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Coloring the Patchwork Metropolis

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Adieu compact city

In our democratic and freedom-oriented society is hardly thinkable the possibility to keep on fighting versus the dispersed city growth. *“The tendencies to establish limits, boundaries, to build new differences between the city and its surroundings, to create again a shape for the city that ideally separate itself from what is considered an undifferentiated background, represent just the admission of a conception debt”* (Secchi, 2007). The phenomenon of urban growth is affecting, with different degrees, all the urban environments. Even if it is called in different way, according to different spatial configurations, a new type of territory is appearing, *“a territory in which the distinction between city and landscape has dissolved into an ecological and cultural continuum of built structure between city and landscape”* (Sievert, 2007).

Researchers like Sieverts, Secchi and many others stated that the sharp distinction between city and landscape has dissolved. This means that all the XXth century planning and representation practices based on zoning and land use are not any more adequate. This opens the necessity of a more holistic way to manage the territory.

The compactness of a city has showed the capacity to guarantee some characteristic that nowadays appears as essential to create a urban environment. The compact city model has organized so strongly the thought about the city and urban society that the concentration appears as the only suitable character of the city. While new policies based on green belts, density parameters, strict zoning acts were developed, the urban environments were already following another trend (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).

In Holland, the ancient but seemingly still valid theme of the “Green Heart” in which the core of the Randstad area would remain empty, encircled by a ring of cities, has in recent memory never been subjected to critical scrutiny. *“The Green Heart, never adjusted, never analyzed, has become the more and more unconscious formula that guide the planning and development of the country”* (Koolhaas, 1997). Due to its vanishing agricultural role this central green area has lost its economic base and with that the only active reason until now for safeguarding its empty expanse. An effective building ban act replaced today the agricultural role with ecological reasons.

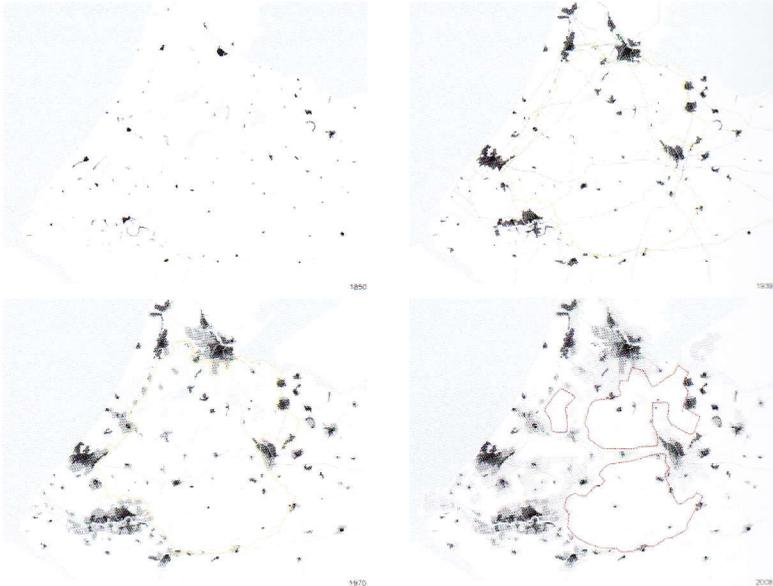


Fig. 2 The broken hearth I

After the 1990, the supplement of the 4th policy of spatial planning came in stressing even stronger the concept of compact city. The future housing development called VINEX were planned close to the main dense centre and were intended to strengthen the position and the economy of the main cities. The application of this sort of "land sparing policy" brought immediately to an increase in the land prize. Due to this and to the market requests, the new developments were realized with the typical dense and low rise environment, that today seems as the main urban leitmotiv in the Netherlands.

Because of the focus on the neighborhood scale and the fact that there were no other stakeholders to grasp the potential of these new developments at a bigger scale, the vinex locations are built on empty spaces within the borders of one municipality.

What started as a policy to preserve and strengthen the role of the compact city actually realized a new type of urbanization in which the inhabitants use the car, take the highway everyday to reach the working place, the shopping centre or just to find a better school for their children.

The same critique can be raised for the new shaped business parks, shopping cities, green belt parks that were planned in the left over spaces in between the cities and the countryside. For the 2020 are foreseen 28.500 ha of new green areas. This abundance of "nature", randomly distributed in the territory and poorly connected with the preexisting urban green areas, will improve the patched structure introduced by the vinex policy.

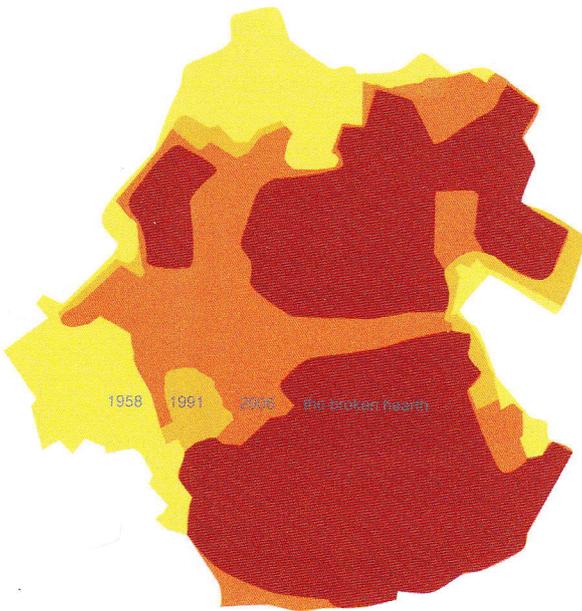


Fig. 3 The broken hearth II

All the brand-new patches are laying together, side by side, without sharing any facilities or interests, without being connected, but instead plugged with the national or international traffic network.

The city is not able any more to host all the urban functions and practices, that are, with different degrees, escaping out of its borders. This concept is easily provable just taking some processes that are nowadays affecting the relation between city and countryside:

- In production and trade, as well as in entertainment, the tendency towards rationalization and specialization leads to have bigger units. These units for example supermarkets or big box stores replace a multiplicity of smaller stores, cinemas, retail shops and are difficult to be integrated into the fine grain of the compact city. They need connections to fast infrastructure, bigger parking lots, for these reasons they find a more comfortable position in the space in between the urbanized areas and the rural territories.
- In leisure, the time on weekends and vacations become ever more rigidly organized. *"We are facing a thinning of possibilities for spontaneous social interaction"*(Sieverts, 2007). Today's city residents can choose their social contacts independently from their own city neighborhoods. For these reasons a new type of leisure time has been developed that is based on the leisure centers or thematic parks that are appearing all over the territory. Playgrounds, kindergartens, sport centers: these are the spaces that have been prepared for the contemporary leisure.
- On the opposite side also the landscape is rapidly changing; it is becoming more industrialized, more artificial, more hybrid because it has to host all the functions and the practices that don't find anymore space in the contemporary cities. Aside many different opinions, there is one thing on which Dutch landscape architects and planners agree: the landscape in not, or not exclusively, nature.

From Archipelago cities...

The Randstad can be defined as an example of the change in the use of the territory and the consequent need for a change in the representation methods. By highlighting the spread of urban amenities, facilities, job places, knowledge centers and recreational areas (Fig. 4) it is visible that *"the urban practices are not related any more with the urban boundaries"* (Viganò, 2010) and that red and green on topographical maps could not be interpreted as each other opposite. It is instead a territory completely covered by a carpet of facilities and amenities.

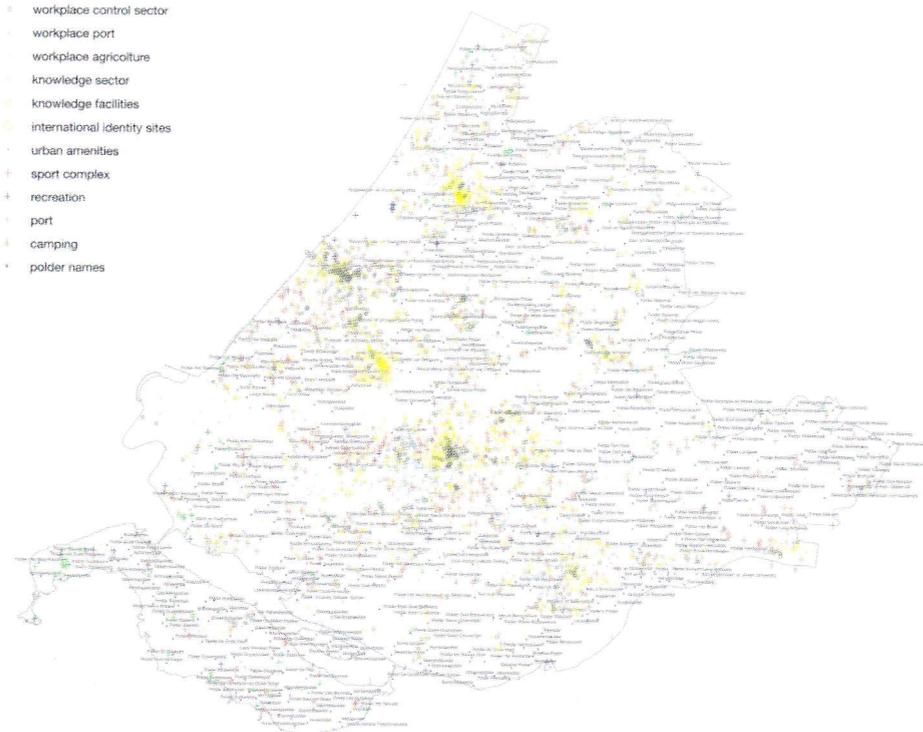


Fig. 4 The South Wing as a carpet of facilities and amenities

"A twenty minutes drive take the Randstad dweller past sculptural oil refineries, colourful bulb-fields, intimate garden cities, medieval rings of canals, eight-lane motorways, hypermarkets, functional high-rise estates, lakes for recreation, old Dutch windmills, university campuses, tourist beaches, protected dune landscapes, glass roofs of greenhouses, reflecting business parks, motel for furniture mega-stores, rubbish tips and golf courts, airfields, market squares and mosques" (Neutelings, 1989).

If we try to represent how the people perceive nowadays the Dutch territory, a Debord-like image will pop out (Fig. 1). In *"The World according to Huda"* are described the pieces of territory that a contemporary urban dweller is using, without almost mentioning their geographical position. Sometimes these areas are districts, sometimes streets along a River, sometimes just buildings. It is described an active life where the activities and the venues are becoming more important than their position. *"The spheres of activities become specialized points of space which are connected with the home in a star formation by intimate traffic areas and thus dead traveling times"* (Sieverts, 2000).

The entire landscape is changing. Some areas have become specialized for the purpose of a mechanized agriculture, characterized by large fields, straight asphalt roads and canalized streams. Other areas have become natural parks, their water systems have been changed and transformed in seemingly arcadia. Functions have been segregated. What before were called rural and cultural landscapes today are suffering the processes of modernization and decoration.

The living environment has been transformed into spatial and temporal islands, but how to represent this paradigm change?

It is possible to represent the Dutch territory, in particular the South Wing Region, through a series of sections that graphically show the inhabitant density. The image produced by selecting

just the dense areas (that exceed 1.500 inhabitants per square kilometers) shows the territory as an Archipelago of islands in a neutral see, as a figure and its background (Fig. 5). With this “traditional” representation too many exceptions are appearing in the territory in between and too many important elements for the territory are cut out.



Fig. 5 The South Wing as an Archipelago

When the sensibility of the representation is increased, taking into consideration the entire range of inhabitant density, related with the land use, the territory shows its entire complexity, abolishing any sharp distinction between urban and rural. The image (Fig. 6) highlights some phenomena that are usually hidden under the dichotomy urban and rural. It is possible to perceive, for instance, that the part of the territory in between Leiden and The Hague, even if it is almost free from any urbanization, has already a density that can be compared with some parts of the Rotterdam city centre. On the other side, inside the main cities there are some areas less dense than the Green Heart average.

“People are continuously moving from one patch to another. Every patch has something different to offer and therefore attracts various sectors of population. In the weekend you can go to the marina, spend the day working in your farm and the night going to Hook Van Holland.

The problem now is that the city cannot be understood any more as a spatial element, because is not a spatial composition. Internet can be an appropriate metaphor of the patchwork metropolis, even if this was developed before. You can have many web-sites were you can go, you can link places and these places don't have spatial relation anymore” (Neutelings, 2011)¹.

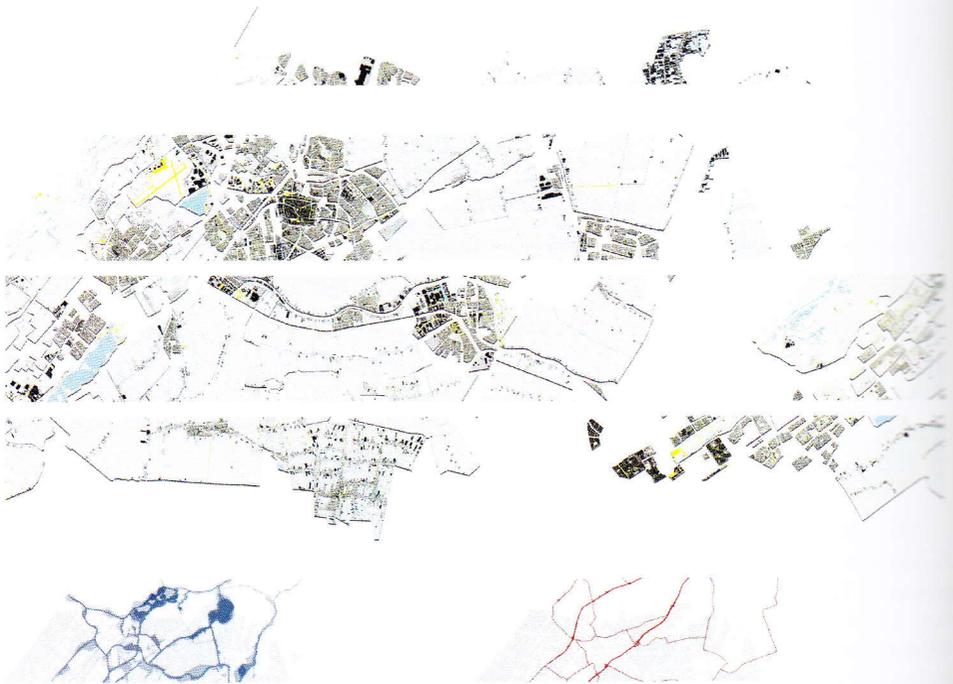


Fig. 7 The Patchwork Metropolis

A patch is a “wide relatively homogeneous area that differs from its surroundings” (Forman, 1995), a piece of the territory that presents similar and homogeneous atmosphere, environment and composition. The patches selection is intimately related with a problem of the scale. The measurement of spatial pattern and heterogeneity is, in fact, always dependent upon the scale at which the measurement is made. It is impossible to define a perfect scale or grain at which the patchwork should clearly appear. The planet is spatially subdivided in many ways, including political, economic, climatic and geographic, depending upon human objectives.

For what concerns the urban patches it is possible to consider the fabric scale, where a fabric is, by definition, a homogeneous repetition of blocks of the same typology. The fabric is moreover a sort of *Zeitgeist* for the Dutch and European urban environment. They are a clear reflection of the architectural, urban and sociological models of the period in which they were realized. They are composed by similar patterns, similar densities and similar facilities distribution.

The agricultural Dutch territory is, instead, divided into polders, where a polder is intended as a low-lying tract of land enclosed by embankments, that forms an artificial hydrological entity. Usually the polders have similar soil type and land height. Also, in this case it can be noticed a

¹ Excerpt of an interview conducted by the author to Jan Neutelings the 21st of June 2011.

clear relation between the polder pattern and the reclamation period. The polders reclaimed around the 11th century and in the 15th century present two completely different landscape geometries because they were drained using different methods and rationalities.

Lastly, a series of special areas, such as big peri-urban parks, airports, historical centers and ecological protected areas, have been selected. They are clearly detectable due to the fact that these patches are already separated and enclosed entities that differ completely from their surroundings.

The different spatial scales are still comparable and are able to mesh both human and ecological patterns, processes and policies.

Other important elements that define the matrix system are the corridors. Although corridors can be isolated strips, they are often connected to patches with similar characteristics. They are the place of meeting and exchanges that can avoid the creation of a series of closed and autonomous patches. *"In the contemporary complex planning situation we can recognize two different networks, the fast mobility network and the slow ecological network"* (Tjallingii, 1995) that become the carrying structures for the development of the patchwork metropolis.

Conclusions

The dissolution of the old European city seems to be irreversible, although nobody can predict its specific future formation in social and spatial terms. In light of the structural problems and uncertainties, how can urban planning find a way from its present still position and defensive attitude?

This was the challenging question that guided this research. The patchwork model proved to be an interesting descriptive methodology. The division of the territory in spatial and functional entities allows a more detailed analysis of it. Conversely this way of doing could create a series of patch-based designs, where each project risks to be a blind closed box. A more detailed investigation about the role of the corridors can represent a sound solution, able to transform them in the place of meeting and exchanges described by Forman.

Moreover, the concept of the patchwork metropolis can be a refreshing answer to the political and bureaucratic limits of the present era. A model that overcomes the compact city limits, defining a new territorial structure.

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