Evolving regional spaces in the southern Randstad[1]

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Abstract
The Randstad in the Netherlands is known for its polycentric configuration resulting in daily urban systems and planning realities that do not match the formal government tiers. During the years many soft governance spaces have been put forward to address this issue. The situation is particularly complex in the South Wing of the Randstad, an area struggling to maintain its competitive position while at the same time improve spatial quality and social/economic cohesion. The paper will address the way in which governance in the southern Randstad has been organized in the domain of spatial planning. Applying the notion of soft spaces we will examine two overlapping governance arrangements: the South Wing Cooperation and the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague. Often the rationale of a soft space is 'to get things done', to overcome the rigidness and inflexibility of hard administrative structures. The wider public does not even have a clue that networks as the South Wing Cooperation or the Metropolitan Region exist. While these soft spaces undeniably are a reality for administrators and officials, they are unknown quantities for many.

1.   Introduction

Soft spaces play a significant role in Dutch spatial planning and territorial governance where they have been a key rationale in the maturing of post-war planning. The Randstad – as the most famous Dutch soft space – as a whole and parts within it are in an unremitting state of change of scale and focus and therefor an interesting case for this paper. This paper focuses on the southern part of the Randstad. The search for an effective level of scale between the formal provincial and local, municipal spaces is a persistent issue in Dutch planning. It is particularly interesting as two largely overlapping soft spaces are at stake: the South Wing Cooperation (*Samenwerkingsverband Zuidvleugel*) and the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague (*Metropoolregio Rotterdam Den Haag*).[2]

What makes the southern part of the Randstad an interesting phenomenon when looking at soft spaces and soft governance is that (1) policy stakeholders share an ambition for a high level of spatial integration, (2) there is a number of cross-cutting administration divisions and (3) there are important spatial planning competences both at local and regional level which call for at least coordination. Post-war history on these regional spaces shows a shifting focus concerning the level of scale to coordinate and integrate policies. Many soft and hard approaches towards the governance of the Randstad – and spaces within the Randstad at lower levels – have been discussed, introduced and abolished during time. In section 2 we will discuss various efforts to organize governance at the

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[2] The information on the website of the South Wing Cooperation is only available in Dutch (http://www.zuidvleugel.nl/) while the website of the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague (http://mrdh.nl/metropolitan-region-rotterdam-hague) is partly in English. This is a clear indication that the former is more internally and the latter externally oriented (both websites accessed May 2014).

city-regional level. After a characterisation of the area in section 3, the two main regional cooperation structures are introduced and discussed in sections 4 and 5. In section 6 we round off with a conclusion and reflection.

In bringing this paper together we have used a mixed methods approach. There is a rich supply of research on individual soft spaces within the Randstad by researchers from TU Delft and others. This has been materialised in many research documents. We also made use of the abundance of policy documents on the soft spaces at stake. Although the focus was primarily on spatial planning, documents with another focus were also taken into account. Interviews transcripts were used with key persons which were held both in the context of related projects[3].

2.   Never ending search for governance at the regional level

With the term soft spaces we refer to non-statutory or informal planning spaces or processes alongside but separate to the spaces and scales of elected government bodies such as local, regional or national government. Whilst some governance spaces can be coterminous with the territorial boundaries of elected government, soft spaces by contrast involve the creation of new geographies that transcend existing political administrative boundaries. As such they represent specific social constructions of space which do not correspond to the political-territorial boundaries and internal divisions of the nation-state. The governance bodies that use these spaces to define their areas of interest are not subject to the formal system of democratic elections, though they may well set out to work within alternative accountability frameworks, and to claim legitimacy though their engagement with elected politicians and government actors. Soft space forms of governance typically involve diverse mixes of actors, including from government, civil society and the private sector, creating new networks which may vary according to the project or thematic policy area under construction. Typically they are intended to allow new thinking to emerge and to provide testing grounds for new policy interventions[4].

A prime reason that soft spaces emerge is that there is a mismatch between the scale of formal government levels and the functional relations in daily planning policy and practice resulting from processes of territorial integration at various levels of scale. The formal Dutch government structure – the truly 'hard' space – is a three-tiered, decentralized unitary state, based on self-government of provinces and municipalities (OECD, 2014: 200 ff.). The formal regional government is the province. However, there has been a long-lasting search for a governance structure which fills the 'regional gap' between provinces and the state – especially at the level of the Randstad – and between province and municipalities. Specifically for the Randstad there has been an on-going restless quest for effective forms of regional governance (Salet, 2003, 2006).

From an international perspective, the sub-national levels of governments have considerable responsibility in the Netherlands compared to many other European countries (OECD, 2007: 157; OECD, 2014: 200 ff.). Nevertheless the responsibilities of the municipalities are more substantial than those of the provinces. Municipalities are responsible for a wide range of policy sectors including roads, public transport, housing, spatial planning, environment, social affairs, economic development, education and health care. Currently the number of tasks is rapidly expanding as the results of decentralisation and devolution of national competences and tasks to the local level (often accompanied by budget cuts). Although municipalities share many of their responsibilities with national government they are nevertheless relatively independent. The local administrative system

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[3] These related projects were ESPON RISE and ESPON TANGO. One of the authors was responsible for the interviews in these projects. These persons are listed at the end of this paper. Use was also made of interviews in a research by the European Metropolitan network Institute (A Strategic Knowledge and Research Agenda on Polycentric Metropolitan Areas) (Meijers et al., 2012).

[4] This paragraph is based on a draft chapter (Soft Spaces, Territorial Governance and Spatial Implications by Phil Allmendinger, Graham Haughton, Jörg Knieling and Frank Othengrafen) submitted to a Routledge book.

of the major cities is relatively large and has a considerable staff. However, there is a significant number of smaller municipalities, which adds to the need for intermunicipal cooperation. Provinces coordinate some public policies (e.g. planning, transport, culture, social affairs), and have legal control over the municipalities and the water boards (which are entirely separate from the municipalities and do not share common boundaries).

Figure 1 Intermunicipal cooperation areas in the province of Zuid-Holland

Source: Alberts & Luyendijk, 2010: 21

Figure 2 The eight WGR-plus areas

Source: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2010: 22

Cooperation between Dutch municipalities is very common: a typical local authority will have close to 30 cooperative arrangements (OECD, 2007: 170). Many of these (voluntary) arrangements are task specific and single issue, where each agreement involves a different set of municipalities. The resulting pattern of administration divisions is very complex (see Figure 1), although the total number of intermunicipal arrangements under the Joint Provisions Act (*Wet Gemeenschappelijke Regeling*) dropped from 1500 to about 700 since the 1985 revision which aimed to rise democratic

legitimacy and transparency of decision-making (OECD, 2014: 225). Another set of rescaling attempts in the mid-1990s led to eight city regions which were formalised into strictly defined so-called WGR-plus regions in 2007 when new clauses in the Joint Provision Act came into force. Cooperation in these eight WGR-plus regions was then enforced between municipalities in the field of spatial planning, housing, traffic and transport, economic affairs and environment. These administrative city regions acted as a kind of fourth governmental layer (Figure 2). The WGR-plus regions are managed through boards formed by administrators from municipalities who have to give accounts of their decisions in their municipal council. So it is a 'hard' space of administration but *not* a political level.

In fact this is an example of a soft space hardening as specific competences were assigned to a specific grouping of municipalities under a new law. Cooperation at this level involves a degree of compulsion which is absent from intermunicipal cooperative arrangements (OECD, 2014: 226). The WGR-plus regions have several areas of responsibility as mentioned above but are particularly important actors in the area of traffic and transport for which they receive considerable budgets from central government. The regions consist of a large city with the surrounding municipalities that form part of the same daily urban system. There are four of these WGR-plus regions in the Randstad: the city regions of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague.

The WGR-plus regions seem to have reached the end of their political life cycle. To simplify the administrative structure of the country the coalition government which took office in 2010 intended to abolish the WGR-plus regions and to strengthen governance capacity at the higher Randstad level. Reducing the number of layers of decision-making was one of the main reasons behind these plans although the issue of accountability (and the lack of directly elected representatives) has also featured as another argument for their abolition. In June 2013 national government decided that the eight WGR-plus regions will formally be abolished as of January 1, 2015. The OECD (2007) also mentioned the administrative crowdedness as one the main governance problems. Taking away the compulsory nature of the WGR-plus region would bring in more flexibility for lower government bodies to choose an adequate form of cooperation (Tweede Kamer, 2013) and thus also softening intermunicipal cooperation. This being said many co-operative arrangements have been instrumental in finding appropriate scales for public service delivery.[5]

Because of these problems informal soft cooperation structures came up in the meantime. As all sorts of territorial relationships – especially in the field of transport and infrastructure – are often of a higher scale, non-statutory cooperation networks have been developed at the level of the two wings of the Randstad. Examples of such informal cooperation bodies are the South Wing Cooperation and the relatively new Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague which is geographically more confined. These will be elaborated below.


3. Southern part of the Randstad

The southern part of the Randstad – also called South Wing – stretches from Leiden in the north to Dordrecht in the south and includes the two major cities of Rotterdam and The Hague and a large number of medium sized and small cities jointly forming an almost contiguous urban agglomeration. This is in contrast with the northern part of the Randstad where relatively large green areas between the main city regions are still intact (Figure 3). Although it is one of the most densely populated[6] regions in the world it is still a rather low-rise region. As part of the economic heart of the Netherlands the South Wing is responsible for 25% of the Dutch gross national product. It hosts 1.5 million jobs. Economically it is an area with a mix of characteristics and a high diversity: Rotterdam

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[5] Some regions (Arnhem-Nijmegen and Eindhoven in particular) announced they would continue their cooperation on an informal level because they did not want to lose the gains of cooperation. This would mean that the hard WGR-plus arrangement would continue in a much more soft manner.

[6] The South Wing has 3.5 million inhabitants. The average density of the province of Zuid-Holland is 1,256 inhabitants per square kilometre, whether the average for the Netherlands is 493 (ABF Vastgoedmonitor).

and its surrounding municipalities boast a large sea port with many related industrial, logistic and transport activities, while The Hague and its surrounding towns are home to many national (as administrative capital of the country) and international political and juridical institutions. The city of Delft with a university of technology and many knowledge-generating institutions, lies in between the two main cities, while Rotterdam and Leiden also host leading universities (all three South Wing Universities are in the Times 100). The Westland area and the area around Lansingerland and Pijnacker-Nootdorp ('Eastland') are home to world leading clusters of horticulture businesses, while Zoetermeer is a typical new town that recently profiles itself as a 'leisure city' by boasting large facilities in this field. Furthermore, there are important clusters in clean technology, medical technology, architecture and design and security.

Figure 3 Southern part of the Randstad
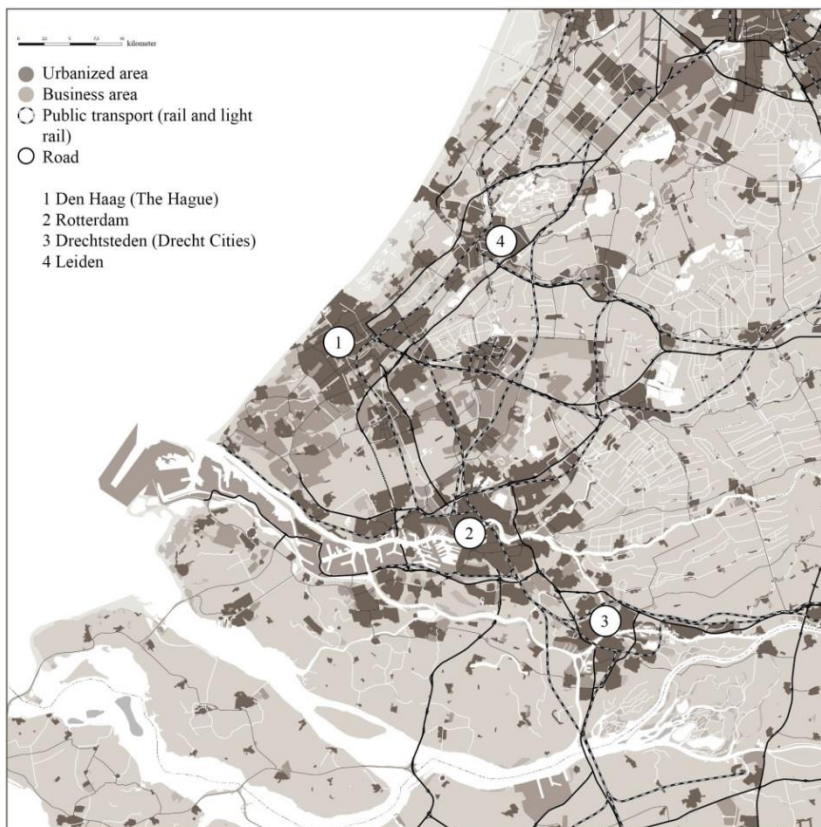
Source: MUST (processed by Verena Balz)

4.   South Wing Cooperation

4.1   Emergence

Although the term itself is nearly 60 years old, the identity of the South Wing as a region has been very unclear right from the start. Minnesma & Rotmans (2007: 41) indicate the many labels of the South Wing in policy discourse: a region, a programme, a concept, a bundle of projects, a social construct, a physical environment, a network of cities, a problem area and a transformation zone. They bring forward that all these are correct, also because everyone seems to interpret the borders of the South Wing differently. Since its inception in the late 1950s there has been a search for the geographical, administrative and functional borders of the South Wing and ideally to have these corresponding. According to Minnesma and Rotmans it is not strange that these borders were not defined precisely as the South Wing is a space in which borders are being explored, reconsidered and shifted: borders between municipalities, provinces and State, between economic development and

environmental pollution, between different cultures and communities etc. (Minnesma & Rotmans, 2007: 42).

The main reason for the emergence of soft space policy approaches (or attempts) in the southern part of the Randstad is not unique: the perimeters of formal government tiers do not match the daily urban system and the scale at which planning issues manifest themselves. Simply put: the province is too large and the municipalities are too small. During the years many soft and less soft spaces have been put forward to address this issue.[7]

The South Wing as a relevant level of scale for spatial-economic policies was strongly put on the political agenda by the Kok centre-left coalition government at the end of the 1990s. A high-level committee was installed which published an extensive advisory report on how to attract crucial investments (Adviescommissie Zuidvleugel, 2000). The committee identified a long list of problematic issues which needed to be addressed: the South Wing has to cope with a structurally higher unemployment than the rest of the Randstad, contains a large number of deprived neighbourhoods, its cities are facing increasing accessibility problems while there is also a heavy pressure on the available space and insufficient 'green blue' qualities of nature and landscape.

Prime-minister Kok announced at the installation of the committee that the seriousness of the problems which the South Wing faced could no longer be tolerated. Early 2001 the South Wing was included in the Fifth memorandum of Spatial Planning as (supposed) urban network meaning that the area is in need of intense cooperation between its constituent parts and administrations. Although this national spatial planning policy document was never approved by Parliament, it put so much pressure on lower government tiers that they simply had to cooperate in some sort (Minnesma & Rotmans, 2007). Already in 1997 the Administrative Platform South Wing – as the predecessor of the South Wing Cooperation was called – was established but only as a temporary organisation: set-up as a network of administrators in the area it was supposed to undertake preparatory work for a new covenant between the region and national government on housing and infrastructure investments (Dijkink et al., 2001: 30; a similar arrangement was set up for the North Wing of the Randstad). So the erection of the Platform was not a genuine top-down decision, but nevertheless crucial to get financial support from national government for new housing and infrastructure programmes: the Platform was expected to come up with joint proposals for the entire South Wing area. In 2000 the decision was taken to turn the Platform into a permanent structure supported by a small secretariat located in the House of the Province of South-Holland in The Hague.

4.2   Participants in the Administrative Platform South Wing

Whereas the South Wing as a space is clearly fuzzy in its boundaries, the Administrative Platform South Wing (BPZ: *Bestuurlijk Platform Zuidvleugel*) has a delimited number of eight partners:, the Province of Zuid-Holland[8] (chairing the Platform); five regional cooperation bodies including Rotterdam City Region (*Stadsregio Rotterdam*, a WGR-plus region), The Hague City Region (*Haaglanden*, also a WGR-plus region); *Holland Rijnland* (the northern part of the province with Leiden as the largest city); the *Drechtsteden* (Dordrecht and surrounding municipalities) and *Midden-Holland* (Gouda and its environs); the municipalities of Rotterdam and The Hague (Figure 4). Initially two ministries delegated an observer to the Platform, but this is no longer the case. It is thus a mix of different government tiers ranging from regional (province), subregional to local and from statutory to voluntary government tiers.

The Administrative Platform South Wing was explicitly not meant to become a new decision-making layer of government. It was meant as a stage – hence platform – to reach agreements about projects and investments without a transfer of competences. In its perimeters – through its

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[7] For instance, between 1964 and 1986 a public body based on a Lex Specialis (so a hard space) existed called Rijnmond (Rhine Mouth). It could even draw up its own statutory spatial plans (to be approved by the province).

[8] The province of Zuid-Holland covers 65 municipalities in total (http://www.vzhg.nl; accessed May 2014). The number is going down slowly through mergers.

membership – the South Wing Platform is clearly demarcated, in its 'tasks' and concrete working arrangements it is rather soft. It obviously has a very complex, multi-layered structure. In terms of 'soft' or 'hard' it can be referred to as 'hybrid': the perimeters are defined but it is not a genuine governmental layer in itself because it lacks competences, does not have an executive arm or an elected council while at the same time its participants seek to agree on joint policies and investment projects. Legitimacy is acquired through municipal and provincial councils where administrators have to give account of their deeds and where the ultimate politically binding decisions are taken. Its main purpose was (and still is) to reach agreements about projects and investments without a transfer of competences. Also the idea was to avoid all sorts of participation through which citizens and societal actors seek influence (Dijkink et al., 2001). The South Wing Platform came into being in a somewhat top-down fashion as the province was (and probably still is) the main protagonist. Internal trust has been a point of constant attention, although it has been growing since the inception. For a long time there has nevertheless been tension between the three major appointed administrators – the mayors of the two main cities of Rotterdam and The Hague and the Crown's Commissioner of the Province of Zuid-Holland.[9] This did not help to function as a cohesive policy network.

Figure 4 The Administrative Platform South Wing

Source: www.zuidvleugel.nl

*4.3   Aims and plans of Administrative Platform South Wing*
One of the main challenges of the South Wing is to improve its international competitiveness and to increase its contribution to the national economy as the productivity growth in the southern part of the Randstad is relatively low compared to the northern part. Especially the southern part of Rotterdam does not score too well on socio-economic indicators: low levels of higher education and high levels of unemployment resulting from de-industrialisation in the past decades. The ports of Rotterdam and Dordrecht generate a lot of employment, but according to many (for instance OECD, 2007) there was too much focus on transporting high volumes instead of more value-added economic activities over the years. In order to achieve this the administrative partners formulated five major tasks in 2011: (1) Towards a cleaner economy; (2) An accessible South Wing; (3) Stedenbaan(Plus); (4) Living comfortably in the city; (5) Landscape nearer by home. These tasks jointly formed the Agenda for the South Wing, which materialised in five programmes: Economic agenda, Accessibility package, Stedenbaan, Urbanisation programme and Metropolitan landscape (Bestuurlijk Platform Zuidvleugel, 2011).
        The Stedenbaan ('City Line') initiative will be shortly explained as it is an interesting example of

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[9] Mayors and Crown's Commissioners are appointed and not elected in the Netherlands.

a platform in which also non-government actors are included: Dutch Railways (NS) and the rail infrastructure provider (ProRail) (Balz & Zonneveld, 2014: 14-16). The initiative is strongly influenced by the concept of Transit Oriented Development. In the Randstad a coherent high-frequency public transport network is seen as an important prerequisite for increasing the competitiveness in terms of business investment and new development. Stedenbaan aims to promote greater integration between public transport and urban development in the South Wing of the Randstad. The initiative combines two main strategies: (1) the creation of a high-frequency light-rail transport system on the existing railway network; and (2) a regionally coordinated urbanisation programme based on the Closely related with the Administrative Platform South Wing was the South Wing Studio (*Zuidvleugel Atelier*), an initiative of the Province Zuid-Holland.[10] In 2002 a new director 'Territory and Mobility' took office. Having a strong urban planning and design focus he felt there was a clear need to fully understand the novel concept of the South Wing as an urban network and what kind of policy development of areas around the railway stations.[11] Figure 5 shows the main projects and programmes in the field of economy, accessibility, urbanisation and landscape. implications this concept could have (Balz & Zonneveld, 2014). The Studio was set up as a temporary laboratory in 2005 and – as planned – dismantled two years later. Although the province paid the major share of the costs, it wanted to keep distance. The Studio was led by an external urban design firm, its staff was recruited externally and it was supervised by a Programme Council in which all formal partners of the South Wing were represented. The aim was to focus on the spatial effects of the increasingly complex and widespread social and economic interactions within the South Wing and to facilitate discussion between the various stakeholders in the area (Balz & Schrijnen, 2009: 78). It was a kind of 'safety zone' where projects, initiatives and people came together.

Figure 5 South Wing with key areas (economy, accessibility, urbanisation, landscape)
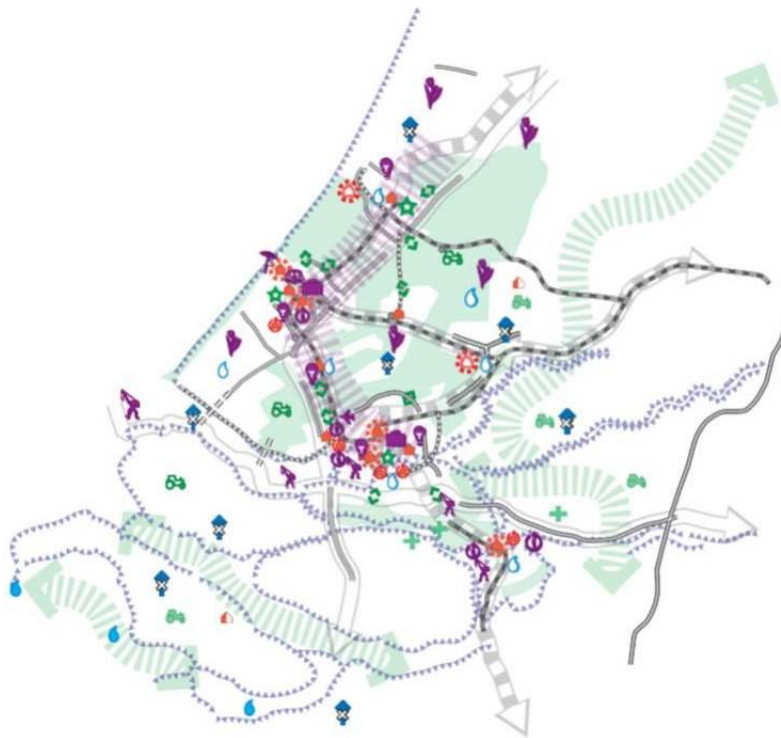
Source: Bestuurlijk Platform Zuidvleugel, 2011: 6

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[10] With the cities of The Hague and Rotterdam, the Administrative Platform South Wing, the ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and two national knowledge programmes as co-owners.
[11] In 2012 the Administrative Platform South Wing enlarged the scale of the Stedenbaan project. The partnership announced that it would include not only the lines of the Dutch railways but *all* regional public transport in the South Wing (Balz & Zonneveld, 2014: 16).

Many spatial analyses and visions were presented since its inception. In fact it functioned as a kind of soft space related to the Administrative Platform South Wing, its official client. Its most successful 'research by design' project focused on the area of the Stedenbaan project which implied there was a context to present and discuss the Studio's proceeding as Stedenbaan was a project with considerable political weight. However, as a soft 'research by design' space it lost most of its connections to the policy and administrative domain of the Administrative Platform South Wing when its main protagonist – the already mentioned director 'Territory and Mobility' of the province – took up a new post outside the province. There have been quite a number of comparable design studios active across the country. Although functioning at arm's length from day-to-day policy practice, a connection with this practice has always proved highly critical to have any impact (Nieuwe Gracht, 2008).

4.4 Administrative Platform South Wing changing course
Since 2011 the Administrative Platform South Wing is gradually changing course. We have already emphasized that the Platform cannot take political decisions as it does not have the necessary statutory competences. So it is no surprise that the high-level political conferences which initially took place eventually became redundant and were abandoned in 2011 together with a name change. Since then the Platform is called South Wing Cooperation (*Samenwerkingsverband Zuidvleugel*), a name which no longer has the connotation of decision-making. Today cooperation is more focused on a limited number of issues where aldermen and provincial deputies have the lead instead of mayors and the Crown's Commissioner.

As we have seen above the Administrative Platform South Wing started off as an exclusive government-dominated soft space arrangement. The South Wing Cooperation still is to a certain extent: it provides the organisational *setting* for the annual negotiations with national government about financing infrastructural and other spatial projects in the South Wing area as part of the so called MIRT programme.[12] This role cannot be taken over by the policy network discussed below as the geographical area covered by this soft space does not include two important areas at the north and south flanks of the South Wing respectively: the cities of Leiden and Dordrecht with their surrounding municipalities. This means that part of the raison d'être of the South Wing Cooperation is determined externally: a central government policy programme and the related financial support scheme.

Apart from that the current South Wing Cooperation seeks to liaise more with key economic players in the region, leading to another type of soft space arrangement called the South Wing Economic Programme Council (*Economische Programmaraad Zuidvleugel*). Members are not only administrators but also representatives of major companies in the region plus knowledge institutes including the three universities and two universities of applied sciences. This shows that as the role and tasks of a soft space like the South Wing Cooperation are not written down in legislation or a constitution it is far more flexible in changing course and adapting its organisational structure.

5.   Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague

5.1   Emergence
Since a few years a new, more bottom-up cooperation structure is emerging in the South Wing: the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague. In this Metropolitan region the two main cities (Rotterdam and The Hague) play a major role which is in contrast with the South Wing Cooperation where in fact nobody is in a leading position.

The Metropolitan region had a very modest start.[13] In 2008 the city region of The Hague decided upon its Regional Structural Plan 'Haaglanden 2020'. A similar plan was prepared for the

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[12] MIRT is the Dutch acronym for: Multiannual Programme for Infrastructure and Transport.
[13] This paragraph is based on one of our respondents.

Rotterdam city region. Both responsible officials in the city regions decided to put their plans together: one single map was made to check what the result looked like. Technically this was not too difficult as the external consultancy which drafted both plans accidently happened to be the same (the reader has to keep in mind that both regions form one large contiguous area). The amalgamation of the maps led to the conclusion that both plans are highly consistent: in fact they reinforced instead of competed each other. Roughly from this moment on an informal cooperation started: project-based and initially civil-servant-led. On the political level matters changed drastically as in both Rotterdam and The Hague new mayors were appointed in 2008. Although they were from two different political parties they got on very well which their predecessors certainly could not. It is probably through them that there is now the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague as a genuine politically approved soft space. Its name ostentatiously mirrors 'Amsterdam Metropolitan Area', the main soft space in the North Wing of the Randstad which started a few years earlier.

Like many other soft spaces it is rather difficult to find an exact and official starting moment unlike hard spaces which are based on legislation or on the constitution. 2009 is mentioned by Meijers et al. (2013). The outside world got acquainted with the new label by the rechristening of Rotterdam Airport into Rotterdam The Hague Airport 2010 (in terms of passengers less than 2% of the size of Schiphol) (Metropoolregio Rotterdam Den Haag, 2010). The Metropolitan region definitely gained momentum through the announcement in 2010 by national government to abolish the WGR-plus regions which will take place from the 1st of January 2015. This perspective changed the situation drastically. As the WGR-plus regions also function as transport authorities with related budgets from national government, a new arrangement had to be set up. One option was that the infrastructure competences would go to the province. The strategy of the mayors of Rotterdam and The Hague was to block off this route as this meant that roughly 0.5 billion euros yearly would find its way to the province. Draft plans of national government indicate that this is the intention for the majority of the country – i.e. in the case of the four WGR-plus regions located outside the Randstad – with exceptions for the northern and southern parts of the Randstad where transport authorities are envisaged at the level of the two wings. As the South Wing Cooperation was never meant as an organisation to take political decisions the Metropolitan regions placed itself at the forefront. If the parliament agrees it would mean that the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague in its shape as a transport authority will become a hard space: fixed perimeters and formal duties (which go hand in hand) but – like the WGR-plus regions – without an elected council (below we will see that the Metropolitan region cannot be equated with a transport authority alone). So far the province – obviously not very happy with this prospect – refuses to bundle its transport budget with the (likely) future budget of the Metropolitan region.[14] Others – as the major employers organisation VNO-NCW West – deplore this: one single transport authority which eventually would also include the Leiden and Dordrecht regions would be far optimal.[15]

5.2   Participants in the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague
Geographically the Metropolitan region joins the areas of the WGR-plus regions of Rotterdam and The Hague (Figure 6). Summer 2012 all 250 city council members of the 24 participating municipalities were invited by letter to join the formation process. The 24 councils discussed this letter and formulated their interest in themes and worries. Some of the smaller municipalities questioned the added-value of the Metropolitan region, partly because they fear to be overruled by their big neighbours, but also that they will be confronted with 'big city problems' as crime and pollution (Meijers et al., 2012). All 24 municipalities stayed on board though as the prospect of the Metropolitan region becoming the transport authority proved realistic.

Nowadays the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague is a network with strategies, policies and a proposal for a legitimate institutional structure. The Metropolitan region is not a new layer of

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[14] Outside the WGR-plus regions the provinces are transport authority for regional transport (mainly coaches).
[15]   http://www.vno-ncwwest.nl/lobby/bereikbaarheid/vervoersautoriteit/vervoersautoriteit.aspx   (accessed May 2014).

government, but depends on the voluntary efforts of the participating municipalities. The relatively proximity of cities in the Randstad makes it difficult to draw boundaries: the Metropolitan region operates within a densely populated area that extends to Leiden, Dordrecht, Gouda, Breda, Amsterdam, Utrecht and on a larger scale even to Antwerp. In order to deal with the multi-scalarity of the region, the Metropolitan region introduced a three-ring-model that can deal with the different levels of institutional integration (Metropoolregio Rotterdam Den Haag, 2011):

1. Mandatory cooperation between the 24 municipalities whereby budgets, tasks and responsibilities are shared and designated (for example the transport authority or investments in green spaces).
2. Mandatory cooperation and joint decision-making of the 24 municipalities without shared budgets (for example with regard to programming real estate; housing, offices, retail, business parks).
3. Voluntary cooperation between certain municipalities and business, knowledge and research institutions which are not part of the metropolitan region. In this last ring the Metropolitan region can cooperate with private sector actors, universities, semi-public organisations.

Figure 6 Local authorities covered in the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague

Source: www.mrdh.nl

But there are more 'rings' – or soft spaces – than these three. We will not elaborate, but we just briefly indicate the main ones. The first one to be mentioned is DelTri. 'Del' stands for Delta as the focus is primarily on the ports and industrial complexes in the Dutch south-western Delta. 'Tri' stands for: (1) the three regions: Rotterdam, Drecht Cities and West-Brabant; (2) the three main challenges: economy, accessibility and quality of life; (3) tripartite cooperation between government, market parties and NGOs. DelTri calls itself a platform: roughly once a year since it started in 2010 meetings (called 'DelTri Platform') take place attended by members of the tripartite cooperation. There is an

administrative core team formed by the initiators[16] plus a small work group formed by civil servants from the participating governmental bodies. So all in all this is a common structure in Dutch soft space cooperation.

A far larger setting in which DelTri is participating is VN Delta, where the V stands for *Vlaanderen* (Flanders) and the N for The Netherlands. This soft space covers the entire area between Rotterdam and Antwerp. It calls itself a 'cooperation network', constituted at a high-level administrative conference in 2011. Its executive committee is formed by senior representatives of three Dutch and two Flemish provinces. The focus is entirely on port development, transport, logistics and economy which is not surprising while there are six ports located in the area. In the past there have been efforts to set up a far more comprehensive cooperation in the area between Rotterdam and Antwerp. The most well-known was simply called Rhine-Scheldt Delta about two decades ago. It was not very successful: striving for a joint comprehensive spatial strategy the ambitions were far too high to be addressed through cooperation in a complex cross-border setting with different planning and policy cultures (De Vries, 2002: 289-290). This soft space collapsed under its own weight. In that light the more focussed VN Delta cooperation will probably be more effective.

5.3   Aims, plans and institutional arrangements of the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague
As with the South Wing Cooperation the overall aim is a better economic position of the area. The participants within the Metropolitan region have formulated three coherent strategies in order to achieve this: (1) to exploit the potential of being a single daily urban system by improving internal connectivity; (2) to make better use of, and invest in the knowledge and innovation potential of the region; and (3) to improve the exploitation of the services and amenities offered in the region (Meijers et al, 2013).[17] In 2012 these three strategies were elaborated in an action programme existing of seven pillars, each with an ambition and actions. Very soon it was doubted whether the scope of the Metropolitan region was not too broad. Too many initiatives could stall the process and could result in bureaucratic and ineffective decision-making as all 24 city councils in the end have to agree with it (Metropoolregio Rotterdam Den Haag, 2011).

Certainly with the prospect of becoming a transport authority one can notice a shift from a project-oriented form of cooperation during the first few years towards a more institutionalized way of cooperation with difficult discussions about democratic legitimacy and shared budgets, tasks and responsibilities. Although the discussion still lingers, the formation of the Metropolitan region is considered as an organic process which takes form bottom up. For each pillar an administrative team has been composed which jointly with civic partners and experts has to give shape to its elaboration. Delft – being a medium sized city in the geographic centre of the region – offers meeting and office space. As originally the WGR-plus regions were intended to be dissolved as of January 2013, the municipalities decided to work along two main streams to meet this deadline. The first one focussed on the construction of the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague, while the second one did so on the dismantlement of the WGR-plus regions. In 2012 the cooperation within the Metropolitan region materialised in the formation of administrative teams to make the seven thematic pillars more concrete on behalf of the 24 municipalities.

In general it seems that the soft space arrangements have implications in particular for organisations and institutions operating in one of the sectors addressed by the Metropolitan region or the South Wing Cooperation. For individual households the direct implications seem low, except for the fact that decision making takes place somewhere far over their heads with arguably very little information and communication trickling down to their daily lives. From a perspective of democratic decision making the soft space arrangements may thus have a negative impact. The model is still point of political discussion since at the time of writing not all municipal councils have approved it

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[16] These are: Rotterdam municipality, the provinces of South-Holland and North-Brabant, three regional bodies (WGR-plus region Rotterdam; Drecht Cities and West-Brabant) and the Rotterdam Port Authority. So again a multi-layered soft space.

[17] See also the English website: http://mrdh.nl/metropolitan-region-rotterdam-hague (accessed May 2014).

yet. Therefore, it is (yet) unknown how this model will work in practice, but it can be seen as an example of institutional integration as the model offers opportunities for different ways of (in)formal cooperation (Meijers et al., 2012). The three-ring model provides a way to incorporate other partners in the process, but the overlap with existing platforms for regional cooperation and coordination – such as the South Wing Cooperation and the province – complicates the picture (Meijers et al., 2013). In the short existence of the Metropolitan region cooperation no spatial visions were (yet) presented. The institutional setting and activity programmes are at the centre of this collaboration. Visions are primarily a visual translation of objectives into logo types without specific spatial designs.

6.   Conclusion and reflection

Creating governance capacity at the level of the Randstad as well as the two wings proved to be challenging, at least in the South Wing, with the two larger cities of The Hague and Rotterdam often acting as competitors. Currently there are two soft spaces and how they will evolve in relation to each other is uncertain. The first one and geographically the largest, the South Wing Cooperation (but originally set up as Administrative Platform South Wing in 2000) has no decision-making or executive competences, but forms the setting for negotiations with central government about financing infrastructural and other spatial projects in the South Wing area. In general it has an ancillary function for province and municipalities, all of them represented by their regional bodies except for the two main cities. It does not reach out very much to the wider public although it tries to liaise with main economic players in the areas. One could say that as a soft space it functions behind and through the hard governance spaces of the South Wing.

The second one, the Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague came up around 2010, when the time and the spirits (of the two main mayors) were ready to set up a cooperation with more implementation power than the South Wing Cooperation. The interesting question is why the soft space of the Metropolitan region was launched in addition to the soft space of the South Wing Cooperation, while the core area of the South Wing coincided with the Metropolitan region? In our view the first reason is the power play between the three main appointed administrators in the area: two city mayors and the Crown's Commissioner, the provincial governor. While the South Wing is more province-dominated, the Metropolitan region is dominated by the main cities. As such the Metropolitan region is much more 'owned' by the majority of the stakeholders in the area and in this sense more legitimate when compared with the South Wing Cooperation. Second is the underlying motivation for the soft space. For the South Wing Cooperation policy alignment in a daily urban system was the primary motivation, whereas for the Metropolitan region this was the preparation for a new transport authority and, not to forget, the large national government budgets which come with this. With the rise of the Metropolitan region the province is clearly on the losing side when it comes to the balance of power. This will be even stronger when the Metropolitan region indeed becomes the (public) transport authority. For the two main cities this would mean that they will remain in control of transport budgets more or less in the same way as they did within the WGR-plus arrangements.

The Metropolitan region Rotterdam The Hague and the South Wing Cooperation presently co-exist next to each other. They each have their focus, which also means that they do not have to be comprehensive on their own. The two soft spaces complement each other in one way and another and thus do not need to cover all issues at stake. Spatial planning for example is mainly an issue in the South Wing and therefore hardly touched upon in the Metropolitan region.

Often the rationale of soft spaces is 'to get things done'. As in practice the more province-dominated South Wing Cooperation did not turn out to be the most effective soft space structure in this sense, a bottom-up and smaller soft space was started. The choice of scale might be questioned as the Leiden region (north of The Hague) and the Drecht cities (south of Rotterdam) are not represented in the Metropolitan region: these regions are undeniably part of the daily urban system in the South Wing which is of particular importance from a transport point of view and we have seen

that new arrangements around public transport provisions are a prime motive to establish the Metropolitan region. Nevertheless the result of working within the context of the Metropolitan region is that at least the two main cities cooperate much more closely than before. Since its inception much effort by the two cities was put into convincing the other 22 municipalities of the surplus value of participation in the Metropolitan region. Yet it is clear that there is no optimal soft space in this part of the country. As long as province and municipality in their present configuration will be the formal building blocks, many soft government structures will remain necessary to address issues at the most effective level of scale in order to get things done.

Summarizing the diversities of the rationales underlying the use of soft spaces in the Randstad it is obvious that the prime motive has nearly always been to address policy issues which cannot be dealt with by individual municipalities while at the same time the transfer of competences to the provincial level to address these issues has always been opposed by municipalities (especially the main Randstad cities) throughout history. Over time municipalities have been very effective in lobbying for their interests, either through their own organisation – the powerful Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG, *Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten)* – or through members of Dutch Parliament. The comparable association of provinces (IPO, *Interprovinciaal Overleg*) always had less power, to a great extent because the position of the province in the administration has always been contested.

The construction of a diverse range of soft spaces between the level of municipalities and provinces has always been quite natural so to speak. We have not evaluated their performance, but we certainly have the impression that through these soft spaces (and next to the South Wing Cooperation and the Metropolitan region there are a few others, but which are more focused in their scope) destructive competition between municipalities has been avoided. Also participants in the various soft space policy networks have become more aware of the South Wing as an integrated urban network. Joining forces to get things done from *central* government – an issue which plays a role in both soft spaces – is also rather effective.

One development we have not treated in much detail has been the fruitless efforts to rearrange the hard spaces of governance within the Netherlands. Over the course of time a number of proposals have been introduced in Dutch Parliament which were eventually withdrawn by government itself or rejected by Parliament as a result of external pressure. At present government is embarking on yet another attempt, heavily opposed by provinces as well as municipalities because at both levels jurisdictions are expected to merge into larger spatial units. The outcome is uncertain although one can also claim the opposite looking at history: complete failure.

The decommissioning of the WGR-plus arrangements will nevertheless go ahead. These formed a hybrid type in terms of soft and hard: hard perimeters but sitting between the two levels of lower-tier government without basically altering their competences and without an elected council. These characteristics are now seen – at the time of writing at least by the responsible minister – as intrinsic weaknesses: WGR-plus regions form an anomaly within the administrative structure of the country. Nevertheless several regions outside the Randstad see WGR-plus as an effective arrangement to address regional issues. Municipalities within these regions have emphasized that they will continue to cooperate albeit without the formal competences given to them by law. In case this will happen softer forms of regional cooperation will emerge. As there are no longer constrictions on this also involvement of actors outside government might take place.

All-in-all the various soft spaces we have been discussing in this paper function as a hinge between the formal or hard spaces of governance. They also have been *established* by formal administrations. In none of these governance arrangement actors outside government(s) participate. Soft governance in this part of the Randstad – and in the Netherlands in general – is used as a *tool* by formal administrations to overcome the rigidness and inflexibility of hard administrative structures. More genuine soft spaces – with the participation of actors outside government – have been developed at the level of regional *projects* within the Randstad and its wings, but not within the context of the cooperation structures. The Stedenbaan project mentioned in section 4.3 is a clear example. Political accountability takes place via existing structures like municipal or provincial

councils. Politically binding decisions – especially when financial budgets or land-use decisions are involved – ultimately need the approval of these councils. Genuine innovative approaches toward (soft) governance of the Dutch Randstad do not seem possible in a context where classic territory based governance still dominates. The wider public does not even have a clue that networks as the South Wing Cooperation or the Metropolitan Region exist. While these soft spaces undeniably are a reality for administrators and officials, they are unknown quantities for many.

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