least) strangers, visitors, aliens to the landscape.

What's more: our desire for belonging in a place should not keep us from recognizing who we also are. *If* Augé's diagnosis of supermodernity has some credibility, then clinging to the ideal of 'good old' place attachment could eventually only result in the creation of artificial 'landscapes of memory', that is: museum pieces, ironical look-alikes of places long gone. Instead of 'grounding' our identity in place, we would actually draw back into a would-be identity and as a result project our desires onto a landscape and thus create non-places ourselves – landscapes that solely reflect our inability to come to terms with our actual predicament.

According to Augé's diagnosis, non-places are not an accident, a circumstantial erosion of place, but a result of a historical development; a symptom of how our whole mode of existence has changed in supermodernity. By neglecting the deeper reality of supermodernity, the opposition against the erosion of place could prove to be merely another a symptom of the crisis of place, instead of a resolution form it. If, in our longing for a restored place attachment, we neglect the causes behind the changes in our experience of place, we condemn ourselves to living a masquerade in an artificial landscape – creating fake places ever more.

6. New Wilderness as an Effort to Emplace our Homelessness?

If Augé´s diagnosis of supermodernity makes any sense, then we should not only reinterpret the desire for place, but also try a different interpretation of the ideas behind nature development. Would it not be possible to come up with a more positive interpretation of what new-nature reserves mean for our relation to place? In stead of blaming nature developers to speak from a "light-hearted kind of post-modern form of thinking in which history is just a grab bag, from which one can carelessly throw away anything that isn't fashionable" (as Willem van Toorn does), we should be susceptible for possible new, and more positive interpretations of our new encounters with the land.

Maybe we could interpret the new nature development movement as a new, post-modern attempt to invest meaning in the landscape in a way that mirrors our contemporary position in time and space. We could try to interpret nature development as an attempt to mirror our new identity in the landscape again, in an post-nostalgic attempt to leave behind supermodernity with its meaningless non-places.

If we follow Augé, we should start with the observation that today the landscape does not suffer from as shortage, but – on the contrary – from an overabundance of ascribed meanings (the signposts and information pavilions, treasure hunts and cycling trails). The *post*-modern way of dealing with such a landscape would then be *not* to recall longingly to some premodern forms of connectedness with one particular place, but, on the contrary, to further radicalize the actual 'detached' or 'alienated' relation we have with the land.

Maybe, the "new wildernesses" along the rivers could be interpreted as such: as sites where we 'emplace' our identity once again, but now, paradoxically by acknowledging our 'rootlessness', as it were. To put it paradoxically: in new restoration practices along the rivers create 'inhuman' places, were one can truly feel 'out of place' in a sense that mirrors who we truly are. In that sense we can experience ourselves in place as beings that are, in some sense at least, out of place; here we can really be the 'natural aliens' that we are (Cf. Evernden 2003). Some restorationists seem to have something like this in mind. Wouter Helmer once used the phrase 'insane oasis' (Helmer 1996) to designate he meaning of these 'new wildernesses': places of freedom, where one can put in perspective the 'sanity' of our everyday moral conventions and regulations, places to celebrate human finitude. In this interpretation, the new 'wildernesses' are places where we can escape from the overabundance of societal orders and regulations and, one might add, symbolizations of place, and

again focus on the not-yet-symbolized place.[18] Of course, the idea that these places somehow represent the not-yet-symbolized is itself another symbolized meaning, but whether that paradox will prove to be a killing objection is yet an open question.

If this interpretation is somehow credible though, we should stop to only trying to make people feel at home in these new 'wildernesses' by means of folklore and rituals[19], information pavilions and treasure hunts. We should also invest in a credible interpretation of what it means to be alienated from the earth. The new palimpsest landscapes should not only let us experience a deep connection to the history of a place, but also enable us to make us feel that we ultimately remain aliens ourselves, inhabitants of a strange world.

7. Closing Remark

So where does all this leave us? What should be the meaning of place in environmental restoration? Depending from one's point of departure, we have seen four different views of what nature development could mean for place. Apparently, the new restoration practices allow for multiple interpretations, multiple visions of what places could mean to us in our time. The different views on places all raise different questions. Let me briefly recount a few.

From the first perspective, the creation of nature in the floodplains appears is merely a promising management tool to fight environmental risks and place attachment is considered a merely subjective extra that should not be decisive. Are we prepared to accept that? From the second perspective, restoration should be confined to prevent the destruction of legible signs that enable humans to dwell. But does that not prevent us from inscribing new traces? The third perspective interprets the development of new nature as a change to revitalize and deepen our sense of place into a "sense of place v.2.0" as it were. But are we willing to accept the interpretational power of experts? From the fourth point of view, these new nature areas could be seen as acknowledgement of our super modern predicament and a postmodern form of place-making in which radical detachment from nature is a key feature. But are we willing to admit that we are aliens?

Not all these modes of reasoning can be equally appropriate. The real question therefore is: what is at stake in these places? What *do* these places have to say to us? Or, to put things differently: the question is not what these places are, but who are *we* really in these places?

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[18] Cf. Drenthen (2005) for a possible elaboration of what such a paradoxical stance on nature could entail.
[19] Cf. Jordan, 2003.

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