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Design for Shrinkage

Generating New Opportunities and Wealth¹

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Analyzing trends show that the population in the Netherlands is growing until 2040 (16,7>17,8 million). However over the past two decades the number of residents in the peripheral regions decreased and this decline continues. Out-migration and aging go together: less people, less households, youngsters leaving for the big city never to return, and the old and less educated people lagging behind as well as the poor ones, isolated and stuck. Primary neighbourhood facilities, shops and schools close down. In its wake the peripheral regions also experience economic decline, it speeds up the departure of the able people -they look for a job elsewhere. A shrinking region begets a 'poor image' much to the distress of the local politicians; authorities go through a mourning process of denial first and acceptance in the end. It might take some years before they assess the situation, recognise the new opportunities and start the necessary transformations bearing in mind 'turn a disaster into opportunity'.²

1. Identifying ones opportunities

Decline or shrinking in a region is not the end, on the contrary it can be the beginning of something different: a new élan, a new resilience. For instance it creates new choices: contrasting regions -rural versus metropolitan-, or iconic and rejuvenated landscapes – viz. the German IBA³ Emscher Park in the Ruhr region, or a new economy –viz. the *slow food* economy in Toscana greatly befitting the spatial quality of the region. Or it reconciles a new quality of life: organic growth, a balanced architecture, urban agriculture and *slow living*: 'go *avant-garde* into a slow-village movement'. Energy conservation as part of a *bio based economy*, beneficial for *people* as well as the *planet* and *profit*, makes sense when one has to economise.

Identifying one's opportunities is incredibly important as is sustained and multi-annual community and stakeholders engagement, viz. the German IBA Saxony-Anhalt.⁴ It might take one or more decennia to reinvigorate shrinking or shrunken communities but it's worth the effort as can be seen in the south-east of The Netherlands, the Parkstad Limburg region (Parkstad = Parkcity).

2. History of Parkstad Limburg

Parkstad Limburg embraces the former eastern coalmining district in the south-east of the Netherlands, bordering Germany and Belgium. The landscape shows soft rolling Aeolian-loess hills with originally dispersed farms, castles and hamlets, cut by valleys, brooks and small rivers. For centuries, this rural region was the plaything of foreign powers' strategic interests with nowadays consequences still visible and tangible. The period of coalmining (1900-1965/1975) brought unprecedented prosperity and growth (Facts & Figures, fig. 1), in-migration from all over Europe, authentic mine colonies next to haphazard urban texture and a very intricate and strong social structure –but also dependency on the mine owner (jobs, housing) and the local priest (knowledge).⁵

In spite of the efforts the region did not overcome the economic depression. From the nineties on the situation was further aggravated by a dwindling and ageing population –many of the young and able people leaving, birth-rates low and budgetary constraints tight as less funding flows into the cities budgets. Rebalancing is not yet in sight. People proud to have worked in the mines, the so called 'koelepieten'⁷, lost hope a long time ago.

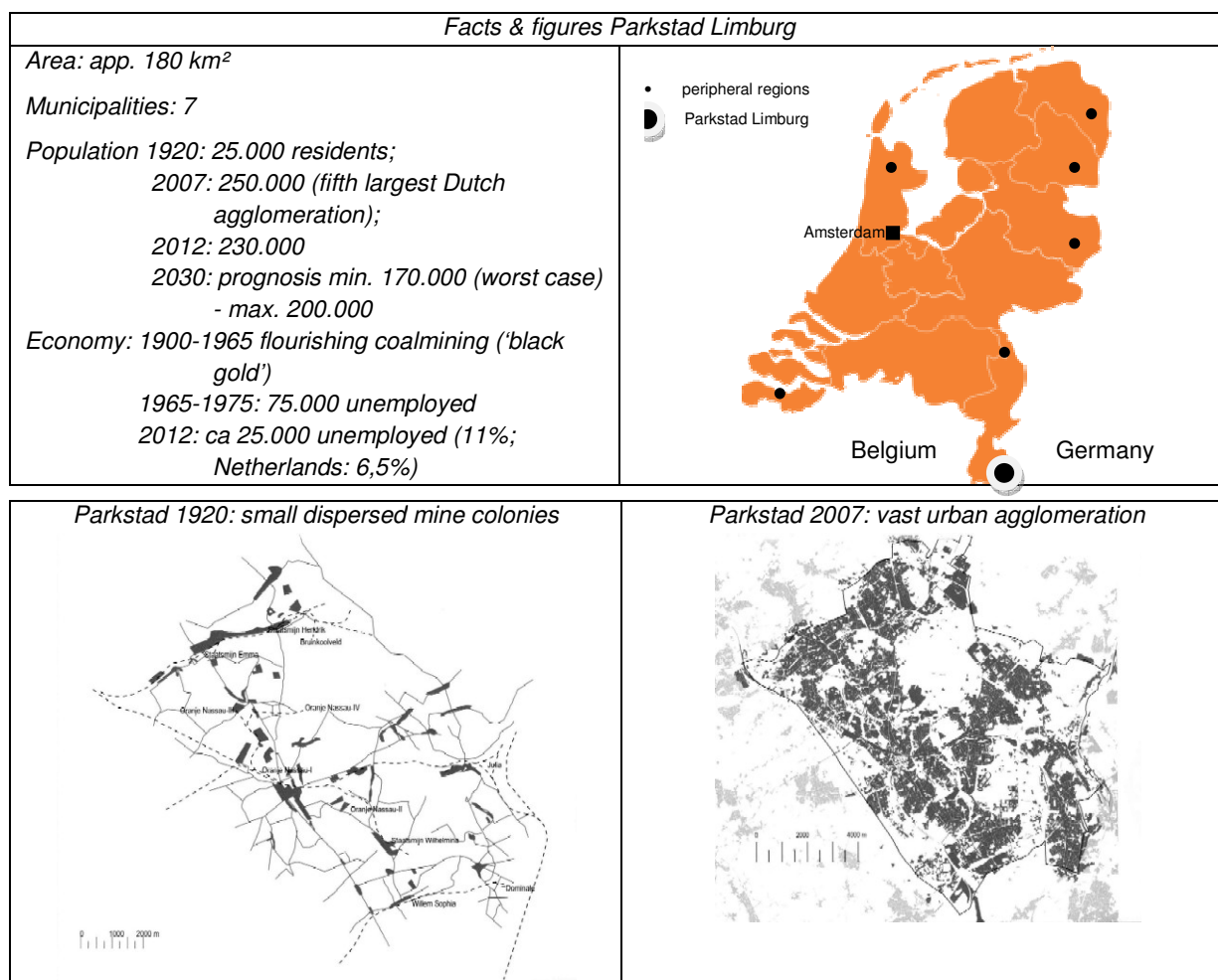


Fig. 1

In 2003 a group of local captains of industry pressed the local politicians for a concerted action: 'There is no more time to lose!'.⁸ December 2005 seven municipalities⁹ decided upon a close co-operation –the Parkstad Limburg region was born: *a coalition of the willing*. Their first aim and foremost overriding objective was to tackle the (bad) economic situation as 'the inhabitants of the region deserve a better perspective and a safe income'. It was closely followed by the identity-mantra 'make use of the inherent qualities of the region' important for the strategies of perception.

However the Parkstad Council had no ready-made solutions available to the Parkstad problems, it was a virtually uncharted territory in The Netherlands. So both strategy and best practices had to be invented from scratch –a massive project.

4. Parkstad Laboratory: ‘what works counts’

The Parkstad region became a ‘laboratory’ creating and testing new strategies, scenarios and policies as well as instruments and toolboxes specifically tailored to this situation of structural changes. Technical surveys were followed by plans and projects, by burden-sharing; piecemeal shared budgets were put together and decided upon etc. Some instruments included so called ‘unorthodox’ measures as the combination of economic decline and a shrinking population had to be tackled in unconventional ways -sometimes by disobeying official rules... As was said ‘success is more important than democratic legitimacy. –what works counts’.¹⁰

5. Reinventing *good governance*: consensus, participation & mental switch

It was evident that technical fixes alone were not enough. The commitment and cooperation between seven autonomous municipalities deeply divided by historic events and set apart by the imminent threat of a municipal fusion was essential. Granting, giving and taking, became a *condition sine qua non*. Much time was needed to avoid falling prey to hurried, political posturing as well as the destructive Calimero effect between the one big city (Heerlen) and six smaller ones.

The different working constellations and alliances with the business community and the civic institutions also required a boost in mutual confidence and a change in the culture of communication & public relations as well as in power-sharing: who is taking the lead, who decides. Many multi-coloured coalitions and alliances were build, codes of conduct for all sides developed, old frictions set aside. More than once mediation of conflicts and values was needed.

A third important group were the residents, many weary by too long a period without a perspective. Quite a few families had a record of three generations stuck to unemployment benefits, an antidote for one’s sense of self-worth. The objective ‘to make people want to act’ (mental switch) was not achieved itself and the self-motivation was not implemented itself. A wakeup call became urgent and was heralded by the Parkstad Council in 2011 by the kick off of an IBA. This IBA, like the Sachsen-Anhalt one, focuses on energising the citizens in Parkstad to create entrepreneurship (jobs), ambition, self-confidence and innovative ideas that give an impulse to the quality of living and working in the Parkstad region. People are addressed as potential stakeholders and not just as those affected by planning -new forms of cooperation and new stakeholder alliances are indispensable, especially in informal planning, which is typical of urban redevelopment.¹¹

The challenge of commitment and cooperation between all parties was a fundamental one, in one word ‘reinventing’ *good governance*.

6. Vision and strategy

The awareness grew that a comprehensive and integrated vision and strategy was needed encompassing employment, housing, infrastructure, amenities, retail and leisure etc. as the multifaceted decline affected all sectors. All programmes were in need of a coherent adaptation, transformation and restructuring as well honouring the paramount decision of the

Parkstad Council to choose quality of life and strengthening the identity of the region and its selling points, the beautiful landscape/nature, historic and authentic mine colonies etc.¹² A strategic spatial –economic perspective had to bond all upcoming ideas and initiatives. The Parkstad Council knew it would take time to implement such a perspective –maybe decades. So they didn't want a rigid template ('blueprint') probably out-dated within a short period but asked for a set of principles ('conscience') to guide future opportunities and dynamics. It needed small steps not cast in stone and useful for both the fat years and lean years ahead. The Council also requested some freedom for the individual municipalities to act on the local level. It was understood that the large and complicated regional projects needed a joint effort. A small professional and high quality regional office (Parkstad bureau) was set up to guide and coordinate the inter-municipal working groups, to prepare the policy and decision-making for both the Parkstad Council and the municipal Councils and act upon it.

7. Concerted action, major tasks and challenges

In a concerted action the initial situation of the region was thoroughly explored: its major assets, problems, alternative solutions, distribution of tasks and its challenges as well as opportunities regarding economy, spatial planning, housing, quality of life, nature and landscape, cultural heritage, etc. Along the way a myriad of questions appeared: what (limited) resources do we have, what investments are crucial to ensure the resilience of the region and its inhabitants, what should be implemented first (priorities, multiplier effects) and what follows and who can invest, when and how much? Where do authorities come in (top down or as facilitators?), where do trade and industry and their CEO's take the initiative, where the historically social-sturdy local communities and their citizen-stakeholders (bottom up movement).

The connection with nearby (rival) cities like Maastricht and the German and Belgium regions too had to be dealt with: Parkstad is not an island, tuning in with nearby big agglomerations like German Aachen (*Städteregion*, 800.000 residents) is necessary and can be fruitful. As it is said 'the future of Parkstad is cross border'.¹³

8. Strategic spatial –economic Development Perspective: core themes

In the Development Perspective the spatial – economic strategy for the region was explicated into so called pillars (icons fig. 2) and principles of restructuring (icons fig. 3).

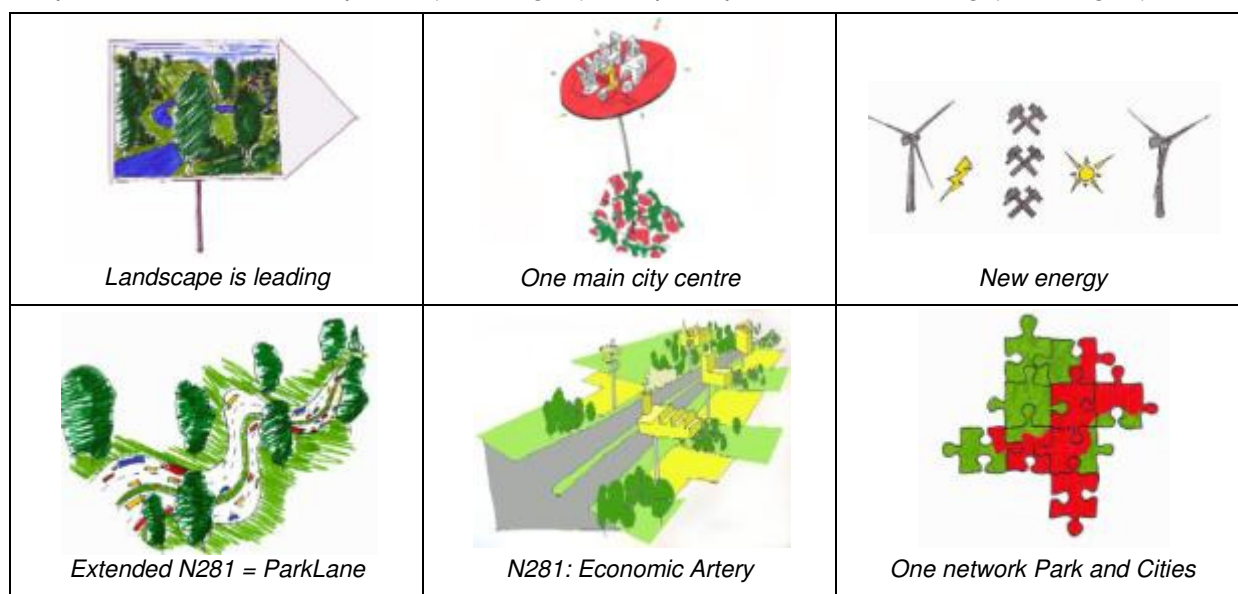


Fig.2: Pillars

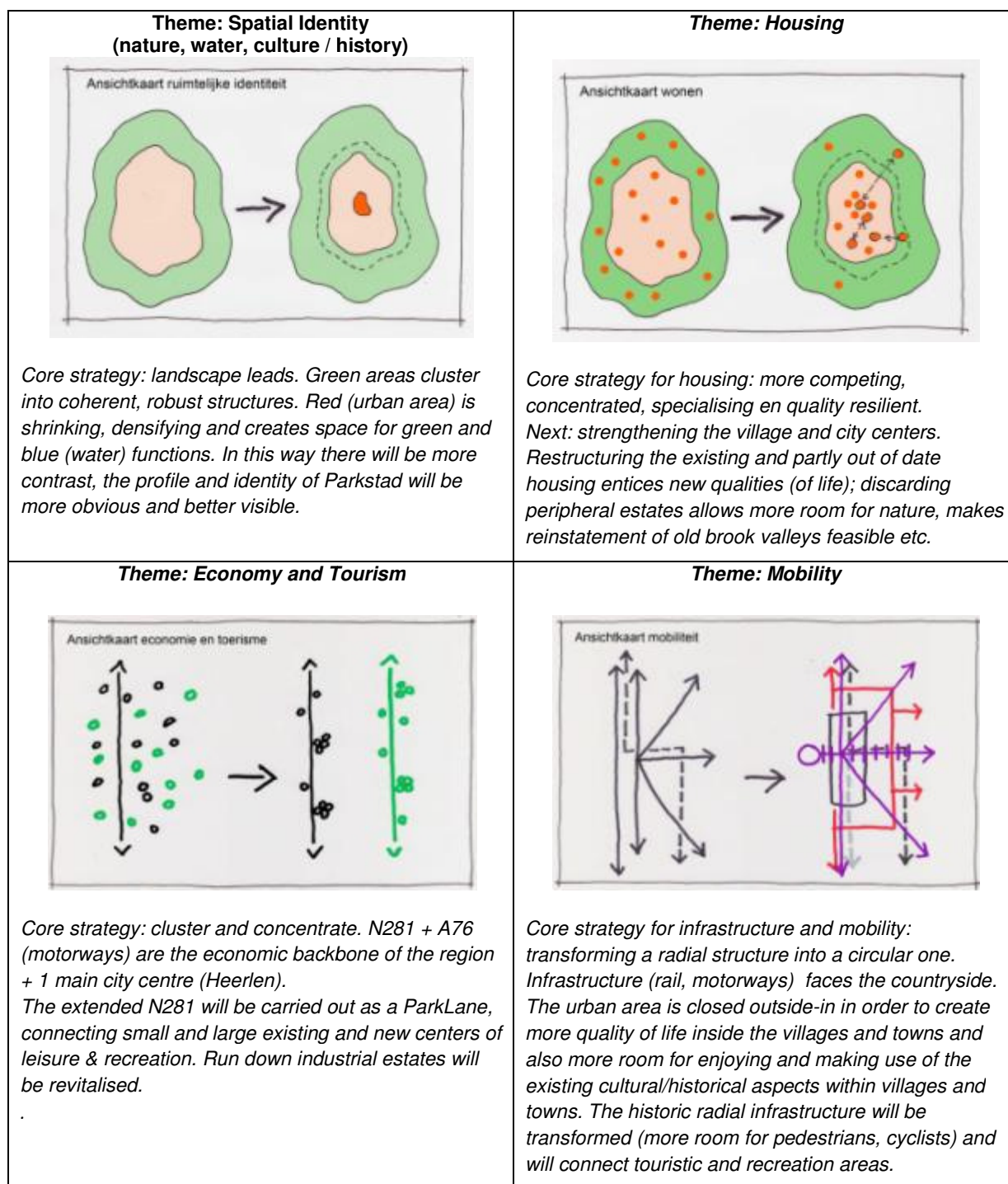


Fig. 3: Principles of restructuring

Pillars and principles are the 'conscience', all future initiatives will be put to the test with these interacting 'doctrines'. Above pillars and principles is the omnipotent umbrella of 'sweet and sour to be evenly shared', i.e. fairly distributing the gains and losses of transformation and willing to make compromises in the process. Shrinking often means redistribution –and redistribution means 'negotiation'.

Note: citizens do understand icons and/or (comic) strips sometimes better than complex maps or tedious long policy reports –so if it helps develop a strong visual language.

Storytelling is another useful instrument as are social media.¹⁴

9. Parkstad on its way

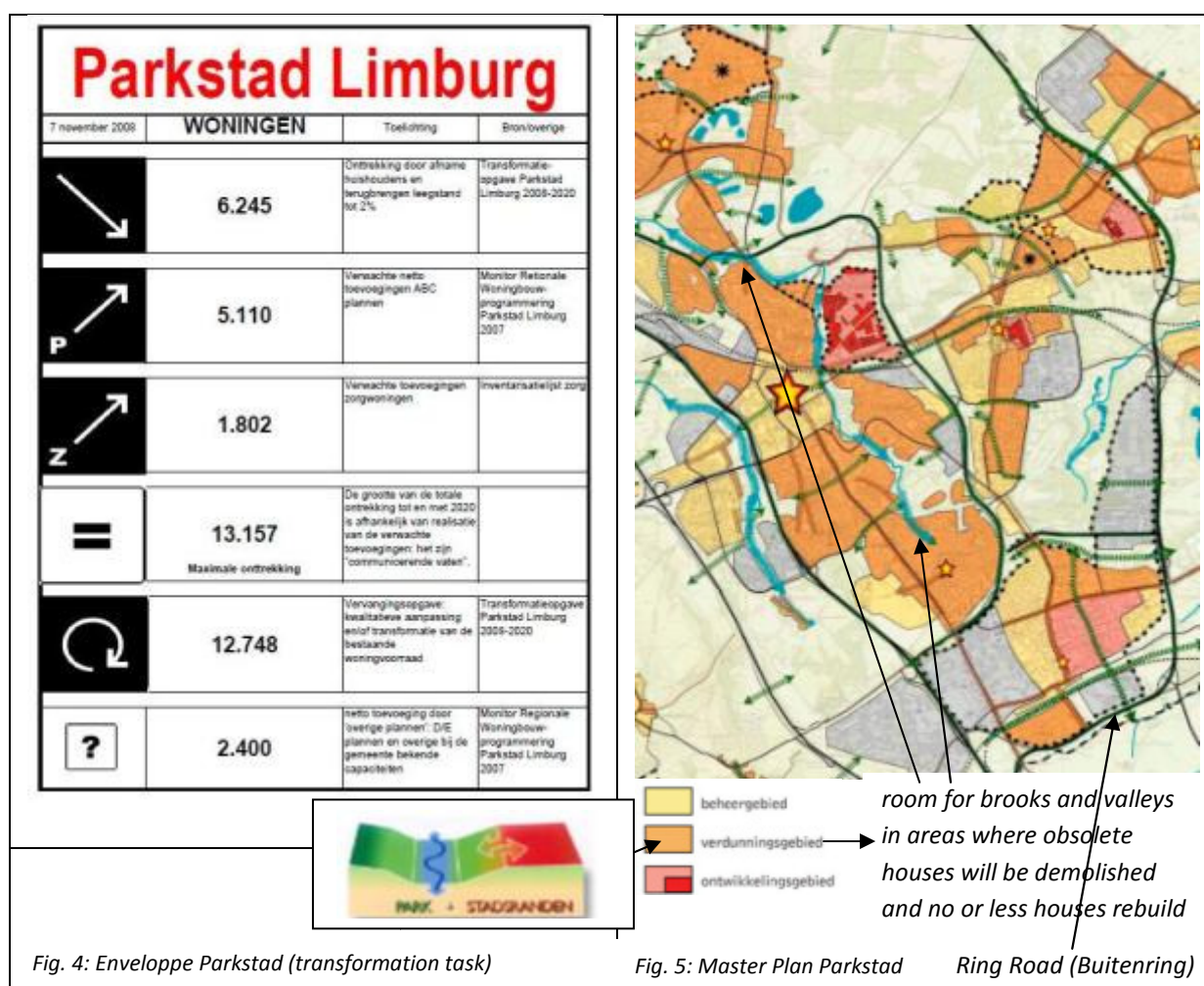
The Development Perspective was laid down in maps, schemes, clarifications and instructions. Connected is a roadmap showing:

- what issues are the responsibility of the local municipalities including a realistic time-table (e.g. small local developments, services & maintenance)? If wanted/needed every municipality can ask for assistance from the regional bureau experts;
- what issues need extensive cooperation between neighbouring municipalities, as well as the help of the experts of the regional bureau (2008: 6 large inter-municipal development projects and restructuring zones)?
- In particular, for which pilot projects is the regional bureau accountable, and the municipalities in assisting and monitoring them (e.g. regional infrastructure –train, motorways, trans-border activities).

Next to the list of projects annual and multi-year programmes coupled with budgets were drafted, to be reviewed yearly.

10. Plans and projects: 2 examples of mutual-gains

Given the nature of this case study only a fraction of the plans and projects the region and its partners developed, tested and made to measure, can be shown. The focus here will be on 2 examples regarding the quality of life and the green identity incorporating the relevant 'pillars' and 'principles'.



Take the case of the many former brooks and ecologically rich valleys/ That past era disappeared in the wake of vast and often ruthless urbanisation robbing the region of its green/blue *genius loci* and identity.

Too much town for too few residents was what a thorough survey and prognosis (2007) showed: a large surplus of houses, many not meeting present standards, as well as a high vacancy rate. The surplus amounted to some 13,000 houses (of a total of some 114,500 [2007])¹⁵ to be earmarked for demolition between 2007-2020 and a mere 6500 new houses were built in that same period (instead of 20,000 new houses foreseen in municipal plans ...).¹⁶ Complicating factor: 30-40% of this obsolete housing stock is private property.

After several heated public debates it was decided that, provided there is enough money available to compensate the owners, the obsolete and non-historic hot-spots would be demolished as they do not meet present standards and often downgrade their neighbourhoods socially, physically and/or financially (lowering values of nearby estates).¹⁷ It follows that if such a neighbourhood coincides with a place where nature and hydrological system are squeezed and dented by past urbanisation, the old bygone green-blue 'connections', brooks and valleys, will be reinstated in full glory and given back their authentic and historic identity (*genius loci*).

The same formula applies for the out of date peripheral housing estates from the nineteen sixties, most property of housing cooperatives: thwarted by high vacancy rates. They would be demolished too and the earth given back to the surrounding landscape and nature (fig. 3 Theme: Housing).

Where buildings are removed, landscape modules are inserted according to the opportunities that arise, gradually generating the building blocks of a future urban landscape. This way the multifaceted desire for a life on the outskirts of town can be realised in inner-city locations.



Caumer Brook



Brunssum heather-covered moors near German border

In the case of the new outer Ring Road (Buitenring) several planning principles were successfully combined creating a cascade effect of added value:

1. building a 'green' Park Lane (fig. 2) deviates the present heavy through traffic from the villages, thus
2. enabling the restoration of the historic, pedestrian friendly profiles of local roads, and
3. giving the citizens more quality of life: less noise, stench, more room for biking, walking and tree planting,

and also:

4. enabling to remove old dilapidated industrial estates on the track of the ParkLane and
5. giving better access to some viable industrial and leisure areas, impetus for new investments,

as well as:

6. creating the opportunity honouring the principle of 'green for red' (according to Dutch EIA) to connect the Parkstad nature reserves with the nearby German national park by calling upon the compensation acres,
7. the result: a vast trans-border nature area more than the sum of its parts.

11. Lessons learned: looking back and looking forward

The closing of the coalmines in 1965-1970 was a horror-scenario for the people of the Parkstad region. The following shrinking of the population, the loss of jobs and the declining economy were severe blows hard to overcome. Every shrinking region will have its own specific story and fitting solutions, nevertheless what can one learn from the Parkstad experience?

- A strong (regional) leader(s) is urgently needed, one who wants to take on this demanding task. It's all about audacity, passion, charisma, optimism and political ingenuity. Even then not everything will be plain sailing but at least things start 'moving' and 'work can be in progress'.
- It is recommended that central government shows compassion from the beginning –a 'wait and see' attitude (or worse 'it's your own fault') will damage citizens' trust.¹⁸
- As for (local) authorities: in periods of growth and prosperity (high tide) 'sharing the abundance' is a less brittle and strife-ridden subject than in times of economic stagnation and decline. A low tide induces 'fighting for the bacon'. Sharing 'sweet and sour' in a low tide period asks a lot from previous autonomous municipalities (as in Parkstad), but cooperation and acting *in unison* is inevitable as there is always the danger of a third party catching the most wanted prey.
- Cooperation, exchanging knowledge and expertise can ease the burden of the workload.¹⁹
- By cooperating and networking, the shrinking towns and villages can accumulate 'borrowed size' and a sizeable amount of 'social capital'.
- Don't wait too long to get the residents activated and involved; authorities need residents' support (pioneers of urban redevelopment) and their self-confidence (social capital).
- Note that citizens understand icons and/or (comic) strips sometimes better than (complex) maps or (tedious long) reports/policies; so it helps to develop a strong visual language and to use social media. Children are very smart in expressing the essence –this raises new generations of understanding as well.
- Best practices are an excellent instrument to show that 'things happen': Yes We Can! One should celebrate these moments beyond the cosy circle of politicians and tech-nerds.
- Leadership and vision, self-confidence and a 'can do' attitude are of utmost importance.
- The aspect of 'urgency' and 'focus' on matching problems with solutions in a fragile situation are important. As is the 'framing of the message', it is essential to get residents energised and involved in their own bright future.²⁰
- Seeking to manage development without growth requires flexible concepts and dynamic implementation strategies, if needed small steps not cast in stone.

And last but not least: the structural tuning of complex problems in a long timeframe asks for steady and long term cooperation. That cooperation can be a happy marriage if it's *con amore*. Things then can happen. A painful foot-dragging relation has less output. Nobody wants to be part of a tragedy, everybody wants to father a success!

Notes

¹ The case study is based on the article 'Regionale strategieën Parkstad Limburg: een nieuwe toekomst!' by HelenaChaja Heyning et al. (2007). In 2007 the author was in charge of the Parkstad Limburg 'Infrastructure & Regional Planning' programme and task force.

² Bloomberg M. (mayor New York) (June 11, 2013), The City's Long-Term Plan to Prepare for the Impacts of Climate Change

³ IBA: Internationale BauAusstellung (International Building Exhibition)

⁴ International Building Exhibition Urban Redevelopment Saxony-Anhalt (2010), Less Is Future: 19 Cities – 19 Themes.

⁵ There is an old saying of the local priest to the owner of the coalmine: 'If you keep them poor I'll keep them ignorant'.

⁶ Perspectievennota voor Zuid Limburg (1977), European Fund for Regional Development.

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A group of proud 'koelepieten'

⁸ Kerngroep Structuurvisie Parkstad Limburg (2003), Op hete kolen – De beloftes voor 2030.

⁹ Brunssum, Heerlen, Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Onderbanken, Simpelveld, Voerendaal –to be followed by Nuth.

¹⁰ Gresel, T. (mayor Heerlen) (2007), Staatscourant August 3d 2007.

¹¹ International Building Exhibition Urban Redevelopment Saxony-Anhalt (2010), Less Is Future: 19 Cities – 19 Themes. Meanwhile the IBA Parkstad Limburg applies for 3 themes: FlexibleCity, EnergyCity and RecycleCity.

¹² TAB Taken Landschapsplanning bv + afa architecturfabrik-aachen Bisscheroux Architect b.i. (2004), Identiteit van Parkstad Limburg.

¹³ Commissie Hermans (2007), De toekomst van Limburg ligt over de grens.

¹⁴ Every day the Amsterdam City Lab sends a promising message to its followers: innovative ideas, things to be seen, etc.

¹⁵ E,til (2009), Sociaal-economische doelgroep en kernvoorraad Parkstad Limburg.

¹⁶ As can be expected numbers change over the years: a recent prognosis (Stec [2013], Financiële arrangementen voor de demografische transitie) shows that 20.000 houses have to be demolished in the period 2013-2030 as the population will shrink 15%.

¹⁷ A draft decision is being prepared (2013): building a new home has to be matched by pulling down an obsolete one.

¹⁸ Note: compassion can be manifold, f.e. 'help in the laboratory', specific legislation rising the occasion or a financial contribution ('seed money')/subsidy to overcome the situation and/or create a multiplier effect. In the period 1970-1990 there were all kinds of state subsidies for urban renewal and regeneration but not for housing demolition in shrinking regions.

¹⁹ The Parkstad bureau and its interdisciplinary work- and decision groups in which civil servants, aldermen of all municipalities and sometimes private enterprises participate, are very effective.

²⁰ See also the heralding in 2011 of the IBA Parkstad Limburg.