

Finding an Equilibrium between Study and Visioning on the one hand, and concrete Project Development on the other Hand: the adjustment of concrete project implementation in function of a developing vision

Preliminary Remarks

In the 2007 ISOCARP Review Dries Willems and co-author Tania Vandembroucke give a description of the spatial evolution of Antwerp and its quest for a sustainable and coherent spatial policy since the beginning of the eighties. The authors argue that the city's policy in this period shifted from an informal involvement and ad hoc actions towards a more active involvement based upon visioning about the intended future of the city, expressed in a legal 'structure plan', combined with concrete urban project development.

The authors focus also on the involvement of actors in the planning and implementation process. As in other cities more and more players were assigned a role in this process. And finally they describe the restructuring of the Urban Planning Department in function of spatial criteria instead of sectorial.

"The spatial policy quest in Antwerp 1970 – 2006"

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Belgium and Flanders do not have a long history of urban renewal policy. In 1989 a retrospective was published on urban policy in Europe, which concluded that “there does not exist in Belgium at either the national or regional level any real policy designed to combat urban decline”. Except for a few individual initiatives such as the decisions regarding the rehabilitation areas the initiatives at supra urban level were few and far between.

Towards the mid-1990s the tide turned. Several policy levels started investing in urban renewal and Antwerp was suddenly given new financial opportunities to invest in the city over a relatively short period — between 1995 and 2006 — and under certain conditions. Moreover the city had a hard time choosing where to use the additional resources, due to a lack of an endorsed global vision.

The choice of which parties would be responsible for the implementation of the programmes proved to be an even more complex one. The situation of Antwerp as regards spatial policy is rather specific compared to that of other cities. A number of European cities (Lille, Barcelona, Bilbao, Rotterdam among others) have developed a global development strategy. The starting point for such a strategy included a new urban development image, in order to eliminate social and economic problems.

Antwerp took up the challenge of a “renovatio urbis” in the mid-1990s in an **unassuming and fragmented** manner. **There was no politically endorsed global vision for the city as yet.** Such a global vision regarding the city’s spatial development was only approved at the end of 2006 in the form of the s-RSA (Strategisch Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Antwerpen / Strategic Spatial Structure Plan Antwerpen).In comparison with other Flemish cities (Bruges, Kortrijk, Aalst, Ghent) this is relatively late.

Until 1999 urban development was mainly concentrated in the subareas. In 1993 the city of Antwerp decided to develop a long term vision in order to turn **around the neighbourhood decline of the central railway station**. Its execution was strengthened by funding via the EU URBAN I programme for strategic projects (October 1995). The innovative aspect of URBAN I was to make the sub-programmes complementary to each other, thus creating an outlined project which went much further than beautification of the urban fabric. Although the programme was successful, critical reflections were made. Research has shown that, in spite of the communication efforts, the goals and impact of the programme were not fully perceived by the local inhabitants and insufficiently known on governmental levels.

From **URBAN I**, the city has learned that city development is not a “project” solely executed by policy-makers, but a permanent and evolving “process”, whereby concrete targets and visioning are vital/essential and in which all stakeholders –

government, private investors and citizens- each have important roles to play and responsibilities to take up.



Projects of the Urban 1 programme: New Library “Permeke” and the “Designcenter”.

Antwerp used the funds from the Objective 2 and URBAN 2 programs and the FGSB (Federaal Groot Steden Beleid/ Federal Metropolitan Policy) resources to develop “city beacons”. Two important beacons within these programs include “*Spoor Noord and Schipperskwartier*”.

The Spoor Noord area is located to the north-east of the nineteenth century belt. Antwerp started up a planning process in 2001 for the reuse of an abandoned railway marshalling yard on the north fringe of the city. The yard covered a total surface area of 24 hectares across an area of 1.6 km of land. It was the property of the Belgian public railway company NMBS and was used for several decades to park, maintain and repair trains. Since 1873 the yard constituted a no-man’s land, which cut off the edge of the city from the surrounding districts. The city negotiated with the NMBS in order to redefine the land use of the abandoned site. Based on research and internal debate Antwerp opted in favour of the building of an urban landscape park. In 2002 an international design competition was launched. An assessment committee unanimously voted in favour of the project “Villages and Metropolis”. Eighteen hectares of land were to be renovated as a sustainable park with space for sports and games, with cycling and walking routes. The park is currently being built and it is expected to be ready in the spring of 2008. Spoor Noord was financed with resources from the Objective 2 and the FGSB programs.



Scale- model " Park Spoor Noord "

City beacon ***Schipperskwartier*** concentrated itself on the prostitution neighbourhood near the Scheldt quays. Following a petition by the inhabitants, which complained about the excesses of malafide practices and prostitution, Antwerp drafted an integrated future vision for the neighbourhood under the motto “The Red Light District, a seductive part of the City”. The starting point was that occupation and prostitution needed to be able to co-exist. The project design comprised four key points: the Red Light District as an “interesting part of the city”, a “pleasant place to live”, a “manageable window prostitution zone” and “an attractive neighbourhood for investors”. Next to attention for the spatial vision, this document focused specifically on the neighbourhood’s “software”: the inhabitants and the social fabric. At the end of 2005 the majority of the streets had been renovated, a “health centre” was founded for the prostitutes, and the neighbourhood now also had its own meeting centre. The process for this project — based on a collaboration between the various municipal departments and services was financed with resources from the FGSB and Urban Renewal Funds.



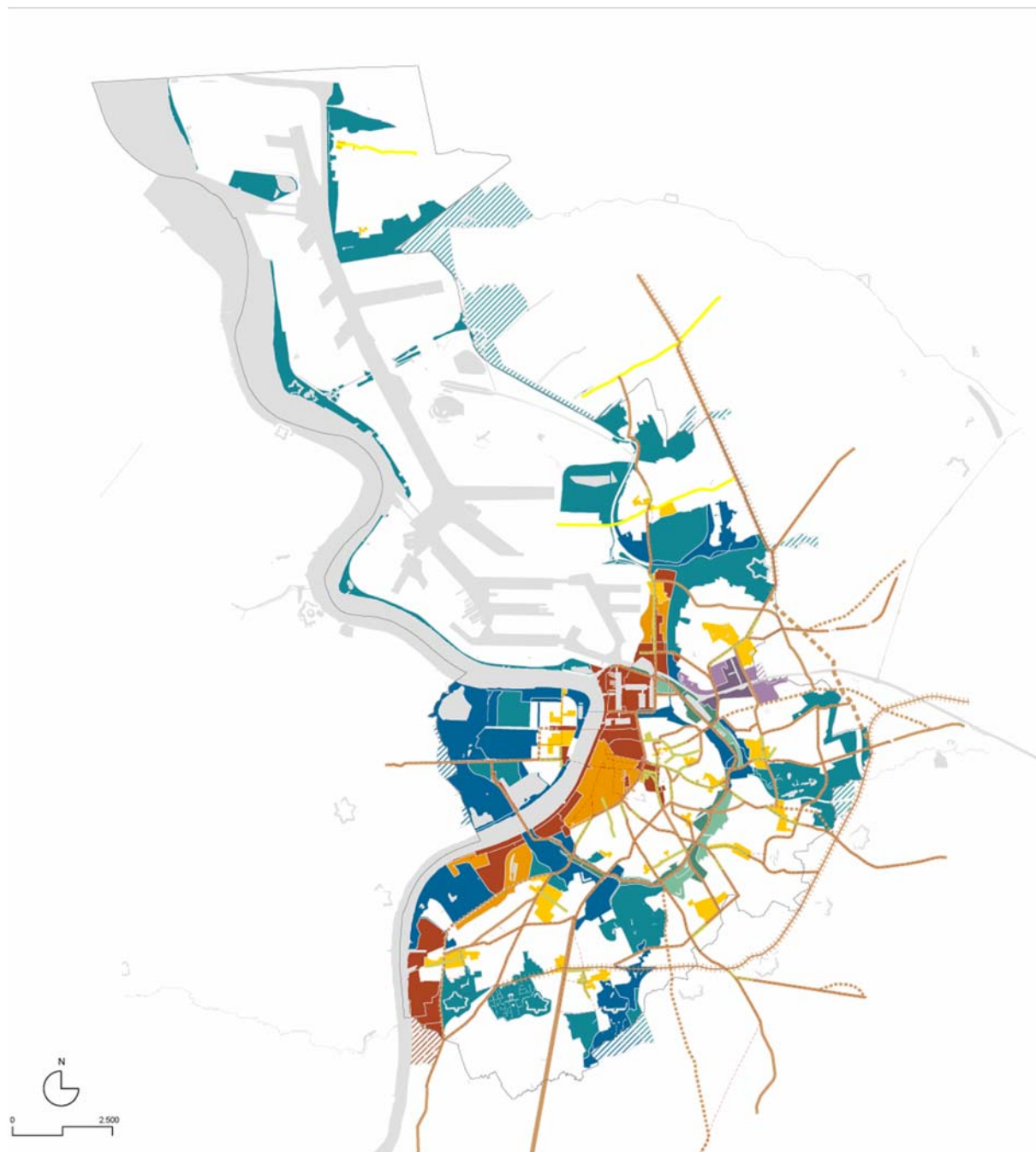
The Health Centre in the “*Schipperskwartier*”

Impulses for the Entire City

The situation changed when Antwerp — like all other municipalities in Flanders — was obliged to draw up a Spatial Zoning Plan — following the decision by the Flemish Government on 18 May 1997. The Antwerp coalition opted in favour of a strategic document that provided a framework for the development of different projects within the prevailing zeitgeist. The city commissioned Italian firm Secchi and Viganò to draw up the document. In November 2003 the starting memo for the Strategic Spatial Structure Plan Antwerp (s-RSA) was approved and in December 2006 the Flemish authorities granted their final approval.

The s-RSA described an informative, an indicative directive and a binding section.

Strategic Spatial Structure Plan for Antwerp (2006)



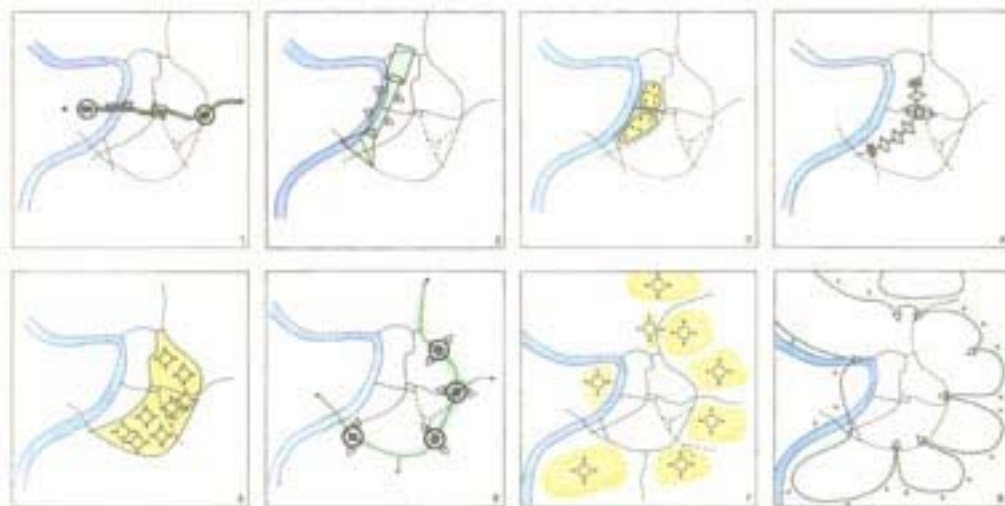
Reflections

The aforementioned projects and developments in urban development in Antwerp came about in a culture, whereby the policy frame for spatial development was shaped very slowly over a period of approximately 25 years. This not only influenced the framework within which the various urban renewal initiatives came about, but also

the manner and extent to which they received political support. Throughout this 25-year period new players or more actors repeatedly entered the field.

The start of the “Globaal Structuurplan Antwerpen“ of **GSA process** (1984 -1990) came about as a reaction of the local government to the spatial policy imposed by the federal authorities in the 1970s. At the time the Act on Spatial Planning only included plan documents, which were aimed at a final situation. This “static” approach to planning mainly tried to offer legal security as regards the final land use. In drawing up a GSA the local level opted in favour of a continuous planning process, aimed at the future and which could be used in a flexible manner.

The “Globaal Structuurplan Antwerpen 1990” (GSA): concepts



The GSA missed its mark as a reaction against static planning, as the request for more flexible plan documents and processes fell on deaf ears with the supervising authority. In a context whereby this document did not have a binding effect, the decision of the city government at the time to opt in favour of a new course as regards content and organization was quite progressive. However none of the city’s officials took a directive role in the implementation of the GSA following the municipal elections of 1994.

The **SAS** project (Stad-aan-de-stroomproject/ -City by the River Project) suffered from a lack of political support. SAS was pushed at political level by the Alderman for Spatial Planning at the time, but the project did not feature high on the agenda of other council members. The Town Council only provided limited support in its annual budgets. The planning process was mainly financed by building companies. The city limited its input to logistic support and approximately ten percent of the financing. The external financing was to be conceived as investment by building promoters in projects, which would yield a financial return in the long term. The lack of support at Town Council level and within the city’s administration meant that the project foundered. Insufficient political support generated insufficient support in general to convince private real estate developers.

The **political apathy** as regards the **GSA and SAS projects** was probably related to the fact that the Flemish government at the time was making available several resources for the so-called rehabilitation areas around this time, which stimulated the realization of concrete projects in the field of housing and public space. From a political point of view it was more interesting to invest time and resources in project-oriented and punctual operations in these rehabilitation areas, rather than in a long-term vision with strategic project developments, which stood to benefit the city as a whole. The projects within the rehabilitation areas were considered to be a weapon against the rise of the extreme right¹⁰. The political world considered working towards a long-term vision or working on a strategic project such as SAS a “luxury project”.

During the drawing up and the execution of the **URBAN 1 Program** the city's involvement was also rather low. Two committees were put in charge of overseeing and implementing the URBAN 1 Programme: the Supervisory Committee¹⁵, in charge of the general strategy and policy decisions, and the Management Committee, in charge of the programme's day-to-day implementation. For all matters pertaining to the project's administrative follow-up the committees received assistance from the Programme Secretariat, which was organized by the not-for-profit association SOMA. The Management Committee was directed by a representative of the Flemish Region.

The local government became increasingly involved in the implementation of the objective 2, URBAN 2 and FGSB programmes. Structures that were financed using resources from outside the city's administration (the Urban Development Unit, the Planning Unit) maintained direct contact with the local political level. They submitted all project requests for approval to the Mayor and Aldermen. After this approval every proposal was submitted to the Management Committee of the programmes involved, which took the final decision.

In the framework of the programmes Antwerp realized complex planning process such as ***Spoor Noord and the Schipperskwartier***. Thanks to sound process management and a clear mandate from the Mayor and Alderman, the city was able to develop a vision for these processes over a period of six years, which was also effectively implemented during this timeframe.

Not only the policy but the population too was involved in the planning processes during this period, but in a different manner. “Canvassing programs” invited them to take part in events in project areas, the objective being that inhabitants would appropriate the project area through events (exhibitions, markets, performances, sports) thus creating broad support for the ongoing projects. Initially the political level questioned these canvassing programs, due to their so-called expense. However the programs are still used even today.

Throughout the story political interest in urban development increased. The regulations pertaining to the various supralocal funds prescribed such an involvement. This changed the informal role of the local government, as with the SAS and the GSA, into a formal role.

Formal political support for flexible plan documents was finally a fact at the end of the 1990s. The sustained efforts by the academic world to draw up a Structuurplan Vlaanderen (Structural Plan for Flanders) resulted in a change of the federal government's political attitude. It shifted away from the regional plan with land use instructions and advanced "structural planning" as a new approach for Flanders' spatial policy. The Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (Spatial Structure Plan Flanders or RSV) was approved in 1997; the Provincial Structure Plan in 2001. In 1999 the obligation for every city and municipality to draw up a structural plan became imperative. Thus the local government was obliged to change from an ad-hoc polity to a more strategy-based policy, within an overarching vision for the entire city.

The s-RSA also changed the input and responsibility of the city's actors with regard to urban development. The Urban Renewal Department was restructured in 2006 in function of the priorities and the binding stipulations of the s-RSA. This resulted in the appointment of programme managers, project managers and project teams, who are responsible for the s-RSA's implementation.

The s-RSA indicates within which spatial framework urban development projects can be realized. The present and following local governments need to demonstrate that they take this strategic spatial framework serious; that they respect it. The restructuring of the Urban Development Department is the first step in the implementation of a number of the s-RSA's objectives and to integrate its implementation within the city's administration. However the necessary guarantees should be given within the regulations of this city structure, in order to be sufficiently dynamic.

The structure within which urban renewal is realized is not the essence of the issue; **a vision, that is endorsed by the political world, the inhabitants and investors, and which clarifies where the city wants to take this renewal, is at the centre of this issue.** Moreover the success factors to give urban renewal a chance matter: a strong process execution, sound decision-making, the opportunity to take initiatives, the creation of broad support and the involvement of all actors, flexible and specialized use of personnel, individuals who agree with one another, a clear delineation of responsibilities and especially the opportunity to have sufficient financial resources at one's disposal.

Antwerp is ready for further urban renewal: the zeitgeist is ripe, the necessary commitment is there and the tools are available.

Dries Willems started to work in Tunisia in the mid-1970s. Together with a Tunisian sociologist, he was in charge of elaborating a master plan of housing and rural development in the northeast (Cap Bon) and in the south west region (El Kef) of Tunisia in the period 1970-1977. Back in Belgium he worked for the office of Belgium's famous architect Renaat Braem. In 1979 he started to work for a Dutch firm on Structural Plans for various cities and municipalities in Flanders. He became Urban Planner in charge for the commune of Stabroek (municipality to the north of Antwerp) in 1983. For the City of Antwerp, he was the Town Planner in charge of Urban Development as from 1993. In 1998, the Antwerp City Council of Mayor and Aldermen entrusted Dries Willems with the creation and organization of a cell for urban planning. This cell started its activities in 1999 with a team of six. Today the Planning Cell is a multidisciplinary team of more than thirty employees. From 1999 to 2006 he was in charge as Co-ordinator of the Planning Cell. At present he is still working for the City of Antwerp and is commissioned with special tasks connected to City Development.