

The Constitution of Spatial Transport Concepts

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In discussions about regional economic development a few key concepts regularly keep turning up. These key concepts focus on issues of infrastructural connections and transport systems, in relation to (spatial) characteristics of the region. In the Netherlands planners are struggling with these concepts. Since the nineties there has been an increasing mismatch between national spatial concepts and local ideas and concepts. My research project aims on identifying causal factors for this mismatch by focusing on the constitution of spatial transport concepts.

Introduction

In the Netherlands there has been a tradition of working with spatial concepts⁵ in spatial policy. With the Fourth National Report (1988), Dutch Government introduced a large amount of relatively new spatial concepts. In the following years some of these concepts turned out to be missing a connection with wishes and ideas of local planners or other actors in the policy process. The concept of ABC-locations is a clear example of this disconnection. Based on targets of environment and public transport, national government was trying to stimulate location of economic activity -as they formulated- "on the right spot". Their policy aimed at location of industries and services with a lot of visitors and employees in areas with a perfect connection with public transport, so-called A-locations. Other industries and services which had less employees and visitors combined with a strong dependency on highways for their production process had to be located in areas with a perfect connection with the national road-system, just outside the city. These locations are called C-locations. Unfortunately it appeared that this national policy of ABC-locations didn't match with wishes and practices of local government and most of all: with preferences of the industries themselves. In many cases industries and services preferred location on C-locations above A-locations, because of the better car-accessibility. Due to the expected positive economic effects local government turned out to be eager on attracting economic activity within their municipality-boundaries. Therefore municipalities were allowing

⁵ Spatial concepts are powerful communication tools. They enable agents to formulate their future vision on the desired spatial developments and structure in one word or image. Often metaphors are used as spatial concepts. Examples are the green hart, concentrated citygrowth, development axes.

companies to locate on C-locations which actually -according to national policy- had to be located on A-locations (Martens 1996, Spit 1996). This case shows that the spatial concept of the government didn't have eye for wishes of other agents in the planning field and for developments in society.

A recent report of the National Council for Government Policy (1998) also mentions this mismatch between spatial concepts of government and ideas of agents and factual developments in society. To restore this connection insight is needed in the constituting forces of a spatial concept. After all, these constituting forces shape the spatial concept long before the concept is laid down in a policy document. In most cases nowadays the laying down of a spatial concept in policy documents is only a freezing-point in the ongoing life cycle of a spatial concept (see Korthals Altes 1995, Blotevogel 1996). In this life cycle of a concept the introductory-phase and the growth-phase are determined for the content of a concept. Knowledge of the sources of a spatial concept and of motives and goals of the actors who promoted it, enables planners to make a better connection between concept and society. In this way spatial planning can make use of the advantage of spatial concepts, as communication-tools and carriers of key elements of spatial policy.

PhD Research: Constitution of spatial transport concepts

In the eighties planning research began to pay attention to the problem of conceptualisation in planning. Among other things these studies on spatial concepts have shown the existence of certain patterns of conceptualisation (Zonneveld, 1991). During a certain period in time a dominant conceptual complex (a complex of related and coherent spatial concepts) can be distinguished. Rising spatial concepts are related to this contemporary conceptual complex. Other studies stressed the importance of concepts in framing a policy situation (Rein/Schon, 1994), and regarded concepts as binding metaphors or 'storylines' in discourse-coalitions (Hajer 1993). But in research relatively little attention is paid to the factors who contribute to, and influence the rise and growth of new concepts. This is partly due to the creative origin of concepts which complicates the study of concepts. It is also due to a neglect of the institutional basis which acts as a constraining and an enabling factor upon the rise of new concepts.

To gain an insight into this matter, the problem of the constitution of spatial concepts is at the centre of this PhD research. Because of the intensifying link between the policy-field of spatial planning and the policy-field of transport in the Netherlands the focus is oriented on a special kind of concepts, namely spatial transport-concepts. These concepts combine spatial images of future spatial development and structure with aims in transport. Examples of this kind of concepts are main transport axes, corridors and public transportation nodes. The aim of the research is to identify determinative factors in the development of concepts, which are related to

future performance of the concept. Starting with a description of the different interpretations of the content of a concept, the research focuses on institutional aspects. Theoretical notions from sociology (evolution of norms - Coleman) and policy sciences (development of organisations) offer useful entrance to study the constitution of concepts.

In the research-project two or three case-studies of spatial concepts will be conducted. At the moment the following case-studies are in consideration: the concept of corridors and the concept of urban and transport nodes. Emphasis will be placed on the first phases in a life cycle of a concept in relation to involved agents and their positions. Attention will be paid to the different interpretations of the concept by different actors. Their motives and goals with a certain spatial transport-concept will be examined, and their means to their disposal to effectuate their ideas. The data in this research will be qualitative and will be derived by studying policy-documents and notes (government and non-government) and by interviewing key-persons. At the moment the case-study of the concept of corridors is conducted. Probably some results of this case-study will be presented at the PhD workshop in Finse.

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