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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS



Rural futures in urbanising contexts: open space as public space

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Multiplicity and diversity are predominantly related to urban contexts, often narrowed to the coexistence of ethnic groups. In highly urbanised and urbanising societies also rural areas seem to be confronted with similar challenges. Rural areas are becoming complex melting pots of diverse societal groups that differ in the functional use of and in the identity they connect to these areas. Because of the historical lead of urban planning in the search for concepts that deal with multiplicity and diversity, urban concepts are a source of inspiration for alternatives that challenge the traditional functional zoning of agriculture and nature. Functional zoning is outdated, especially for the multiple use and identities of rural areas in urbanising contexts. Planning in these areas should shift towards the design of elements of public space (paths, attractors, signs, beacons, ...) that can facilitate multiple use and multiple identities. Examining successes of green public spaces in world agglomerations reveals three success factors that could also serve as leading principles for the design of rural areas: an open area with a sufficient surface, a surrounding built edge whose "residents" make functional and/or visual use of the open area and finally the introduction of an element in the open area that attracts residents of the built edge or elsewhere and that invites them to explore the rest of the open area and to meet its users. The transformation of a 1.200 hectares rural area in the fringe of one of the city of Ghent into a landscape park with (new) forests, farming land, residential housing, castle parks and recreational activities, is an interesting illustration of the concept of public open space. As often, the promising design principles used have been lost in the translation into a traditional zoning plan.

Rural Futures in Urbanising Contexts: Open Space as Public Space

Hans Leinfelder

Abstract

Multiplicity and diversity are predominantly related to urban contexts. In highly urbanised and urbanising societies also rural areas seem to be confronted with similar challenges. Rural areas are becoming complex melting pots of diverse societal groups that differ in the functional use of and in the identity they connect to these areas. Because of the historical lead of urban planning in the search for concepts that deal with multiplicity and diversity, urban concepts are a source of inspiration for alternative visions about the spatial development of rural areas. The exploration of green public spaces in world agglomerations reveals three success factors that could also serve as leading principles for the design of these areas. The transformation of a 1.200 hectares rural area in the fringe of one of the city of Ghent into a landscape park is an interesting illustration of the concept of public open space. As often however, the promising concepts used are lost in the translation into a traditional zoning plan.

Keywords

Public space, open space, spatial planning, planning concepts

1. Introduction

Societal context

One of the main socio-cultural challenges in contemporary network society is learning to cope with the other, with diversity and multiplicity. This pluralistic ambition or positive tolerance is a more realistic perspective than the feverish search for the utopian ideal of 'community'. (see Lofland, 1998 and Sandercock, 1998) Such an ambition does not even involve that individuals or societal groups really meet ... observing the other will often suffice to gain knowledge about other one's uses and it is this knowledge that is essential for the creation of trust and the essential social capital in society.

In a spatial context, 'public space' is the ultimate medium to meet this socio-cultural challenge, to confront the one with the other. (Madanipour, 2003) As a consequence, it will remain one of the main tasks for spatial planning to create public space that is accessible and useful to a varied group of people so confrontation can take place. However, the academic debate about the societal importance of public space is predominantly focused on urban public space. Central is the decline of the 'real' central urban public space, with a striking splits between those who romantically strive for the

restoration of original agora-like places and those who search for germs of contemporary types of public space in network society. New public spaces - shopping malls, theme parks, university campuses, ... especially in urban fringes - are capable of combining the growing mobility in society with the exchange of knowledge between mutually uninformed societal groups - 'parishes' - and have the potential to evolve to places with agoral characteristics since cultural heterogeneity increases through the temporary presence of those passing-by. (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001; Van der Wouden, 2002)

Open space as public space

In an urbanising context also open space fragments seem to be able to fulfil a role as public space. A first argument pro is the growing diversity in users of open space and the meanings they give to this open space. A large group of users nostalgically glorifies the fragments of open space as the lost paradise, characterised by features such as space, peace and darkness that seem to be lost in network society. A rural idyll is being projected on the rural society and on agriculture. For these users, the countryside has become a refuge from modernity and is defended against every thinkable development. (Short (1991) in Halfacree, 2004) At the same time, especially the younger generation looks for entertainment and thinks of space, peace and darkness as boring. Rural areas are a green setting for experiences, fun and consumption as an extension of the urban public space that already fell victim to entertainment. 'Thematisation' and 'spectaclisation' are no longer exclusive urban phenomena and adopt new specific names such as 'agritainment' or 'entertainment farming'. (Metz, 2002) These extremes illustrate that, also in the countryside, network society has resulted in social fragmentation. Mutual understanding of each other's activities, social relationships and mobilising capacity based on shared values and needs have become scarce what, also in the open space, gives rise to mutual intolerance. Neither rural society can escape from the challenge to restore and to strengthen the social capital. (Amdam, 2006) Finally, open space fragments increasingly become morphological equivalents of the unbuilt public space within cities. However, where the urban public space has been kept free as a concept in a solid vision on the functioning of a city, the enclaves of open space are often accidental and thus unstructured remains after urbanisation. However, Gallent et al. (2004) and Halfacree (2004) emphasise the uniqueness and non-transitory character of these open space fragments because of their recreational, aesthetic and identifying qualities that contribute to the living environment of the urban dweller.

2. Planning concepts for 'open space as public space'

'Open space as public space' has to be understood as one possible role that could be assigned to open space fragments in an urbanising environment. Furthermore, it does not imply an underestimation nor a substitution of the existing urban public space. It assumes additional public space and thus, as a consequence, some kind of relief to the extremely occupied traditional public space. Finally, to be clear from the start, the euphony of 'public open space' varnishes over its shortcomings as it ignores the most important fact that it can never become a public space in the sense that it would be a public good, owned by the state and at the service of everyone. Also in future the majority of the open space will be owned by private owners who are confronted with the fact that their (activities in)

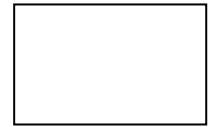
open space (are) is 'consumed' by a growing number of users. They will, to a smaller or larger extent, give access to this open space and/or tolerate other users. In this context, it seems more appropriate to use notions such as 'collective space' and 'shared space'.

Based on a research project looking for the critical success factors in the design of green public spaces in large urban agglomerations all over the world - such as for instance Central Park in New York - Tummers & Tummers-Zuurmond (1997) determine three elements: the green public space is a piece of land with a sufficient size and a permanent status; the fringe of the green public space is occupied by buildings; and a special building is situated in the periphery of the green public space.

On further consideration, these three success factors for green public space seem to have the potential to be a lot more essential to the spatial visioning on open space fragments in an urbanising spatial context than the current zoning on land uses.

Sufficient size and permanent status

The first success factor includes the presence of a space with a size that is proportional to the surrounding urban tissue. Moreover, its continuity in time has to be guaranteed politically as well as socially.



Translated to the planning and design of public open space in an urbanising context, the success factor can be applied at different scales. Radial urbanisation along the connection roads between villages results in open space fragments with a rather proportional size in relation to the urbanised environment. Smaller fragments are often in proportion to smaller communities nearby; one or a few agricultural parcels are in proportion to spread out or linear residential development. At a national scale, the Dutch Green Heart operates as an open space for the city dwellers in the surrounding cities of the Randstad.

The permanent status of the open space fragment is very contextual. In some fragments, for instance in river beds, it is physically impossible to build so their continuity in time is almost automatically assured. The societal and cultural value of castle parks, important natural areas or protected landscapes is that high that the risk of being built in is quite small. The economic, ecological or cultural value of the largest number of open space fragments however - especially those in agricultural use - is not enough to guarantee the openness over time. In these cases, the permanency has to be created in facts, for example through their public role in urbanising society, or artificially in zoning plans.

Built fringe

The second success factor implies the design of a built fringe around the open space fragment. The urban functions and activities in this fringe really or visually make use of the open space and are, in the long term, an important guarantee for the conservation of the open space.



In an urbanising context, the element of a built fringe is already available in the form of residential and other developments in the urban fringe or in the network urbanity of smaller villages and communities, ribbon and spread development. What often seems to be missing however, is the functional and/or visual orientation of the buildings towards the open space. Mostly the urban extension takes place with the back to the open space. Urban extension is essentially an introvert process that is especially oriented to the urban centre and public space and a lot less to the surrounding attractive open landscape.

These observations lead to recommendations concerning the design of the contact area between the open space and the built fringe. Important elements are of course ‘windows’ or ‘vistas’ that facilitate the view from the private space in the built fringe to the public open space and vice versa. But the contact area is also a potential agoral space, where the residential passer-by from the built fringe - to sleep in between his or her commuting and professional activities - encounters the societal groups rooted in the countryside, for instance the farmers. For this purpose, the contact area could also be explicitly ‘designed’ as a sort of common ground for activities that attract both farmers and dwellers: allotment gardens, school gardens, composting grounds, ...

Peripheral attractor

The third and final success factor to make an open space a real public space is the location of a special building at a peripheral position that unifies the public open space and the built fringe. The (activity in the) building attracts people from the fringe and beyond and stimulates the interested ones to further explore the open space.



Also this concept opens interesting and innovating perspectives for open space in urbanising contexts. Where the location of a bank or a playground in a public square determines the latter’s functional possibilities, similar dynamics can be expected in open space of the insertion of recreational services - a children’s farm or a forest - sport infrastructure - a golf court - cultural activities - an open air museum - or, at a very detailed scale, a bench in the periphery of some parcels in agricultural use. The most important challenge is to tune the attractiveness of the new element to the degree of public character wanted for the open space fragment involved.

3. Incompatibility with institutionalisation through zoning on land use

Since Flanders’ (North Belgium) forestation index was and still is very low compared to European standards, an overall challenge of the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders was 10.000 ha forestation in the period 1997-2007. Making abstraction of the fact that this objective has not been met at all at the scale of Flanders, an extensive planning process has been set up to realise a 300 ha large forest in the southern fringe of the urban agglomeration of Ghent, the second largest city in Flanders and one of the least forested regions in Flanders. This original forestation idea has been integrated in the aim to create a 1.200 ha large ‘urban landscape park’, a multifunctional area with a dominantly open space character, in and surrounded by a strongly urbanised region. (David et al., 2005)

The planning vision for the so-called ‘Park Forest Ghent’ (see figure) integrates the open space fragment - quite uniquely and therefore being a sample for Flemish ‘rural’ planning policy - within the urban structure, also legally as it is located inside the delineation of the Ghent urban area. The implicit assumption of this strategy is that the open space fragment will address the future urbanisation pressure better by making it part of instead of excluding it from urbanisation.



Assessing the Park Forest vision to the three success factors shows that the vision meets the idea of 'open space as public space' to a large extent. First, the Park Forest area is in proportion to the Ghent urban area. Its permanent status as open area is already virtually guaranteed by the delineation in the zoning plan and, on short term, the realisation of its public role will be enforced through the location of some new contextual elements such as biking and hiking paths, reception infrastructure, minor forestation projects, ... Major roles are appointed to passive recreation, nature conservation, forestry and agriculture and secondary roles to economic development, more active recreation and residential activities. In other words, recreating city dwellers, firms, sportsmen and new inhabitants are added to the existing societal groups/parishes of the open space fragment in the idea that a multifunctional use will stimulate the confrontations between societal groups in public open space. New functions and activities in existing castles, the development perspectives for agrotourism and the concept of four reception porches to the Park Forest fit the idea of attractors. What is missing in the planning vision however is a concept for a built fringe making use of the open space. Besides the conception of a new science park in the north-east corner of the forest, the relation between the Park Forest and the residential development in the outskirts of Ghent is not at all taken into consideration.

What strikes however is that the potential of the planning vision to create a public open space at the scale of the Ghent urban area is heavily mortgaged when translating it into a zoning plan. First of all, the plan allocates the land uses within the Park Forest traditionally to accurately delineated zones - forest areas, agricultural areas, castle park areas, areas for recreation, ... defined at the level of the individual parcel. In other words, any flexibility in the actual realisation of the forestation program is largely precluded; consequently, the addition of necessary new contextual elements to the Park Forest will need a very active government, expropriating the parcels involved. Next, the idea of multifunctional use is sporadically present in the urbanistic rules of the zoning plan. Hiking, biking and horse riding and nature conservation are the only uses that receive a letter of safeguard all over the Park Forest. Through this allocation at the level of

individual parcels, different societal groups are forced into a legal straitjacket that refers to land uses. This sharply contrasts with the societal self organisation - or the development of social capital - that is or should be so characteristic to the realisation of public space, in this case public open space: *Landscape multifunctionality stands in sharp contrast to the dominant 'single objective' planning of the past.* (Selman, 2006:15) More and more, the deeply rooted zoning on land uses in the planning of open space seems to meet its limits. Saey (2005) accounts this focus on land use zoning to a shift in the objectives of spatial planning: the prevalence of land uses over purposes; or the legal security gets priority over the well being of people. Van Dooren (1999) is however convinced that the challenge in contemporary network society again shifts from hardware to software and orgware, meaning that the question of spatial development no longer deals with zoning, land uses and solidified space, but increasingly with the use of space and with the direction and organisation of spatial development. The overall relevance of 'open space as public space' is that it no longer attempts to legitimate the conservation of open space from a merely (agricultural) economic or (nature) ecological point of view. It offers an innovative complex of planning concepts that accommodates a socio-cultural positioning of open space in urbanising contexts.

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