The New Dutch Waterline
the story of a line

Nowadays, heritage is shifting towards a more structural approach, focusing on the urban landscape in which the intangible or the narrative of the place is used more often. The New Dutch Waterline is an example of this changing focus. This national transformation process (1999-now) led to high profile architectural and landscape architectural designs. But do we really experience a historic line in the landscape? And how is the narrative emphasised? For two years, MSc 2 landscape architecture students worked on this through a narrative- and structure-driven approach to urban landscape heritage. This contribution will research the immaterial aspects which were used by the students and try to identify different types of stories being used.

After most Medieval castles lost their role in the defence of sites and regions, Dutch defence was based on defence lines with different military strategies. One of them was a water defence line, a vast amount of unbridgable water to stop the enemy by inundation. The New Dutch Waterline (1815-1963) was a complete water defence line which included two castles, several tower fortresses, several fortified cities and had two co-working systems. The first system was the main resistance line which combined a series of adjacent inundation fields with water works (inundation canals, water inlet sluices and such) to flood the land as quickly as possible. This flooded area was approximately six to eight kilometres wide and 40 to 60 centimetres deep; not deep enough for ships but too dangerous to wade through for soldiers in woolen cloth. The second system consisted of military objects (fortresses, bunkers, group shelters and such) for defending specific non-floodable places, the so-called access points, like crossings with roads, rivers and train tracks.

Later on, due to changes in warfare, this clear outline incorporated numerous casemates, lunettes and bunkers for group shelter. The Waterline was spatially functioning on three scales; from an object level (fortress, bunker or site), from areas (access points) as well as the entire Kne. The main theme of the line was vision. How could you see as much as possible, without being seen by the enemy? A definition in line with the ideas on site specificity which was defined by Braae and Diedrich in the three terms: physical, immaterial and dynamic aspects. The project started as a top-down process with many participating actors, means and conditions, which led to renewed attention for our military past and many transformations were published. Almost iconic is the cut-through Bunker 599. These transformations led to many renewed sites and functions like: campsites, hotels or B&B, living areas, museums and many places to drink and eat. But although the main ideas for transformation were framed in the wider spatial context, we see a strong focus on the transformation of objects, like fortresses, bunkers and even group shelters. Large scale plans or even plans for the entire line are limited.

Material and immaterial heritage

Students were asked to research and design with the narrative of the line and to show a transformation plan. As the theoretical background for MSc 2, a heritage landscape (heritage site) was defined as a system of both material (physical; structure, objects, plain) and immaterial elements (narrative), changed over time by nature and men. A definition in line with Braae and Diedrich in the three terms: physical, immaterial and dynamic aspects.

Students were struggling with the complexity of many layers of and many types of stories and how to turn these into spatial designs. In general, two different approaches towards heritage were used: they used historic stories nowadays or used the (current) experience of the history and combined it with new functions related to the past. A large group used the historic narrative of mostly the line itself on aspects of use and meaning on different scales. Students tried to emphasise the main resistance line with small orange poles, white flags to show the ‘end’ of the inundation fields and even coloured hiking paths with historic facts to keep the memory of the line. Other students worked with the site specific history, focusing on the day-to-day activities like working, waiting to fight the enemy, fear, boredom and writing poetry. Here, students made plans to show even other functions in time like agriculture and focussing on ‘different’ histories on site. But there were even plans to show the consequences of inundation very literally in waterparks and playgrounds. The last set of plans tried to preserve the current, historic atmosphere and in historic reflects on nature, as part of the essence of the place. The (bodily) experience and visual beauty, uniqueness and quietness were essential for two plans that developed small and medium scale plans for retreats. This new function was referring to the waiting and boredom of soldiers.

The wide variety of outcomes shows generally that sites have (mostly) different types of stories: of day-to-day use, stories of its specific use (defence) and what it was representing (meaning over time), and stories referring to the memory of the history or to a specific moment in time, contributing to the atmosphere to the place. But to really understand the importance and construction of the narrative on heritage sites more research is needed.

Note: Student’s MSc 2 work is available through the TUDelft library (Shelby). An article on the transformation process will be published in the near future by the author.

References