

Imagining a new waterfront for Antwerp



picture: Coolens & Delleuil

1. A new stage in the visioning process for the Antwerp waterfront

The city of Antwerp and the Flemish Government (through the Department for Waterways and Sea channel) are initiating a planning process for the 6km long Scheldt quays area.

As a consequence of the actualisation of the "Sigma plan" (a large-scale plan on flood protection in the entire river Scheldt estuary) the existing flood barrier along the quays has to be raised.

This infrastructural operation is an opportunity for a profound re-visioning of the Scheldt quays and the relation between the city and the river. Therefore a Masterplan will be developed for the end of 2008. This Masterplan will set out the guidelines for a project spread over the coming 10 - 15 years. In June 2006 five teams of architects, landscape architects and urbanists were invited to present their vision for the Scheldt quays. The involved teams were:

- West 8 (Rotterdam)

- the Portuguese - Belgian - Italian team of Proap / Wit / Idroesse / Arcoveneto
- Bernardo Secchi - Paola Vigano' (Milan)
- S333 (a team of international architects based in Amsterdam)
- B.A.U. (the office of Joan Busquets, Barcelona).

This competition provided a treasure of interesting material and insights for the debate on the future Scheldt quays. As a result in February 2007 the team of Proap with Joao Nunes was appointed to draw up a Masterplan for the quays.

The debate about the quays is not new. The current initiative can lean upon a lot of thinking that has been done during the last decades. Today nobody would underestimate the potential that the former harbour areas including the abandoned docks, quays and warehouses represent for the city. Nevertheless this consciousness was acquired only recently, starting from the 70's.

It took until 1990 before any concrete initiative was taken. Leaning upon the insights of the Global Structure plan for Antwerp and in view of Antwerp as a cultural capital in 1993, a cooperative of urbanists, architects, the local government and private parties founded a project called "Stad aan de Stroom" to investigate on the future of the abandoned harbour areas since they lost their economical meaning. Stad aan de Stroom launched an international competition for ideas. Following other cities, the challenge for Antwerp was to turn the areas of Old and New South, the Scheldt quays and the Eilandje into a new "face" towards the river, thus involving the river directly in the urban tissue. Six architects were invited to develop their vision: Manuel de Solà-Morales and Yves Lion for the Eilandje, Beth Gali and Bob Van Reeth for the quays and Toyo Ito and Rem Koolhaas for the South.

Due to its autonomous position in between noncommittal academicism and political restraint Stad aan de Stroom introduced a broad and refreshing perspective and a high level of ambition and quality. These were rather a precedent for Antwerp. Stad aan de Stroom was a real turning point for the perception of the abandoned harbour areas within a large public of experts, citizens and private investors.

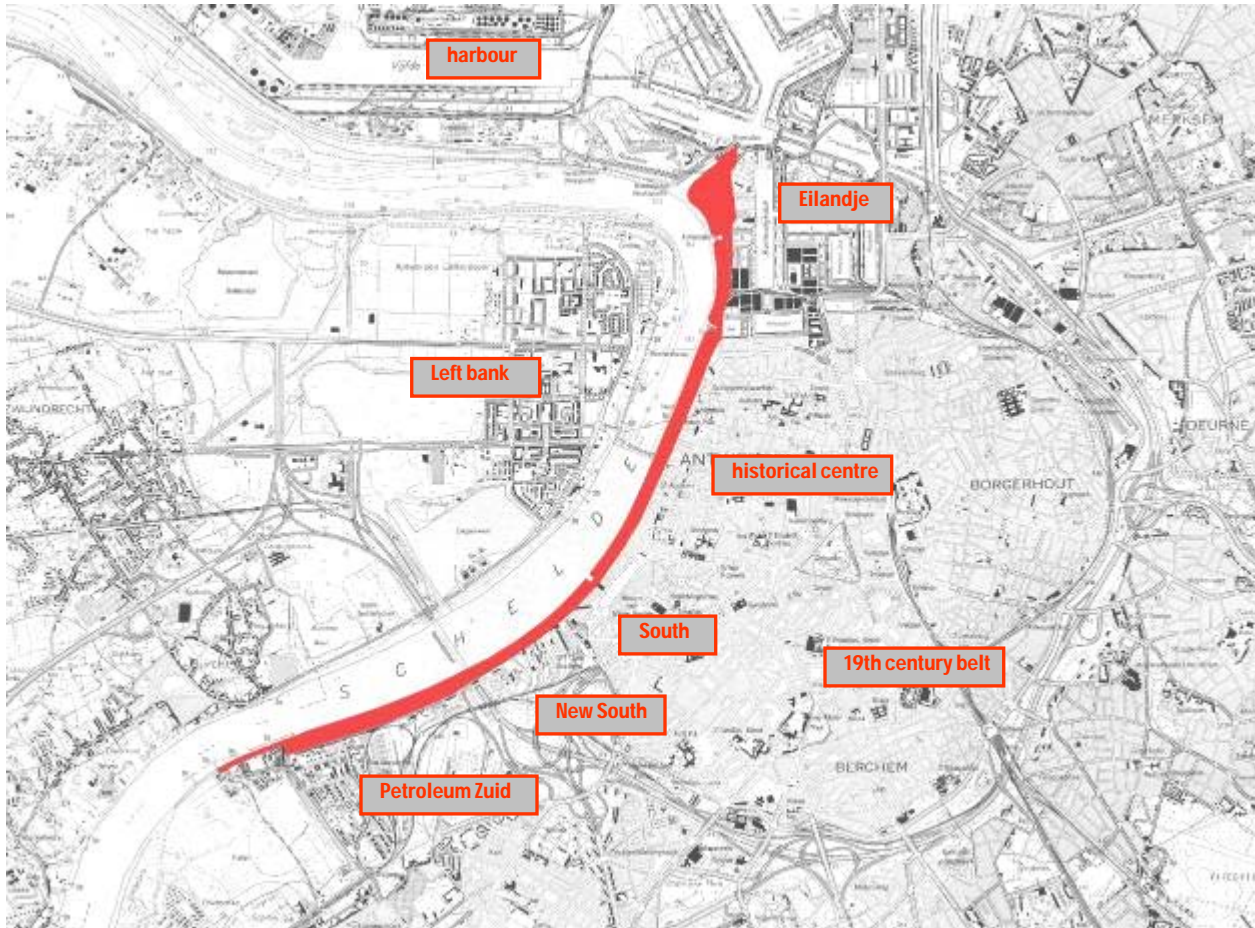
When in 1994 the city council decided to suspend the support to Stad aan de Stroom, protest and reactions of unbelief were very strong. The general perception was that an ambitious and visionary urban project had to make way for short term interests of project developers.

What followed was a period of limited planning and investments by the public authorities. In 1998 a working group of public servants developed a low-profile and pragmatic plan for the central parts of the quays. As a consequence some isolated small-scale projects were realized such as a cruise terminal and a floating pontoon. However it took until today before the ambition of Stad aan de Stroom was picked up again for the quays.

Instead, Stad aan de Stroom had been a trigger for massive private investments. In only few years the value of the properties along the quays raised drastically.

With some distance we can say that the ideas of Stad aan de Stroom did not disappear but rather opened the way for the present acceleration and dynamic in the visioning process for the city and the quays.

Some questions for the Scheldt quays remain the same since Stad aan de Stroom. On the other hand the context has changed somehow. Which are the main challenges today? How to look towards the future? And how should the Masterplan for the quays fit in with this?



map planning area within the city: elaborated by the planningscel, city of Antwerp

2. City, river and harbour

Restoring the relation between the city and the river remains as much - and even more - an issue as it was during Stad aan de Stroom.

Antwerp is developed as a harbour city on the river Scheldt, around the medieval core called the "wharf". Through the "vlieten" the urban tissue was strongly intertwined with the river.

As in numerous harbour cities the harbour underwent radical changes, with a far-reaching impact on the relation between the city and the river.

At the end of the 19th century the quays were straightened and a quay wall was built in order to keep pace with the economical progress and the scaling-up of the ships. As a consequence of this monumental infrastructure the city was abruptly cut off from the river and its tidal movements. The medieval wharf was torn down to a large extent. A 100m large quay area was merely conceived as a utility space for the harbour, deprived of any urban concept. A new straight wharf was developed along it.

In the 20th century the harbour activities again underwent a scaling-up and moved downstream to the north of the city. Antwerp became a medium-sized city with a world harbour. The quays remained as a vacant, deserted and undetermined space, with the warehouses and railway

tracks as witnesses of the former activities. The building of the poor concrete flood defense wall at 1.35m above the ground level confirmed the status of the quays as an isolated no-man's land.

Recently the challenge concerning the city - river relation has got a new dimension. According to the Sigmaphan the flood barrier needs to be heightened another 90cm, which brings it to a level of 2.25m above the ground level. It needs no further explanation that this intervention will change dramatically the experience of the quays itself and the open perspective between the city and the river.

The idea of bringing the city to the river also concerns the relation between both river banks. Antwerp was developed on the right bank with a limited 20th century extension on the left bank. The left bank is characterized by the low density of mainly residential functions. Connections between both banks are limited to two traffic tunnels and one pedestrian tunnel.

Stad aan de Stroom already put forward some visionary ideas in the ongoing debate on how to deal with this asymmetrical and "uncompleted" city. Bob Van Reeth launched the idea of a circular structure (with 35m high bridges) between both river banks, thus including the river within the city and facilitating urban developments on the left bank. Also Yves Lion emphasized the need for a more equally spread urbanity between both banks, by building a new channel for inland navigation westward and thus bringing the river within the city.



picture: planningscel, city of Antwerp

Since Stad aan de Stroom the debate on stitching both banks together has been continuously going on. Today the "Oosterweel connection" under the river is planned in order to complete the circular highway structure. The strategic spatial structure for Antwerp (s-RSA) proposes two bridges between both banks, one for local traffic and one for cyclists and pedestrians. The recent competition for the quays concerned only the right bank. Still, ideas were suggested. For example B.A.U, the office of Joan Busquets stresses the asymmetry of the green left bank and the mineral right bank as an important asset for Antwerp and suggests appropriate locations for the bridges connected to the broader mobility structure of the city.

3. The new quay project driven by the flood barrier

Even if the challenge concerning the city - river relation remained, the context of the Scheldt quays project has changed since Stad aan de Stroom.

Stad aan de Stroom was organized in a period that both the historical city centre and its 19th century belt were perceived as unlivable and in decline, with major problems of decay and flight towards the periphery. Stad aan de Stroom project was investigating the future meaning of the former harbour areas, and how these areas could make up a trigger for urban renewal in general.

Since the suspension of Stad aan de Stroom the issue of urban renewal has been picked up in different ways.

Numerous small and bigger projects - completed or still in a realization stage - reaffirmed the city as an attractive environment. A striking example is Spoor Noord, the development of a new 24ha park in the middle of a rather "problematic" area in north of Antwerp.

The Eilandje is carrying an important part of the city's and harbour's memory. Together with the openness and the presence of the docks this is determining its attraction. The planning trajectory for the Eilandje was re-initiated in 1996 and is since that time at its own rhythm. In 2002 a masterplan has been approved. Today the first private investments get elaborated in detail and will soon lead to realization of housing, offices, leisure functions etc.

Nieuw Zuid is in an earlier planning stage. Except for the former southern station and railway yard there are no historical references proposing starting points for this new urban area to be developed. Including the crossing of several mobility axes Nieuw Zuid is a major urban issue for the future.

Last but not least, urban renewal - or "renovatio urbis" - is a key issue in the strategic spatial structure plan (s-RSA) that was approved recently. The s-RSA proposes a coherent renewal and development strategy for the city based on key images and strategic spaces and defines a large number of priority projects. The quays are part of the strategic space of the "hard spine". Thus the s-RSA confirms their status as a significant public space intended for collective functions.

Fifteen years after Stad aan de Stroom the regeneration of the quays is again on the agenda, but with a certain autonomy towards the bigger picture including Eilandje and Nieuw Zuid. The emphasis on urban renewal has shifted somehow to the background. Instead, the project got a new dimension through the issue of safety and flood defence.

On the other hand the planning area has been extended with the river banks next to the dry docks and Petroleum Zuid (with the remnants of the petrol industry). These are potential future urban areas at the far northern and southern end of the city.

The safety issue gives another kind of - more explicit and urgent - justification to the project that goes beyond the status of Stad aan de Stroom as a competition for ideas. A clear indication of this new status is the allocation of budgets by the Flemish Government for the realisation of the flood protection within 2015.

The infrastructural challenge is explicit. However, main challenge is not to repeat the mistakes of the past, but to integrate the - again - large-scale infrastructural intervention within a broad urban project that meets all aspects of this complex area. An integral and integrated approach is necessary to develop appropriate solutions for a new flood barrier within a highly urban context, putting substantial emphasis on aspects of the quality of urban space. Therefore the recent competition provided a lot of inspiring ideas.

The Scheldt quays project seems to have acquired a bigger autonomy. Still, in the first place it should approach the fundamental choice that has to be made with regard to the kind of waterfront that Antwerp wants to present itself with.

Experiences with former harbour areas in other cities have demonstrated the instant success of autonomous project developments creating "culturalized urbanity" to be consumed. The example of Barcelona shows another strategy for urban renewal, based on the upgrading of the public space and looking for connection with the collective memory of these areas. The benefits of this approach are not directly measurable.

What is the direction for Antwerp? The reactions on the competition proposals leave no doubt. Most striking is the resolute rejection of the approach of the team of S333. This considers the present indefiniteness and programmatic void of the quays as a problem that has to be solved by juggling with a wide range of spectacular programs and poles of attraction for each area along the quays.

Still, although the value of public space is broadly supported and laid down as a main principle for the project in the declaration of intent between the City and the Flemish Government, Antwerp is not another Barcelona. It will have to develop its own strategy.

4. A renewed public involvement in the quays project



picture: Antwerpen Open

Which other conditions have changed since Stad aan de Stroom?

The quays are no longer a forgotten area at the back of the city. Today they have a prominent place within the mental map of any Antwerp citizen. The quays are far more claimed by citizens and visitors. At the beginning of the '90's Antwerpen Averechts - organising unconventional visits to unknown parts of the city - was one of the initiators of this evolution. Since 1995 the quays are annually occupied by the cultural events of the Zomer van Antwerpen - an urban festival during the summer. Furthermore they are used as seems appropriate: for a lonely walk, a romantic moment, an improvised barbecue, enjoying the view on the city from the river bend next to the dry docks etc. Continuously used for escaping from the dense inner city, giving a way out to a variety of informal activities but never completely occupied.

People are still referring to Stad aan de Stroom and its abrupt suspension. Any new project will provoke some scepticism. Still a broad public support is to be expected for the regeneration of the quays. It is a positive project with a supra-local dimension. It concerns a large public of citizens, visitors, inhabitant committees, economical actors, architects and urbanists, all kind of interest groups etc. Nobody will deny that the current condition of the quays is a shame and a flagrant waste of to the huge potential of this area. Even if some cherish also its current condition as a non-space and fear that this characteristic may not survive a radical upgrading.

A main challenge for this planning process will be to keep the public support once important choices will have to be made concerning the flood barrier, the functional program, mobility etc.

Without any doubt some minor issues will provoke emotional reactions and might prevail in the public debate. An example is the question whether or not keeping the 19th century warehouses that are obstructing the open view on the river. Therefore it is important first of all to pass on the ambition for the quays on a large public and to fit in the debate about concrete proposals with this ambition.

For different reasons there is a certain hesitation towards a broad communication campaign and public debate. The first realisations are not to be expected before 2010. Too long to tide over without losing credibility? At present there are still many uncertainties about the direction that the Masterplan will take. Concrete engagements still have to be achieved in a negotiation process between the involved public actors. A broad - and possibly uncontrolled public debate brings about the risk for this delicate planning and negotiation process to get stuck.

On the other hand the Masterplan that will be delivered at the end of 2008 will be much more than abstract concepts. At present most people can hardly imagine to what extent the regeneration and especially the new level of the flood barrier will have an impact on the quays. At the end of 2008 there should be a wide public support for a drastic change. The insight with regard to the future image for the quays has to be achieved gradually by a large public.

Communication should be worked out on different tracks. "Inspiring actions" focus on the ambition and potential of the quays. Examples are public events on the quays, an exhibition about waterfront development in other cities etc. Except for the project management many external parties can be put forward as initiators of these inspiring actions. Another track is the communication related directly to the evolution of the Masterplan. This has to include both information and interaction with carefully composed target groups.

5. Challenges and proposals about public space, emptiness and landscape

How to conceive the public space of the quays?

After a century of intensive use, today a main characteristic of the quays is the emptiness. The re-conquest of the openness was already an issue for Beth Gali during Stad aan de Stroom. After a careful consideration of the existing buildings on the quays she proposed to demolish the warehouses while keeping the elevated promenades along them.

Another dimension of public space that got strongly in the picture during the recent competition is the programmatic emptiness, the condition of "terrain vague" versus the urban meaning of the quays. The participants proposed different balances between both of these possible conditions of the quays.

To what extent can the spatial and programmatic emptiness be made true? At present the quays are not only claimed as a public space.

- For example they constitute a (free) parking area. Although this function was not planned but rather "happened" by absence of other claims, at this time the parking area is considered as badly needed. Any proposal to eliminate it will have to include an alternative for 3.000 parking spaces.
- There are some private initiatives on the quays, for example "Miniaturstad" (where a scale model of the city of Antwerp is exposed).
- Although controversial, the zoning plan for Rijnkaai (northern quay area next to the Eilandje) includes housing, offices and private equipments and is thus responding to a private building market looking for locations next to the water.
- The inhabitants along the quays claim the open view on the river.
- Important archaeological values are waiting to be dugged up and presented to the public.
- Maritime activities and (cruise) tourism require important infrastructures.
- There are important transshipment and industrial activities in the southern part of the quays.
- Etc.

On top of that many new ideas are projected on the Scheldt quays. These are very diverse with regard to scale, level of concreteness and support but all have an impact on the quays. Examples are: a congress centre in the green area near to the dry docks, an (outdoor?) extension of the museum for contemporary art in the southern part of the quays, a hotel in one of the historical buildings on the quays, solar panels on the roof of the warehouses etc.

Still, despite all claims and ideas, there is not such a thing as a broadly supported and coherent functional program for the whole of the planning area. Drawing up the Masterplan will have to bring in leads to this.

A main question is to what extent the public space of the quays can bear a built program. And to what extent there is room for private functions. A question in line with this is how the urban sequence of straight building line / quay road / open quay surface / quay wall with blue stone - providing a big coherence to the area - should be continued towards future extension areas of the city such as Nieuw Zuid.

The uniqueness of the quays consists in its scale: an open space of 6.000m by 100m at the foot of the historical center. This condition is in a way a consequence of a very brutal intervention in the past, namely the straightening of the wharf. Because of the scale and current status as an urban void the quays are potentially a new urban landscape. A fundamental choice to be made is whether or not a radically new landscape is appropriate in the first place. And how does the new flood defense infrastructure fit into that? What is the approach towards the natural process of the tide which is at the moment brusquely controlled by the straight quay wall.

All of these were central reflections of nearly all of the participants of the Open Oproep. Results were very diverse. The following paragraphs give an overview of the most striking ideas and points of view.

New monumental landscape by West 8

West 8, the office of Adriaan Geuze conceives the quays as an extremely autonomous and easily readable landscape, determined by a limited number of strong urban features, namely a massive tree grid, a dike next to the quay wall, a mobile flood defense wall on strategic spots, and some visually defined buildings ("follies"). The current surface and its "sense of place" are

preserved to a large extent but get a new lay out that is inspired by the aesthetics of the 19th century warehouses. The simplicity and monumental scale of these elements provide a big coherence to the whole, but are missing subtlety and urban dimension in comparison with the cultural-historical complexity of the quays and the diversity of the neighbouring urban tissue.

Quays as an urban extension by Secchi - Vigano'

The attraction of Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano' proposal depends on the sensitivity to the existing atmosphere and the symbolic meaning of the quays for the city. The quays as such are a part of the collective memory and the image of the city. Therefore the future image has to fit in as closely as possible with the existing one. The quay surface including the existing cobble stones should be preserved. As a consequence the flood barrier gets a straightforward architectural solution. Secchi - Vigano' demonstrate their capacity to design sophisticated solutions for the integration of the flood barrier in the quays' lay out (wall within buildings, platforms, ramps, benches etc.). Still it remains a wall.

The quay area is domesticated by a variety of small-scale and flexible urban programs, however without significant spatial impact. Mainly in the central area the quays are as a big square that clearly belong to the city. The spatial configuration is mainly determined by the neighbouring urban tissue (perspectives and green malls in extension of the streets etc.). In the northern and southern quay areas the functional programs can be of more impact.

This approach provides a concrete image for the quays and might safeguard the emptiness of the quays. However it does not take advantage of the opportunity to conceive a new landscape, not even in the northern and southern area where the quays are less charged with meaning. The diversity of small-scale programs might prevail to the coherence of the whole. Secchi - Vigano's approach might not be an appropriate answer to the scale and hierarchical order of the quays.

Quays as a new urban area by B.A.U.

B.A.U, the office of Joan Busquets, suggests a new topography and large-scale and urban landscape whose features fit in with the 19th century potentials of the Scheldt quays. The flood barrier gets integrated in the overall new topography for the quays. B.A.U. makes a sharp analysis of the larger urban context of the project - including the left bank - and brings the Masterplan for the quays in relation to some interesting supra-local figures for mobility. However the "international style" future image for the quays shows that the sense of place is not fully caught.

Quays as an "intermediate space" by Proap / Wit / Idroesse / Arcoveneto

The team of Joao Nunes and Proap conceives the quays - and mostly the central part of them - as an "intermediate space" in between city and the river, a "decompression zone" for the dense urban tissue. This intermediate space needs to be reorganized, but still the programmatic void is a quality to be protected.

The team creates a varied landscape and restores an interesting interaction with both the river and the city behind. The future lay out of the quays is mainly a consequence of the diversified treatment of the flood barrier. The team proposes a set of principal sections for the 100m large quay area, integrating different - less or more innovative - solutions for the flood barrier (mobile flood barriers, slopes, platforms etc.). Different sections are to be used in different "fields" of the quays, strongly depending on the characteristics of the neighbourhood behind and to the

intended use of the public space in that particular "field" of the quays.

Still the image for the whole is a new typology of autonomous landscape with an urban dimension, its own image, scale and topography. This new landscape catches very well the determining aspects of the current atmosphere - such as the cobble stones. Coherence is provided by "lines" over the whole length of the quays such as the flood barrier, cycle paths, a tram line etc.

The flood barrier distinguishes between permanent dry and potentially wet areas on the quays. Thus it can safeguard the "intermediate space", structure its flexible use and select some well-defined "fields" for permanent developments.

6. Challenges for the Masterplan

What is the meaning of the Masterplan in the planning process for the quays?

In the first place the Masterplan is all about proposing an image and vision for the future. The vision of the team of Joao Nunes and Proap was considered as the most appropriate, because of the strong landscape dimension, the new image for the quays at the same time referring to the present quality and atmosphere, the interesting interaction with both the river and the city, the diversified approach of the flood barrier, the sophisticated balance between urbanity and "terrain vague" spread throughout the central decompression area and the northern and southern areas.



images: competition proposal Proap / WIT / Idroesse / Arcoveneto

Through this appealing image for the future the Masterplan must be able to gather the different involved public actors with their (contradictory) interests around the project. Not at least because of the important financial engagements that are required to realize the project, including its big amount of public space. Main public actors are the city, the Flemish Government, Waterways and Sea channel, the public transport company, the harbour authority etc. In a second stage the Masterplan also has to offer a frame for involving private actors in the realization projects.

The Masterplan for the Scheldt quays is an opportunity to connect the neighbouring urban areas - both existing and future and within all their diversity. The overall view on the 6km long quays might also offer new insights that improve the coherence between the ongoing planning processes for some of these areas. For example the Masterplan for the quays might be an appropriate basis for re-evaluating the zoning plan for the Eilandje. It can bring in ideas for the

development of Nieuw Zuid and for Petroleum Zuid. In the approach of the team of Proap and Joao Nunes building on the quays might be discussible next to the Eilandje and Nieuw Zuid considering the potential intrinsic open and public space within these areas.

The Masterplan has to deal with time aspects. It has to define strategic projects for short term realization, and at the same time leave flexibility since a lot of uncertainties for the future (mainly with regard to the functional program) cannot be cleared out in the coming year and a half.

With regard to time the team of Joao Nunes and Proap defends an explicit point of view. The quays cannot be consumed entirely by today's generation, but should leave margins for the future. It would make no sense to agree on an instant program of large scale public facilities while time might change ideas, opinions and insights concerning the feasibility. In the words of the team of Proap: the challenge for the Masterplan is to set out an optimal "starting position" for future developments by future generations. As stated earlier the flood barrier makes up an important instrument to preserve the open space for the future and to safeguard some areas against rash development.

In this early stage of the planning process, the Masterplan cannot be a design for the quays. The regeneration of the Scheldt quays will be a matter of partial projects brought forward by different actors and spread over many years. The elaboration of the partial projects will be appointed to different designers. The Masterplan has to guarantee the coherence and quality in this diffuse future trajectory. By distinguishing "fields" and "lines" the team of Joao Nunes and Proap proposes a flexible strategy and thinking frame for this future trajectory. In this strategy the strategic "fields" should get a definite lay out on short term while others can be solved with a temporary (and cheaper) models.

Proap's approach was considered as most appropriate because of the combination of a strong image and a flexible strategy. This is even more clear comparing it to the other competition proposals. Flexibility is missing in the design of West 8. Secchi' - Vigano's proposal includes a certain pragmatism and thus substantial opportunities for realization. On the other hand the sophisticated architectural dimension is at the same its weakness because of the strong dependence on the design quality of the partial projects in a later stage. B.A.U. proposes a efficient managerial approach of the process, missing somehow an appealing image for the quays that is necessary to carry forward the Scheldt quays project.

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