Rural Landscape Anatomy: Public space and civil yards in Dutch rural landscapes of the future

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Abstract
Landscape Architecture is still maturing in the Netherlands. It fills gaps left by urban designers and provides integrated design examples that reflect current cultural conditions, yet at the same time this does not necessarily lead to specific and adaptive design strategies. When dealing with the future of rural landscapes and countryside, a shift should take place regarding current landscape architects’ competencies because, as Dutch landscape architects are gradually becoming urbanists (they may not call themselves ‘stedenbouwers’ since that is a protected title), the long-term growth and maintenance of trees, perennials and biotopes is losing their attention.

Many dominant designers perceive the future of rural landscapes as being only loosely related to agrarian activities. They regard the rural landscape as bourgeois countryside with rural backdrops. Mixed with a fashionable historic perception and this results in an awkward brew of “purified spaces” that only solve non-rural issues. Worse, the same urbanist ‘best practices’ are repeated over and over again and thus gain authority amongst the relatively small community of landscape-related professions, without much review.

In this paper I will comment on this status quo and also explore some projects by young landscape architects who show glimpses of a shift in design motives. These projects focus on the mechanisms that have produced current rural patterns and aesthetics. The counterurbanisation that will gradually introduce non-agrarian inhabitants into the future rural landscape will also have to work creatively with mechanisms such as establishing right-of-way routes, and initiating causal relationships between the ownership and care of yard, garden and landscape – mechanisms that will produce future living landscapes instead of fashionable images that reflect (sub)urban demands.

Rural Landscape / Counterurbanisation / Regional Identity / Landscape Aesthetics / Contemporary Dutch Landscape Architecture

Status Quo
Over the next one or two decades, the Dutch rural backdrop will change. Between forty and sixty percent of farmers will retire without successors (RPB 2005). They will want to sell their valuable land to farmers who have a fair chance of surviving in the dynamic environment of European interventions. They could also change their purely agrarian activities to hybrid forms with recreational intentions. These two options summarize precisely the current characteristics of transformation. The first will result in a rural landscape with larger parceling and more mechanical means – for example, there is even serious talk of high-rise pig industry: ‘pig city’ (MVRDV 2001). The second option will lead to small-scale transformations of former rural yards. In the Dutch context, rural yards are defined as the total of build and non-build area used for agricultural activities. They may include a small garden, often a kitchen garden. Some farmers may sell their yard complete with house, barns and infrastructure to new colonists, which will introduce ‘gentrified’ aesthetics to the rural landscape (Phillips 2004).

Future transformation of the Dutch rural landscape over the next two decades is now a fact – the current question is how to initiate and guide this change. The Dutch ‘counterurbanisation’ and its resulting ‘counterurban’ architecture (Mitchell 2004) may be very different from other European countries. In the Netherlands, almost every square meter is fought over and planned. Larger countries face the depopulation of rural – and industrial – landscapes that lack economic and social interests, but the Netherlands has numerous fiercely negotiating institutions claiming the future of the landscape.

In addition to this inevitable physical transformation, the current mindset of architecture- and landscape-related professionals is deeply influenced by historic legitimacy. The ‘Nota Belvedere’ (Feddes 1999) is a governmental program that articulates the potential of new transformations and their historic roots or relationships – both urban and rural. It effectively catalyses design assignments by offering attractive financial support when designs are conceptualized by both historic awareness and contemporary translations. Although the ministries involved have struggled to be clear in their message that development of heritage does not necessarily imply renovation, this is what is generally understood. Municipalities desperately
seek historically legitimizing concepts to accompany their intended transformation. Project supervisors and designers try to provide this legitimization by using stylistic efforts to get as close as possible to historic patterns and images. This may not have been the intention of the ‘Nota Belvedere’, but has certainly been the result of it.

The resultant brew that comes from the inevitable changes in the rural landscape combined with a general historic obsession is the imposition of a picturesque future on rural landscapes. This resembles the classic eighteenth-century interpretation of the picturesque in gardens and landscapes – meaning a “variety and contrast of forms, lively light and dark interplay, rough textures, and above all, rather busy foregrounds with assorted irregular trees or rambling shrubbery in one or both corners of the picture, between which a few figures and/or animals appear” (Hawes 1988: 6). This vision could very well become the future of rural landscapes, but is not at all strange, for the picturesque was invented in relation to rural images painted by landscape painters.

Yet contemporary interpretation of the picturesque quality of rural landscapes is based upon an explicit belief that most of the agrarian users will be marginalized in the near future. The Netherlands is totally artificial and, on a European scale, rather non-agrarian. Future landscapes may transform into a ‘post-agricultural landscape’ (Kerkstra 2004), resembling a large series of well-maintained gardens rather than a coherent landscape produced by natural (or agrarian) processes. It seems that it is not the living rural landscape that is being debated but its visual representation, generally referred to as ‘countryside’. This contemporary interpretation of the picturesque may become a marketing success based upon ‘gentrification’ (Phillips 2004) and ‘purification of space’, resulting in a landscape free of agrarian productivity and instead full of agrarian imagery. This could be defined as “a distaste for or hostility towards the mixing of unlike categories, and urge to keep things apart” (Sibly 1988: 409). I will refer to this as the ‘purified picturesque’.

For non-rural dwellers, the notion of the word ‘countryside’ may be rather personally defined. Designers have rediscovered countryside as the patterns representing a visual bond between architecture and landscape. They have learned to celebrate historic ribbon development (such as LA4SALE’s proposals for the province of Noord-Holland 2004) (Fig. 1) and have rediscovered village-architecture and the garden-city (for example, Brandevoort, by Van Beek & Krier 2003) (Fig. 2). Project developers were glad that these few designers – strikingly, most of them landscape architects – dared to go with the flow and produce popularized historically based designs. Polemically speaking, these designers – who have produced contemporary archetypes of Dutch landscape architecture – all argue to build in the landscape, even in areas with nature redevelopment. They know of no unsolvable problem; it is just a matter of how to build. In their projects they reveal a frivolity regarding living landscapes that is refreshing, especially after all the doubts about landscape transformations since the 1970s and ‘limits to growth’ (Meadows et al 1972). These designers have revealed a new ethical attitude regarding landscape transformation.

Figure 1. LA4SALE ‘View-shed ribbon development’ Design proposal for the province of Noord-Holland, dealing with counterurbanisation but with respect for the landscape and its history. Very refined in its identification of a ‘rhythm’ of yards in a ribbon development, yet very dependent upon open agrarian fields and without the notion that the agrarian sector will have to adapt in the coming decades. Most clearly presented in this picture with view-sheds from densified ribbon development – implicitly stating that the development of agriculture should be ruled by aesthetic demands for a rural backdrop. (Provincie Noord-Holland & LA4SALE)

Figure 2. Brandevoort Photograph of the new village Brandevoort in the province of Noord-Brabant. Public space design by landscape architect Paul van Beek, architecture by Rob Krier. Mimicking old villages yet with all the conveniences reflecting contemporary demands – resulting in introvert relationships that reflect urban demands instead of countryside interconnectiveness with the context. (Picture by L. Aspeling, 2003)
However, in all this new-found certainty, has there been any doubt as to whether agrarians would be able to have a future in this picturesque countryside? In fact, they are deemed to nurture hard-to-maintain green objects in the landscape, such as hedgerows, orchards, herbal grasslands, etc. Their intentions to change business and start campsites or bed-and-breakfast is also regarded as fitting and harmless. However, large-scale agrarian transformations that will make an industry of the countryside lacks the attention of these designers. Rural areas are not a minority in the Dutch landscape – 70 per cent of the Dutch landmass is still rural and agrarian, most of it privately owned by farmers and cooperatives. It is striking how 70 per cent of the Dutch landmass is still rural and agrarian, most of it privately owned by farmers and cooperatives. It is striking how large, complex transformation problem that is dominated by the frivolous examples of just a few (landscape) architects dominate this large, complex transformation problem that is dominated by the frivolous examples of just a few (landscape) architects dominate this. Most elements of an ideal rural area are thus to be found in this has not yet become an instrument to enforce an accessible network. Most right-of-way paths were eradicated between 1945 and 1970. This lost network of unpaved pathways is estimated at 30,000 square kilometers, one-third of the total amount of unpaved pathways that existed until 1900 (Sijmons 2004).

Figure 3 Map of the Netherlands and Belgium, showing the project locations and nearby cities. (Paul Roncken)

Might this be a crucial issue in the discourse about a living countryside – to increase accessibility of the rural landscape across and beside agrarian hybrid activities, instead of suburban settlements that will be merely marketing rural backdrops? This contrasts with urban public space, where “the de-odorisation of urban space, the restrictions of sounds and the encoding of a visual order render contemporary cities devoid of rich sensual as well as social experience. Consequently, a public space in which difference and disruption was sensually confronted has become restricted, and sensory deprivation suffuses the contemporary Western city as regulated tactileities, sounds, aromas and sights become predictable and unstimulating” (Sennett 1994). Set against the earlier stated ambition to pursue a different picturesque than a ‘purified’ and ‘gentrified’ one, the question arises as to whether rural public space can be picturesque at all. Should not the crucial design issue be instead “to excavate a network of anti-spectacular spaces” and to counter the “mechanistic functioning of the city” (Sadler 1998: 91–92)? A rural counter public space of counterurbanisation may well be based upon different aesthetic articulations than that of the picturesque.

Rural aesthetics are mostly the unintended results of agrarian pragmatism, resulting in a public rural landscape as a series of “weakly classified spaces,” (Sibley 1988: 414) “which possess blurred boundaries, are associated with ‘liberation and diversity’ and in which activities, objects and people mingle, allowing a wide range of encounters and greater self-governance and expressiveness” (Edensor 2005: 11). Rural landscape boundaries of private and public properties are very weakly expressed in the countryside, as we will see in the first project – which is weakly, and therefore intriguingly, rural. (Fig. 3)

**Public-Space Countryside**

In this paper, we discuss three projects initiated by young landscape architects who have taken up a position on the side of the farmers – a bottom-up strategy. All reveal great fascination with the mechanisms that thrive upon intense relationships between landowners and their personal care of their own land. The valued landscape elements that appeal to most people as aesthetic images are nothing more than the results of this intense relationship. This alternative perspective seems less frivolous. It states that former town-dwellers who move to the country should focus instead on the source of this relationship rather than on its results.

All the designers featured below have come to the same, rather awkward conclusion: in the Dutch countryside, there is barely such a thing as a public domain – which is very different from the ‘commons’ in the British landscape, where a vast network of paths, meadows, woodlands and pubs is frequently used to explore the rural landscape. In the Netherlands, at best, cycle paths, a small number of walking paths, and a few concentrated recreational areas explore the rural landscape over great distance, not in its ‘substance’. Although a right-of-way also exists in the Netherlands, this has not yet become an instrument to enforce an accessible network. Most right-of-way paths were eradicated between 1945 and 1970. This lost network of unpaved pathways is estimated at 30,000 square kilometers, one-third of the total amount of unpaved pathways that existed until 1900 (Sijmons 2004).

**The ‘Yard’**

In ‘Garden State’ (in Dutch, ‘Tuinenrijk’) (de Groot & van Pandern 2004), a case was made for Zuid-Twente (the eastern part of the Netherlands) that focused on the re-use of rural yards and their characteristic arrangement of fields, vegetation and accessibility. Due to the overall modernization that took place between 1900 and 1980, the numbers of remaining landscape features have radically diminished. Most elements of an ideal rural area are thus to be found in.
the mental space of a devoted flock of fans, but barely in the real physical landscape. In ‘Garden State’ the designers are not counting on this mental space – instead, they want fields, vegetation and accessibility evolved by twenty-first century mechanisms.

This evolution is similar to the nineteenth-century transformation of urban park structures. For instance, the military defence structures around inner cities - such as Utrecht, Nijmegen and Deventer - were redefined by a modern right to exist. Dutch garden and park architects such as Zocher, Copijn and Springer introduced the attractive aesthetic motif of the English landscape garden. Along the former military topography, long and narrow strolling parks were introduced – a transformation that may sound enormous, but was in fact far from being so. The designers used existing height differences very efficiently by maintaining the sequence of former bastions. The entries to and exits from the inner city also remained the same – creating self-evident and efficient connections to the once-protected churches, town hall and squares.

Currently, rural areas are also redefining their right to exist. Again, the proper professional to guide this transformation is the landscape architect. In de Groot & van Paridon’s ‘Garden State’, the design principles of the English landscape style are directly recognizable in the introduction of scenic routes through a sequence of civil yards (Fig. 4). The resulting arrangement of spaces, pathways and views is at the same time historically characteristic of this part of the Netherlands – with tight social relationships between farmers and their communities – yet it also appeals to a big audience. In the series of designs discussed in this paper, ‘Garden State’ is obviously close to the status quo amongst Dutch designers. It expresses a visually oriented change of the rural landscape.

The new residents of the former rural yards will introduce their own versions of the English ‘patented’ style. To make themselves feel at home, they will probably landscape their part of the farmland with white fences and horses, hedges, flowery meadows and closely mown lawns. Such a transformation will result in a recognizable bourgeois domain – quite picturesque in a classic sense, for its hidden places behind foliage and lingering vistas over other people’s properties (Figs. 5 and 6).

However, the crucial aspect of this design is not the restyling, but is instead a mechanism that will gradually create public pathways. By transforming rural yards into civil yards, and by arranging them as sequences of pathways with rights-of-way across the yards, an intriguing and widely covering network of scenic pathways is created. A rural yard that is transformed into a civil yard will not change the amount of the build and non-build area, but will use it for non-agrarian functions such as a large garden, a few parking places and maybe some non-agrarian workspace in former barns. The new civilians will pay for the construction and maintenance of the new public pathways at the moment they sign for their yard. In their current stressful situation, the pragmatic larger-scale farmers may object to the right-of-way, but new civilians will have both no choice and even a few favorable options with this deal: their yards will be more valuable and they will recognize their aesthetic prefer-

Figure 4 Indented view from the scenic route onto civil yards. (Illustration by R. van Paridon & K. de Groot, 2004)

Figure 5 Development of a rural yard into a civil yard and scenic-route components. Top: Half of the existing agrarian volume may be rebuild. Next below: Bad example of total freedom of housing types. Next Below: Good example gained by strong guidelines for yard typology and morphology. Bottom: Increase of public features on scenic route. (Illustrations by R. van Paridon & K. de Groot, 2004)

Figure 6 Final arrangement of civil yard. Note the positioning of solitary trees, hedges, gardens, entrances and lanes. (Illustration by R. van Paridon & K. de Groot, 2004)
found in the sequence of civil yards, providing yards for all kinds of social and economic classes and creating public pathways that may be part of ecological networks with all their natural irregularity.

Can it be that the new vernacular landscapes are not actually already present and in need of protection (as they have been eradicated in the past forty years), but are in fact not yet even constructed in the Dutch rural landscape? And can it be that the opposing political landscapes are no longer urban or industrial but agrarian? How has this mechanism been introduced?

The designers have suggested strategic exchange of land. These transactions accelerate and concentrate the inevitable rural development over the next decade into a much shorter period of time. It is a classic instrument for rural transformation: pro-active control by land exchange. Medium-sized farms would transform slowly, if at all – at present, they tend to get stuck in the margins of funding and regulations (see Fig. 7). To these unlucky farmers, the designers tentatively suggest a trade. They could sell their land to the big landowners, who may thus generate the critical mass that will enable them to survive in the European market. In exchange, the medium-sized farmers buy unprofitable land from the big farmers – those parts with the remaining, and appreciated, landscape objects such as tree clumps and hedges; by doing so, the medium-sized farms will gain the resources and features to start developing both their yards and the first components of the scenic routes. They become – at least for a short period of time – project developers instead of farmers.

Introducing urban structures into the landscape to increase resources to create nature and landscape features is referred to in the Netherlands as ‘green by red’ (Needham 2005). Such agreements contain mainly qualitative ambitions that can only be made legal when the negotiating parties are all active in the same designated area; outside these areas, general law can easily break agreements. ‘Garden State’ deals with small areas and therefore provides an almost informal trade at the kitchen table that is feasible and constructive. The government and project developers only need to facilitate what is an almost autonomous process.

Two characteristics of this trade mechanism can be distinguished here. The first is a specific manner of negotiation, motivated by personal interests, as farmers become project developers. This may be seen as a mechanism of the ‘political landscape’ as it clearly makes a distinction between agrarian industry and new countryside construction. It is initiated by designers but provided by local farmers. The second is the offering of parcels to new civilians, with a financial commitment included in this transaction that results in civil yards and right-of-way scenic routes owned by a third-party collective. This may be seen as a mechanism of the ‘vernacular landscape’ (Fig. 8).

The Land
The next design, ‘Homesick for Sand’ (in Dutch, ‘Heimwee naar het zand’) (Ooms 2005), also tries to introduce a vernacular landscape. Landscape architect Lieve Ooms returned to her Belgian birthplace to address the rural problems of her relatives with the benefit of her
landscape-architectural education. A healthy 10,000-hectare agricultural area in Flanders (Belgium’s Dutch-speaking area) was investigated with regard to its aesthetic and agricultural future. Again, the timeframe was set for the coming two decades.

In the history of Flanders, there is a long tradition of developing rural areas on the basis of a few simple financial rules. Consequently a visible causal relationship between financial factors and aesthetic features can be seen in the Belgian countryside, creating the typical ‘disorderly’ Belgian landscape. This seems very different to the Dutch ‘over-regulated’ situation. Can the Dutch learn from it? Lieve Ooms thinks they can – the best of both worlds would provide the right future perspective. She argues for a combination of approaches, involving the redevelopment of the brooks that disappeared during the first land-exchange program in the 1960s and the introduction of small-scale landscape elements on the higher parts of the brook land.

However, her choice is ambiguous: she openly admits that she does not know where, when and what parcels and yards will have to be transformed in the coming decades. To address this uncertainty, Ooms presents a large series of GIS scenarios of possible parcel arrangements with owners that will want to sell their land. These scenarios were constructed from detailed observation of the social and economic situations of her own family and a few other related families (Figs. 9a, 9b and 9c). Then the computer randomly picks one of these scenarios as a model of land exchange over a period of ten years.

Additionally, Ooms distinguishes between three types of rural mechanisms that need to be transformed. In the first place, a new and economically healthy agrarian community; then a few new civil yards that will incorporate remaining and new landscape elements that lack agrarian interest; and finally, a rejuvenation of the water system in the lower parts of the area. Through field observations, absolute measures, relative measures, structure of vegetable fields, variation of landscape objects and movement through the landscape, Ooms argues that the desired vernacular countryside is only slightly different from the current agricultural domain (Figs 10a and 10b). There is no need to ‘pimp’ this landscape – as is done to old cars tuned-up to become fashionable icons (MTV 2004).

The real problem is that current landowners are forced into a ‘political landscape’ by European laws. They have to provide a certain amount of natural biotopes that are strictly distinguished from their industrial agrarian activities, but at the same time they have to maintain a certain amount of endangered landscape elements. ‘Homesick for Sand’ may be perceived as a pamphlet with the message to create a vernacular landscape by political mechanisms. The future rural landscape should not be a battlefield in which agrarians are hindered, ecologists gain ground and new bourgeois inhabitants materialize their (sub)urban wishes. Instead, a landscape ambition is needed that fluently allocates the political and social demands.

The new rural landscape in this project will not be drawn as a final plan. It will consist of three choices that are inter-related: agrarian land-exchange for the benefit of big land-owners; civil yards that...
contain endangered landscape elements; and low parts of the land that belong to the rejuvenation of the brook system. Every time a farmer wants or needs to quit, the position of his offered parcels will impose the choices for these mechanisms. The rest of the farmers will stay, for this is good farming ground. Derived from the probable number of farmers without successors, a total of 1,200 hectares was estimated to be part of the physical transformation in the next decade. The introduction of biotopes and conservation of landscape elements will only take up 300 hectares of land (only 3 per cent of Flanders’ 10,000 hectares). The rest of these 1,200 hectares will effectively be divided among big landowners.

That is all that is needed to create a healthy new rural landscape. The new civil yards would be mainly for local offspring. The price of these yards can be based upon the feasible market prices within this region and still provide enough income for one new farmer to take care of all the common landscape elements in the civil yards. At the end of a period of ten to fifteen years, when the older generation have passed on their former grounds, only a small aesthetic intervention would be needed to interconnect civil yards and natural biotopes to a public pathway system. This process would leave a vernacular landscape organized with a scale and complexity that could not have been imagined fifteen years earlier (Figs. 11-17). Com-
pared to the current status quo in Dutch debates, a project developer would probably have argued for a few hundred new civil yards with a frivolous picturesque background – a preconception that is now confronted by putting a priority on agricultural ambition.

The Owners

In ‘Northbound!’ (in Dutch, ‘Noordwaarts!’) (Aorta 2004), this type of design by mechanisms is extended further. The project site is an existing regional park near the city of Utrecht. The total 6,000-hectare project area, known as ‘Noorderpark’, is one of the biggest urban-related parks in the Netherlands. Though it already exists as a ‘political landscape’, its physical components are barely developed, due to lack of resources by the owners. The aim of ‘Northbound!’ is to create a ‘vernacular landscape park’ by introducing civil yards that will somehow provide both the right resources and desired aesthetic engagement. This future park will consist of 20 per cent agricultural land, 60 per cent nature-preservation areas and 20 per cent of recreation areas.

The intended introduction of nature, recreation and water retention will result in an almost entire transformation of the existing landscape (Figs. 18 and 19), yet the current lack of funds does not allow optimum levels of biodiversity to develop. There seem to be too many stakeholders in the area and they only share ‘qualitative agreements’ (Needham 2005). The current landowners cannot achieve the high standard of maintenance that will lead to the intended – and publicly promised – optimum; they need help. Civil yards are not primarily needed in this new countryside, but they may speed up transactions like we have seen in ‘Garden State’ above.

The designers of this plan stress that a coalition of current landowners has to be created. This way, the intended qualitative ambitions can be made legitimate by a legal collective. They suggest that the park may best be constructed in a way more analogous to a business company than to a governmental project. Green professions usually lack the political power to be bold and efficient in these matters.

To create a corporate target for this ‘park company’, the introduction of civil yards proves to be necessary. All the 6,000 hectares are divided into 6,000 shares, and then offered to the inhabitants of Utrecht. Once the shareholders have bought, they may claim a percentage of this share as their yard and build their house inside the park. The allocation of these yards, and the dimensions and restrictions of construction are seen as the qualitative task of the coalition (Fig. 20).

The offering of landscape shares will not only commit new citizens to certain company rules, but will also allow control over the timeframe of the building processes. Shareholders will be allowed to claim a yard and a house according to the ‘vernacular landscape’ ambitions of the coalition. Some yards may be positioned inside a natural habitat, some in recreational parts. A small portion may even be allocated in agricultural ribbon development. The landscape share consists of an agreement on the size and conditions of the yard, the garden and a part of the total landscape. The shareholders only possess the yards, on which they may build future houses, while they only sponsor the garden and the surrounding
landscape, as these remain the property of the coalition. In this way, the important ambition of raise resources by the current owners is ensured.

Depending on the allocation of the site, the yard and garden will vary between 2–5 per cent of the total share. In total, no more than 8 per cent of the ‘Noorderpark’ will be built on, including the existing built areas. In addition, the spreading of shares will assure that urban extensions typical to most city expansions will not occur. A maximum of two to four yards may develop where a few long, attenuated parcels meet in this historic peat area (Figs. 21, 22a, 22b and 22c).

The shareholders will be allowed to use their future yard and garden as kitchen garden or playground at the start of their financial agreement. However, the right to build on the yard is only granted in accordance with the time needed to develop the intended and stable biotope or recreational area (Fig. 23). The primary focus is to introduce the necessary transformations as formulated in the coalition’s landscape ambition and so, gradually, the current landscape is transformed. Yards that belong to natural areas will impose a considerably longer delay for the shareholders to finally build their houses.

This kind of development—according-to-biotope means a substantial decrease of construction speed, compared to the existing status quo in the Netherlands. Some biotopes take up to nearly twenty years to become stable, others five. The positive aspect of this long-term construction agreement is noticeable in the price of the yards (and shares). As it takes a long time before you may actually build your new house, the yearly interest will grow over a period of time to help even economically weaker citizens to buy a share. For instance, in the cheapest share, someone makes a monthly payment of 100 euros. He or she may immediately rent the future 100-meters-square yard as a kitchen garden, and do so for the next twenty years until the right to build is granted by the coalition and a house may be built. The part of the share that will be invested in the surrounding landscape will structurally accumulate to 2,000 square meters of the total landscape maintenance. Families of all social levels will consider it a very tempting investment to create a good future heritage for their children.

The success of the coalition ambitions is totally dependent upon the buyers. If they don’t buy, the resources of the park management will stay the same. It is a kind of Belgian experiment in Dutch society. It is interesting to note that in this proposal, shareholders, with much more committal connotations, replace the stakeholders usually referred to as partners in public–private agreements. This kind of commitment may be seen as another mechanism of the countryside: an in-depth relationship between owner and financer. By introducing a landscape share construction that is designed parallel to the maturation of new landscape biotopes, the designers hope to establish an equal commitment amongst the new shareholders.

One remarkable element in this project is the intended aesthetic freedom of housing styles. Landscape architects seem to argue for this more and more. In their landscaped reality, the dominance of a large tree, shrub or hedge between the observer and the object
compensates for almost any type of built object. With this in mind even old tattered villas and non-fashionable houses can have the presence of estate houses. Even when all shares are sold, the dwellings that result will hardly be recognizable in between all the green landscape ambitions. Precedent to this, the designers refuse to prescribe colors, parcel borders, styles or façades.

Reflection
The reviewed projects are hypothetical experiments to define future characteristics of living rural landscapes. The designers involved seem to take a different road to that of most landscape architects, who are gradually becoming urbanists. Dealing with the future of rural areas inevitably means dealing with the growth and care of plants, trees, animals and social relationships. The importance of agrarian management and the existence of landscape elements and features are reflected in these projects. In most cases, the intended rural aesthetics are defined as causal relationships between ownership and economic reliance, without much specific aesthetic direction.

Within a context of changing agrarian activity, and through the introduction of non-agrarian inhabitants, the landscape will change, but that does not mean that a ‘post-agrarian landscape’ (Kerkstra 2004) will be inevitable. The message of the projects above is of a living rural landscape that is the result of agrarian passions. Implicitly, they extend the definition of ‘agrarian’ by taking into account hybrid forms of agrarian professions such as civil yard exploitation, nature development and development of rural public pathways.

To conclude this essay, four explicit mechanisms used in the reviewed projects are highlighted:

1. Landscape ambition
The projects aim for total transformation on a regional scale, which is different from partial transformations by, for example, only yard transformations. They take into account that the current landowners – mostly agrarians but partly also the forest department and nature-preservation groups – will be facilitated in their new role as landscape developers instead of being only the maintenance team of municipal management. This coalition will establish a landscape ambition, a future ‘vernacular landscape’ meaning “all kinds of uses and spaces together” (Jackson 1984: 152).

2. Yards, gardens and landscape
The introduction of civil yards is essential in all of the projects. They serve two important purposes. Firstly, they attract investors to increase the resources of the current landowners. These investments have an immediate and binding relationship with yard, garden and landscape. In the yards, private space is dominant and can probably be recognized by ‘gentrified’ aesthetics: “it is possible to see rural gentrification as stimulating a self-reproducing circulation of ideas [...] focused on the symbolic and material construction of gentrified forms of rural space” (Phillips 2004: 21).

The gardens are organized as collective space and they either remain the property of the former land-owners or are consigned to a new collective organization. They contain endangered landscape el-
ements such as remnants or renewals of agrarian features and natural biotopes that need special care and constant nurturing. In their spatial arrangement (e.g. repetition, sequence and interconnectiveness), they also serve as public pathways.

Lastly, the surrounding landscape is privately owned as farmland, forestry and natural biotopes. These components lack public space comparable to urban situations, owned by the municipality. I presume that the featured landscape architects fear that real public space would indeed be ‘purified’ (Sibley 1988) and ‘de-odorized’ (Sennett 1994). A publicly accessible yet collectively owned rural space will bear the signature and pragmatism of rural care and use of the land, which is probably what the designers are intending. Both the civil yards and the collective gardens are a kind of ‘vernacular cement’ in between big bricks of land use, in order to prevent ‘political landscapes’ from materializing.

3. Sublime aesthetics
The resulting landscape features are not primarily intended as beautiful or picturesque. This may be an important aesthetic characteristic of the rural counterpart regarding urbanization. The rural aesthetics of countryside are not meant to be enjoyed by an audience; they are but results of transactions with natural dynamics, whether or not they are beautiful or picturesque. How to describe this? Is it enough to bear the sign of ‘vernacular landscape’ defined as a specific kind of organization and less defined in its aesthetic principles?

The classic set of three aesthetic garden and landscape principles also consists of the sublime. But the sublime is problematic to understand and to use as a designer. Most of my Dutch colleagues perceive the sublime as the ‘romantic sublime’, as described by Edmund Burke (The Sublime and the Beautiful 1759); but in more recent philosophical studies these romantic extremes of the sublime are much more refined towards general subjective mechanisms. In this discussion, the beautiful and the picturesque are positioned as conventions: “for the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublime a basis merely within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature” (Kant 1987: 246). It clears the way for a debate about engagement with ourselves by relating to landscapes, as is thoroughly studied, for example, in Berleant’s notion of the ‘Aesthetics of Engagement’ (Berleant 1992). Instead of a visual distance between the observer and the objects and sights in landscapes, the rural landscape provides various kinds of subjective relationships that are beyond characteristics such as ‘beautiful’ or ‘picturesque’.

A contemporary interpretation of the sublime shifts towards aesthetic concepts that deal with personal reflection and integrity, both concepts that in recent perception research have been recognized as essential qualities of rural landscapes (SCP 2006). It is much less object-related and instead much more precise in describing an interconnectiveness between observer and context, or in this case owner and landscape. “Because what awakens the feeling of the beautiful is the form of the object alone. In the sublime, form plays no role at all. In fact form conflicts with the purity of sublime delight” (Lyotard 1994: 77).

The architects involved in the reviewed projects all put aside part of their architectural object manipulation to make way for self-organizing processes. They intend to initiate processes by understanding mechanisms that conceive rural landscape not as an object but a subjective presentation of human adaptation and interconnectiveness with nature, creating living landscape. Simply recovering historically based patterns within this environment is not enough. That would be the gaze of a parasite overlooking the many hectares of ground still worked as agrarian landscape.

A new balance will have to be initiated between non-agrarian aesthetics that may be intended as picturesque or beautiful, and new pragmatic aesthetics that might be conceived as sublime. This balance is intricate and highly sensitive due to its subjective relationships between care for landscape features and ownership. Yet the mechanisms that produce this intricate and sensitive landscape are very simple.

It is in this combination of almost inconceivable complexity and simple initiating mechanisms that the sublime may be much more articulate than its aesthetic counterparts: “the German word ‘die Einfalt’ evokes not only what is not complex but also what is not subtle: candor, and even foolishness. Simplicity is the style adopted by nature in the sublime, as nature without art. This brusque observation echoes the dispute that swept intellectual Europe and occupied it at the time, whether the sublime style is the ‘grand style’ in the sense of ancient rhetoric or, on the contrary, the absence of all style” (Lyotard 1994: 156).

4. Development according to biotope
Unfortunately, the financial and legal framework that would guarantee the projects discussed in this paper have been insufficiently implemented within management, both at a governmental level and elsewhere. Organizational networks that discuss the Dutch countryside are not effective, as they are managed according to many preconceptions (Geerlings & Van Vloten-Doting 1995: 16). However, maybe it is not particularly necessary to create complex planning options. Maybe the engine of the countryside only needs to be readjusted by the owners themselves. Whatever the organization may be, a development-according-to-biotope (such as ‘Northbound’) acknowledges that future rural landscapes will have to adapt building activities according to the natural succession of features that materialize landscape ambitions. Broadly accessible shares could be smart and pragmatic new rural investments to initiate the necessary landowners’ empowerment.

Future rural landscapes should not be new eighteenth-century landscape gardens creating a desirable picturesque effect by, for example, hiring a modern ‘hermit’ (such as a farmer, ecologist or lumberjack) to live in the ‘lonely cavern’. The young Dutch landscape architects presented above instead reveal an anatomy of future rural landscapes that is potentially existent and both theoretically and professionally profound. It awaits testing in other European countries.
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Biographical Notes

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