

“Urban and regional planning in Flanders:  
a 10-minutes overview of 50 years of  
urban policy and spatial planning policies”

1. The 1962 Act and the ‘Gewestplannen’
2. The city rediscovered
3. Towards a Flemish spatial policy and the structure plan Flanders
4. From urban renewal to urban regeneration
5. The implementation of the structure plan
6. A new policy plan for Flanders

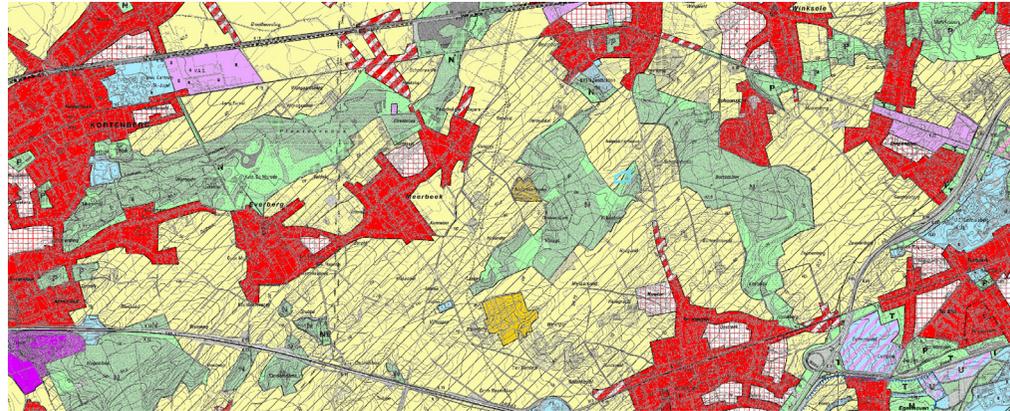
Flanders witnessed a period of sustained economic and demographic growth during the 1950ties and the 1960ties. Economic and social policies converged in the development of the European Welfare State, in which a free market model was combined with an extensive system of social security and the development of public services and infrastructure works. Due to the combination of war damage, demographic growth, and an increased standard of living, the demand for new houses boomed to an unprecedented level. Public housing programs, typically inspired by the Garden City Movement or a bit later, the Modernist movement, could only relief a small fraction of the demand. Moreover, the Belgian government had developed a system of subsidies favoring individual house-ownership. As in many industrialized countries, new housing development mostly took place outside the city centers, because of the availability of land. The development of a system of motorways connecting the major urban centers and the democratization of the car supported the suburban growth. Speculative urbanization of former agricultural land resulted in the typically sprawled urban form that characterizes Flanders today. Individual land owners massively subdivided their land for residential purposes, and local public authorities had little power, nor incentives to guide these developments. A positive result however was the fact that this policy gave an efficient answer to the housing needs.

In 1962, faced with the rapid and uncontrolled post-war urbanization, the Belgian government approved a Planning Act with the purpose to “protect the natural beauty of the country”. The new act introduced a nested system of comprehensive regulatory planning, comprising of a Nationaal Plan (national plan), Gewestplannen (sub- regional plans), Streekplannen (regional plans), algemene plannen van aanleg (general municipal plans) and bijzondere plannen van aanleg (specific municipal plans). In practice however, only the Gewestplannen and the Municipal plans have been used. These Gewestplannen have been developed starting in the late sixties and approved in the second half of the seventies and defined the land use of the whole country on a scale of 1/25 000.

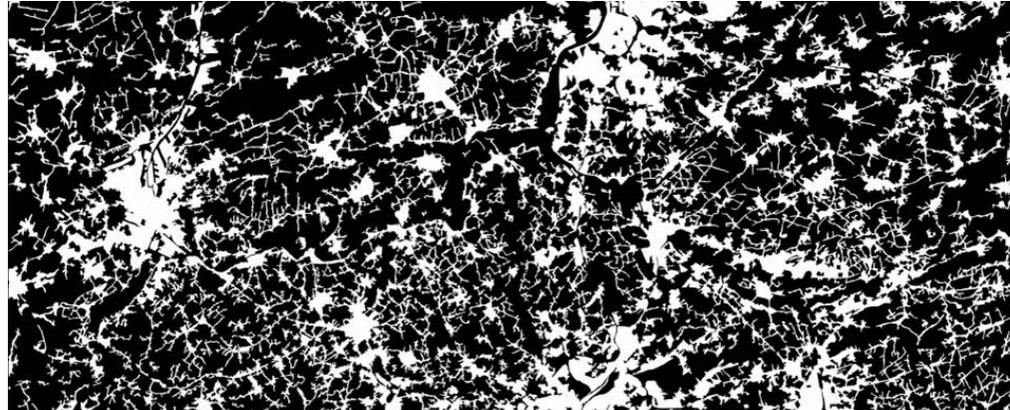
The regulatory planning system of the 1962act was able to protect important natural and agricultural areas from development. However, the new planning system has not been very effective in preventing suburbanization and sprawl. In the economic growth optimism of the 1960ties, a large amount of space for housing, infrastructure and business parks has been zoned. Because of the vast amount of land designated to housing and business outside urban centers, suburbanization was rather supported than restricted by the new Act. Moreover, the zoning of the regulatory plan system determined the financial value of land. The large financial implications stimulated clientelism and patronage, and even in some cases corruption. The regulatory plans also created a very inflexible planning system: land-use decisions from “hard” uses such as housing and business parks were difficult to reverse to agricultural or natural land, because of the financial implications.

# 1

Gewestplan 1962  
Leuven



After Sprawl  
(Xaveer De Geyter  
Architects)



Subdivisions in  
Flanders



## 2

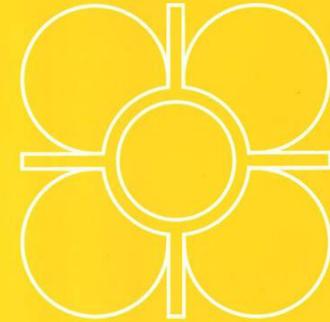
Protest movement against the demolition of the Royal Entrepot (1968). De demolition was executed in 1990.



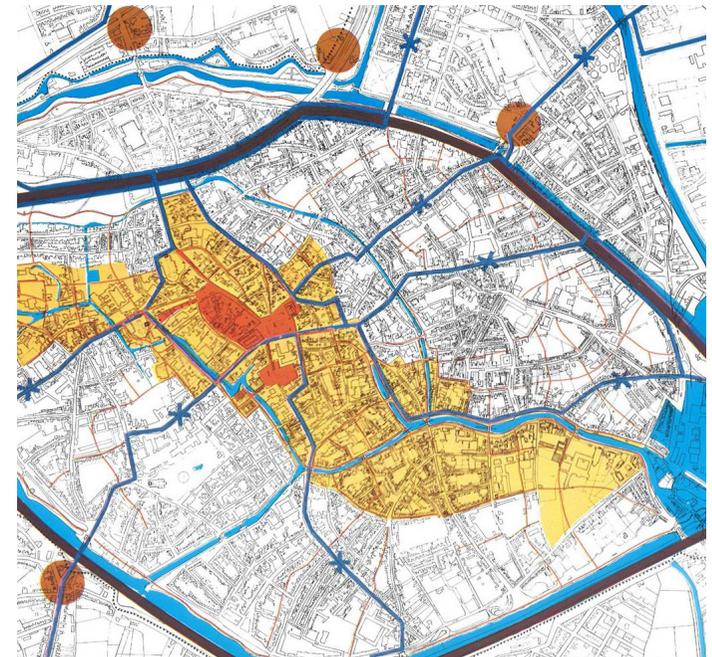
“Herwaarderingsgebied Stuivenberg” (1984)  
Renovation of social housing in Stuivenberg, Antwerpen.



## Structuurplan Brugge



Structure plan Brugge (1973)



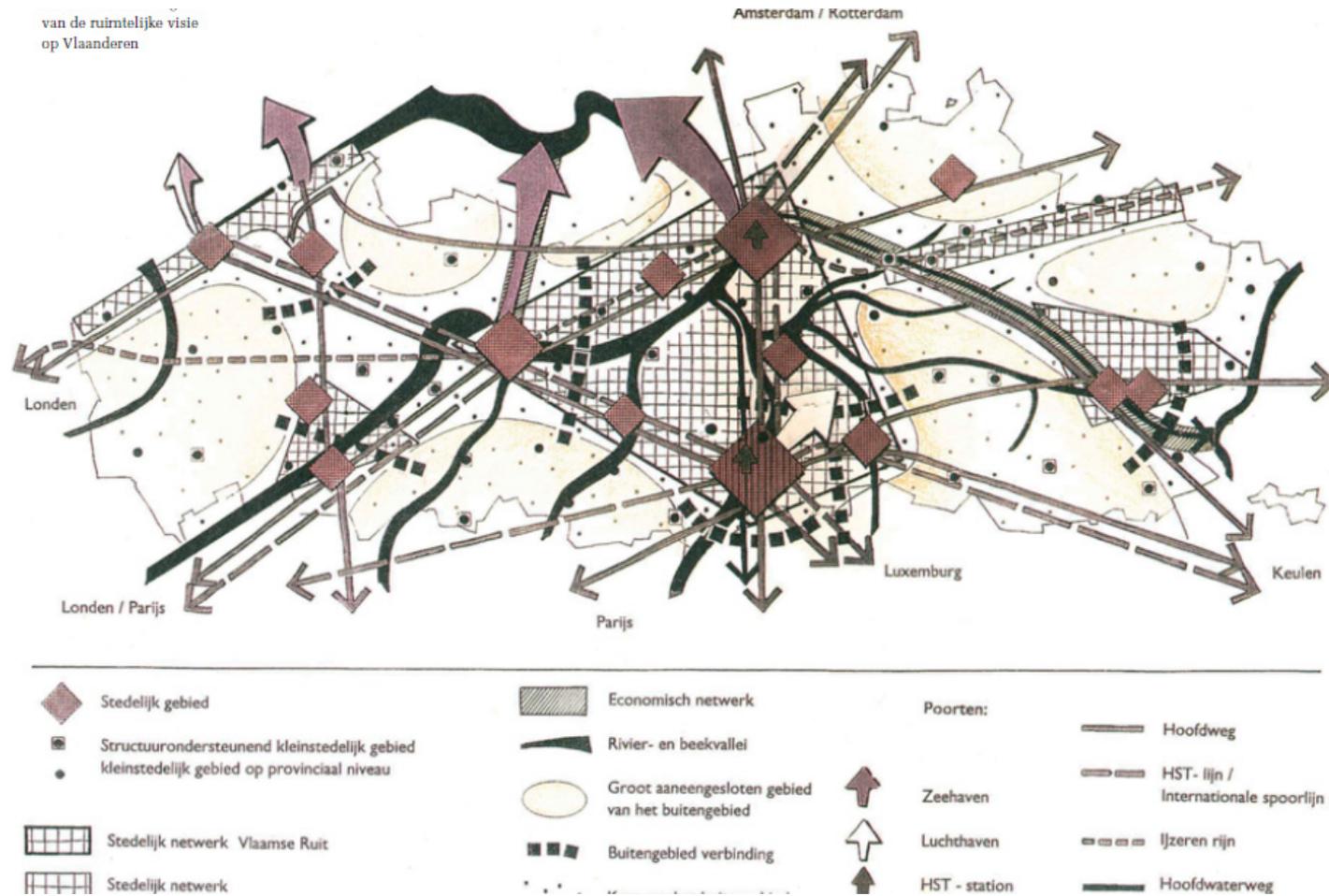
During the 1950 and the 1960, Flemish city centers had been largely neglected or even destructed. Selective suburbanization had hollowed out the economic base of many larger cities leading to increasing social segregation. Investments in cities were largely concerned to increase car accessibility. A policy of slum clearance and city sanitation had resulted in large open wounds in some of the Flemish inner cities. Urban development schemes soak to replace the historical city by a new modernist schemes with high rise development and the separation of housing areas form working areas and recreational areas. Poor environmental quality, the lack of public space, industrial delocalization and selective suburbanization and segregation had brought Flemish cities in a negative spiral.

In the early 1970ties however, new environmental movements emerged, advocating new environmental, cultural and social values. Protest in larger cities such as Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent against urban policies grew by movements reclaiming the right on housing, public space and green in the cities and the protection of monuments. In reaction to the growing protest, in 1973, the Belgian government started to set up pilot projects in urban renewal in the largest cities. Due to the process of defederalization, from 1974 on, urban renewal and spatial planning became the competence of the Flemish region. Small renewal projects were set up in order to restore the most deprived housing areas, often in participation with local residents.

Parallel with the new urban renewal policies in the 1970ties, experiments with new planning approaches emerged. The need was felt to frame the different local renewal projects into a more coherent strategic framework. Also the disappointment with the regulatory land-use planning system led to the development of the method of structure planning by academics and practitioners. Structure planning was considered a dynamic, more action-oriented, more flexible and adaptive alternative to regulatory planning. A three track approach with a track on visioning, a track on short-term projects and a track on stakeholder involvement replaced the former traditional Geddesian 'survey – analysis-plan' approach.

Some cities, as Bruges, Antwerp and many smaller municipalities pioneered with structure planning. The structure plan of Bruges for instance developed a coherent framework for the renewal of Bruges and the valorization of its historical heritage. These experiments in the cities paved the road to the general institutionalization of structure planning in the 1990ties.

The small scaled experiments from the 1970ties with urban renewal proved not to be sufficient to keep up the pace of degradation of the inner cities. In 1983, a new Urban Renewal act was approved by the Flemish government to speed up the renewal process. The new act was oriented to the most under-privileged areas in the cities, the so called “Herwaarderingsgebieden” (renewal areas). Cities and local municipalities could receive Flemish subsidies to develop projects in these areas in close participation with inhabitants. The success was mixed. Although some areas had been redeveloped, the total impact of the new act remained moderate. For instance, over a period of 6 years, only 233 new houses had been built in Flemish cities also because of the crisis in that period. The renewal act could not counter the growing anti-urban sentiments and the flight of the middle-class to suburban settlements. When in the early nineties, the ultra-right wing party ‘Vlaams Blok’ won election after election, the Flemish and the Belgian government decided to increase the subsidies for urban policies. The urban renewal Act was replaced by the social impulse funds. The financial resources for urban renewal increased, but the focus on the poorest areas and the strong social agenda remained. Also European subsidies and programs such as the URBAN pilot projects and the Urban I projects intensified the process of urban renewal in the largest cities.



Structure plan Flanders (1997)

When the 1962 Act on Spatial planning was approved, spatial planning was the competence of the Belgian government. However in the process of devolution this competence was transferred to the regions Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia in the second constitutional Reform of the Belgian State in 1980. Flanders inherited the Federal legislation with its regulatory system of planning, but the call to reform the former Belgian legislation into a new Flemish Act gradually increased during the 1980ties. Some successful experiments with structure planning on the municipal level, and academic research inspired the Flemish government to develop a new planning system based upon structure planning, and ideas were launched to make a structure plan for the Flemish region.

It took however more than 20 years before the reform actually took place. In 1997, the Structure Plan Flanders was approved by the Flemish government. The central vision of the plan “Flanders: open and urban” stressed the need to reinforce the urban structure of Flanders as well as to protect the remaining open space. Two years later also the legislation was reformed into the 1999 Act, with a planning system based upon structure planning on the three policy levels (region, provinces and municipality) and implementation plans which could replace or change the existing regulatory plans.



Urban renewal Schipperskwartier 1994 -2000, Antwerp

Urban renewal Central Station area, Antwerp



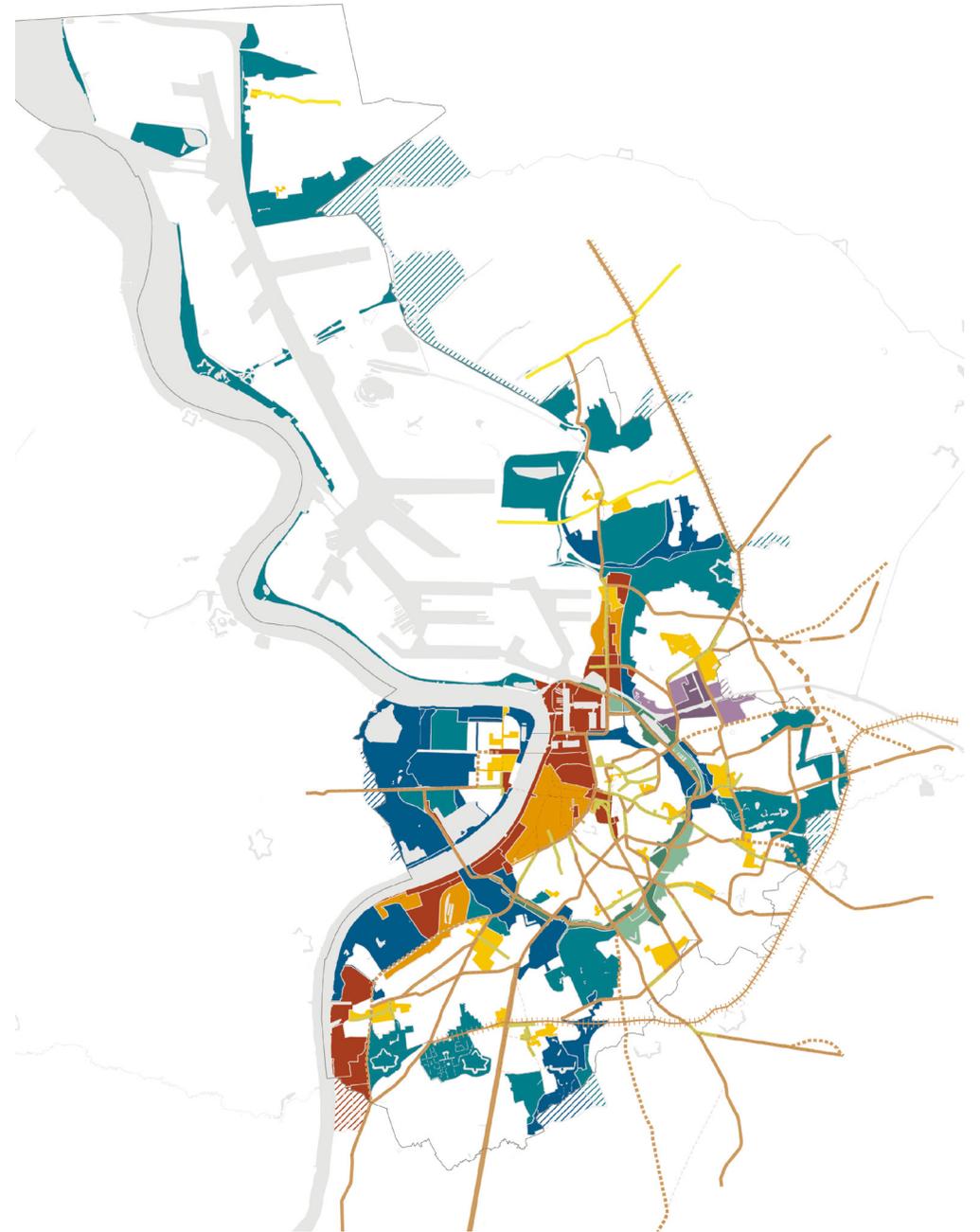
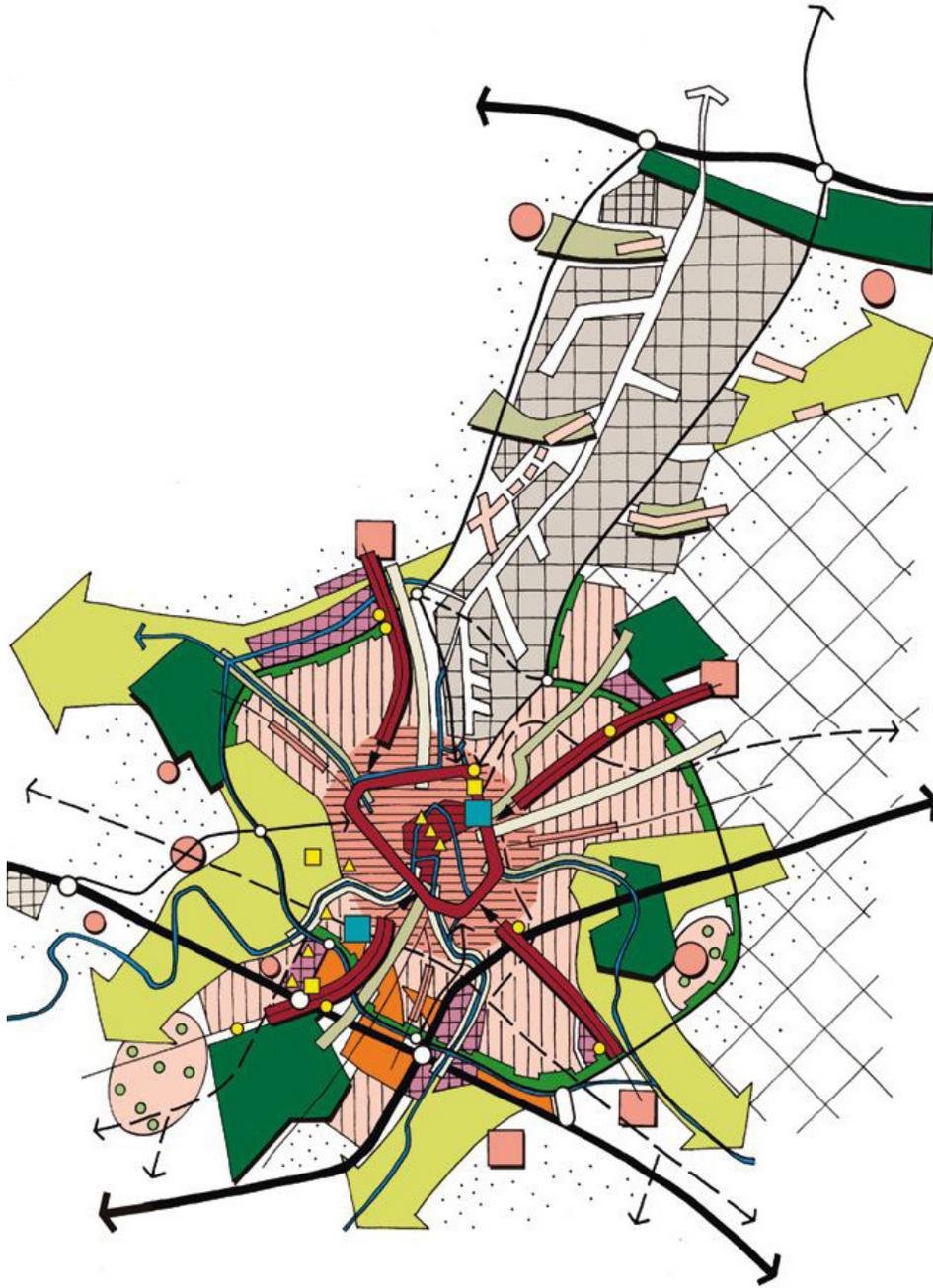


Ledeberg Leeft, Gent



Buda eiland, Kortrijk

Parallel with the 'social renewal' movement urban policy gradually shifted from an urban renewal approach to an urban regeneration approach with a stronger emphasis on the physical dimension, less attention for social and economic problems and a focus on opportunities rather than problem areas. This approach had its roots in "urban design" that took international developments such as in Barcelona and the French *Projet Urbain* as leading examples. It started (1990-1994) with a cultural event 'Stad aan de Stroom' (City and the river) including a design competition concerning some urban voids along the river Scheldt. The redevelopment of the railway station area in Leuven, and the project Hoog-Kortrijk in the mid-nineties were seen as path breaking predecessors of this new approach. By the turn of the millennium, urban policy was reformed in order to support and to generalize this new approach. The social impulse fund was replaced by the "stadsvernieuwingsprojecten", a competitive subsidy system for the larger cities in Flanders. Cities that applied for subsidies for urban regeneration project were evaluated by a multi-disciplinary panel on different criteria, such as design quality, compliance to strategic planning documents, participative character... Urban policy also focused on capacity building of local governments in order to allow them to create better proposals. A new vision on urban policy resulted in the 2003 White Paper on Urban Policy. The renewed urban policy had a large impact on the attractiveness of cities. After decades of suburbanization and decline, the population in most of the cities started to increase again.



The approval of the Structure Plan in 1997 hallmarked a new era of spatial planning in Flanders. Structure planning became the institutionalized model of planning for the 308 municipalities, the 5 provinces and the Flemish region. Planning schools and planning consultancy firms started to grow as the demand for planning assignments, and better qualified planning personnel steeply increased. The professional community grew and new associations such as the Flemish association for Space and Planning emerged. Citizen's involvement in planning was improved by setting up participative local planning commissions. In many cities, urban regeneration projects and structure planning converged into a consolidated and integrated urban policy and cities became again attractive for new inhabitants. The Structure Plan Flanders also succeeded to freeze the suburban supply of designated housing areas and to stimulate initiatives to strengthen the Flemish cities. The strategic planning model also supported the development of more horizontal policy arrangements between public authorities on local and supra-local and even international scales, such as the project "Gentse Kanaalzone", but also the Benelux structure plan or the development of the transnational urban region Grootstad in Kortrijk-Lille-Roubaix.

Despite its success, structure planning also had some deficiencies. Structure plans, certainly on the municipal level, had only low impact on actual policy making. The strategic character of some structure plans diminished, as more and more bureaucratic rules from the Flemish government started to determine the content. Because of the obligatory character, some structure plans lacked quality and innovativeness. The implementation of the structure plan also took more time than initially thought. Processes to create growth boundaries around Flemish cities for instance could easily take 10 years because of the lack of societal and political consensus. Also the implementation plans to protect natural and agricultural areas progressed too slow. Driven by an agenda of deregulation, the Flemish government started to change the legislation on spatial planning. As the regulation became less strict, some of the basic principles of the Structure plan were hollowed out.



Groenboek, Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen, 2012

Project Gentse Kanaalzone



Subsequent modifications of the planning Act lead to the new Codex Spatial Planning in 2009. By the end of the 2010 the Flemish government started to prepare the successor of the Structure Plan Flanders. With an initial planning horizon of 2007, the plan had become outdated. Moreover, new challenges such as climate change, energy transition, demographic growth and a stagnating economy were coming ahead. The Flemish government decided to renew its planning method to allow a more flexible system and to give more responsibilities to local governments. In 2012, the Flemish government approved its Green Paper Space, with guiding principles for the spatial development in Flanders from 2012 to 2050. The new policy however was not approved by the government, because of the lack of consensus about the role and content of the Flemish policy level in spatial planning. To some, the non-approval of the new policy plan actually reflects a crisis within the planning discipline. At this moment the future of urban development and planning in Flanders is uncertain. New concepts stressing self-organization and entrepreneurial citizenship reflect to some extent a retreat of the public authorities in urban development. The dynamics of spatial planning are increasingly found on the local level which results in a significant number of local urban projects. Besides these local initiatives, large-scale integrated site-specific projects are set up and introduce a new kind of planning.

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