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Leisuregarden or: the *recreation* of the landscape

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Aim

Increasingly town and country planning is determined by the dynamics of leisure which not only seem to overpower the once spatially dominating domains of housing and work, but at the same time undermine the geometry of city and countryside. Theme and holiday parks, zoo's, health resorts or a subtropical swimming paradise, luxurious marina's, beaches, sports centres, golf courses and the historical town centre, but also multiplexes, discotheques, indoor ski-pistes, furniture boulevards, shopping malls, garden centres and even a nature reserve, an agricultural camp site or an abandoned industrial complex. An increasing share of the territory is found within the sphere of influence of recreation and tourism. More and more, parts of the territory turn out to be leisure environments. This transformation of the landscape has welcomed a growing share of attention from a socio-economic as well as from a political perspective. However, from a spatial point of view, this *recreation* of the landscape has been, up till now, largely underexposed.

The aim of the research in question is to fill this blind spot by studying the impact of leisure on the spatial planning of the territory and the consequences for both architecture and urbanism. In short: the research aims at revealing new urban manners with a contemporary spatial condition by a close reading of the recreational landscape that will, by literally mapping, lay bare both its problems but above all its potentialities.

Methods

This contemporary spatial condition, which has come into being due to a growing importance of leisure on town and country planning, is inscribed in the territory. However, the territory is not a *tabula rasa*, but it contains the traces of preceding era's and their accompanying spatial conditions. So, over and over again, distinct conditions scratched their tracks, in different tempi and with alternating force, onto the territory. In spite of that the territory is, certainly in comparison with the dynamics of leisure, changing very slowly. Metaphorically speaking we can consider the territory as a stage upon which distinct characters, in this era leisure, not only play there parts, but simultaneously leave their traces. Therefore a close reading of the contemporary territory and its traces from previous era's can reveal the problems and the potentialities of this new, leisure related, spatial condition, but also serve as a starting point for future developments. Developments that surpasses the old paradigm of a compact city surrounded by an idyllic countryside to justify processes that, in a non-hierarchical territory, are already, though latent, present.

“Rather than creating maps which risk imposing approximate limits on the area of a city on the basis of some historical or juridical simulacrum, it is preferable to discern the varying degrees of urbanity in a given territory by sweeping through it with a precise gaze (...), constructing longitudinal sections of the inhabited territory and then dealing with this different ‘strips’ of

space.” Following Stefano Boeri the subject of the investigation is restricted to a sample of the territory where the impact of leisure, causing a new spatial condition, is most manifest: amidst a concentration of various cities and leisure activities. Insight in this territorial sample will be achieved by combining material coming from historical maps, aerial photographs and (regional) archives, from other relevant sources like books, policy documents, governmental reports and articles, discussions with key figures, secondary analysis of existing data files, but also from (regional) novels and paintings, postcards and even promotion campaigns and ad's. By *mapping* this material insight will be gained that reveal, but even offer new urban manners with the contemporary spatial condition wherein city and countryside have dissolved into a diffuse, heterogeneous and hybrid territory.

Progress

To gain insight in the impact of leisure and the resulting new spatial condition it is essential to study a territorial sample which possesses the aforementioned characteristics: a concentration of various cities and leisure activities. The network-city of Brabant, the urban region surrounding Breda, Tilburg, 's-Hertogenbosch, Eindhoven and Helmond is such a territorial sample. A pure urban sprawl without a dominating city, a great amount of countryside amidst a diffuse urbanisation so an equal match could be played between urbanity and rusticity, an extensive infrastructural network that has crossed this region of old making almost every location a potential development area, and, above all, distinct leisure activities with a strictly local to an even international attraction, form the phenomena of this region. An unprejudiced description, a new interpretation, and finally mapping the phenomena in this particular territorial sample results in a better understanding of a contemporary spatial condition. A spatial condition which is, however, not restricted to the network-city of Brabant, but happen all over Europe.

Results

The contemporary spatial condition has come into being under the combined influence of related phenomena: an ever-growing mobility, an increase in prosperity, a stagnating or even decreasing amount of free time and a continuing process of privatisation and commercialisation. Independent of city and countryside, new unambiguous, thematic, clean, heavily guarded and mainly artificial leisure environments have sprung up which are cut loose from their immediate surrounding area: the holiday park, a theme park, a multiplex cinema, a shopping mall, a sports centre, but also a historical town centre, a nature reserve and a furniture boulevard. A struggle is being carried out for the consumer with great purchasing-power. In this struggle the significance of both city and countryside is increasingly reduced to equivalent sources of consumer experiences. In other words: in the contemporary spatial condition urbanity and rusticity are commodified.

Within the recreational landscape we can distinguish three independent, neither sequential nor improving, types of leisure environments. The three types can have, influenced by social, economical or political circumstances, common as much as contradictory characteristics. The first type is the *instant leisure environment*. This type of environment is especially constructed for the benefit of leisure; safeguarded against any form of production and created solitary for the satisfaction of consumer needs and desires. Probably the first environments solitary created for the benefit of leisure are country estates. In the seventeenth century wealthy citizens built their private paradise in uncultivated rural areas. Their paradise served as an escape from daily life. An escape which spatially manifested itself in an environment designed according to the latest fashion. Country estates manifest themselves as autonomous islands in an archipelago, as an artificial Garden of Eden amidst an unspoiled nature.

Zoo's, theme and holiday parks, camp sites, but also multiplexes, indoor ski-pistes, skating rinks and golf courses are modern expressions of the country estate. All of a sudden they emerge in the territory, mostly prefabricated and certainly footloose.

A second type we can distinguish is the *historical leisure environment*. These environments are in possession of a historical or cultural identity. They can be found within the domain of leisure of old, but their manifestation as leisure environments is often the result of a well-considered promotion and sometimes even a reconstruction of cultural inheritance. Contrary to instant leisure environments and their absence of a local population or a workforce solitarily bound to recreational activities, historical leisure environments are entwined with the architectural and cultural fabric of the territory; pleasure-seekers are guests amongst local inhabitants and/or employees unattached to leisure activities. However, the moment when the common use of religious objects, rural tableau's or inner city-structures is mixed with a recreational use, the significance of these environments changes, even if they kept up the same historical configuration.

The last type distinguished is the *transformed leisure environment*. Influenced by political, economical or cultural processes certain environments containing an amalgam of leisure activities are transformed so that they, in a process of uneven development, withdraw from their immediate context. An attempt has been made, by means of an intensification, diversification and expansion of the leisure environment, to convert an accidental visit into a determined choice of pleasure. In nature reserves we find an extension of bicycle and hiking trails, an expansion of camp sites and holiday parks to increase the nights spent, congress centres to please the business sector, and the appearance of many restaurants in or in close vicinity of these natural environments. Sport facilities like soccer and hockey fields or tennis courts are increased with sauna's, climbing halls, squash courts, cart centres or indoor ski-pistes. Existing facilities like swimming pools are reconstructed into a subtropical swimming paradise and covered to guarantee, independent of weather conditions, their practical value. Next to nature reserves and sport enclaves, functional harbours are transformed into luxurious marina's and different museums join forces to become a *museummile*. It may be stated that under the combined influence of political, economical or social developments and a specific attention, environments withdraw from their immediate surrounding area in favour of a manifestation on a regional, national or even international scale.

The question is if a distinction in, and finally a mapping of, three types of independent leisure environments is productive to gain insight in the contemporary spatial condition. It is truly problematic that no clear understanding is available of these environments which make up an increasing part of the territory. For the time being it seems as if we can only speak of this phenomenon in negative terms. On the one hand this has to do with the standard scheme of a compact city versus an idyllic countryside which guides our spatial thinking, wherein more hybrid forms of urbanity/rurality do not fit. On the other hand until now there is a lack of specific design proposals for the contemporary spatial condition. It is still insufficiently clear what the potentialities of this new spatial condition are, how to use them and which strategies can be developed. As explained above leisure is an outstanding phenomenon which surpasses the traditional distinction between city and countryside and therefore it is valuable to study its impact on the territory and to explore the significance for a feasible understanding of the contemporary spatial condition.

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