In search of the urban field: Past, present and future of urbanisation and urbanisation policy in the Netherlands and Europe

Marco Bontje
Amsterdam study centre for the Metropolitan Environment (AME)
University of Amsterdam
Nieuwe Prinsengracht 130
1018 VZ Amsterdam - Netherlands
Tel.: 0031-20-5254003
Fax: 0031-20-5254051
E-mail: m.bontje@frw.uva.nl

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the future spatial design of the Netherlands is being debated heavily in the public sphere. The government intends to publish the Fifth Report on Physical Planning before the end of this year. This provokes a lot of discussion about which direction planning policy should take. Quite often, scientists and politicians mention the formation of so-called urban fields. This would be the next step in the process of continuous deconcentration of population, work and services: first there were cities, then monocentric urban regions, then polycentric urban regions (like the Randstad) and now, the urban fields are supposed to be the 'next big thing'. These urban fields lack a clear centre. Population, work, services and recreational facilities are spread across a large area. The mobility pattern connected to this is characterised by a 'criss-cross' pattern: daily travels are no longer for the largest part between suburb and city, but more and more city-to-city and suburb-to-suburb.

This formation of urban fields might actually be happening, but it might as well not be. So far, a lot of visionary things have been said about the urban fields, but empirical evidence was hardly presented. Are we really heading for urban fields in the Netherlands? What consequences would this have for Dutch planning policy, at the moment still aiming at a compact city development?

Urbanisation and urbanisation policy in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Sweden since the 1970s

In my Ph.D research, an attempt is made to test the assumptions about the formation of urban fields in the Netherlands. Before doing that, the major trends in population distribution in the Netherlands in recent years have been analysed. It is necessary to trace the recent history of population redistribution before being able to judge the direction in which Dutch urbanisation might go.

The period under analysis is 1970 to 1995. In the first years of this period, deconcentration was the dominant trend. The suburbs were gaining inhabitants as well as several rural communities at some distance of the cities. The large cities lost a considerable share of their population. These trends meant a continuation of developments that already started in the 1960s. However, from the mid-1980s on, the large cities started gaining inhabitants again. Between 1985 and 1995, the deconcentration trend stopped. What followed was a period of 'status quo', with all types of municipalities growing in population at a comparable speed.

The major explanatory factors for recent trends in Dutch population distribution were:
- The restructuring of the economy (with service-sector-activities replacing manufacturing as the dominant sector in the economy);
- The growth of mobility, mostly by car;
- Demographic trends like the growth of the proportion of one- and two-person households in the population;
- Socio-cultural trends like individualisation and the increasing proportion of foreign-born people in Dutch population.

The Dutch government tried to influence population distribution through physical planning. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the dominant concept was 'concentrated deconcentration'. The aim of this policy was to direct out-migration from the large cities to a few selected locations, called growth centres. A large amount of houses was built in these growth centres and building outside these locations was severely limited. This concept was traded for a compact city policy from the mid-

1980s on. The main building sites were now in or near large and medium-sized cities. Building outside these locations was again severely limited.

Although the compact city policy is criticised more and more, the Dutch government seems determined to hold on to this policy. Some minor changes will be introduced in the Fifth Report, like building along corridors, but the main idea remains the same: concentration of houses and working locations in and near to the large cities. Open areas should be kept open according to Dutch policy. The formation of urban fields does not fit in this policy at all.

An international comparison is included in this Ph.D project to check whether the development of population distribution in the Netherlands is a country-specific trend or a reflection of general trends in Northwest Europe. The other regions in Europe analysed in this study show obvious parallels to the developments in the Netherlands.

The major explanatory factors described above are also largely the same.
In Switzerland, population growth was strongest in suburban and semi-peripheral communities in the 1970s. In the 1980s, growth returned to the cities, but a trend towards reconcentration was not really taking place. Metropolitan areas kept extending in the 1980s. Some local urban researchers even describe the current situation in the Mittelland (between Jura and Alps) as the 'Swiss city', meaning that the whole Mittelland has grown together in one large metropolitan region. But this seems to be an exaggeration of the current situation. The urban regions of the largest Swiss cities are still merely operating on their own and don't function as one integrated whole.

The Swedish Westcoast showed a less extreme deconcentration trend since the 1970s. The suburbs directly outside of the largest cities experienced a quite fast population growth. Small towns and villages at more distance of the large cities grew as well, but at a much more modest speed. The large cities lost inhabitants in the 1970s, but like in the Netherlands and Switzerland, recovered and started growing again in the 1980s. A fourth case study will be added to the project during this year. It will be a region in England, most probably the polycentric urban area of Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and surroundings.

The major difference between the Netherlands and other European countries is the urbanisation policy. Although planning policies in other countries have also shown a tendency to promote compact city development, they generally did not have the means available to actually realise this compact building philosophy. A good example of this is Switzerland, where the most recent national planning document 'Basic principles of Swiss physical planning' clearly aims at compact city development, but since the cantons are the most powerful level in Swiss physical planning, the document has only an advisory status. The result is that some cantons follow the national guidelines, but other cantons don't take any action against suburban sprawl at all.

Urban fields?

In many European countries, urban fields are seen as the next step in the process of urbanisation. The suggestion of urban field formation is heavily influencing the preparation of the Fifth Report on Spatial Planning in the Netherlands. But are these urban fields really being formed already? So far, most researchers and politicians mentioning the formation of urban fields did not base their opinion on empirical data. A case study in the Netherlands will be undertaken to test the assumption that urban fields are being formed. The case study area consists of the area labeled the 'Central Netherlands Urban Ring' in the Fourth Report on Physical Planning, with the addition of the semi-peripheral areas around this ring.

Mobility data on home-to-work travel, visits to public services and recreation should give an impression of the 'action space' of households in the case study area. The data are acquired from a large-scale enquiry on mobility behaviour by the National Bureau of Statistics. Two points in time can be compared: 1985/1986 and 1996. The analysis of this data set should lead to conclusions about trends in mobility behaviour. Has traffic between 'traditional' urban regions increased? Has traffic between suburban areas increased at the expense of traffic between suburbs and central cities? If these developments have actually taken place, this could indicate that urban field formation is occurring in the Central Netherlands Urban Ring.

The scarcity of empirical research on the formation of urban fields has positive and negative consequences for this Ph.D project. The positive consequence is that the project can be

considered 'innovative', contributing to progess in knowledge about the process of urbanisation. The negative consequence is that there are hardly any reference points. It is hard to find a method to determine whether or not urban fields are being formed. Also the borders of such urban fields are difficult to determine, since the definitions available so far are very vague. What intensity of interaction between communities is needed to include these communities in the functionally integrated unit called urban field?

Planners are confronted with problems concerning the urban field, too. If further deconcentration is really the trend of the next decades and traditional concentrations of population, work and services will lose their dominance, what is the further use of a policy aimed at compact cities? It might still be possible to stop the deconcentration trend, but this probably requires a much more influential role of national government than can be realised in the current situation. The results of this Ph.D project might contribute to the discussion about the preferred future spatial design of the Netherlands, and the possible role of physical planning to reach that goal.