

# leisure landscape

Out of a hopefully well-intended wish to preserve the landscape, spatial planning in the Netherlands has been rather defensive in nature the last few decades. It concerns a spatial planning system that dictates where to build and where not. This red contoured way of thinking has led to the adoption of defensive strategies, where each time something new had to be built; this ultimately led to sacrifice of the least vulnerable or the least visible area on the outskirts of a city or village to housing construction, business activity or recreation. It was a mindset that assumed that to build something new is wrong in definition and should therefore be prevented. And if it could not be avoided, it had to be done in a place where it did the least harm, preferably concealed from view.

In the rural area, the main issue of the discussion was developments in villages and village outskirts. Although constructions took place in a compact manner, close to the village core, it could not be prevented that it was done in a way that did not fit the village atmosphere. Open space, residual areas, frayed edges and other empty spaces so characteristic of the village were filled up. Planned expansions with standard solutions as well as dreams of private individuals, often realized on plots that are too small, form the new outskirts of the village. It is not surprising that, thus constrained by rigid policy frameworks, recent village expansions added little to no spatial quality to both the village and the landscape.

Also socio-economically, something peculiar happened. With the vanishing of the heretofore inseparable bond between the village and the surrounding agricultural country land, the close relationships between inhabitants disappear as well. The obligatory *noaberschap* is replaced by friendly, open-ended relationships between neighbors. Like extras on a film set, new and old inhabitants live in a village that is, due to new building, less and less recognizable as such.

Hopefully, these village developments contributed, at the very least, to preservation of the landscape elsewhere, in the green counter mold of the red contours. But this, too, is still questionable. Even the contour-guided policy could not prevent the occurrence of all kind of developments in the rural area that were perhaps economically desirable or even indispensable, but generally detract from the spatial or cultural historical quality of the landscape. In this way, recreation grounds that are not labeled as 'red' are now covering surfaces comparable to that of the old villages while in the meantime practicing farmers are extending their farmyards to small industrial areas.

## new policy

In response to the planned village expansions, work is currently being done on the development of strategies that are based on the original cultivation methods and settlement patterns. Much more than before, this strategy allows a respond to the specific qualities of the place and, possibly, initiatives of the villagers. But however sensibly embedded in the existing structure of the village, these strategies, too, are finite in their absorptive capacity. When the village outskirts are reached and the open spaces are filled, while hardly any quality is

added, it is time to change course and maybe develop new, organically grown settlement patterns. Independent of those villages, in and together with the landscape.

After years of defensive spatial planning, *Nota Ruimte* opens the door to building in rural areas. Beside nature development and agriculture, living in the landscape is now allowed as well. This decreases the burden on the villages and creates an opportunity for new connections between living, nature development and agricultural activity. However, there is a risk that with pure consumption of the landscape the most valuable areas are developed first, leading to a decreased accessibility of these areas and, again, the addition of few new qualities. Which conditions are needed to protect the Dutch landscape from becoming a collection of private gardens? Is there a next colonization of the landscape possible, with an impact equal to that of the first cultivation? A colonization, that does not only add a new layer of meaning to the landscape, but also discloses the landscapes' lost history?

### **New cultivation**

Supported by demographic projections for the next decades that show stagnation and shrinkage rather than growth of villages, it seems the time of urbanization of villages has passed. While the demand for new build in the villages stagnates, there are several on-going developments in the field of living in the rural area.

Firstly, there is a growing group of people who have the possibility of permanent recreational living. The group comprises both vital elderly that leave town to 'drentenieren', meaning to live in the province of Drente, and people with a profession that, due to technological developments, can basically be practiced anywhere. Secondly, the group of second home owners in Europe is steadily growing. In Denmark, the country in Western Europe with the highest number of second homes, more than 50 percent of the population has a second home at their disposal. The Netherlands still has the relatively lowest number of second homes. However, this is changing rapidly. Recent research shows that almost 300.000 households consider purchasing a second home in the next ten years. They form the group of people who have enough savings and, in times of economic decline, prefer the stability of a second home to holidays abroad. While visitor numbers of bungalow parks are declining (an *all-inclusive* week in Turkey is less expensive than a week to the Dutch Wadden Sea Island Schiermonnikoog), second home ownership increases rapidly. Because of cheap flight tickets and low land and house prices in Southern and Eastern Europe, many will decide to carry out their building plans abroad. However, a significant proportion of second homes are likely to be built in the 'leisure landscape' of the Northern Netherlands. In this, the difference between permanent and temporary residence slowly becomes less clear. For many, the second home became the first. Are these developments an opportunity or more of a threat? Are questions on temporal or permanent residence, on living, working or recreation still relevant, or should we rather concentrate on how the foregoing might enrich the landscape?

These developments will pose a threat especially then, when they are left to fate and at best only moderately regulated by means of a restrictive policy. This will come at the expense of spatial and cultural-historical value, without offering

anything in return. Directions, with red-green strategies of an offensive rather than defensive nature, offers opportunities to on one hand resolve existing problems and on the other hand sustainably add new collective qualities to the landscape. In other words, the construction of recreational houses used as a contemporary method of cultivation in order to increase the quality, readability and accessibility of the public landscape.