

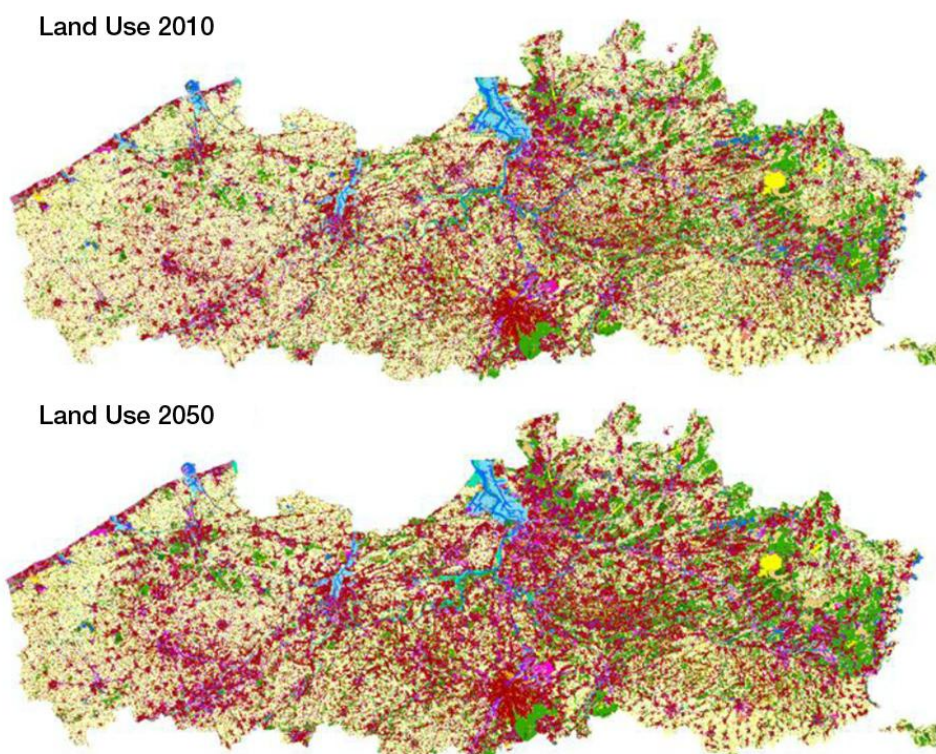
New spatial strategies for the densely built-up Flanders region (Belgium)

Guy Vloebergh, CEO of the private planning company OMGEVING cvba, Lecturer at ARTESIS University College Institute and University Antwerp - BELGIUM

1. Introduction

In 1997 the Flemish parliament approved the Spatial Structure Plan, and a coherent spatial vision was formulated in this policy plan under the motto of “Flanders, open and urban”. Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, is in fact characterised by a high population density (450 inhabitants/km²) and an extremely spread-out pattern of construction. From this ambitious spatial policy plan, over the subsequent 15 years there followed a great deal of planning processes concerning urbanicity, living, open space, infrastructure and industry, steered by the Flemish government. Provinces and municipalities likewise drew up spatial structural plans for their regions. In addition, and in order to realize these visions, these three policy levels are also engaged in spatial implementation planning (land use plans). In spite of all such activity, and the accompanying expansion of administrative services for spatial planning on the three policy levels, the further urbanisation of open spaces in Flanders continues apace. Between 1990 and 2007, the total area of developed space increased by +22 %, housing space by +37 %, and space for commercial and industrial activity by +27 %. Agricultural space shrank by 6.5 % and 3 % of woodlands and nature reserves disappeared. Forecast figures for 2050 indicate that, without changes to the existing policy and additional measures, this fragmentation will record an enormous increase. It is, especially, the central region between Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent that will witness ongoing urbanisation towards the creation of a major urban conglomeration of continuing and ever-spreading lateral expansion.

Figure 1: Increasing fragmentation of space in Flanders



Aside from its involvement in the above-mentioned regular plans, the Flemish authorities have since 2004 been in the process of developing a subsidisation instrument in the form of financial support for complex and strategic projects with a view to accelerating their implementation. These successful 30 strategic projects are not initiated but subsidised by the Flemish government. To a greater degree than other projects steered top-down, these are focused on the effective realisation of spatial policy in Flanders.

Working with 'strategic projects' has developed into a new spatial strategy in densely built-up and spread out settlement structure Flanders. In this paper (1) the success factors of this approach are defined and (2) two strategic projects are explained more comprehensively.

2. Success factors of this approach

2.1 Strategic projects

What are strategic projects in Flanders? A strategic project is a multi-faceted planning assignment that interconnects and harmonizes existing and current planning initiatives by various administrations and partners. When this attempt is successful, the project effectively becomes strategic, acquires a sustainable character, and is thus enabled to continue for the long term, hence spanning a number of legislatures. The development of each and every strategic project is different and, in all cases, customized and tailor-made. Common to all of them is the fact that their realisation is area-focused and integrated. What is generally lacking is, on the one hand, spatial cohesion and harmonisation amongst the diverse sectoral plans and, on the other, insights into the links between vision and concrete realisations. Many problems and opportunities remain mired in contradictory visions, lack of dialogue, and the absence of a project structure. In order to re-energize these situations of stagnant immobility, the Flemish authorities have decided to subsidize the appointment of a project coordinator, with proviso that the application for accreditation be worked out and submitted by the local partners.

2.2. Strategic projects arise 'bottom-up'

Strategic projects arise 'bottom-up' and are initiated by local authorities (municipalities, provinces and other partners), in a collaborative partnership spontaneously arising around a set of issues. Of essential importance is the conviction amongst the local partners that the project will generate added value. Strategic projects ought at least to possess characteristics that transcend municipal boundaries, which should lead to a new kind of collaborative partnership. Some strategic projects extend across several provinces or even national borders. Many actors already find it a challenge in itself to collaborate with their neighbours in a project structure. This local embedment is especially valuable given that also the realisation of large-scale projects at the Flemish provincial level needs to be implemented and realized locally. The orientation towards the realisation of such projects means that the pursuit of a local platform is, in fact, particularly important. When the 'engine' that drives the strategic project is made up of a project team with adequate representation of local actors, chances for success are excellent.

2.3. 'Seizing opportunities' resulting from autonomous processes is central in these strategic projects

Every municipality, every province, the Flemish Region itself, and each and every sectoral policy area within these administrative structures are drawing up plans. Flanders is suffering from an increased partitioning in its diverse sectoral planning (environment, mobility, economy, tourism, agriculture, commerce, etc.), each in its own way laying claim to the available space. In area-focused projects, chances and opportunities are embraced that by the very fact of an integrated approach are very likely to lead to a win-win situation. Given that strategic projects are oriented precisely towards implementation, these opportunities may lead to realisations. There is, nonetheless, the condition that the partners involved are

prepared to work together in an atmosphere of sufficient openness and with a taste for dialogue and are willing to collaborate in a search for solutions. Starting from a strong project structure, it is likewise possible to entice reluctant actors to join in the collaborative partnership instead of staying on the sidelines. Also in terms of the collaboration, it is possible here to book good results. It would even be better if this were also further extended into joint financing towards the implementation of the (part)projects.

2.4. Financial support for the salary and operational costs of a project coordinator

After selection, the Flemish government provides financial support for the salary and operational costs of a project coordinator for 3 years, amounting to 100,000 Euro p.a. By means of this financial stimulus, the local actors generally manage to erect a transparent project structure that is being continuously reinforced and directed by the project coordinator. Furthermore, the local actors involved in the project are being asked to contribute an additional 20 % financing. This increases local responsibility for, and commitment to, the project. The local actors establish independently how to give form to the project coordination and where to allocate the subsidy amount. Semi-annually, the Flemish authorities request a progress report while, annually, a progress meeting is being organized. It is important here to create a subtle balance between making funds available towards the project coordination and monitoring the objectives and the results of the implemented process.

2.5. A professional and independent project coordinator

A professional and independent project coordinator is an essential condition for being able to achieve complex and strategic projects and results with an exemplary and leverage role. The project coordination of strategic projects is hardly a task to be entrusted to inexperienced individuals. The assignment is mostly offered to professional senior spatial planners, seeing that they possess both a broad knowledge of the complex range of implementing instruments and the ability to fashion the links between vision formulation, operationalisation, and implementation. Ever more frequently, the project coordination is being handed to a team that will be responsible for the project's realisation, monitor its continuity, and steer the process in all of its facets, both on the official administrative and the political levels. The ability to function independently is likewise a must for the project coordinator. He/she needs to gain and enjoy the confidence of all actors and partners. He/she ought to be able to operate with sufficient authority and legitimacy. The strategic projects, the coordination of which is being entrusted to, for instance, a civil servant of one of the involved administrations / partners, hence may (not infrequently) demonstrate a greater rigidity in the way in which they are being run. In addition, the project coordinator must ensure synchronisation and consultation. He/she looks for opportunities to create visualisation of various aspects of the plan, thus generating a savings in time. This kind of coordinative process thus ensures that the breadth and scope of the plan is being suitably clarified for the partners.

2.6. Land purchase subsidy

On implementation, land policy often proves to be crucially important for achieving spatial objectives. For this reason, a subsidy of up to 500.000 Euro can be requested on top of the project coordination for land purchases. During the implementation of a strategic project, land policy frequently proves of crucial importance. It is often necessary to change the ownership of land and buildings in order to realize spatial objectives. To circumvent impediments of that kind, this additional subsidy presents the project partners with an interesting opportunity towards the realisation of (part)projects in the field.

2.7. The organisation of a strategic project

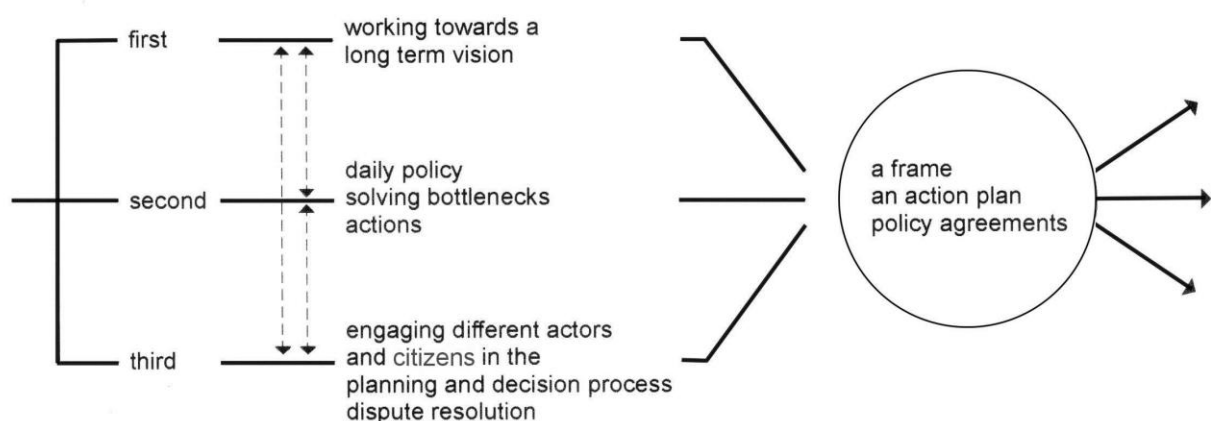
It is advantageous to consider the structure and composition of the collaborative partnerships, and the interaction in each strategic project. Customisation is a keyword in this respect. A strategic project is characterized by the presence of key actors such as

municipalities, provinces or Flemish services, non-profit organisations, or enterprises that jointly constitute the project structure of the core group and participate in subscribing to the project. The official applicant of a strategic project, however, needs to be a public body. In addition, there are a host of other partners that, in a less formal manner or to a rather indirect degree, are involved in the project. Some of the projects may attract the participation, in some way or other, of more than one hundred actors. How do all of these partners collaborate with one another? Generally, we distinguish within the organisation of strategic projects a project group or key team, a steering group wherein managers are brought together in order to arrive at decisions in a process of policy consultation, diverse working groups deliberating about themes, part-problems and/or part-areas, and groups acting as sounding boards, or more scientifically oriented advisory groups. Important is the fact that the manner of collaboration be organic and attuned to a process 'in motion'. Working groups keep coming and going on an ongoing basis, steering groups gather with a frequency as determined by the process itself, the project group or the key team ensures continuity and provides direction for the project coordinator on a daily basis.

2.8. All strategic projects are multiple planning tasks

All strategic projects are multiple planning tasks that are only realised if a robust basis is built up within the context of open plan processes. Three tracks run throughout each process: (1) working at a long-term vision for the project in the form of a structural sketch, masterplan, visual quality plan, and the like; (2) reacting to concrete problems, permit applications, chances to realize part-aspects and to ensure that no short-term decisions be taken that are contradictory to the long-term objectives; and (3) the building-up of a platform through consultation and communication. The creation of a platform is essential for the successful realisation of concrete actions in the field. The idea is to effectively involve the citizen in the process by means of open and pro-active communications. To this end, a variety of instruments are being deployed, such as the development of a house style and logo, website, brochures, newsletters, meetings, walking tours, exhibitions, events and animated and imaginative entertainment, and the like. The key to success for the project coordinator consists in his/her ability to properly manage the coupling and intertwining of these three tracks, to ensure that decisions be taken promptly, and to ascertain the continued realisation of part aspects within the strategic project.

Figure 2 Methodology for 3-track planning



2.9. Dynamics arise at micro level

Dynamics arise at micro level through the innovative capacity of individuals and groups, stimulated by governments. Various different strategic projects have been experimenting with all sorts of forms of innovative agreements: charters, statements of intent, collaborative

agreements, in principle decisions, and administrative agreements are just a few examples. The creativity to have the process advance and achieve progress via interim decisions needs to be present at the local level within the project group and with the project coordinator. Decision moments create tension, which is welcome at regular intervals in the process. Certainly for what concerns long-term strategic projects, regular monitoring and evaluation of progress in the project are self-evident, indispensable conditions for the engagement of the partners.

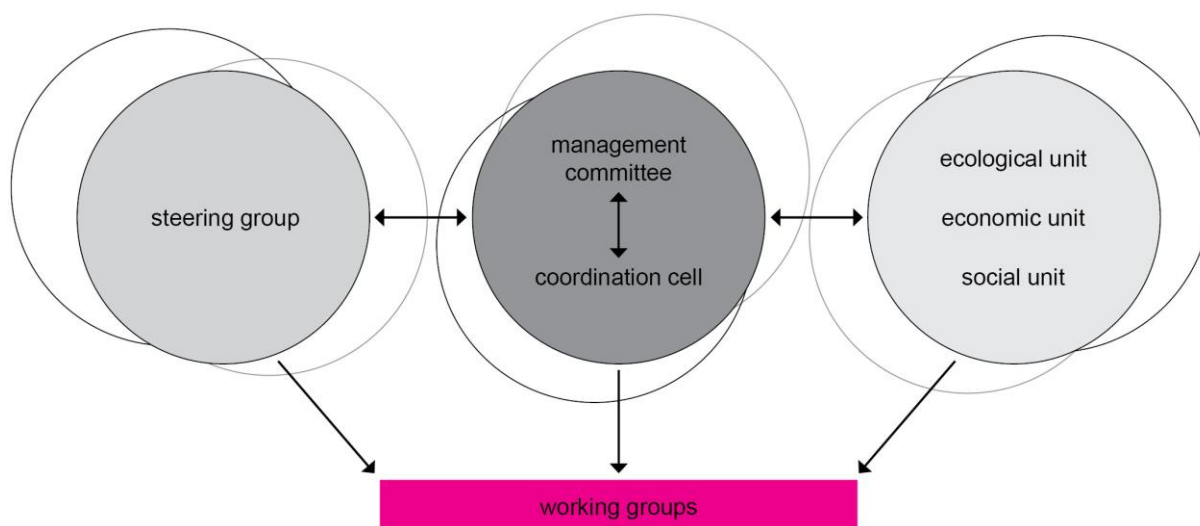
3. Two strategic projects : (1) BOSLAND, the development of the largest and most child-friendly woodland in Flanders, and (2) ALBERTKNOOP, the realisation of a cross-border, innovative and multi-modally developed business area adjoining a substantial green belt.

3.1. BOSLAND

As the largest wooded region in Flanders, Bosland enjoys international recognition. The strategic project aims at the creation of the largest child-friendly woodland in Flanders (ca. 10.000 hectares in area) and at the further development of the region in a sustainable and socially integrated manner. The project pursues the creation of a qualitative environment wherein woodlands and the general natural environment be protected against further encroachment of intrusive forces. Project partners in this are the Flemish Agency for Nature and Woodland, the municipalities of Hechtel-Eksel, Lommel and Overpelt, Tourism Limburg, and the Regional Landscape of the Lower Kempen. These partners have been united within a steering group and a management committee, bodies that also direct diverse working and deliberative groups.

Figure 3 Project structure BOSLAND

An Open Project Organisation



The Bosland Story can be told on the basis of three main themes:

- 'Boom in – *All About Trees*' tells the story of woodland and timber within the project area
- 'Terug in de wortels – *Back to the Roots*' recounts the project area's rich history
- 'Bijt in het zand – *A Taste of Sand*' examines the subsoil level and examines the use of sand throughout the centuries.

The Masterplan Bosland 2020 presents an integrated future picture as a framework of diverse concrete actions, amongst them additional forestation, fragmentation, new pathway connections for walkers and hikers, bikers, and horseback riders. Also in Bosland there is ongoing groundbreaking research work, for instance, in the area of woodland development, timber production, biomass(energy), eco-system services, ecology, the protection of natural floral varieties, in concert with the use of the area for recreational purposes. Via child-friendly activities, people, school groups, and tourists are being attracted the region (www.bosland.be).

3.2. ALBERTKNOOP

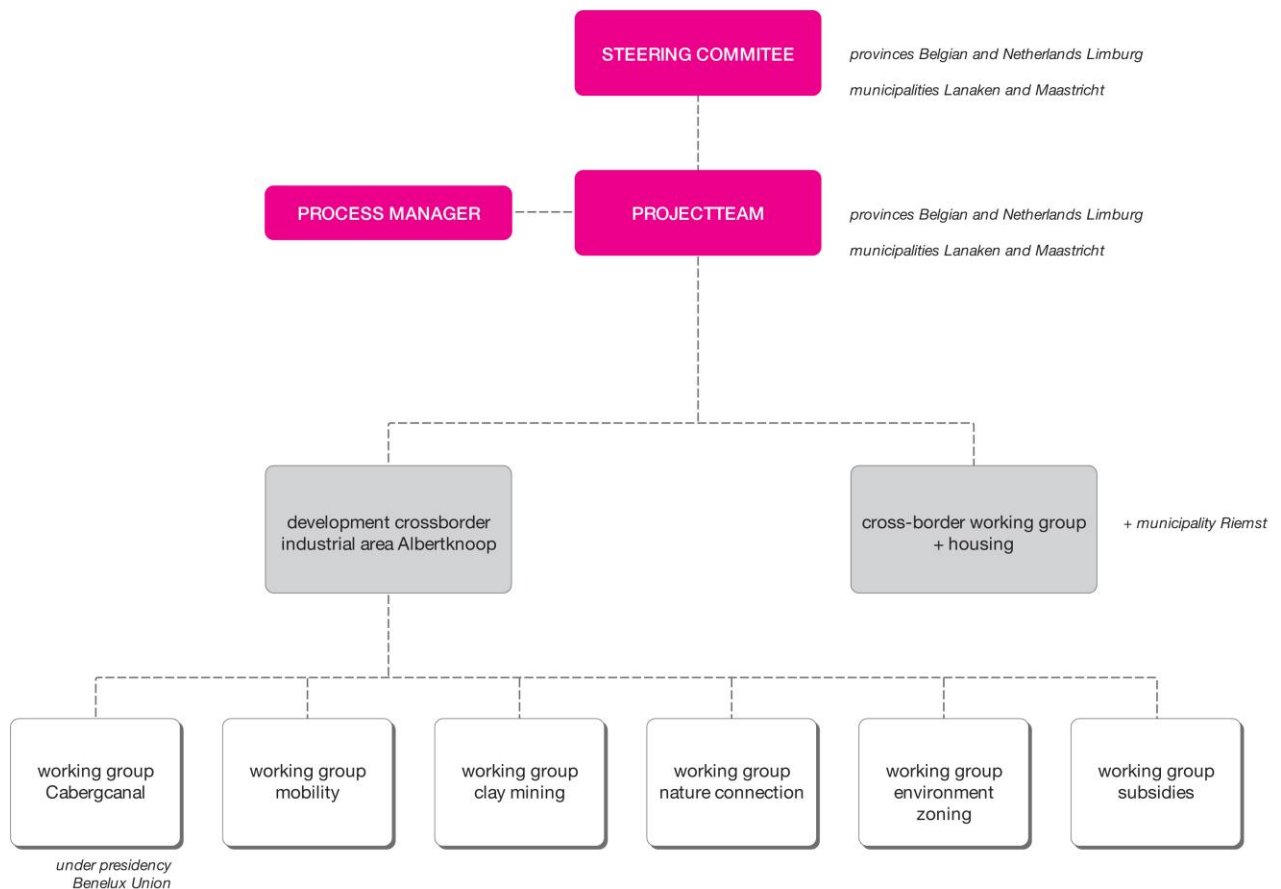
The strategic trans-border project ALBERTKNOOP was started with the aim to create and open up within the border region between the Dutch city Maastricht and the Flemish municipality of Lanaken a multimodal and regional industry park, to be situated within the area in a sustainable and integrated manner. The project fits within the Albert Canal Economic Network (ENA), which in the Spatial Structural Plan Flanders is designated as an important region for the future spatial economic development of Flanders and the Euregion. The national frontier between Belgium and the Netherlands runs straight through that project area, which is further bordered by the currently back-in-service freight transport railroad connection Maastricht-Lanaken, the Albert Canal up to the Veldwezelt Bridge, the trans-border open space Zouwdal, the existing housing development Malberg (Maastricht), and the restructuring and urban renewal area Belvédère, located within the territory of Maastricht.

Project partners are the provinces of Belgian and Dutch Limburg, the City of Maastricht, the Lanaken municipality, and the company NV De Scheepvaart.

In the course of an extensive consultation process with the involved actors, the project coordinator (called the border manager) is here to sweep away all impediments that are compromising and prejudicing the realisation of a trans-border, sustainable, integrated, and tri-modal accessible industry park covering 90 hectares in surface area.

Themes up for discussion are, amongst others, the scrapping of the Caberg Canal from the 1961 Treaty concluded between the Netherlands and Belgium, the unlocking of multi-modal potential, the advance loam extraction, the planned nature connections, water management, and the integrated organisation of the border region. In a more distant future, (2020-2030) as an adjunct to the existing industry park 'Europark' in Lanaken, one new large-scale trans-border industry park will be created. This trans-border harmonisation of reciprocal development objectives and permit trajectories remains as always a central focal point in the process. The steering group ALBERTKNOOP, the decision-making body within the consultative process, explicitly is opting for a area-focused approach wherein, from a spatial perspective, special attention is being devoted to problems that are inherent in the region, and solutions are presented on the basis of the qualities and potentialities offered by the region. This way, not only due attention is given to a conflict-free border zone, but also the border itself stimulates an array of win-win situations and joint projects within a new urban and suburban context. Aside from the project work in function of the industry park to be established in the future, the steering group likewise placed the problem of trans-border living on the agenda (www.albertknoop.be).

Figure 4 Project structure ALBERTKNOOP



4 Epilogue

With these strategic projects, the Flemish government is taking a major step from generic to specific policy: the area-focused approach and the importance of 'governance' are becoming more important.

Thanks also to this strategy, the spatial policy within Flanders is evolving towards an open network structure wherein activities are becoming ever more area-focused and integrated. The Flemish authorities are concentrating more and more on realisation-directed planning, with much operating room and initiative offered to local partners. In Flanders, any ambitious local project will, because of the scale, turn invariably and quickly into a project at the Flemish level.

Major challenges are found in (1) quality control and the further enhancement of the professional dimension of the instrument 'project coordination', to which ever more recourse will be had for the realisation of strategic projects, and (2) the indispensable financing of the realisation of the strategic projects in the field, where it behoves Flemish authorities to assume their responsibilities. The more strategic projects lead in the practice to qualitative realisations in the field, the better this instrument can be deployed strategically to counter the further fragmentation of space and the loss of ecological diversity.

Reference

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Biography

Guy Vloebergh (Belgium) has been CEO of OMGEVEING cvba since 1998, a private design and planning company with a passion for the living environment (guy.vloebergh@omgeving.be), since 2004 a professor of urban planning at ARTESIS University College of Urbanism and Spatial Planning in Antwerp, since 2009 Manager of the Strategic Cross-Border Project ALBERTKNOOP and since 2012 chairman of the National Delegation of Belgium planners in ISOCARP.

Synopsis

Working with strategic projects has been introduced by the Flemish government since 2004. More than 30 projects got the label 'strategic' and got money to organize the project coordination. The beginning of a new spatial strategy for the densely built-up Flanders region?