



A more strategic zoning plan for rural areas under urban pressure

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Abstract

Today's planning strategy for the preservation of rural areas under urban pressure in Flanders-Belgium is identical to the one used designing the first zoning plans 40 years ago: the exclusive allocation of specific functions and activities – nature, forestry, agriculture, ... – to precisely defined areas. This approach is driven and contortedly maintained by an overall need for legal security. How visionary planning processes may be – trying to define and legitimise the future role and position of these rural, more open areas in relation to the urbanising context – their political translation always ends up in old-fashioned monofunctional zoning plans.

Not only this doesn't match the planner's vision, it neither fits the growing multiple use of these areas nor the perception of an increasing number of actors involved. People don't perceive rural areas as a mosaic of zones on a zoning plan, but in a qualitative and holistic way as an attractive setting for living, recreational activities or just for passing by.

The paper explores briefly the possibilities of a more strategic type of zoning plan as an alternative for the detailed functional zoning plan. It formalises the (intermediate) results of a planning process by defining areas based on visionary elements such as identity, role and position in a broader context rather than allocating specific functions and activities. Rules linked to this zoning plan formulate conditions for development – such as the dynamics, environmental impact, meaning or landscape features – rather than specifying which specific functions or activities are allowed or not.

1. A dominant planning discourse about open space

A discursive analysis of the story line and the institutionalisation of this story line in planning practice through fourteen policy documents at three important moments in Flemish planning of open space and agriculture – the design of the zoning plans in the period 1960-1980, the development of the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders in the period 1980-2000 and the definition of the areas of the natural and agricultural structure since 2000 – shows the existence, already for forty years, of a dominant planning discourse about open space. (Leinfelder, 2007a)

This dominant planning discourse treats city and countryside as antipodes, as two separate entities that need a complementary and simultaneously opposite policy: new developments are concentrated in urban areas and in villages, while the open space is safeguarded against new developments and agriculture, nature and forest in open space are endowed with very extensive development possibilities. Where the zoning plans of the 1960s-1970s breath an atmosphere of boundless belief in the economic and residential development of Flanders – and consequently a clear feeling of superiority of the urban over the rural – the separation of urban and rural is treated in a more neutral way since the development of the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders.

The dominance of this planning discourse of city and countryside is not unique for the Flemish planning policy. Several scholars refer to similar phenomena in the Netherlands and Great Britain. Based on the findings of the European RURBAN-project, Overbeek (2006) points at a culturally bound perception of city and countryside as the possible explanation for the dominance of this discourse. In this perspective, North-West-European countries seem to share a rural tradition in which agriculture and/or nature are central elements and in which, as a consequence, countryside is highly valued as a space for production and consumption and city and urbanisation are perceived in a more negative way. In contrast, the Mediterranean rural tradition approaches the countryside negatively and perceives city and urbanisation quite positively because it stimulates economic development. In the marginalist rural tradition in Scandinavia the urbanisation of the countryside is not really a matter of interest.

The dominant planning discourse of city and countryside as antipodes also has its consequences for the planning approach of agriculture and nature in Flanders. (Leinfelder, 2007a) First, it is being translated in a very modernistic and economic planning discourse on agriculture that considers agriculture a priori as an economic activity that ought to be provided with maximal spatial development possibilities. This is in sharp contrast to the changes in agricultural policy at the European level during the last 25 years, with an evolution from an economic policy towards a broader countryside policy discourse. Secondly, nature is approached through a very ecological planning discourse, inspired by European as well as national/regional legislative initiatives protecting and strengthening networks of areas with outstanding natural values.

After forty years however, the validity of the dominant planning discourse of city and countryside as antipodes seems to be questioned increasingly. It no longer seems a solid frame of reference for the characterisation of functions and activities in society as relations between places and activities have become very complex in network society and concern different spatial scales at the same time... In other words, the traditional political dichotomy in simple categories 'city' and 'countryside' ignores this complexity and stratification of society (Halfacree, 2004). Furthermore, it is remarkable how planning does not seem to succeed in defining a clear role and position for open space in 'network urbanity'. Open space is mainly considered – as a continuation of the planning discourse of city and countryside as antipodes – as the space that remains, that is not taken by urbanity, that has not been consciously designed.

Especially a more comprehensive socio-culturally inspired planning discourse on the role and position of open space in the (Flemish) urbanising context seems to be missing. That is why this paper explores more profoundly one possible socio-cultural role of open space – open space as public space – as a kind of alternative planning discourse that, in time, could challenge the dominant planning discourse of city and countryside as antipodes. Chapter 2 briefly positions the alternative planning discourse in a broader societal context. Chapter 3 addresses the possibilities of the planning discourse for the planning of open space, agriculture and nature and chapter 4 suggests a more strategic type of zoning plan for the institutionalisation of the alternative planning discourse.

2. Societal positioning of alternative planning discourse 'open space as public space'

The story line of the alternative planning discourse of open space as public space – or even better as 'shared space' – is inspired by one of the most important overall socio-cultural challenges in contemporary network society: learning to cope with the Other, with diversity, with differences. This pluralistic ambition is generally considered as a more realistic perspective for society than the feverish search for the utopian ideal of 'community'. The most important reason for this consideration is that the pluralistic ambition does not imply that individuals or societal groups have to adjust their behaviour ... observing and taking notice of the other and its activities and uses will often suffice to gain knowledge about each other's uses. It is this knowledge that is essential for the creation of trust and the crucial social capital in society.

Translated to space, public space is the ultimate medium for confronting the Other in society.

It is impossible for me to see the world entirely from the viewpoint of another person and I am not able to enter the private realm of strangers and experience life from their perspective. I can, however, albeit in a narrow sense, have the same perspectives as they might have in public space. I can stand where they stood and experience common space from the same perspective, even though my experience may be completely different. (...) This means that I can understand how this stream of thoughts has the same fundamental

structure as my own consciousness and how far the Other is like me. Sharing a present, which is common to both of us, can construct a 'pure sphere of the "We"'. (Madanipour, 2003: 165 en 166-167)

As a consequence, one of the main challenges for planning is to make public space accessible and useful to a great variety of people and groups so societal confrontation can take place.

Until recently, public space policy was mainly oriented towards central urban locations. In network society, this central public space however seems to lose its prominent role as meeting place in society and place of societal exchange. Contemporary variations on urban public space in forms of semi-public and collective space – especially in the urban fringes – are characterised by typical features of public space such as anonymity and multifunctionality: shopping malls, theme parks, university campuses, ... (De Sola Morales, 1992; Hajer en Reijndorp, 2001)

What is characteristic for these variations on public space is that two aspects, preferably in combination, are growing in importance: passage on the one hand and parochial realms on the other. (Van der Wouden, 2002)

- In the more mobile network society, public space seems to arise at places that are only briefly visited by passers-by, by people in passage.
- Next, public space is increasingly occupied and claimed by societal groups ('parishes') that are composed of individuals with a (temporarily) shared interest.

In a context in which almost the entire Flemish – and by extension a great part of the North-West-European – space seems to be 'urban', also open space fragments seem to be able to fulfill a role as public space. (Leinfelder, 2007b) A first argument pro this concept of public open space is the growing diversity in meanings that are attributed to open space by a growing number and diversity of actors in open space. The different meanings of open space vary from this of a 'rural idyll' to that of open space as a space for entertainment and amusement. Furthermore, there is an increasing lack of understanding and a growing intolerance between those actors in open space – between farmers and newcomers, between farmers and recreating people, between newcomers and recreating people, ... Finally, open space fragments also physically and morphologically increasingly resemble urban public space – as the (remaining) unbuilt area between buildings. These fragments are however no longer a phase in the transition of open space towards built space. (see Gallent, Shoard, Andersson, Oades & Tudor, 2004) Because they are crucial for the quality of life in urbanising society, the need for a more integrated approach in policy of open space in relation to urban dynamics becomes more and more prominent.

3. Possibilities of alternative planning discourse for story line about open space

Considering open space as public space implies a more conscious 'design' of open space. Open space fragments in an urbanising society are no longer residual spaces, but have become determinant for further urbanisation. Summarised, the perception of urban development inverts in a very drastic way: from a quasi autonomously growing city that uses up open space towards a consciously designed urban agglomeration in which open space is approached as an important element in the urban structure. (Halfacree, 2004)

This inversion in perception of urban development also opens up perspectives for the design of public open space. Tummers & Tummers-Zuurmond (1997) analysed green public spaces (parks) in vast urban agglomerations – such as Central Park in New York – all over the world. Based on this analysis, they defined three success factors that also seem applicable to the spatial visioning on and design of open space fragments in the Flemish urbanising context. (Leinfelder, 2006)

- First, an open space fragment has to consist of a sufficient surface in relation to the surrounding urban tissue. This can be translated to several scales, even to the scale of some parcels of farming land in relation to a few surrounding houses that is characteristic for the Flemish situation. Furthermore, the continuity of open space needs to be guaranteed: temporary by juridical or planning means or more permanently by fulfilling in an optimal way the role of public space for the urbanising surroundings. Open space can also be made public, especially by creating a continuous accessible network of paths, by an optimal visual accessibility and by making the role of open space more explicit as the place where society expresses its way of dealing with physical structure and nature. Finally, the creation of different parochial realms in this open space is not automatically synonym to the traditional allocation of functions and activities. Public open space will, analogously to urban public space, benefit more from a characterisation of the public character of the open space, using conditions that determine the spatial development possibilities of (parochial) functions and activities.

- Secondly, it is best that the fringe of the open space is occupied by urban functions and activities that really or only visually use this open space. They are, also in the long term, the best guarantee for the conservation of open space. In Flanders today, the interaction between most of the houses and the surrounding open space is nil. This observation results in a plea for an increasing attention to the separation and at the same time the connection between open space and the built fringe. It is in the connecting area between open space and fringe that the stroller from the built fringe is confronted with the harvesting neighbour-farmer or, in other words, it is in this area that passage and parochial realms are combined to become places with agoral characteristics.
- Finally, the open space and built fringe are unified through the location of a special construction at a peripheral position in the open space. The construction fulfills the role of an attractor: it has to attract residents and users of the built fringe to the open space and then to stimulate them to explore the open space. In the Flemish open space, these attractors can appear in several forms or scales: an open air museum or a golf court in a vaster open space, a children's farm or a pick nick spot in a smaller open space fragment and finally a sitting bench at the edge of a few farming parcels surrounded by scattered residential homes.

The relevance of the alternative planning discourse 'open space as public space', as elaborated on above, is that it doesn't try to legitimate agriculture or nature with economic or ecological arguments, but that it offers agriculture and nature the possibility to look for a contemporary societal and cultural role in urbanising network society. The planning discourse of open space as public space also implies that it is not that essential to protect areas for agriculture or nature in planning, but to characterise the role of a particular open space as a public space and to translate it into conditions that are relevant for the spatial development of all kind of functions and activities and, consequently, also of agriculture and nature.

4. Institutionalisation of alternative planning discourse in a more strategic type of zoning plan

An analysis of existing planning initiatives that implicitly or more explicitly try to meet the story line of the alternative planning discourse 'open space as public space' shows that the translation into a traditional functional zoning plan involves an unwanted narrowing in development perspectives. (see for instance Leinfelder, 2006)

By allocating functions and activities to zones, often defined according to lots, the different parishes or societal groups in the public open space are forced into a juridical planning corset. In the traditional zoning plan and its accompanying development rules, the perception prevails that (material elements of) the different users of the public open space should be accommodated in properly separated entities. This is in sharp contrast to the societal self organisation which is or should be characteristic to the development of public space, in this case public open space.

The traditional zoning plan also lacks the necessary guarantees that the development of public open space takes into account the existing contextual elements in the area or that it adds new elements in an intelligent way. Moreover, such a qualitative description of the existing and potential contextual conditions in which a function or activity can develop, has nothing to do with the allocation of functions and activities in a traditional zoning plan.

4.1. Increasing discontent with functional zoning in zoning plans

These remarks stress the weak power of the traditional allocation of functions and activities in zoning plans to translate the concept of public open space in an appropriate way. This critique is not unique however. In general, the technique of functional zoning is being questioned increasingly.

The desire to separate functions and activities through a functional zoning of space finds its origin in the spatial determinism of the CIAM-doctrine (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) in the after-world-war-period. According to this doctrine, government has to influence the power relations concerning the use of space in such a way that the functions and activities do not obstruct each others spatial development. (see for instance Albrechts, Allaert, Vanbelle, Van den Broeck, Verheyen & Vermeersch, 1983) The most important explanation for the long lasting success of functional zoning is without any doubt the legal security it creates. By allocating functions and activities to a defined area/a zone, a 'waterproof' legal and administrative framework is constructed in which government and citizens can be relatively sure what their rights and duties are concerning the spatial development of a certain lot. At this moment, it is clear that this legal dimension really prevails in (Flemish) planning practice. A second explanation for the success of functional zoning is closely related to this

legal security. Through zoning, policy fields that serve the spatial interests of a certain function or activity, can, as a matter of speech, appropriate a part of the territory or at least appropriate (a part of) the authority on it.

The protective feature of public intervention has shaped over time a kind of ‘social contract’, a contract by means of which society has accepted and institutionalised ‘the right of farmers to be protected from income instability, particularly downward instability’. That is an institutional and political cover which farmers have translated into property rights. (...) The sum of both the implicit terms of this contract and the historical strength of private property over the land in industrialised societies, have given rise to an institutional structure that recognises the inalienable right of farmers to freely decide how to use available resources. (Ortiz-Miranda & Estruch-Guitart, 2003: 1)

These policy fields stress this control over space by coupling their own legislation to the planning zones. As a consequence, the search for alternatives for functional zoning is paralysed because a change in zoning would cause the entire battery of related legislation to tumble down. A final explanation is the almost seamless fit between functional zoning and a still quite dominant, centralised and top down planning policy. The development of zoning plans in the 1970s in Flanders, but also the recent strategic planning – in theory led by the principle of subsidiarity – were and still are initiated at the federal or regional policy level. In such planning approaches, a generic functional and passive zoning technique seems easier to manage than planning instruments that try to capture the existing or desired qualities and meanings of areas.

Functional zoning in planning practice however appears to be meeting its frontiers, especially because of the increasing multifunctionality in land use. Moreover, functional zoning is also unable to address the different meanings different actors connect to (open) areas.

Landscape multifunctionality stands in sharp contrast to the dominantly ‘single objective’ planning of the past. (Selman, 2006: 15)

There has been no strategic thinking on how landscape is functioning as a whole. (Gallent et al, 2004 : 226)

That is why planning should leave more openness for societal self organisation – the strengthening of social capital – and for uncertainty in planning initiatives. Van den Broeck (2005) suggests that, because of the one-sided emphasis on the creation of legal security, actual planning instruments essentially neglect the most important goal of planning – that is the search for the best possible mutual adjustment of space and society and this because of society. Saey (2005) states that as a result legal security becomes more important than the well being of people.

4.2. A more strategic type of zoning plan for rural areas in an urbanising context

Planning, also planning of open space, has to become more proactive by addressing the most divergent future societal developments as efficiently as possible. Because it is however often unclear what these developments will look like and how they will be expressed in space, the technique of zoning or allocating functions and activities as a well-known planning practice loses its effectiveness and its orientation towards implementation. This chapter explores the possibilities to remold the planning instrument of the zoning plan so it addresses more efficiently the multiple use and multiple meanings of open space in an urbanising context.

a) Content of a strategic zoning plan for open space/rural areas in an urbanising context

A strategic zoning plan still involves zoning as planning is ultimately territorial. Even when a plan is mainly a prosaic description of the desired future development, the area that is addressed by this plan will have to be defined geographically, in one way or another. (Zonneveld, 2005) The question is whether or not this zoning still has to allocate functions and activities in space.

Alternatively, zoning could, for instance, no longer be related to the definition of zones for one or more functions or activities, but to entities that are defined by and that refer as much as possible to the desired (societal) role of the open space involved.

- Consequently, the names of the zones in the zoning plan try to express as much as possible the most relevant spatial characteristics of the entities – for example names that refer to the dynamics in development, the vulnerability of the environment, the meaning of space, ...
- Secondly, the juridical rules in the zoning plan related to these entities define the conditions in which spatial development can take place, without however mentioning the functions and activities by name.

In other words, development and management of space become increasingly dominant in relation to the traditionally popular destination of space. (see also Albrechts, Van den Broeck, Verachtert & Coppens, 2003)

In this perspective 'landscape' as a holistic framework for integration is undoubtedly becoming increasingly important in these 'strategic zoning plans'. This is because a socio-cultural planning no longer deals with the neutral and technical object 'space', but with the ambiguous subjective and emotional object 'place'. (see Selman, 2006) The aim for a perfect, logical management of functions and activities in space is more and more replaced by an analysis of landscape qualities of places and the definition of ways in which those qualities can be conserved and exploited. Selman (2006) pleads in this context for a 'landscape scale planning' – a planning that takes landscape as a starting point – that recognises the integrative power of landscape:

Potential for landscape to provide an integrative framework for wider practices of spatial planning. (Selman, 2006: 2)

Landscape planning policies have tended to be expert-driven and strongly influenced by 'polite' tastes. Top-down bureaucracies, effected through negative restraints over land use change (...) It is now abundantly clear that landscape scale planning must be a far more positive activity, and one which centrally involves stakeholders in choices and stewardships. (Selman, 2006: 180)

b) Status of a strategic zoning plan for open space/rural areas in an urbanizing context

As mentioned above, because of the never ending and dominant focus on the allocation of functions and activities, the average (Flemish) zoning plan remains a classic land use plan that is produced at the end of a planning process. The plan expresses a (central) government's vision on what space should look like at a certain moment in future and defines the measures how to realise this image of future.

In contrast, a strategic zoning plan refers to a much less defined image of future spatial organisation. It has to be considered as an indicative and temporary frame of reference for private and public actors through which the future decision making about specific projects and measures can be coordinated – even when the choices at the moment of the decision will be different than those at the moment of the making of the plan. That is also why a strategic zoning plan should not be a solitary document but should be a part of a voluntary, more comprising territorial contract with mutual and result-oriented commitments between private and public actors about the development of a specific open space. As Van Ark (2005) states, these territorial contracts are not really strict juridical instruments, but are more relational contracts – pacts – that express the cooperation between independent actors.

Planners and designers like to believe in the notion that 'plans' can change reality. From a historical point of view and from experience, we should be aware that people constitute the crucial factor in planning and that implementation is the objective. (Van den Broeck, 2006: 12)

Such a decision-oriented planning approach also has its consequences for evaluating the effectiveness of a plan. This effectiveness is not determined by the degree in which the concrete results on the field are in line with the objectives of the plan, but by the working or functioning of the plan. As a consequence, it is not even really a problem that the implementation measures deviate from the vision expressed in the plan. The effectiveness of a strategic zoning plan is dominantly determined by the practical value of the plan as a frame of reference at the moment of decision taking in situations where the choices at the moment of the decision taking can be different to those at the moment of the conception of the plan. Also the coordinating territorial contracts mentioned above are not meant to enforce results (legally), but to point out the collaboration between mutually dependent actors. They are relational contracts with rules concerning behaviour and arbitrage. (Van Ark, 2005)

Conclusion

The last forty years, (Flemish) planning of open space or rural areas seems to have been dominantly inspired by an economic planning discourse on agriculture and an ecological planning discourse on nature. In contrast, referring to the traditional three pillars of sustainable development, the socio-cultural dimension of planning of open space seems underexposed. However, especially in an urbanising context, this dimension seems increasingly important.

Hajer (1996) stresses that a greater appreciation of the socio-cultural dimension of planning implies a general reconsideration of planning practice. Planning no longer has to focus on 'space' but on 'place', as mentioned earlier in this paper. 'Space' is an empty, rational and technical category that dates from Enlightenment. As a consequence, (open) space and the use of (open) space by society are considered perfectly malleable: spatial problems are met by generic and univocal solutions that refer to generic and logical planning principles. As 'place' is not an empty, rational or technical notion, planning of 'places' is obliged to penetrate deeply into the qualities of and differences between places, and especially into their societal reality. These qualities and differences have to be discovered through discussion with public and private actors. In this context, the role of government is to provide society – amongst others through spatial design – of different alternative images of

spatial development and accompanying societal management trajectories. Subsequently, the actors themselves will select the most appropriate trajectories through their concrete acts.

In this context the classical object of planning – the search for the best mutual adjustment of space and society for the sake of society – shifts towards an aim to create a broad scope for societal needs. This scope to fill in perhaps today unknown societal needs is made possible through a much more flexible planning instrument in which spatial conditions for the spatial development of functions and activities are defined instead of traditionally allocating these functions and activities to well defined zones. That is what a ‘strategic zoning plan’ should be about.

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