

## Planning and politics

The influence of politics on spatial planning

### Introduction

Politics and spatial planning are closely related. Because politics dictates the economical structure of a country and spatial planning is a means to realise (political) ideals.

It is interesting to see the differences in spatial planning and urban fabric between three different countries with distinguished different political structures: England (capitalism), the former Soviet Union (communism) and The Netherlands (a symbioses between socialism and capitalism).

### Britain versus The Netherlands

In British planning the central and local government has always had limited power to build large-scale projects. Hence developments in spatial planning were mostly initiated by private investors. This goes even back to 1665. After the great fire of London sir Christopher Wren made an ambitious plan for the rebuilding of the city. This plan proposed a series of boulevards and squares in the centre of London. The plan didn't make it because England was at war and had no money to spare for rebuilding London. Only 10% of the landowners were prepared to co-operate with the plan. The result was that everybody rebuild their own piece of property and nothing of sir Christopher Wren's plan was build.

Some decennia before the squares appeared in London. The first square, Covent Garden, was build by a social minded private investor. This was then the only possibility for large-scale projects because public parties (which in those days were local governments and members of the royal house) didn't invest in housing at all. Other squares, like Soho Square and Leicester Square, were all build by private investors. And because each square was being build by someone else, they didn't have any connection at all.



Covent Garden (The elusive city)



Bath (Postcard)

In Bath a development corporation for housing was established by some investors who saw the potential of the tourist industry. They bought vast pieces of land and build complete neighbourhoods in a monumental style on the edge of the town. This were the first large-scale private investments in British housing.

In general one can say that there have been only a few large-scale projects in Britain, as there have been in other European countries. Bare in mind Paris, were complete neighbourhoods were torn down to make boulevards and long lines. In Britain this was out of the question. They left the development of the city mainly to the landowners and investors. Hence only relatively small areas were developed and there was no overall view on the development of the city.

More recent examples show the same result. The industrial cities, like New Lanark, Saltaire, Bourneville and Port Sunlight, and the Garden cities, like Welwyn garden city and Letchworth, were all build following the philosophy of one man, whom convinced an investor to buy a piece of land and build a new town there.

It is not a coincidence that these kind of developments mainly happened in Britain. There were no regulations regarding discouraging large-scale investments by private investors. The garden movement was also popular in The Netherlands, but the garden cities were never build as Ebenezer Howard intended them to be because the Dutch government did the planning and regulated the building of the plans. In The Netherlands the garden cities existed mainly of social housing and were an urban or suburban neighbourhood of the existing cities.

Thus the private investors in Britain have a strong history. And the British government has almost always stimulated this in their policies. The influence of the private sector on the spatial planning in Britain is therefore immense. By a lack of money the government is forced to execute plans with private money. They have to interest an investor in their plans (e.g. the financing of a substantial part of the Docklands by the Millennium Lottery). Only by incidents money and space becomes available for major urban projects (e.g. the renewal of the centre of Manchester after the IRA-bomb).



**Java-eiland (Atlas van het Hollandse bouwblok)**

The difference with spatial planning in The Netherlands is substantial. Both the general and local government make spatial plans which are binding. The Dutch have also a law that makes it possible to disown land. This makes it a lot easier to execute the spatial plans. Therefore in The Netherlands the private investors usually don't make spatial plans. They execute the spatial plans of the (local) government. This is beneficial for both parties since it reduces the risk for the (local) government in executing their plans and the private investors have a reasonable profit margin.



**Prinsenland (Housing in the Netherlands)**

### **The former Soviet Union**

Karl Marx had a strong opinion on the ideal communist society. The only thing he did not describe was how this society should physically be build. Planners have therefore struggled with the question how the ideal communist city should look like. And it is therefore no surprise that there is still no ideal communist city.

Eventually there were three movements with each there own view on the ideal communist city. First there was the "Hyper-urbanisms". This movement stood for a relatively uncontrolled growth of the cities. The "Urbanism" movement however thought that a city had a limited size, to establish an optimum of collectiveness of public life. They suggested huge building blocks with facilities on the inner areas. A third movement was the "Desurbanism". They suggested proposed all kinds of linear settlements nearby the main roads and industry, with greenbelts. This movement approached the ideals of the of garden movement.



**St. Petersburg (foto MHH. van Dijk)**

The view on spatial planning of the Urbanism movement was, because of their economical component of the city, closest to the view of communism: a city has a distinguished economical limit in size. After this optimum the costs of building and maintenance of the city rise out of proportion. This is , among others, due to the fact of the mobility to work and recreational areas. In a communist city these costs are financed by the government. Therefore it was only

logical to restrict the growth of a city to its optimum. Cities should not only be socially perfect, but also economical perfect and efficient.

An example of this view is the Expansion Plan for Moscow, of 1935. The plan included not only the city itself, but also the suburban area of 50 kilometres round Moscow. The area of Moscow was functionally divided into zones with compact housing. And the differences between the rich centre and the outskirts needed to be dismantled. Due to World War II, the plan has only partially been build.

By giving up private owned land and capitalistic properties cities and settlements could be rationally planned in everybody's best interest.

National planning was done by the Five Year Plans. These plans existed for the spatial component out of two parts: a plan to locate the population and a plan to locate the industrial areas. The later dictated hence also the major infrastructure. In a way the plan to locate the industry pointed out the main lines for the location of the population, since the industry needed workers. The main goal of the population plan was to restrict the size of the settlements.

Regional planning was also done by economical plans and population plans. And because the first one had the highest priority, the population plans were not always carried out to their optimum. On this regional scale the plans for cities were made. But because of the central regulated government it took a long time before a plan was approved of. Bureaucracy was undoubtedly the greatest enemy of regional planning.

Local authorities didn't have much to say about spatial planning. The housing areas of the regional plans had to be designed and that was about it. For housing the Microdistrict (8.000 dwellings each) was the ideal opportunity to build the collective society of the former Soviet Union. In these housing districts the dwellings and the facilities were combined and by making huge housing blocks the areas were also ideal from a construction- and buildingtechnology perspective. Infrastructure had an main focus on public transportation due to economical and efficiency reasons.



St. Petersburg (foto MHH. van Dijk)

Physically the housing areas differ from the Western European housing in the sense that individual houses only scarcely have been build. The main building stream was flats and apartments. On the map of a city this is clearly to be seen. But since there is no longer a communist government to control building operation, little shops and private houses grow like crazy and more and more mains of private transportation are occupying the streets. But a lot of people still can't afford a car.

## Conclusion

Because of it's capitalistic economy, England has a serious a lack of public investments and hasn't been able to build any large-scale urban projects. Only by incidents money and space becomes available for major urban projects (e.g. the IRA-bomb in Manchester and the Millennium site in London). Therefore local governments have to convince private investors of the necessity of a plan rather than to impose it on them.

On the other hand we have the former Soviet Union, where the government had so much power that they made all the plans and executed them themselves. Only by basing

everything single on economical motives and an immense bureaucracy this did not always work out.

The Netherlands seems to be a symbioses in both political and planning. The government dictates only the rules of the game and lets others execute them. Economics mainly play a leading roll with the reliability of plans.

Planning is Politics. With globalisation and changing political structures there can be some unexpected opportunities and problems. For example, one of the threats for the former Soviet Union could be the capitalistic ideal in Western Europe: a car for every man. Almost none of the urban area's can handle that amount of mobility and parked cars.

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