

TOWARDS A STRONGER INTERACTION OF PLANNING AND REALIZATION OF STRATEGIC PROJECTS IN FLANDERS

Gerard Stalenhoef, Charlotte Geldof ¹

Introduction

The rise of a new planning system in Flanders and the approval of the spatial structureplan for Flanders in the nineties created a strong impetus for a profound institutionalisation and has been precipitated in a great number of planning processes and innovative plans. In spite of this significant progress, planning practice shows that the planning instruments and processes have not enough been related to the realisation of strategic projects. In order to fill this gap between planning and implementation the Flemish minister for Spatial Planning introduced a resolution on subsidising strategic projects in 2004.

In this paper we want to show the background and the content of this resolution. In order to do so, we first briefly run over the specific characteristics of (the instruments of) structure planning in Flanders. Then we argue that the increasing complexity of the planning context demands for a more meticulous approach, which is able to take into account a wide range of planning interests and requirements. Subsequently we describe how the resolution defines strategic projects derived from the spatial planning policy objectives. This gives us the basis to describe the content of the resolution, the first projects and some first lessons that have been learned.

1. Planning tools

Between 1980 and 2000 a period of rethinking the planning system resulted in the concretisation of the method of structure planning. A structure plan is seen as a result of a planning process and as a policy document that offers a framework for the desired spatial structure. The long term spatial vision for the development of an area is a result from an integrated and coherent approach in order to prepare and determine the implementation of decisions that influence the territory of that area. Since planning is also seen as a learning process it is continuous and cyclic: evaluation and revision are essential.

The spatial structure plan for Flanders has been approved by the government on September 23d, 1997. At the same time a planning decree has been elaborated. In 1996 a first decree had been approved to regulate the change of the old to the new system. This decree introduces a system granting authority over planning issues to the region, its 5 provinces and its 308 municipalities. Each governmental level or planning level will have to use two kinds of plans: a spatial structure plan and spatial implementation plans (SIP). On May 5th, 1999 the decree for the organization of the territory was approved, followed by a number of resolutions for the implementation of various parts of the planning decree.

At all levels a spatial structureplan consists of three parts :

1. Informative - existing context (existing spatial structure, plans) and prognoses
2. Indicative
 - with a general vision, objectives and most important choices
 - with a desired spatial structure on the long term, including principles, schemes, etc by area (spatial structure) and by component
 - with general quantitative aspects (for housing, economic growth, ect)
 - with priorities and indications for the execution of the actions
3. Normative or binding – selections, actions that will be done by the respective government.

The desired spatial structure is operationalized by planning processes for the respective actions, for instance the delimitation of an urban area or setting more concrete perspectives for an economic network. These processes result in specific plans and are the base for the design of the so called spatial implementation plans (SIP). A SIP gives a juridical base to the spatial vision and can be seen as a land-use plan 'new style', that also will be a basis for granting or refusing building permits. It consists (at the three planning levels) of:

- Graphic plan(s) with zones and symbols situated on a cadastre underground.
- Regulations for destination, composition and management.
- Description of actual and legal situation.
- Description of the relation with structure plan of which it is the implementation..

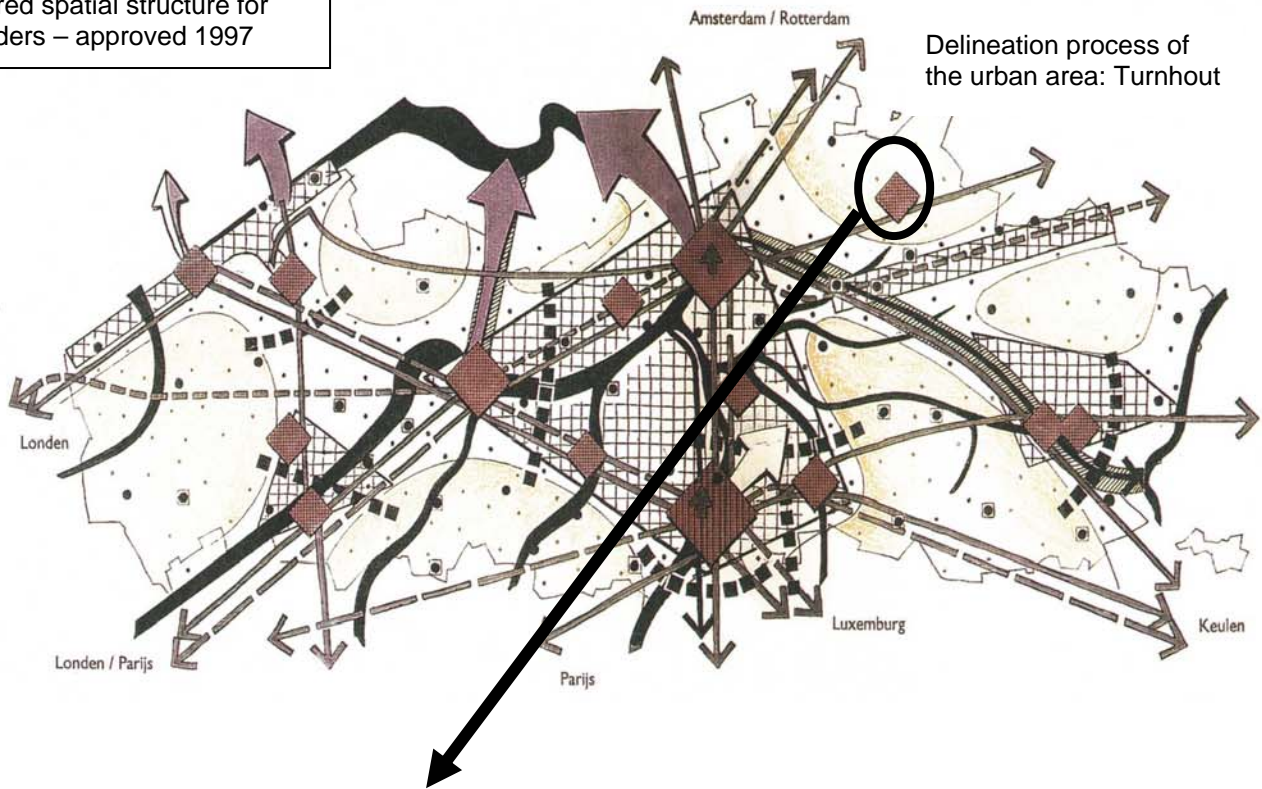
Apart from spatial structure plans, specific planning documents and SIPs, the spatial structure plan for Flanders also foresees other possible instruments like for instance 'strategic projects', land policy and development, etc. Some important characteristics of the Flemish planning system are::

- Sustainable development is a starting point (dealing with carrying capacity of space and improving 'spatial quality').
- It is meant to be strategic. From the desired spatial structure choices have been made for emphasizing on urban areas, urban networks, natural and agricultural structure, economic concentrations (like gateways), infrastructure-networks (road, rail, water, pipelines) and most important services policies are defined at the Flemish level (a hierarchy and categorization has been made for these components).
- It is designed according to the principles of subsidiarity. This means that all governmental levels can draw up a spatial structure plan and implementation plans for issues that are at stake at their planning level. For both type of plans there is a hierarchical relationship. Consequently, a lower structure plan has to be directed to the higher structure plan and a higher SIP can undo regulations in a lower SIP. Every planning level may also set up strategic projects;
- The planning decree is flexible leaving space for concretization (by for instance resolutions). Instruments are suitable for meeting long term as well as short term planning needs
- The planning decree gives guidelines and rules for a professional organization; minimal competencies for planners, obligation for local level to have at least one professional planner in the administration, different rules for the organization of the structure planning (with an advisory committee at every planning level).

Based on the general guidelines, goals, perspectives and the desired spatial structure for Flanders, many different planning processes have been set up in the last years, for instance the delineation of urban areas and open areas. Of the thirteen urban areas eleven processes have been finished, five have a SIP approved and three almost), In fifteen zones a spatial vision concerning the natural and agricultural structure are now elaborated, the first SIP has been approved in 2005. For the six mainports strategic plans have been made, in some cases also the SIP. For the economic network Albert Channel a spatial vision has been finished and many actions (including SIPs) are now implemented and approved. Many plans and SIP have been approved for important infrastructure and services (R0 near Brussels, R4 near Ghent, telecommunication, pipelines,...): for a complete view see :

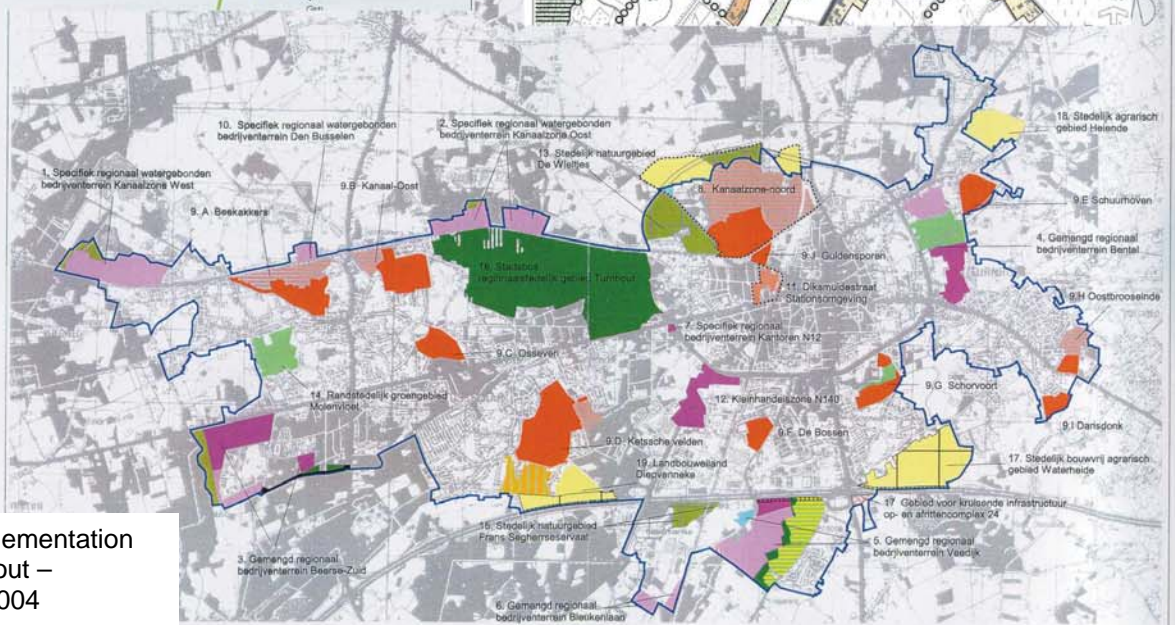
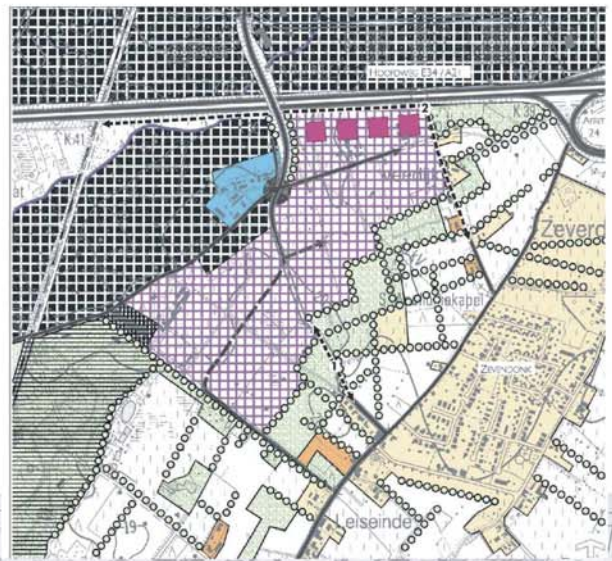
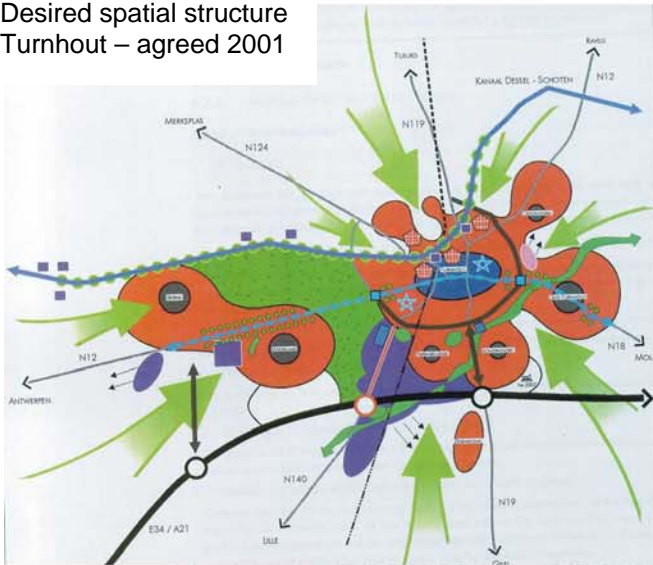
<http://www.ruimtelijkeordening.be>

Structureplan for Flanders -
Desired spatial structure for
Flanders – approved 1997



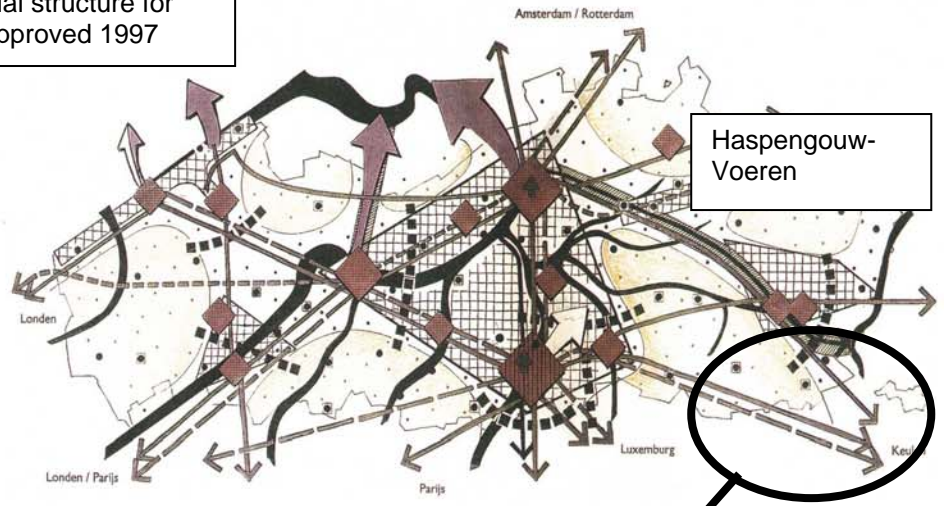
Delineation process of
the urban area: Turnhout

Desired spatial structure
Turnhout – agreed 2001

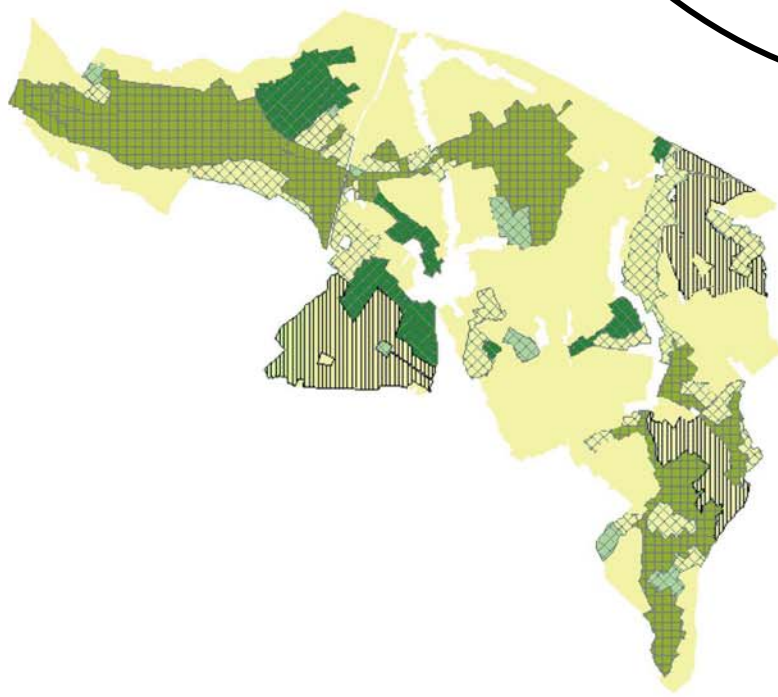
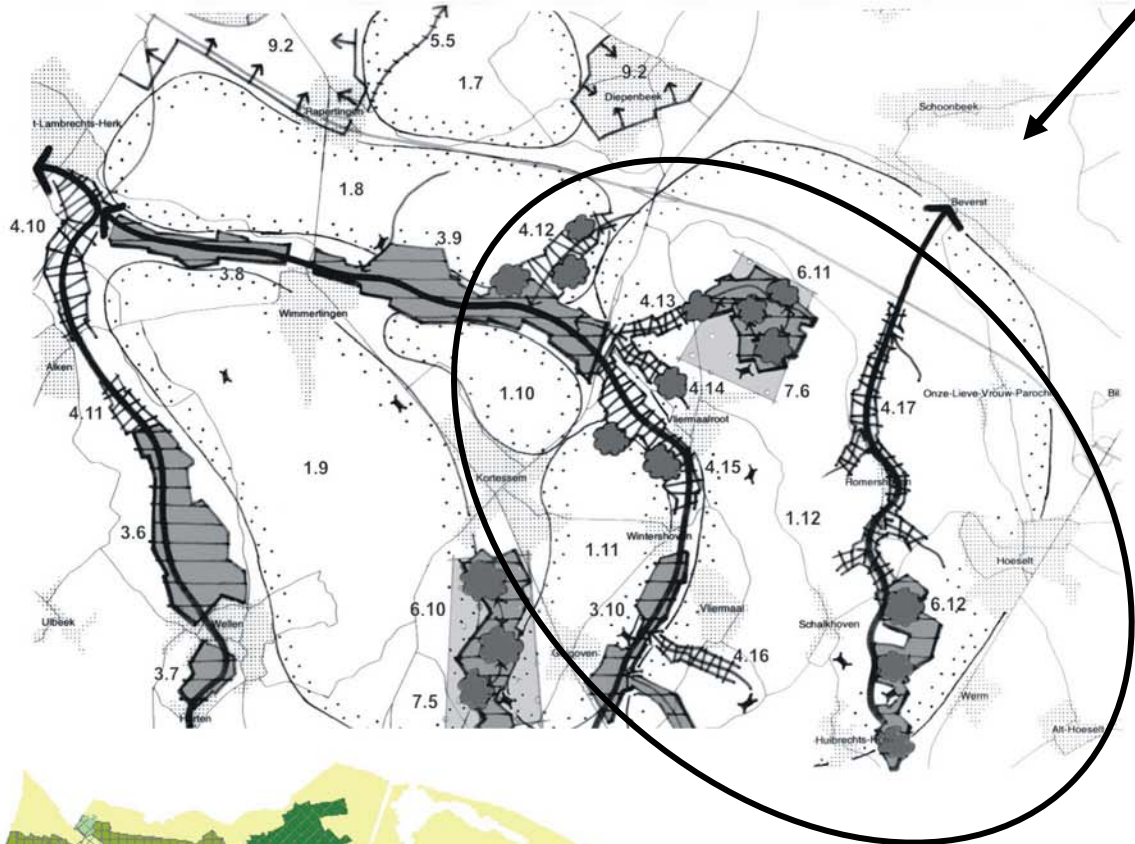


Spatial Implementation
Plan Turnhout –
approved 2004

Structureplan for Flanders -
Desired spatial structure for
Flanders – approved 1997



Haspengouw-
Voeren



Delineation of open areas for nature and agriculture
Haspengouw-Voeren
Spatial vision (above) - decided may 2005
SIP (left) – phase of public enquiry

2. Challenges

Ten years after the approval of the spatial structureplan for Flanders the context has changed. In this paper it is not possible to go very much deeper in analyzing the trends, just to mention the effects of globalization in relation to the position of Flanders or all kind of changes in society (social, demographical, cultural) that occur: And what to say about all phenomena that are related to the environment, the shortage of land to let water to run over. Many environmental changes and the way society deals with them have a direct influence in spatial planning. New technologies, new habits will be a challenge to deal with. Here we want to emphasise that as a consequence of the changing context, (spatial) planning has become much more difficult. There are a lot of aspects to take into account, many more then ten years ago. When relating (strategic) projects to the planning those factors may form uncertainties and widen the gap planning-realisation. We will focus here on two items to illustrate this.

New instruments are arising. Every sector had to deal with the changing context and has from their point of view, and one more successful than another, searched for answers. As a consequence of all kind changes in our world new European and sectorial instruments and policies have arisen and are influencing more and more the spatial planning. They have specially an impact to the way planning is organised, cause an enormous flow of new studies and documents to be added to the planning procedure (specially for the SIP) and demand huge capabilities of the planners. Some of these instruments have an obligatory character, and are related to a specific theme. Because of this, during planning procedures (specially for the SIP) specific documents and information must be available. When there is a failure of timing, one element has been forgotten, any individual may claim the destruction of the approval of the plan by the Supreme Administrative Court of Belgium. We mention for instance:

- European policies like Lisbon strategy
- Environmental Impact Analysis (EIA-Directives 85/337/EEC & 97/11/EC; decree concerning the General Provisions on Environmental Policy)– to be done at planning level and at project level (planMER and projectMER).
- Specific Protection Zones (Habitat – Natura 2000) – and the obligation of making an Appropriate Assessment when those zones are influenced by the planning.
- Seveso (SEA-Directive 2001/42/EC; decree concerning the General Provisions on Environmental Policy) – RVR - During the preparation of the plan which precedes the SIP or during the preparatory stage of the SIP
- Watercheck – to be included in every SIP
- Archaeology (convention of Malta) – to be mentioned in a SIP and obligatory at projectlevel
- Mobility Impact Analysis - facultative
- Agricultural Impact Study – facultative
- Legacy concerning extraction and mining
- Etc.

Changing responsibilities within planning. The planninghorizon of the first Flemish structureplan was set at 2007 and is now being passed. An evaluation of what has happened on the field, an insight in the necessities for the future and rethinking the longterm vision is necessary. Within structureplanning there still is the spatial vision for Flanders, but there are now different plans and policies that have been approved by the Flemish government, the provinces (all 5 provinces have an approved structureplan) and the local governments (172 out of 308 have an approved spatial structureplan – may 2007). This means that there is, more then ten years ago a bigger ‘mass’ of plans to be carried out. There is also a shift of responsibilities towards provincial and local governments. With other words, the subsidiary planning system (according the decree) is really working, but many of those plans are just now being implemented (there is for instance a big increase in the number of SIP).

For the future (strategic) projects, within a decentralised planning system, a minimum requirement is having a spatial vision with a desired spatial structure. It is an important instrument to visualise the future of the territory and integrate proposals and to see if they contribute to a sustainable development of the area. A second requirement is an organisation where all actors that are involved may have an 'equal' input (from the principles of subsidiarity).

Spatial planning in Flanders has thus two great opportunities:

- To continue to fulfil its role as integrator between sectorial aspects and the variety of demands for territory, but now a shift should be made from the planning to the integrated realisation of projects in certain (strategic) areas.
- To stimulate (local) actors to work together on strategic projects in a more structural way.

3. Matching challenges with planning tools

Continuity by reloading

It is not possible in spatial planning to design an ideal future from a white sheet of paper, as it is the result of a planning process. This process is outlined by the planning context that has to be taken into account. This context is a complex mix of aspects related to the area where plans will be developed that a planner and designer should know about;

- All plans and policies that have been approved by the Flemish government, the provinces, and the local governments.
- All legal framework and instruments within the planning process
- Idem for other sectors and international aspects
- The physical structure, territorial structure and carrying capacity (not all functions can be placed next to another) – There is a logic and structure to territories, one should find out the driving forces behind these structures; this is not the same as considering territory as a raster or mosaic or as a network of equal nodes and corridors.
- Challenges as described in previous chapter and many more.

Spatial planning is balancing needs for territory from the society in a way that the structure of that territory can be reinforced and consumption of territory is kept to a minimum. Claims for space by the different sectors or groups in society are very diverse. When we would only put together these claims for territory, Flanders needs to be at least twice as big. As challenges and the context are very complex it is very necessary to be strategic in planning. This all means that choices have to be made, procedures and priorities agreed, so that a balance, based on the territorial logic, between all claims can be made. From this perspective spatial planning (or town and country planning) can be defined as a strategic process oriented towards the future with the objective to take decisions and execute actions on the territory, based on subsidiarity and on a spatial strategic but integrated long term vision.

As has been said, spatial planning is an evolving process, but we start to have results. First evaluations of already 'finished' planning-processes show that in global terms long term spatial visions are still valid for the next years (from 2007 to 2012 or even 2017) and use the long term vision as a kind of framework for judging short term necessities. In fact we see that the spatial vision and main goals developed in different processes are relatively recent (from 2000 onwards), which is even more true for the spatial implementation plans (from 2003 onwards). This means that many actions have not (yet) been realised. This delay of the implementation aspect of the spatial planning is a field to develop in the coming years.

It is also important to mention that actors, specially local governments are asking the existence of a forum with the presence of the three planning levels for the implementation for those actions agreed during a planning process that go beyond their own capabilities and need investments from different actors (or sectors). Or, they ask enough means to do this themselves (or both).

4. General focus of strategic projects in Flemish spatial planning

Mutual commitment means sharing responsibilities

Previous chapters are important in order to understand the present search of spatial planning in Flanders in order to get more results on the field and accelerate the implementation of what is planned. A spatial vision for a certain area together with plans from other policy domains (water protection, economic incentives, etc) for the same area are to be put together as a starting point for strategic projects. The existing planning instruments (RSV, decree, ...) seem to give enough room to generate results on the specific level of the strategic project area, but an emphasis on unexplored parts or the addition of new specific regulations might be necessary. Further we mention the initiatives of other sector-administrations who are looking for similar changes in their policies. There are for example economic, touristical and agricultural strategic plans, there are subsidies for urban renewal projects, of rural landdevelopment projects, etc.

Strategic projects can be devolved at three planning levels. In this paper we will focus on those projects at the Flemish level. In the spatial structureplan for Flanders of 1997 (p.568) a distinction between a strategic project in an urban area and in open areas (that is to say not urban) is made. They are defined as follows:

- Strategic projects in open areas are projects that maintain, reinforce and mix the natural and agricultural structure, the housing structure and the infrastructure.
- Strategic projects in the urban areas are projects that illustrate the great potentials of the urban areas on a co-ordinated and efficient way. They can be implemented on the short or mid-term. They should reflect the level of quality that has been developed within the spatial vision for the respective urban area.

Within the intended spatial structure for the urban areas and for the open areas additional perspectives and goals for strategic projects have been set. In the first years of practicing structure planning it was felt necessary to simulate the initiation of strategic projects with financial incentives. The definitions, perspectives and goals of the Flemish structure plan have then been translated and updated in a resolution approved by the Flemish government on the 4th of june, 2004: "resolution concerning the conditions for recognising and/or subsidising strategic projects in the context of the Flemish structure plan" (R-4th of june, 2004). The resolution makes it possible to subsidise a strategic project, which means financing a project coordinator for up to 80% with a maximum of 50.000 € of his salary and 80% with a maximum of 12.000 € of his operational costs.

Definition of a strategic project (R- 4th of june, 2004, art.1) – A strategic project is a project that has a spatial approach and has as its main goal to contribute to the reinforcement of either urban areas or open areas.

1. A strategic project in open areas is a project that maintains, reinforces and mixes elements of the natural and agricultural structure, the housing structure. They can be implemented on a short or mid-term. These projects are important as an impulse for the Flemish spatial policy on the open areas.
2. A strategic project in the urban areas is a project that is focused on increasing the mix of functions, that illustrates the great potentials of the urban areas and helps to realise them in a co-ordinated and efficient way. It can be implemented on a short or mid-term. These projects are important as an impulse for the Flemish spatial policy on the urban areas.

Criteria for selecting strategic projects (R- 4th of June, 2004, art.3). Every year applicants (local governments) can send a file for the selection of projects. In order to be selected or recognised as a strategic project every proposal will be screened and judged based on the following criteria:

1. Fitting within the spatial vision of the Flemish structure plan giving a substantial added value to the implementation of the Flemish spatial policies.
2. Being a clear example and signal in relation to the further operationalisation of the Flemish structure plan.
3. Having an integrated approach / character (spatial, economical, social) and is structuring parts of the urban or rural area.
4. For the urban strategic projects. Bringing innovative results and stimulating a process of renewal in the urban area. Depending on the location of the project
 - it should offer an improvement of the housing supply, at higher densities, for different segments of the housing market, services for public and collective transport, public services, parks and recreational areas:
 - It should offer space for economic activities at strategic locations
5. For the strategic projects in open areas. Contributing to an effective equipment of strategic locations concerning landscape, nature, agriculture and/or forests and/or housing and working in small villages and/or recreation in the open area.
6. Having a functional, spatial and institutional/administrative complexity that exceeds the local government's capabilities of implementation; without a specific project coordinator the strategic project can not be developed successfully. When the implementation of more than one project is proposed the overall package exceeds the possibilities of implementation of the local government.
7. Proposing a project structure that is based on the following principles:
 - a methodical approach of the strategic project(s)
 - a specific, administratively not complex and professional organisation
 - a communication strategy with a clear relationship to the decision makers and the actors involved (inhabitants, media,.....).
 - an involvement of private actors in the realisation of the project.

Every proposal is judged individually and in relation to other proposals by a jury within the Flemish spatial planning department, ranking them by majority. As the instrument is relatively new the number of proposals has been small, but it has been increasing year by year. From the first year (2004) until today seven strategic projects have been recognised. These projects are:

- 2004 – TURNHOUT – development and park management of three regional industrial zones.- association of local governments of the regional urban area Turnhout –
- 2005 - GHENT– Scharnier. – development of an area between the railway station Dampoort and the port with waterfront development 'Old Docks' – city of Ghent
- 2005 - AALST - development of a regional industrial area Siezegemkouter– city of Aalst.
- 2006 - VILVOORDE – Watersite (Broek) - Complex restructuring of a brownfield for a mixed development near Brussels - city of Vilvoorde and NV Novovill
- 2006 - NOORD-HAGELAND – strengthening the valley of the Demer as a strong spatial structure.- regional association of the North of Hageland -
- 2006 - ROESELARE – development of three railway station areas within the regional urban area Roeselare – municipalities of Roeselare, Ingelmunster and Izegem.
- 2006 - KORTRIJK – development of the railway station area of Kortrijk – city of Kortrijk

5. Trends and first lessons

Because of the stimulation (instruments and subsidies) and because it is felt necessary to implement projects we notice a trend of organising strategic projects in a more professional way. Before 2004 coordinating a project was mostly an extra job for the staff of the administration, whereas now more and more often a specific (internal) structure is set up to realise projects. Local governments (especially in bigger urban areas) start reorganising the internal structure to be able to cope with the increasing (complexity of) projects, instruments and subsidies. There is also a kind of search to combine them in some way. In some cases the effort of the management changes towards a general directing of projects, like a movie-director, instead of doing the work for only one project. For the effective implementation of projects we see for instance a growth of the establishment of local semi-autonomous or semi-public development companies, especially in the main urban areas..

When a planning process is taking place many actors that are involved will meet during project teams, steering groups, etc. When discussing the intended spatial structure the actors involved will look for projects and actions that are more or less favourable for the realisation of the goals or spatial vision. Many actors already have plans for specific projects and can investigate whether these projects will fit within the vision. This forum is crucial to propose, develop or test possible projects and actions. On the other hand the duty of this forum is to obtain the agreement concerning the general spatial development and not the organisation of specific projects. Therefore it is desirable to agree on really strategic projects (main concept, area, etc) and set up a specific 'realisation-process' next to and directly related to the general organisation.

After some years of experimenting with strategic projects at the Flemish level, some trends have been identified and the first lessons learned. The most important element to find ways for closing the gap between the planning and the implementation are:

- strengthen the organisational capacity in general.
- starting a strategic project in a more early stage of planning processes, and to link strategic projects stronger to the planning efforts in such a way that these projects really can 'realise' an intended spatial structure

By doing so more clarity can be given on the moment that specific instruments, like the SIP or other sectoral instruments, will have to be implemented. The more is known about the development of a strategic zone, the more efficiently and effectively this can be done. Some practical guidelines may be:

a. Mapping of (spatial) visions. Strategic projects are related to a specific zone: an urban and/or open area. Translation of the existing (spatial) visions and project them on one map on a more detailed level is a first step for the strategic project. It is possible to agree to study more in detail the possible design or equipment of the zone, the specific spatial principles and the programme that is to be implemented.

- Strategic projects should be logically linked to approved or agreed planning documents, including those that will be elaborated during the realisation process. Specifically the project should be or is related to a SIP, as a SIP has a specific role (because it is the instrument within the spatial planning that has a legal impact): or it is already there on the moment that a strategic project starts to be developed or, and that would be better the SIP will be 'feeded' from the elements that come out during the process around the strategic project.

- On the way it is possible that new elements arise. It is then important to relate these elements to the general vision and check where are essential and less important interferences, in order to find a balance towards the further development of the project(s). The general desired spatial structure should offer therefore enough goals and principles for directing possible strategic projects.

b. Mapping of actors and instruments. Strategic projects have different levels of complexity, rhythms of realisation or critical factors for the realisation. A key factor is bringing together the right actors from the three levels of planning, taking into account the principles of subsidiarity and with respect for the existing instruments, administrative and institutional peculiarities of these actors. As the search for new or the deepening out of the existing instruments takes time and debate apart from the strategic project, it should not be the main purpose of strategic projects to set a change of them as a main goal. It is further necessary to identify actors that are involved in that strategic zone, and to find out whether the project is also strategic for them. Are they the same as in the general planning process. Different methods, instruments, financial system, decision structures of every actor should then be identified. A specific focus on land policy can be important. Also it is necessary to find out what information is missing and what kind of actions should be taken with that respect.. In the best case a specific agreement may be reached and decisions taken by the actors involved concerning, the intention to work together in that zone, etc. The more is known about the content and the further development the higher the probability on success.

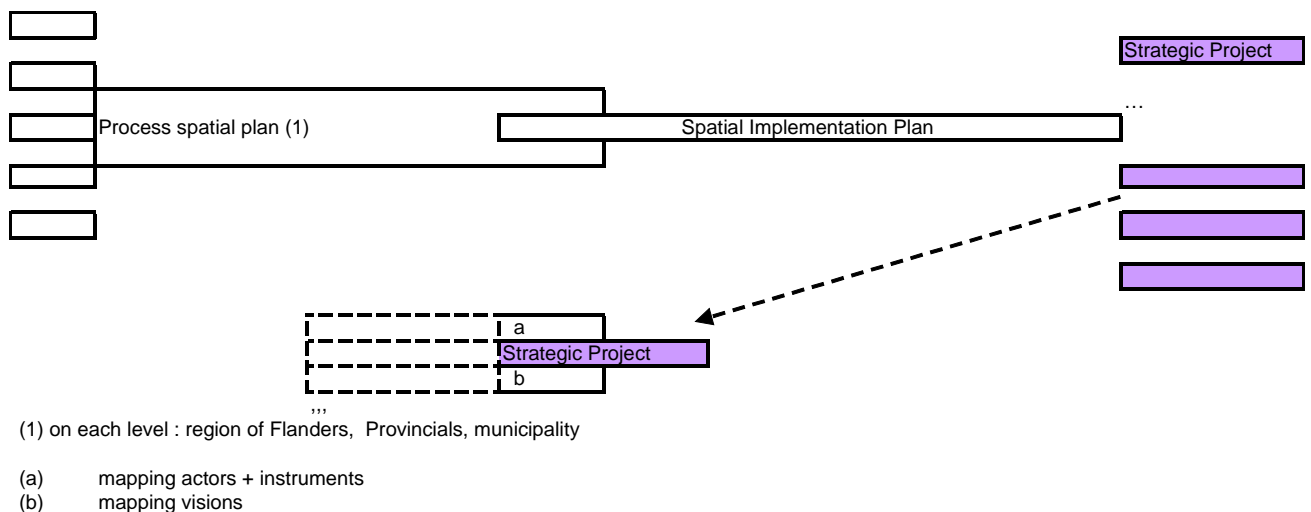


Figure. Introducing strategic projects in a more early stage of a planning process

Conclusions. It is possible to develop and implement strategic projects in Flanders within the context of the spatial structureplanning. Further finetuning and detailing the instruments, eventually by specific resolutions, is possible. To start more early to work on a strategic project during a spatial planningprocess and bringing actors together for the implementation is desirable. Translating the spatial vision towards the strategic area by mapping visions and instruments is then an essential start.

With special thanks to René van der Lecq and Wiet Vandaele.

¹ This paper is written on personal title of the authors, source of information and figures: Flemish Government, Flemish town and country planning department – RWO-RP. Both authors work at this department RWO-RP.