THE POLITICS OF PERI-URBAN PLACE MAKING

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Abstract

The paper explores the linkages between planning and place making. These processes are interrelated but that is hardly acknowledged. Land use planning is about intervening in all kinds of land development, obviously with an important political component of combining an array of claims. This is about action and future. Place making is about the personal and community perceptions of what the world around people really encompasses. That is about perception and the present.

The paper provides European examples of how planning can reframe perceptions of place – mostly as an unintended consequence, but always with an unpredictable impact. We argue that when the dynamic but unpredictable nature of place making were acknowledged, cultural geographers and planners would jointly understand more of the social side of geographic change than in isolation.

Then planners and their products may intentionally be employed as co-framers of place, and of action. With geographers monitoring and explaining changes in frames. Not as a top-down tool, but as an attitude for authentic dialogue and social learning about places in the framework of the society of tomorrow. In particular communities in peri-urban areas, that tend to suffer from lack of sense of place, need help to learn what their place is. We review relevant theories to precise and conceptualize this political process of place making.

1. Introduction

Land use planning is about intervening in all kinds of land development. We want to change the world - improve it. This is not an easy task because each site and each objective is surrounded by an array of claims. This is about action and future. Although we are aware that these claims have to be solved in a political way, obviously with an important political component of deliberation and decision-making, perceptions and intentions of people tend to be seen as static. The political decision, then, is an amalgamation of the positions it seeks to integrate. But with these individual positions unchanged, there will always be a misfit for everybody involved.

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In my article "Imaging Future Places" (Van Dijk, 2011a) I contend that people's interests and perceptions are fluid. They change during a decision-making process. In fact, outcomes of planning processes, once shared with the public, immediately change how people see the world around them. Because plans point out problems and propose solutions, the limitations and possibilities are exposed. The result is a changed place.

Place making is mainly a geographical term, about the personal and community perceptions of what the world around people really encompasses. That is about perception and the present, while planning is about action and the future. But place making would be worthwhile to be seen as a planning result, as well as a planning objective.

In this paper, I present some examples to illustrate this point (section 2), showing the unpredictable yet inevitable social effects of plans. I then point out that peri-urban areas, by nature, particularly would benefit from planning as a way to help construct a joint image from a region (section 3). In section 4, relevant theories are reviewed.

2. Examples of plans that primarily changed place-perception

This sections seeks to empirically demonstrate the subtle frame changes that plans bring to bear. And the indirect changes on land use that are the consequence.

2.1 Harbour plans that sparked landscape appreciation [2]

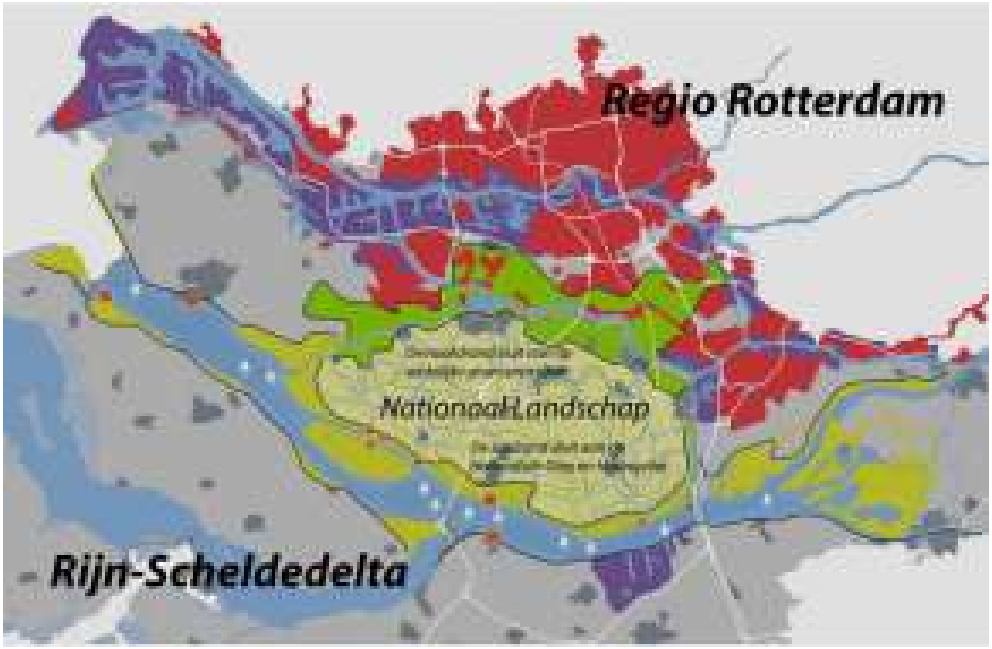
Just south of Rotterdam lies an island surrounded by several river branches just up the river mouths. Given the deficit of space for harbour expansion directly around Rotterdam, this island, called the 'Hoekse Waard' is a good location for building new harbour terminals that complement Rotterdam seaport. Politicians from Rotterdam and the relevant province start preparing plans and a political lobby to put pressure on the 'Hoekse Waard' city councils.

The population on the island does not like the idea. Although the six local governments on the island initially promised to cooperate in designating a preferred harbour site, this joint agreement was challenged by wealthy people living close to its projected site. They started the protest, enabled by dominating the municipal elections at that part of the island.

They try to stop the plan. Initially by using the conventional hearings and appeal procedures, but their efforts are in vain. The threat of the harbours make them

[2] For more details, see:
Van Dijk, Aarts and De Wit (2009) and Van Dijk, Aarts and De Wit (2011)

aware of the landscape on their island. They see the value, because they are about to loose it.



Then they discover that the national government is preparing to designate to several sites the status of National Landscape. This coincidental opportunity locally prompts further study into the cultural-historical values of the site and the locals successfully demonstrate that Hoekse Waard is well worth preserving.

So, the plan for harbour expansion reframed the perception of the area – but in an unexpected opposite way. First among the locals, that successfully change the place perception among the national politicians. The Hoekse Waard island actually becomes a National Landscape and that means the harbour is off.

As the area receives this official designation, also the larger public start to perceive the area differently. The representations of the area, in cycling guides, tourist communications and magazines, give it a new significance.

So, although the harbour was not made, the plan did change the meaning of the area. It even was given a legal status, meaning that certain land use changes are not permitted any longer. The plan has changed the phyical world- in an indirect way.

2.2 Strategic land purchases because of expected gains

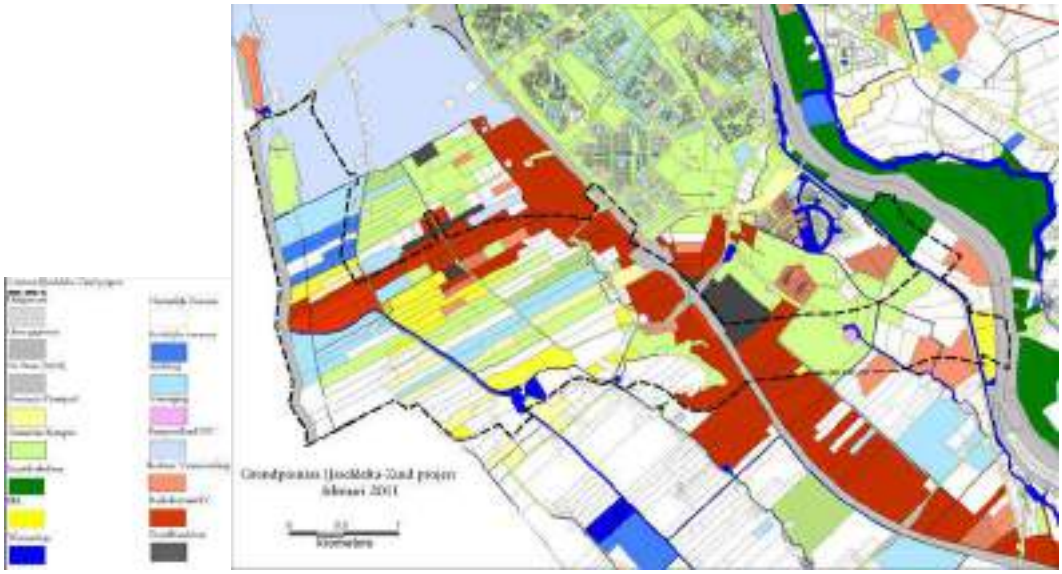
Reframing places may spark anticipatory behaviour in the form of land acquisition. Plans feed expectations of where new land development will occur.

The Portland Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) for example steers land hoarding by developers to go to other sites than in an unregulated situation; it channels expectations. Plans to expand the UGB induce speculation long before the changes come into effect.

And so may plans for a new highway exit, for instance, prompt land purchases by developers. The anticipatory behaviour, by its subsequent land ownership situation, will influence the eventual nature of the land development.

Below is a picture from a major regional project close to the Dutch city of Kampen. It proposes a new river branch and high-end housing sites. During the decision-making, the area was given new meaning. Not the landscape qualities became highlighted as in the first example, but it became a place of possible real estate gains. Land purchases started to occur.

The dreams, rumours and discussions that lead up to formal plans generate anticipatory behaviour. So, the context for plans, that will obviously change compared to the time of drafting the plan, changes partly self-induced. It is a feed forward loop that changes project conditions – either in favour (self-fulfilling) or complicating (self-falsifying; Portugali, 2008).



3. Peri-urban areas in need of alignment of frames[3]

The inherently transformative nature of peri-urban areas, together with their typically fragmented institutional landscape (Mattingly, 1999; Simon, 2008), imply a particularly complex setting for conventional planning efforts. We argue that dealing with transformative zones such as the peri-urban area may require planners to develop a more inspirational role. Planners that are aware of the reframing processes may be valuable for peri-urban planning in particular, as it potentially can mediate stand-offs between actors by uncovering shared values and interests.

If planning actually has to be designed to encourage imagination, spatial visioning goes beyond conventional consensus planning, that Innes and Booher (1999) lament for lacking creativity, instead offering comprehensive concrete and credible images of the future that reframe problems and opportunities (Van Dijk, 2011).
Of vital significance but little discussed in the literature is that the peri-urban characteristics mentioned above (dynamic, diverse, fragmented) have a social impact which complicates peri-urban planning: they cause regional identities to be weak, with much contestation or many conflicts of identity. We believe this to be an inherent property of the peri-urban area. Daniels (1999) also provides an elaborate characterization of the peri-urban area as a zone of collision, emphasizing that the transitional zone between city and country tends to be a place where controversies over land use are most visible and bitter.

Peri-urban residents share one space but live in different places (e.g. Kunstler, 1994). This mental division is the most challenging aspect for planners, causing difficulties for planning, since sustainable spatial developments often rely on common goals and collaborative planning efforts. Such goals are difficult to determine in fragmented and diverse peri-urban areas, where many conceptions of the identity of the space co-exist.

The lack of a common cultural identity, which lies behind peri-urban conflicts over land use, is a direct consequence of peri-urban dynamics, diversity and fragmentation. Because peri-urban areas are located in-between urban and the rural regions, they are home to an array of sub-communities with particular niche interests. For example, some farmers might attempt to continue farming, while others anticipate selling off their land for urban development. Then there are those who are neither farmers nor urbanites, who prefer to live in open

[3] This section draws on parts of an article accepted for publication by Environment and Planning B, with the title 'A design-approach to forge visions that amplify paths of peri-urban development.'

spaces, perhaps keeping horses and enjoying a certain freedom. Moreover, there are the entrepreneurs and the manufacturers, expanding their business districts and office parks into the peri-urban area along the easily accessible regional road network. Furthermore, there are the more wealthy urbanites, who desire new low-density housing and recreation facilities. In sum, a diversity of interests can be found in peri-urban areas.

Deeply distinct perceptions of and demands on land trouble planning in peri-urban areas. This diversity hinders the emergence of a consistent and shared peri-urban identity, making it difficult to make sensible, concerted and sustainable choices about future land use. Due to the fragmentation of peri-urban identities, the political basis for deciding over future land use is also fragmented. For spatial policies to be successful, they need to connect to what the population considers wise, acceptable or desirable. Any normative assessment by the public of any government policy on land use draws on a normative framework – whether a person supports a policy depends on their general world-view as well as their view of the peri-urban area in particular. Do we want new factories, roads and houses here, or would that be harmful to our region as we know it? Identities are such frameworks for the normative assessment of optional policies.

Facing a fragmented pattern of meanings in peri-urban areas, planners have to deal with the diversity of frames that makes it difficult to determine which future developments are acceptable. Planners can help to overcome this complication, uncovering shared values by sharing and discussing images of the future, thereby contributing to a fusion of horizons (Dierkes et al., 1996).

4. Concepts for seeing planners as reframers

Hoch (2007) and Throgmorton (1996) have emphasized the significance of rhetoric in planning (considered in the constructive, storytelling sense), and in my article I pointed out three important implications of the rhetorical perspective which had not been adequately explored, but which are vital for further understanding of planning performance in regional design processes.

My first contribution to existing rhetorical planning thought was the idea that design deserves to be understood as a particularly powerful form of storytelling because it is central to the devising and sharing of credible and appealing stories about regional futures. Indeed, these stories have to be forged. Designers that analyse spatial configurations and propose changes to them, are in essence forgers of such stories.

Secondly, I expanded on the effect of designs in regional communities by drawing on theories of framing and place-making which logically follow from the notion of rhetorical planning, but which are nonetheless still remarkably absent from the discussion. Because designs change people's perceptions, they

are reframers. If we would exploit that capability, change induced by plans would be understood, measured and appreciated in a different way. It is a way out of the post-modern relativity of planning that dismisses rational and instrumental perspectives without offering a constructive alternative.

Thirdly, given the reframing effect of designs, I argued that the relationship between governments and regional communities should be understood as symbiotic and therefore in constant interaction. In this sense, the relationship can be considered as much more diffuse and co-constitutive than is commonly acknowledged by planners and policy scientists. This suggests that regional society itself is the source of regional change, rather than change being the result of regional policy that is exogenously administered to a society by a government. Nevertheless, with respect to planning issues, the values held by the regional population are also fluid and partly influenced by communicative planning processes.

Together, these three claims help us to understand regional planning in a more strategic relational way, where stories constructed within and told through design, play a central role in spatial developments. In this perspective, the formal and governmental are just single aspects of an overall regional web of interrelationships.

Acknowledging the mental side of making and communicating plans prompts an image of two interrelated cycles of change. One is about the mental world, where ideas, dreams, expectations, stories are conceived, shared and transformed. This is a social process, hard to measure, more cultural geographical than planning. The second cycle is the action that people take,

based on people's place construction. As shown in section 2 of this paper, this action ranges from highly spontaneous and individual (on the property market or establishing a business) to formal and collective (giving an area a protected status).

Whatever the nature, as visualised in the diagram, people stand between ideas and physical reality. People are part of dynamics of place construction. And they are part, in all kinds of ways, in the actions that change physical reality. People translate ideas into spaces. And spaces are one source of information for place construction.

An interesting additional theory for the left half of the diagram is visioning. Shipley and Michela argue that it can be defined as "the process of arriving at a consensual vision" (2006, p. 224). It is based on dynamic worldview as its premises is that the best way to plan for the future in a world of constant change is to trace back from a imagined future, build on inventiveness, intuition and reflexivity, instead of extending the present (Gaffinkin and Sterrett, 2006). Moreover, visioning is seen as a collaborative process (Helling, 1998), since the assumption of most proponents of visioning is that 'plans that resonate with citizen's deepest aspirations and values have the best change of being implemented' (Klein et al, 1993, p.10).

Related to this assumption visioning is a process of persuasion. Visioning processes are undertaken with the aim to elicit a contribution of the stakeholders to the development path drawn up with help of visioning (Shipley & Michela 2006). In contrast to designing spatial plans, aimed to decrease perceived contemporary problems, visioning processes are conducted with the explicit purpose to create shared and multidisciplinary ideas of the future and as such offer a common ground for guiding spatial developments.

The left cycle is known to have several effects. According to Hajer and Poorter (2005) they have an orientating, coordinating and motivating function. Considering the first aspect, visioning may provide an overview of principles that are considered desirable for guiding planning activities (Zonneveld, 2005). Subsequently, visioning produces a framework, an leitbild, for process of change that enlights the general, pursued, direction of development and strengthen the capacity to coordinate decisions on future investments (Rotmans et al., 2001; Peel and Loyd, 2005). Finally, visioning is considered to have a motivational effect on stakeholders to invest in line with the end's defined during the visioning process (Ames, 1997).

5. Conclusion

Plans co-constitute what is - they make what people see around them. When the dynamic but unpredictable nature of place making were acknowledged, cultural geographers and planners would jointly understand more of the social side of

geographic change than in isolation. Peri-urban areas, with their fragmented identity being areas of troublesome decision-making, could benefit particularly from planning as place-making. It could unite the disjointed places that the people sharing those spaces live in.

Then planners and their products may intentionally be employed as co-framers of place, and of action. With geographers monitoring and explaining changes in frames. Not as a top-down tool, but as an attitude for authentic dialogue and social learning about places in the framework of the society of tomorrow. In particular communities in peri-urban areas, that tend to suffer from lack of sense of place, need help to learn what their place is.

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