Networking and Urban Networks : a challenge for spatial planning
The case of the Flemish Diamond/ Belgium

Paper prepared for the
39th ISoCaRP Congress 2003
'Planning in a more globalized world'
Cairo, Egypt, 17-22 October

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Introduction

In the 'Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders /Belgium (1997), the notion 'Urban Network' is introduced as a spatial concept. Also the Benelux Second Structural Outline (1997), the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) and many other policy documents and studies, use the notion and concept.
A study (Albrechts,et al, 2003) commissioned by the Flemish government tries to define the notion, develops a proper approach for the Flemish networks, an instrumental framework and a possible policy taking into account the urban dynamics in and the growing impact of urban regions in the worldwide economic competition between them.
As a recommendation for spatial planning in general the authors argue that within a network society, the changing spatial dynamics and spatial structure, an appropriate, more efficient, developed led and action oriented spatial policy is needed based on networking and collaboration between actors. They argue too that spatial planning should be strategic, selective and modest and focus on three kinds of activities and policies: generic (for the whole administrative territory), specific (for a specific territory or a specific thematic issue) and the realization of projects and implementation of measures. Concerning the Flemish Urban Networks and specific for the Flemish Diamond they propose a specific integrated approach. A final conclusion deals with the role of spatial planning, planners and public planning institutions.

Spatial transformations in the network society: the role of urban regions and space and place

According different authors, the origin of networks, defined as the set of relations between individuals, companies and institutions, is changing fundamentally today, Relationships are more and more globalized as a result of new information-, telecommunication-, and transport technologies. Castells (2000) characterized the phenomena and gave it a name: 'network society', more and more an important research topic in different scientific disciplines: economy, sociology, public management,…
It is not yet a pure hypothesis any more that also space is changing under these new circumstances however not unambiguously. As Mitchell (2001) told us at the IsoCaRP Congress in Utrecht (2001) 'the emerging trend of urban evolution is leading to a nomadic lifestyle and new urban patterns: more flexible work patterns, greater fluidity, adjacency matters less than connectivity, dispersal and fragmentation'.

On the other hand within a globalized economy different authors emphasize on the role of specific places, called urban regions, as important motors for (economical) development (Leitner,et al, 2002) (Massey, 1993) (Scott, et al, 2001).
We can define 'urban regions' as dense urbanized areas with strategic economic activities, headquarters of multinationals, important governmental services and institutions, universities, research centers, high level cultural and recreational activities, attractive surroundings and of course different infrastructures, steering and managing worldwide economic processes Urban regions can be mono-centric as Paris, London, New-York, Tokyo,…, or poly-centric, a conglomerate of different bigger and smaller cities with each a specific character and profile (in Europe among others: the Rijn-Ruhr-area, Randstad Holland, Lille- Roubaix- Kortrijk, Rijn-Mainz and the Flemish Diamond or the Belgium Central Network).
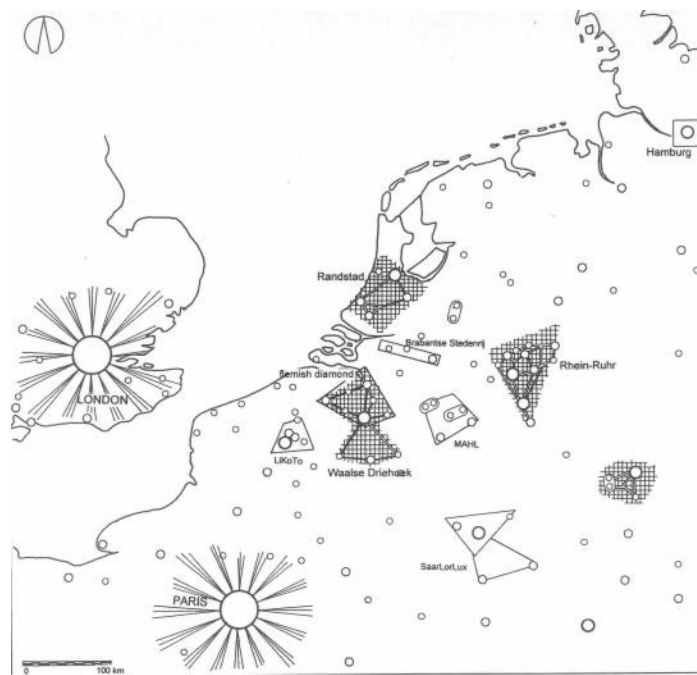
Fig. 1: Urban networks in Western-Europe
Source Albrechts and Vermeersch, 1996

Within Europe but also elsewhere competition between such regions is growing, each trying to attract public and private world actors, activities and money from national and supranational governments and organizations. Networking within such urban regions and alliances between the different actors can be seen as an answer to the sharp competition in order to combine forces and power. Such a cooperation doesn't mean that competition between the actors is excluded, on the contrary (D'Hondt, et al, 2002). Cooperation will always focus on specific issues with an interest for all actors.

The authors define an urban network as an urban region where different actors are working together in an informal or formal cooperation focussing on chosen key-issues in order to develop a common vision for the area and a concrete action plan concerning the key-issues.

Mitchell(2001) refers to another 'revenge of place' in the information age. It occurs on regional and local level and is based upon individual and collective values, interests and priorities related to specific places: social nearness, livability, security, natural values, exiting (historic) fabrics, … In his mind *'a smart region is a highly differentiated microstructure, with local advantages and subcultures. It offers a great variety and diversity, together with specialization sustained through global connections'.*
But what is happening on this level: suburbanization of typical urban functions and activities, sprawl and fragmentation,…Certainly within urban regions separation between urban and rural is disappearing as well as the traditional hierarchical structure of settlements: former central places loose their importance and new nodes appear, planned and spontaneously, nearby main road and railway infrastructures. The huge increase of the individual mobility undoubtedly is an important reason for this evolution. Nevertheless flexibility and a 'nomadic or hybrid' lifestyle didn't lead to a complete homogeneous space where any location is possible everywhere. As well enterprises as people have their own logic and strategy when looking for a proper location: urban when they search for a representative or creative environment, rural or peripheral if cost of land or accessibility are criteria. In a specialized network economy every activity has specific location conditions. Also households, even very mobile, are looking for a specific microcosms. Analysis prove that the demand for housing and environments, depending on social-demographic characteristics, relationships, but also on emotional

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aspects and tradition, is extremely divers. Not only in Belgium but also in many other countries (Sorensen, 2001).
Last but not least we can notice a fundamental transformation in the rural area. At least in or nearby urban regions according Gulinck and Hermy (2001), *'agriculture tends either to retreat or to intensify and diversify'* and the area is losing its agricultural production function and is looking for new roles. Stakeholders with different interests, nature, water, recreation, tourism, development,…, are claiming the area.

Spatial transformations and policy in Flanders

From the morphological point of view Belgium and especially Flanders, developed in sprawl and fragmentation are a main characteristic as shown in figure 2.
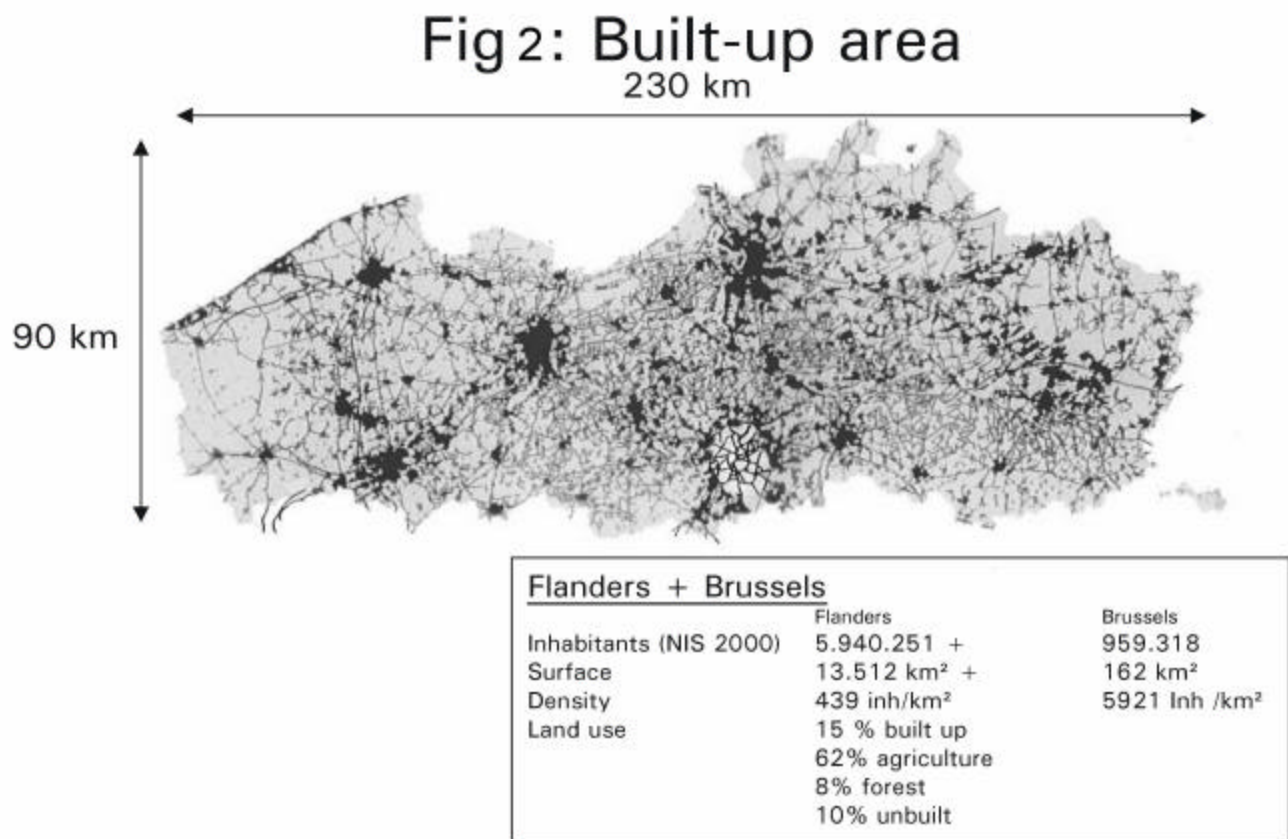

Fig. 2: Built up area in Flanders/Belgium
       Source: Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders (AROHM, 1998)

'The strategic and economical interesting location in Europe and the Delta of the river Scheldt certainly is a reason. But also the dense medieval road network, the physical characteristics of the land easy to develop, the aspiration of the population for a single family house and last but not least the promotion of ownership by the government and the church during two centuries. In this way only few places escaped from urbanization characterized by the growth of all settlements and their peripheries and ribbon development along the many roads, local, regional and national. The city regions are are coalescing into a kind of vast conglomerate, a galaxy of all kind of traditional entities (cities and

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villages) and neo-urban entities such as peripherical landscapes, urban fragments, urban grids, strips, linear cities, etc., with 'neo-rural fields' between' (Van den Broeck, 2001).

The zoning plans (scale 1/25000) elaborated in the seventies for the whole of Belgium according the Urban Planning Law of 1962 couldn't stop the evolution (fig. 2). In the beginning of the nineties the Flemish government became aware of the accumulating problems: spatial and environmental degradation, traffic congestion and insecurity, deterioration of inner cities and other living environment,…Therefore started the elaboration of a Spatial Structure Plan, accepted by the parliament in 1997. A structure plan was seen as a dynamic strategic plan defining the policy for the spatial development of Flanders. It contains on the one hand a vision and spatial concepts on the long term and, for the public sector, binding specific decisions on the other hand. Different action plans, binding for each citizen, should guarantee the implementation of the plan. In the new planning law (1999) both the structure plan and the action plan are the new planning instruments which should be used on the three planning levels: the region (Flanders), the provinces and every municipality, every level totally (policy and implementation) responsible for 'own' issues.

As shown in figure 3 and 4 the vision 'Flanders: open and urban' is represented by some diagrams as an intended strategy.
- De-concentraded clustering of urban functions which means that the existing de-concentrated structure and fragmentation are taken as a base for further urban and economic development which can take place in many urban areas with a different character creating very different living and working environments. The urban network' is one of the settlement categories.
- Gates, ports, airports and high speed train stations have to be motors for economic development as they are the components of the economic and ICT structure on international level and suited to attract international investments.
- The dense road and rail infrastructure network should be the base for the localization of activities. Especially stations will be used as concentration knots, a principle also used in the Transit Oriented Development (TOD) policy in the US(Calltrope, 1993), the Smart Growth policy (US) and also in a certain way in the compact city concept.
- The physical structure, mainly the river Scheldt network and the topographical elements and also the remaining open areas, as basic structuring backbone of space and the ecological network.

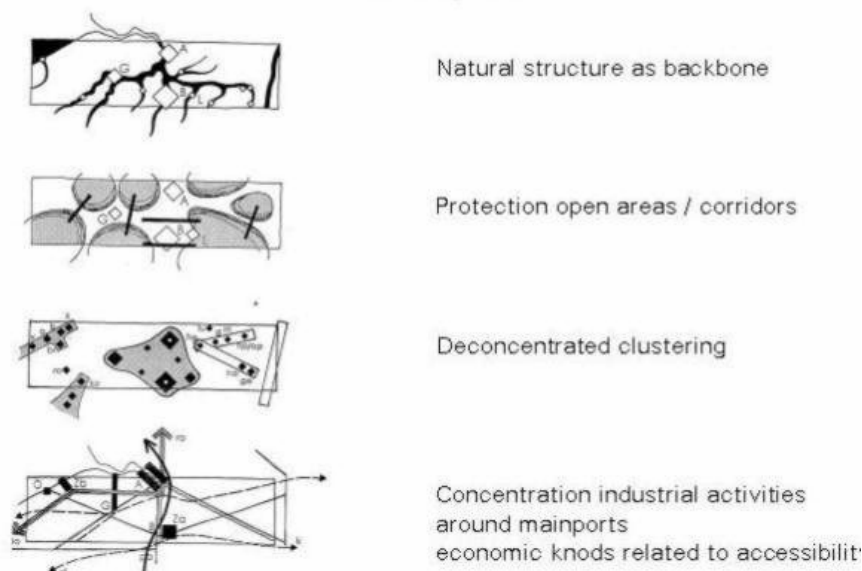Fig. 3: Spatial principles Structure Plan Flanders

Intended spatial structure

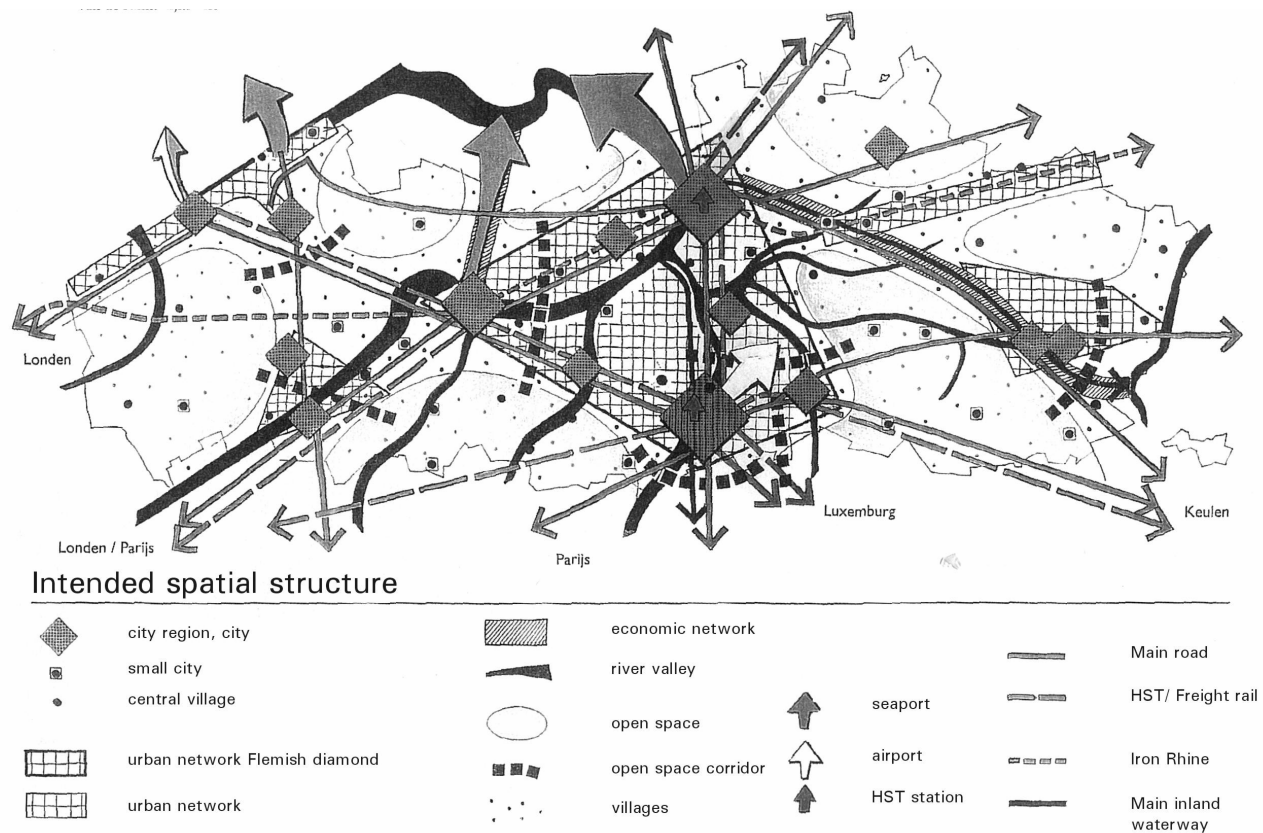| | city region, city | | economic network | | Main road |
	small city		river valley		HST/ Freight rail
	central village		open space	seaport	Iron Rhine
	urban network Flemish diamond		open space corridor	airport	
	urban network		villages	HST station	Main inland waterway

Fig. 4: Intended spatial structure

 The Belgian central area, in the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders referred to as the 'Urban Network Flemish Diamond', certainly is an example of the evolution described above and a dense galaxy of about 4000sq km and about 4 million inhabitants (1100inh./sqkm) which is comparable with other urban regions of the same kind. Very specific is the presence of three main cities (Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent), three regional cities, all with interesting historical values, and many other smaller cities and villages. As said before a new kind of 'communicative' city is appearing, an urban region and a potential urban network.

Challenges for Spatial Planning, a frame for an efficient spatial policy and an approach for urban networks

The analysis gives us a new perspective on what 'urbanity' can be in these new circumstances and in consequence on an appropriate approach in urban regions which we consider as urban networks or as 'communicative' networks of places in always changing relation with each other. The adjective 'communicative' refers to the need for many physical networks and the need for a co-productive and pro-active policy looking for integration between sectors, policy levels and problems (Van den Broeck,2003).
As in other disciplines dealing with networks we should relate a specific place always to other places. Healy and Graham (1999) criticizes the 'Euclidean' perspective considering space as a static object possible to manipulate. In their mind we should focus on the contextual relationships between different places in stead of giving places an absolute meaning and identity. In a network society another spatial structure is appearing, the functions and identities of structuring elements(cities, villages,…, even natural areas and open space) are changing in a way that another and dynamic hierarchy between

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places emerge due to the superposition of different types of networks (physical and social) on different scales as also clear is the case in Flanders. Places have multiple meanings and identities changing fast in time.

Which are the challenges for planning in such a dynamic environment?
As for Flanders the recommendations of the study are:
- stimulation of the competitive capacities of the urban networks/regions by networking and creation of strategic alliances between different public and private actors in the area and by focussing on key-issues and opportunities; a key-issue in Flanders certainly is the accessibility of central places and business areas and the creation of top-locations for investors;
- a permanent care for the livability of the very dense area already congested and overcharged; creating a divers environment, a divers housing market and qualitative public transport can be the main objective as well as the care for nature, landscape and open space;
- selective and strategic use of means as well finances as human resources; networking, seen as a necessary tool for planning, is very time and means consuming and is only possible in circumstances where a willingness of actors exists.
Apparently these challenges occurring the most in dense urban networks, seems to be contradictory. Only an integrated, non sectoral, approach can handle the conflicting visions, opinions and interests. Mainly as facilitators and negotiators the role of public authorities and planners will be considerable in the negotiation processes.

A framework for planning and the institutional planning services is proposed focussing on three related types of activities with each an appropriate set of instruments and tools. Networking always remain a basic tool in order to reach consensus in the negotiation processes. Aiming for consensus means that comprehensiveness isn't a planning objective.

A limited generic frame
Within this frame general spatial principles for the whole administrative territory can be developed and legalized as well as a limited strategic action program. Today in Flanders there is as mentioned before a legal Spatial Structure Plan. However the principles of this plan, the long term vision, should be kept, a revision should strengthen its strategic character. Strategic in the sense that it will be related to the means for implementation: choice of priorities, relation with short term budget, cooperation with executive sector administrations, agreements with the private sector,…

A specific integrated territorial focussed policy
This approach and policy deals with key-issues in specific areas, aiming at the elaboration and implementation of a strategic plan for the area within a responsible arena of key-actors In specific areas already many initiatives are taken by different policy levels to bring stakeholders together in network organizations trying to solve problems and develop opportunities. In Belgium a success story in this field is the 'ROM-project Ghent Canal Area'. The authors of the study propose to generalize the approach using a specific methodology. Success factors are: choice of a restricted package of key-issues, gathering all involved stakeholders, a flexible but clear process, professional management and a trusted process director, building social support and most of all the willingness to cooperate. All these conditions are rarely present which means that such much energy consuming processes only seldom can be implemented (Van den Broeck, 1996, 2001) (Albrechts et al, 1999, 2003). Nevertheless for instance in the case of urban regions only this kind of specific approach based on networking and selectivity seems the only way for intervention.

Effective realization of strategic projects
Planning today often remains at the level of visioning and goal setting using regulations as an instrument, not popular at all and mostly ineffective. Means for implementation are managed by sectors: housing, public works, …Without cooperation with executors, public and private, spatial objectives will always remain a dream.

According Mitchell's message for planning and urban design a 'smart' region will 'focus on the organization of land use patterns and new building types, transportation and telecommunication networks and above all control systems to support communities and their new systems of production, exchange and consumption'.

What means 'smart' in the Flemish Diamond (or Belgian Central urban network)? The authors searched by means of in depth interviews for key-issues and key-actors willing to initiate a territorial focussed integrated process within a network organization. Common key-issues mentioned by different actors were:

- the amelioration of the accessibility, internal and external, through the connection of the public transport networks of the different main cities in the area, Brussels, Antwerp, Gent and Leuven and the coordination of their management;
- development of strategic international oriented business areas on suitable locations,
- development of mixed housing projects linked with public transport nodes; in this way a settlement structure will be created based upon these nodes;
- protection of valuable natural areas to strengthen the natural structure based on the river valleys;
- landscaping as a mean to create a new coherent image for the urban network and as a way to strengthen its livability;
- common international promotion of the network;
- common proposals for European programs.

The different tasks for the public planning authority are asking for an active entrepreneurial approach and organization and for skills very away far from the traditional administrative ones. Networking, negotiating, facilitating, management of processes and projects are the new ones. And of course quality care as the most important one.

Conclusion

General, global and generic 'systems, concepts and approaches' only are useful as an hypothesis to start communication and discussion. Concepts as 'compact city, smart growth and don't forget the CIAM- concept', sound always very reasonable and acceptable. But any general concept should be 'localized' for investigation in concrete social, economic and spatial context. Even on national and regional level generic policies certainly are necessary but should be limited to specific issues able to manage and implement on that level. Many strategic plans and long term visions are utopias in reality and far from 'peoples bed'. The traditional plans mostly are not any more the answer to the spatial and social transformations and context. Components of a policy, strategy and the tasks of public planning organizations will be more and more on the one hand the design and management of specific processes and the realization of projects on the other hand. 'Plans' will only be instruments for the implementation of a policy resulting from the agreement between actors. The notion 'plan' refers to a dynamic vision on the long term, a set of (win-win) actions on short term and concrete policy agreements specifying the engagements of the partners concerning the realization of the actions.

The role of the planner? Possible also ambiguous: designer of visions, concepts and solutions, designer of processes, facilitator, process manager,…? In my mind quality care should remain his/her first concern and task. Networking doesn't make it easier. Often planners miss the language to explain the value of spatial quality and bring it on the agenda in a communication and negotiation process (Albrechts et al, 2003).

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