
THE SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE NETHERLANDS 1988-2015

Ries van der Wouden

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL)

The release of the Fourth Policy Document on Spatial Planning in 1988 was the start of a new and highly dynamic age of spatial development in The Netherlands. The policy document itself embodied a major reorientation of the national spatial policy strategy. Development of the economy and infrastructure became the new goals of spatial policy, and thereby replaced the focus upon the public housing sector of the years before. The national airport Schiphol and the port of Rotterdam both expanded and became important focal points for the Dutch economy, new transport infrastructure including High Speed Railway was planned. In the cities, dilapidated districts were transformed into new urban residential areas and new suburban districts were built close to the cities. In the countryside many projects were started in order to transform agrarian land into 'new nature'. On top of this, the Dutch spatial planning system itself faced a partial 'regime shift'. Spatial development projects became more market-based instead of financed by public resources. But at the same time, the national government kept its central position in the planning system. Only fifteen years later, at the beginning of the new millennium, decentralization of spatial planning towards regional and local government became a major trend.

This paper will focus upon the spatial transformation of the Netherlands during the 25 years after the release of the Fourth Policy Document on spatial planning. In order to assess the influence of the national spatial policy, I will give a brief review of the Fourth Policy Document. But the changes in the spatial policy strategy of the Fourth Policy Document did not come out of the blue. They were both result of and response to political and economic trends. Therefore, I will start with two major and interrelated trends: the urban crisis and globalization.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL CHANGES

URBAN CRISIS

During the 1970s and 1980s most countries of the western world faced a severe urban crisis. The industrial economy, concentrated in and around the cities, lost many jobs, leading to high urban unemployment figures. In addition, the decline of the manufacturing industry left considerable derelict 'brownfield locations', not only in seaport areas but also in or close to inner cities (cf. Couch, Sykes, & Börstinghaus, 2011: 3). On top of this, many middle class families had left the cities for suburban places, leading to a sharp decrease of the urban population. Especially the large cities in the Randstad area, the highly urbanized Western part of The Netherlands, were hit by the suburbanization (see figure 1).

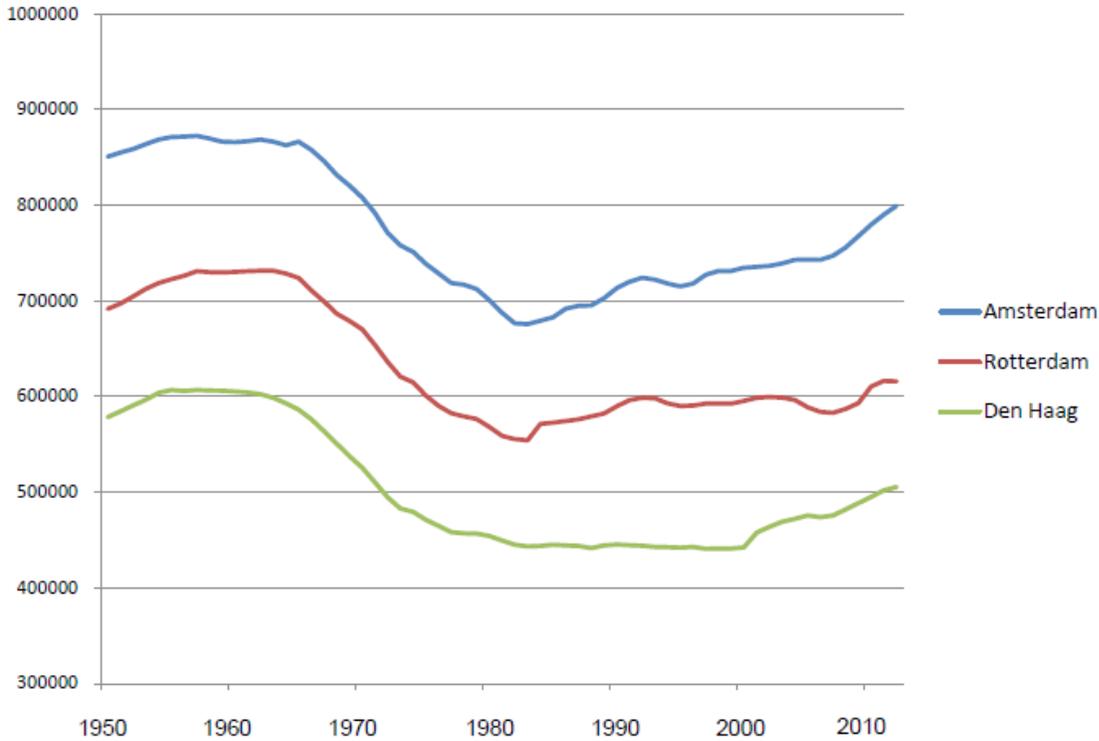


FIGURE 1 Population of the three largest cities, 1950-2012

The Netherlands as well as many other countries were confronted with this urban crisis, but unlike countries as the USA and the UK it did not cause an urban fiscal crisis. This is because of the highly centralized Dutch tax system, making the cities less dependent on local tax incomes. But as was the case in other countries, the urban crisis had weakened the urban economies in general. This was the first reason for the reorientation of the national spatial strategy.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE UNIFICATION OF THE EUROPEAN MARKET

The globalization of the service economy, especially in the financial sector, led to more international competition between urban regions (Sassen 1991). This was a major challenge for the urban economy in the Netherlands. On top of this, there were plans for the unification of the European market in the year 1992 (to be formalized in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992). This unification was expected to cause more competition between urban regions within Europe. During the second half of the 1980s the Dutch government realized that it was necessary to strengthen the economy in order to anticipate the rising competition between urban regions. This could be done by investments in the infrastructure and the urban economic structure. This was the second reason for the reorientation of the national spatial strategy.

A NEW NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY: THE FOURTH POLICY DOCUMENT 1988

The Netherlands have a longstanding tradition of national involvement in urbanization and urban redevelopment. The Dutch national government has had a direct role in housing and spatial planning since the Second World War, with spatial planning closely related to housing production. A good example of the integration between the two was the new towns policy introduced in the 1970s, aiming at the concentration of new residential areas in a limited number of greenfield locations in or in the proximity of the Randstad area. National government invested heavily in these developments, mainly by means of subsidies for social housing. Apart from this, urban policy in the 1970s concentrated on the urban renewal of dilapidated 19th-century housing areas. National spatial policy, in turn, was mostly limited to regional policy and focused particularly on the transfer of economic activity to the north and south of the country.

The release of the Fourth Policy Document on Spatial Planning in 1988 marked a radical break with this policy. The main goal of national spatial strategy was to improve the competitiveness of the Dutch economy, not social housing. Instead of massive public investments, the national spatial policy should facilitate private investments. Private-public partnerships were to become a major instrument to realize this. But the direct involvement of national government in urban redevelopment and infrastructure was still considered justified, in order to increase the international competitive power of urban areas. In this regard, the Fourth Policy Document emphasized the strengths of the Randstad area in particular, its main seaport and airports, and paved the way for a resurgence of interest in 'the city', as economic competition and welfare-creation in Europe would increasingly take place in urban areas. The urban governments themselves shared this approach. National and local governments together made plans to create attractive inner-city locations for international companies, the so-called 'key-projects' (cf Spaans, Trip, Van der Wouden 2013).

But the new spatial strategy involved also a reorientation of the housing policy. The release of the Fourth Policy Document on Spatial Planning Extra in 1991 (in the Netherlands known by its Dutch abbreviation: VINEX) added a further reason for the involvement of the national government: the concentration of urban development in and close to urban regions would avoid urban sprawl and prevent additional mobility growth. From 1995 onward, a number of new large building sites close to the cities were developed. Local governments worked together with private development companies. By building mainly suburban houses for homeowners, middle class households were expected to live in the urban areas again.

The new spatial policy was not only directed at the urban areas, but also at the countryside. Here, the changes were more gradual than in urban policy. For decades, the spatial policy for the rural areas had been dominated by the interests of the agricultural sector. About 65% of the land in the Netherlands was in agricultural use, and the main goal of the policy for the rural areas was to modernize the agricultural sector. But the domination of agricultural interests in national spatial policy eroded, partly because of growing involvement of the EU, and also because of the overproduction of milk and butter. As a result of this, the spatial policy for the rural areas started to articulate other goals: preservation of landscapes, recreation for urban residents, and the creation of new natural areas. In order to facilitate the latter goal a new spatial concept was formulated: the Ecological Main Structure, in Dutch 'EHS'. This policy change was implemented into several projects, transforming agricultural land into 'new nature'. However, in this paper I will concentrate upon urban areas.

There are different ways to estimate the degree of success of the Fourth Policy Document. First and foremost, the effectiveness of the policy in relation to its implementation, policy outcomes and spatial developments. I will briefly return to this issue in the last section of this paper. But another dimension of the success became already visible within a few years. The new policy concepts, launched by the Fourth Policy Document, were adopted (and also partly adapted) in a number of other national policy documents: on housing, on environmental policy, on nature, on mobility, on the 'green spatial structure', on regional economic policy (van der Cammen en De

Klerk 2003; Van der Wouden et al. 2015: 18). This dimension of success, one might call it the 'discursive success', is mostly not covered by traditional policy evaluations, but can hardly be overestimated. The authority of its arguments has always been an important instrument of spatial policy.

SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN AREAS

URBAN BROWNFIELDS

Redevelopment of urban brownfields and turning them into attractive business districts or urban residential areas became a major goal for both national and local governments. The most important of these redevelopment projects were adopted in the national spatial strategy and labelled 'key projects'. The involvement of private investment companies was an important prerequisite for these projects. The projects differed in size, program, and success/failure. Most key projects had a mixed program: offices, retail and houses. To illustrate the spatial transformation in urban areas, I will highlight one of the largest key projects: the Eastern Harbor Area in Amsterdam. The urban area is located at the East side of the center, at the Y river. The Y river connects Amsterdam to the North Sea canal and the North Sea. Because of growing ship sizes, port activities in Amsterdam had moved to the West, closer to the sea. Many port related companies left the Eastern Harbor Area. Large parts of the area became dilapidated. This was the situation at the end of the 70s. During the 60s and 70s, the Amsterdam municipal government had spent much effort in renovating old urban neighborhoods, but this strategy did not cause substantial growth of the urban housing stock. New urban residential areas were needed, so from 1978 onwards the municipal government made plans to redevelop the Eastern Harbor Area. In order to do so, the municipality had bought large parts of the urban land in this area. The municipality started the redevelopment of the area in a rather traditional way, by building social housing blocks. However, at the beginning of the 90s the political mood changed. In order to attract more middle and higher income groups to the city, the urban redevelopment policy changed course. New plans were directed at building houses for homeowners instead of social rent, and at more variation in the building program: highrise as well as new urban mansions for families. At the same time, the area was assigned a national key project status, and became part of the national urban strategy. Within two decades, more than 8000 new houses were built. As the two pictures of the area show, a partly derelict urban brownfield was transformed into a new urban waterfront.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

In order to enhance the competitiveness of the Dutch economy, the national government made plans for the improvement of the existing infrastructure and for new infrastructure. Focal points of the strategy were the national 'mainports' (Schiphol airport and the port of Rotterdam) and railways, including high speed railway. A new High Speed Line (HSL) was planned to connect the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam to Belgium and France, the HSL South. The implementation of the plan was not entirely successful, to put it mildly. There was a lot of debate on the route of the new railway line, the estimated costs rose from year to year, and the privatization of railway companies made exploitation more complex. Between 2000 and 2006 the new railway line was built, but the use of the line by high speed trains is still far behind the initial plans. But in this paper I will focus upon another aspect of the high speed lines: the upgrade of exiting urban railway stations to HSL stations, and the redevelopment of the urban area around the stations. The six future HSL stations became part of a national program. One of these railway stations is Rotterdam Central Station. The plans for the railway station included the environment of the station. First of all, the railways station had to be adapted in order to facilitate a rising number of daily travelers, from 110.000 at the beginning of the millennium up to an expected number of 350.000 in 2025. This could not be done within the existing building, so the station had to be rebuilt. The new station was opened in 2014, within planned time and within the planned budget. In this respect the project was a positive exception amongst other 'grand projects', in the national as well in the international field.



FIGURE 2 Eastern Harbor Area Amsterdam: 1960s. Source: West 8 (60s)



FIGURE 3 Eastern Harbor Area Amsterdam: 2003. Source: Jeroen Musch (2003)

The new railway station now accommodates international and national railway lines, light rail and subway lines. Also, the urban area close to the railway station was restructured. In front of the station a tunnel was built, so that the car traffic is now underground. This resulted in an enlargement and improvement of the public space, and in a better connection between the railway station and the city center. Furthermore, a number of buildings within the railway station area were renovated. Rotterdam Central Station was the first of the six HSL stations in the Netherlands to be finished.



FIGURE 4 Rotterdam Central Station. Source: Theo Baart, 2014

GREENFIELD RESIDENTIAL AREAS

The large new residential areas close to the cities are presumably the most iconic result of the spatial transformation of the Netherlands during the last 25 years. They were labeled ‘Vinex’ areas (‘Vinex’ is the Dutch abbreviation of the Fourth Policy Document on spatial planning Extra). They were consequence of a major change in the urban strategy of the Dutch governments, aimed at ending the negative effects of suburbanization upon the cities. During the 80s the national urbanization strategy was redirected from the ‘new towns’ to the cities. New residential areas should preferably be built in or close to the cities, in order to facilitate urban demographical and economical growth. And so it happened. The national Vinex program was launched, resulting in the construction of more than 650.000 new houses between 1995 and 2005. By choosing building sites in or close to the cities, the government wanted to minimize the invasion of greenfield land, and also to reduce the car use (RIGO 2007; Hall 2014: 145-146). The largest of these new suburban Vinex areas is Leidsche Rijn, close to the city of Utrecht. The size of Leidsche Rijn is huge. Its total area is as large as that of Leeuwarden, the capital of the Dutch province of Friesland. 30.000 houses were to be built in this area, of which 22.000 were built in 2013. The crisis of the financial and housing markets slowed down the building pace, but the municipal government of Utrecht still aims at the initial goal of 30.000 new houses. The Leidsche Rijn area was successful in attracting middle class families, as were many other Vinex areas. But although Leidsche Rijn is close to the city of Utrecht, it did not become an organic part of the city until now. This is partly because the old city of Utrecht and Leidsche Rijn are separated by infrastructure barriers (canal, motorway), partly because of the sheer size of Leidsche Rijn which makes it a city in itself, and partly because a lot of the new inhabitants are not exclusively oriented towards Utrecht but also towards other urban areas in the west of the Netherlands. They can be easily reached by car and train. So Leidsche Rijn is very suitable to house two income families whit their jobs in different cities. This is also valid for many other Vinex areas. Thus, despite their success as a building program, from a sociological point of view the Vinex areas are an ‘archipelago of suburban residential areas’ rather than organic parts of their cities.

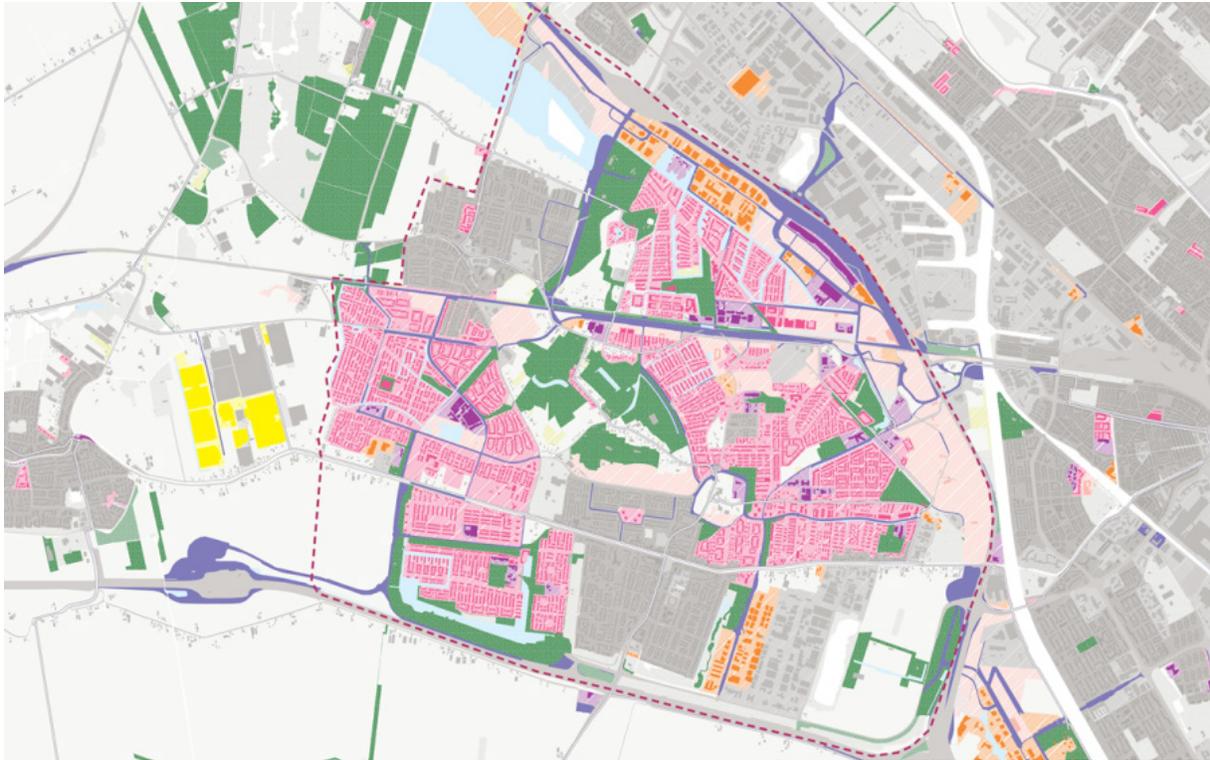


FIGURE 5 Leidsche Rijn, Utrecht

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The last 25 years showed a profound transformation of urban areas in the Netherlands, that is for sure. A great number of new residential and business areas came into existence, both in the inner cities and the urban fringe. These physical changes resulted in demographical and economical growth. But how important was spatial and urban policy for this transformation? There was an urban renaissance in most of the countries in the western world, also in countries with different or no urban policy. This was mainly caused by the transformation from an industrial to a service urban economy, not by urban policy. But spatial and urban policy played a role in the transformation, both in terms of speed and form of the developments. A few tentative conclusions.

- 1 First and foremost, the Fourth Policy Document on Spatial Planning had impact at the level of the policy discourse. The document convinced other policy sectors and municipal governments of the urgency to adapt the policy concepts to a post-industrial economy in a globalizing world. Within a few years after the release of the Fourth Policy Document, both urgency and new policy concepts were visible in policy documents on housing, on environmental policy, on nature, on mobility, on the 'green spatial structure', and on regional economic policy
- 2 The balance of inner city transformation is surely positive. New residential areas were created, middle class families stayed in the cities whereas they would otherwise have moved to suburban areas outside the city. Very often, municipal governments were the first movers in these areas, and they were supported by the national policy. Without urban policy, developments would at least have occurred slower.
- 3 The results of infrastructure projects defy general conclusions. Some projects were successful both in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, others were not. High speed Lines belong to the latter category, up till now. But the railway stations are a different story. Many of them had to be restructured anyway because of the rising number of travelers, even without High Speed Lines. Not doing so would have harmed the public transport in the Netherlands in the long run.

- 4 The judgement about greenfield development is also ambivalent. The new suburban residential areas ('Vinex') were planned closer to the cities than they were the decades before. This was the result of a policy change, and it surely contributed to the economic growth of urban areas. But from a spatial point of view, the overall result were not the 'compact cities' the policy makers had hoped for, but rather a 'archipelago of suburban areas'. In the end, urban policy did not prevent sprawl.

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THE CHANGING FACE OF DUTCH NATIONAL SPATIAL PLANNING¹

Wil Zonneveld

TU Delft

Unnoticed by the wider public and the majority of professional planners, a symbolic event took place on 12 November 2010. Directly following a reorganization of the public sector by the new government taking office that year, the letters of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment — VROM according to its Dutch acronym — were scraped off the façade of the main building in The Hague. Compared to the United Kingdom, where the name, scope, aim and composition of ministries are changed virtually every election period, ministries in the Netherlands are relatively protected from the caprices and vacillations of party politics and prime ministers. VROM was an institution in more than one sense of the word, and “spatial planning” (the RO in VROM) had been part of its name since 1965 (Siraa et al., 1995: 64). In the title of the new ministry — Infrastructure and the Environment — spatial planning is conspicuously absent.

The removal of the letters represents more than a symbolic act: it reflects the stated intent of the new government to “leave spatial planning more up to provinces and municipalities” (Coalition Agreement, 2010: 38). Within a year of assuming office, the new ministry published its new spatial planning strategy which minimizes planning at the national level (Ministerie van IenM, 2011; final version: Ministerie van IenM, 2012). With this, the tradition of national urbanization policies such as growth centers, new towns, buffer zones, the Green Heart and VINEX had come to a close (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994; Zonneveld, 2007). To foreign eyes, these changes may seem drastic and sudden, but they are actually part of a gradual systemic change.

Since the early 1990s, the external institutional environment of national spatial planning has transformed fundamentally. National housing policy, once a key partner in helping spatial planning steer urban development, has largely been privatized (Salet, 1999). Agricultural policy, once instrumental in protecting rural areas from urban encroachment, has weakened under increased EU influence and reform. On the other hand, the powerful national transport and infrastructure department, whose relationship to planning was as much one of rivalry as partnership (Siraa et al., 1995; Priemus, 1999) has now merged with planning. The same is true for regional economic policy: this has become the main spatial policy thrust.

¹ Taken and adapted from: Zonneveld, W. & Evers, D. (2014) Dutch national spatial planning at the end of an era. In: Reimer, M., Getimis, P. & Blotevogel, H. (Eds.) *Spatial Planning Systems and Practices in Europe; A Comparative Perspective on Continuity and Changes*, New York/Oxon: Routledge, pp. 61-82.

In the same period, national planning has undergone significant changes from within. At the beginning of the decade the research arm of the National Planning Agency (RPD) was transferred to an independent organization (Roodbol-Mekkes et al., 2012). At the same time, the practice of passive or regulatory planning was criticized for being too reactive. Since then, planning has attempted to become more “hands-on” and development-oriented (Gerrits et al., 2012). A major reform to the Spatial Planning Act in 2008 reshuffled powers, responsibilities and expectations between governmental layers, with the intent to simplify governance, speed up planning procedures and stimulate proactive planning. This was accompanied by a succession of administrations that, on balance, favored decentralization to centralization and deregulation to regulation, and new legislative proposals attempting to further streamline the planning process.

Finally, the role of planning in Dutch society seems to have changed in this period as well. A general trust in government and faith in expert opinion — conducive to technocratic planning — has diminished, not unlike developments in many other countries (Albrechts, 2006). Citizens have become more vocal, and civil society more polarized. For the first time in its post-war history, national spatial planning no longer seems immune to this. Consensus on the necessity of national planning has eroded even within the ranks of planners and scholars. Urban growth (and therefore the need to manage it) is no longer self-explanatory and governance rescaling (rise of the regional and EU levels) has made the national level of scale increasingly suspect as a locus for spatial planning.

The fact that Dutch planning use to cut across so many governmental layers and departments and tries to arrive at a coordinated, comprehensive and integrated solution has earned it the epitaph of “comprehensive integrated approach” in the international literature. In fact, according to the synthesizing report of the 1990s EU Compendium project, the Dutch system epitomizes this approach because it is characterized by, “...a very systematic and formal hierarchy of plans from national to local level, which coordinate public sector activity across different sectors...” (CEC, 1997: 36).

This description no longer fits as national government has retreated from spatial planning. Most national urbanization policies have been abandoned and spatial quality – for decades the cornerstone of national spatial planning – is no longer considered a national interest. Even more than before, economic development is the main priority of spatial planning. At least at national level, the comprehensive integrated approach is being substituted by a kind of regional economic approach. Interestingly, national planning has not taken on one of the key characteristics of the regional economic approach found in other countries: balanced development. Instead, funding is focused on what are seen as the most competitive areas of the country. So there is convergence with respect to Europe as well as divergence: convergence because economic goals are dominating, divergence because fair distribution of economic development across the country (one dimension of what is often called territorial cohesion) is not what the present policy seeks to achieve.

The fact that the Dutch national planning system no longer nicely fits into the category of the comprehensive integrated approach is related to much wider developments. One can safely say that the system of Dutch spatial planning expanded as part of the construction of the welfare state. Basic principles like affordable housing for all, balanced spatial-economic development of the country, a balanced urban system (the famous planning concept “concentrated deconcentration” as an expression of this) and open, rural areas as public spaces — including the Green Heart — are the expressions of spatial planning as a particular offshoot of the Dutch welfare state. A clear indication that the recent changes are unprecedented, is the disappearance of the Green Heart as a national policy concept. As the Green Heart was the core of what has been called a planning doctrine (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994) its disappearance marks the end of this doctrine (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1997; Faludi, 1999; Roodbol-Mekkes et al, 2012). The present objectives, concepts and instruments towards stimulating economic development could become a new doctrine, given a certain durability over time. But it would be difficult to call it a spatial planning doctrine if comprehensiveness is taken as a condition.

Dutch national spatial planning has therefore changed course in more than one sense: 1) content: it is no longer comprehensive, 2) influence over lower levels of government: what was binding in the past has been handed over to provinces and municipalities; 3) geographical scope: much narrower. These changes may be abrupt and unprecedented in their intensity, but should not come as a surprise. Although spatial planning had been a fairly de-politicized policy domain it would be naïve to assume that the system could be shielded from the restructuring of the welfare state in which it was historically rooted, and from the profound changes occurring in Dutch society. Since the 1990s the deliberative polder model has eroded as society has become more politically polarized, and with it support for a technocratic activity oriented towards consensus and compromise has eroded as well. The changes were foreshadowed in statements during the second half of the 1990s that planning should become more “selective” — in terms of issues and geographical scope — and more oriented to stimulating development instead of controlling it. But the recent changes are far more radical than the reforms advocated by the National Scientific Council for Government Policy at the end of the 1990s (NSCGP, 1999). The change in course is also the result of a political decision to curtail national planning in terms of objectives, concepts and instruments, and to transform what remains of it into a policy sector aimed at improving the competitive position of the most competitive regions of the country. Unlike the NSCGP’s report to reform planning, the present policy course has generally been met with suspicion by the planning community (Warbroek, 2011).

Currently the Dutch administration is working hard on a new policy report based on a new definition of spatial planning. In fact the notion of ‘spatial’ has been replaced by ‘environment’. The more critical issue to be decided is whether the new environment strategy will just contain the priorities of national government only or main environment challenges to be addressed by all administrative players plus civil society at large. In different words: again a list of national projects like the present strategy or a genuine comprehensive vision what the Dutch physical environment should look like in the future. As next national elections will take place in the Spring of 2017 at the latest we will probably not see a clear answer on the short term.

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