Spatial strategy for the Great War Landscape in Flanders

Introduction

"Flanders Fields Country is pure, authentic and green. The Flemish hills with their wooded peaks and endless views and the flat north of the region with the Yzer and the polders invite you to some unique voyages of discovery. In short, Flanders Fields Country is a fascinating region to fall in love with."
(www.toerismewesthoek.be*, 2011)*

Figure 1: www.toerismewesthoek.be*, 2011*

Situated between the Belgian coast, the French border and the larger Flemish towns of Courtrai, Bruges and Ostend, Westhoek consists of 17 municipalities of which Ypres, Dixmude, Veurne and Poperinghe are the main small cities. When visiting the tourism website, the region is presented as a place of remembrance (Flanders Fields) of the first World War, and the home of famous belgian beers. The largest nearby city is Lille in France with approximately 1 million inhabitants, but the linguistic barrier and different planning approach makes intensive cooperation with the metropolitan region difficult.

In the coming decades the rural Westhoek will be confronted with new challenges, mainly a ageing population and a shrinking labour force. Municipalities within Westhoek are facing a decline in tax revenue and will have to provide more specialised services for elderly people. The attractiveness of the region lies in the open, beautiful landscape and the agricultural and historic past. While the accessibility of the region is good for those who are able to drive their own car, public transport is slow and has a poor frequency. Costs are high compared to the number of people that use it.
If the local authorities employ the usual strategy of masterplanning to raise more money by providing more possibilities for new developments, new business parks or dwellings, it will prove to be ineffective. As the demographic challenges will be similar in Flanders and neighbouring regions, such a strategy will fail to attract more young people to the Westhoek region.

Furthermore, this approach will lead to a deteriorating, and meaningless urban fringe landscape. The work of Boris Sieverts (2004) clearly shows that people have difficulty to understand these new types of landscape which are neither urban nor rural. This is clearly the case in some recent developments near Ypres, eg. the new industrial estate in Boezinge with the 'integration' of the Yorkshire Trench heritage site (fig 2).

Figure 2: Boezinge: Yorkshire Trench & Dugout: view of the site (Decoodt, Hannelore, 06-01-2005, ©Vlaamse Gemeenschap)

For a small rural region faced with demographic and possible economic decline within the next decades the spatial assets on a regional scale - the coastal development and resorts, Lille métropôle and Great War heritage – should form the backbone of any spatial strategy for Westhoek.
This paper will explore a possible spatial strategy, where economic development can enhance the cultural landscape, starting from the principles of territorial cohesion, presented by Andreas Faludi (2010) as a form of soft spatial planning on a European level. Soft spatial planning, in contrast to the traditional hard spatial planning, focuses on space as a rather "soft" category which is to be negotiated wherever challenges cut across boundaries.

1. Great War heritage

The first world war was fought on many fronts troughout the world. From the german colonies in Africa to the middle east, and from the Russian border, Turkey and the Balkans to Italy, France and Belgium. The most impressive and extraordinary episode however remains the four year long impasse on the western front. The stabilised front, shown in figure 3, runs from Nieuwpoort in Belgium to the Swiss border near Basel, and remains in the same area from november 1914 until the German offensive in the spring of 1918.
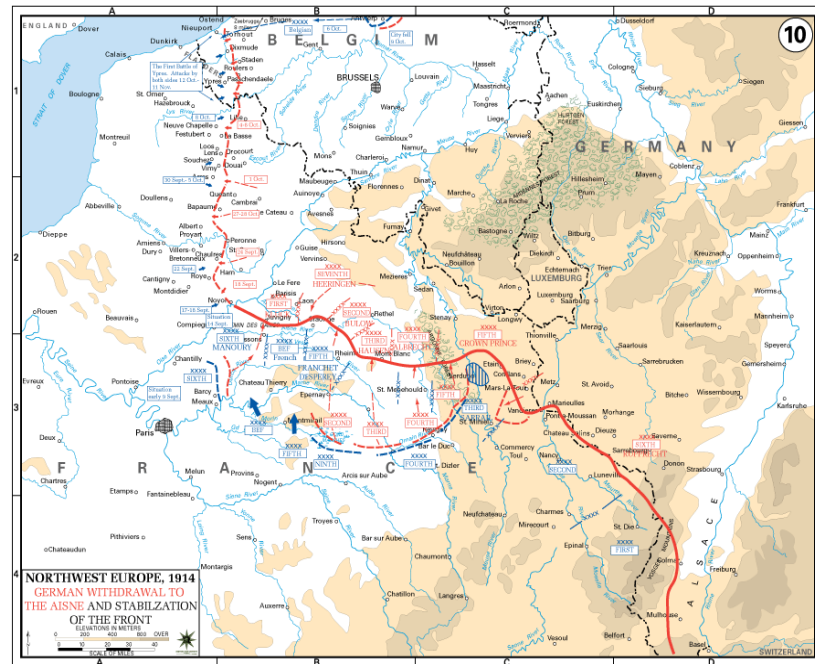
Figure 3: The History Department of the United States Military cademy. As found on 23/2/2011 on:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stabilization_of_Western_Front_WWI.PNG

The spatial connection along the whole western front is by and large absent if one visits a remembrance site or when consulting literature on the first World War. Each site focusses on the battles that were fought there, Brittish history looks at Brittish contribution, French on French realisations, German remembrance sites are very limited and frugal,... A 'Battle Map' (Passchendaele memorial museum, 2008) abruptly stops at the French border without mention of the continuity of the battles in northern France.

On the eve of the centennial memorial of the first World War, it is necessary to emphasize its spatial uniqueness and to give meaning to the western front as a whole. Comparing the Flemish Great War landscape and heritage sites with other parts of the european front can attribute to a broader understanding of possible approaches, concepts and vision. Such exchange of good practices can lead to cooperation and joint actions in various fields, eg management of heritage sites, carefull urbanisation, good local development and awareness to the creation and maintenance of a coherent contemporary cultural landscape.

This *'soft' organisational framework* can start the development of spatial initiatives on the same scale as the western front and will also contribute to the promotion of the memorials, events and scientific research.

Figure 4: Antony Gormley, Horizon Field, August 2010 - April 2012, A Landscape Installation in the High Alps of Vorarlberg, Austria, Presented by Kunsthaus Bregenz, © Kunsthaus Bregenz, Antony Gormley, Photo: Markus Tretter

When almost all survivors of the first World War have disappeared, the need for a new meaning to the remembrance will grow. Especially contemporary land art and evironmental art interventions have the ability to add new layers of meaning to the existing layers of landscape and history. The recent work (figure 4) of Anthony Gormley (Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2011) in the Vorarlberg mountains for the Kunsthaus Bregenz is a good example of the way art can add meaning to a landscape. On this work Gormley says: *'The idea is that you are immersed in a field that connects these three aspects of consciousness: the palpable, the perceivable, and the imaginable' (Antony Gormley, April 2010).* For this ability to make emotions percievable in everyday life, we propose artist interventions to increase the visibility, the accessability and the meaningfulness of the remembrance sites for the centennial memorial. In addition to the permanent interventions in the landscape, a 660 kilometer walk will connect both land art and remembrance sites from Nieuwpoort to Switzerland. The walk consists of one main trail, with a variant connecting the main German and Allied memorial sites.

Figure 5: Great War hiking trail from Nieuwpoort to Switzerland, own map

2. Developing a prosperous urban-rural relationship

In Flanders, the Westhoek is regarded as a 'remote' region, although it is in the vicinity of Lille Métropôle, Ghent, Courtrai and the urban development of the Belgian coast. The remoteness of Westhoek is best defined by percieved low accessability by car and public transport and a low level of local and regional services. In addition, the absence of well developed links with nearby Lille (50km) orientates the region towards Ghent (80km) and Brussels (130km). Simultaneously, being remote preserved the landscape and the villages from urban sprawl.

We want to improve the accessability of the region for the inhabitants and the tourists travelling to the beach, without pursueing urban fringe economic development that will destroy the main territorial asset of the region: its agreeable landscape.

Except for hot summer days, when tourists travelling to the seaside cause traffic jams on the main road, there is no real problem with car accessability for the Westhoek and motorists can easily reach all facilities. Local busses and regional trains Poperinge-Ypres-Courtrai and Veurne-Dixmude-Ghent provide for the very basic travel needs and the connection to Ghent and Brussels. Fast and frequent public transport to Lille Métropôle and the seaside urban development is almost absent, leaving no real alternative for the car.

The strategy proposes one new, fast and frequent public transport line between Lille-airport, the main train station (Lille Europe) and Veurne. This backbone crosslinks both the Belgian seaside and Lille Métropôle to the main small cities Ypres and Veurne. Some Westhoek villages along this line will be connected, and provide for the necessary transfer from and to local transport. This line can continue along the coast to Nieuwpoort and Ostend. To reinforce the transborder relationships a reopening of the former railroad between De Panne and Dunkerque is also part of the proposal.
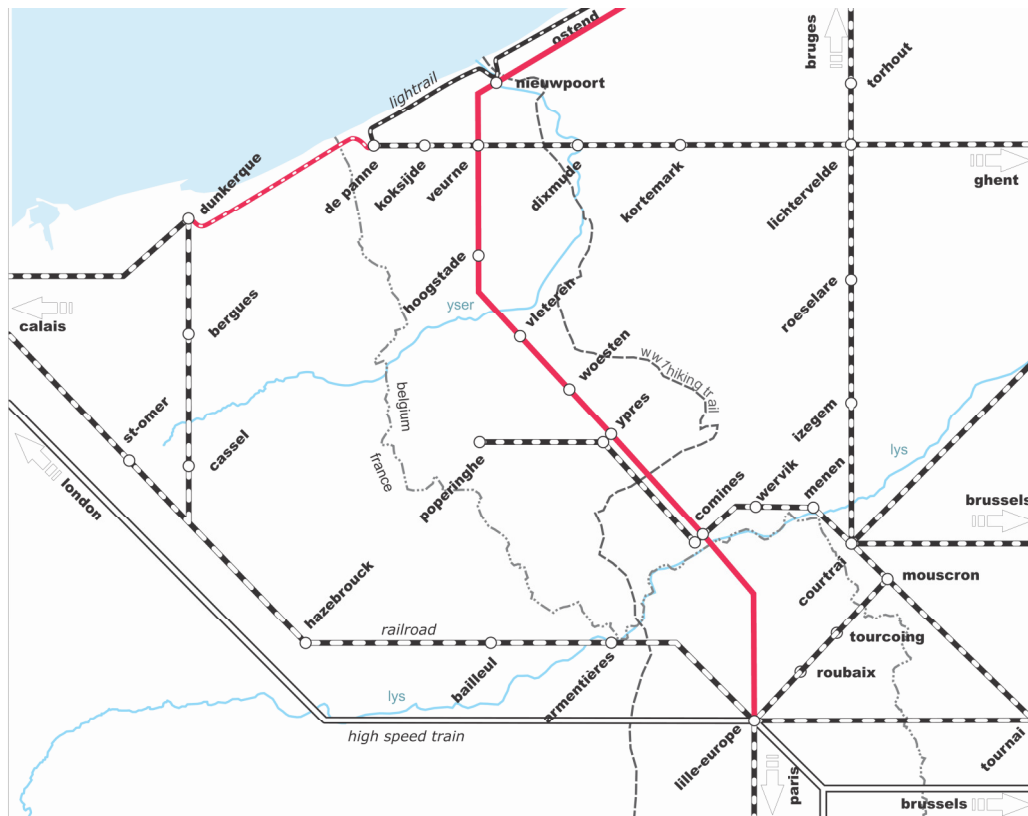
Figure 6: public transport for a prosperous urban-rural relationship. Own map.
black = existing public transport; red=proposed new links

Accessability by public transport will become decisive for the service level and possible development of the villages, along with the quality of the build environment confronted with the surrounding landscape.

The research Magel, Gross & Ritzinger (2011) did for villages in Bavaria, shows four different spatial scenarios for the functionality of Bavarian villages. The basic variables are the degree of multifunctionality of villages and the economic prosperity of the region.

	monofunctional village	*multifunctional village*
weak regional economy	**'Land ohne Leute'** (countryside without people)	**'patchwork Dorf'** (patchwork village)
prosperous region	**'Schlafdorf'** (residential village)	**'Stadt und Land – Hand in Hand'** (city and countryside work together)

Table 1: Magel et al (2011): matrix of four scenarios, own translation

As Flanders is a prosperous region, and the metropolitan infrastructure of Lille is well within reach, only two scenarios are withheld here: *'Schlafdorf'* and *'Stadt und Land – Hand in Hand'.* The main difference between these two scenarios is the presence of or the need for multifunctional development. For the Westhoek, a differentiation of policy is proposed based on the accessability by public transport and the existing service level.

	high accessability (public transport)	**medium** accessability (public transport)	**low** accessability (public transport)
high existing service level	- attract new services - promote multifunctionality - provide additional housing in the village - attract new households	- specific measures for maintaining existing service level - maintain quality of housing - attract new households	- specific measures for maintaining existing individual services and companies - maintain population rate
medium existing service level	- attract new services - attract new households	- maintain general service level - maintain population rate	- specific measures for existing individual services and companies - improve quality of individual houses - maintain population rate
low existing service level	- attract new services - improve quality of residential areas - maintain population rate	- attract additional services - improve quality of individual houses - maintain population rate	- specific measures for existing individual services and companies - improve quality of individual houses

Table 2: differentiated spatial policy scenarios in the context of a shrinking region between 'Schlafdorf' (bottom right) and 'Stadt und Land – Hand in Hand' (top left), own proposal

The feasability of these policy scenarios depends on the cooperation between all stakeholders in the village, which needs common values and an innovative approach to complex situations. According to Magel, Gross & Ritzinger (2011), the central issues should be *'How do we want to live in our village? What community do we want to live, work, play in?'* The debate will focus on values, lifestyles, expectations of stakeholders within each village community.

3. Innovative solutions

To implement and realise the spatial strategy, the existing rigid spatial structure plans and land use plans will not suffice. The land use plans (fig 7) cover the whole Westhoek and have vague standard planning prescriptions. These types of (hard) spatial planning are unable to react quick and flexible to the proposed landscape and land art development and the stakeholder oriented approach for the future of the villages.
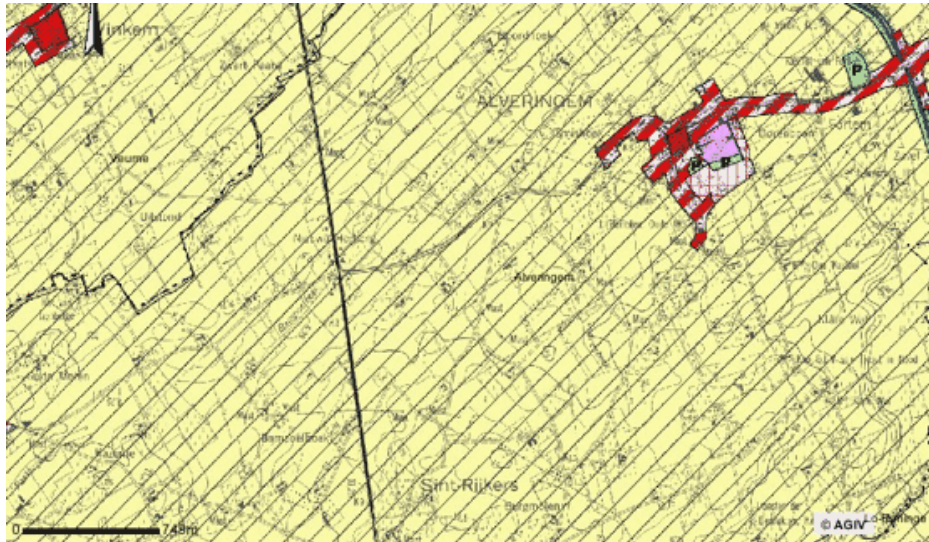
Figure 7: AGIV, existing land use plan, with generic planning prescriptions for Flanders

An innovative, two faced planning system is needed to implement the spatial strategy. The first part consist of a restrictive default land use plan based on the existing situation and the planned regional and supraregional infrastructure and protected sites. The land use plan has to preserve the existing spatial quality and prevent irreversible local development. This plan forms a strict framework for local planning permissions.

The second face of the new planning system is oriented towards positive (landscape) development, and encourages balanced investments. If stakeholders in villages do not reach an agreement, or fail to see the necessity the default land use plan remains the basis for planning permissions.

The second face is stakeholder oriented and gives local communities the opportunity to enable other developments that the land use plan does not allow. The local community has to develop a shared vision on the future of the village and the surrounding countryside. In a multiactor, multilevel setting they make a *landscape development strategy* where the basic values, needs, expectations of the village are defined in guidelines. The landscape development strategy forms the basis for covenants with local actors. The covenant will give planning permission for new constructions, provided that there is a clear benefit for the community.

Table 3 shows some examples of conditions that might be included in such covenants, based on the location of the project and the guidelines of the landscape development strategy.

Local actor	Development	Conditions of covenant
Small company	Extention of existing building and parking lot	- renovation of existing 'ugly' building - providing small wooded area for children to play in
Farmer	New barn, next to the village church	- use traditional materials - building type fits surrounding village buildings
Farmer	New barn	- good design of building - planting lane trees
Retail developper	New supermarket along main road, away from the village	- no consent, investment only acceptable on a different location

Local actor	Development	Conditions of covenant
Family	Rebuilding a house in the polders	- respect the landscape characteristics - good design of building

Table 3: Example of conditions in covenants, depending on the landscape development plan

Conclusion

The Westhoek case shows that planning of a cultural landscape is feasable when implementing an innovative approach, based on principles of territorial cohesion. Agriculture, tourism, heritage, small towns, villages and local industries form the socio-economic base of this territory. To create an actual cultural landscape, cooperation between all local stakeholders, accros municipal borders is necessary. A good understanding of the functional specificity of this 21st century area will feed into attempts of horizontal policy coordination and evidence of multi-level governance.

A territorial cohesion approach for the great war landscape strengthens a strategic programming approach based on adequate knowledge of local potentials, but also taking into account the interdependence of, and taking advantage of complementarities between areas. It broadens the scope of territorial capital beyond endogenous potential, looking at over-the-border interdependencies and regional competitiveness. It goes beyond social and economic capital, and includes space as a resource for development. In this way, each place should be able to exploit and preserve its own territorial capital by finding specific links with local as well as global resources - making the most of each place.

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