

Legible landscapes: the use of narratives in landscape design for leisure and tourism in Dutch cultural landscapes

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Abstract

Nowadays, leisure and tourism have become significant factors in rural development, which is manifest in the 'commodification' of landscapes. However, leisure and tourist markets are very competitive and consumers increasingly demand high quality, unique and memorable experiences.

Landscape designers are called in to contribute to the adjustment of landscapes for leisure and tourism purposes. Landscape design involves functional as well as perceptive and imaginative aspects of space. It is this particular combination that is essential to making contemporary landscapes more attractive.

In the twentieth century, a specific design tradition concerned with leisure and tourism in cultural landscapes was developed in the Netherlands. My reconstruction of this tradition, based on an analysis of landscape designs from the 1920s to the present, shows that landscape designers used knowledge and theories from Leisure Studies and Environmental Psychology about functional use, behaviour and perception in their designs. However, imaginative aspects received less attention. Contemporary landscape designers search for innovative means to rouse peoples' imagination. With the new demands for special experiences, imaginative aspects have become very important nowadays. An interesting challenge for designers is the use of narratives. The value of this approach will be illustrated with the concept of 'the legible landscape'.

A changing context: asking for narratives and imagination

Both in highly urbanized regions and in peripheral regions, leisure and tourism are considered as important economic supports of future rural economies. In peripheral regions where processes of abandonment take place, local economies have often become very dependent on leisure and tourism. In regions where the dominant position of agriculture is under pressure due to urbanization, high land prices and increasing environmental restrictions, processes of diversification can be observed. In order to profit from growing leisure and tourism economies, rural areas are being “packed, commoditized and presented for consumption; the more authentic the better” (Metz 2002: 181).



Competition is strong in a globalizing market and traditional supplies of sun, sea and pleasure or a simple, tranquil stroll in the countryside no longer do. Consumers have become very demanding. They expect high quality supply and unique, memorable experiences. ‘Spare time’ has become the ‘ultimate experience time’ (Metz 2002). In their competition for customers or visitors, leisure industries have introduced more spectacular supply (Mommaas et al. 2000; Meethan 2001).



Theme parks with ever higher and faster roller coasters or shopping malls with a constantly growing and diversifying supply are examples of the tendencies to intensify, enlarge, multiply or accelerate experiences. The counterpart of this trend is noticeable as well: new meanings can be derived from environments which represent modesty, deceleration or ultimate quietness. These processes accelerated the past decades and nowadays, leisure is more diverse and dynamic than ever before.

Unique selling points and an elaborate and diverse supply are essential for regions to promote and distinguish themselves. The key to success could lie in approaches which integrate activities, place, facilities and services, emphasize regional or local identity and rouse peoples’ imagination; that is, to appeal to people’s fantasy, to stimulate amazement, wonder and curiosity. Distinct local and regional narratives can mobilize and unite stakeholders, and connect existing spatial qualities with future economic opportunities (Vromraad 2006).

Leisure, tourism and design tradition

In order to create landscapes which meet leisure and tourism needs and wishes, landscape designers are called in. The involvement of landscape designers concerned with leisure and tourism has a long history. After all, they have been modifying landscapes for leisure purposes for centuries, with ‘pleasure’ being an essential motive in garden architecture. Landscape design involves functional as well as perceptive and imaginative aspects of space. It is this particular combination that is essential to making contemporary landscapes more attractive.

Initially, landscape designers' activities were restricted to private gardens, manors and estates, but from the second half of the 19th century they became involved in public urban space, in peri-urban areas and in rural landscapes as well. In the twentieth century a specific design tradition concerned with leisure and tourism in rural areas was developed in the Netherlands. Dutch landscape designers have been involved in re-designing existing landscapes and in creating entirely new landscapes since the 1920s. Leisure has been one of the aspects to take into account, not only in traditional tourist landscapes but also in those that are seen primarily as productive landscapes. These practices have produced a range of design concepts, tools, styles and images which can be elaborated on.

My reconstruction of a design tradition, based on an analysis of landscape designs from the 1920s to the present, shows how it relates to contemporary questions of landscape adjustments for leisure and tourist purposes. It turns out that landscape designers used knowledge and theories about functional use, behaviour and perception in their designs (Brinkhuijsen 2007). Surveys of leisure use and behaviour were carried out since the 1930s. The results were standardized into norms for policy, planning and design. Insights from environmental psychology were easily integrated in landscape design practices as they resembled some basic principles of landscape design. Diversity, coherence and orientation for example were familiar concepts for landscape designers.

While aspects of use, behaviour and perception were addressed in landscape design, imaginative aspects received less attention. On the one hand this is due to the dominance of a rationalist engineering culture which landscape designers were confronted with in rural areas. On the other hand, the landscape design tradition in rural areas itself was predominated by a functionalist approach. Landscape designers developed design approaches and aesthetic preferences based on the well-functioning of the landscape as a system and held on to the Modernist motto 'Form follows Function'. Landscape designers' experience of beauty was primarily related to the recognition of a logical and functional arrangement of land use. Landscapes were meant to refer only to themselves. One of their leading concepts was the 'legible landscape'.

The 'legible' landscape

In the early 1960s, Kevin Lynch introduced the concept of 'place legibility'; "with which parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern" (1960: 3) or, in other words, the ease with which people can understand the layout of a place. Transposed to a landscape situation, legibility was interpreted as the understanding of how the landscape worked from its manifestation based on coherence between climate, soil, water and human occupation; or "understanding relationships between process and material, form and space" (Whiston Spirn 1998: 6). Apart from these so-called vertical relations, legibility also comprehended the horizontal relations; the ability to discern the relation between spaces. Landscape designers based their designs on the 'hidden system' of the landscape; the coherent logic of landscape patterns. The spatial organization of plantings for example was utilized to emphasize and clarify the main landscape structure. Hendriks and Stobbelaar (2003) defined this as the first layer of legibility and called it 'superficial' legibility; the ease to understand and memorize a situation.

In the 1970s, the concept of the legible landscape was elaborated with the concept of landscape identity. Landscape identity, which also had been one of the components of Lynch's legibility, resembled one of the basic concepts in landscape design; the 'sense of place' or 'genius loci' (Norberg-Schulz 1980). A landscape with signs that

related to former days would enable orientation in time in addition to orientation in space. For this reason, landscape designers tried to secure historic objects in land consolidation projects. "The chronology of land reclamation can be read from the pattern of dikes. [...] It is important to preserve the dikes as intact as possible and to emphasize the pattern with plantings" (Bosch 1984: 76). At the same time, several landscape designers thought new elements should be recognizable as well. New additions to the landscape should look as such and not provide the illusion of something gradually grown. "New patterns must be related to historical patterns; not by imitation but by showing both old and new beside each other, each with its own form and nature" (Slabbers and Vrijlandt 1985: 95). By the mid-1980s, the legible landscape was re-defined as a landscape that offered orientation in time and space, recognizability and identity (Slabbers and Vrijlandt 1985). The extent to which a landscape features coherences that enable orientation in space and time, is called 'geographical legibility', the second layer of legibility (Hendriks and Stobbelaar 2003). The central question in 'geographic' legibility is: "Where am I?" It gives people the opportunity to experience themselves in relation to their environment.



With the new demands for special experiences, imaginative aspects have become very important nowadays. Contemporary landscape designers search for innovative means to rouse peoples' imagination. An interesting challenge for designers is to explore the concept of the legible landscape beyond superficial and geographical legibility. If a landscape contains signs which refer to people's individual biography or to collective history, the third layer of legibility, 'existential' legibility, comes up. Narratives play an important role in existential legibility. Narratives can provide orientation in time and space and add to personal identity and place identity. Especially when people 'script' their personal landscape narratives, existential legibility enters into the formation of personal identities and people's attachment and appropriation to the landscape. Whiston Spirn described this interpretation and understanding of landscape as follows: "The language of landscape is loud with dialogues, with story lines that connect a place with its dwellers" (1998: 17). "Humans interpret landscape signs and elaborate upon them, reading meanings in to tell stories (Whiston Spirn 1998: 32).

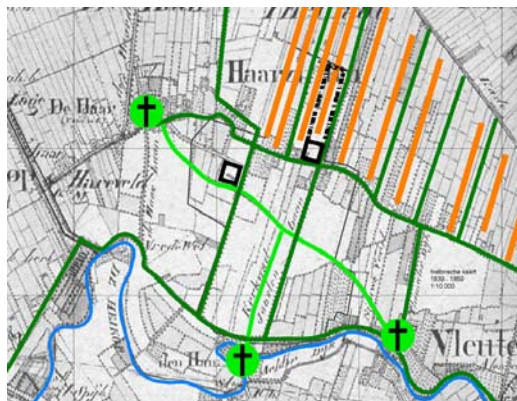


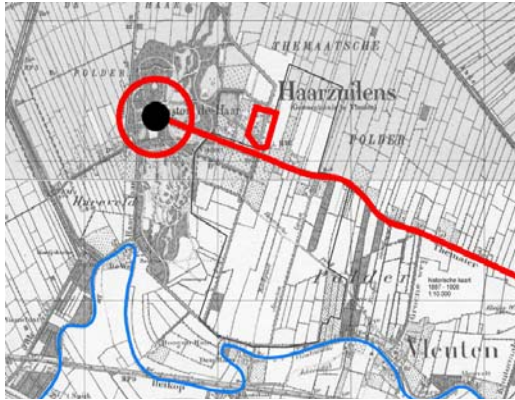
Landscape design based on narratives

A recent debate with landscape architects suggested that the content of the concept of the legible landscape has shifted towards 'existential' legibility. Probably, present-day popularity of history and heritage made designers pay more attention to temporal aspects of landscape. A legible landscape should contain visible references to its cultural history. A landscape without those references would lack identity and the opportunity for orientation in time. They were also conscious of the existence of

personal representations – individual narratives referring to personal events and memories - in addition to an 'expert canon' representing collective history. There was more than just one landscape narrative and they existed beside one another. Landscape designers indicated that landscapes are being read in many different ways, depending on the knowledge and bond of a person with the area. They asked themselves whether landscape designers should add other narratives and make them explicitly visible and recognizable or not. Wasn't concentrating on orientation in space sufficient as a design problem? No; they posed, certainly not from a leisure and tourist point of view. The recreational and tourist value and appreciation of a landscape will increase when different layers of meaning are open to interpretation, especially historical layers. After all, a clear local or regional identity and the presence of landscape elements that appeal to people's imagination are distinctive factors for leisure and tourist attractiveness. An attractive landscape should contain visible references to its cultural history; without those references, it would lack identity and the opportunity for orientation in time (Brinkhuijsen et al. 2006). The landscape designers thought that the design problem was not *if* other narratives should be incorporated, but *how*. If a landscape represents different narratives for a variety of people and every person can have his or her own narratives and emotions, then how should narratives be represented in landscape design? Should the narrative be explained obviously and one-dimensional or should it narrate itself, open to multiple representations?

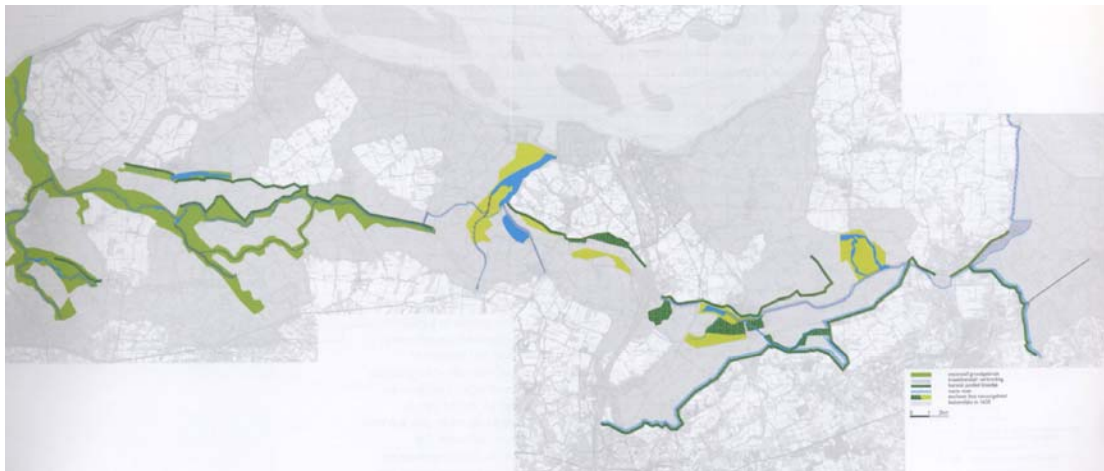
Some recent examples of Dutch landscape design illustrate the use of historic narratives in landscapes which are being adjusted for leisure and tourist purposes. The first example illustrates how landscape designers, in cooperation with archaeologists and historians, chose narratives which rather focused on the history of *people* than on the history of *landscape*. An interdisciplinary workshop was organized to provide concrete ideas, conditions and suggestions for the area of Haarzuilens, an agricultural landscape which will be transformed into a future leisure landscape for citizens. The workshop focused on cultural heritage as the basis of the area's future identity. The results consisted of diverse design proposals for separate sites and routes. One team developed a network of paths based on linear landscape elements dating from different historical periods. The history of the landscape turned out to be an inspiring source of narratives for those who know how to find them. Each period gave cause to a characteristic appearance. Feudal times for example were represented by an unpaved track parallel to an avenue. The avenue referred to the lord of the manor, the track referred to the inferior position of the peasants. Today, people have the freedom to choose their path. In the past, they wouldn't have had that choice. Present time was represented by the entrance road of the castle which was transformed into a 'fun avenue' with contemporary follies. What used to be the playground of the baron, turned into the playground of citizens (Buningh et al. 2005).





Design sketches for Haarzuilens, based on historic narratives (Buningh et al. 2005).

In the second example, landscape designers were asked to explore how remnants of 16th and 17th century defence lines in the Dutch-Belgian borderland could be exploited to diversify the tourist product of the coastal area (H+N+S 2003). Landscape designers, historians and leisure experts commonly agreed that the defence lines should not be turned into a ready-made attraction, fully renovated and equipped with information panels. They preferred to make special, unique places in the landscape over a predictable museum-like formula. People should be taken more seriously and challenged to use their creativity. The design team and experts observed that many people were interested in history in a broad context but that only a few artefacts were left. They suggested to broaden the historic narrative and to distinguish the landscape as a whole as 'lieu de mémoire'. Where historic forms had perished, new meanings could be evoked with land-art-like operations instead of minute restoration.



Conceptual plan: combining the Defence Lines with nature and water storage (H+N+S 2003).

All experts thought it was necessary to create spatial coherence in order to make sure that relicts of lines and forts would be preserved in their landscape context. Sole cultural-historical value wouldn't be forceful enough against agro-economic forces however. Other programs were necessary to guarantee sustainable spatial coherence. The designers chose to make use of ecological and water management objectives to develop a regional landscape framework, a 'landscape backbone' of watercourses, marshlands and extensively managed meadowlands. It would connect the different defence lines and integrate them into the landscape. A continuous trail would connect the various parts, running along the Defence Line landscape, following the defence dykes and sometimes crossing the agricultural landscape in between. Strolls from the towns and a Defence Line Museum at a strategically

situated in the region completed the program. Thus, the designers managed to contribute to a new tourist product and at the same time created opportunities for residents to gain access to their everyday landscape and appropriate to it.



Routes from the towns: tourist attraction and daily stroll for residents in one (H+N+S 2003).

The strolls were worked out in detail, without paving to strengthen the contrast with local roads. “Accessibility of the countryside is of major importance, but so is the staging of the passage. I want to enable a landscape experience along the route in a certain way; unpretending though designed with love and care, and fitting in an everyday environment instead of over-designed” (Feddes in 2005). The forts and redoubts were designed as special, exciting places, dramatized by remodelling the surface level and adding upwards elements. On first sight they would merge into the landscape, waiting to be discovered by visitors. Then, if come across, they would suddenly reveal their special character.



The third example of a Landscape Development Plan for the river landscape Gelderse Poort near the city of Nijmegen shows how the landscape designer based his design for the development of recreational networks on existential legibility. He used fictional storylines to restore peoples’ involvement and develop local attachment and support. When the project started, the designers were confronted with residents and land users who felt that the landscape was no longer theirs. For ages, the landscape had been created by its inhabitants. This sense of belonging with the landscape has been lost due to lack of time, more intensive agricultural management and nature and landscape elements being managed by authorities. Villagers missed their local stroll as paths and tracks had disappeared over the years. In their eyes, their landscape had degenerated into a meaningless landscape owned and managed by a



handful of farmers and outsiders (Van Blerck and Van Ziel 2004). "A path, a bench or special sites invite people to make use of the landscape; narratives will grow naturally. The landscape has become inaccessible and has lost its meanings. An inaccessible landscape is also a meaningless landscape" (Van Blerck in 2005). The landscape designer was convinced that accessible space was essential for people's well-being. "It is important for people to stray in the landscape and in their minds. People want to be out now and then, simply go for a walk or a bicycle trip. It is a simple though essential and universal need" (Van Blerck in 2005).

The designers knew that a simple spatial design would not do and tried to restore the relation between inhabitants and their landscape through a participatory design process. At first, spatial interventions were not localized and the future image was not designed in detail. Design models were based on storylines that referred to the actual or fictitious past and present of the area. Storylines referred to ecological potentials, local use or history: the Vista Romana (the reconstruction of scenic views referring to the Romans who settled on the hills due to their strategic position over the river basin), stroll dikes (trails connecting dike remnants into a new recreational network, aligned with reed) and the cherry blossom circle (a chain of blossom lanes referring to former orchards on a bowl-formed slope creating a small-scale landscape on the gradient from the wooded hills to the river basin). The stroll dykes for example never existed as a network. The landscape designer thought of a possible solution of water storage fields surrounded by embankments which could be used as footpaths. One or two existing old trails were enough to suggest that his idea was inspired by historical relicts. "It doesn't matter whether a story is real or not, as long as we can make it alive" (Van Blerck in 2005).



A set of the card game which was developed to explore and discuss possible design solutions (Van Blerck and Van Ziel 2004).

Proposals for new landscape elements were developed in cooperation with farmers and other land owners. These landscape elements combine ecological and recreation networks and will be primarily realized on private grounds. Detailed landscape plans were made at individual farm level and mutually linked up into a coherent regional network. A recently established Landscape Fund will provide tenants or owners the financial means for management and maintenance. The exact terrain modelling, locations of solitary trees and surprising vistas will be determined on site.

To conclude

Landscape narratives in de voorbeelden zijn niet ready made klip en klaar. Ze bieden ritme voor iegen interpretatie

The examples show that landscape designers of the present generation have freed themselves from modernist dogmas and relate more directly to the previous, long-lasting tradition of garden architecture. Inspired by concepts like the experience society, they search for design concepts and tools which rouse peoples' imagination. Narratives are represented in such a way that they are open to multiple interpretations. At the same time, narratives create coherence in the supply of routes, attractions, facilities and setting. By using narratives, landscape designers are able to design attractive leisure and tourist environments and to provide a framework for integrated local or regional development as well. They are not just an instrument to commoditize landscapes and to give cause for leisure and tourist experiences. They also stimulate people's attachment and appropriation to the landscape.

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