

## COUNTRY RESIDENCES AND PEAT MEADOWS

*Spatial and financial relationships between these landscapes on the one hand and urbanization on the other*

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**Abstract.** Among the most interesting landscapes of the Netherlands are the landscape of the many former country residences (buitenplaatsen) and the peat meadows (veenweidegebieden) in the delta planes of two river systems. The question is how to maintain vibrant spatial and financial relationships between country residences and peat meadows on the one hand and urbanization on the other.

### 1. Country residences

In the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, traders and city administrators in Dutch towns bought country residences, sometimes as an investment, and often for their own personal use in summertime.

From the outset profit and pleasure were combined at the country estates. Of course lands were used for agricultural purposes, and hunting complemented these direct resources. But the owners also generated profit from the polders and sand quarries. In doing so they created new spatial realities and financial possibilities. and subsequent paragraphs indented 5 mm from the left-hand margin, with no extra space between the paragraphs.

For example, dune sand from the later country estate Elswout was used in building projects; and sand from the Utrecht Hill ridge (Utrechtse Heuvelrug) was used for infrastructure along the canals of Amsterdam. And although the drainage of the Beemster demanded large investments, it later provided attractive sources of income from rent.

Country residences built in these new polders served as a status symbol. They were built in relatively quiet and healthy regions, which were easily accessible (either by land or by water) from the owner's home in town. The staff would accompany the family to the residence. The owners were keen on buying estates situated near to one another, so as to be able to visit each other easily and discuss socio-economic, philosophical and political matters. The result in fact was rather like a summer 'town', but with far more oxygen, light, darkness, colour and calm.

A smooth summer-winter transition was possible, mainly because (1) the budget for investments and maintenance was earned in town; (2) the country

residences could be easily reached in only several hours from town and (3) mutual social contacts were effortlessly maintained and the change in setting gave them an extra dimension. The region shared in the profit, directly through construction and maintenance work on the houses and in the gardens, and through the organization of receptions. Indirectly, the region benefitted both spatially and financially. The waterways became more passable, the parks belonging to the country estates made the surroundings pleasant and healthy to live in, the advancement of city-planning was limited and the house prices went up.

The development of these country residences was influenced in equal parts by natural systems and human intervention. Various schools of thought in architecture and landscape architecture have played a role and still do. Dutch country estates also provide an important habitat for various species of plants and animals, often situated right beside densely populated regions.

The 20th century brought about much change. The number of privately-owned country residences diminished. Some were parceled out to villa quarters. Others started to be used as offices, hospitals or houses for the elderly. The consequences were on the one hand an increase in the number of buildings, as well as the amount of hardened pavements, and on the other hand a decrease in the amount of nature, fresh air, darkness, colour, silence and a loss of individual styles. Although most country residences have been (partly) demolished, examples still exist in the inner dune area near the coast, as well as along the rivers Vecht, Amstel and Vliet, along former lakes

such as the Wijkermeer and in new polders like the Watergraafsmeer and the Beemster.

## 2. Peat meadows

Peat-meadows are grasslands on top of boggy soils. Most Dutch peat land was cultivated between the 9th -13th centuries. The reclamations were started on the better drainable and better attainable parts, mostly adjoining little streams that formed part of the natural drainage system. An example is the region around Assendelft, a village with a church still intact from 950 AD. In the first instance the newly reclaimed land was used for agricultural crops, but quickly the peat settled and arable farming became impossible. From this time onwards we refer to peat-meadows, with the advancing need for drainage.

The allocation of these first reclamations has only been partly preserved. Roughly speaking this is due to three processes: floods from for example the Zuiderzee (the present-day IJsselmeer), the excavation and drying of peat and building upon it (Amsterdam itself for example is built on peat).

Apart from drainage, the waterways in peat-meadows nowadays serve several other purposes at the same time: the slip is used to heighten the meadows; they serve as a barrier for cattle; and they are used as a means of transport for cattle, people and so on. Although cattle occasionally stray into the shallow water, one will not find many fences or barbed wire in the peat-meadows. The waterways must be dredged on a regular basis, to ensure that they do not develop into land. Peat is soft and must be kept wet to prevent oxidation and subsequent settling. The meadows are fragile and cannot bear heavy agricultural machines.

The peat itself is drying out and subject to nutrient enrichment (from too much manure). Both developments cause accelerated oxidation of the peat. This threatens not only the plant and animal species bound to the peat, but also the peat-meadow landscapes. These landscapes are very popular for living and recreation.

Farming in these peat meadows is becoming much less profitable than it used to be. One of the problems is that the scale of lands, buildings and infrastructure is comparatively small.

Large parts of the West and North Netherlands still consist of these peat meadows, including the regions 'Laag Holland' and 'Groene Hart'. Here, landscape, cultural history and natural systems go hand in hand. As a landscape, peat-meadows have valuable qualities, such as the living peat moss itself and openness of the meadows on top.

As a specific natural phenomenon, peat-meadows are valuable because of their high water table and nutrient-poor soils, providing a unique habitat for threatened plants and animals. They are grazed by cows

and sheep and are a favourite breeding and foraging site for meadow birds like the Black-tailed godwit and the Redshank.

As a specific cultural phenomenon, the old patterns of land division have been preserved in most areas, including the many waterways and picturesque villages, as well as the archeological finds and the (later) reclaimed land in between.

## 3. Precious relationships

Both country residences and peat-meadow landscapes are situated in the densely-populated surroundings of the capital city of Amsterdam, which is expected to grow in the coming decades.

Both landscapes nowadays still guarantee the economic attractiveness of the region (for work and living) and challenge developers to opt for (/invest in) sustainable development. This ensures that authentic and much-appreciated values are maintained and developed with care in today's rapidly changing modern life.

The precious relationships between town and countryside were recognized throughout the centuries. Visionaries like the 20th century town planner Cornelis van Eesteren, one of the European 'fathers' of the idea of functional town planning, introduced the model of a fingertown with urban wedges, divided by green areas, such as Amsterdam still is. In fact he ensured that town and countryside remained close together.

## 4. Valuation, new layers of costs and profits

Comprehensive methodologies are available to provide economic valuation for cultural history, biodiversity and ecosystems, the results of which can be easily communicated to policy and decision-makers. These help efforts to protect, maintain and enhance habitats and species. Cost-benefit analysis (CBA), sometimes called benefit-cost analysis (BCA), is an economic decision-making approach, used particularly in government and business. CBA is used in the assessment of whether a proposed project, programme or policy is worth conducting, or to choose between several alternatives.

It involves a comparison between the total expected costs of each option against the total expected benefits, to assess whether the benefits outweigh the costs, and by how much. In CBA, benefits and costs are expressed in economic terms, and are adjusted for the time value of money, so that all flows of benefits and flows of project costs over time (which tend to occur at different points in time) are expressed on a common basis in terms of their "present value".

Currently a CBA is being made for the region of

'Laag Holland', with its peat meadows. We are mapping out and describing the most important qualities of the region. In general the peat meadows and country residences are recognized as valuable. Although both used to be run by individuals, nowadays the costs as well as the profits are more distributed across individuals and society.

Solutions for possible new economic layers have not been found yet, although some successful efforts have been made to maintain a proper balance between existing values and changing needs, ideas. Sustainable development has been applied in several cases. Not only by officials, but also by concerned inhabitants, who have shown commitment to that balance in a socio-economic context.

### 5. New spatial and financial relationships

Townsppeople will always need food, water, fresh air, playground, places to go in summer and winter. They

also need objects and projects for investment, inspiring breeding-grounds, suitable infrastructure, safe surroundings, nature ...

It seems logical to follow and use old landscapes in new developments. And to ensure that they keep their values. Differentiation seems a sine qua non in this.

Landscapes such as those with country residences and peat meadows provide many answers to those needs, but new spatial and financial structures are necessary to connect the value of these old landscapes to the needs of the new developments. Some have already been tried in the Netherlands. Comparison with relevant cases in other countries can be most interesting. Please feel invited.

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