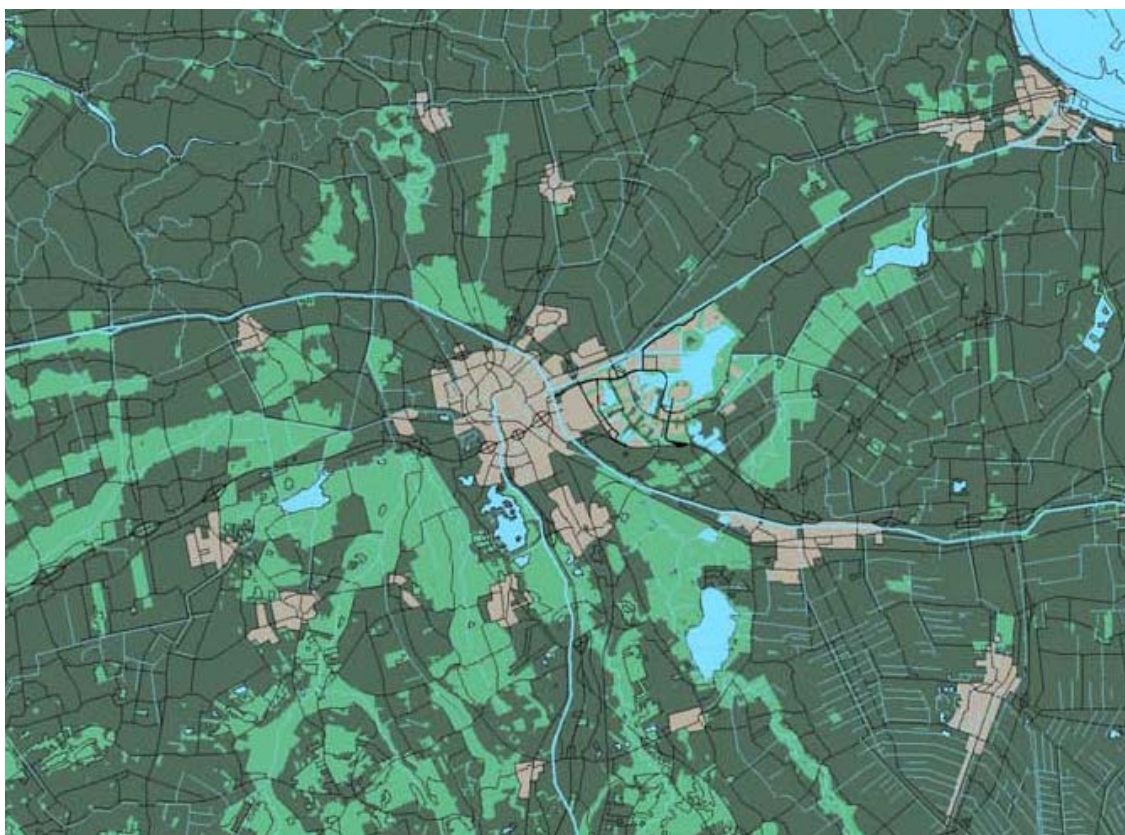




A Compact City and a Better Balance

New Flexibility in Dutch Planning Provides a Model for Balanced Development



By Ladd Schiess

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Masters student at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Visiting the University of Groningen Spring 2007

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Summary

Newfound flexibility afforded by the shift in Dutch planning laws aims to produce a balanced outcome between the demands for low density housing and the necessity to minimize negative impacts. Using the city of Groningen and its new Meestad development as an example, it appears that the new flexibility in planning within the Dutch planning context results in a better balance between the developments benefits and negative impacts. It is evident that the Netherlands is beginning a new era of planning which loosens the control of the national government in order to give more flexibility to provinces. All this is a response to the demand of the changing Dutch population which is in an era of small households with more spending power. The new Dutch planning follows a trend in decentralization which allows more localized, and more market driven, control in planning and development. By letting development fall into provincial and market driven control, the government may be taking chances with its new policies creating the potential of an unhealthy amount of low density development, but it appears that regulations are in place to keep developments, such as Meerstad, within the bounds of control while satisfying the needs and desires of the people.

Introduction

The initial focus in this research was to study possible ways that American rural areas could abate the negative effects of development and development pressure in the face of inevitable demand. Perhaps there are examples where rural areas could maintain countryside and new housing could also be built in ways less dominating either by design or density. A possible example could be by looking at the Netherlands compact city policy. I posed the question: How effective is the Dutch Spatial Planning Act and its subsequent reports at preserving land on the urban fringe?

It would seem the Dutch have found positive results from their compact planning limiting low density, auto-oriented development, but the focus in this research changed from looking at the past achievements through their national compact city policy to a more recent shift in culture and planning decentralization. Dutch planning has been undergoing decentralization that allows for more flexibility among the provinces. This paper now focuses on the question: How does the newfound flexibility afforded by the shift in planning laws produce a balanced outcome in new development? This paper explores how a new lower density development works to meet the needs of a changing population while staying within the Dutch planning context.

In the past, the Netherlands has had success at developing cities while preserving vast amounts of countryside in close proximity, especially when compared to other countries. The method was a national strategy imposing development regulations on all cities that required compact growth plans and developments. This type of development, also called smart growth, calls for dense development that should help to reduce waste and pollution through design and placement of uses. The main goals are to reduce suburbanization and pollution by reducing automobile dependence and increasing access to various uses and services by proximity or alternate modes of transportation (Geurs, 2006).

Currently the effects of these types of Dutch developments are debated as it is hard to analyze what might have been, but these policies, implemented since 1970 appear to have slowed the consumption of undeveloped land and may have lowered automobile use. Dutch policy limiting suburbanization has preserved open space, increased accessibility to transportation, and reduced air pollution (Geurs, 2006). Despite planners' desires for compact cities and the benefits associated with them, people still desire more low-density housing that has the benefits of space and recreation in a way more difficult to implement using the past national compact city policies. The new policy allows provinces and municipalities to try different methods to try to find a balance between the necessity of minimizing environmental and traffic impacts and maximizing population demands for less-dense living environments.

In order to illustrate the Dutch planning system and its recent changes, this paper will first go over the history of modern Dutch Planning and its current changes and then examine a new development in the City of Groningen to see if the new flexibility in achieves a balance between the benefits of new development and the negative impacts

created. Groningen, the Mini-Metropolis of the North, developing Meerstad, a development of enormous proportions that has the potential for both good and bad, but appears to be finding an appropriate balance.

Dutch Spatial Planning and Policy

The Netherlands has a modern infrastructure that allows for automobile use, but the nation has managed to limit the low density auto-oriented development that is so typical of many countries after World War II. The Netherlands is one of the top ten countries in the world for density and they still have vast amounts of undeveloped land. The central government has played a strong role since World War II and that role has been as developer and preservationist. Until recently the central government was in control of spatial policy, but has decentralized in order to allow provinces to develop according to their individual needs. This newfound flexibility allows for more development options that vary due to the unique situations of each of the provinces. This new flexibility is in the context of past spatial policy that still influences and guides the current methods of today.

The First Four Memoranda on Spatial Planning

Modern Dutch planning began after post-World War II reconstruction and has been amended and tailored through the intervening decades. It shows a strong central role of the national government and how planning has adapted to change. As the Netherlands emerges from a welfare state to its current more market economy, new flexibility in planning implementation is a reflection in the needs and wants of the people.

The first Memorandum on Spatial Planning, published in 1960, was a modernization policy aimed at increasing modern industry and housing (Pellenbarg, 2001).

The second Memorandum, 1966, aimed at an even distribution of housing and economic activities across the country in anticipation of a population boom. The 1966 Memorandum brought with it the concept of 'collected deconcentration' that aimed to control suburbanization (Pellenbarg, 2001). This memorandum has led to the modern Dutch planning system that began with the Spatial Planning Act of 1965 and follows a hierarchy of planning instruments, from the national 'Key Spatial Planning Decision' (PKB-Planologische Kernbeslissing) through the provinces' 'Regional Plan' (Streekplan), to the municipal 'Zoning Scheme' (Bestemmingsplan) which is the only binding power for land use (Wolsink, 2003).

The third Memorandum took the collected deconcentration concept and developed it further limiting suburban growth to a limited number of 'growth centers.' It was released in separate issues during 1973-78 (Pellenbarg, 2001).

The fourth Memorandum, published in 1988 and followed by an extra edition in 1994 called 'Vinex,' focused on planning for the cities rather than suburbs to encourage new growth impulses and maintain vitality in the cities. Thirteen 'urban nodes' were given priority status for public investment and Vinex developments are those where land has been set aside to meet the demand for new housing (Pellenbarg, 2001).

In 2000, the Dutch government proposed a major overhaul of the planning system. This began years of heated debate and proposals that have emerged in the fifth Memorandum (Wolsink, 2003). This memorandum introduced the concept of 'urban network,' which presented the idea of making space, sharing space. The fifth Memorandum outlines various spatial needs in the Netherlands until 2020. The Memorandum also shows anticipated spatial needs from 2000 to 2030 for housing, economic activity, mobility, nature, and culture, all with a take on national and regional objectives (Pellenburg, 2001).

The Fifth Memorandum on Spatial Planning

Some argue that the fifth Memorandum is much of ideas of space quality and little of policy on how to achieve these levels of quality. called the New National Spatial Strategy, this memorandum is supposed to be the result of evaluation of past policies conducted by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) which is an independent evaluation organization. The new National Spatial Strategy should be implementing the WRR's recommendations; which are to continue the decentralization and market approach for spatial planning, meaning that the central government provides only broad guidelines while the provinces and municipalities create the specific details and plans that best suite their unique needs (Wolsink, 2003 & VROM2, 2007).

In an article published in *Environment and Planning A 2003*, Maarten Wolsink argues that the new Strategy seems to ignore the research and recommendations from the WRR. The WRR recommended a change in spatial planning to continue decentralizing, but the government's new policy has a strong top down centralized approach when it comes to certain large projects. The article argues that the new strategy is not based on a past learning experience. In order to try and speed up legislation and make way for large projects, legislation aimed at shortening approval time for large projects resulted in rush jobs that were implemented top down – national to local level – and have a history of failure and impropriety. The first few projects started with this legislation were largely opposed and were not built as intended. Wolsink's argument is that the ability to allow the government to implement the projects of national importance so quickly and without giving adequate local input was exactly opposite of what the WRR recommended (Wolsink, 2003).

On the contrary, Bart Vink and Arjen van der Burg from the Office of the Director General for Spatial Development, Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, wrote that the policy's main aim is to limit central government control, except in issues that are important on a national and international level with a motto of, "Decentralize if possible, centralize if necessary." The focus is to allow locally controlled development with as little interference from the central government, which is opposite of the post World War II years' development of the welfare state. Issues of national importance are still centralized, since they are beyond the boundaries of the provinces.

Vink and van der Burg write that the new Strategy focuses on more localized control and can be summed up in three terms: development, decentralization, and deregulation. Municipalities can now decide how much development is to occur, generally without central government interference. In cases where interests are beyond municipal control, the provincial government would direct actions. Decentralization will redistribute planning tasks with the central government focusing on the National Spatial Network of infrastructure and protecting national and international interests (interests which Wolsink argued have a history of failure); the provincial governments will focus on local and regional interests partnering with municipalities; and municipalities will partner with local organizations and citizens to plan development actions. Deregulation will allow for a more stream lined development process that limits the amount of red tape needed. The new Spatial Planning Act shortens many procedures and processes for permits (Vink, 2006).

This new memorandum has resulted in a more market oriented approach and has given the municipalities much more control on spatial planning. Perhaps the history of failed national projects can be better planned with better focus on national level projects rather than on the development in the many municipalities. The fear is that this could lead to unchecked development by allowing the provinces, such as Groningen, to develop what suits the needs and wants of those in the localities, allowing for Meerstad. Perhaps the reason why the principles outlined in the fifth Memorandum are generalized when talking of the national approach is to let the national government act in a policing role to ensure developments don't overstep the bounds of the general guides in the Spatial Planning Act. The plan of decentralization could be a change in the right direction to allow for changes in culture and protect against harmful short-term development trends.

Recent Trends in Dutch Planning and Culture

The Netherlands has been making the transition from a welfare state to a market driven state in recent years. Its change is evident in the decentralization push and peak in social housing in the 1990s. Dutch households are getting smaller and the push for new housing is an ever present need. Dutch lifestyles and consumption patterns call for different qualities in places to live beyond proximity to work.

Demographic Trends

The Netherlands is a small country with 41,000 square kilometers (15,830 square miles) of which 33,900 square kilometers (13,089 square miles) are inhabitable. With a population of around 16 million, the Netherlands is the sixth most populous country in the European Union. According to 1998 statistics, the average density is 380 persons per square kilometer overall with 460 persons per square kilometer if only the inhabitable land is taken into account. This density puts the Netherlands in the top ten most densely populated countries in the world. That density varies from 6,500 persons per square kilometer in The Hague area to only 25 persons per square kilometer in the less populated areas (Beets, 2000). Even more interesting is that the Dutch live at very high densities with 90 percent of the population living on 10 percent of the land (Van Steen, 2007).

The Dutch population as a whole is relatively young for Europe since its baby boom was a bit more prolonged than other countries. Its growth will continue, but is slowing and is expected to begin declining around 2033 onward when the population is estimated to peak at 17.2 million. As the population begins aging, the younger generations are waiting longer to have children and marry. Also, most women are having fewer children as more and more women join the workforce. Fertility rates are around 1.6 children per woman, which is below the replacement rate (Beets, 2000).

Besides the effect of having fewer children, household sizes are decreasing as people live alone longer before marrying, divorcing more frequently, and living longer after a spouse has died (Beets, 2000). The impact of smaller households is that even with the same population, the demand for housing is still increasing (Ministry of Housing, 2001).

The current Dutch welfare state enables individuals with a basic minimum income and provides for those who fall beneath a level deemed unreasonable. As a result, poverty is relatively small. Part of the welfare state has been to supply housing for all (Beets, 2000), but as more and more people are able to own homes, there is a rift between supply and demand.

Housing Trends

Dutch social housing is different than many other countries as it currently takes a more market oriented approach and allows for residents to choose where to live. Much of this could be attributed to the fact that people are leaving social housing for the private market. Dutch social housing was also built up over a longer period than most other European states and it peaked in the early 1990s as the private housing market began to be more competitive. Local housing authorities responded by providing more flexibility as they competed for tenants (Boelhouwer, 2002). The results have been more demand for private housing and less for the social housing developments. Social housing is losing ground as peoples' housing preferences change.

The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) released a document in April 2001 entitled "What People Want, Where People Live," that explains the Dutch housing situation along with peoples' preferences. This document is the descendant document to previous housing policy documents. It is the next step from the last housing document and it continues to focus on decentralization, but it places emphasis on freedom of choice for individuals while still allowing limitations that are in the best interest of the collective good (VROM1, 2001).

The Ministry of Housing reported that people no longer look for places based on proximity to work due to changes in technology that allow people to do more from home. The increased number of women in the workforce is providing more households with dual incomes. Together these factors allow for more freedom of choice and people are looking for the locations that have qualities that allow them to do more from home. The aging population also has different needs that may not be met in their current environments. Repeatedly, the Ministry wrote about the shortage in the quality of

housing people desired and that the policies of that time were leading to an increased gap between supply and demand for such housing. Policy cannot keep people in their present homes, people will find it elsewhere. The Ministry suggested charting a different course, and what they suggest appears to be followed by Groningen in the creation of Meerstad.

The Ministry of Housing suggested making more space in the cities by redeveloping the out-of-date post World War II housing and making them more recreation and green oriented and also add more green land, nature areas with recreation opportunities, to the edge of cities where municipalities think it is appropriate. They recommend that housing needs to change from mass producing quantities to understanding and tailoring housing quality by making the process more consumer oriented.

People now have more ability to move and will only stay in their present situation if the city offers the quality they desire. People want the type of space afforded by country living with all the benefits of urban living. The Ministry of Housing even warns that the line between urban and rural will blur. Village life is popular as lot sizes are bigger while costing less than in the city. There is a need for more residential environments in the countryside, especially in the North. Many Dutch villages have many new residents, but with this comes the danger of losing the rural identity as prices rise and development encroaches.

In order to maintain the rural lifestyle despite an increase of residents, the Ministry suggests that villages establish a growth boundary and to have municipalities give their own residents priority to inexpensive housing. The Housing Allocation Act enables municipalities and allows the province to oversee the process.

Another suggestion to help stave off urbanization of the countryside is for cities to make more green, meaning outdoor recreation oriented development, essentially bring more countryside to the cities. They suggest building high-end housing villages in depressed areas, such is the case for Blauwe Stad, another development in the eastern area of the Province of Groningen, and develop new transitional areas between the city and surrounding.

From the Ministry's report, it would seem the Dutch people's wants are similar to that of the United States: the benefits of both country and city living. Low density developments in the US often dominate the landscape and if the Dutch develop similarly, they could face the same problems American cities face due to massive suburbanization. It appears that the proper balance can be achieved as is evident in the case of Meerstad. Proper planning can help prevent the bad side effects while addressing the needs and wants in Dutch housing. This balance is being reached by recent changes in Dutch planning.

Planning Trends

Coinciding with the change of social housing in the 1990s from a welfare state to being more market driven is the change in Urban Regeneration Policies from a national top-down approach to the current local system's distribution of block grants. These block

grants were established with the Urban Renewal Fund (*Stadsvernieuwingsfonds*). This fund established a breakthrough in national-local relations bundling resources for local urban regeneration policies and may have been one of the driving forces behind the decentralization of the 1990s. It makes local government accountable for an allotment of national funds using local knowledge and expertise for local projects. The local governments can tailor sound planning principles and policy handed down from the national government to suit local needs (Korthals Altes, 2002).

The powers of local governments are now more closely associated with provincial governments. Provinces create and follow their own plans, which is a change from the regional plans handed down from the national government. The changes have enabled new housing and perhaps more locationally unique developments, such as Meerstad. Along with that freedom comes the risk of undoing what Dutch planning may have been trying to protect.

In the Ministry of Housing's document on housing, they recognized that while development may become more market driven, the laws still apply. The government is just stepping back from being the developer. A new act called "Woonwet" or New Housing Act is being introduced that deals less with policy and more with regulation. The new act has the national government providing the vision and framework for the nation, much like the Fifth Memorandum. It acts as a police force that ensures that local developments are within the bounds set. Provinces have more responsibility with the new act to ensure that municipalities are acting regionally in their policies. The province will be making policy and the municipalities will be implementing them with the national government acting more as an observing police officer.

Groningen's Meerstad: More City and a New Landscape

The changes resulting from demographic and planning shifts are seen through the new designs and developments emerging in the Netherlands. In the case of Groningen, the city is acting with public and private entities to build a new development that better meets the needs of the people in the area. The development shows the newfound flexibility in Dutch planning as it is a departure from what has been typically allowed in the Netherlands, but the development still contains many of the hallmarks that Dutch planning is known for, just with some differences.

Meerstad provides some additional choices to the housing available in Groningen in more ways than just the number of households. Groningen is historically an important city for the Netherlands and is the most important city in the Northern region and Meerstad helps to continue that importance by filling a need that isn't being met..

The City of Groningen

Groningen has been an important city in northern Netherlands because of its population, university, and cultural amenities. It is the capital of the Province of Groningen and along with Assen, the provincial capital of Drenthe to the south, has been designated as one of six important corridors and networks for the Netherlands, a country with a population of nearly 16 million. Groningen has many commuters with 50 percent of its 125,000 jobs being filled by out-of-city commuters. The city has a population of around 180,000 with the Province of Groningen having around 320,000. The city is home to two major universities: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (RuG) and Hanzehogeschool, with about 20,000 students each (Van Steen, 2007) helping to give the city a lively college town feel. Groningen is also home to the UMCG Academisch Ziekenhuis which is a regional medical and multi-use complex. Groningen is known for its country setting and many student oriented establishments.

Culturally, Groningen is the heart of the Northern Netherlands and the City of Groningen is the seat of the Groningen Provincial government. Groningen has many performing venues including the new Euroborg stadium with 20,000 seats and the indoor Martini Plaza which can seat thousands. Additionally there are several museums including the renowned post-modern Groninger Museum, a transportation hub, and regional shopping centers. Groningen has been awarded "Best Binnenstad" for its vibrant city center. It has become an anchor city in a region of nearly 1.6 million (Van Steen, 2007). All of this has been compacted into 2,300 hectares (8.9 square miles).

Groningen is keen to keep its position as an important regional city while allowing for new innovations. In its 2004 Development Plan, the city laid out a few strategies to guide planning and city development. One strategy is to be innovative, inclusive, and unique. The idea is to ensure Groningen as a special place, not just another Dutch city and to strengthen its identity. Another strategy is to incorporate a regional aspect to city

planning. A strategy to continue a compact city legacy is with the STIR policy, which is to stimulate intensive use of space, meaning that spaces should be used for multiple functions to limit horizontal space needed. One last, but important strategy is an element of flexibility. The city plans should be adaptable to market change and other future unknowns.

Perhaps the last strategy of adaptability is a reflection of recent shifts in Dutch planning that seem to be the result of shifts in Dutch culture. As will be discussed later in this paper, Dutch national planning is undergoing some restructuring that has changed it from a one-size-fits-all strategy to a more flexible approach allowing for provincial control of planning. One could say that Groningen has been the victim of one-size-fits-all national planning restricting city growth in an area with an abundance of undeveloped land, but there is always the opposite side of the issue. Groningen has been shaped by Dutch compact planning to create a dense livable city surrounded by a vast pristine countryside. Whatever the viewpoint, it is this argument over top-down planning that has changed Dutch planning from a more regional focus to one allowing individual provinces to plan to suit their needs. The Netherlands is a Democracy and its elected officials are responsible to the people. Recent changes in Dutch culture have led to changes in planning and perhaps this can be best illustrated by Groningen's new development currently underway: Meerstad.

Meerstad: More City for Groningen

Lying on the southeast edge of the City of Groningen, partly in the municipality of Groningen and partly in the municipality of Slochteren, is the vast new Meerstad development. Meerstad, meaning "Lake City," is centered on a large lake and will change thousands of hectares of land from its current rural character to a recreational and more urban environment. In a clever play on words, the word 'meer' has a double meaning which is rather fitting for such a large development. Besides meaning 'lake', 'meer' also means 'more', so, in essence, the new development could read "More City." However you read it, Groningen will be welcoming a new lake and more city to its southeast urbanity for the next twenty years.

Meerstad is being developed by a public-private partnership and is being constructed to absorb the anticipated need for housing, employment, and recreation in the region. On October 1, 2005 the Ground Exploitation Society Meerstad (Grondexploitatie Maatschappij Meerstad) (GEMM) was set up to develop Meerstad. The GEMM partnership is between eight entities, four public entities: the Municipality of Groningen, the Municipality of Slochteren, the Province of Groningen, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, & Food Quality/Service Rural Area (Bureau Beheer Landbouwgronden (Ministrie van LNV)); and four private entities: AM Grondbedrijf B.V., Hanzevest Ontwikkeling B.V. (In March 2007, Hanzevest bought out: KOOP Holding B.V. who was one of the founding partners), Heijmans IBC Vastgoedontwikkeling B.V., and BPF Bouwinvest LTD. The GEMM is currently based in the village of Harkstede as the Bureau Meerstad.

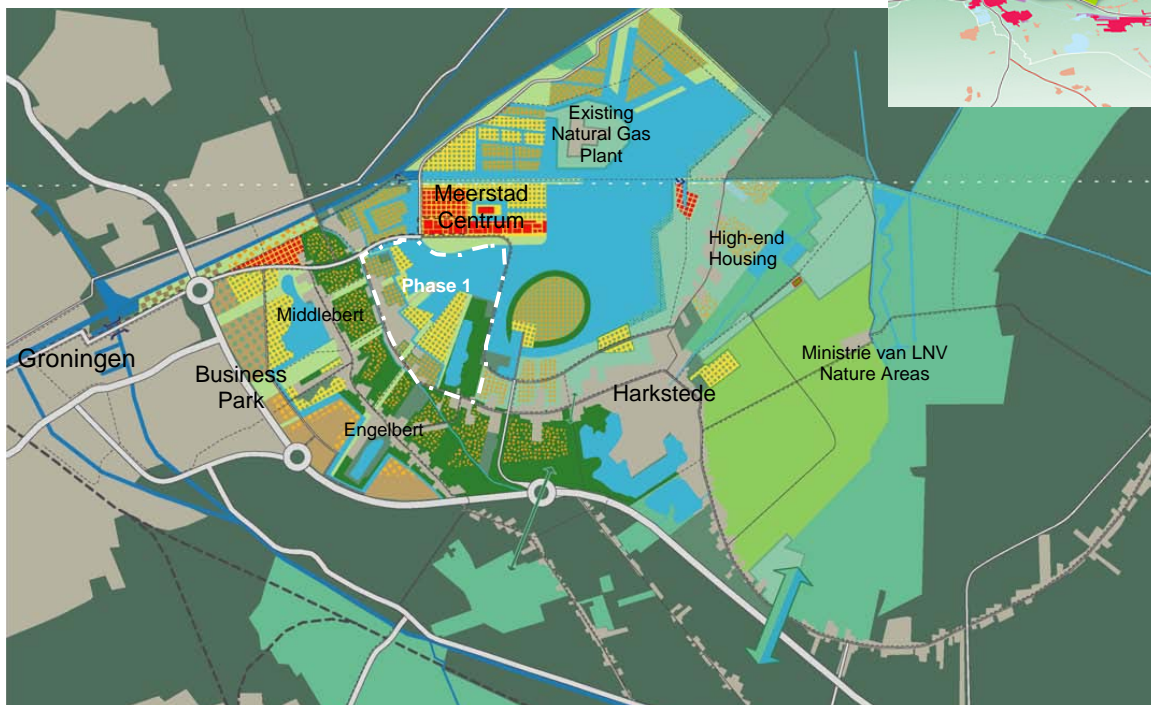
These current eight entities are the result of work began with interested parties in 2001. With the recognition of the masterplan between the Municipalities of Groningen and Slochteren and the Province of Groningen in March 2005, the project began to be officially realized (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).

The size of the project is enormous. At 2300 hectares (8.9 square miles), Meerstad is exactly as large as Groningen. Including the lake, two-thirds of the development is slated to remain or become natural and agriculture areas. The lake will take up 600 hectares (2.3 square miles) and 700 hectares (2.7 square miles) will be for 10,000 houses built among 17 country neighborhoods (woonlandschappen), housing an estimated 30,000 people. The villages of Engelbert, Middelbert, Scharmer, and Harkstede (all within the municipality of Slochteren), will all be incorporated into the development (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).

The 2300 hectares (8.9 sq miles) are divided into:

- Approx. 700 hectares (2.7 square miles) for 10,000 houses in 17 different neighborhoods
- Approx. 135 hectares (0.5 square miles) for business activity, the interpretation is not yet stipulated
- Approx. 27 hectares (0.1 square miles) services and sport fields
- Approx. 600 hectares (2.3 square miles) of lake
- Approx. 800 hectares (3.1 square miles) nature areas, of which 480 hectares (1.9 square miles) are for recreation (Bureau Meerstad, 2007)

The plan can be broken up into three main aspects of development, space for nature, space for living, and space for recreation.



Space for Nature

With its lake and future nature areas, Meerstad may prove to be a nature oriented development. The master plan calls for an ambitious amount of nature areas, for each hectare of red (land with development) there will be a hectare of green (nature areas including recreation). Any original natural areas have been mostly erased by farming over time and Meerstad offers a chance to reclaim natural areas. The area once was a large peat marsh that had been drained to allow farming. The existing agriculture fields east of Middlebert and Englebert will be replaced by new and existing stands of trees to create a ribbon of forest. The existing developments along these roads, including the villages of Englebert and Middlebert, will be incorporated into the strip of woodlands providing a contrast to the more intense development along the A7 Motorway (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).



The new nature areas will provide new habitat for wildlife amongst fields or forest and along the banks of the lake or canals. With two-thirds of Meerstad's area being set aside for the lake and green areas, there will be chances for wildlife to get a new start. These new nature areas will connect to existing nature areas outside Meerstad to try to enhance the habitat through connections for animals and people recreating in these areas. The nature areas are being constructed following the typologies of ecosystems in the area and can connect to existing habitat. Many of these natural areas will have housing also, but will be at light densities of 6 homes per hectare (2.4 units per acre) (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).



The lake will also have a sophisticated system to maintain habitat and marsh lands while enabling it catch flood water and keep the shores moist in times of dryness. With the unknowns in global warming, the lake will try to go with nature to either extreme.

Nature will even be incorporated into the business area. Largely to act as buffer, there will be alleys of trees, meadows, and water bodies. Strip plantings will line the banks of the ponds and canals.



Space for Living

Meerstad will be a place to live, work, and shop. Meerstad publicizes to be a city in a village or a bit village in a city, all on the edge of water. There will be a variety of residential developments and a new shopping area in the Meerstad Centrum. Expansion of the existing business area in southeast Groningen will provide many more additional employment opportunities closer to the future residents of

Meerstad. (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).



With 17 new neighborhoods mixed among a variety of different environments, Meerstad will have the opportunity for many lifestyle choices. As each new neighborhood is realized it will have its own look depending on its position in the landscape. For those that prefer a more urban setting, the Meerstad Centrum will contain the densest neighborhoods



creating an urban area. It will be surrounded by water and built up to densities similar to an inner city. For those wanting a more park like or country setting, there are developments of lighter densities amongst the nature areas and the agricultural areas. You can live on the banks of the lake with your own boat dock or have a view looking into one of the new parks. There will even be new hobby farm areas where those wishing it can keep animals or do light farming.



Roadways in these areas will be like traditional alley developments where the homes are all along the lane as is often found in the Dutch countryside (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).



Density varies among the 17 neighborhoods. As mentioned, the densest area will be the Meerstad Centrum with densities around 27 units per hectare (10.9 units per acre), but some of the neighborhoods in the nature areas will have densities as low as 6 homes per hectare (2.4 homes per acre) in the developments in the nature areas. (Of course many areas will not have any units.) Meerstad will offer more architectural flexibility in some neighborhoods than is typical for Dutch development as they aim to give variety for the people who will live there, but with guidelines more sensitive to the living area. The variety of housing will be from the style of a, Swedish



fishing village or haventje with more historical looking houses to very modern architecture. The architecture and style of the entire development has not been finalized as it will develop with Meerstad in phases over the next 20 years (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).

Amongst all the new development will be the existing villages of Harkstede, Engelbert, and Middlebert. Meersted has the potential to greatly affect the character of these villages, but

the development tries to minimize the impact by trying to keep the villages more isolated from the new development by using the new nature areas as buffer zones. Perhaps the phasing in of the development will help to create more gradual change. Additionally, there will be a parallel road on the north side of Harkstede to minimize in-town traffic and a new entrance/exit ramp will be built on the A7 motorway for better access for new developments without the need to drive through Harkstede (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).

The villages of Engelbert and Middlebert may experience more of a character change as new business development grows around them. These villages are closer to the existing business area that will be expanded across the Oostzeeweg, which is a motorway spur currently under construction to give better access from the A7 motorway to the eastern side of the Groningen Ring Road. These villages will have buffers also to separate them from the business park in the form of new lakes and canals. They will have a more urban view than they currently do and the new business will have a more rural view into the villages which will be across the water. (Bureau Meerstad, 2007).

Space for Recreation

Of the 800 hectares (3.1 square miles) set aside for nature areas, 60 percent will be for recreation. In addition to recreation available on dry land, the 600 hectares (2.3 square miles) for the lake plus all the canals create an enormous opportunity for recreation. Homes will be in the nature areas or on the edge of water. Many residents here are just a few steps away from recreation. Even in the business area recreation is planned as trails and paths connect to the rest of Meerstad.





Trails and paths for bicycling, jogging, and walking will connect the various areas of Meerstad. Even the business park in the Engelbert and Middelbert area will be connected to the development with walking and bicycling paths. Playfields near these villages will be accessible along with playgrounds and public services. The ribbons of forests throughout the development will connect woodlands to the lake through various bicycle and walking paths.

On the water there will be plenty of room for all sorts of boating. Many of the canals amongst the neighborhoods will allow for private boat docks or boat houses that will connect to the lake. The lake will even connect to the North Sea through the Eemskanaal and its various connecting canals. Along the south shore of Meerstad Centrum and possibly a few other places, the park area will be lined with public beaches and beach facilities for sun bathing and swimming. In winter months when the canals and lake freeze, skating will be possible.

Development in Phases



Meerstad will be built in phases over the next 20 years. The first phase begins in the summer of 2007 and the first homes will be built in 2008. Phase one will have 1,300 housing units which will be built at about 300 units per year. After the first 100 houses are built, a nursery school and market will be built. Phase one is about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) from the Groningen Centrum, which is about a 20 minute bike ride.

Phase 1 will have a piece of the lake constructed, but, like the rest of

Meerstad, the lake will be done more gradually. The lake should be completed by 2012, which will help to sell future phases. Each phase will be tailored to fit the needs and demand of the time. The look of each phase will depend on its location in Meerstad and the tastes of the day.

Constructing the development in smaller phases makes the development more cost effective upfront and reduces the risk established from selling 10,000 units all at once. Perhaps more importantly, phasing the development has the potential to lessen the shock

to the existing villages as new residents gradually move in and begin using the existing infrastructure.

Are we still in the Netherlands?

The sheer size of the development and the idea of the Dutch purposefully flooding land may make an outsider ask, “Are we still in the Netherlands?” The answer is, of course, “Yes.” Meerstad just shows the newfound flexibility allowed in Dutch planning. Meerstad is not the only largescale development centered on a new lake, but is perhaps the best example of how the flexibility can create a better balanced development.

As mentioned previously in the section *Housing Trends*, there is another large development in the Province of Groningen besides Meerstad. Blauwe Stad (Blue City) has a large lake and is surrounded by forest and nature areas, but besides the lake, recreation, and lower than normal densities, the two developments differ. Blauwe Stad will not have an urban element and all the shopping is expected to take place in existing developments. Many of the homes are built as second vacation homes for Germans as well as the Dutch and are not built as an extension of any of the surrounding towns. It is being built to help rejuvenate the most depressed region in the Netherlands. Blauwe Stad’s purpose is to encourage wealthy to spend money in a depressed area, not necessarily to meet the normal planning needs of a city. Meerstad is in response to normal housing demand and future needs in a city.

At first glance, Meerstad seems to make the same promises as other low density developments. Its sheer size throws up a red flag warning of American style sprawl, but, Meerstad offers additional housing for Groningen and additional places for businesses arranged in a not-so –American way. It has a large nature focus with its equal red and green development policy. It has higher densities and an urban area helping in part to keep the Dutch compact city policy tradition. It offers additional housing right next to the city while affording a forest (rather than agrarian) type countryside. Meerstad provides a very good balance between the benefits and negative impacts that new developments offer.

Conclusions

As mentioned before, the compact cities of the Netherlands have resulted in 90 percent of the population living on 10 percent of the land. That would mean that around 14.6 million people live on 3,390 square kilometers (1,309 square miles). Dutch planning's recent shifts in policy that allow for provinces to take control appear to pose the risk of losing the density and open space, but the provincial plans are still in the context of Dutch planning. They are just tailored to the province rather than to one-size-fits-all national plans. Perhaps more low density development should be allowed in places where the provinces feel it would best suit them, provinces such as Groningen in the north with a relatively low population and lots of open countryside. Keeping in the context of the Dutch planning, Meerstad allows for lower densities while striking a balance between low density and high density living, networked in a scheme that preserves open spaces and green corridors with associated recreational amenities, and plenty of public and pedestrian traffic options

Meerstad: A perfect balance?

Besides the new lake, the most defining element of Meerstad could be its new nature areas. The ratio of one to one with red and green land use is unprecedented for the Netherlands (de Boer, 2007). It will create vast amounts on new forests and meadows. The addition of new forests on the southeast side by the Ministerie LNV will help create a new character to the area from one of agrarian fields to a wooded wild area.

Meerstad will change the character of the area, but maybe not so much a perceivable change from countryside to suburban, but a change from agrarian countryside to wooded countryside. The edge of Groningen will be moved outward, but perhaps not in the fashion of American suburbs. The elements of a dense urban area along the northwest side into Meerstad Centrum will extend the compactness of Groningen into the development, but there will also be lower densities meeting the demands for other housing types.

The lower density housing areas are mixed in with the woods to provide amenity for the new housing units, but also it helps to screen the new units in a way to make the area feel more wild and wooded. This low density area from the ribbon forest east to the lake shore is hemmed in by the business park to the west, the lake and Harkstede to the east, the Meerstad Centrum to the north, and the A7 Motorway to the south. It leaves little room for expansion and new future large scale developments would need to be incorporated into a new design scheme, which may prevent sprawling suburbanization. Of course we can only speculate what will happen in the future, but Meerstad might be meeting all of the demand for new low density housing in the area until 2025 when the last units are constructed.

The Ministry of Housing (VROM), recognized that people's desire for housing quality could lead to a loss in countryside as it is converted into housing as more and more people opt for country locations. Comparing Meerstad to the Ministry's suggestions and warnings show that Meerstad is trying to achieve a balance between the necessity of minimizing environmental and traffic impacts and maximizing population demands for less-dense living. It meets a need, benefits a city, and fits the new planning structure.

Meerstad has had public involvement since the beginning, it provides a variety of choices, it involves the municipalities and province, and it increases green recreation area all the while working to preserve the villages and rural character. Meerstad is a reflection of the new planning policies that best fit the new demographics of the Dutch people. Meerstad could be the beginning of Groningen's "new" countryside.

The New Countryside

Officially there are no "rural areas" in the Netherlands according to European Union OECD classification, but with only 10 percent of the land inhabited by 90 percent of the people, there is a high percentage of countryside. In order to understand how the Dutch view their countryside, a survey was produced and distributed to understand people's views of where countryside is, how it is perceived, and its attractiveness. The survey found that peoples' interpretations were based on what it looks like. Age group played a factor on views. Senior citizens view the countryside through its cultural and relational aspects, young people look at it based on its uses of agriculture productions. Overall, people believe that the Dutch countryside is largely in the North (Haartsen, 2003) and Groningen is often perceived as the only major city in the North.

The success of countryside preservation in Groningen while allowing for development could be Groningen's ability to begin a perceivable shift in views of countryside being recreational rather than agriculture production. Groningen could change its identity from a city surrounded by fields and farm animals to a city surrounded by forests with excellent recreational opportunities. As agriculture becomes less land intensive and more capital intensive, the demand or need for farmland is diminishing. Meerstad takes the wide open fields and fills them with forest, another type of open space, and wild animals roam instead of livestock.

By converting the countryside into areas for nature and recreation, the area around Groningen can begin to change to suit some of the desirable qualities Dutch citizens are looking for in a place to live. As outlined by one of the city's strategies in the 2004 Development Plan, the city hopes to encourage Groningen's uniqueness and identity. Changing the perception of Groningen as a city lying in fields to a city that is a recreational hot spot would most certainly strengthen the city's identity in the region and perhaps in the nation. Groningen may begin to gain a reputation as a place for recreation and thus continue to strengthen its attractive qualities and uniqueness through creating forest and recreational developments such as Meerstad.

Lessons for the United States

A world with a balance between low density and high density living, networked in a scheme that preserves open spaces and green corridors with associated recreational amenities, and plenty of public and pedestrian traffic options, would be a very good world. The Netherlands is close to achieving this balance through its past rigidity and increasing flexibility. They started by beginning with a centralized approach and gradually decentralizing.

The United States would need to begin centralizing, most likely at a state level, in order to try to begin adopting Dutch planning methods. Planning in the United States is almost a reverse image in structure compared to the Netherlands. The federal government allows the states to determine planning power and the states in turn largely give local government control. The lack of strong oversight has resulted in ubiquitous low density development and separation of uses that have erased countryside and produce a myriad of problems. Recent trends in development have called for increasing density and a mixing of uses and transportation options. While there isn't a shortage of new low density development, there is more variety in what is being built than in the previous decades.

Perhaps, the United States can adopt more statewide plans at development that are binding and require better variety in the development of housing and infrastructure. Just as the Dutch try to reach consensus between those who want compact cities and those who want more space, maybe states can take on more over-site in the developments of their cities. Consensus between environmental groups, developers, and existing citizens could be arranged to meet needs and protect existing areas.

An important aspect that would be more difficult to adopt, but would improve the health of cities is to make it easier or at least more cost effective to redevelop obsolete land uses. Undeveloped land seems to be less expensive to develop on rather than clearing and redeveloping past abandoned industrial sites, but the depressed sites remain dead and the United States ends up with its dead inner ring around a struggling central business district. It results in commutes from the outer ring suburbs through the depressed zone into the center. A massive campaign would need to be made to densify cities while restricting new development on undeveloped land.

While the United States may never implement Dutch style planning of its own accord, the benefits it could gain might convince it to implement pieces of it. It would largely be up to the states to make planning decisions and implement national guidelines. The federal government can provide the policing and national vision. It is a lesson the Dutch can teach us.

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