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Trees of Birth: rituals and the emergence of sacred space in Dutch Vinex-areas¹

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In this article, I aim to explore the role of rituals in the emergence of a “sacred” space in a newly built suburban area in the Netherlands. This so-called birth forest serves as a case study to show how nature functions as a platform for ritual practice in this neighbourhood.

1. Introduction

It is early on a Sunday morning in March when a group of people – babies, toddlers, their parents and grandparents – gather at a field in a park in a newly built suburban area in the Netherlands. The group listens to a man in a bright green coat who provides them with information about the tree they are about to plant. It is a typical Dutch Lime tree: these can grow more than one hundred years old and are therefore very suitable to celebrate the birth, or, in some cases, the death of a child. The man in the green coat is a board member of the Friends of the Máxima Park Foundation. After a request from one of the residents of the area, the foundation, which coordinates activities in the park, decided to create a so-called Birth Forest and to facilitate two planting days a year. Hence, on a particular Sunday morning in spring and autumn, the two seasons most suitable for planting trees, a growing group of people gather in the park to ritually plant a tree that will celebrate the life or mourn the death of a baby.

Rituals like these play a central role in the research I conduct on the emergence of sacred places in a large, Dutch suburb called Leidsche Rijn that is currently being built. I wish to argue that this Birth Forest is a sacred place; maybe not sacred for everyone, but sacred for the participants, for the people who planted a tree to celebrate or to remember. In order to analyse how places such as the Birth Forest come into being, I focus on three different dimensions of the place, based on Henri Lefebvre’s theoretical framework as described in his book *The Production of Space* (1991): the physical streams and context of the place, the social relations and the way in which people perceive and use the space, and the symbolic and imaginary layer.

2. The Urban Triad

Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the production of space has been interpreted and used in various ways ever since its inception. In my studies, I came across a Dutch interpretation of this theory in the book *Nederland Stedenland*, which can be translated as, *The Netherlands, a city country*. This book was published in 2012 as the outcome of a large-scale research project on urbanism and city culture in the Netherlands. The chapters of the book are divided into three parts, *urbs*, *civitas*, and *topos*, referring to three dimensions of an urban triad (E. Taverne, S. Dembski, L. de Klerk and B. Ramakers 13-15).

The first aspect, *urbs*, refers to both the physical city, which is envisioned by the urban planners and architects, and to the knowledge of the spatial structure and built shape of a city or neighbourhood. The *urbs* has a strong public character and is influential: when it comes to urban planning this aspect is specifically interesting since it not only provides the residents of the area with their daily living environment, but also determines what is included within it. In this way, the lives of the Vinex-residents are influenced by the role planning plays in determining their living environment.

The second pillar is *civitas*, the city as a place in which political, economic, social, and cultural developments come together and whereby space and place play an increasingly important role. It “denotes the ways people generate, use and perceive space. It structures all aspects of daily life and urban living, from minute, repeated gestures to the rehearsed journeys from home to work and to play” (Knott 39). This pillar refers to a broad spectrum of human actions, including walking, gardening, and recreation, but can also – particularly interesting for this subject – include ritual practice. It needs to be emphasised, though, that there is nothing intrinsically sacred or religious about these practices. Of course, the people using the space are influenced by the way the area was planned, but they also have the power to create their own stories within the framework they have been offered; these stories are “inaccessible for planners and scientists” (Knott 39). The planting of the birth trees is an example of such a practice. *Nederland Stedenland* refers to this pillar as the “hard city”, that is, the dimensions of the city that can be mapped or shown in statistics (15).

The last element to influence urban life is *topos*. The Greek word *topos* here refers to the rhetorical side of the city, the way it functions in texts, images, and representations. The *topos* functions separately from the two other dimensions while simultaneously encircling or overlaying them (Knott 37-38, Soja 67). The term can be used to describe the ideals, ideas, dreams, and visions of people, among which religion and other sacred perceptions should also be placed. *Topos* attempts to explain the way in which people understand space, as well as the associations and symbolic meaning they attach to it. People often describe a park using terms such as “oasis” or “paradise”; this does not mean that the park is actually a paradise or that it was at all designed to be a paradise. The word paradise is used to describe the way in which this person experiences the park. And whereas *civitas* can be seen as the hard city, *topos* is the *soft city*, the city of illusions, myths, and aspirations, but also of horror and nightmares. These can be much more real than hard city statistics could ever portray (Taverne, Dembski, de Klerk and Ramakers 15).

In short, it is possible to capture this triad as follows: the imagined and artistic representations referred to by the term *topos* comprise, as it were, a symbolic layer spread out over the physical environment (*urbs*) in which we live and move around (*civitas*). Since cities are the result of the continuous correlation of places, players, and practices, it is this multiplicity of interactions between the social (trade, production, politics, and institutions), the physical (places, landscape, buildings, and artworks), and the symbolic (representations, artefacts, myths) that make cities “work” in a literal sense (Taverne, Dembski, de Klerk and Ramakers 19-21).

3. Defining the Sacred

Using this triad, this paper attempts to show how elements in the neighbourhood design (*urbs*) function as platforms for ritual practice (*civitas*), thereby changing those elements or parts of them into sacred places for certain groups or individuals (*topos*). I interpret the term “sacred” in a broad sense, in line with American scholar Matthew T. Evans, as: “set-apart with special meaning” (32-41). This more situationalist approach is inspired by the ideas Emile Durkheim presented in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).² In this work, Durkheim states that “sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred” (40). This means that Durkheim did not use the sacred simply to describe something that we would conventionally refer to as “religious,” nor did he claim that there should be a connection between what is sacred and the supernatural in any form. The sacred “should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits” (36). He writes: “A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words anything at all can be sacred” (Durkheim 36). Those ordinary – or sometimes not so ordinary – objects become sacred as they are “treated with great care and respect and preserved from any profanation,” making them “set apart” and “radically different from any other aspect of the mundane human life” (Lynch 23-24). Hence, Durkheim defines the sacred by the way in which people experience and behave in relation to it.

Evans elaborates on this theme of the “set-apart sacred” in his article: “The sacred: differentiating, clarifying and extending concepts” (32-44). As with the ideas set out by Durkheim, Evans states that everything and anything can be sacred. The concept is not bound to the religious or the transcendent, nor is it determined by a set of rules or regulations. This paper will follow this broad interpretation of the sacred, thereby strongly emphasising that the sacred is not the same as the religious. Religious places and objects can, rather, be seen as part of a broad sacred field, meaning that not everything which is religious can by definition be called sacred. In my opinion, every individual and every group can have its own opinions about sacrality: “As with beauty, what is sacred, lies – at least to some extent – in the eye of the beholder” (Molendijk 87). Evans agrees with / follows Durkheim’s statement that there are sacred things of every degree and that there are variations in sacred types. This leads him to agree with Durkheim’s idea that “the circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once for all. Its extent varies infinitely” (38).

4. The Field

How does this theory relate to the emergence of sacred space in the Vinex-area? A newly built suburb is the ideal place to see how sacred space emerges in line with the changing dynamics in the sacred field as well as the repercussions these changing dynamics have on both the built environment and the lives of the people in it. As traditional religion and its accompanying sacred places disappear from Dutch society, the demand for the sacred remains unchanged, shedding light on a broad and changing sacred panorama reaching beyond religion to fields of memory, leisure, and culture (Post 13-61). The emergence of the sacred is all about the way in which people use the space offered to them by urban

planners as their ritual practices overlay the physical environment with a symbolic layer, setting this specific place apart by inscribing it with a different meaning. Since the majority of its inhabitants live and work in its cities, and the bulk of the country is located in the sphere of influence of a city, the Netherlands is considered a city-country. There is no metropolis, but there are several medium-sized cities and a large number of small ones. Despite this, multidisciplinary studies of the Dutch city are rare. My field of research, the suburb of Leidsche Rijn, is currently being constructed as part of the city of Utrecht. Utrecht, with its 300,000 inhabitants, is one of the largest cities in the country. The suburb in question is part of a proposal of the Dutch ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (Ministry of VROM); the so-called Vinex-plan. The term Vinex stands for *Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra* (Fourth Memorandum Spatial Planning Extra). The plans were drawn up in the 1990s and they delineated the preferred outlines of the urbanisation of the Netherlands for the period 1995-2015. In this time period the Dutch government wanted to construct around 835,000 new houses (van der Cammen & de Klerk 348). The aim of the Vinex-plans was to build the majority of the houses within existing cities as well as on their outskirts. The suburbs would be made easily accessible via public transport.

As stated, Leidsche Rijn is being constructed on the west side of Utrecht, a city located in the middle of the Netherlands. The new neighbourhood incorporates the two villages of Vleuten and de Meern with their traditional infrastructure. Parts of the outskirts of the villages which were mainly used for agriculture had to make way for the construction of the new neighbourhood. However, the old farmhouses are preserved and are now, just like the old villages, part of Leidsche Rijn. The plans state that once the neighbourhood is finished it will consist of approximately 30,000 houses and between 80,000 and 100,000 urban dwellers; a large extension for a city the size of Utrecht. And whereas for centuries church buildings have functioned as the centre of all Dutch cities, villages, and even neighbourhoods, in the urban plans of Leidsche Rijn the traditional religious buildings are left out of the equation. Instead of surrounding a church and accompanying churchyard, the eighteen different sub-neighbourhoods in the design are built around a large park, several historical heritage sites, a sculpture garden, and a singing glass tower (Schippers 147-150).

5. The Emergence of Sacred Space

From the research I have conducted in Leidsche Rijn, I will present one of my case studies, The Trees of Birth, as an example to illustrate the previously explained theory regarding the emergence of sacred places. The Trees of Birth ritual described in the opening paragraphs of this article takes place in the large city park and it involves the planting of trees for newborn, and in a few cases deceased, babies. Twice a year a large group of parents, grandparents, and other relatives and friends ritually plant a tree to symbolise the birth and life, or death, of their child or grandchild. Later on they return to their tree and small personal rituals emerge.

Of course the ritual planting of a tree is not a completely new phenomenon. Judaism has a special holiday to celebrate the New Year of the trees, and in Indian religious traditions the tree plays an important role (Nugteren 46-47). In addition to common religious traditions, “nature” in general,

and maybe more specifically trees, is a returning theme in contemporary commemoration ceremonies. A number of these modern day commemoration rituals take place in gardens, parks, or forests.

In the Netherlands there are various examples of trees playing an active role in contemporary commemoration. Soon after the *Bijlmermeer* plane crash in 1992, in which a cargo-plane crashed into a block of flats, killing at least forty-two people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, a memorial site was organised around “the tree that saw everything” (“de boom die alles zag”; *my translation*, IS). Candles and pictures were placed around the tree, and soon it became an important place for people wanting to deal with their grief (Post, Grimes, Nugteren, Petterson, & Zondag 63-64). In addition, Dutch religious psychologist Judith Tonnaer has studied the *Koningin Wilhelmina Forest* located in the Dutch polder. This forest offers relatives of cancer victims the opportunity to plant a remembrance tree. By doing so, the participants play an active role in the ritual which is a feature of modern remembrance rituals: there is a great need among next of kin, mourners, or people who feel otherwise involved to do something, to take action. One lights candles, walks, or plants a tree (Tonnaer 187).

Most of the trees in the Leidsche Rijn Birth Forest are planted to memorialise a happier occasion than the ones described above: the birth of a child. There are a few exceptions: trees that were planted for babies who died at, or soon after, childbirth. Although special planting days are organised, the planting of the trees in the birth forest should not be seen as a collective ritual. When the group arrives at the planting location they immediately split up into separate family groups, often consisting of at least three people, and they then start looking for their own tree, marked with the name of the baby. Each group plants its own tree.

Although people are free to shape this planting ritual any way they want, there are a lot of similarities. Cameras are always present and still pictures taken of every step of the process, from the name label hanging on the tree to the hard labour of the planting to the final result, everything is put on film. Where a birth is being celebrated, planting groups try their best to have the baby in question present in most of these pictures. If possible, older children are actively involved in the planting process and the parents sometimes even bring a little scoop and a sprinkling can. The group takes turns filling up the hole and playful complaints are made about the hard work they have to do on this Sunday morning. When the hole is filled some parents hang the birth announcement card from one of the branches. Sometimes the cards are carefully covered in plastic to make sure they will last longer. They use the card to mark and identify the tree. Another action recently gaining in popularity is the reading of a poem or a wish (or both) for the newborn and the tree after the planting.

Observing various planting days³ I came to know that the most important aspect of this ritual for the participants is the location of the tree. Most participants deliberately made the decision to plant a tree in their new neighbourhood as they want to build a future there for their family. Moreover, after the planting ceremony everyone receives a certificate with the exact GPS location of the tree to make sure they are always able to find it again. In addition, some people tie a knot in one of

the still flexible branches of the tree. When the participants return to the tree they like to see if the tree is healthy and growing well or if it needs watering in a dry summer. “When the children are older and the trees will be big enough, they can carve a heart in their own tree with the one they love,” one of the parents said to me. Other participants return to the tree on specific, special moments. A lady who planted a tree for her daughter who died at childbirth returns every year on the birthday of the baby girl. “We eat cupcakes on a bench nearby and hang little ribbons from the branches of the tree,” she said.

6. Conclusion

The tree-planting ceremony shows how the park, which holds a central position in the neighbourhood’s design, functions as a platform for ritual practice. The plans the designers made for the park are focused on the long term. Only with years, maybe even decades, will it grow out to look the way its planners intended. Therefore, in addition to being a personal ritual to celebrate the life or mourn the death of a child, the tree-planting ceremony is also meant to create a connection between the residents and their new living environment. The participants are thereby included in the growth process of the park. Together with these personal trees, the park will grow out to be a special place connected to the life of children. The residents of the area are using the park to ritually plant trees, thereby changing the park, or part of the park, into a sacred place; a place that is set apart because it has a special meaning in reminding them of a newborn or deceased child.

Rituals such as the ones practiced during and after the planting ceremony create a connection between the participants and their tree, and most likely also between the participants and the place of the tree, the Birth Forest. Places like this are important in a newly built suburb such as Leidsche Rijn. It is easy to make plans and build 30,000 houses; to make people feel at home in their new living environment, to make them care about and for it, is much more difficult. Sacred places with additional value help create this soul or content for the neighbourhood. This is something that cannot be planned on the drawing board as it strongly depends on the way in which people perceive and use the space. Moreover, the use of space alters the way it is perceived.

This process demonstrates the working of the urban triad as it shows the correlation between the *urbs* (referring to the physical aspects of the neighbourhood), the *civitas* (as the residents choose to make use of this design in a certain way, to use the park as a place for ritual practice), and, by these practices overlaying the physical place with their imaginations and so attributing a special meaning to it, the *topos*. By planting a tree in the park, the place has come to influence the senses, the memory, and the future practices of its visitors. A symbolic layer overlays the physical environment, setting this Birth Forest apart by virtue of its own special meaning.

Notes

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² Original title: Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse.

³ I attended four planting ceremonies between March 2010 and December 2012.

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Inez Schippers works as a fourth-year PhD candidate at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. In her research, Inez explores the emergence of sacred space in Leidsche Rijn, a newly built suburban area in The Netherlands. Wider research interests include American history and politics, and Islam in Western society.