



Perspective essay

## “Design makes you understand”—Mapping the contributions of designing to regional planning and development



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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Designing contributes to the content and process of regional planning and development.
- Designing advances the understanding of regional situations and opportunities.
- Designing improves collaboration and networking in planning and development.
- A research agenda on design approaches in planning.

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### A B S T R A C T

Designing has assumed a prominent position in current regional planning and development. There is, however, no coherent body of knowledge on how designing contributes to, alters or influences planning processes. Our essay explores a leading example: the contributions of designing to Dutch regional planning and development, and identifies topics for scholarly research that will improve the understanding of design approaches in planning and advance regional design practice. We interviewed stakeholders involved in Dutch regional planning practice and identified eleven contributions of designing: four to the content and seven to the process of planning. An exploration of scholarly literature in landscape architecture and urban design added more depth and understanding to these contributions. We conclude that the long-term scope of regional design means its impacts must also be evaluated over the long term. Moreover, stakeholder involvement in a design process draws attention to the political aspects of designing and the need to develop skills to balance multiple interests. Finally, as designing and planning are never the same in different situations, empirical research and design experiments in different planning settings can reveal which characteristics determine the potential of designing in different planning contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last 25 years, designing has assumed a prominent position in the planning and development of urban, rural and peri-urban areas (Childs, 2010; Madanipour, 2006, p. 213; Meijmans, 2010; Neuman, 2000). This upsurge in design activities within planning arenas is illustrated by a number of recent projects, such

as ‘Rebuild by Design’ in the USA for the development of long-term resilient plans for the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Taskforce (Editor, n.d.), the ‘Le Grand Pari(s)’ initiative to generate new ideas for the Paris metropolitan area (Wells, 2009), the ‘Infra Eco Logi Urbanism’ research and design project for the Great Lakes Megaregion on the border of Canada and the US (Thün, Velikov, & McTavish, 2013), the ‘Dessau Landschaftszug’ design strategy for the Dessau region in Germany (Langner, 2010, 2014), and the ‘Coastal Quality Studio’, a series of collaborative design workshops for climate change adaptation in the coastal areas of the Netherlands (Brand, Kersten, Pot, & Warmerdam, 2014). Design projects like these focus on a supra-local or regional scale and take a strategic perspective. In that sense they are reminiscent of late 19th and 20th century regional designs from well-known landscape architects and urban

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planners like Frederick Law Olmsted, Constantinos Doxadis, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. Current regional designs are the outcome of intense collaboration between people from different disciplines and with the participation of many stakeholders (Balz & Zonneveld, 2015; Meijsmans, 2010; Neuman, 2000; Steinitz, 2012).

Not all regional design projects are equally successful. In the Netherlands some turned out to have had enormous and transformative effects, while others hardly had any impact at all (de Jonge, 2008, 2009). Nevertheless, regional designing and design approaches to planning have become quite common in Dutch planning practice over the last two decades (de Zwart, 2015; Meijsmans & Beelen, 2010). In academia however, regional designing and design approaches to planning are only slowly getting more attention. There is still little understanding on how designing contributes to, alters or influences the planning and development of a region, or what factors explain the success of regional designing. Several authors have emphasized the need to further understand the role of design in planning (Balz & Zonneveld, 2015; de Jonge, 2009).

Previous essays in this journal have touched upon this subject. For example, Nassauer (2012) addresses in her essay the concept of landscape as a medium and method for designing. Based on the 'laws' that landscapes are by definition integrative and visible, she introduces two principles. The first focusses on landscape as a medium to create synthesis and to merge diverse perspectives. The second principle sees landscape representations as a means to explore and imagine alternative future landscapes, which can lead to surprising insights and innovations. Both principles are useful and valuable in planning processes and might explain the prominent role landscape architects played in the development of regional designing in Dutch regional planning (de Zwart, 2015). In addition, Ahern, Cilliers, and Niemelä (2014) explore in their essay ways to enhance transdisciplinary and innovative urban planning and propose a framework for adaptive urban designing. In another essay, von Haaren, Warren-Kretzschmar, Milos, and Werthmann (2014) explore the value of design approaches in landscape planning, concluding that landscape design is a suitable approach in certain planning situations. In our essay we take regional design(ing) in Dutch planning and development as a leading example and focus on the contribution of designing to regional planning and development. We explore regional designing in Dutch planning practice and aim to develop a research agenda on regional designing.

In the next section, we outline our perspective on designing and planning and their positions in the 'making' of a region, before exploring stakeholder experiences in Dutch regional planning practice. We then turn our attention to scholarly research and debate, followed by a reflection on the opportunities for designing in planning. This results in a range of topics for scholarly research on design approaches in regional planning.

## 2. Design, planning and the 'making' of a region

'Design' is both a noun and a verb. As Lenzholzer, Duchhart, and Koh (2013) have said, it is helpful to distinguish between *designs*, the artefacts that are the outcomes of the act of designing, and *designing*, the process of creating these results. Besides *designs* and *designing*, we use the term *designer* to mean a professional who is trained and educated in a spatial design discipline, such as landscape architecture or urban design.

In general terms, designing can be defined as "the playful creation and strict evaluation of the possible forms of something, including how it is made" (Lynch, 1981, p. 290). This 'something' in Lynch's definition is in our case the landscape of a region—the arrangement of settlements, infrastructure, water features, nature reserves and other land uses, including the relationships between

them and their aesthetic appearance. This kind of designing is referred to as regional design and has its roots in landscape architecture and urban design (de Jonge, 2009; Neuman, 2000). The resulting designs cover a large area and seek to accommodate change over a long period of time. They have a strategic character and provide the framework for smaller scale decisions.

Regional designs usually consist of maps and illustrations that represent a desirable future for a region. These large-scale representations are accompanied by proposals for small-scale and short-term interventions that make the vision and the pathway towards the desired future tangible (Neuman, 2000). However, it is also possible to bring a specific situation to the forefront, the idea being that a particular small-scale development can act as a catalyst for further change and development within the region. This tactic emerged in Southern Europe in the 1980s for the development of cities like Barcelona, Rome and Madrid (Meijsmans, 2010; Neuman, 2012). Either way, regional designing aims to improve the regional situation and addresses multiple scales in space and time. It is therefore closely bound up with the spatial planning and the development of regions.

Planning used to be carried out primarily by government authorities. However, in many countries it is now a more inclusive process of governance involving both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010; Sanyal, 2005). The nature of European planning has also changed from a predominantly regulative activity to a more strategic and proactive activity to facilitate or stimulate development (Reimer, Getimis, & Blotvogel, 2014; Roodbol-Mekkes & van den Brink, 2015; Waterhout, Othengrafen, & Sykes, 2013). This has led to an increasing need for coordination, facilitation and process management in the planning and development of regions.

Planning systems, practices and cultures differ (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Reimer et al., 2014; Sanyal, 2005). Some planning styles are top-down, hierarchical and government-led, whereas others lean on bottom-up initiatives from non-governmental stakeholders. Differences also occur in the dominant scale at which planning takes place, the institutional setting, the tools and planning modes, and whether planning is sectoral in scope or aims to be comprehensive (Reimer et al., 2014). Many of these differences reflect the prevailing social and economic conditions, the organization of the state and the social culture in which planning is embedded. However, planning systems, practices and cultures are not static and fixed; they evolve and change under the influence of many factors, such as changing socio-economic circumstances, emerging political ideas, and the migration of planning ideas between planning systems, cultures and practices (Healey, 2012; Sanyal, 2005; Waterhout et al., 2013). This makes it worth sharing and exchanging concepts and innovations across planning cultures and practices. While this essay focuses on Dutch regional planning and design practice, our conclusions may be applicable to other geographical and political contexts. Sharing concepts, experiences and ideas from different contexts can be, as we believe, valuable for developing innovative planning and design approaches.

Academics frequently discuss and dispute the relationship between planning and designing (e.g. Anselin, Nasar, & Talen, 2011; Gunder, 2011; Steiner, 2011; van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & De Jong, 2013; von Haaren et al., 2014). Their differences of opinion seem to have their origins in the differences among geographic and political contexts, between planning and design cultures, their conceptions of what planning and designing are, and the kind of design or planning discipline they have in mind. However, there often is less dispute or discussion between planning and design practitioners. In regional planning arenas, they closely work together on the 'making' of the region. In the Dutch context, spatial planning is about deliberately adapting the spatial organization of the

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