

BOOK REVIEW

Dutch Land-Use Planning

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Dutch Land-use Planning: The Principles and the Practice

Barrie Needham

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The new edition of the book ‘Dutch Land-use Planning. The Principles and the Practice’, first published in 2007, with 8 chapters, seeks to explain how land-use planning in the Netherlands works and how it is related with what takes place on the ground. As Barrie Needham refers, the book has two aims: first, to assess if the Dutch spatial planning realise what it sets out to achieve; and second, to assess the processes by which government bodies pursue their spatial planning. The author offers a different vision of Dutch land-use planning, which will certainly be useful for all those planners that often tend to see the Netherlands as a model in the field of spatial planning. If it is certain that the book illustrates well why Dutch planning is so praised by the planning community around the world, it is also clear that the author does not follow an uncritical view of the Dutch planning practice, an approach that makes this book mandatory reading for all those interested in the history of Dutch urban and regional spatial planning.

In the first chapter (‘Setting the scene: the underlying land and the underlying attitudes’), Barrie Needham explains why the book was written, the analytical perspective adopted and presents the structure of the book. It offers also an introduction to the Netherlands, by providing a broad view of the land occupation in the country, some of its cultural characteristics, the aims of the planning system and the societal goals attached to them, as well as the planning institutions, highlighting the tensions between ambitions and resources available and the continuities and changes in the Dutch land-use planning. In the following chapter (‘How the Dutch want their land to be used: the content of Dutch spatial planning policy’) Needham examines the content of the spatial planning policy and how the planning system aims to achieve the goals described in the previous chapter. As readers of the book will find out, this is a rather complex process, which the author describes in detail, discussing it from a well-informed critical perspective (e.g.,

policy for the location of new housing; policies for towns and cities; policy for housing and housing areas; policy for the location of new workplaces; policy for rural areas; specific issues such as the danger of flooding, cultural heritage, and so on).

In the next two chapters (chapter 3 ‘The planning agencies, their land-use plans, and how they use them: the formal system for land-use planning’, and chapter 4 ‘The statutory powers for realising those land-use plans: and how they are used’), Needham provides an important piece of information for a full understanding of the Dutch planning system, namely by highlighting the fact that it is the relationship between plans and what is actually built that constitutes the critical point in the appreciation of the Dutch planning. Among other issues on how plans actually translate into what is built on the ground, the author examines in these two chapters the following issues: who influences what happens on the ground; the planning agencies, their formal powers, and the interrelationships between them; the statutory spatial plans; the vertical and horizontal co-ordination; the property rights and land-use planning; the compulsory purchase; the development permit; the enforcement of the rules; the passive planning; the public powers for acquiring land, and other issues.

The following chapters deal with pro-active planning. In chapter 5 (‘Realising the land-use ambitions in practice. Pro-active planning: making things happen’) Barrie Needham examines how the Dutch planning system can go further beyond mere passive planning and make things happen in the way the planning agencies wish. Among other aspects, the chapter deals with the following topics: land-use planning through land ownership; the municipality as land owner; active municipal land policy, and the new ways of pro-active planning without municipal land ownership, concluding by highlighting some of the dangers of corporatism associated with pro-active planning. Chapter 6 (‘Pro-active planning in practice: examples of the types of projects being realised in this way’) examines and discusses examples of pro-active planning (e.g., a housing estate; an industrial estate; a town centre redevelopment; the improvement of an area of run-down housing and industry; revitalisation of an old industrial estate; the redevelopment of a peripheral area; a regional park; a nature development area).

In Chapter 7 (‘Obligations on planning agencies: and how those agencies take account of them’) the author describes the limits to the powers which a planning agency, namely municipalities, may use for the implementation of its policies. Among other aspects, Needham examines the general principles that should guide the actions of public agencies, and the obligations arising out of the spatial planning act, from the Act that regulates development permits, from other public laws statutes, from EU principles, as well as those obligations that result from practising non-statutory planning.

The book ends in chapter 8 (‘An assessment of Dutch spatial planning: how good is Dutch planning’) with an assessment of the effects of the Dutch spatial planning as well an assessment of the processes followed by planning agencies. Needham asks and gives his answers to whether the Dutch planning has been successful, its effectiveness and efficiency, and its distributional effects. The chapter also answers the questions the author asks about the planning process, trying to clarify how much does the Dutch planning system accords to the principles of good government. The book ends with an assessment of a critical aspect of Dutch planning, ‘planning by projects’, arguing that this practice moved in recent decades towards big projects which has been the cause of concerns for all those engaged in planning in the Netherlands, concluding with what seems to be a wise recommendation to Dutch planning agencies suggesting that they should not resume uncritically their old practices of ‘planning by projects’ namely the most recent practice of big projects and the associated over-development, corporatism and exclusion of citizens.

An important feature of this book is the fact that it gives much attention to the means for realising plans and less to the plans, contrary to what is often the case in the books about the

Dutch land-use planning practice, as the author argues. The link between the plans with what is built is done by planning permissions and investment decisions and therefore these two aspects receive ample attention in the book. This concern with the results of planning on the ground explains the option for the greater detail given by Barrie Needham in the book to planning at the municipal level than at higher tiers (e.g., provincial or national) in the planning system. Despite being a country with a land-use planning system that gives substantial formal powers to planning agencies, the formal powers seem not to be sufficient for achieving all the goals attributed to the planning system, which may justify and explain the appeal pro-active non-statutory planning seems to have within the Dutch land-use planning. Readers interested in urban e-planning will note a lack of explicit references to the new developments associated with the extensive use of information and communication technologies in the planning field. This is certainly a feature of current planning practice that I would prefer to see in the book, a point the author should consider if a third edition is considered. In sum, despite missing recent developments in the field of urban e-planning, the book will certainly be useful to all those interested in urban e-planning and in comparative planning studies and /or with an interest for the Dutch spatial planning system, seen and praised by the planning community around the world as a model planning system.