

Where is the guiding planning tradition?

Hans Leinfelder
— Associate Professor at KU Leuven-Faculty/Department of Architecture

No(n)sense of urgency

In times where even tenacious teenagers don't succeed in convincing grown-ups to change behavior and policies to limit climate change and its devastating consequences, it is rather nonsense to expect from a national strategy document, such as NOVI, to define a shared sense of urgency. In a society where the majority of people leads a carefree existence, with the exception of the annoying daily traffic jam, it is impossible to unite society around a common challenge.

The NOVI national strategy itself sets the course in the form of four priorities: space for climate adaptation and energy transition; sustainable economic growth potential; strong and healthy cities; and future-proof development of rural areas. Knowing that the strategy considers a well-performing infrastructure network as a precondition for economic development, these four priorities are all-embracing and, as a consequence, rather predictable. A more thorough assessment of the elaboration document reveals the real priorities: the energy transition, securing Netherlands' position in the top five most competitive economies and a shift towards circular agricultural production. These priorities reflect a continuing belief in the growth potential of Dutch society, reassuring people and politicians that all these ambitions can be met in a sustainable way. The further expansion of windmill parks, seaports, airports, brainports, greenports, digital infrastructure and so on, is perfectly thinkable because this will happen in a sustainable and circular way.

Unfortunately, the NOVI strategy has failed to explore the margins of an alternative and more futureproof planning discourse, a discourse that puts forward qualitative development, improvement and reconversion of what is already available to society, making further expansion less self-evident. The ambition of the NOVI strategy could have been to illustrate that the necessary transition of society to 'no expansion' is not synonymous with 'loss', since 'no growth' or even 'degrowth' will be more robust in terms of physical environment without necessarily harming societal wellbeing.

Many points on the horizon

Missing this transitional shift in the planning discourse of the NOVI strategy also explains the multitude of ambitions in the document. Needing 17 lines at the start of the document to describe the future perspective is quite symptomatic. This feeling is strengthened by the definition of 17 issues of national interest and 23 policy choices to meet the 4 NOVI priorities.

The undeniable strength of NOVI is the very meritorious attempt to merge spatial, environmental, mobility and economic norms and standards in this wealth of ambitions. It has to be said that the authors of the NOVI have succeeded, in my opinion as one of the first, to find a style of writing that goes beyond the familiar spatial strategy document and to tackle different challenges about the physical environment in a quite inclusive way.

The multitude of policy choices in the document is however quite worrying with regard to the operationality and accountability of the NOVI strategy. Most of these choices are elaborated in a very qualitative and conditional way, creating a basis for so-called 'invitational' planning policy society is evolving to. The lack of an alternative planning discourse, underpinned by clear and workable planning concepts in text and in cartography, turns these often still sectorial policy choices into a spectrum of points on the planning horizon. The current NOVI strategy is missing meaningful notions of the type of 'gebundelde deconcentratie', 'Randstad', 'rijksbufferzones' or 'groeikernen' as well as more conceptual (instead of geographical/analytical) maps and a number of smart and accountable objectives that give a direction to discussions between governments and between governments and society. That is why the NOVI strategy is at risk of becoming a rather lame duck in the 'invitational' planning policy. The flexibility these policy options offer to decision making guarantees that small and large steps will be taken, but does not mean that they will lead to the desired outcome. The way in which one of the most traditional planning issues, namely the supply of an affordable and qualitative housing stock, is so voluntarily addressed in the NOVI strategy that an efficient system of monitoring and evaluation of the desired outcome becomes impossible.

Where is the guiding planning tradition?

Finally, the NOVI strategy seems to have the intention to settle the final score with

the long lasting planning tradition in the Netherlands that has inspired and still inspires a lot of countries all over the world. In the past and today concepts such as the 'Green Heart', the Deltaplan and the 'Ruimte voor de rivier' approaches and the multi-level planning system have resulted in a vigorous planning tradition that has made a visible difference on the ground... just compare the aerial pictures of Flanders and the Netherlands!

It is clear that the persuasive capacity which was so characteristic for Dutch planning documents in the past has to make room for a more submissive approach. Even for issues of national interest, the national government often recedes merely to system responsibility what means that it leaves the responsibility to change things on the field to local governments and society. In other words, don't blame the system/the national government if nothing changes!

**take
on
the
future**

**program and
reflections**

Deltametropolis Association
Museumpark 25
3015 CB Rotterdam

Postbus 600
3000 AP Rotterdam

+3110 737 0340

www.deltametropool.nl

secretariaat@deltametropool.nl

**the new
planning**

For more information about "The New Planning" project, mail us or call us.

preface

The starting decades of our century have shown a complete reluctance as a society to take control of our future. Just at a moment when the importance of thinking ahead is ever more apparent, we seem to have lost confidence in the skills of shaping territories, cities and countryside's. Political ideals aside, the margins of being able to create a stable future rely increasingly on being able to cope with creating long term plans and particularly with getting them done. In the endeavour started with three Dutch universities and with help from numerous international planning experts and stakeholders, the Deltametropolis Association have taken the momentum of a new Dutch environmental vision to rethink planning, as a skill, as a societal necessity and as an effective instrument in safeguarding future prosperity. The two-day international conference Take on the future - Critically reflecting on Planning Visions seeks to bring together national and international experts in an open discussion, for sharing experiences and creating a new paradigm for an effective planning.



Paul Gerretsen
— Director, Deltametropolis
Association

Paul Gerretsen is leading in the fields of urban and regional planning and design in The Netherlands. He is director of the Deltametropolis Association, in function of which he advises Dutch government leaders, NGO's and market parties.

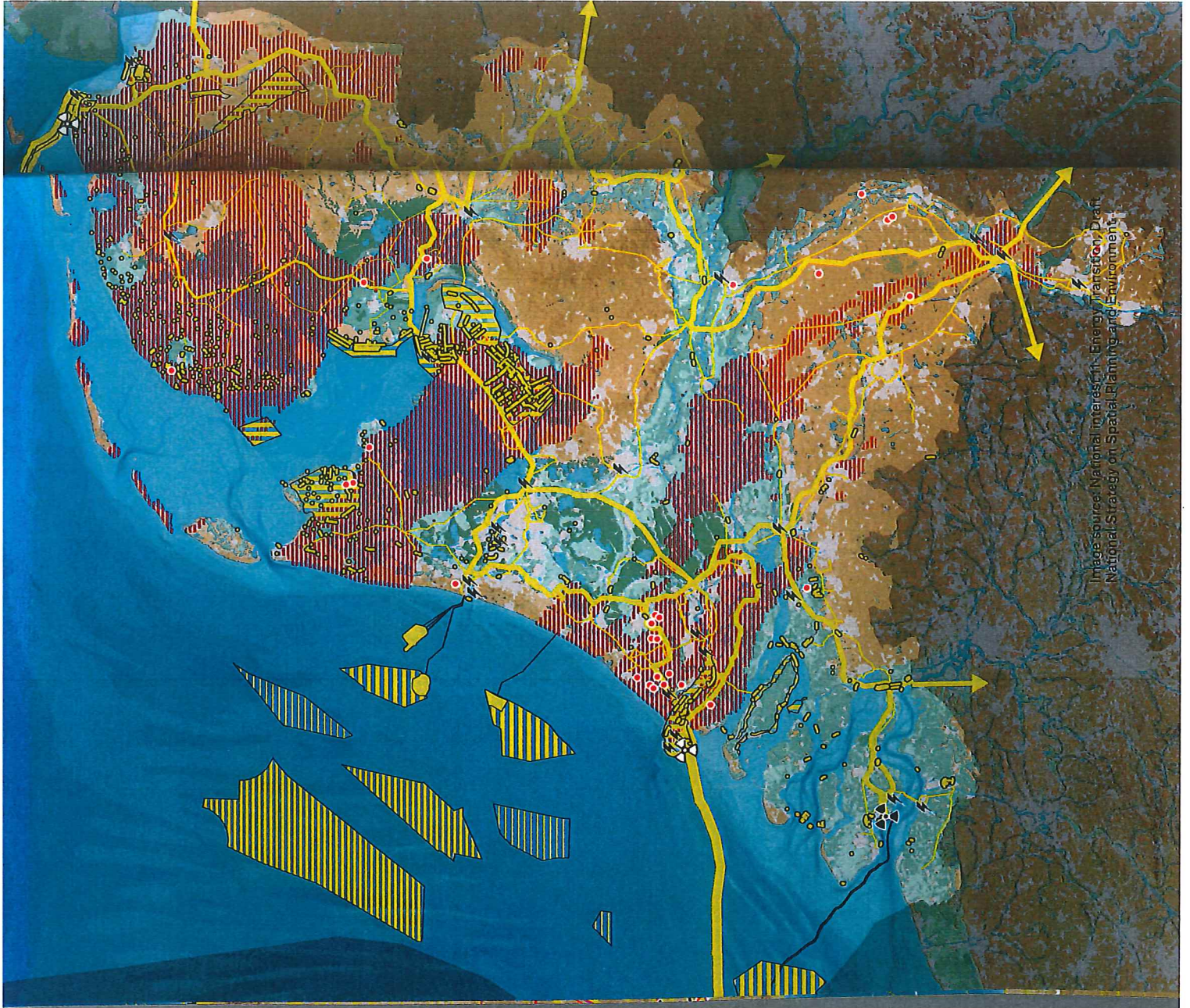


Image source: National Interest - Energy Transition, Draft National Strategy on Spatial Planning and Environment.