

Republic of Images

The Political Agency of Design in Regional Planning

Since the 1980s, Dutch spatial planning practice has seen a growing interest for plan making at regional level. This revival came as a response to the predominantly process-oriented planning attitudes of the preceding decades, and prompted a renewed attention among both planners and policymakers for the projective and prospective dimensions of planning. Early examples of this period include initiatives such as the design manifestations of *AIR Rotterdam* (1982-1999), the *Eo Wijers* design competition (1983-to date) and *Netherlands Now as Design* (1987). All of which were initiated from within planning practice and demonstrated a distinct interest for design-based approaches in regional plan making.

From a disciplinary point of view, the projects of the 1980s and 1990s are considered to have rekindled a contextual sensibility in planning, drawing attention back to content rather than to procedure (De Jonge, 2009). As a consequence, many projects of the period are, to date, being credited for their visionary power, as well as their ability to channel ‘societal will’ into comprehensive planning schemes (Salewski, 2012).

Around the turn of the century, a new wave of regional designs emerged. Within this ‘second generation’ of regional plans, focus shifted from engaging the public in the planning process through the use of provoking visions and shared imagery, to mobilizing this visual repertoire as a means to politically recharge the activity of planning itself and subsequently (re)legitimize the role of design expertise. Given the complex spatial and institutional conditions of today’s urbanized regions, this meant that expectations with regard to regional design soared. Not only were designs expected to develop integrating concepts to deal with multi-layered territorial issues and hybrid peri-urban landscapes, it was also anticipated that design – as a communicative tool – could negotiate, or even transcend, conflicting interests, raise collective awareness, and organize the institutional capacity to get things done.

Objectives and Methodology

The goal of this research has been to assess the capacity of design in the light of these expectations, by empirically and theoretically investigating the roles designs take on within contemporary regional development projects in The Netherlands. In doing so, the study simultaneously addresses three areas of ongoing transition (i.e. city, government, urbanism) and explores a design-based approach in response to the challenges of regional development as a co-production of different public sections and administrative tiers. More particularly, the research aims to analyse the performance of design in a multi-actor setting, and develop a reflective understanding of design's agency from a political perspective.

The empirical basis of the research consists of a cross-section of Dutch regional designs from the period 2000-2010. This sample was constructed through case and literature studies, as well as interviews with various groups of experts, i.e. planners, promoters and policymakers. Through qualitative plan analyses a series of attributes was established to describe the roles and modalities designs take on in (various phases of) the plan making process. Subsequently, this categorization was validated during expert meetings with practitioners from the field (Meijsmans & De Zwart, 2010). After validation, four thematic threads remained, each of which was then further scrutinized in three respective case studies.

Results: Four Modes of Operation

The comparative case study shows that, while acknowledging the multitude of forces at play in spatial development processes, it is possible to pinpoint several instances in which designs, through their material presence, shape the course of planning trajectories. These interactions, which are associated with particular visual registers, can be summarized as four potential modes of operation:

Dispositioning

This is the role of design in setting the framework for planning activity. It includes the demarcation of the site and the representation of the territory, the framing of issues, the inclusion and exclusion of actors, as well as the legitimatization of spatial claims.

Within the empirical body of this research this role is exemplified by the case of the *Koerskaarten* (course maps) commissioned in 2007 by the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. The document in question illustrates how maps, as visual implements, support the policymaking process, and how different political goals are served by different representations of the territory. Juxtaposing, for instance, the expressive *Icoonkaart* (iconic map) with the quasi-neural base map, it becomes clear that every cartographic visualization revises its subject matter, and that consequentially the act of mapping itself is a central part of the shaping of the region.

Propositioning

This mode refers to the power of design to act as a visionary instrument, its ability to generate persuasive or provoking images, as well as its capacity to influence public debate by putting forward alternate visions of the future.

Upon examination of the Waterland case, discussed in Chapter 3, it becomes clear that whenever a design proposes a vision of the future, this vision is laden with ideological subtext. This political meaning can be explicit or implied, depending on the context of the planning brief, and may be more or less controversial depending on the goal to be achieved. In the case of scenario studies, the statement is usually overt, and may even be considered instrumental, as it sets the playing field for political debate. In other cases, such as the Waterland plans, there is a more subtle mechanism at work. Here, rather than putting forward a radical agenda, each of the designs represents an underlying institutional framework. The design acts as a vehicle to reinforce this framework – and the distribution of authority, means and power it presumes – in favour of the vision being promoted.

Problematizing

Design's third mode of operation is its ability to critically investigate the territory and question underlying assumptions. This includes its potential to re-frame issues, to (re)direct attention, to prioritize and to set agendas.

Illustrative of this problematizing function is the case of the IJmeer design studio, which was initiated by the municipality of Almere in 2003 as part of a westward expansion plan. By commissioning the design of a bridge between the shores of Amsterdam and Almere, the council of Almere not only successfully induced the city of Amsterdam to rethink its stance on cooperation with its neighbour, it also succeeded in allowing a new political discussion to develop around the future of the area. In fact, it may be argued that the actual realization of any works by the lake from the outset had been secondary to the larger goal of reframing the debate about the IJmeer region. Both the context in which the design was developed (i.e. the design studio), as well as the design itself (the bridge as a visual and conceptual metaphor) played a crucial part in this threefold persuasive operation.

Assembling

In addition to disposing, proposing and problematizing, a design may also act as a 'business case'. In doing so, the design invites actors to partake in a prospective development by expressing opportunities, earning potential and common interests. It may set the 'rules of engagement' between the stakeholders, providing tools for managing the process and monitoring results.

This latter function has become increasingly conspicuous over the last couple of years. Illustrative of this development has been the transformation of the Eo Wijers design competition. Started out as an initiative to celebrate the visionary power of design, the Eo Wijers foundation in 2005 redirected its attention to the issue of execution. Rather than weighing the visionary quality of the proposals, the organization encouraged designers to boost the feasibility of their plans by actively engaging with

prospective stakeholders. As a result, the design competition developed into an incubator for project-based regional planning. Within this particular genre of plans, design functions as the ‘administration of proof’ for a viable business case.

The point of this categorization is not to claim that any of these four modalities has a static relation with a certain form of design or a particular planning phase, nor that it serves as a fixed set of attributes to evaluate every interplay between a design and its environment. Instead, what the research findings show is that there are several ways in which a design may interact with the situation, and that each of these interactions can be linked to existing discourses within the urbanism theory (i.e. cartography, scenario planning, research-by-design, or the urban project). Together, the modes constitute a tentative typology of the agency of design in contemporary regional planning; they describe the various ways in which a design may act upon a situation, generating new insights, new meanings or new ideas.

Conclusion and Theoretical Reflection

The empirical inquiry is paralleled by the development of a theoretical argument. This argument is rooted in a pragmatist intellectual tradition and draws on communicative planning theory (e.g. Healey, 2006), theories of social practice (e.g. Giddens, 1984), as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS). At the heart of this line of reasoning lies the hypothesis that rather than treating plans as the negotiated outcome of a deliberative (policy) process, they can be better understood as performative objects. As the tentative typology that was constructed throughout the case studies suggest, this agency may take different forms depending on the situation and the actors involved. It will also likely develop as the context of the design changes.

Building on Bruno Latour's interpretation of Actor-Network-Theory, we may conceive a regional design as an *actant* following a political trajectory. An actant that, in the course of this trajectory, influences other actants, altering beliefs about the region and the issues it represents. Such a framework, in which regional designs are part of the construction of Latourian 'objects of concern', may not only help to scientifically determine how design enables issues to become political (Latour, 2005), it also opens up the possibility to rethink the societal relevance of design practice and design expertise. Most significantly, it appears that regional design, from both a historical and a practical viewpoint, is best equipped when addressing issues that arise from an increasing tension between the city and its territory. It is thanks to this particular disposition that regional design may well be particularly suited for dealing with the collective ecological and social challenges of our time.