Kneedbaar landschap, kneedbaar volk. De heroïsche jaren van de ruilverkavelingen in Nederland
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2000

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 24-09-2020
After the Second World War, the Dutch agricultural landscape underwent a drastic metamorphosis. Small parcels were merged and levelled, ditches were filled in or deepened, meandering streams were straightened, agricultural roads were constructed, widened and hardened, farms shifted and reconstructed, and farmyards, roads and numerous other spots replanted. The instrument par excellence for this spatial and scenic transformation was land consolidation, a tool that was deliberately applied on a large scale after 1945 to modernise Dutch agriculture and to elevate it to a higher level of production. Within a fairly short period, this process of reorganisation evolved from a purely agricultural development matter into a sweeping programme for the total modernisation of the countryside. To cope with the social and mental adjustment of the agrarian population, the land consolidation was extended with the concept of regional improvement.

It can be argued that the productive use of the agricultural landscape acquired a planned and technological character by means of a conscious government policy based on the idea of a society that could be constructed. Both literally and figuratively, it served as the basis for the advancement of Dutch society.

This book deals in depth with the way in which these radical physical and social changes took place, the political constellations and the economic conditions that governed them, the actors, resources and social forces that played a role, and the spatial, scenic and social consequences that followed.

In the revival of the Dutch economy after the Second World War, total attention was devoted to the reconstruction of the domestic production system, allied to wage and social policies. The development of agriculture was of essential importance here, in terms of both the domestic food production and the export of products that would ensure the foreign exchange necessary for the recovery. Drastic measures were required. As a result of the international crisis in the thirties that brought massive unemployment, and the predominantly small-scale and labour-intensive character of Dutch agriculture, the sector lagged behind competitors such as the United Kingdom, Argentina, and North America. The Minister of Agriculture S.L. Mansholt (Partij van de Arbeid - the Dutch Labour Party - later the EC Commissioner for Agriculture) developed a policy geared towards an increase in production, a decrease in cost prices, and intensification of agriculture by means of mechanisation and rationalisation. This conformed to general aspiration to realise, in an economic framework, an 'industrial development of the nation', which was given shape in a policy attuned to the industrialisation of rural areas already suffering from large-scale unemployment or of areas where redundancy threatened to occur. Thus, the modernisation of agriculture, which assumed a reduction of manpower in this sector, was linked to a policy for stimulating the creation of new jobs. The Marshall Aid plan offered by the USA brought the (financial) opportunity to realise these intentions.

The support of farmers' and agricultural workers' organisations, whose leaders often maintained close relations with political representatives of (mainly confessional) political parties in the two Houses of the Dutch Parliament, was of fundamental significance to the implementation of the agricultural policy. In its content, it was supported by knowledge centres such as the Landbouwhogeschool (Agricultural College, later the Agricultural University) in Wageningen and the Agriculture Economic Institute, while the State Agricultural Information Department, with its own scientific section, formed an essential link in the contact with the target group, the farming population. The founding of the European Community (1958), which gave rise to new export opportunities, also gave an impulse to the development of agriculture.

The intended increase in agricultural production level required a thorough revision of conditions for external production. Many agricultural areas were not only poorly accessible, they also suffered from inadequate water management. The fields were often flooded in autumn or winter, whereas they were frequently afflicted by drought in summer. Another problem was the scattered position of the ground parcels, which made their cultivation and usage extremely time-consuming. Mechanisation was scarcely feasible let alone viable. An improvement of this situation by means of land consolidation – an organisational process in which parcels of land were re-apportioned in a rational manner by merging and exchanging, and in which roads were surfaced and the water management was optimised – or by means of incidental land development measures, accordingly received high priority. The Ministry of Agriculture still had an executive system at its disposal.

In legal terms, it could appeal to pre-war practices and legislation (Land Consolidation Act of 1924, revised in 1938). The basis of this was a roads and waterways plan, approved by vote, which had been formulated by the Government Department for Land and Water Use (1935), in close co-operation with the Land Registry Office and with numerous advisers and representatives of administrative instances and organisations with vested interests. The Central Land Consolidation Committee was responsible for the policy regarding land consolidation. The small-scale farms on the sandy ground in the East and the South of the Netherlands formed a special problem, from both a social and an economic point of view. These farmers could not or could barely make a living. To them, rationalisation and increase in scale was too much. Building on the pre-war approach, Minister Mansholt, partly due to the political support
Divergent interests

Two closely related issues that had to be addressed in these agrarian developmental operations were the landscape designs of the land consolidation areas and the preservation of natural and landscape beauty. The agricultural engineers had little interest in the natural-scientific, the spatial and the aesthetic aspects of the landscape. To them, land had primarily economic and utilitarian functions. An official regulation dating from the beginning of the war, which prescribed that areas that were to undergo agricultural development improvements had to be inventoried in advance, did bring some consolation but this was hardly sufficient for the preservation of items of natural value. In actual practice, both fragmentation and reduction occurred.

It was particularly due to the commitment of the landscape advisor and later head of the special Landscape Section of the State Forestry Service, R.J. Benthem, that the contribution of landscape architects to the renovation of the agrarian landscape acquired a certain status. In addition to the plan dealing with roads and waterways, Benthem also introduced the landscape plan. Nevertheless, in terms of implementation, the government was strongly dependent on the agricultural engineers involved. The concepts of the ecologist and landscape architect J.T.P. Bijhouwer formed an important leitmotiv in the elaboration of the plans. This doyen of Dutch landscape architecture regarded the landscape as a cultural phenomenon whose continuous adaptation to physical, economic and social circumstances, and to technological developments was one of its quintessential features. Accordingly, landscape designers in general were not dismissive of the renewals desired by the agricultural sector. In this, they distinguished themselves from the protectors of nature and the landscape whose main aim was the preservation of the status quo. They continually criticised agricultural policy and the associated land development improvement schemes.

Improvement of the agrarian landscape

Although rather hesitantly at first, due to a shortage of manpower and material, an intensive practice of land consolidation, regulated by the government, came into being slowly but surely after 1945. In addition, numerous incidental public works were executed to improve the production and living conditions in the country side, such as the canalisation of streams and the surfacing of roads. The implementation of the work rested mainly in the hands of the private reclamation and development companies, Gronmiij and Nederlandse Heidemaatschappij (now Arcadis).

An important impulse for the practice of land consolidation, from the point of view of both spatial and agricultural development was the reconstruction of the Walcheren region in the Province of Zeeland, which had been destroyed in the war and lay under water. In contrast to other, much more small-scale land consolidation schemes, this involved a clearly determined geographical area (the top of a peninsula) whose agricultural reorganisation took place in the framework of a total reconstruction that took into account the demands in the domains of employment (industrialisation), living, and recreation. A completely new element was that of relocation. In order to realise a rational division of the ground parcels, the governmental authorities decided to move farms which lay in close proximility to one another in the villages to 'empty' areas where more space was available. A precondition was that the farmers should have at their disposal sufficient capacity and financial scope.

A number of farmers who were considered suitable were given the opportunity to 'emigrate' within the Netherlands to start up a new farming enterprise in the newly reclaimed Noordoostpolder that had been prepared for agricultural use. In this way, this new land acquired a vital role in solving problems encountered on the old land. In the execution of the tasks, draglines and other mechanical equipment were deployed for the first time.

The reconstruction of the landscape of Walcheren was carried out according to a design by N. de Jonge. Inspired by the notions of Bijhouwer, and based on the soil-scientific data obtained during the war years, he created a landscape of clearly bounded spatial units by situating greenery on the high-lying creek ridges which also bore the roads. The greenery was denser towards the coast to combat the prevailing sea wind. Functional considerations were allied to spatial-aesthetic ones. The choice of trees was based on phytosociological arguments; types native to the area were primarily planted.

Land consolidation – new style

Whereas the broad approach to the reorganisation of Walcheren was based on a specific reparcelling act, a new type of land consolidation arose during actual operations in the river area in the central Netherlands. At a distance, this process was inspired by the experiment in Zeeland. The area, bounded by large waterways, displayed such

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somewhat desolate picture especially in the backlands between the river dikes. With their inadequate access and water management, these areas were scarcely productive as agricultural propositions. Poverty prevailed. Many people lived in hovels and lacked facilities such as electricity and a supply of fresh running water. Plans that were developed in the Second World War to 'colonise' these backlands were initially unsuccessful in their attempts towards reorganisation. But after liberation, agricultural authorities, administrators, and social organisations got together and made an appeal to the government for extra support. The improvement of the agricultural situation should be combined with a general enhancement of prosperity. In the Land van Maas en Waal-West substantial land consolidation took place in which a large number of farms were moved from the villages along the river dikes to these backlands, with the aim of generating efficient and renovated production methods. So-called boerderijstraten ('farm streets') appeared, with new farming enterprises at regular distances in the middle of the reorganised and renewed ground parcels. Five architects were responsible for the architecture of the enterprises. In view of the costs, they designed a series of standard farms varying from types that were indigenous to the region, such as a closed, broad-façade farm or Saxon farm, to modern segmental farms with the farmhouse resembling a contemporary urban dwelling. A general subsidy measure was formulated to finance the reconstruction of the relocated farming enterprises. Countless numbers of people, including Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, visited the colonised region. A major initiative for land consolidation in the Bommelerwaard-Oost was the concentration of horticulture, into which innovations such as movable glasshouses were introduced. The Provincial authorities did not wish to lag behind and reorganised the fragmented district water board system and improved the accessibility of the districts by constructing new provincial roads. The largest and most expensive reorganisation of the river area in the Province of Gelderland concerned the Tielerwaard-West land consolidation, which took place from the end of the fifties onwards. The project was the showpiece of the Government Department for Land and Water Use. Here, too, a large number of farms moved to the 'empty', reparcelled, newly opened-up, drained backlands. Stimulated by national slum-clearance subsidies, houses that had been declared uninhabitable were demolished or purchased for renovation by city-dwellers as a consequence of the increasing prosperity over the years and the rise of a new appreciation of nature. Uproot subsidies encouraged fruit cultivators to replace their old standard fruit trees with new, more fruit-bearing and more convenient half-standard ones, a measure that also had a significant influence on the landscape.

Landscape architect De Jonge, who linked aesthetic considerations to practical aspects, as had been done previously in Walcheren, was responsible for the concrete realisation of the landscape. In order to preserve the characteristic splendid views and also limit the size of the areas, he postulated a distinct compartmentalisation of the area by means of ongoing lines of trees along certain roads. Countless numbers of new farmyards with their groves completed the view. The layout of the various land consolidation areas, with ever-increasing compartments, reflected the continuous scale enlargement in agriculture. The broad approach, otherwise referred to as 'land consolidation – new style', received legal expression in the Land Consolidation Act of 1954 which also provided the opportunity to allocate ground to objectives geared to 'public welfare' (town and village expansion, infrastructure), and made the formulation of a landscape plan obligatory. The increasing number of reorganisation projects and the corresponding increasing governmental costs led to a long-range plan for land consolidation and other land development works in the Netherlands (1958).

A civilisation offensive

To underpin the success of mechanisation and rationalisation of agriculture, the State Agricultural Information Department, in conjunction with the farmers' and country women's organisations, started up an intensive information campaign oriented towards changing the attitude of the agrarian population. Research by sociologist E.W. Hofstee, in particular, indicated that it was necessary to influence the behaviour of people and their culture in order to implement fundamental changes, and that this should take place in groups since most people do not wish to deviate from the behaviour shown in their peer group.

An important element was also the information attuned to women, since there appeared to be a direct relation between the way in which the housekeeping was done and the house organised, on the one hand, and the way the agricultural enterprise was run, on the other. In terms of the techniques used to convey this information, both the American method of providing information and the working method in France, with its model villages, proved to be sources of inspiration.

After an experiment with two exemplary villages had been successfully carried out, the so-called 'regional improvements' were also initiated elsewhere in the fifties, preferably in conjunction with a land consolidation process. To arouse the interest and involvement of the population, the information campaign took place in consultation with 'leading figures' in the region as much as possible. The idea was that others would then soon follow. Where the agricultural consultants mainly concentrated on business issues, the house-
keeping information officials addressed their attention to the layout of the house which, according to ideas already developed prior to the Second World War, should be above all efficient and purposeful, but also cozy and convivial. Other topics were also covered, such as clothing, childcare, and leisure time. The framers and country women's organisations assumed the responsibility of furnishing so-called 'agrarian social counselling', in which education, occupational opportunities, and all kinds of ideological issues were discussed. The civilising offensive reached a climax at the beginning of the sixties and gradually lost significance in the subsequent years, partly as a result of the increasing modernisation of rural districts due to external factors such as the advent of mass media, increasing mobility, better educational opportunities, and the expansion of (cultural) amenities. In line with the agricultural policy, information was more geared towards enterprises with sufficient chances of survival, and acquired a mainly socio-economic character. The regional improvement indisputably accelerated the modernisation of the countryside, not only as a consequence of the thoroughness with which it was planned, but also as a result of the involvement of farmers' and country women's organisations that enjoyed the confidence of the population.

Pliable landscape

The rise of mass recreation necessitated additional adjustments to the land consolidation strategy. Although the construction of recreational amenities, varying from simple picnic places and fishing spots to large-scale recreational areas near the major cities, amounted to new spatial claims on the agrarian landscape, the Director of the Government Department for Land and Water Use, S. Herweijer, managed to turn this obligation to his advantage. With the argument that the construction of such elements would also promote the well-being of country people as a result of the formulation of better settlement criteria for industry, he took this task upon himself wherever possible, thus increasing the reach of his Department and consequently the Ministry of Agriculture. The demand for new recreational facilities also generated new design opportunities for landscape architects. The mere 'dressing' of the landscape evolved into a more comprehensive landscape construction.

In contrast, the rise and institutionalisation of town and country planning (Town and Country Planning Act, 1965) imposed a restriction on the relative freedom to act. From this time onwards, land consolidation plans had to be attuned to provincial district plans while, at the municipal level, zoning plans regulated the functions of the outlying quarters. This also meant that agrarian allocations could be established to the benefit of agriculture.

The land development engineers adapted to the changing circumstances; reorganisation projects acquired a multifunctional nature. Where necessary and possible, agricultural and land development interests were united with urban requirements such as recreation, urban expansion, and infrastructural construction. The 'multifunction development' of the New Deal projects in the USA supplied the inspiration for this working method, which involved diverse interested parties and financiers.

The new approach manifested itself for the first time in the land consolidation of the Maarsseveense Plassen near Utrecht. The improvement of a horticultural area was combined with the quarrying of sand, which was necessary for the physical elevation of future residential and industrial areas in Utrecht and Maarssen as well as the actual reorganisation of the agrarian district. The ponds that originated as a result of this quarrying were allocated a recreational function for the residents in the planned new housing estates. The leisure area was designed by the garden and landscape architect H. Warnau whose reserved design was inspired by the ideas of the urban planner C. van Eesteren and those of the De Stijl movement, among others.

The substantial reconstruction of the Geestmerambacht horticultural area, a waterlogged district in the north of Noord-Holland was also well known. A highly fragmented division of landholdings and waterways that were becoming increasingly silted-up formed serious obstacles to the development of prosperity. The regional villages lacked facilities such as sewer systems and running water, and had no possibility of expansion. Land consolidation was aimed at putting a stop to the many years of economic decline. This was prepared and implemented in conjunction with the District Plan for Noord-Kennemerland, which included the northward expansion of the city of Alkmaar and the construction of recreational facilities and new infrastructure, among other items. The area evolved from a 'waterway polder' into a 'thoroughfare polder' by means of a large-scale approach in which numerous ditches were filled in, fields were turned over, levelled and equipped with drainage, new roads were built, enterprises were relocated, and the villages were renewed. Here, too, the centrally situated sand quarry was converted into a large recreation area. A similar reorganisation of the agrarian landscape also took place in Het Grootslag polder nearby.

The widespread land consolidation not only reflected the flexibility of the Dutch agricultural landscape but also gave it a completely different appearance. A modern production landscape arose with a differentiated road structure, with perpendicular farm roads, with renewed water management, and a rational parcelling structure geared to mechanical operations. The trees and shrubbery along the new or improved roads articulated the new structure. Recreational
facilities and advancing housing estates and industry foreshadowed increases in urbanisation.

A fitting approach

Whereas the new large-scale recreation facilities frequently formed conspicuous ‘incidents’ in their surroundings, these facilities were fitted into the landscape in a more subtle way in the land consolidation area of Oukoop-Kortrijk in the Province of Utrecht. The area was popular for day-trippers who ventured into the countryside on fine days. As an alternative to a draft concept that Bijhouwer and his colleagues had designed for a parkway landscape in the Randstad (the urban agglomeration in the West of the Netherlands), which he found to be alien in his environment and too compelling in its utility, the landscape architect Warnau designed a network of touring routes over and above the existing (agricultural) road system.

In his view, city-dwellers should be able to determine their own routes. Taking account of the desired openness of the typical peatland pasture area, he left the new roads largely without any accompanying trees or shrubbery. However, he did position small wooded recreation areas at prominently situated junctions. The result was an agricultural area, adapted to the changing requirements, in which the new urban pattern had quite clearly been introduced without loss of any of the original openness. The land consolidation area became a Mecca for landscape architects.

A fitting approach was also deployed by H. de Vroome in the land consolidation project at Vries in Drenthe. He regarded the layout of the landscape as a ‘reparation’ of the existing situation consisting of a landscape with villages around an ‘es’ or green. The leitmotiv was the continuation of what he referred to as the essence of the landscape, determined by the spatial coherence of the elements (settlement, green, reclamation, stream valley) that it comprised.

De Vroome saw the agrarian renewal of the area as inevitable; after all, change was an intrinsic part of the agricultural landscape. Despite the radical changes, such as the scale enlargement, the relocation of farms to the reclaimed areas, the introduction of new roads and the straightening of several streams, the typical structure of the landscape remained clearly recognisable.

Stagnation and reflection

Despite criticism from nature conservationists, land consolidation continued on into the sixties relatively undisturbed. The rise of environmental awareness, the social enlargement of nature and landscape protection, and the increasing opposition to the undemocratic content of the Land Consolidation Act – absentee were regarded as ‘yes’-voters at any balloting – ruptured this period of uninhibited progress and gave cause for reflection. The defenders of landscape values felt brace by the Mansholt plan (1968) which envisaged the withdrawal of hundreds of acres of agricultural ground from cultiva=
tion for the benefit of recreation and nature. The various town and country planning memoranda also reflected increasing awareness of non-agrarian interests of the Dutch agricul tural landscape.

Land consolidation stagnated, partly due to the international economic recession and to the growing criticism of government expenditure on land development projects that were regarded as irresponsible in view of the increasing surpluses on the European market. The subsidies were reduced while the land consolidation policy was modified to fit the changed circumstances. In terms of the use of space within the framework of a more extensive organisation of the land, agriculture was subsequently obliged to weight interests democratically against functions such as recreation and nature and landscape conservation. In areas that possessed significant landscape value and in rapidly urbanising areas, land consolidation was not or only barely possible. After a provisional amend
ment, the Land Consolidation Act was replaced by the Land Use Act (1985), which definitively concluded the heydays of land consolidation in the Netherlands.

New ‘capabilities’

The epilogue turns to a new field of interest. A picture is sketched of present developments in the domain of agriculture and the organisation of the Dutch agricultural landscape, against a background of the changes that occurred in the post-war decades, as described.

Both the economic and spatial margins in the sector are shrinking as a consequence of the European agricultural policy, which is more oriented towards the world market, the stronger national and European environment criteria, and the emergence of active ‘nature development’ (Main Ecological Network). Farmers are seeking (or sheer necessity) supplementary means of existence, in which they attempt to capitalise on the increasing interest of city-dwellers for the countryside and on the greater powers of expenditure that the group has. A large-scale approach and specialisation are only possible for a few. Many terminate their enterprise or seek opportunities elsewhere and emigrate to Canada or the USA, for example.

In the context of the agricultural use of the Dutch landscape, the far-reaching intervention of bygone times has been replaced by the current policy of ‘steering a main course’. Nevertheless, the image again changing drastically, as a result of new policy visions in the fields of urbanisation, recreation, nature development, and changing insights regarding water management. Old watercourses are being
restored, polders flooded, and reclaimed ground is being turned back into boggy moor or swamp. Here and there, a ‘country house’ is created, just as in days gone by. Once again, the ‘capabilities’ of the landscape know no limits. For the landscape architects, a new design assignment is being served up on old grounds.