

# Introduction

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As long as we have had spatial planning at a regional and national level in The Netherlands, the contrast between city and countryside has been a key principle. Cities should be compact, high density, incorporating an intense mix of functions. Cities should be meeting places for the widest possible variety of people, breeding places for new ideas and movements, integration and emancipation 'machines' for an endless stream of newcomers. Cities need to be linked to the world: they are the entry points that funnel the global economy and culture into a country, but also the centres which make their own cultural and economic influence felt throughout the world. Cities are the apex of social, cultural and economic dynamism.

In the Dutch planning tradition, the countryside has to be the city's opposite in every respect: quiet, green, open, reserved for typical rural functions such as agriculture and nature. Changes need slowing down. The characteristic landscape resulting from a long history of interaction between nature and culture needs to be protected and should be defended against urban encroachment.

The central principle of the urban-rural contrast has been under pressure for a long time now.

On the one hand, urban inhabitants and businesses are less and less inclined to orient themselves exclusively to a classical urban environment. Many prefer a setting that is greener, less noisy, safer and offers smaller-scale, socially more homogeneous neighbourhoods. They don't see this as inconsistent at all with their urban lifestyle and urban occupations, or their integration in world-wide economic and cultural networks. A hundred years ago, the first suburban settlements resulting from this preference were accessible only to a happy few.

By now, for a majority of the population and the business community a suburban environment represents a serious alternative to the traditional city.

On the other hand, the functional basis of the countryside is eroding. Agriculture, which has always provided this basis, is under pressure in many ways. Production subsidies are being discontinued; protective barriers against global competition are gradually broken down. Regulations with regard to environment, landscape, water management, treatment of farm animals, and food security become ever stricter. As a consequence, farm profits decrease, accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the capital needed to acquire sufficient land, due to the upward pressure on land prices caused by nearby urban developments. Caught between these opposing movements, agriculture finds itself in a fairly difficult position. In many cases in the foreseeable future, agriculture will no longer be viable as an economically independent activity.

Meanwhile, the principle of urban-rural segregation is so deeply rooted, and so 'sacred' to a vast majority of planners and politicians, that no other answer seems acceptable than the strongest possible resistance against these tendencies. This cannot go farther than fighting the symptoms, however, as the underlying forces cannot be changed. As with all treatments addressing only the symptoms and not the disease, this is doomed to failure. Two recent publications by the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research (Ruimtelijk Planbureau, RPB) offer ample proof of the hopelessness of this struggle. One shows the lack of success of the Green Heart policy in the past, and even more so when continued in the future. The other makes it clear how fundamental the forces are that drive suburbanisation. Both lead to the conclusion that the only chance to maintain the 'Arcadian' character of the countryside that is so deeply desired as a counterbalance to the hectic city is to abandon the traditional segregation policy. Suburbanisation should no longer be fought, but instead be properly channelled so that it may take over from agriculture as the new functional basis of an idyllic landscape.

The next challenge, of course, is to find out what this ‘proper channelling’ of suburbanisation actually means. How does it interact with the landscape as it has developed historically? With the condition of the soil? The water management system? How does it seize the opportunity to create a symbiosis between urbanisation and nature, offering far more space for nature than the old agricultural environment could ever provide? How can suburban developments and new forms of agriculture be mixed? What we know for sure is that the budgets currently available for attaining spatial quality won’t be such a restricting factor any more. When we satisfy the deeply felt need for suburban space, then people and businesses will be more than ready to pay a good price for what is offered. At that time, we will see the end of the exclusive dependency on government financing for spatial development. While governments generally profess that spatial quality is their highest priority, in practice economising on their expenditures more frequently takes centre stage, thus offering an environment that remains far below the exacting standards of modern society.

Opponents will not believe that such a turnaround will save the quality of the countryside. To the contrary, they will see it as the final surrender of the rural environment. And moreover, they will see it as the final surrender of the city as well, which in their eyes is even worse. To them, to stop fighting suburbanisation means the end of the city. Considering the observation that urban economy and culture are firmly embedded in global networks, this is an improbable expectation. Being a functioning part of these networks doesn’t depend just on the digital exchange of information, with its relative lack of dependence on location. It also requires access to physical networks serving the transportation of persons and goods, which will always be restricted to a limited number of places in direct proximity to the nodes of these networks. These are more likely to become more attractive areas for settlement than

to lose their appeal. Where many people want to settle as close to the access node as possible, the intensity and variety of urban life in these areas is accordingly more likely to increase than decrease.

At the same time, those existing urban areas that lie outside the direct sphere of influence of the major transportation infrastructure will become less attractive. These may be redeveloped at far lower densities than their present form, thus creating suburban environments not outside but inside the city. Finally, the old boundary between city and countryside will disappear. To put it another way, the city will contract around the nodes of the transportation networks, while the countryside will penetrate those parts that lie farther away. Conversely, the city will penetrate the countryside, but mostly in an unobtrusive way, in the form of suburbanisation embedded in a park-like transformation of the old agricultural landscape.

In considering appointments to the board of the Megacities Foundation, Lars Lerup seemed an excellent choice for a lecturer who could deal with this kind of urban-rural development from an American perspective. His best-known book 'After the City' shows the failure of traditional urban and regional planning, which he says he doesn't regret all that much. In his new book 'Smartacres', he follows up on this analysis with an attempt to find new ways to guide suburban development. In his present Megacities lecture, he shows that in fact it all comes down to reconciling culture and nature, not only forcing nature to adapt (and ignoring the fact that sooner or later nature will always strike back), but in the first place making culture adjust to nature. To relate this to Dutch urban development: city and countryside should no longer be viewed as segregated and opposing spheres, but as one space containing both as equal and indivisible components.