The actor-relational approach in Flanders – Meeting the practice of political service

TRISTAN CLAUS & BEITSKE BOONSTRA

Toward non-governmental-led spatial planning

As stated in the introduction of this book, the actor-relational approach was initially developed within the specific Dutch planning context of the 1980s-2010s. In this period, the traditional strong dominance of the public sector in determining spatial developments in the Netherlands was increasingly challenged by calls for multi-stakeholder governance and citizen participation. Following this trend, the actor-relational approach held a strong opposition against unilateral government-led spatial planning. It advocated for a shift in planners' views: no longer governmental-led planning with minor influence from society, but the other way around: a multitude of private and civic stakeholders engaged in planning, with the government in a mere facilitating role. "*[The actor-relational approach] starts from neither a governmental viewpoint about planning, nor the need for a periodic renewal of existing plans. On the contrary, it starts from a problem definition, a perplexity ventured by stake- and shareholders in the business and/or civic society*" (Boelens, 2010, p. 46).

In the actor-relational approach to planning, seven steps are distinguished that guide professional planners along this outside-inward path. In the first two steps, the planner would define non-governmental focal actors, unique core values, and primary leading actors within a certain area or around a certain planning issue. Leading actors (actants) are thus found among investors, project developers, tourist entrepreneurs, other businessmen, retailers, agrarians, and representatives of interest groups. They are carefully selected by the actor-relational planner based on their internal motives, objectives, and drives in order to obtain heterogeneous and cross-sectoral alliances. In steps three and four, the planner would organize bilateral talks and round tables in the search for opportunity maps and potential business plans (see Introduction elsewhere

in this book, figure 1.1). The public sector and governmental agencies would then only be invited *afterwards*, at step five, when the first opportunity maps are ready to be shared. The public sector is asked to support the translation of these opportunities into business cases and pilots, and to help in institutionalizing and anchoring these opportunities in new spatial regimes such as cooperatives or other forms of an associative democracy (steps six and seven). Following these seven steps, the actor-relational approach advocates a leading role for those non-governmental (civil and business) actors, in order to eventually reach a balance between actors in the business, public, and civic society. If the fundamental incentives like money-making, vote-winning, and interest sharing respectively were all taken into account in a well-balanced way, spatial planning could truly contribute to the *"best conceivable interaction between space and society, such for the sake of that society"* (Steigenga, 1964), and contribute to the overall resilience of our living environments.

As within the Dutch context of the early 2000s, governmental actors and the public sector in general held strong positions within the spatial domain. This non-governmental, or at least not-only-governmental approach fit well with the specific time and place in which the approach was developed. But, as argued by Boelens and Pisman (see elsewhere in this book), this approach fits closely with the historical ontology of the Low Countries (as the collective name for the Netherlands and Flanders): a so-called "horizontal metropolis" characterized by its many competitive and collaborative small urban forces, entrepreneurial and free-spirited mentality, rich culture of public-private-people-partnerships, and governmental institutions that emerged out of societal interactions (as opposed to state-led power imposed on society). As such, it is only a matter of logic that the actor-relational approach expanded its influence and research area to Belgium and more specifically Flanders as well.

However, no one can deny that, despite the many historical ontological similarities between the Netherlands and Flanders, some diametrically opposed spatial planning and management philosophies have emerged over the last two centuries as well. This has resulted in highly different conceptions of the relation between individual property rights and the public interest and the role of plans (area-wide in Flanders or intervention-led in the Netherlands) (Boelens & Pisman, this volume). Such differences influence the way in which an actor-relational approach gains shape in the actual practices of spatial planning.

In this chapter, we specifically explore how the involvement of local politicians in spatial developments influences the applicability of the actor-relational approach within Flemish spatial planning. After analysing the main differences of local political involvement in spatial development, we speculate on what these differences might mean for planners who aim to apply the actor-relational approach within a Flemish context.

Local politics in Dutch and Flemish spatial planning

The role of local politicians in spatial development is indeed very different in Flanders and the Netherlands. We discuss two features that – in our opinion – have shaped these differences: the size of municipalities, and the local political system and its influence on spatial planning.

Concerning the differences in size. In the Netherlands, there are 355 municipalities for a population of 17 million inhabitants, with an average number of 44.000 inhabitants per municipality (with the largest municipality being Amsterdam with 845.000 inhabitants, and the smallest municipality Schiermonnikoog with 941 inhabitants). In Flanders, the average number of inhabitants per municipality is exactly half as much as in the Netherlands. It has 6,6 million inhabitants divided among 300 municipalities (with the largest municipality being Antwerp with 525.000 inhabitants, and the smallest municipality Herstappe with 89 inhabitants). As such, Flemish municipalities are significantly smaller than in the Netherlands. Moreover, in Flanders 40% of all inhabitants live in rural areas with a population density of no more than two inhabitants per hectare (Pisman et al., 2018). With such small numbers of inhabitants, the number of local politicians is rather small as well (e.g. Herstappe has, besides its mayor, only two aldermen). It goes without saying that in many of these small municipalities the local mayor and aldermen have a close connection to their citizens (De Kinder, 1997), much more than in the larger Dutch municipalities.

Concerning the local political system and its influence on spatial planning. In the Netherlands, local elections take place every four years. Based on a coalition between several political parties (together forming the majority), aldermen are appointed by the local council. The mayor, however, is appointed by royal decree for six years, a period which can (and often is) renewed by the local council without a maximum number of periods. Moreover, the political influence of the mayor on policies and practices is very limited. And

even though aldermen and the mayor hold official authoritative power, the administration has significant influence over decisions taken, as civil servants both prepare and implement them. Aldermen and the mayor hold authoritative power concerning spatial plans, policies, or interventions. However, for any decision taken, aldermen are obliged to request content-related advice from their administration, and they are only allowed to divert from such advice on legitimate (and written!) reasoning. The municipal council subsequently holds the aldermen accountable for decisions made. As a result, when citizens in the Netherlands want to influence municipal decision making, they predominantly reach out to the administration and its civil servants.

In Flanders, mayor and aldermen are also the decisive actors in the issuing of building permits, with an obligation to ask content-related advice from their administration. Diverting from that advice – the so-called 'overruling the advice' – does not happen frequently. This is often simply because it is well-founded or trusted, but also because overruling could provoke a perception of favouritism within the local society (Claus & Leinfelder, 2019). In Flanders, municipal elections take place every six years. The candidate with the most preferential votes usually remains or becomes the mayor. In that sense, it is the local politician's job (mayor and aldermen) to obtain and maintain a strong bond of trust with its citizens in order to get (re-)elected. In order to do so, some of them hold open day once a week. Citizens can come by to have a chat about small personal problems like a neighbourly dispute or a building permit for a garden shed, but also big plans, ideas, or views on the area are discussed. As politicians might benefit from favouring requests of certain groups of citizens, decisions on plans and permits easily become driven by an electoral logic, and politicians might use their power to bend the administration's advice in a way that follows the same electoral logic (Claus & Leinfelder, 2019). As in the Netherlands, both mayor and aldermen are supervised by the municipal council. The difference, however, is that in Flanders both mayor and aldermen take part of that same council. The practice described above is called political service: an informal, not-entirely-legal (but certainly not illegal) approach to helping individual citizens, by bypassing general rules (Depauw, 1996). It is the set of activities that a political representative performs on an individual basis for the client or clients through a personal relationship – with an asymmetrical balance of power – whereby the elected politician uses his influence to provide the client(s) with all kinds of favours and services (Dekeyzer, 1989, p. 11). Political service is an often-occurring practice within spatial planning in Flanders (Claus & Leinfelder, 2019).

A happy but transformative couple

To begin with, political service has its advantages. By acting as a 'refined social worker', it is a way for local politicians to keep their finger on the pulse of society. They get to know the individual needs of the population or perceive the counterproductive or even repulsive consequences of their policies after which they can make adjustments. Political service can thus be seen as an informal form of participation for the citizens who are entitled to vote, often with more results than through the more established channels of participation (Depauw, 1996; Poggi, 1983). In the Netherlands, residents who aim to influence spatial developments need to find their way through the local administration first. This is a task often only feasible for those who already have some experience with bureaucratic language and logic, e.g. higher educated and well-resourced people. In Flanders, political service seems to have a different relation with the level of education or socio-economic status. Claus and Leinfelder (2019) perceived that some politicians tend to mostly help those who don't have the knowledge or resources to use the formal way. In that sense, the locally political-driven culture of Flemish spatial planning could theoretically even align well with the basic premises of the actor-relational approach, that society – in this case individual residents – should be well-balanced within spatial developments, and that public actors, e.g. local governments, have a role in facilitating this balance.

On the other hand, there is a down-side to political service as well. Spatial decisions made based on political service can easily disrupt or delay the normal decision-making process within the municipal administration (De Becker, 1984; De Winter, 1983, 1981; Huyse & Poulet, 1974; Rawlings, 1990). Citizens who take the formal path, and therefore do not invoke political protection, see that politically supported dossiers are often dealt with faster and at a higher level (Rawlings, 1990; Claus & Leinfelder, 2019). Besides, since political service is not the most transparent way of participation, no one is ever assured if they are being threatened equally. Furthermore, local service-giving politicians often lose vision on the overall spatial development in their municipality. They are taking over the civil service's operational role by limiting their actions to solving acute problems among its clients (Stoop 2000), causing a spatial policy defined by a sum of individual interests, rather than the public interest (Claus & Leinfelder, 2019). This way, political service can not only obstruct the necessary long-term vision but can also create a conflict between politicians and civil servants (Renard, 1995; Claus & Leinfelder, 2019).

Since the actor-relational approach holds a strong opposition against unilateral government-led spatial planning, pleads for a societal-driven approach instead, and thus proposes a deliberate suspense of involving the public sector in emerging spatial regimes, it could also offer a way to leave the deficits of political service behind. We think that the benefits of political service—or at least the open doors for individual interests with Flemish planning that exist through political service—should be well-balanced against the down-side of disrupting spatial planning in the overall public interest. As such, we argue that the actor-relational approach and the seven steps it proposes could do well in Flanders, although this would be in a different way than was done in the Netherlands. First, the actor-relational approach could open doors for other non-governmental parties that could have been neglected otherwise, and secondly, it could bring, in the long term, a much more strategic perspective. This would not just be by emphasizing the civic-led direction of spatial planning, but rather by emphasizing the long term collectiveness that emerges from the production of opportunity maps, business models, spatial regimes, and associative democracies. Local politicians do not have to close their doors towards informal forms of participation that political service offers, but they should complement this by using more transparent ways of participation, or even better: by looking at what the citizens actually need as a *collective*, potentially together with the private sector and business actors and start the planning process from there.

In addition, a remaining issue we would like to address is that political service might disrupt normal municipal decision-making processes as well as disrupt actor-relational planning processes. For that matter, we think that the actor-relational planner should at least be aware of if and what kind of political service is being given. When Boelens (2010) developed his actor-relational perspective, he acknowledged factors/non-human actors as crucial elements in the emerging planning regimes of human actors, shaping their objectives, developments, and results. In line with Rydin (2010), we think that, in addition to non-human actors/factors, the non-human socio-technical system – in our case the local political and planning system that allows, and perhaps even relies on political service – should be taken into account. In other words: political service is an actor too. The idea of having it represented as an actor, ANT, opens up different views on social and deontological acceptability. For one, political service could mean no more than listening or providing information to a citizen, while for others it could be referring to the competent authority or carrying out an intervention themselves. Maybe then, the actor-relational approach

can support politicians in connecting their usual way of providing service to individuals to societal collectives and longer-term developments as well. And if private and civic actors get on the same page with public actors, maybe governmental parties can even be included earlier in the actor-relational planning process. Because, for better or for worse, ultimately, they get to decide.

REFERENCES

Boelens, L. (2010). Theorizing Practice and Practising Theory: Outlines for an Actor-Relational Approach in Planning. *Planning Theory*, *9*(1), 28-62.

Claus, T., & Leinfelder, H. (2019). De invloed van politiek dienstbetoon op het lokaal ruimtelijk beleid in Vlaanderen. *Ruimte & Maatschappij*, *11*(1), 43–64.

Dekeyzer, K. (1989). *Het effect van dienstbetoon op het aantal voorkeurstemmen: onderzoek naar het verband tussen dienstbetoon en de voorkeurstemmen bij gemeenteraadsleden.* Leuven, België: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Depauw, S. (1996). Rational choice, sociaal dienstbetoon en de mythe van de collectieve probleemoplossing: De invloed van het politiek dienstbetoon van Vlaamse parlementsleden op de parlementaire functievervulling in 1992-93. *Res publica*, 38(1), 135-157.

De Becker, E. (1984). *Het parlementslid als makelaar in dienstbetoon* (Proefschrift). Leuven, België: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

De Kinder, K. (1997). *Effect van het politiek dienstbetoon op het voorkeurstemmengedrag: een onderzoek bij Vlaamse parlementsleden* (Proefschrift). Leuven, België: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

De Winter, L. (1981). Particratie als blokkade. *De nieuwe maand*, *5*, 337.

De Winter, L. (1983). Het sociaal dienstbetoon van politici als niet-juridische vorm van probleemoplossing. *Kultuurleven*, *50*(3), 239-240.

Huyse, L. & Poulet, E. (1974). De politisering van het openbaar ambt. *Kultuurleven, 41*(2), 294-304.

Pisman, A., Vanacker, S., Willems, P., Engelen, G. & Poelmans, L. (Eds.). (2018). *Ruimterapport Vlaanderen (RURA). Een ruimtelijke analyse van Vlaanderen.* Brussel: departement Omgeving

Poggi, G. (1983). Clientelism. *Political Studies, 31*, 662-663.

Rawlings, R. (1990). The MP's Complaint Service. *Modern Law Review, 53*(1), 39

Renard, P. (1995). *Wat kan ik voor u doen? Ruimtelijke wanorde in België: een hypotheek op onze toekomst.* Antwerpen, België: Icarus.

Rydin, Y. (2010). Actor-network theory and planning theory: A response to Boelens. *Planning Theory, 9*(3), 265–268.

Steigenga, W. (1964). *Moderne Planologie*, Het Spectrum, Utrecht.

Stoop, P. (2000). Samenwerken tussen politiek en administratie. *De gemeente, 75*(527), 17-20.