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# Jeroen van Schaick, Francisco Colombo, Peter Witsen, Shaping Holland—Regional Design and Planning in the Southern Randstad

Mina Akhavan<sup>1</sup>

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The rapid urbanisation, globalisation trends, and the new urban economy of the 1960s, accompanied by the more contemporary challenges such as climate change, environmental issues, digitalisation, the energy transition, and the circular economy, have forced today's society to respond and act immediately and adapt our living and working environments accordingly. This necessitates adopting innovative planning tools, tailored policies, and strategies at the local, regional, and national scales. Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a notable shift towards prioritising strategic planning schemes, departing from the conventional focus on large-scale projects for urban renewal and landscape transformation.

The Dutch have a strong and promising tradition of developing strategic-spatial planning that has significantly influenced national, provincial, and local policies (Healey, 2004), (Faludi and van der Valk, 1994). The Netherlands has been recognised for its well-balanced urban environments and successful urban development projects (Daamen & Louw, 2016). The country has also proactively adapted to climate change-related risks in urban areas, with protective infrastructure safeguarding future urban growth from rising sea levels (Runhaar et al., 2012). Since the 1990s, there has been a shift in territorial governance, with provinces playing a pivotal role in planning and design within the national policy schemes. Moreover, the turn of the century is marked by the proliferation of public and private stakeholders with diverse (sometimes conflicting) interests.

In the regional planning literature, the Randstad region, which comprises the four important Dutch cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht and, in between towns and rural areas, is recognised as a laboratory for testing new urban and planning concepts. For Peter Hall, the Randstad model was an 'open metropolis' consisting of numerous fast-developing urban centres with a specific nature of open-green landscapes and a clear spatial planning strategy. Including Randstad in his 'World Cities' doctrine and inspired by the region's polycentric identity, Hall (1966: 121) admits that: *'There seems little doubt that for most of the rapidly growing world cities of the present time, the Dutch solution is the right model'*.

The book *'Shaping Holland: Regional Design and Planning in the Southern Randstad'* authored by Francisco Felix Colombo, Jeroen van Schaick, and Peter Paul Witsen,

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stems from the collaborative efforts of a team of experts, including researchers, consultants, and practitioners. It aims to provide a detailed and illustrative narrative of the contemporary Dutch experience in regional spatial planning and design. The focus is on the South Randstad region as a laboratory for testing regional ‘designing’ and how it evolved and functioned during the 25-year period from the early 1990s, which marks a significant development era. From a planning perspective, the 1990s was a turning point for shifting from functional zoning to strategic planning, followed by decentralisation and deregulation of the planning system. Here, ‘regional design’ is introduced and used as a powerful tool for bridging spatial and regional planning with architecture and urban design disciplines through the narration of various projects and studies over time.

Moreover, the aim is to demonstrate ‘design’ as an important instrument for recognising challenges—primarily climate adaptation and the transition to a circular economy—by narrating the multiplicity of scales and stakeholders and then imagining convincing scenarios for the future of regions. The authors advocate for an expanded understanding of the region that transcends conventional boundaries and encompasses factors such as infrastructure, landscape units, daily urban systems, economic relations, etc. They argue that regional design is essential for addressing territorial issues and envisioning sustainable futures in a region where administrative borders are not defined due to the complexity of urban and rural patterns, global economic activities, and ecological systems. It is worth highlighting the fundamental distinction between regional and urban design that is generally about the scale and details provided in the plan: the latter is concerned with local level and master planning—the design of a group of buildings, spaces, and street profile—while the former is all about shaping frameworks for territorial governance and decision-making while bringing together various stakeholders.

Following an introduction to the era after the WWII historical context and spatial planning of the region, the core part of the book is structured into six thematic chapters—the Coast, Urban Growth, Landscape, Corridors, Regional Transit-Oriented Development, and Beyond the Port—each with a focus on a specific regional spatial structure. Working with ‘layers’ as a method and analytical basis, each chapter showcases a distinctive interplay between space, networks, flows, and human presence. The discussions in the thematic chapters are enriched by six interviews conducted with key players in the Randstad region. The final concluding section ‘Regional Design Principles for the Future’, briefly outlines four important ‘lessons’, providing readers with valuable insights to take away from each chapter: (i) regional design as a continuous process of visioning across different scales, as a compass that guides the decisions and actions; (ii) the fundamental role of ‘governance’ in making a regional design work; (iii) expanding the territory into layers as a constant working method; (iv) finding the right balance between changing scales, constant visioning, setting the governance framework, and using the layering approach to decompose and recompose the territory. The authors suggest a regional design based on a balanced ‘formula’ between ‘agenda-setting design’ and ‘development-oriented design’.

How could ‘Shaping Holland’ contribute to Europe’s current spatial planning and design debate? Perhaps it could foster the rethinking of boundaries beyond the municipal scale and call for action on climate change, resource preservation, and the circular economy at the regional scale. Overall, this book provides inspiring visual narratives and detailed illustrations on ‘designing’ the region as a new territorial governance. It serves as a valuable resource for both academic scholars and practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of their territory beyond limited borders, especially while dealing with challenges such as climate change and sustainability. One important issue that remains relatively open in this book is the aspect of ‘public participation’ and ‘citizen science’ that is

becoming increasingly important in today's decision-making process. Although the authors hint at the call for giving more space to citizens' initiatives and contributions in spatial planning, the question of 'how' to involve and dedicate space to the complex network of private actors (e.g. industry, NGOs, etc.) and citizens in particular in the process of 'co-designing' and research by design remains relatively untouched.

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