THE CHANGING FACE OF DUTCH NATIONAL SPATIAL PLANNING[1]

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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.

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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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