Harvesting innovative ideas for a productive landscape, the case of Flanders.

In 2013, the Flemish Government Architect – a state created mandate whereby an excelling architect introduces and advises public development projects in a cross-sectorial manner to ensure their quality – teamed up with the Institute for Agriculture and Fishery Research (ILVO), the Ministry and Department of Agriculture, and the Planning Department of the Flemish Government. Together they initiated a 5 year program to support innovative rural progress that has a clear spatial impact and high societal value. The program was induced by a growing need of innovative ideas to meet present and future challenges in rural practice. Growing population numbers, for example, call for an augmented food production, while available land is increasingly occupied by expanding housing and other services. Likewise, flooding and dry periods call for more sustainable ways of water management in which farmers could play a more important role.

Hence, a call for pilot projects on productive landscapes has been issued, aiming to collect ideas from both public and private rural practice. It resulted in about 40 ideas for tangible projects. From December 2014 onwards, five projects are guided intensively towards implementation within a short time span of ca. 5 years. These five projects tackle issues as the rezoning and intelligent development of housing expansion areas going beyond traditional allotment strategies, occupying all rural land; dealing with water while maintaining a more diversified rural activity; fine-tuning material life-cycles and their spatial impact; professionalizing urban agriculture; and constructing 21st century food parks in close relation to the city.

The guiding team consists of a multi-disciplinary group of experts in the fields of agriculture, (landscape) architecture, urbanism, spatial planning, agronomics, legislation, ... depending on project specifications. An important role is given to design and research by design that will infuse the participative process through a workshop-approach with creative out-of-the-box ideas and innovative images of rurality. Research by design is understood here as an explorative, mobilizing and vision-forming method that can engage actors, stimulate ideas, and enhance discussion. It is used to create experimental labs, as places for freewheeling where policy, research and practice are confronted and come together using design.

The presentation and paper discuss intermediate results from the strategic exploration phase and the call, and frames these within current academic debate on the roles of design in guiding public processes. In particular, the ideas harvested from actual spatial and rural practice are analyzed. The method, the types of innovations, and the limits of todays practice for their implementation are explained. First results point at a lack of knowledge about rural planning that is being experienced in practice, and indicate that the used method can indeed collect and support valuable bottom-up ideas about rurality that remained hidden for policy before. An example is the search for alternative ways and designs to develop a housing expansion area while leaving room for (certain forms of) agriculture. Likewise, results show new types of actors involved in rural development and planning (e.g. collective of farmers experimenting with farming in areas with high natural values, which is obstructed by all kinds of legal and spatial boundaries).
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