

# Planning at a crossroads

## *Dutch and Flemish planning cultures transformed*

Submitted to track 6 – Planning History

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### Abstract

The Netherlands is famous as one of the most meticulously planned countries in the world. Its planning history spans more than a century and many authors have commented on the scale and comprehensiveness of its planning system and the seeming ability to get plans realized. These characteristics have not only remained locked up within a professional community, they have expanded and grown into values broadly carried in society, leading Faludi to comment on Dutch culture as one characterised by “rule and order” with “a soft spot for planning”. (Faludi, 2005; Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994) Yet this culture is under scrutiny as 21<sup>st</sup> century developments such as globalisation and increasing citizen initiative require a more flexible spatial order.

The contrast with the neighbouring country of Belgium is striking. From a century of development aimed at private homeownership, infrastructural development and weak national planning policy, a country has emerged with a remarkably diffuse building pattern, yet with a great diversity of building types and a high standard of individual housing comfort for the middle and upper classes. Due to this pattern Belgium suffers from gridlock and a lack of nature and open space, leading one of its preeminent architects to term it the “ugliest country in the world” half a century ago already. (Braem, 1968 / 2010)

Despite a shared language and common culture The Netherlands and Belgium can be considered extreme cases in their Western-European context. Several sources have spent attention over the years to the origins and effects of these differences. (De Block, de Kool, & De Meulder, 2015; Zonneveld & Evers, 2014) My research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the considerable transformations these countries have gone through since the turn of the millennium.

Looking at the spatial planning systems of The Netherlands and Belgium at the turn of the millennium one sees the ambition for a radical change of direction which has put planning at a crossroads. In The Netherlands a strong century-old spatial planning system found its latest incarnation in the Fifth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning. Presented with much enthusiasm in 2001, only a year

later it fell prey to newly risen populist politics and the turn towards decentralization and deregulation that gradually emerged in the 1990s. The leading narrative, which had been one of basic quality and restrictive zoning, turned into one stressing the distaste of top-down regulation and the need for initiative of governments and citizens at the local level, a trend that continues up until the present.

In Belgium, particularly in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders, an almost opposite turn can be observed. A weak planning system with much room for individual initiative and various forms of (more and less formal) political influence was to be curbed and given structure by developing a regional spatial structure plan by 1997. The narrative surrounding this change was one best characterized by the phrase: "it can't go on like this". (Albrechts, 1999) In the space of five years a structure plan for Flanders was produced, accompanied by planning law and the hiring of planning officials at all government levels. At the end of the plan's horizon in 2007 the question remained whether the endeavor could be termed a success. Currently a new plan is in preparation to succeed the 1997 one.

Both episodes imply a change, not only in the institutional fields of policy and law but also of those unconscious elements that can be grouped under the heading of *planning culture* such as planning principles, citizens' acceptance of plans, and fundamental ideas about "the right way" space should be ordered. (Othengrafen, 2010, 2012) In both countries there was a specific aim not only to alter the institutional structure but to cultivate a new attitude towards spatial issues. To understand these transformations an encompassing analysis is required that includes various actors and forces operational both within and beyond the institutions of spatial planning.

This paper will discuss the transformations of the Dutch and Flemish planning culture in a comparative perspective from the turn of the millennium until the present. It will employ the theoretical perspective of *planning cultures* operationalized through the policy arrangement approach. (Arts & Leroy, 2006; Liefferink, 2006) In order to focus the analysis two themes in particular will be discussed. 1) The delineation of urban from non-urban areas which is a key issue in both countries at this time; 2) The policy arrangements intended to ensure spatial quality. Both these themes are essential to Dutch and Flemish planning practice and culture, and both extend beyond their professional groups into values and practices of their societies. This comparison will enable us to understand and look deeper into the way planning cultures and arrangements transform over time in an interplay of state and professional actors that are embedded in the particular cultural frames of their societies.

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