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1. Present Status of Planning

In terms of Dutch society, planning still has a good overall reputation. My impression is that this is especially driven by the challenges that climate change raises for The Netherlands, with the obvious major challenge stemming from the element of water. Water management and flood protection provides every Dutch citizen with a lively picture regarding challenges and the required answers, with spatial planning measures at the core.

However, approaches, instruments and laws are also changing in the very same context. The political system has been working on a planning law reform since the late 1990s, with a current new round of re-formulation still pending in the political decision-making system. The intentions are, among others, to facilitate and ease planning laws and planning processes. In addition, the intention is to give more opportunities to society and stakeholders for finding their own solutions to planning challenges. An interesting element within those processes is the ambition to keep “spatial quality”, that is to keep the standards achieved by the Dutch spatial structure. In the view of some Dutch planning academics, those changes are interpreted as a general degradation of Dutch planning tradition and quality.

2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

2015 has been declared the “Year of Space”, among others, marked by a series of public meetings that are being organized by the major planning departments of Dutch universities. The venue is a networking hub of the civil society in Amsterdam. Until now, those meetings mostly reached expert participants, discussing relevant items for spatial development and planning. The media coverage of this does not seem to be that strong and broad.

However, judging from the interest that PhD research, for instance, and other research regularly generates, press and media are interested in planning research, with solutions to societal problems being especially sought after.

Turning towards “official” media events, topics that find a national echo and are usually linked with the Ministry for Infrastructure and the Environment (which is nowadays also responsible for planning at the state level), are items such as the impact of new technology, epitomized by the self-driving car or by the quest for big data.

An indication of important themes is given by the Dutch Ministry for Infrastructure and Environment, which published a central document formulating the strategic vision for the coming years in 2012, bearing as its subtitle, The Netherlands: “competitive, accessible, livable, safe”.

3. Theory vs. Practice

Dutch research programs for spatial planning have also taken on board the relevance for society and “valorization” as a central issue, thus the interest to generate new economic activities from research. The practice-related element is, I would say, quite high on the agenda. So for the Dutch context, we are not talking about a worryingly growing gap between theory and practice.

In general, Dutch academia, and through that also Dutch planning practice, is very much interested in English language planning literature and the conceptual debates therein. In turn, Dutch academia pro-actively contributes to the English language planning literature, in part, facilitated by the big publishing houses, but also because of a rather small home “language” market for academic work. Currently, university management is searching for an optimal publication mix, with an even clearer focus on high-impact academic journals, while at the same time responding to a growing call for open access to research findings.

4. Addressing and Reducing Disparities

Growing disparities are certainly a concern to Dutch planning professionals and academics alike. The analysis and interpretation of cause and effect relationships do not see spatial planning as the main solution to the problems, which have to be found in economic and distributional terms. However, spatial planning does contribute to the betterment of conditions and the improvement of living conditions of citizens. Social and innovative projects still have a high value in the professional and academic field. A better understanding of the divisions in society and the spatial dimensions of those is key to the academic planning debate. But equally so, planning professionals and academics pay attention to market mechanisms that provide new opportunities to generate income and to generate solutions outside the public purse.

5. Future Challenges and Education

Regarding the pro-active element, we try at least to stimulate this more and more in our education, even though the theoretical and institutional side still dominates our specific educational program, i.e. focusing on analysis and understanding. In that sense, a solid basic understanding of conditions and processes should help students develop the required solutions in specific settings and challenging situations.

Regarding the second part, the answer is clearly NO: planning education should not return to architecture or geography schools. On the contrary, the study of spatial planning should be more and more seen and understood in the context of general managerial capacities. Much of the recent academic literature and research has fo-

Disclaimer

This statement is made on the basis of a certainly still incomplete view of the particularities of Dutch planning. A planning academic of Dutch origin will have a different view on the items expressed.

cused on the “managerial” challenges in planning, organizing processes in complex settings, and mobilizing knowledge, but also solutions in large actor networks, exploring future challenges and responses with citizens. All of this requires new approaches, which cannot be found by returning to traditional home disciplines, but by reaching out to other disciplines that provide different skills and knowledge to pursue the planning enterprise.

6. Role of the European Union

We have already a lot of regulation shaping the field of spatial planning, for instance, environmental regulations or through the regional development programs. We also have some formulation of principles shared between Member States and providing generally accepted guidelines in planning practice. The latter could be better communicated and also further discussed by planning professionals, in order to shape people’s mindset and reach implicit agreement. A top-down regulation, which is a strong formulation of principles, is not that helpful in my view. Planning should not so much “regulate” in terms of aims, objectives, material conditions, or others. Instead, it should offer opportunities for experimentation and learning, and for sharing the experiences gained in such exercises. Our knowledge, networking, and exchange programs can provide a great deal of support for that ambition.

Notes

¹ A keyword search in the digital archive of the Dutch newspaper *Volkskrant* did not generate many results. Of course, the Minister for Infrastructure and Environment can be found in the paper.