

How can urban projects have a strategic influence

Discussions about urban projects as a tool for urban regeneration are focusing on **architectural and spatial quality**. That is correct. Without clear spatial concepts and a strong architectural image, a project cannot really integrate in the urban morphology or in the 'mental map' of inhabitants and visitors.

In these discussions, most of the time, professionals like we, are looking for how **inspiring and innovative** a project may be. Sometimes we forget that at the same time, it has to have a kind of **obvious character** as if it had always been there, as if it were a kind of evidence that originated on that very spot.

Four main principles

Yet, it requires more to ensure that an urban project really has a strategic influence. This 'normality' and the 'inherent spatial quality' need to be underpinned by a rich vision and background. Therefore, Stramien tries to integrate **four main principles in its approach of urban projects**. These principles are presented here as a contribution to the 'trialogue'.

Urban heritage

The city is built up by the different layers of the urban history. It requires a balance between respect and discretion to value this richness. At the same time it is necessary to add **new values and contents to the urban heritage** and this urban history.

The programme

Without **a well established programme**, a project cannot operate as a strategic tool for urban renewal. A good project demands a direct exchange with cultural infrastructure and other services, new housing concepts, and a social basis in that particular local area, starting by a joint approach in collaboration with different partners.

The urban context

Integration of a project in the urban context seems to be self-evident, but this is not always the case in practice. New structures and infrastructures, new pedestrian connections, opening up of new areas, space for loading and unloading, transits and passages, and the impact on the neighbourhoods behind as well as the complementary mixture with other projects: it all needs special attention and care.

Sustainability

Different aspects of sustainability (cultural, social, socio-economic, ecological and technical) have to be integrated in order to maximise the benefits of the project and to reinforce the multi-layer aspects of the city in a multiple approach.

This contribution aims to illustrate these four main principles by a number of 'Stramien-projects' and others, projected on the structure of Antwerp. Almost twenty years ago, Stramien had the opportunity to work on the first strategic structure plan for Antwerp. Since that time different projects were realised, some of them, Stramien also worked on, Here we present a selection, spread out over the structure of the complete metropolis.

1. The East-West axis with Permeke, Eco-house, Karel de Grote College
2. The suburbs with Kiel, Abdijstraat shopping plaza
3. Outskirts with Boomsesteenweg and Fort belt

East-West axis

Footprint

The East-West axis along the Turnhoutsebaan-Carnotstraat is one of the oldest approach roads to the city; up until today the backbone of the nineteenth century belt around the city centre. In the last decades of the 20th century the balance got lost though. Traffic took the upper hand, commerce regressed and living in Borgerhout became a problem. The first initiatives to renovate the city were taken twenty-five years ago. It became a very fascinating learning process with divergent accents set around living, working, commerce and traffic.

Today the tide has turned, especially because of the recent execution of several bigger and fascinating metropolitan renovation projects; living there is appealing again. In the years to come, this trend will become even more obvious as thanks to the greater interconnection between various pending initiatives, the success of the project will manifest itself more clearly.

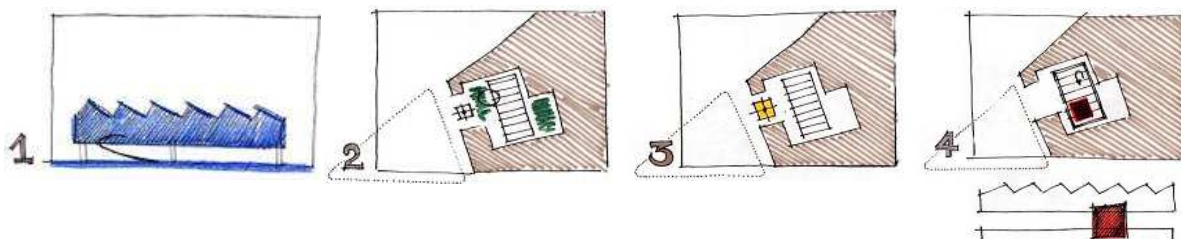


Programme

The Permeke library is one of the showpieces of the renewed station district. At the design competition Stramien presented 4 basic concepts for this complex which open up the old garage to the De Coninckplein. Today these concepts are still clearly present in this well-functioning whole; the library turned out to be the ideal way to bring people back to this degenerate neighbourhood.

In addition, the Atlas building, the brilliantly renovated Roma and the development of the Eco-house (also by Stramien) are very positive stimuli for the entire Turnhoutsebaan. It's just a matter of time for the Eco-house to really develop into a case example of durable urban living. The same goes for the planned revival of this shopping axis, amongst others because of the establishment of a number of specialised stores around the Eco-house.

Furthermore a number of studies were developed quite some time ago around interweaving the axis with the surrounding quarters. The street block approach that is now used as a powerful instrument by the city was in fact already tested here more than 10 years ago, by several architects and urban developers. This resulted in suggestions for new residences and additional urban infrastructure to draw people from elsewhere to this part of the city. Notwithstanding the spontaneous revival the area has known, there are still a few interesting places that could use a boost.





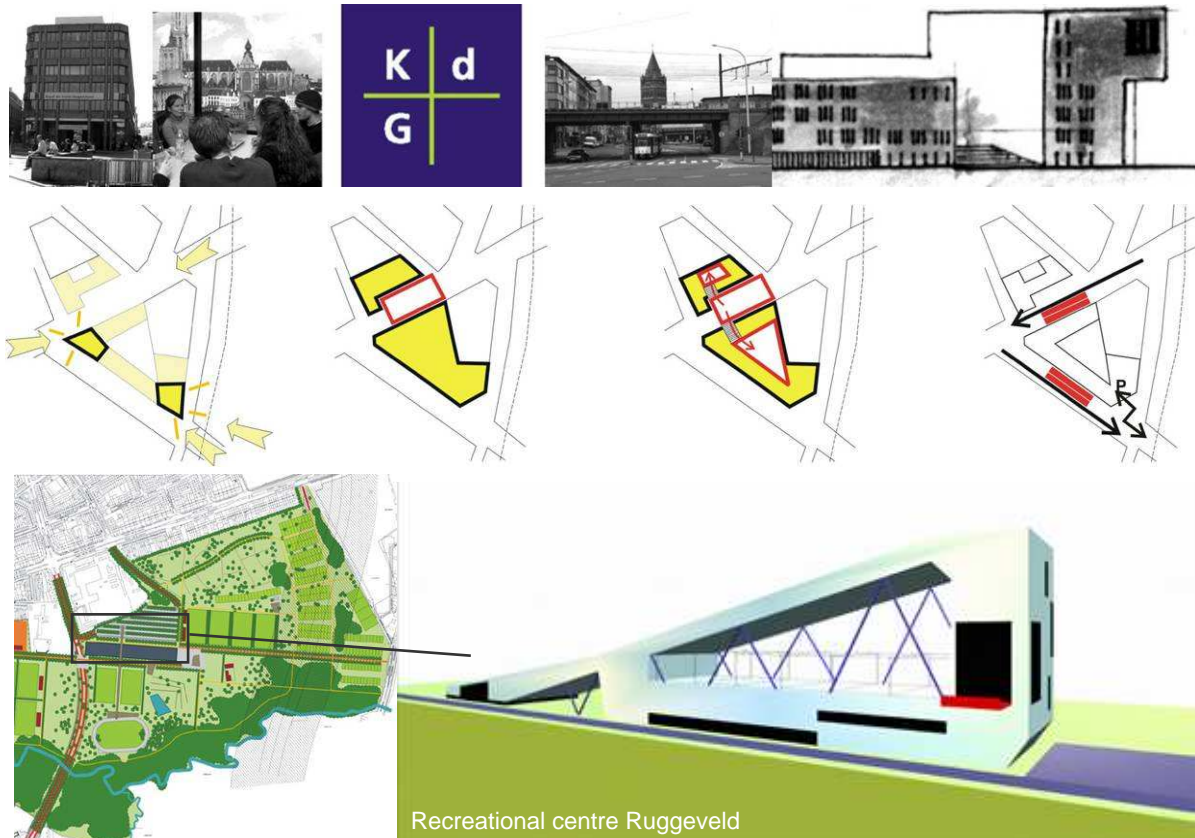
Context

The two links on either side of the axis, the 'head' and the 'tail' so to speak, are important elements in this story, to embed the whole of the Turnhoutsebaan as transparently as possible into the urban structure.

On the city side, the project Operaplein is intended to restore the connection with the 'Leien' and the city centre. This could be made possible by reorganising regional public transport, as extending lines in the city centre will clear some public space. Moreover Stramien once suggested, as an example, to move the headquarters of the University of Antwerp to the Operaplein, as an extra metropolitan facility. A similar function would revive the area even further.

On the other side, the Turnhoutsepoort also demands a strong urban function, as central point at the end of the axis, as eye-catcher from the Singel and as a link to the Rivierenhof and the suburbs. The classic extra shopping space and a few new apartment blocks wouldn't be enough; extra leverage is needed.

Stramien suggests the new branch of Karel de Grote College as lever for commerce and trade as well as for infrastructure. In addition, the extension of the tramline to the Kempen is also on the agenda again, as well as an urban link to the Rivierenhof and the municipal recreational centre Ruggeveld. Both of these ideas will embed the Turnhoutsebaan deeper in the city structure again, so this area can become a new focus for the entire 19th Century belt.



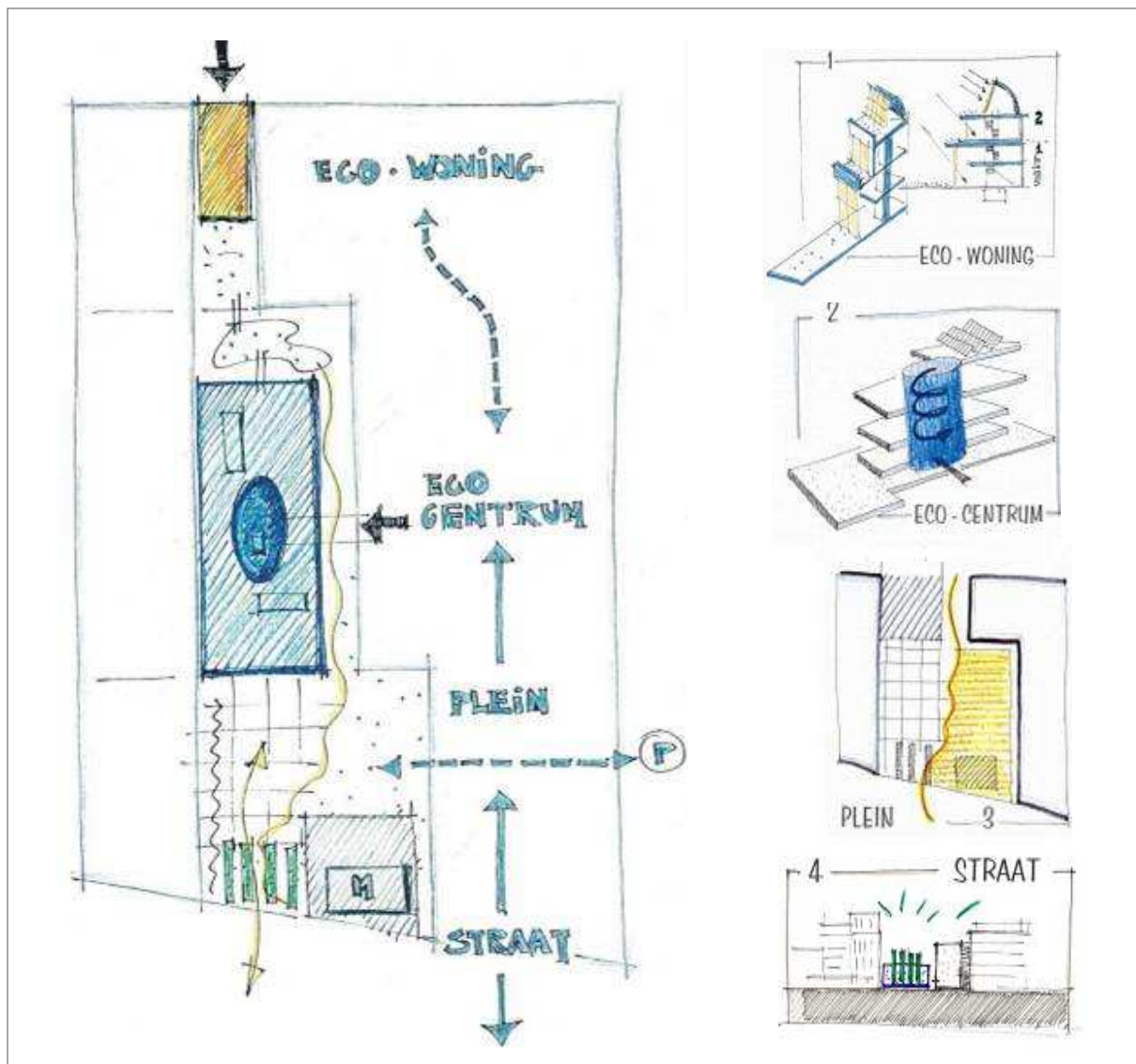
Sustainability

Durability has been attained by renovating and giving the patrimony of the Permeke garage and the warehouses of the Wolmolen (the new Eco-house) a new purpose. They are not necessarily 'beautiful or monumental buildings', but striking constructions that reflect the history of this part of the city. The Eco-house's programme is furthermore a stimulating factor in reflecting on durable cities.

The branch of a College for teachers in this part of town is from a *socially* sustainable viewpoint a guarantee for the future. It will bring young students from the whole province, and even further, in direct contact with the multicultural society, which they'll no doubt be confronted with in their teaching careers. On the other hand, a school in the vicinity of a predominantly migrant populated neighbourhood could well provide the necessary stimulus for youngsters from this group towards education.

But these mainly socio-cultural functions also have to attract complementary economic functions in this area, to strengthen the basis in the long run.

Durability in terms of mobility and public space could use extra initiative on this axis. Luckily opportunities are manifold as the old idea to have a regional tram underground in the unused metro tunnel, next to the city tram above ground, is back on the agenda. Improvements to the overall quality of life on this axis are certainly to be gained when the excess of buses is reduced significantly and when pedestrians and cyclists are thus given more space again.



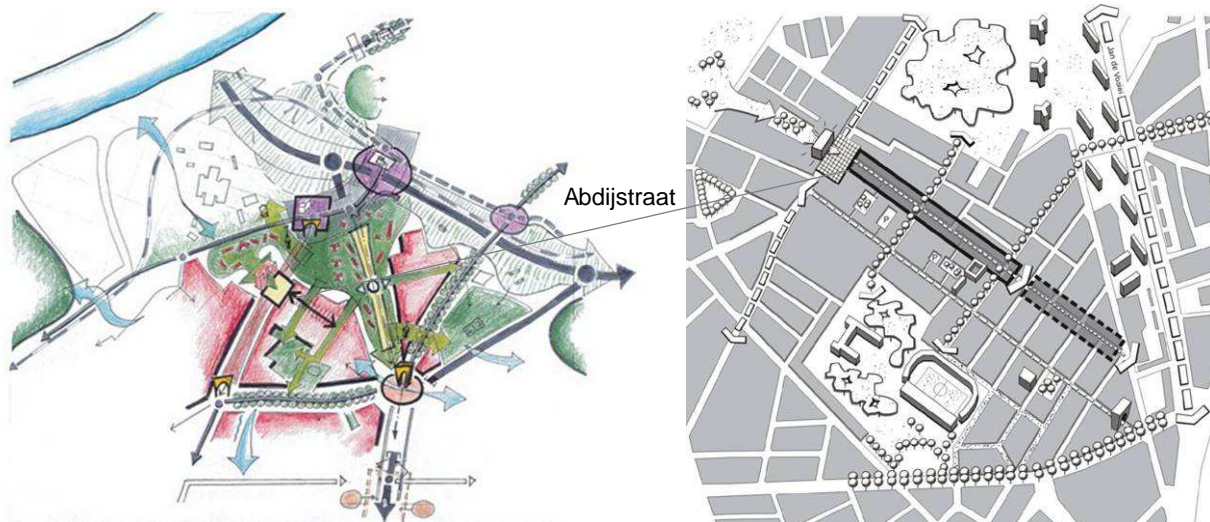
Suburbs

Footprint

Last century, the Kiel was the centre of the world on several occasions. The Olympics took place here in 1920 and later the World Fair was held here. The local council housing set the tone on a European level, both after the First World War with the old buildings, as after the Second World War with the modernistic buildings by Braem and others.

Through modernisation the Kiel neighbourhood wants to tie in again with its trend-setting history. This part of town has the unique potential to become a model neighbourhood, where the modernistic city pattern of high-rise buildings surrounded by a green belt seamlessly flows into the old city district surrounding the Abdijsstraat and where the link between the city and the outskirts is confirmed through the Sint-Bernardsesteenweg.

The renovation of the public space Abdijsstraat-Winkelplein (a realisation by Stramien in association with Bram Breedveld, the B-architects and Laurent Ney) and of the Kielpark anticipate this. The park will again have a more open feel, cycle and walkways are being traced again and a new playground will increase the attraction to the local inhabitants.



Programme

The new **shopping centre** on the grounds of the former TIR creates an extra focal point at the head of the Abdijsstraat, situated in the centre of the quarter and complementary to this ancient axis of commerce. This project will be all the more popular, when the city succeeds in implementing the right policy regarding shopping outlets at other locations.

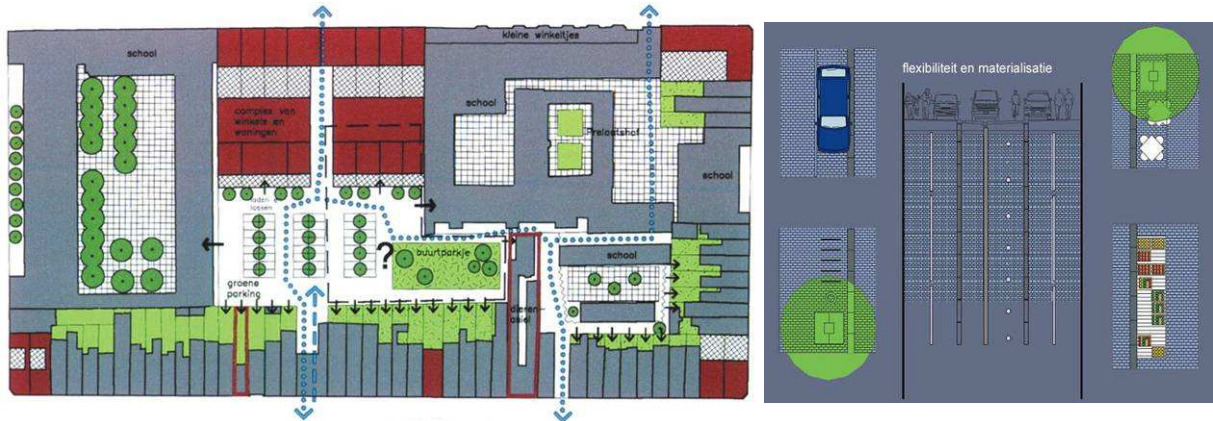
The fact that the shopping centre is a rather closed entity that does not provide a main stream of public passage and doesn't really have an equally attractive front and back facade still raises a few questions though.

The site of Petroleum-south, situated between the Kiel and the Scheldt, makes up the perfect location for a new **football stadium**. It is one of the top locations suggested in the new structural plan. It is clear that such a project could be the perfect drive for the renovation of the whole Olympic district. There is also enough space elsewhere to build a sports centre for the area, like for example on the roof of the tunnel of the Jan Devoslei or in one of the transitional green belts.

With regards to **living**, a lot has been accomplished already by systematically renovating the council housing patrimony. The renovation of the old homes on the Kiel demands the same

complementary approach as the buildings, for which many studies have been conducted already.

As a result of this complementary approach focussed on profoundly mixing several functions at both local and urban level simultaneously, this part of the suburbs is allowed to blossom into a fascinating area as well as to become a fully integrated part of the city.



Context

The relation of the district with the rest of the city remains to date quite problematic on all sides. The intersection Olympiadelaan is the most poorly organised intersection in all of Antwerp, especially for cyclists. The spaghetti junction is a real barrier between the Kiel and the South station and centre a bit further along. The construction of a circular bicycle and skate track, or an accessible green area within this infrastructure junction, could be a big step in the right direction. The development of Petroleum South could restore the link with the Scheldt.

Another unfortunate problem is that the Sint-Bernardsesteenweg, as artery in the middle of the area, has 2 completely different looks after the recent renovation. In Hoboken the view is mainly dominated by heavily split up traffic. Crossing the street is very difficult here, parking along the central tramline is in fact dangerous and the image isn't convincing.

The central part off the Kiel looks a lot stronger. Here was resolutely opted for mixed traffic. Because of the continuity in the square layout, crossing the street is easy. The residential function prevails here. Materials, street furniture, technical installations and tram stops are all geared to one another, the Kielse Rat as well as the new awning (by Laurent Ney) adds a strong image to it.

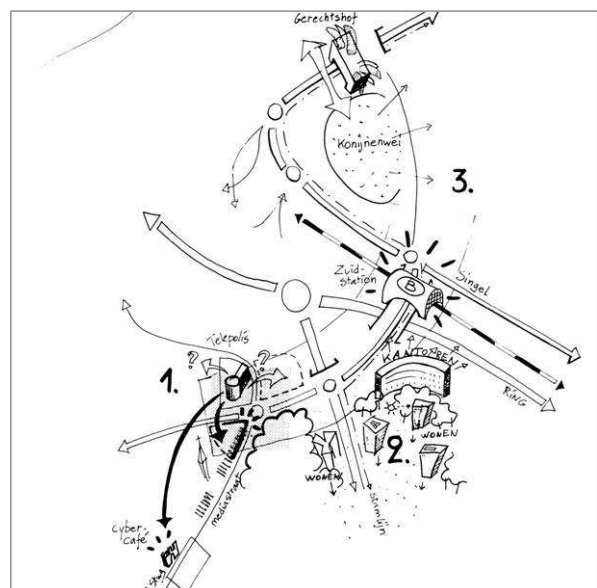
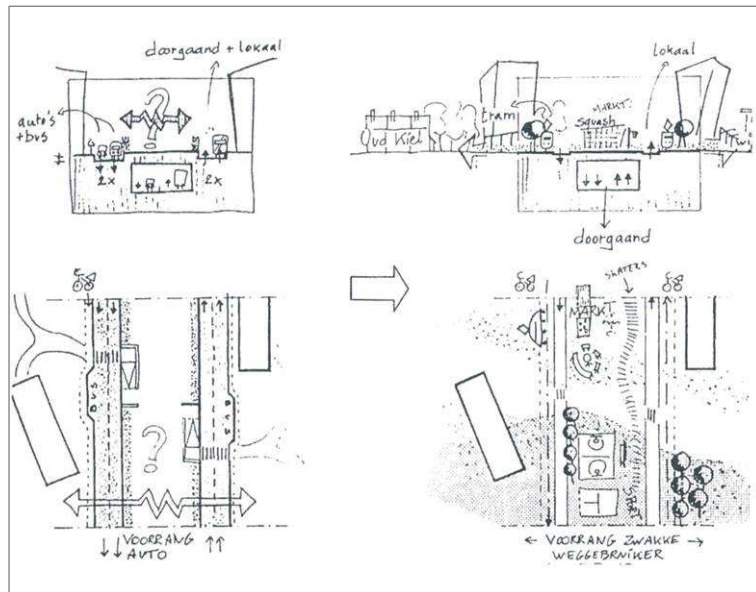


Sustainability

Within the quarter itself the focus on pedestrians and cyclists is very positive for the quality of living, especially in the Abdijstraat and the adjacent streets. On the outskirts this can and has to improve significantly, on the Olympiadelaan as well as the Jan Devoslei and on the crossing over the Ring to the centre.

By combining the fragmented green spots that parks and open spaces provide around the high-rise buildings into a whole, the quality of life in the area can be boosted further. Social durability demands attention for the balance between the renovation of the council housing complexes on the one hand and the approach of the living environment and resources at neighbourhood level on the other. This way, social structure can be widened, without the effects of displacement that this usually entails.

The development of Petroleum South starts from the basic concept of a durable green industrial estate. This can produce an extraordinary result, especially if justice is done to the integration of the industrial-archaeological values. By combining it with a football stadium an interesting multifunctional complex would arise, with potential for economical and multiple use of space.



City outskirts Boomsesteenweg

Footprint

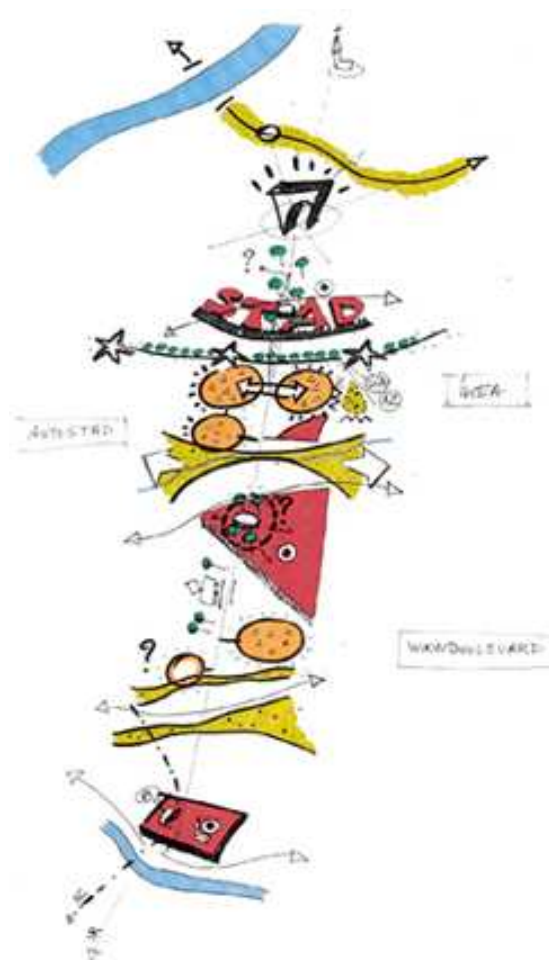
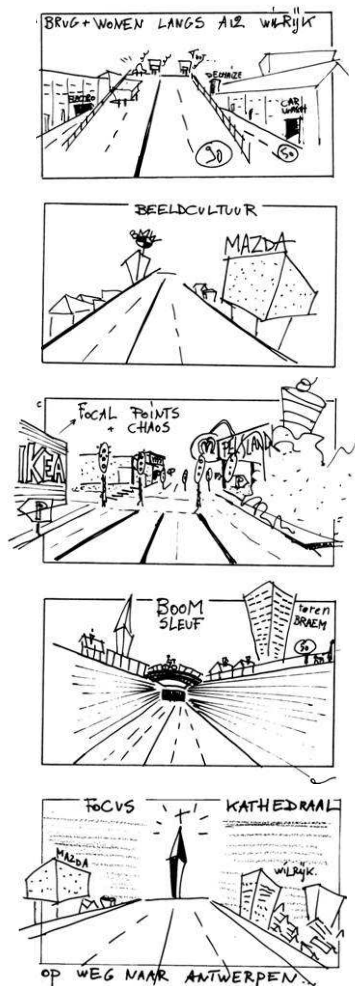
The dead straight Boomsesteenweg dates back to Austrian times when the infrastructure in the whole country was extended with direct connections between the big cities. Later on, activity settled around this axis, but this was ousted by commercial developments, followed by increasingly heavy traffic. The result is in fact chaos. The question was how to bring back structure. The structural sketch Boomsesteenweg tried to provide an answer.



Programme

This study for the Boomsesteenweg started from a new central point near the three town centres (Antwerp, Aartselaar and Boom), with in between clear green corridors that connect the big green spaces behind it.

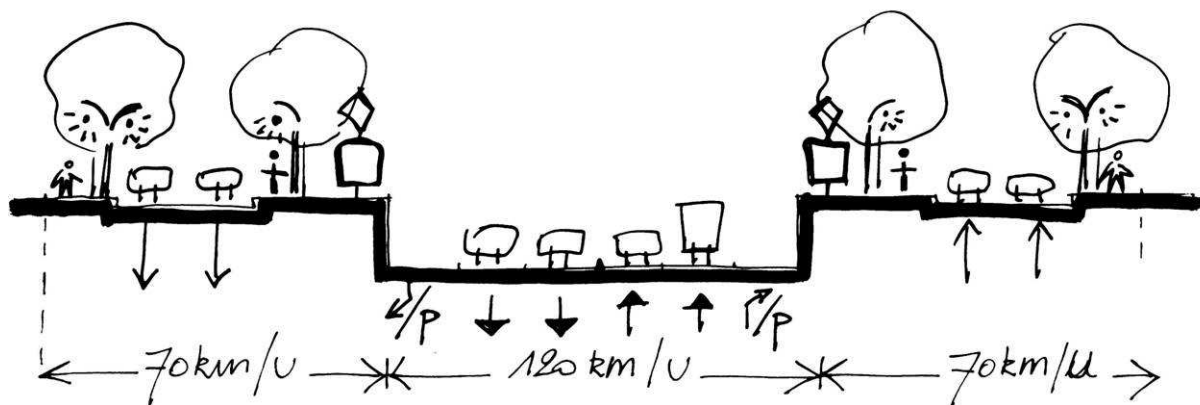
This basic pattern was supplemented with concentrated clusters of large-scale retail stores, in a coherent spatial whole and with communal parking lots. This way elsewhere on the Boomsesteenweg space could be made available for small and medium-sized businesses.



Context

It was proven that for the Boomsesteenweg a thorough reorganisation of traffic is essential for a better functioning of this axis. Resolutely opting for a clear separation of through traffic on unequal levels in a continuous groove, complemented the local roads aboveground that opened up to the adjoining services. This option was defended by the conviction that half-baked solutions would not provide long-term relief.

Calculations showed that public transport by tram to Boom would be profitable and could even be connected to a system that could also take care of the missing connections to Brussels. The whole idea would work for commuters and traffic to and from work in general, as well as for other transfers for the whole urban conglomerate. Experiences elsewhere teach us that even large-scale retail stores could profit from this.



Sustainability

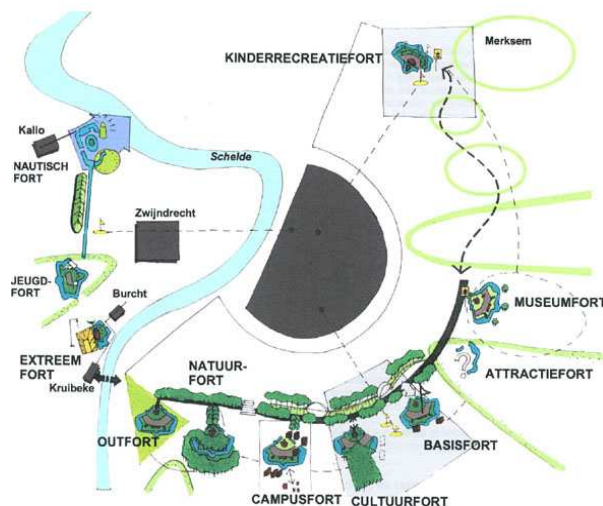
The traffic concept for the Boomsesteenweg has proven too expensive so far, the durable aspect of a much better structured accessibility and a more durable modal split couldn't tip the scale in the decision process. The idea of extending public transport on the Boomsesteenweg has again been introduced into the new Spatial Structural plan of Antwerp though.

On the other hand, today the first initiative has been taken to help the clustering of large-scale retail stores, through two BPA's (special building plans). A broader initiative on Flemish level, aimed at controlling and supporting the delocalisation of this large-scale retail in the whole metropolitan area, would also be very meaningful to a durable use of space.

City outskirts Fort belt

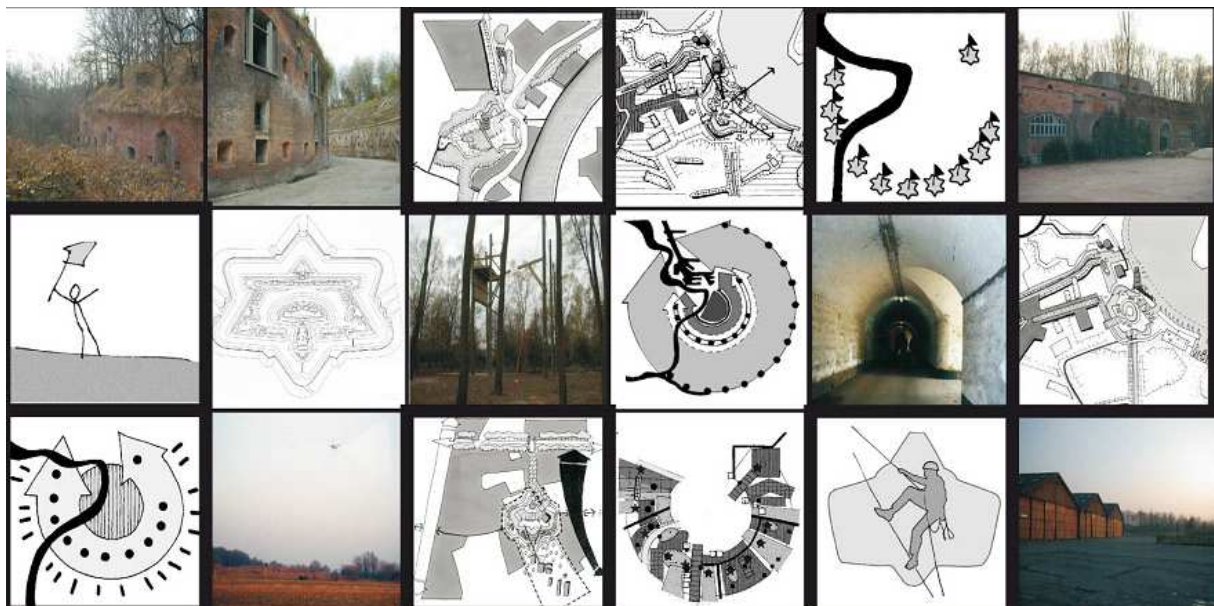
Footprint

Finally, the Fort belt, built in defence of the 'National Reduit', the last bastion of the young Belgian state, seemed to be outmoded before construction even ended. After the soldiers left, nature took the upper hand and several functions and activities started taking place here, from sports and games to hangars, traffic parks and dumpsters, the one more obvious or more suitable than the other.



Programme

The study 'Recapture the Fort belt' (conducted by Stramien, commissioned by the province of Antwerp) offers many recommendations to accommodate metropolitan functions in the forts, each of them with a different theme. Fort 8 in Hoboken already has a few beautiful outdoor-installations and it houses a few interesting social employment programmes (related to the renovation itself). Fort 7 is a Nature Fort; Fort 6 in Wilrijk could become a Campus Fort if the UA would integrate the remains in their campus site. Forts 5, 4 and 3 will be assigned a recreational function, with Fort 4 in Mortsels playing a central part. For Fort 1 a Children's Fort has been suggested, on Linkeroever a Nautical Fort near the Scheldt and in Zwijndrecht a Youth Fort.

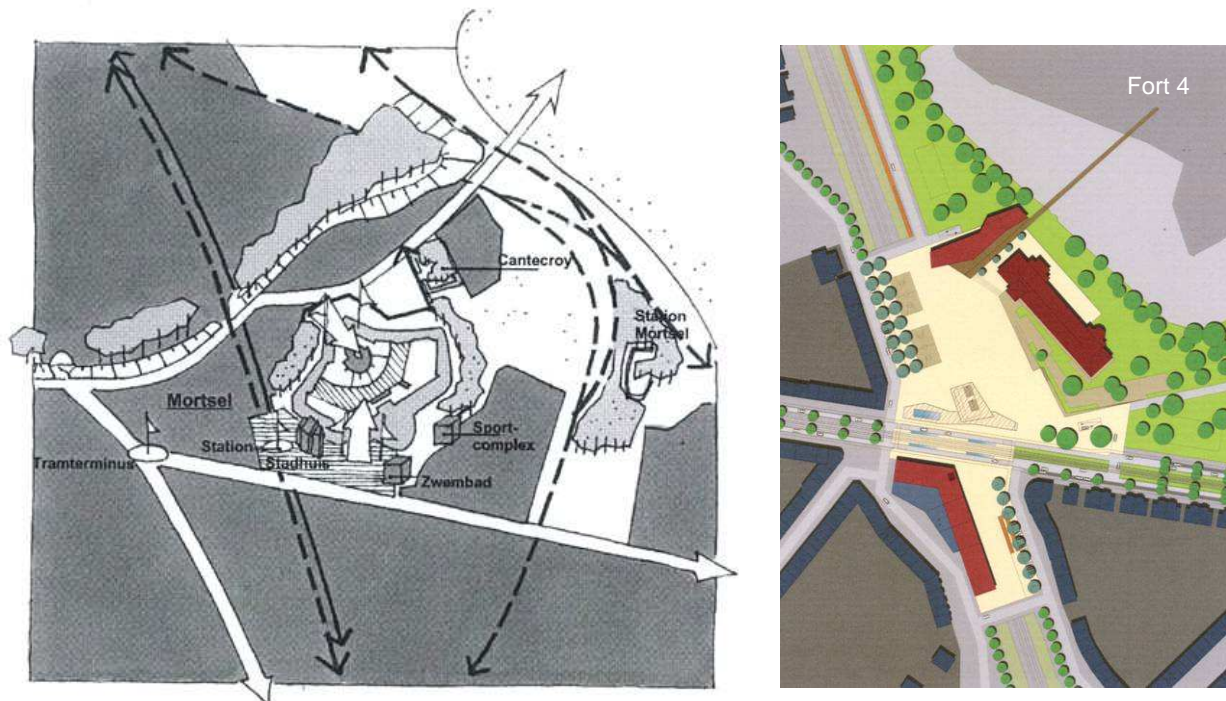


Context

The location of the forts in the urban structure, close to a town centre or in an open space, whether or not in the vicinity of public transport, determined the proposed use. For example, the Youth Fort on Linkeroever fits perfectly within the wide open space and the bicycle network of the whole Waasland, but at the same time it has excellent accessibility by public transport from the city centre.

Fort 4 in Mortsels, connected via a new bridge to the city square and the station surroundings, is more strategically situated to discover the whole Fort belt from there. On the other hand this project offers the opportunity to give the city square a strong new boost.

The belt as a whole offers our last chance to coherently shape the green city outskirts. The historical link of the Forts to the Militaire Baan demands special attention for this green connecting belt in the context of the wider urban conglomeration. For example a new balance between traffic and the green recreational connection is needed here.



Sustainability

The preservation and renovation of the basic structure (moat, glacis, inside of the fort) is essential for the Forts, in combination with nature development. Therefore this is not a plea for a full-scale renovation, which would be too expensive and go at the expense of the essential green aspect, as well as of a varied approach and the purpose.

Furthermore the concept of the green Fort belt around the conglomerate fits in perfectly with the spatial plans on metropolitan level. Collaboration with all partners, under the impulse of the province is the most appropriate method for this. It could be a lever for the realisation of economical use of space in new developments and recreational joint use of the complete open space.

CONCLUSION

This global overview, based on the three metropolitan structures, the East-West axis, the suburbs and the outskirts with their diverse spatial phenomena, shows the importance of a strategic and integrated approach at a high level on every scale.

The district-oriented, integrated policy that the city of Antwerp implements so successfully today in a number of strategic projects such as Spoor Noord and the Red Light District could be very inspiring for this, even though the context is more difficult and the number of partners is even bigger.

It is essential that all these partners participate equally in a project but at the same time to retain enough control to get the required results.

If this works, this approach will become relevant for the whole urban development, as a guideline for programme and project operations, as well as in the regular operation of the city.

To pave the way we need maximum integration of all the planning initiatives that the city is involved in. Depending on the kind of project it will be the city itself or a higher authority (on Flemish level or provincial level) who will take the lead. From its global spatial policy the city itself has the best insight in the versatile aspects that emerge in any project. This is therefore a plea for a strong approach from the urban policy officials.

For specific projects like the Boomsesteenweg or the Fort belt it is normal that the initiative falls in the hands of a higher authority (the Flemish community or the province). Therefore strategic planning has to become one of the key tasks of these governments again. In the past few years it seems that inspections of urban structural plans or spatial implementations for example, have taken up too much time, as a result of which other initiatives have been left behind.

Finally, to top it off: Sometimes it is easily said that the lack of financial means make this ambitious large-scale approach impossible. In present company or on this occasion it is fitting to stress that more investments in the quality of the planning itself and in the organisation of the complex planning processes with all the different partners and across the different authority levels, always pay off and make so much more possible with the same budget.

Hopefully this lecture will deliver a constructive contribution in the urban debate that needs to be held in the coming years.

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