

Urban dynamics in the Flemish countryside

A comparative study on morphological patterns and local economy dynamics

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Abstract

The boundary between Flanders' urban and rural areas has faded in recent decades. What remains is a chaotic spatial structure without any real notion of centrality. The rural areas are evolving from an agricultural production area to a semi-urbanized area, where people reside, recreate and set up economic activities (often in former agricultural buildings). It is difficult to understand this complex structure of the Flemish urbanized countryside and little research has been carried out on the mechanisms of this evolution. This comparative analysis intends to gain more insight in this dispersed pattern. Some relevant research questions can be posed:

- Does some historical determination exist concerning the morphological pattern or is the pattern the result of recent evolutions?
- Which kind of economic activities take place in these rural areas? What is their role in the morphological development of the area?
- Are there any differences in morphological patterns and local economy dynamics across Flanders' rural areas? What forces are behind these differences?

The research relies on an extensive case study. Nine municipalities in Flanders, with different spatial characteristics, are examined. In these municipalities both the settlement pattern and the rural economy dynamics are examined.

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The historical evolution of the morphological pattern is analysed through the study of historical maps, starting with the 'de Ferraris' maps of the end of the 18th century and ending with recent topographical maps. The local rural economy dynamics are examined through a study of the so-called VKBO-database, which contains all registered Flemish companies. The type of activity and the starting date are the most important factors to analyse. All results are processed in a geographic information system, giving many possibilities for further research.

The comparative study in the nine case municipalities reveals some interesting findings. In some case municipalities the sprawl pattern seems to have a historical ground (and has only enlarged in recent times), whereas in other case municipalities the pattern has just come to effect in the 1970s and 1980s. Regarding the local economy dynamics, some municipalities have a high amount of service industries and professions; other municipalities by contrast house many retail companies or 'harder' activities such as contracting firms and garages. The date of establishment of the various companies show that these activities are often the result of very recent evolutions, but again differences can be noted. Some 'generic' factors can be found to explain these transformations, such as the general programmatic needs of certain activities, but these are not sufficient to explain the differences in the uncovered patterns.

To fully understand the case study results, the authors try to relate the studied phenomena to broader societal evolutions and spatial dynamics at a larger scale. Not only 'generic' factors, which are the same for all the cases, but also time and space bound factors, which are unique for different areas, play an important role in the differentiated transformations of the Flemish countryside. These factors include socio-economical and demographic processes and evolutions on the one hand, and local factors such as natural resources, accessibility and location, ... This way, the research shows the variety of forms of urbanization; the methodology can also be helpful for studies on similar semi-urbanized regions.

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