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Stimulating spatial quality? unpacking the approach of the province of Friesland, the Netherlands⁴

Abstract

The article introduces the concepts of robustness and flexibility into the discussion on spatial quality to unpack the approach adopted by the Dutch province of Friesland in pursuit of their ambition to stimulate spatial quality. The analysis of how robustness and flexibility are manifested in Friesland, respectively the capacity to counteract negative impacts on spatial quality and the capacity to progress to more enhanced forms of spatial quality, reveals a multi-component, dynamic and selective approach. Multi-component refers to the combination of regulations, the building of purposeful organisations and teams, and deliberate actions to influence spatial development projects and plans. It is dynamic because the approach is adapted to the dynamics of the multilevel governance system wherein the province and its actions are embedded. It is selective because spatial quality is reduced to a limited set of factors, decision-making is done by a selected set of actors and some measures tend to address a limited set of themes. The findings suggest that stimulating spatial quality strongly depends on how spatial quality is conceptualized and formalized in the arena of politics and planning, negotiated in multilevel decision-making processes alongside decisions on whether to make resources available for this purpose.

Keywords

Spatial quality, robust, flexible, governance, decision-making

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Introduction

Many rural regions in Europe are encouraging spatial transformations to meet the demands of recreational activities, tourism and residents. This spatial development process, described as ‘leisuring’ by Bunce (2008), becomes manifest through land use changes that favour recreation, tourism, leisure and amenity migration. As a result, rural areas are undergoing a transition from productivism to post-productivism, shifting from being areas of production to areas of consumption (Marsden, 1999; Slee, 2005; Wilson, 2008). For authors such as McCarthy (2005), rural areas are becoming more ‘multifunctional’, although the extent of this multifunctionality varies geographically and therefore remains a subject of debate (see Mather et al., 2006; Lowe & Ward, 2007). A similar leisuring shift can be observed in cities that people visit for their history, heritage and built environment, as well as for their atmosphere, liveability and the availability of events, festivals and museums. Cities and rural areas can then also be regarded as places to consume leisure experiences that are appreciated for their uniqueness and memorability (Southworth, 2003; Therkildsen, 2009).

The leisuring process leads to a more diversified use of space and entails the attribution of new meanings and values to landscapes (Florida, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Aesthetics, identity, authenticity, perceptions, memories, sense of place and belonging (Tuan, 1977, 1990; Relph, 1976; Ashworth et al., 2007) are fundamental for the creation and recreation of experiences that make places worth visiting, living in or starting a tourism-related business in (Kloosterman & Trip, 2011; Stephenson, 2010; Trip, 2007; Parra, 2012). From this perspective, spatial quality is considered a very important factor for the development of tourism/leisure places (Buijs et al., 2006; Kloosterman & Trip, 2011). As a means to foster leisuring processes, the ambition to stimulate spatial quality has appeared on several societal and political agendas, notably in the Netherlands (VROMraad, 2011). In the Dutch context, planning and decision-making regarding spatial quality are deeply woven into the realm of government and politics. Many public authorities at multiple spatial levels express the need to stimulate and bring quality to space. Nevertheless, spatial quality cannot be defined univocally as it means something different to each individual. Spatial quality is perceived and understood differently according to the great variety of lenses through which individuals interpret space. As a result, the governance of and decision-making about stimulating spatial quality can be problematic or at least challenging as further discussed in the following sections of this article.

This article looks into the process of stimulating spatial quality in the Netherlands from the perspective of the role of the Dutch provincial government. The overall aim is to unpack the approach of the provincial government of Friesland regarding the ambition to stimulate spatial quality. As such, this article furthers knowledge of the role of state actors in shaping institutional frameworks that bring quality to space, and the governance implications that accompany these frameworks. Institutional frameworks are defined as the ensemble of formal rules (laws, regulations and procedures), policies and informal constraints (norms and codes of conduct) that circumscribe the range of actions of the plurality of actors involved in decision-making and implementation (North, 1990; Hajer, 2003; Affolderbach & Parra, 2012). Governance refers to the ways in which “associational networks of private (market), civil society (usually NGO) and state actors” engage “in rule-making, rule-setting and rule implementation at a variety of geographical scales” (Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 1992). Accordingly, the term governance implications is used in the context of how institutional frameworks affect the ways in which actors engage in making, setting and implementing approaches geared towards stimulating spatial quality.

In order to unpack and discuss the approach of state actors in their quest for spatial quality, this article brings in theories of spatial quality and the concepts robustness and flexibility that emanate from theories of complex adaptive systems. As a first step, the concept of spatial quality is discussed through a set of ontological perspectives allowing a more clearly expressed characterisation and understanding of spatial quality in practice. As a second step, the concepts of robustness and flexibility are introduced to go deeper in the conceptualisation of spatial quality and in its analysis in planning practice. Robust relates to the capacity to counteract negative effects of perturbations caused by development plans and projects. Flexible refers to the capacity to open up to development projects and utilize these to progress to more enhanced forms. While contributions on spatial quality highlight the vagueness of this concept (Porter & De Roo, 2007) and its relational meaning (Moulaert et al., 2013), the concepts of robustness and flexibility allow for a more systematic analysis of practice and provide analytical leverage on planning practices (Portugali et al., 2012; Gershenson, 2007). We use these concepts to conceptualize stimulating spatial quality as a process of development and improvement – towards a state that reflects a ‘higher’ quality – which comes with the challenge of being simultaneously robust and flexible (cf. Heylighen, 2008). Moreover, these concepts are used in the case study analysis to examine how robustness and flexibility are manifested in the approach of the province of Friesland. In doing so, it is taken into account that institutional frameworks are constantly

renegotiated and reorganized (cf. Jessop, 2005; 2008) and understandings of and measures for spatial quality can change over time. Such dynamics could drive the need for the province of Friesland to adapt its approach in order to persist in stimulating spatial quality.

Spatial quality is important to Friesland's growing interest in the 'leisure economy'⁵. The provincial government of Friesland has become very active in the pursuit of spatial quality at the service of the development of tourism, recreation and all leisure economy-related activities. The analysis focuses on the provincial level because it plays a key role in linking higher (nation state, EU) and lower government tiers (municipalities). The contribution of this article is therefore twofold. First, it offers a grounded understanding of contemporary approaches and strategies aiming at stimulating spatial quality in the Netherlands, of potential use for planning practitioners. Second, the article contributes to the theoretical debate by introducing the concepts of robustness and flexibility into the discussion on spatial quality, offering a framework to grasp the important steps contained within the ambition to stimulate spatial quality and its underlying governance implications. Taken together, the findings of this research could be useful for other regions facing similar socio-spatial dynamics and challenges related to quality of place, competitiveness, leisure and sustainable spatial development.

In a nutshell, the main argument of this article states as follows: stimulating spatial quality involves a plurality of actors and institutions in dynamic interaction which are expected to be capable of providing robustness by counteracting negative impacts on spatial quality, on the one hand, and supporting flexibility by leaving room to enable transformations that may enhance spatial quality, on the other hand. Section two discusses the concept of spatial quality and the challenges associated with the societal ambition of stimulating spatial quality. Section three elaborates on the concepts of robustness and flexibility and discusses how these can be applied in the analysis of the Friesland case. Section four examines how robustness and flexibility are manifested in the spatial planning approach adopted by the province of Friesland to stimulate spatial quality. The final section concludes that stimulating spatial quality strongly depends on how spatial quality is

5 Leisure economy is an umbrella term used in Dutch planning practice to refer to an economic subsector including tourism, recreation, leisure, wellness, and exurban living and working (Hartman, 2013).

conceptualized and formalized in the political arena, negotiated in multilevel decision-making processes alongside decisions on whether to make resources available for this purpose.

4.2

Examining the ambition to stimulate spatial quality

The ambition to stimulate spatial quality touches upon the question of what constitutes spatial quality. Answering this question is problematic because spatial quality is loaded with multiple meanings, understandings and interpretations (Porter & De Roo, 2007). Interpretations of spatial quality are considered to be highly context dependent, inter-subjective, normative and therefore quite impossible to generalise or define objectively, and difficult to operationalize (Van Assche & Jacobs, 2002; Goethals & Schreurs, 2011; Stephenson, 2010; Albrechts, 2006). As such, spatial quality can be defined as a dynamic social construct that is produced, reproduced and adapted over time by changing assemblages of actors, actions, interpretations and (power) relationships. In this context, we should be aware that actors may adopt different ontological perspectives to conceptualize spatial quality. De Roo (2012) distinguishes four perspectives on how the world around us can be perceived and understood, which he considers particularly relevant within the context of spatial planning and development. These four perspectives are also useful for analysing spatial quality as is discussed below, although for reasons of theoretical accuracy and application in the context of spatial quality we discuss a positivist perspective instead of a realist perspective that is discussed by De Roo (2012).

- First, from a positivist perspective there is an unambiguous, factual landscape that can be understood objectively (Buijs et al., 2006). Spatial quality from this perspective is a characteristic attributed or permanently fixed to objects, and can be determined for example by experts.
- Second, from a relativist perspective, common understandings and models of reality are generated through the exchange of viewpoints and values. Spatial quality can be attributed to any object as it is understood as a socially mediated construct and the result of agreements (cf. Goethals & Schreurs, 2011).
- Third, a relational perspective concerns how objects, values and processes acquire meaning through their relationships with an ensemble of other objects, values and processes (De Roo, 2012, cf. Rapoport, 1970; Moolaert et al., 2013; Van den Broeck et al., 2013). Spatial quality is considered as

'situated'. This implies that spatial transformations are valued on how they affect relationships and meanings, and on whether actors consider that they fit the specific local situation. There are similarities between the relational and relativist perspectives, both emphasising the relevance of interactions and agreements. The relational perspective adds that objects are part of an ensemble, and that this ensemble is relevant to determining the values or qualities of individual objects and vice versa.

- Fourth, from an idealist perspective, the key is not how the world is, but a normative understanding of how it could or should be. Spatial quality is something to achieve, and it is defined through creative visioning processes that explore desired future situations. In dynamic contexts these explorations are likely to be on-going processes. This should inspire caution in planners about fixed end-states, blueprint plans or immutable utopias with respect to spatial quality (De Roo, 2012).

In the literature on spatial quality and sense of place there is an emphasis on relativist perspectives that focus on social constructions and inter-subjectivities. These contributions emphasize that subjective aspects and experiences also matter, in addition to objects (Tuan, 1977, 1990; Relph, 1976; Ashworth et al., 2007). It is argued that spatial quality concerns values derived from or attached to sets of tangible/'hard' and intangible/'soft' factors (Florida, 2002; Kloosterman & Trip, 2011; Stephenson, 2010; Trip, 2007), and refers to the interrelatedness of structures, functions and values (Parris, 2004; Selman, 2009). Recently, an interest in relational understandings and approaches has also emerged. For instance, Khan et al. (2013, p. 294) argue that "space and spatial quality are produced as a result of collective place-shaping efforts", involving various actors and factors "in different relations of power through subjectivation, organisation, and practices of signification". Hartman and De Roo (2013), for their part, add the relevance of 'qualitatively embedded' functions in landscapes and societies as an alternative to approaches that neglect how developments fit into local contexts in terms of design, aesthetics and identity. These insights are used in the case study analysis, to show how different aspects of the approach of Friesland relate to different ontological perspectives, and also to discuss potential benefits and issues that may arise from such a composite approach.

Clearly, there are different perspectives on understanding spatial quality. The ambition to stimulate spatial quality, however, calls for an agreement on what constitutes spatial quality. This is needed to inform decisions about development processes to ensure that those which stimulate quality are prioritized. Given that there are multiple possible interpretations, making

choices about spatial quality raises questions about who decides and whose quality is pursued. Choices made regarding the use and operationalisation of spatial quality might not fit all ontological perspectives, and might be contested if actors perceive such interpretations as overly selective readings of space. Clearly, decisions are inevitably influenced by the beliefs, understandings and preferences of actors with power in decision-making. Furthermore, concrete matters related to the availability and allocation of financial and human resources act as enablers or blockers of decisions. For example, a positivist perspective on spatial quality could be mainly a technical exercise executed by experts, whereas a relativist approach would involve multiple actors in dynamic interaction. The more actors and goals included, the more appropriate collaborative, communicative approaches become compared to technical-comprehensive approaches, but also the more complex planning processes become (De Roo, 2003).

To summarize, decision-making on spatial quality is value-laden and its outcomes could be considered as being selective readings of space. In the Dutch context, government authorities play an active and leading role in framing and pursuing the complex ambition of bringing quality to space. This does not mean that other actors, institutions and agency are less important but on the contrary: for regions in the process of leising it matters greatly how places are perceived by all the individuals converging on them, including those outside the governmental arena, and whether the place qualities are good enough to attract visitors, new settlers and leisure investors. Against the backdrop of the complexities contained in the concept of spatial quality, the following section turns to the analysis of approaches addressing the challenge of stimulating spatial quality.

4.3

Analysing approaches to stimulate spatial quality

This section digs deeper into the challenges associated with the conceptualisation and analysis of spatial quality and its governance. This is done with the help of complex adaptive systems theory, and notably the concepts *robustness* and *flexibility*. In the last few years, there has been increasing interest in applying complexity theories to examining transformations and development in cities and urban regions. These complexity lenses offer the capacity to highlight how urban and regional change is driven by the dynamic interplay between various systems and subsystems at multiple levels (Portugali, 2012; Rauws & De Roo, 2011; De Roo et al., 2012a; Chattiparamb, 2013; Gerrits,

2012, Innes & Booher, 2010; Hartman & De Roo, 2013). These contributions elaborate on the adaptive capacity of complex systems that enables them to deal with perturbations and to move to enhanced forms of organisation and performance (Holland, 1995; Kauffman, 1993; Axelrod & Cohen, 2000). Among other properties, complex adaptive systems are able to do so by means of mechanisms that make them “robust and flexible at the same time” (De Roo, 2012, p. 135; Heylighen, 2001; Bertolini, 2010).

An approach combining robustness and flexibility matches the analytical considerations that are important for getting a grasp of the challenges that accompany the ambition of stimulating spatial quality. On the one hand, mechanisms are needed to protect existing qualities from disruptive effects of spatial development projects. This relates to the concept of *robustness*, which refers to the capacity to counteract perturbations (Heylighen, 2001). On the other hand, mechanisms are needed to engage in processes of spatial development, aimed at creating an environment that reflects a ‘higher’ quality. This relates to *flexibility*, or the ability of agents to adapt their behaviour and actions so that the systems of which they are part can transition towards a more enhanced state (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000). Below we further examine mechanisms that contribute to robustness and flexibility and elaborate on how these offer analytical support in the context of spatial quality. By doing so, robustness and flexibility become useful for the case study analysis, enabling a discussion on how these are manifested in the spatial quality approach of Friesland.

Mechanisms for flexibility relate to the capacities of agents to adapt the structures and functions of a system. According to Heylighen (2008, p. 9), systems in order to transition towards enhanced states require that “agents are organized and coordinated in their actions so as to maximize their synergy”. Organisation and coordination can be understood as having “to obey new rules, determining which actions are allowed, and which are not” (ibid, p.9). This reduces the freedom of agents and is considered essential to turn a collection of initially independent agents into an organized, cohesive and goal-directed whole (Heylighen, 2008). In the context of stimulating spatial quality, it is also crucial that agents initiate spatial development projects in order to adapt places and reach a state that reflects a ‘higher’ quality. But if the organisation and coordination amongst agents is weak or absent, influencing such projects becomes a daunting challenge, as this affects their impact on spatial quality. This situation can be considered positive because it provides freedom for actors to pursue their individual goals, yet it can also become problematic when plans and projects act against collective views on spatial quality. Encouraging synergies between development initiatives and spatial quality may therefore

require the organisation and coordination of the actions of agents with the help of planning laws, procedures or other instruments. These could target adding and embedding features into existing landscapes or supporting processes of restructuring and transformation that bring new features (Hartman, 2013). Moreover, idealist perspectives such as strategic visions and future scenarios could provide the goals needed to (re)direct collectives of agents towards a particular, desirable future situation.

Mechanisms for robustness relate to the ability to counteract perturbations that disrupt spatial quality. First, systems can cope with perturbations when small scale transformations within a system are free of consequences (Gershenson, 2007). This is the case when spatial quality is plentiful and well-distributed. To achieve such a situation benefits from positive feedback: the support and amplification of effects of actions that reinforce spatial quality. Second, systems can counteract or suppress disruptive effects by means of negative feedback. This supposes that governing structures in place have the capacity to “privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others” (Jessop, 2008, p. 236). In complexity theories, these are conceptualized as ‘emergent structures’, as they stem from interactions between actors over a period of time, and have the capacity to steer and shape the behaviour of individual agents (Heylighen, 2008). As observed in the case of Friesland, structures supporting spatial quality are currently emerging as a response to the growing societal concern for quality of life and the interest on the development potential of leisure (Hartman, 2013; Urry, 2002; 2005). Moreover, governments at multiple tiers introduce strategic visions, planning procedures and sets of norms to influence building activities. These may function as negative feedback mechanisms and counteract spatial development plans and projects that hold a potential negative impact on qualities.

The analysis of the spatial quality approach of the province of Friesland will follow two main categories obtained from the theoretical discussion above:

i. analysing how robustness and flexibility are manifested in the spatial quality approach of Friesland.

Robustness and flexibility both assume that supportive forms of coordination and organisation are in place, which act as governing structures and influence the behaviour of individual agents. Hence, the focus of the analysis includes, on the one hand, institutional measures for robustness that are aimed at counteracting negative impacts of plans and projects to protect existing qualities and; on the other, measures for flexibility that encourage synergies

between development projects and spatial quality. The ontological perspectives on spatial quality are used to further examine, categorize and discuss the approach of the province of Friesland.

ii. analysing adjustments to the spatial quality approach of the province of Friesland.

Spatial quality is a dynamic social construct because views on how places should develop, understandings of spatial quality and approaches to stimulating spatial quality tend to change over time. Strategic (policy) changes on higher and lower governmental tiers and changing societal views on spatial development may impact on the successful pursuit of robustness and flexibility and could trigger adjustments in the approach. Finding the appropriate ways and scales for acts of coordination and organisation to stimulate spatial quality is an ongoing negotiation, and is therefore included in our analysis.

4.4

Unpacking the spatial quality approach of Friesland⁶

Friesland is a rural province located in the north of the Netherlands. Leeuwarden, its capital city, hosts a population of almost 100.000 inhabitants. Spatial quality is an important aspect of the tourism and leisure popularity of Friesland, characterized by the presence of the islands and mud-flats of the Wadden Sea area (since 2009 on UNESCO's World Heritage list), the Frisian lake district, the National Parks and Landscapes, and several historic cities. Already for several years, the provincial government of Friesland has been taking spatial quality seriously. This is reflected in the 2007 strategic spatial plan entitled 'Om de kwaliteit fan de Romte' [For the quality of space] and in the ongoing aim to stimulate spatial quality.

6 The data for this research was obtained from ten semi-structured interviews. Respondents were selected on the basis of their professional involvement in relation to the approach of Friesland i.e. planners and policy advisors from the province of Friesland, independent policy advisors, landscape architects, and architects. Data for this research also builds on the analysis of secondary sources, including key policy documents in the context of spatial quality: the provincial strategic plan for spatial development (Province of Friesland, 2007), the provincial ordinances that deal with the formal, legal implementation of the strategic plan (Province of Friesland 2011; 2014b) and the thematic strategic plan 'Grutsk op 'e Romte' [proud of our environment] that specifically outlines the vision spatial quality (Province of Friesland, 2014a). These documents were considered for the analysis of how robustness and flexibility are manifested in the approach of the province.

The case study analysis of how robustness and flexibility are manifested in Friesland reveals a multi-component, dynamic and selective approach to spatial quality. Multi-component refers to the combination of regulations, the establishment of purposeful teams and organisations, and deliberate actions to influence spatial development project and plans. It is dynamic in the sense that Friesland adapts its spatial quality approach according to the dynamics and challenges stemming from the multilevel governance system wherein the province and its actions are embedded. It is selective because the approach reduces spatial quality to a limited set of factors, decision-making is in the hands of a selected set of actors, and some measures tend to address a limited set of themes. Nevertheless, the spatial quality approach touches upon all four ontological perspectives discussed in section 2. The following sections elaborate on these findings in detail

A multi-component approach: regulations for robustness to counteract perturbations

The provincial strategic spatial plan (2007) and its accompanying provincial ordinance (2010) are key factors regarding the protection of spatial quality and contribution to robustness. The strategic spatial plan contains the provincial perspective on spatial development for the middle-long term, and serves as a guideline for development plans and municipal zoning plans. The ordinance is the formal implementation of the provincial strategic plan, and elaborates the principles and prescriptions for project plans and municipal zoning plans. Together these documents guide provincial and lower spatial government tiers, and make reactive interventions by the provincial government legally possible in the event that municipal plans or project development plans do not align.

These two documents define spatial quality in two categories: 'environmental quality' and 'core qualities'. These categories provide the basis for decision-making about developments that do not contribute to spatial quality, and developments that could harmonize and eventually also stimulate spatial quality. On the one hand, these categories act as a negative feedback mechanism, counteracting perturbations and thereby contributing to robustness; on the other, they serve as a positive feedback mechanism for fostering spatial quality, privileging certain plans and projects over others.

The 'environmental quality' category relates to norms for water, soil and air quality, for noise, odours and light impairment, and for risk management and safety, all of which must be taken into account in development plans. These are mostly enforced by the state and imposed on the provincial level. The norms

are generally expressed in quantitative values and standardized technical-instrumental measurement and assessment methods. On the whole, these norms are generic, fixed and quantitative. More detailed context-specific approaches are possible for specific urban circumstances and under strict conditions (discussed in detail in De Roo, 2003).

The ‘core qualities’ category is subdivided into landscape types, cultural historical elements and structures, and archaeological sites. Each of these aspects is geographically listed on a map and their most relevant characteristics are documented (Table 3). The selection of core qualities is influenced by national laws and international treaties which require provinces and municipalities to account for archaeological sites and structures (2007 Law on Archaeological Monuments), cultural historical monuments (1988 Monument Law), and nature and ecology (1988 Nature Protection Law; 2002 Law

CORE QUALITIES	INDICATORS	ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK
Landscape	29 landscape types *	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provincial ordinance (appendix): landscape typology map Provincial ordinance (appendix): description of structures, functions and their values
Cultural history	23 categories of elements and structures **	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural historical map (CHK2) Website fryslan.nl/chk: description of characteristics
Archaeology	Archaeological sites related to two periods (< 800 B.C. and > 800B.C.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frisian archaeological monuments map FAMKE). A digital and regularly updated, and therefore ‘dynamic’ map Website fryslan.nl/famke: description of characteristics

* Beaches and sandbars, moraine landscapes, dunes, inner-dune areas, forest reclamation areas, steam valley landscapes, reclaimed lands, summer polders, salt marshes, old sea polders, young sea polders, young sea polders/tidal flats, tidal flats, clay-on-peat areas, mound landscapes, salt meadows, salt marsh embankments, peatland areas, peat reclamation areas, moorland reclamation areas, moorlands, heath reclamation areas, heath reclamation (rational) areas, heath reclamation villages, ‘essen’ landscapes, heath afforestation areas, moorland reclamation (rational) areas, estate zones, peat polders.

** Geomorphology, geologically valuable areas, historic farms, parcelling patterns, settlement forms, churches, medieval monasteries, granges, estates, fortifications, waterways, dykes, duck decoy structures, rail and tram lines, provincial bordermarkers, architecture (1850-1940), areas and sites with extraordinary value, post-WO II reconstruction works (neighbourhoods), pottery (‘Delfts Rood’), dairy factories, state monuments, protected country estates, protected cityscapes and townscapes.

Table 3: ‘Core qualities’ of Friesland (source: Province of Friesland, 2007; 2011)

on Flora and Fauna). The core qualities category affects spatial development because it functions as an obligatory ‘process requirement’. This means that municipal zoning plans must demonstrate how core qualities are respected, and development plans proposing urban expansion or rural transformations should explain how core qualities are considered in a special ‘spatial quality paragraph’. The strategic spatial plan and the ordinance also introduce the principles of *bundling* and *careful use of space*. These spatial planning and development principles have a twofold purpose in the context of spatial quality. First, they contribute to robustness because spatial developments become subject to strict conditions, thus preventing haphazard developments which negatively impact on views on spatial quality. Second, the principles contribute to flexibility by introducing a set of exceptions that open up space in policies for spatial development.

- *Bundling* is explained as restricting urban development outside predefined urban boundaries to prevent the distortive impacts of uncontrolled sprawl. For the leisure sector, clustering is pursued in predefined urban, regional or recreational centres. Exceptions are allowed under strict conditions to create opportunities for enhancing places and preventing excessive rigidity from causing negative lock-in. For example, projects can be allowed when new developments replace visually unattractive objects and buildings or are combined with investments in landscape design. Table 4 provides an overview of exceptions and assessment criteria. This table shows that some are measurable and assessable, whilst others are less clearly defined and could therefore also be explained variously.
- *Careful use of space* refers to the planning instrument known as the ‘ladder for sustainable urbanisation’, which applies to the development of business parks, office buildings, housing, and urban facilities. Since 2012, this instrument has been a mandatory requirement of Dutch national law. It implies that the following three aspects need to be explained in planning and development processes: i) there should be evidence of the demand for new developments; ii) opportunities for restructuring or reusing existing urban areas and buildings should be assessed; and iii) if greenfield development is considered necessary, optimal integration into the existing landscape and intermodal accessibility should be achieved.

The planning principles and spatial quality categories contribute to an institutional framework that enables the province to counteract perturbations to what is understood as spatial quality. Whereas the room in the policies for developments contributes to flexibility, additional measures are taken to encourage synergies between spatial development projects and spatial quality.

General conditions and exceptions	<p>Exceptions to the principles of bundling apply when developments involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reuse, restructure or replacing obsolete (agricultural) buildings for recreation, living, care, culture, arts, education, businesses with low environmental impact (cat. 1, cat. 2); • strengthening historic housing patterns; • establishing ‘rural housing clusters’ or new estates that include large public spaces and feature 1:1 investments in new landscape and natural elements (‘quality arrangements’); • replacing (obsolete) buildings; • building new properties when decayed, abandoned or scattered agriculture-related buildings or greenhouses are removed, known as the ‘space-for-space arrangement’;
Recreation and tourism: conditions and exceptions	<p>Leisure-related developments are subject to the following conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in or adjacent to urban, regional or recreational centres; • a maximum of 200 pitches for tents, 50 holiday bungalows, 250 yacht moorings, 100.000 visitors on annual basis (same for expanding existing businesses in rural areas); • a maximum of 15 pitches or bungalows at a farm, company or house; • group accommodation only within existing buildings. <p>Exceptions in terms of location and size, by decision of provincial executives. Conditions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developments must be spatially embedded; • contribute to variety and/or quality of the existing stock; • greenfield development and upgrading campsites are subject to adding 1:1 new landscape and natural elements and 3:1 within a buffer of 3 kilometers around National Parks.
Agriculture: conditions and exceptions	<p>Secondary activities are supported when developments involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retail trade of local products; • health care (incl. animals); • upkeep of nature and landscapes; • businesses with low environmental impact (cat. 1, cat 2 such as whole sale, office, riding school, bakery); • small scale hotel, restaurant, café, day time recreation, holiday accommodation.

Table 4: Exceptions and conditions for development projects (source: based on Province of Friesland, 2007; 2011)

A multi-component approach: measures for flexibility to encourage improvement

The ‘process requirements’ that oblige initiators to explain in plans how proposed developments and core qualities harmonize could enhance spatial

quality. An interviewee explains, however, this is not that straightforward: “process requirements are the lowest rung in enforcement. While they require it [the list of ‘core qualities’] to be taken into account, they do not offer a basis for actually rejecting something” (interview policy advisor, Province of Friesland). Process requirements define what must be done but are less specific about the exact procedure that needs to be taken. This approach is deliberate, however, because further formalizing procedures requires a higher level of detail in terms of defining spatial quality and could overly reduce the room in policies for development initiatives (cf. Province of Friesland, 2012). Doing so could also interfere with the responsibilities of municipalities, as stressed by interviewees. The impact of process requirements on spatial quality therefore relies on the commitment of actors and their willingness and ability to embed perspectives on spatial quality into the design of project plans, municipal zoning plans, and municipal guidelines on land use and construction (cf. Province of Friesland, 2011, p. 47). Place-shaping efforts by project developers will have higher chances to enhance spatial quality if these perspectives are ‘incorporated into the planning process...that is where it stands or fails’ (interview policy advisor, Province of Friesland). Crucial is therefore to deepen relationships and strengthen communication between the concerned individuals, companies, institutions, and societal organisations of the governance system.

Accordingly, the province aims to be involved since the early phases of a given development plan or project to encourage that spatial quality is considered as an integral part of the planning processes. For this purpose, Friesland gives special attention to the relations between the province, municipalities and the actors engaged in project development, and has taken the following measures to achieve this aim:

- On a politico-administrative level, provincial and municipal authorities draft collaborative agendas, and along with the sub-provincial institutions (‘Plattelânsprojekten’) create development plans to implement parts of the provincial spatial policies. This reflects a focus on aligning ambitions and interests at various spatial levels.
- From 2008 and onwards, Friesland is financially supporting the organisation ‘ARK Fryslân’. This organisation has the goal to raise awareness about the societal importance of architecture and spatial quality. ARK Fryslân aims to connect and share information between inhabitants of the province, firms, organisations, institutions and governments. It does so by organising seminars, fieldtrips, workshops, conferences and other activities about, for instance, the conservation and reuse of heritage buildings such as vacant churches.

- The province created in 2008 its ‘Core Quality Team’, a multidisciplinary group of government officials operating across governmental institutions. The team advises on how to incorporate the core qualities category into spatial plans, zoning plans and development projects. Examples include the project ‘Moai Fryslân’ [Beautiful Friesland] on the sustainable maintenance of landscape features (table 4) as well as initiatives incorporating investments in spatial quality into housing and road infrastructure projects. The team actively invests in building relationships with project initiators which keep the flow of information about projects and plans active, and which serve as a means to participate in and influence the early stages of planning processes. In 2012 the team drafted the policy document ‘Grutsk op ‘e romte’, meaning ‘Proud of our environment’, to assist and inspire municipalities to integrate the core qualities into plans and projects. In 2014 the document acquired the formal status of ‘structure vision’ which obliges initiators to motivate the impact of projects and plans on the defined core qualities (Province of Friesland, 2014a).
- In 2008, the province also established the organisation ‘Atelier Fryslân’, an independent design studio offering solicited and unsolicited advice on a variety of spatial quality-related issues. These include, for instance, projects to generate scarcity on peri-urban business parks as a strategy to stimulate investments in the quality of existing parks, as well as advice on the location of turbines for wind energy parks with reduced impact on spatial quality. Another example is the creation of a toolkit for waterfront redevelopment projects which has been used in 28 localities. This toolkit has stimulated collaboration among local and regional actors, on the one hand, and it has improved waterfronts in a number of villages, increasing their tourism, recreation and residential values, on the other. This studio’s goals are to inspire more idealist perspectives on spatial quality, disseminate them more firmly into communities and urge their systematic incorporation into the political arena, decision-making and planning practices at the local and provincial levels.
- In 2010, the province initiated the project ‘Nije Pleats’ [New farmyard] to support farmers in their efforts to renew and upscale their businesses. ‘Nije Pleats’ revolves around a method in which a team of experts functions as mediators and help accommodate the interests of farmers. The team consists of a landscape architect, a policy advisor on spatial quality and representatives from departments of a local municipality. The team gets involved at an early stage in planning processes and can thereby influence place-shaping efforts through building aesthetics, landscape design, the removal of old buildings, etc. It aims to incorporate functions into their surrounding landscapes, in line with a relational understanding of

spatial quality. As a result of its function as a catalyst and its proactive development-oriented nature, the province is transferring the strategy underlying the ‘Nije Pleats’ project to the sector of recreation and tourism (Province of Friesland, 2014b).

Friesland has worked towards the creation of an institutional framework that promotes spatial quality in various ways. This framework consists of rules and planning principles that, together, contribute to robustness and flexibility at the same time. In addition, the province of Friesland has invested in collaborative and communicative planning processes to stimulate discussion and awareness about spatial quality, to gain actor commitment and to enhance their capacity to influence initiators of development projects to take core qualities into account.

A dynamic approach: responding to adjustments in multilevel governance systems

The case study also shows that the province and its actions are part of a system of governance which is multilevel and multi-actor (Parra, 2010). For example, national laws and international treaties have an influence on the selection of core qualities amongst others. Changes on higher and lower levels within this system can therefore have an effect on the spatial quality ambition of the province of Friesland. The case study draws attention to adjustments in laws and policies of higher government levels and changes in strategic and zoning plans of municipalities. Such dynamics are potential triggers to adapt approaches and (re)introduce (additional) measures for robustness or flexibility.

First, challenges emerge when there is less freedom for development projects. The ‘Nije Pleats’ project was initiated to address a complex of laws, rules, procedures and process requirements operating at different spatial levels. It is a response to the bureaucratic difficulties encountered by farmers in their efforts to renew and upscale their businesses. More precisely, it addresses the excessive regulation and multiple permits required by different government agencies and departments. Moreover, the aim of the project is to respect spatial quality by incorporating functions into its surrounding landscape.

Second, greater freedom for development projects opens the door to new spatial challenges. In the Netherlands there is a tendency towards deregulation to enable local development initiatives and towards decentralising responsibilities to achieve a better match with local contexts (De Roo et al., 2012b). Whereas the underlying rationale is to allow for greater flexibility at local levels, in practice this could prompt actors to pool resources and establish new support

institutions to maintain the level of robustness. This process is happening in Friesland in the context of ‘welstand’ [aesthetics of the built environment] and granting building permits. In the Netherlands municipalities are authorized by national law to draft memoranda on architectural and spatial quality which contain the object-oriented and area-oriented prescriptions to guide architectural and spatial design, e.g. size, shape, colours, materials, building orientation and area characteristics. The strictness of these memoranda varies from one municipality to another (Ten Cate, 2010). There are memoranda which allocate zones free of prescriptions and which can cover an entire municipality. There are also memoranda with detailed prescriptions for the granting of building permits. These detailed memoranda require personnel and expertise that can be difficult for small municipalities to organize. In Friesland the provincial centre of expertise ‘Hûs en Hiem’ was established to provide advice to municipalities on the assessment of plans for housing projects. Similar situations are emerging in the context of heritage conservation and permits for building activities. The modernisation of policies on heritage conservation is a national government project that started in 2009 and seeks to focus less on conservation and more on development. The aim is to reduce the number of protected sites and ease the procedures for rezoning and the granting of construction and regeneration permits. Also the 2010 national law on general provisions for the environment (‘WABO’) was adopted to reduce the regulatory burden. The law integrates permits for construction and regeneration, housing, monuments, nature and environment into a single permit (Gerrits et al., 2012). Permits are no longer required for small projects unless explicitly requested by a municipality. The rationale behind both examples is to transfer responsibilities and allow policies at the local level. This greater freedom implies less control over outcomes. Whereas greater freedom enables individuals to pursue their own (idealist) perspectives on spatial quality, it could come at the expense of collective views on spatial quality. As such, this greater freedom can exert pressure on the available resources (finance and expertise) at the local level to develop approaches that guide initiatives and encourage enhancing spatial quality. Potentially, forms of coordination and organisation (similar to ‘Hûs en Hiem’) may need to be introduced at the regional/provincial level for reasons of efficiency and control.

Summarizing, the previous discussion shows how the reorganisation of institutional frameworks brings changes to governance systems. The approach of Friesland is not static but in a constant state of being reproduced and transformed over time. Changes are implemented on the levels of the national government (e.g. the WABO and heritage policies), by the provincial authority itself (e.g. the ‘Nije Pleats’ project, articulating core qualities) but also by

municipalities (e.g. memoranda on architectural and spatial quality). This multilevel and multi-actor governance system requires the ability to adapt approaches. This system is dynamic in terms of ambitions and mechanisms to stimulate spatial quality which are in constant (re)negotiation vis-à-vis other spatial development priorities, political interests, and institutional effectiveness. An example is the winding up of Atelier Fryslân in late 2012 because of budgetary reasons and overlap with the approaches of ARK Fryslân (interview landscape architect, independent advisor). Approaches should therefore not become too static or rigid but should constantly be evaluated and adjusted. On the one hand, some mechanisms may disappear to avoid overlap of tasks and responsibilities or to address budget restrictions; on the other, new mechanisms that contribute in different ways to spatial quality can be introduced, as is the case of the ARK Fryslân or the Quality Team.

A selective approach: choices in decision-making processes

The analysis of how robustness and flexibility are manifested in the approach of Friesland reveals a selective approach to spatial quality. First, spatial quality is reduced to a limited set of factors. The articulation of core qualities refers mainly to tangible factors (see Table 3). Second, spatial quality is defined by a selected set of actors with different degrees of power. According to our interviewees, there is a more or less informal consensus within the province, its municipalities and their institutional relations regarding the category of ‘core qualities’ reflecting spatial quality. However, an interviewee clarified that ‘although some municipalities were consulted, it [the list of core qualities] was not jointly drafted. Indeed, they [the core qualities] represent the provincial interest’ (interview policy advisor, Province of Friesland). Societal actors and leisure entrepreneurs are hardly involved in decision and policymaking: at best informally and therefore indirectly. Third, some measures tend to address a limited set of themes. Atelier Fryslân focussed on a selection of topics and the ‘Nije Pleats’ project thus far concerns only agriculture related issues yet plans are made to transfer the strategy to the sector of tourism and recreation.

In their pursuit of what Trip (2007, p. 19) calls “favourable conditions for quality of space to develop”, the province actually selected a mix of ontological perspectives. Their strategy touches upon all four ontological perspectives on spatial quality. Selecting core qualities by provincial experts and their focus on tangible factors hint at a positivist perspective on spatial quality. The Atelier Fryslân addressing how things could or should be in the future produces more idealist perspectives on spatial quality. Consulting municipalities and supporting ARK Fryslân reveals a closer alignment to relativist and relational

perspectives on spatial quality. The ‘Nije Pleats’ project, for its part, tries to embed functions into landscapes to respect and contribute to views on spatial quality, exhibiting an explicit relational understanding and approach to spatial quality. Whereas this approach successfully garners results, a major challenge remains to connect closely to what society as a whole considers important qualities as there are multiple possible perspectives on understanding and conceptualising spatial quality and multiple approaches to enhance spatial quality. The approach taken by the province of Friesland can be easily contested in this respect. It is selective in terms of the aspects that are considered as bringing spatial quality, the selection of mechanisms, and the involvement of (non-governmental) actors in decision-making processes.

The province does, however, take an important responsibility from a societal perspective as spatial quality is an important factor for socio-cultural and socioeconomic development in the region. In turn, the selective approach relates to a sense of restraint towards an institutional framework that is too comprehensive and prescriptive. Furthermore, even though the conceptualisation of spatial quality by the province of Friesland can seem selective or partial, this does not necessarily mean that other aspects are considered irrelevant. These are often viewed as the responsibility of municipalities, communities or developers to further negotiate and specify. All in all, selectivity can create room in policies for initiatives that stimulate spatial quality (contributing to flexibility), as well as to protect selected qualities from perturbations (contributing to robustness). It can therefore be part of strategies for implementing the ambition to stimulate spatial quality by fostering regions being robust and flexible at the same time.

4.5

Conclusions and discussion

The road towards spatial quality is a multilevel governance ambition which sets a complex and dynamic agenda. It includes agreements and decisions of a normative, political and pragmatic nature on situations to avoid and situations to achieve. How spatial qualities should unfold in the future is, therefore, subject to a variety of understandings, interpretations and interests, which can coexist, compete and conflict. This article discussed spatial quality as a social construct that is situationally defined (cf. Van Assche & Jacobs, 2002; Moulaert et al., 2013; Goethals & Schreurs, 2011). This implies that spatial quality is shaped by an ensemble of actors and their perceptions of how sets of tangible and intangible factors relate to each other, as well as

by these actors’ interwoven actions and power relationships. Because these ensembles are dynamic, perceptions on and definitions of spatial quality are constantly produced and reshaped over time. At the same time, what is conceptualized and enforced as spatial quality relates to choices made in decision-making processes which are influenced by politics, authority and power relationships.

The Friesland case shows that there are actors who create relatively stable understandings of spatial quality which serve as “temporary fixities in the on-going flows of reality” (Hillier, 2007, p. 226; also see Healey, 2007). These are relevant to sustaining an institutional framework which contributes to robustness and flexibility: for instance, fostering both spatial and socioeconomic development by introducing conditions to harmonize place-shaping efforts with perspectives on spatial quality. The case study shows how spatial quality in the Netherlands is produced and negotiated in a multilevel governance system. It shows that the province of Friesland tries not to develop a comprehensive institutional framework but focuses on a selection of aspects related to the preservation of cultural-historical, archaeological and geological objects, sites and spatial structures. On the one hand, the resulting institutional framework brings robustness by favouring “some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others” (Jessop, 2005, p. 48). On the other hand, the selectivity brings flexibility in the sense that there is room in policies for developments and more place-specific approaches that better suit local and regional contexts and needs. In Friesland, this has resulted in an institutional framework that consists of a set of generic norms on environmental quality, process requirements including planning principles and the obligation to account for core qualities, and planning strategies revolving around connecting actors on various governance levels and spatial scales.

Furthermore, the case study shows how the urge to stimulate spatial quality prompts the introduction of new approaches to spatial development and planning. Reactive and prescriptive approaches to improve the quality of places, through for example the assessment of plans and the granting of permits, are supplemented with more development-oriented and collaborative planning approaches (e.g. the ‘Nije Pleats’ project). Initiators are proactively guided to realize developments and at the same time respect and enhance qualities by the qualitative embedding of functions into landscapes. Efforts of this kind generate momentum to enhance spatial qualities. These could become increasingly important. Declining public budgets could inspire planners to become more proactive in looking for, inviting or even tempting public and/or private actors to develop plans and projects to enhance spatial quality.