

## Regional design

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# Regional design: Discretionary approaches to regional planning in The Netherlands

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## Abstract

In recent decades, The Netherlands has seen an increase in the use of regional design-led practices in national indicative planning. Despite this, the interrelations between design and planning decision making are not well understood, and attempts to involve the expertise and ambition of designers in planning have had unclear outcomes. This article elaborates on the role and position of regional design in indicative planning. It is argued that design in this realm resembles discretionary action, implying that design both influences, and is influenced by, prevailing planning rationales. An analytical framework is developed on these grounds and applied to a set of regional design initiatives that evolved in the context of Dutch national plans between 1988 and 2012. Significantly, the analysis reveals forms of discretionary control that shape the creative design practice, of particular importance being the flexibility of planning guidance and the resulting room for interpretation. In theoretical terms, the article contributes to the discussion of how design – as an explorative search for solutions to problems in a particular spatial context – and design theory can contribute to an understanding of the multiple planning experiments emerging in this post-regulative era.

## Keywords

discretion, indicative planning, regional design, spatial concepts, spatial planning

## Introduction

Dutch national planning is plan led, meaning that the government predefines desirable spatial outcomes and uses these determinations to take planning decisions. However, to view Dutch planning as entirely shaped by national plans would neglect the flexibility of such planning guidance. Plans by the national government usually incorporate outline

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planning agendas and principles only. Sub-national governing bodies use the freedom given: they formulate development proposals that fit the particularities of their territories, and then present these to the central government, which judges proposals on their merits. Such 'indicative' planning practices, in which decisions are legitimised by negotiated interpretation of planning guidance, have a long tradition in The Netherlands.

Similarly, design – as an explorative search for solutions to problems in the built environment – is an important and stable component of planning in The Netherlands. To imagine design solutions for particular areas and to use these to influence planning guidance is a long-standing practice, which can be traced back to the emergence of urban planning in the early 20th century, with Van Eesteren as its most important founding father (for his reflection on design and planning, see Van Eesteren, 1948). Design practice is positively associated with both innovation in, and operationalisation of, national planning. Since the 1980s, in the context of decentralisation and deregulation, design has also come to be seen as a practice that contributes to the formation of governance around projects and strategies, as well as tempering any conflicting political and territorial interests that arise. However, the position and role of design in indicative planning are not well understood. As a result, attempts to involve the professional expertise and value schemes of designers in planning decision making continue to have unclear outcomes.

This article discusses the interrelations between design and planning. It is argued that design, when used in the realm of indicative planning, aims to improve planning guidance by assessing its implications for particular situations. In this way, design practice resembles discretionary action – an attempt to look beyond generally applicable rules when making decisions. This preposition implies that design is an integral part of planning, a practice that informs and is informed by prevailing planning rationales. The dialectic is developed against a background of literature on design, spatial planning, spatial representation and spatial concepts. The result of theoretical reflection is an analytical framework to distinguish design practices by their discretionary agency. The framework enables us to identify if practices are intended to refine or challenge planning guidance. It also reveals forms of discretionary control. In particular, it highlights how, in the context of collaborative planning decision making, the flexibility of planning guidance and the resulting room for interpretation are important determinants in the role of creative design practice.

The article is structured in four main sections. In the first section, the analytical framework to interpret relations between regional design practices and planning is developed. In the second, this framework is applied to four well-known regional design initiatives that evolved in the context of consecutive Dutch national plans since the mid-1980s. The analysis reveals that flexibility in Dutch national plans reduced over this period. It is shown that, in this context of diminishing room for interpretation, the role of design in the making of planning decisions changed: initially, it was a practice that criticised national plans from an extra-governmental perspective; it then worked to collaboratively define national planning with various levels of government, and then further transformed into a practice that challenged national plans on behalf of the national government. Design shifted from a practice operating on its own initiative, with the attention of a broad audience, into a procedure made mandatory by the national government, who acted as both a sole initiator and a sole audience of designs. In the third section, observations from this

analysis are summarised, and the institutionalisation of regional design in Dutch planning is critically reviewed. The fourth, concluding part of the article, discusses the theoretical foundation of the analytical framework and further questions it raises.

In theoretical terms, the analytical framework and article are based on a combination of planning and design theory, thus enhancing understanding between fields (for a lack of such understanding, see Gunder, 2011). Its planning-theoretical ambition is to contribute to an increased understanding of planning in a post-regulative era. Observation indicates that planning in the context of flexible planning guidance enhances attention to particular spatial contexts (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Brenner et al., 2011). Such a consideration of material settings and practices – the built environment and the way it is used – is central to design. Against this background, the article emphasises the capacity of design theory to contribute to an understanding of variations in regional planning and governance, under differing institutional circumstances (Mayntz, 2001).

## **Understanding regional design in the context of planning: an analytical framework**

### *The use of spatial representations in regional design*

Few scholarly writings are dedicated to regional design, and many of these build upon the seminal work of a small number of authors from the fields of architecture and urban design (Hillier and Leaman, 1974; Rittel, 1987; Schön, 1983, 1988). These authors describe design as a reflective and argumentative practice, oriented towards the improvement of the built environment. Design has a holistic orientation also. It is an attempt at a comprehensive understanding of spatial development, a search for integral solutions that consider dependencies among parts. Since the built environment is a complex system, the act of designing is unlikely to evolve in a linear manner from problem definition to solution. It is more likely to be explorative, evolving during multiple synthesis-evaluation iterations and steps in which problems and solutions are explicated, comprehended, reflected upon and adapted.

However complex, the built environment itself plays an important role in design. Design theorists argue that ‘design is a relatively simple set of operations carried out on highly complex structures, which are themselves simplified by socially constructed “theories” and modes of representation’ (Hillier and Leaman, 1974: 4). Schön (1988) suggests that design evolves in a ‘design world’ – a designer’s subjective perception of material settings. A designer simplifies his or her perception of these settings into types or ‘generative abstractions’ (p. 183). When considering possible design solutions, these abstractions lead to the recognition of matches and mismatches: the designer learns how well certain solutions fit particular settings. In this way, design may be both a process of elaboration and a process of discovery. Imagined solutions may lead to a refinement of types, a more detailed account of material settings. They may also help the designer to reveal new aspects of the built environment and define new types (Schön, 1988). From the testing of solutions against types, rules are deduced: ‘As rules of law are derived from judicial precedents, [...], so design rules are derived from types, and may be subjected to test and criticism by reference to them’ (Schön, 1988: 183).

Images of the built environment are a central media in design (Rittel, 1987). Maps, diagrams and models facilitate the ‘conversation with the situation’ that constitutes design (Schön, 1985: 49). Specifically in the spatial planning literature, the use of geographic imagery has also gained attention. Such imagery is frequently related to subjective perceptions of material settings and practices used in decision making (e.g. Dühr, 2004; Faludi, 1996; Neuman, 1996; Thierstein and Förster, 2008; Van Duinen, 2004). Images are seen to be socially constructed, relative expressions of what different actors find important and what they are willing to neglect (Davoudi and Strange, 2008). When associated with interpretative planning, visualisations turn into spatial representations (Davoudi, 2011). These representations have ‘agency’ (Davoudi, 2011: 438), intentionally generating meaning by drawing on repertoires of existing symbols for the purpose of politics and planning.

Writings on the utilisation of such spatial representations in planning processes distinguish three main logics that span multiple disciplines, notably an analytical, normative and organisational logic (Dühr, 2004; Förster, 2009; Van Duinen, 2004). When representations have an *analytical logic*, they are associated with (invariable) scientific knowledge about material spatial settings and practices. The *normative logic* of representations evolves against the background of political values and norms, wherein representations portray desirable planning outcomes. Such representations are often seen to be persuasive – to advocate future development and also to promote appropriate planning action in light of this – hence the focus of much (academic) attention to visions in spatial planning (e.g. Albrechts et al., 2003). However, when distinguishing know-why (the values and norms that motivate planning) and know-how (the action derived from such motivation), the *organisational logic* of spatial representations appears. Here, a representation shows a territory, it ‘relates to a concern with regional impacts and incidences of policies and the question of how specific local and regional entities (territories) are affected by those policies’ (Schön, 2005: 391).

In this way, regional design can be seen to expose analytical knowledge, normative convictions and territorial interests when developing solutions for the built environment. A design proposal may be utilised for a single purpose, or may also assemble notions and compose a more intricate story line about what, why and how to intervene. Van Dijk (2011), who theorised regional design as a form of storytelling, notes that regional design ‘deserves to be seen as an attempt to prepare the regional perceptual foundations of eventual decisions, and be applied as such’ (p. 141). However, this does not evolve without context. In the few scholarly writings on regional design, there is agreement that it is often a collaborative and interactive practice, involving a broad array of planning actors (De Jonge, 2009; Kempenaar et al., 2016; Van Dijk, 2011). In such an ‘arena of struggle’ (Faludi and Korthals Altes, 1994: 405), it is likely that design proposals produce matches and mismatches not only in the mind of the individual designer but also with ‘pre-existing stories’ (Faludi and Korthals Altes, 1994) – institutionalised perceptions of geographies that stabilise prevailing planning practices (see also Brenner et al., 2011, on the reflexivity of assemblage urbanism).

### *Design in the context of spatial concepts*

It is common to describe spatial planning as a strategic planning approach that pays more attention to the particularities of the built environment than statutory planning does

(Albrechts et al., 2003; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010; Healey, 2006; Nadin, 2007; Needham, 1988; Schön, 2005). Its objective, 'to articulate a more coherent spatial logic for land use regulation, resource protection, and investments in regeneration and infrastructure' (Albrechts et al., 2003: 113), has generated a considerable body of literature on 'spatial concepts' – the 'pre-existing stories' and institutionalised geographies mentioned above. Faludi (1987) and Needham (1988), theorising the emergence of spatial planning in The Netherlands, argued early on that a form of planning that allocates planning resources to some areas while others are omitted requires a shared understanding of spatial development. They saw explicit (and negotiable) relations between what they called a 'spatial order' (autonomous spatial development, motivated by social action) and 'spatial ordering' (intervening in spatial development) as a precondition for any approach to strategic spatial planning. Empirical analysis verified their argument. It was shown that Dutch national planning in particular relied on a generic spatial logic, a 'planning doctrine', that was repeatedly used to justify more detailed operational decisions (Faludi and Van Der Valk, 1994; Roodbol-Mekkes et al., 2012). Investigations into Dutch 'planning concepts' (Van Duinen, 2004; Zonneveld, 1991) brought similar patterns to the fore. They also indicated that operational planning relies on a set of relatively stable spatial concepts: core guiding principles and related core planning tasks, articulating presumptive planning rationales, which are explored when they are applied to more specific situations.

Such spatial concepts in planning have a well-established importance in The Netherlands (for more recent writing, see, for example, Hagens, 2010; Van Duinen, 2015; Westerink et al., 2013) and are also recognised elsewhere (Davoudi, 2003; Graham and Healey, 1999; Richardson and Jensen, 2003). Investigations into the use of relational geographies in collaborative planning contributed to a growing recognition that perceptions of space and place are selectively used by governments 'with the ambition of accumulating sufficient allocative, authoritative and imaginative force to shape both the materialities and identities of particular places' (Healey, 2006: 527). A critical review of these geographies has shown that such concepts are used to perpetuate prevailing planning regimes and the political interests behind these (e.g. Brenner, 1999; Jessop, 2012; Massey, 2011). In governance theory, certain perceptions of space (and time) are associated with institutions. They are used in order to

[...] stabilise the cognitive and normative expectations of [...] actors by shaping and promoting a common worldview as well as developing adequate solutions to sequencing problems, that is, the predictable ordering of various actions, policies, or processes over time [...]. (Jessop, 2001: 1230)

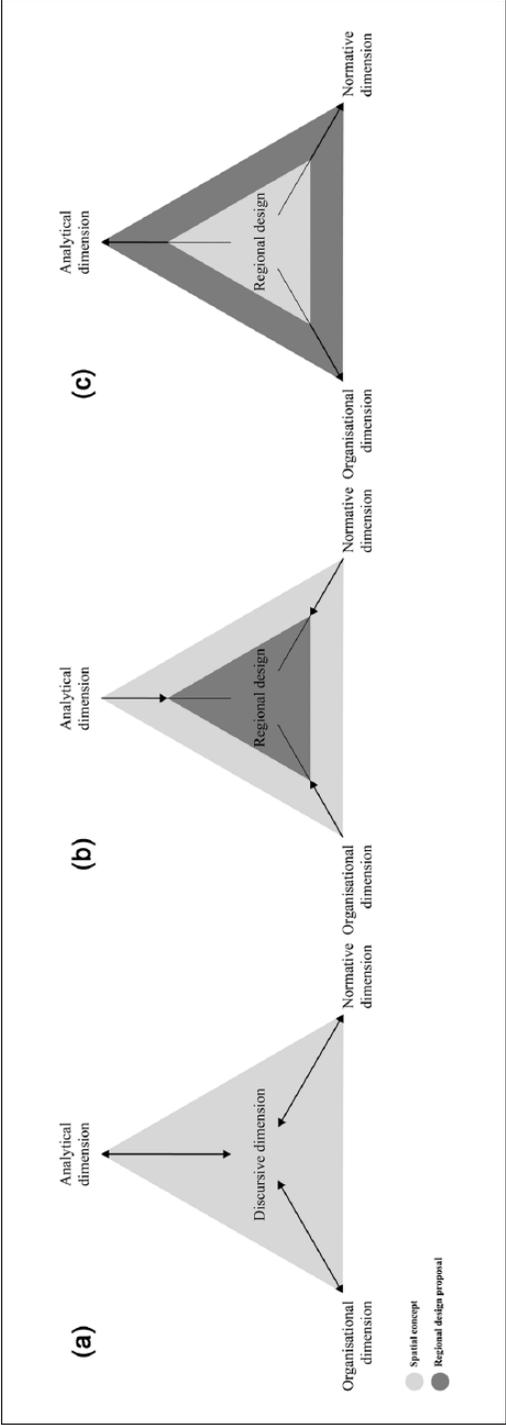
Davoudi (2003) observed the use of the polycentrism concept, which had become widespread currency in European spatial planning by the mid-1990s. She noted that the concept had several dimensions. This can be generalised to spatial concepts as a whole: the *analytical* dimension provides knowledge on how unplanned individual action affects spatial development; from the *normative* dimension, a concept is a metaphor for desirable spatial structures and also includes a guiding principle to achieve a policy goal; the final, *organisational* dimension of concepts reflects prevailing territorial control. Davoudi (2003) showed how the concept of polycentrism was transformed from a

descriptive and analytical tool to a widespread prescriptive and normative agenda. As it was applied to a multitude of situations in European Union (EU) member states, it turned into an 'ideal type', 'despite a lack of common definition and empirical evidence about its desirability, effectiveness, or the potential for its alleged success being replicated elsewhere by policy intervention' (Davoudi, 2003: 996). The concept continued to be used, not as a deterministic rationale but as a collection of notions from which planners derived logics that fitted the spatial particularities of situations and arguably also their political preferences and territorial interests.

From these notions, a model of an interplay between regional design and spatial concepts (as key elements of planning guidance) appears. Design solutions for particular regions are framed by an institutionalised repertoire of notions from which decisions about what, why and how to plan are derived. Design may be a form of analytical reasoning (referring to the analytical foundation of concepts), a form of political action (referring to a normative planning agenda) or a form of organisational reasoning (referring to prevailing territorial control) (see Figure 1(a) below). As highlighted earlier, design theorists argue that design – the testing of solutions against simplified abstractions of the built environment – may be a process of elaboration or of discovery. When assuming that design evolves in the framework of spatial concepts, it may be used to refine these: deducing solutions from a given choice, an institutionalised repertoire of meanings (see Figure 1(b) below). Conversely, a hypothetical or imagined solution may help the designer to uncover new aspects of the built environment. It may be inductive, being used to challenge or enrich prevailing spatial concepts and the array of rationales that these incorporate (see Figure 1(c) below).

### *Positioning design in the realm of planning*

The notions above differentiate regional designs by their relation to the spatial concepts used to stabilise and perpetuate prevailing planning guidance. The study of spatial concepts in planning is not an easy task to accomplish. As Davoudi (2003) has shown, concepts change while being used for the planning of particular areas. In this sense, it is difficult to distinguish concepts from their interpretation. The use of concepts also varies according to regional planning regimes and cultures in countries (Nadin and Stead, 2008). In some European countries, regional planning relies on narrowly defined statutory planning guidance. In many countries, regional planning evolves in a 'gap' (Allmendinger et al., 2015: 1), an 'institutional void' where 'there are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon' (Hajer, 2003: 175). Concepts, in the context of 'gaps' and 'voids', rely not on a select and detailed empirical evidence base but on a fuzzy landscape of theories (Davoudi, 2006; Markusen, 1999). They incorporate not specific operational goals but vaguely defined political agendas. Spatial concepts then do not encompass specific policies, projected upon clearly defined administrative territories by governmental authorities who hold the sole power for planning, but general measures, projected upon softly defined regions by governance arrangements who (often temporarily) share such planning power. When concepts are seen to frame decision making, the degree of flexibility opens up room for interpretation. Despite being difficult to trace, such room for interpretation is decisive for the position of



**Figure 1.** Interrelations between spatial concepts and regional design: (a) dimension of spatial concepts: framing reasoning in planning decision making; (b) regional design as a process of elaboration: refining spatial concepts; (c) regional design as a process of discovery: challenging spatial concepts.

regional design in the realm of planning. What (Rittel, 1987) calls ‘the awesome epistemic freedom’ in design is built into a planning system.

In his reflection on a designer’s way of reasoning, Rittel (1987) notes that design solutions are derived from argumentation, but that such argument is always incomplete. The built environment is composed of multiple dependent parts. During the design process, a designer continuously chooses to focus on some dependencies, taking a distinct path in reasoning while leaving others unexplored. His or her choices are based on arguments but are not derived from them: ‘Looking at the various pros and cons, the designer has “made up his mind.” How this happens is beyond reasoning’ (Rittel, 1987: 5). Multiple choices constitute ‘epistemic freedom’ on which design thrives (Rittel, 1987). They turn design not only into a creative practice but also into a practice of doubt, wherein the designer pragmatically searches for acknowledged constraints that limit choices and releases him or her from responsibility:

What the designer knows, believes, fears, desires enters his reasoning at every step of the process, affects his use of epistemic freedom. He will – of course – commit himself to those positions which matches his beliefs, convictions, preferences, and values, unless he is persuaded or convinced by someone else or his own insight. (p. 6)

These notions imply that being given room for interpretation informs not only the nature of argumentation in design but also its collaborative rationality (Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 1999, 2006). Design then is an elaboration of multiple beliefs, convictions, preferences and values that actors pursue. Giving broad room for interpretation entails that design is a collaborative search for planning solutions by means of negotiation on convictions (although with the risk of overly pragmatic behaviour). Narrow room for interpretation entails that design and planning decision making evolves through confrontation (at the risk of conflict).

### *Summary: design as discretionary behaviour*

In Figure 2(a), the ‘room for interpretation’ within which design may evolve is defined by the multiplicity of choices that prevailing planning guidance incorporates. The room for interpretation – likewise a ‘field of choice’ (Faludi and Korthals Altes, 1994; Friend and Jessop, 2013), ‘a field of argument’ (Dryzek, 1993; Fischer, 2007) or ‘a field of positions’ (Rittel, 1987) – has been extensively discussed in planning and design theory. The most detailed notions of how such choices influence the making of planning decisions stem from the field of planning law and discretion. Discretion is a form of decision making concerned with ‘making choices between courses of action’ (Booth, 2007: 131). What distinguishes discretion from other forms of decision making is the importance of rules therein. Discretionary action aims to bend rules; it is a search for ‘leeway in the interpretation of fact and the application of precedent to particular cases’ (Booth, 2007: 129). In normative terms, discretion is associated with an improvement of rules through a judgement of their implications for particular situations.

The degree of flexibility or ambiguity within rules is seen to be decisive for the way that discretion is exercised. Discretionary action in the context of imperative

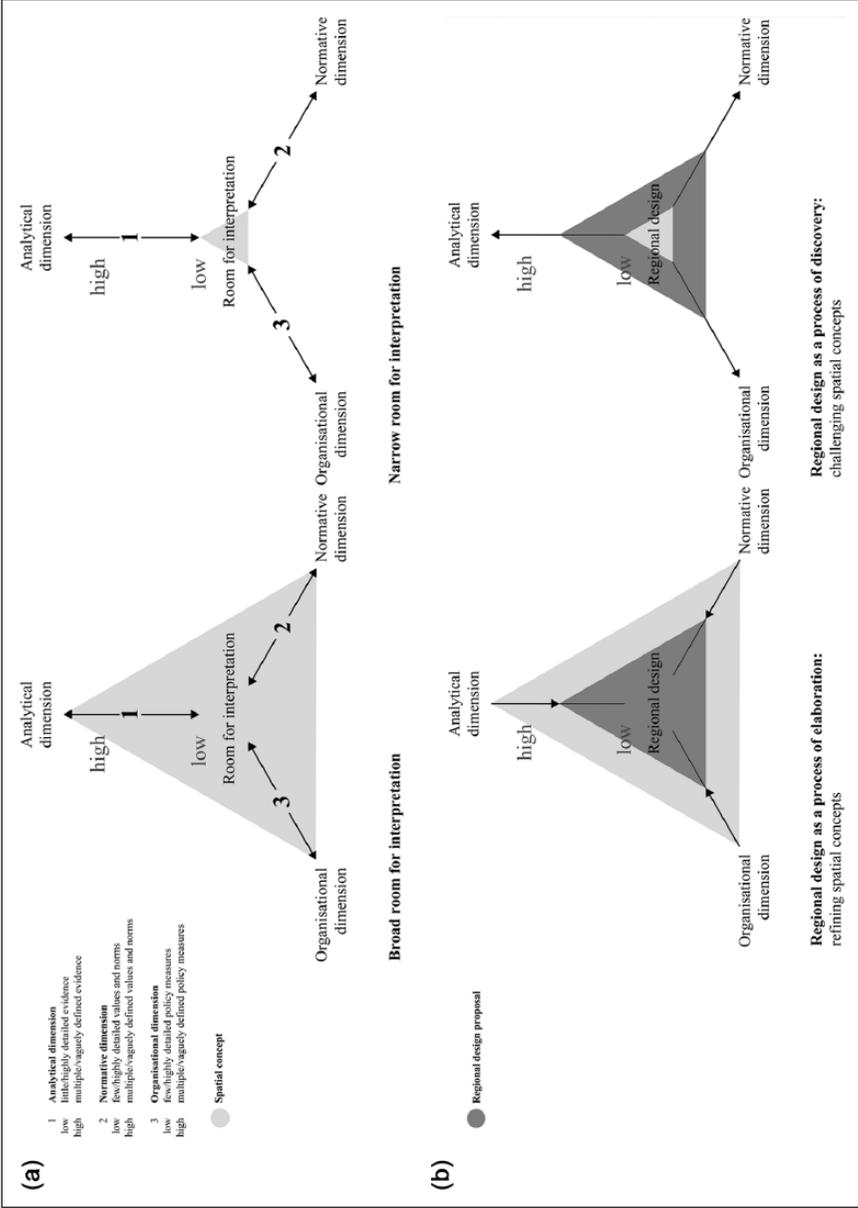


Figure 2. Flexibility of planning guidance/room for interpretation as context for regional design: (a) flexibility of planning guidance, (b) regional design in the context of planning guidance.

instructions, select and detailed rules, is likely to be inductive – it challenges rules by alternative reasoning. In the context of flexible guidelines, multiple and ambiguous rules that allow for multiple interpretations, discretion is practiced in the form of policy argumentation (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999: 245) – a consideration of multiple ‘other schemes of values’ to legitimise decisions, as Booth (2007: 136) notes. It is deductive meant to refine rules. The selection and degree of detail within rules inform the nature of decision making. They also inform constellations among actors. Imperative instructions are likely to have a clearly identifiable author and ‘court of appeal’ which exercises discretionary control in case of discretionary action by others. Flexible guidelines imply a collaborative rationality. They are not only inclusive but also result in unclear arrangements of who exercises discretionary action and who exercises discretionary control.

The amount of room for interpretation is central to how design practices are embedded in planning (see Figure 2(b)). It defines if design is meant to be a practice that assists in the collaborative production of planning spaces, is deducted from an outline agreement on planning agendas and principles, is at the risk of overly pragmatic behaviour or is challenging planning from the outside at the risk of conflict. Several questions arise regarding the flexibility of planning guidance, the relationship between design practices and this guidance, and actors involved. Below, these questions are further defined and used to discuss a series of exemplary regional design initiatives that evolved in the context of Dutch indicative planning between the late 1980s and the 2010s, a period when the flexibility of national planning guidance fluctuated widely under the influence of deregulation and decentralisation.

## **Exemplary Dutch regional design initiatives**

Above, an analytical framework to differentiate regional design practices by their relation to planning guidance was introduced. The framework raises three questions concerning the role and position of regional design in the realm of indicative planning: what is the flexibility of planning guidance? Are design proposals meant to challenge or refine guidance? Who are the authors and audiences of design? Below, the framework is used for an analysis of exemplary regional design initiatives that evolved under the influence of four consecutive national planning frameworks published in 1988 (as a backdrop for analysis), 2002, 2004 and 2012. The four planning frameworks are briefly analysed to identify the spatial concepts they incorporated. From an analysis of their dimensions, the degree of room for interpretation is deduced. Regional design initiatives that emerged in the context of these frameworks are examined for their references to the identified spatial concepts, as well as the way that these references have been combined for the purpose of discretion.

The analysis of the flexibility of planning guidance is based on a review of publicly available policy documents, most importantly the national plans themselves. Plans include maps which set out planning principles in overview. Spatial concepts mentioned in the key of these maps were selected by their concern about urbanisation. They provided the basis for a system of coding used for in-depth documentary analysis. Text and additional maps in reports and secondary policy documents (referred to in core

documents) were reviewed for their analytical knowledge, normative goals and policy measures associated with concepts. Changes in the flexibility of planning guidance were deduced from the amount and relative degree of detail in evidence, goals and policy measures given in plans. Findings were supported through a review of academic literature on Dutch indicative planning, spatial concepts and governance over time. The choice of regional design examples was guided by the prominence that practices gained in Dutch professional discourse on the role of regional design in national planning. The analysis of regional design initiatives is based on various written and drawn material, including regional design products (maps and other visualisations). This material was reviewed for references to spatial concepts, analytical knowledge, normative goals and organisational implications. In addition, authors (involved in design initiatives and/or the making of design proposals) and audiences (who commissioned designs and/or to whom designs were presented) were identified. Results on the discretionary agency of design practices were supported by a review of professional and academic writing on the particular design initiatives.

### *Episode 1: designerly critique on national policies*

The most well-known Dutch spatial concept is the Rim City (*Randstad*), invented during the building of the Dutch welfare state in the 1950s. In its original form and in conjunction with its counterpart, the Green Heart (*Groene Hart*), the *Randstad* was considered to have a distinction between rural and urbanised areas, resulting in a vision for a just and healthy distribution of land uses across such zones, forming territories to which restrictions and regulations applied. The ‘urban-rural dichotomy’ (Van Duinen, 2004: 49) behind the concept remained a dominant planning rationale for decades (Faludi and Van Der Valk, 1994; Roodbol-Mekkes et al., 2012). However, in the 1980s, in anticipation of European integration, new spatial concepts emerged in the realm of Dutch national planning. In their analytical dimension, these concepts relied on observations of regionalisation and theories of functional relations from the field of economic geography. In their normative dimension, they referred to economic competitiveness. In their organisational dimension, they sketched the first contours of a new way of planning, favouring investment into strategic development over designation and containment by means of land-use regulation (Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000).

The Fourth Report on Planning, published in 1988 (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer (VROM), 1988) was the first national planning framework that reflected these new rationales (Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004; Zonneveld, 1991), albeit in a careful manner. The report used both old and new spatial concepts, neatly set apart in two groups: a ‘spatial main structure’ (*ruimtelijke hoofstructuur*), reiterating the principles of land-use regulation and a ‘spatial development perspective’ (*ruimtelijke ontwikkelingsperspectief*), introducing new principles of strategic spatial planning. The report received criticism nevertheless, particularly from lower levels of government. Provincial and municipal governments accepted the new analytical knowledge and agenda but were highly critical of the organisational implications that were deduced from these. Increasingly imperative regulation and the selection of a few projects of national importance were seen to be overly rigid and arbitrary choices in the

context of an increasingly broader selection of planning rationales. Sub-national governments also criticised the national government for the overly paternalistic role it took in the late 1980s. The fact that these policies were promoted informally within national governmental departments and by new actors with unclear positions in the political structure only accelerated criticism (Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000).

In the mid-1980s, several regional design initiatives expressed similar worries. A prominent one among these was called The Netherlands Now As Design (*Nederland Nu Als Ontwerp* (NNAO)). It was initiated by a handful of individuals, among them planners and designers. Its purpose was to produce a public exhibition on Dutch urban and regional design to be held in 1987 (for a summary, see Van Der Cammen, 1987). To prepare this exhibition, an elaborate, 3-year long design process was conducted. Overarching societal trends were taken from analysis by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (NSCGP), and their spatial impact was imagined in the form of four alternative futures for The Netherlands. Projections were evaluated for their impact on ecology, energy supply, housing and labour markets. What they would mean for the development of four typical Dutch regions, with different degrees of urbanisation, was imagined, and typical measures to address development were illustrated in more detail. Designs were to 'revitalise the political debate' on planning, as Frieling (2006: 10), a prominent member of the NNAO initiative, noted in retrospect (see also Salewski, 2012). They demonstrated that spatial patterns, deduced from different societal trends, can be desirable to variable extents, depending on differing political stances, and that the appropriateness of planning measures varies accordingly. In this way, they illustrated publicly that deciding on measures is not just an administrative task, accomplished inside the government, but a political practice of public importance as well.

The NNAO initiative evolved in an extra-governmental domain, as did other design initiatives at the time. Initiatives were instigated by individual professionals, with support from their professional institutes and a few governmental policy institutes. They were meant to reiterate the important role that the design profession traditionally played in Dutch planning. To design was seen as an indispensable way to bring emerging spatial development to the foreground and debate planning decisions on these grounds. Design practices were a form of quality control for national planning guidance, evaluating it from the outside. This function changed in the period after, when decentralisation became an important issue in Dutch national planning and sub-national governments became involved in regional design.

## *Episode 2: designing national planning by local governments*

The rigidity of territorial control in the Fourth Report on Planning caused worries not only among professionals and sub-national governments. From the mid-1990s onwards, the national government itself started to raise concerns. In 1998, the NSCGP summarised these accumulated concerns. Reflecting on the possibility of a new Fifth Report on Planning, it identified a fundamental mismatch between an analytical understanding of spatial development patterns, normative planning agendas and operational policies. It concluded with an influential call for the modernisation of decision-making structures through more open planning protocols and new spatial concepts:

The basic principles of spatial planning and the way in which these have been elaborated into practical concepts face radical problems [...]. In the Council's view, the challenges being posed for the deliberation structure require the latter to be reviewed. (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (NSCGP), 1999: 74)

Collaboration among levels of government became an important issue. New 'argumentative' concepts that could simultaneously guide and enhance involvement in planning were asked for (NSCGP, 1999: 80). However, exactly how such collaborative spatial concepts should look remained unclear for the time being.

A famous Dutch regional design initiative took shape during this period of debate. The initiative was rooted in the work of a group of professors in planning and urban design at several Dutch universities. Starting in 1996, under the header 'The Metropolitan Debate' (*Het Metropolitane Debat (HMD)*), these experts engaged in reflection on regionalisation in The Netherlands, with specific attention to the *Randstad* region. An elaborate design process, conducted by students, researchers and professional designers, imagined alternative futures for this region. During public debate on these proposals, the 'urban-rural dichotomy' behind the old *Randstad* concept was publicly dismantled. Its empirical foundation was critiqued, for example, on its ignorance of uncontrolled sprawl in the Green Heart and its neglect of the delta landscape structure, interwoven with both urban and rural land. Observations of emerging regional development patterns were used to stress the embeddedness of the region in European and international networks as well as a need for regionally coordinated planning in such a context.

The products of the HMD design exercise were a range of critical readings of the classic *Randstad* concept. One of these framed the *Randstad* as a Delta Metropolis (*Deltametropool*), envisaging partnerships among municipalities in the region (for reviews of this process, see, for example, Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004; Salet, 2006; Van Duinen, 2015). In the mid-1990s, such a coalition – among politicians from the four large *Randstad* municipalities – was already in existence in response to a perceived lack of attention from national planning to the persistent economic underperformance of these municipalities. They took up the Delta Metropolis design and brought it to the national government. With these local governments associated with the design, it evolved from a critique of the analytical and normative foundation of the *Randstad* concept into a proposal for the organisation of planning in the region. The design circumscribed a territory to be managed by the group of local governments who had volunteered to coordinate the planning of the region on behalf of the national government.

In 2002, an initial version of the Fifth Report on Planning became available (VROM and Rijksplanologische Dienst, 2002). This report, which remained a draft due to political turmoil, was the first Dutch national report to explicitly foster decentralisation (VROM and Rijksplanologische Dienst, 2002: 260). Concepts favouring land-use regulation and investment into strategic development were both sustained, as in the Fourth Report. However, in contrast to the Fourth Report, the organisational dimension of spatial concepts became open to interpretation. In particular, 'urban networks' (*stedelijke netwerken*) figured prominently as a concept to facilitate decentralisation. A landscape of information was associated with the concept, concerning functional relations within and among regions, accessibility and diversity of social and economic activities for instance.

An array of goals was also attached to it, most importantly those of international economic competitiveness and vitality, a social norm. In its organisational dimension, the concept was a request for active engagement of sub-national governments in national planning. Emerging regional governance arrangements were given the benefit of the doubt. The national government hoped that they would have the ability to autonomously and effectively act on the particular problems in their regions.

The Delta Metropolis initiative was taken up in the report as one such ‘urban network’, and inspired a period of optimism among Dutch regional planners and designers. It became not only a planning but also a design precedent. Advocates of the Delta Metropolis had promoted their ideas not only in professional and academic circles but also in the hallways of public offices and on political podia (Van Duinen, 2004, 2015). The act of designing came to be seen as a way to clarify political options and forge governance alliances around design proposals. Design practices that resembled the Delta Metropolis in their composition of participants emerged. Designers, groups of experts, planners and politicians engaged in collaboratively exploring problems within their regions and presented solutions to the national government. The ‘urban network’ concept was a near to empty canvas. The broad analytical notions on regional spatial development, the many values and norms and the open call for involvement of sub-national governments in national planning, turned nearly any design proposal by sub-national governments into a refinement of the national planning guidance.

### *Episode 3: designing national planning on behalf of the national government*

The Fifth Report was a highly flexible planning framework. The room given for interpretation was deliberately broadened to encourage the voluntary involvement of sub-national governments in national planning. The following national report, the so-called Spatial Strategy (*Nota Ruimte*), first published in 2004, restricted this flexibility again (VROM et al., 2004).

The Spatial Strategy was a revision of the Fifth Report but incorporated new spatial concepts nonetheless. To align national policies across various sectors, it was preceded by several policy documents in which the ministries of economic affairs (EZ) and transport (V&W) set out their ideas about spatial organisation. The final strategy included these ideas in the form of new (and revived) spatial concepts. The ‘urban network’ concept, the central entry of the ministry of housing, spatial planning and the environment (VROM) in the Fifth Report, came to lie next to ‘economic core areas’, ‘main transport axis’, ‘main ports’, ‘brain ports’ and ‘green ports’, promoted by a coalition among the ministries of EZ and V&W. As the names already suggest, these new concepts relied strongly on theories from the field of economic geography and emphasised economic competitiveness.

Taken together, the preexisting and new spatial concepts created a landscape of multiple planning rationales, seemingly broadening the flexibility of national planning guidance. This impression was deceptive though, since concepts were re-ordered and selectively refined in terms of their organisational implications. The new concepts by the ministries of EZ and V&W were immediately associated with direct investment into national projects. Only the ‘urban network’ concept, the contribution from the ministry of

VROM, remained associated with negotiation and collaboration among governments at different levels. Furthermore, only five out of the 17 ‘urban networks’ in the Fifth Report were continued. Collaboration was refined by a prescription of policies for sub-national governments to work with. Among these policies, the possible provision of funding for infrastructure projects became the most important incentive for collaboration. In addition, the national government started to regulate decision-making processes in the soft ‘urban network’ territories. Provinces were to take a leading role in regional governance arrangements, for instance. As another example, specific analytical knowledge about regional spatial development (e.g. insights into regional accessibility generated by a national survey) was to be considered when formulating potential projects of national importance.

A regional design initiative that emerged in the context of the Spatial Strategy was Studio South Wing (*Atelier Zuidvleugel*). The studio was concerned with the southern part of the *Randstad* region, the so-called South Wing (*Zuidvleugel*), as one of the core economic areas that the Spatial Strategy identified. The studio was initiated by the province of South Holland in 2002 but only took up work in 2005: the scope of the studio was extensively discussed among governments in the region which caused delay. Eventually, a range of partners from municipal and city regional authorities participated. The long negotiations on the scope of the studio led to a brief being given to it. Designs were to investigate the usefulness of the ‘network city’ concept, exploring the region by means of the – admittedly vague – theories and values it incorporated. Attention was focused on managerial concerns. The many existing local plans in the region were to receive specific attention: design was to deliver insights into how these plans might obstruct or catalyse the emergence of a ‘network city’ and produce comprehensive regional strategies that integrated these insights. During the 2-year existence of the studio, a set of such strategies were designed, for example, for integrated public transport and land use, and for integrated urban and rural development (for a review, see *Atelier Zuidvleugel*, 2008; Balz and Zonneveld, 2015). Projects were presented to the national government that was also a member of the advisory board.

In the composition of participants, Studio South Wing resembled earlier initiatives that had emerged around the year 2000, such as Delta Metropolis and its successors. However, in other aspects it differed. The national government took a more important role therein as both author and audience. It was part of the advisory board of the studio, as mentioned above. It also provided funding and important knowledge and expertise. While earlier initiatives emerged around distinct problems in regions, this studio was in search of such problems. An exploration of the region through the lens of the ‘urban networks’ concept was to provide ‘insights into nodes, crucial relations or indispensable switches, where missing projects undermine a cohesive overall structure for the purpose of optimal provincial governing’ (Provincie Zuid-Holland, 2004: 2, my translation). It was also to define projects of national importance. In light of the refinement of national planning guidance, design became above all a claim for national funding.

#### *Episode 4: designing national projects on behalf of the national government*

In July 2008, a new Dutch planning act became effective and obliged government at all levels to formulate new planning guidance that complied with the procedural requirements

set out in the act. In 2012, the national government responded to the obligation (with some delay): the National Policy Strategy for Infrastructure and Spatial Planning became available, replacing all earlier national frameworks (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Milieu (I&M), 2012). The National Policy Strategy was authored by a new ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment (I&M), the product of a fusion of the ministries of VROM and V&W in 2010. It differed substantially from all previous national plans due to the spatial logics it used. Only a few planning rationales were extended, retaining economic competitiveness in a normative sense and the provision of infrastructure projects in an organisational one (Needham, 2015). A thoroughly evidence-based method to measure accessibility was used to identify new links in transport networks. Specialised economic activities also remained important through a concept called 'urban regions with top sectors' (Needham, 2015: 28). Analytically, the concept relied on observed concentrations of specialised economic sectors whose development was to advance the competitive position of The Netherlands internationally. However, in its organisational dimension, the concept was associated with largely non-spatial policy measures such as tax incentives.

The National Policy Strategy incorporated few spatial concepts and had little room for interpretation by sub-national governments. Instead, it consisted of a catalogue of national projects, most of them concerning investment into infrastructure. A new perspective on decentralisation was employed: the new spatial planning act equipped sub-national governments with more planning power. Regional planning (and the related decision making) was now to take place at lower levels of government. However, decision-making procedures for national infrastructure projects required the participation of government at all levels, and in this way incorporated the seeds for new rounds of negotiations under the roof of the so-called Long-term Investment Programme for Transport and Spatial Development (MIRT).

The MIRT programme allocates national funds to large-scale infrastructure projects through highly regulated procedures. Since 2008, projects under this programme have had to consider not only an improvement of transport but also spatial development. Advice to the government at the time had indicated that the realisation of projects was being delayed by conflict between the many affected stakeholders. The advice led to a revision of decision-making processes. Regional design became a mandatory requirement. It was assumed that such design practices can, when employed at an early stage of implementation, explicate interdependencies among planning issues at different scales, facilitate discussions and agreements on these, and in this way help to avoid conflict, delay and costs at later stages. With the increasing number of national projects included in the National Policy Strategy, the MIRT programme, and thus also regional design, grew in importance.

The design of Spatial Models SMASH 2040 (*Ruimtelijke Modellen SMASH 2040*), conducted in 2012, was associated with this new obligation to employ regional design (Zandbelt and Van Den Berg, 2012). The acronym SMASH stands for Structural Vision Main Port Amsterdam Schiphol Haarlemmermeer (*Rijksstructuurvisie Mainport Amsterdam Schiphol Haarlemmermeer*), a framework detailing national planning for the area around Schiphol International Airport, and one of the projects of national importance identified in the National Policy Strategy. The SMASH design exercise was commissioned by the ministry of I&M to investigate (infra)structural change in the area. It was conducted by an individual urban design professional. During a series of workshops,

representatives of sub-national governments in the area, private parties and experts commented on evolving design proposals. There were three alternative futures presented for the region, reflecting on three predefined main tasks in the area: notably an improvement of accessibility, the expansion of Schiphol and the satisfaction of housing demands. The impact of each alternative was illustrated, showing implications for water management systems, housing and working environments, energy schemes and environmental law. Designs were to stress test the proposed national infrastructure project. The multiple interwoven arguments they brought forward can be understood as a critique, challenging the restricted scope of national planning. However, when compared to earlier regional design practices, this challenge took place in a highly controlled environment in which the national government predefined a project, the region that may be affected by it, the main problems and tasks in implementation, and also both commissioned and judged it.

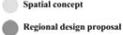
### *Discussion*

Above, a set of regional design initiatives that evolved under the influence of four consecutive Dutch national planning frameworks were analysed using the new analytical framework. The framework assumes that design in the realm of planning resembles discretionary action. Such discretionary action aims to improve planning guidance by judging its implications for particular situations. From this perspective, design is an integral part of planning, a practice that informs and is informed by prevailing planning rationales. Analysis by means of the framework allows for a detailed account of these interrelations. Figure 3 below presents the results of the analysis in overview.

The first observation drawn from this analysis concerns planning guidance. In the period between 1988 and 2012, the Dutch national government provided four planning frameworks. During a seemingly experimental phase, the flexibility of each one differed, reflecting different ideas about collaboration among levels of government in national indicative planning. Differences in the degree of room for interpretation were mainly the result of modifications to the organisational dimension of planning guidance, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to collaboration. The Fourth Report on Planning (VROM, 1988) contained a broad array of new spatial concepts, but it was the national government that decided upon the organisational implications. The Fifth Report on Planning (VROM and Rijksplanologische Dienst, 2002) broke away from this paternalistic role for national government, including concepts that were highly open to interpretation in all their dimensions. To enhance the involvement of local actors, earlier imperative instructions about ‘what should be done’ turned into broad suggestions for what ‘could be done’ (in the terminology of Tewdwr-Jones, 1999: 245, that is borrowed from the UK context here). Later plans, published from the mid-2000s onwards, became more select and detailed in their prescription of specific policies again. Direct investment into projects of national importance became a dominant form of planning, as in the National Policy Strategy of 2012. The few concepts that this plan included were also highly select and detailed in their analytical and normative dimension. Regional planning and decision making were largely devolved to lower levels of government.

In the context of diminishing flexibility and diminishing room for interpretation, the role of regional design in decision making changed. Indeed, it reflected, through its

Flexibility of planning guidance	Role of regional design in planning decision making
<p><b>Fourth Report on Planning, 1988</b></p> <p>Planning guidance relies on multiple and vaguely defined analytical knowledge/political goals, few and highly defined policy measures (direct investment, land-use regulation).</p>	<p><b>The NNAO initiative, 1985 – 1987</b></p> <p>Design demonstrates that different development trends and political goals require different policy measures. Design challenges national planning from an extra-governmental position.</p> <p><b>Authors:</b> Individual design and planning professionals, supported by representatives of planning agencies and professional institutes.</p> <p><b>Audiences:</b> A general public, national government.</p>
<p><b>Fifth Report on Planning, 2002</b></p> <p>Planning guidance relies on multiple and vaguely defined analytical knowledge/political goals/policy approaches (direct investment, land-use regulation, voluntary coordination).</p>	<p><b>Delta Metropolis initiative, 1996 – 1999</b></p> <p>Design deduces a need for regional co-ordination in a distinct territory from multiple development trends and political goals. Design refines national planning on behalf of local governments/creates planning precedent.</p> <p><b>Authors:</b> Individual design and planning professionals, involving municipal governments.</p> <p><b>Audiences:</b> A general public, national government.</p>
<p><b>National Spatial Strategy, 2004</b></p> <p>Planning guidance relies on multiple and vaguely defined analytical knowledge/political goals, few policy approaches (direct investment, coordination).</p>	<p><b>South Wing Studio, 2005 – 2007</b></p> <p>Design deduces projects of national importance from multiple development trends and political goals. Design refines national planning at the request of the national government.</p> <p><b>Authors:</b> Provincial and municipal governments, design professionals, supported by the national government</p> <p><b>Audiences:</b> national government.</p>
<p><b>National Policy Strategy, 2012</b></p> <p>Planning guidance relies on few and highly defined analytical knowledge/political goals/policy measures (direct investment).</p>	<p><b>Spatial models SMASH 2040, 2012</b></p> <p>Design explores the implications of national projects by referring to multiple analytical knowledge, political goals and policy measures. Design challenges national planning on behalf of the national government.</p> <p><b>Authors:</b> National government, design professionals, under consultation of municipal and provincial governments.</p> <p><b>Audiences:</b> national government.</p>



● Spatial concept  
● Regional design proposal

**Figure 3.** Interrelations between design initiatives and Dutch national plans over time.

discretionary action, shifts in the flexibility of guidance. Author–audience constellations changed alongside. First, design was a practice that criticised national plans, from an extra-governmental perspective, for a neglect of the political dimension of planning, as the example of the NNAO initiative shows. Then, in the context of the highly ambiguous planning guidance in the Fifth Report, design turned into a practice to collaboratively refine national planning with various levels of government. This was exemplified by the Delta Metropolis design initiative. When planning guidance then became oriented towards projects of national importance, design practices followed, as the South Wing studio example demonstrates. Finally, in the context of the National Policy Strategy and the MIRT programme, design became a mandatory requirement in decision making on national projects. As the SMASH example shows, design became a practice to purposefully challenge these projects. The national government became the commissioner of such critique as well as its sole receiver. This most recent institutionalisation of regional design in Dutch national planning does not reflect the distance between authors and audiences, or between discernible actors in action and control, which qualifies discretion.

## Conclusion

There is a tradition of using regional design in Dutch indicative planning. Expectations concerning the impact of design-led approaches on planning decision making were and are usually high. Design is thought to mobilise thinking capacity; it is seen to be an adventurous and inventive endeavour. To reflect on spatial development is to enhance the technical quality of planning strategies and projects. Since decentralisation and deregulation became issues in Dutch planning, design is now also expected to perform in political and organisational settings. It is expected to clarify political options, forge societal alliances, remove conflict around planning solutions early on and thus speed up implementation.

The analytical model developed here reflects these multiple expectations: design may challenge or refine planning; it may be oriented towards political values and norms, towards the analytical foundation of planning and/or towards organisational planning measures in territories. However, the model implies that the impact of design is not only determined by the design solutions themselves but also by concurrent planning guidance. The dialectics between design and guidance suggests that design may be an inherently discretionary practice. When viewing design as a form of discretion, it is the prevailing planning rationales that define whether an imaginary future is a relevant interpretation of fact or an arbitrary fantasy; a precedent to be considered in future planning decisions or a negligible incident.

Discretionary approaches within design aim to improve planning guidance by assessing its implications for particular situations. The testing of this preposition has revealed that there may be strong interrelations between planning and design. In particular, the flexibility of planning guidance and the resulting room for interpretation are determinants. Giving broad room for interpretation in planning guidance may inspire a collaborative and creative search for problems and innovative planning solutions but at the risk of a loss of operational planning guidance and overly pragmatic behaviour. Narrow room for interpretation almost inevitably turns designs into criticism, with the risk of conflict. As the examples above show, the Dutch national government has sought to resolve this dilemma by positioning design in a highly controlled organisational environment where

the government itself is a facilitator of design and a court of appeal. However, such institutionalisation of discretionary practice (a form of meta-governance in fact) raises concerns about its ability to legitimise planning decisions. More broadly, it shows that it is important to consider the authors and audiences of design as they relate to planning. If design practices are to be discretionary action, as is the case in Dutch indicative planning, they must evolve at a distance to the formal planning apparatus.

The analytical model that was used for analysis here is based on a combination of planning and design theory. A search for similarities among theories has resulted in the recognition that the built environment itself is the most common denominator across fields. The model recognises that perceptions of geography are composed of analytical knowledge, normative agendas and notions of territorial control. Spatial concepts that stabilise prevailing or institutionalised planning practices incorporate such perceptions. Design assembles a selection of notions for a distinct planning purpose in a particular area. Both the use of concepts and design have agency in constructing perceptions of the built environment. This notion calls for a more intricate understanding of how perceptions of material settings transform as they are used – how spatial concepts turn into detailed plans and vice versa.

Planning-theoretical reflection has revealed that planning in a post-regulative era, in the absence of clearly defined planning rules and institutions, pays increased attention to specific spatial development. Such attention has led authors to distinguish between policy-making, which concerns the resolution of predefined problems in predefined territories, and planning as a political practice, which includes the formulation of problems in areas that are yet to be defined. Analysis here has shown that roles of design practices in planning decision making vary. Varieties may be the outcome of incidental experiment. However, observation indicates that they may also be the result of more structural attempts to balance pragmatic and political planning approaches, which calls for an increased understanding of the performance of design-led approaches in planning decision making.

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