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BOOK REVIEW

The Randstad: a polycentric metropolis? edited by Wil Zonneveld and Vincent Nadin, Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY, Routledge, 2021, 382 pp., £88, ISBN: 978-0-415-82609-9(hardback), £29,59, ISBN: 978-0-203-38334-6(e-book)

The Randstad, a concept referring to the city-regions of the four largest cities of the Netherlands and their immediate surroundings, is one of the best-known and most influential concepts in Dutch spatial and economic planning since the late 1950s. The roots of the concept even go back to several decades earlier. Soon after becoming a key concept in Dutch national planning, it was also recognized as a pioneering idea in international planning literature: when a country does not have a 'dominant city', an equally powerful or maybe even more powerful polycentric metropolis could be developed. When the EU started to develop European spatial planning strategies in the 1990s, the Randstad was also perceived as one of the inspiration sources. However, after more than 60 years of Randstad planning, to what extent has the idea materialized in reality? Is it really such an exceptional case of effective territorial governance? Is the Randstad really more than the sum of its city-regional parts? In *The Randstad: A Polycentric Metropolis*, Wil Zonneveld and Vincent Nadin want to offer a critical review of the Randstad, both as an idea and as a polycentric metropolitan reality.

This book is an edited volume, with 16 chapters by 23 authors overall. Edited volumes may often result in rather loosely connected collections. On the contrary, this edited volume is a coherent whole structured in five parts: an introduction and a conclusion by the book editors, with three thematic blocks in-between: 'The origins of the Randstad', 'The dynamics of a complex metropolitan region' and 'Governance, planning and design'. The book's coherence is strengthened further by four main questions raised in the introduction and answered in the following chapters and conclusion. These questions are about: the evolution of the spatial configuration of the Randstad and its determining factors; the extent to which the polycentric Randstad metropolis has real substance (is it indeed more than the sum of its parts?); the advantages and disadvantages of the Randstad's spatial configuration; and the future perspectives of the Randstad as a policy context to meet new and changing urban and regional development demands and preferences.

The book contributions and the concluding chapter make clear that the Randstad as planning concept, most often combined with its 'conceptual twin' the Green Heart, experienced its ups and downs but remained very influential from the late 1950s until the 2000s. The Randstad idea was initially based on the historically emerged settlement system on the one hand and the felt need to balance further development between concentration and sprawl on the other. This resulted in the 'concentrated deconcentration' policy from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s. Opinions on the extent to which this balance was indeed successfully reached are mixed, also in this book. Most housing was indeed built at the planned locations in new towns and growth centres, but urban sprawl in amongst others the Green Heart could not be prevented. Opinions about the effectiveness of Randstad/Green Heart planning after the switch to a compact city strategy (1980s and 1990s) are equally divided. In the concluding chapter, the book editors also point at the contrast between consistency in the Randstad's planned morphology and inconsistency in planning the functional relationships, in particular the scale level at which these relationships should be perceived. Added to this, some of the book contributions question the economic disadvantages that may have

resulted from preventing the formation of a sprawled megalopolis: the Randstad may lack what the book editors (in the concluding chapter) call 'genuine metropolitan environments'. It is also acknowledged by the book editors thought that assessing the effectiveness of planning strategies is notoriously difficult, and that the planners were not only faced with spatial and relational complexity, but also with governance complexity. Moreover, the diversity of living, working and leisure environments (partly historically grown, partly planned) may have resulted in a more liveable region than a megalopolis or metropolis would have been.

In the 2010s strategic planning at the Randstad level lost much of its prominence because national-level strategic planning became less prominent, due to the abolition of the Ministry of Spatial Planning, Housing and Environment in 2010 and decentralizing planning to provincial and local governments. National-level strategic planning seems to be making a comeback in recent years though, which may offer new chances for Randstad-level planning. The Netherlands as a whole and the Randstad, in particular, are faced with many challenges in the coming decades, the largest challenges being the combination of sea level rise and land subsidence, the transition towards more sustainable energy and availability and affordability of housing. As the book editors stress in their concluding chapter, these challenges are interscalar with scales ranging from individual buildings to cross-border areas like Northwestern Europe. The recent Dutch Environment and Planning Act (*Omgevingswet*) calls for a new type of strategic planning in which spatial planning and environmental planning are integrated. The National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment (*Nationale Omgevingsvisie*, 2019) presents a comprehensive development vision, but from a spatial planning perspective, the lack of clear spatial concepts and the lack of development scenarios are problematic.

Although the authors represent different academic disciplines and institutions and their contributions highlight different dimensions of and perspectives on the Randstad, their view on the Randstad may still be impacted by several possible biases and/or limitations. Although the ambition to offer a critical review of the Randstad as a concept and as an urbanized reality is achieved, the book mainly seems to have an 'insiders perspective', as it is written by mainly Dutch authors, all working at academic or policy research institutions based in the Randstad, the majority working or having worked at TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment. It would have been good to see some 'outsider perspectives' too: from other parts of the Netherlands beyond the Randstad, and from abroad. Still, this book can definitely be recommended to those that look for an introduction to the Randstad as a concept and as a (planned or unplanned) reality, but also to those that already know the Randstad and want to update or expand their knowledge.

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