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## 12. BELGIAN DESIGN LABORATORIES OF POST SPRAWL URBANISATION

Michiel Dehaene

**Abstract** What makes urban projects urban and what does it take to take urbanise deliberately? This is a highly pertinent question in the Flemish context, where the regional design agenda is driven by the collective challenge to move away from the notoriously anti-urban legacy of sprawl that has shaped the Flemish region. The argument of this chapter seeks to answer the question: what does it mean to design for the urban on the regional scale? In order to answer this question, this chapter attempts to gather clues from design research laboratories and collective efforts to deal with regional design in Flanders and Brussels. This analysis produces an inverse way of looking at the relationship between design and governance rescaling within the regional context. Designing for the urban involves articulating the various scales at which urbanisation processes play out, in order to define concrete settings within which variously-scaled dynamics can be made the object of concrete and locally supported actions. It also means identifying local actions that enable communities to convert the collective burden of urbanisation into collectively shared opportunities.

### 12.1 Introduction

In studying the relationship between regional design and governance rescaling, this chapter begins with a reflection on the urbanisation dynamics that influence both governance and design dynamics. Design enters into this reflection, not directly as a practice promoted by rescaled tiers of government, but as part of wayfinding exercises in which designers are asked to scale urban problems in order to make them available as the subjects of planning and urban governance [Ingold 2011]. The recent renewal of regional design practices is not just a call for design to address the regional scale, but may also be looked at as the effort to address, through design, multiscale dynamics that shape a region undergoing transition.

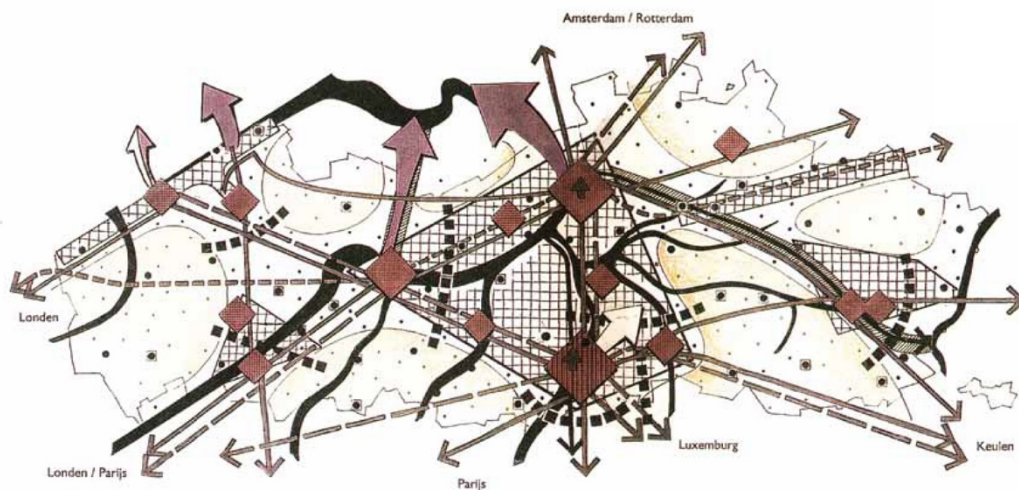
More specifically, this chapter looks at how the Flemish region is entering a post-suburban development phase (Phelps 2010), confronting a new geography that breaks away from that spatial planning logic which actively encouraged development throughout the entire territory and enacted social redistribution and equal opportunities through spatial dispersion and support for equal standards everywhere. As Flanders enters a process of reurbanisation, this chapter calls for a deeper reflection on what it takes to design for the creation of urban conditions.

The chapter also outlines current efforts to break away from a long history of anti-urban planning policies. In the 1990s these efforts produced new design methodologies that saw the return of people and investment to the cities. In that same period, the Flemish region officially adopted the urban-project working model, which was subsequently introduced into regional planning practices in Flanders. The urban project represents the coming together of project-driven investment and urban design, thus brokering context-specific, sectorially-integrated, public-private urban development schemes.

The project-driven urban renewal policies of the nineties were quickly followed by attempts to consolidate urban agglomeration at the regional scale. These efforts to introduce design at the regional level explicitly borrowed from the urban-project tradition, albeit without much reflection on the implications of the change of context, including the specific nature of regional-scale issues. This chapter engages in this reflection by discussing five recent design explorations that seek to get to grips with new urban questions within emerging metropolitan regions of Flanders. It also seeks to demonstrate how design can address urban questions at the regional scale by fashioning itself as a scaling practice that articulates urban questions so that they can become the object of local coalition building and practical action. In constructing this argument, the paper draws on insights from both urban theory (and the interpretation of urbanisation) as well as urban-design theory and the role specific urbanisms may play in structuring the urban condition.

### 12.2 Urbanising Flemish Regional Design?

The political responsibility for spatial planning was transferred from the level of the Belgian nation state to the Flemish, Brussels and Walloon regions, as part of the second constitutional reform (1980-1988). This led to the adoption of the Flemish Spatial Structure plan in 1997, which tried to produce a double break with the past. First, it introduced an ambitious form of planning in a country that had generally used statutory planning to facilitate development rather than to guide it. Second, it explicitly aimed to put an end to the anti-urban nature of planning and housing policies in Belgium. In contrast to the long history of sprawl (De Meulder 1999, Grosjean 2009, Polaski and De Block 2011) the plan tried to introduce a compact-city policy. On the macro scale, the plan concentrated economic development within the core region identified at the time as the Flemish diamond. [Fig.1] On the meso-scale, the plan introduced urban-growth boundaries around the central cities.



**Fig.1** Synthetic representation of the guiding principles of the Flemish Structure Plan 1997. The Flemish Diamond at the centre of the drawing encircles the cities of Ghent, Antwerp, Louvain and Brussels. [credit. Vlaamse Gemeenschap]

Since 2003, as yet inconclusive preparations for a new plan are under way. Starting from an evaluation of the weaknesses and strengths of the previous plan, the Flemish planning administration has given up the label “structure planning” and requalified its approach to planning as “policy planning.” Policy planning has the explicit aim of overcoming the implementation gap within the previous plan. The draft policy plan proceeds from a more empirically grounded assessment of urbanisation dynamics within the Flemish territory. It has dropped the notion of the Flemish Diamond and seeks to come to terms with the difference between agglomeration dynamics in the corridor between Brussels and Antwerp, as opposed to the secondary agglomeration effects measured around cities like Ghent, Bruges and the bi-polar constellation of Hasselt-Genk. (van Meeteren & Boussauw 2016)

These exercises highlight the relative autonomy of these agglomeration dynamics and bring to the foreground marked territorial differences that have crystallised even within a territory that was deeply affected by the politics of sprawl. While the policy plan and its supporting studies reveal a new interpretation of urbanisation, the policy plan on the whole produces few concrete suggestions regarding the appropriate scales and territorial delimitations within which the sustainable (re)urbanisation of a region like Flanders can be organised. The policy plan, like the structure plan it will replace, continues to operate in the absence of a proper system of metropolitan governance. The possibility of addressing urban question remains suspended between local (municipal) levels of government and the Flemish Region. In the absence of a proper system of metropolitan governance, Flanders has produced a long and arguably rich tradition of developing urban agglomerations through various forms of ad-hoc cooperation between local authorities (Broes & Dehaene 2017). The current ambition to reurbanise urban fringes of the metropolitan area is producing a new wave of such exercises.

While the policy plan is awaiting its definitive approval and practical implementation, various tiers of government have been engaged in design research aimed at rendering what the sustainable reconversion of urban sprawl in Flanders might look like specifically. These joint efforts seek to define new planning methodologies at the supra-local level, experimenting with area-based, cross-sectorial and integrated forms of planning. While the areas studied do not necessarily look particularly urban, and may indeed have been shaped by anti-urban ambitions, the problems they are confronted with today can be understood as urban. More than a century of efforts to spread development geographically and avoid urban questions have lead, in certain places, to forms of accumulation and produced local challenges and feedback loops that can be interpreted as urban questions. The reason to read them as urban questions

is programmatic because it shifts the attention from the logic that produced the conditions to the consequences and possibilities shaped over time. It draws attention to new possibilities of taking action that have opened up over time, and which can be seized as people begin to explore alternative ways of inhabiting these historical conditions, using the existing, semi-urbanised landscapes against the grain, thus ascribing new meaning to existing settings.

In imagining an urban future for the legacy of sprawl, which is geographically unevenly distributed, the main challenge is to structure that unevenness and to imagine a process of 'urbanising in place.' This would intensify interdependency in one place, yet in others try to take the radical consequence of functioning off-grid outside of the structured arrangements for collective consumption. This work of spatial differentiation begins to read urbanisation as a process of territorial specialisation producing multi-scalar, territorial geometries but also diverging social dynamics. Urbanising in place, in that sense, means mobilising imaginaries that show the extent to which specific places and social settings within the urbanised landscape are ready to move towards more urban and collective ways of functioning. [Fig. 2] Urbanising in place is a plea to attach investment in a region to those places that exist on the threshold of a more integrated and urban way of functioning, i.e. places where the consequences of urbanisation can already be felt – places where essential amenities, public spaces and a level of public transport may still be missing, for instance, but spaces that, through targeted investment, could be pushed over that threshold and moved into a new, more urban state of aggregation.



**Fig.2** For the 'Collective Housing' pilot project of the Flemish State Architect, Bovenbouw Architecten produced a series of images demonstrating various ways in which collective housing constellations could be used to occupy positions in the suburban fringe (around Antwerp) that offer alternatives to historical track development. The work of Bovenbouw imagines a different relationship with the landscape, trading the progressive consumption of open space for a way of building that produces new collective landscapes. Bovenbouw chose to represent this position through 'picturesque frames,' through a low, embodied perspective that speaks directly to future and current inhabitants of this still suburban context. [credit Bovenbouw Architecten]

These threshold conditions should not only be understood in physical or infrastructural terms, they also need to be defined in terms of a particular socio-political dynamic to determine whether or not places are ready to change. They apply to those places where groups and individuals begin to realise that they have been subjected to urbanisation and are ready to shape their own urban history. This might be by virtue of the fact that they are simply tired of being stuck in traffic and no longer feel liberated by individual forms of mobility, or it might be because they are confronted with the disadvantages of suburban living when having to run their family as a single parent, or it might even be because they are questioning the health consequences of living next to the ring road and the exposure to high concentrations of particle matter in the air they breathe. These people and the places they occupy define the particular settings within which a new political deal, shaped around new collective ways of structuring the urban condition, may be shaped.

The task of designing urbanisation might then be about designing this new deal, and in particular the spatial differentiation needed as well as how it can be positioned, localised and scaled. The question of governance rescaling and its relation to design then becomes a matter of moving competences between various levels of governance, and may also be thought of as the hard work of (re)qualifying the process of urbanisation itself, caught in-between the logic of socio-economic exchange and efforts to fix this logic within dedicated regional territorial boundaries. This may require not only specific institutional arrangements but also the identification of those specific localised assignments around which emerging urban communities may come together.

### 12.3 Urbanisation as a scaling process

Urbanisation intensifies the ways in which people live together. When subjected to urbanisation, people's lives become increasingly entangled and interdependent. Urbanisation is first encountered as misery: as traffic jams, noisy neighbours, smells from a factory or dirt in the street. Only when properly organised and when investments are made, in what Manuel Castells calls 'collective consumption,' may urban conditions deliver the benefits that render cities attractive places of choice and opportunity. Living under urban conditions requires a form of governance as well as a physical infrastructure capable of living up to this heightened sense of interdependence, with mutual attachment to a given place where problems need resolving. (Castells 1972, Saunders 1984, Merrifield 2014)

Urban questions pinpoint those moments in the urbanisation process in which the group(s) affected by urbanisation are confronted with a collective crisis due to the lack of organisation necessary to live together in an urban way. When such arrangements are in place, people can enjoy urban benefits to a greater or lesser extent and are in a position to rely on shared infrastructure. They can have access to adequate housing, may benefit from the use of urban utilities, can enjoy amenities, have access to public space and find a job, etc. They also find themselves in a new social context, defined by neighbours and fellow citizens that are at the mercy of the very same conditions. This new situation in which people are *de facto* implicated in each other's lives requires new forms of solidarity not shaped around traditional relationships of kin, shared background, race or religion etc., but rather around place based solidarities. (Corrijn 2012)

Urbanisation perpetually shifts the balance with respect to this state of relative interdependence. Where additional organisation is needed, where urban questions arise, but also where it is possible to mobilise around urban questions and collective solutions, all these questions manifest themselves within perpetually changing geographies. The anti-urban nature of dispersion policies deliberately circumvents the possibility of coming together around urban questions. Sprawl defines a counter-geography that literally deactivates collective organisation. Sprawl, one could say, depoliticises urban questions, moves them away from those places where the latent urban crisis calls for urgent action and where communities can be mobilised due to shared predicaments. Sprawl geographically allocates the consequences of urbanisation elsewhere and rearranges relationships of dependence between old centres and new peripheries within non-urban geometries. It also leads to a rescaling over time, shifting the consequences of a certain lifestyle to future generations. This is clear when we look at the environmental impact of sprawl, the consequences of soil sealing, the increasing frequency of flooding and the loss of biodiversity etc.

Urban planning typically differs from spatial planning in that it tries to consolidate the collective benefits of urban living. Whereas planning in general is primarily motivated by reducing the negative externality and inefficiency of living together, urban planning typically acts to increase positive externality (Dehaene 2013, Sternberg 2000) by imagining the public spaces, infrastructures, utilities, as well as spatial and aesthetic qualities necessary to shape and share the surplus value of urban accumulation as a non-dividable, collectively produced asset (Remy 1966). While urbanisation is to a large extent a self-organising process, positive urban conditions it does not come about by default. Today, investing in urban collective arrangements is more of a choice. While in the old industrial metropolis, investing in sanitation, public space and housing was still a matter of survival and a necessary precondition for social reproduction, today the possibilities of avoiding urban miseries have multiplied, and so have the options of economically strong groups to pick their place within uneven urban geographies.

Choosing for the urban is a scalar choice. Opting for the creation of urban conditions entails siding with the value and the positive external effects that can be derived from proximity and the collective sharing of assets. The urban cultivates social interdependency and attempts to derive mutual benefits, rendering spatial specialisation into a mechanism that can generate difference and choice. It entails the pooling of resources to enable choice and variety and requires strategies to render these choices accessible in a socially-inclusive manner. By contrast, sprawl promises a state of independence, but by the same token it also installs a state of collective deprivation as regards the benefits that could be derived from urban forms of collective organisation. Designing sustainable post-sprawl options requires identifying the scales and places where conditions may be shaped to reengage mutual attachment to the local context and enable investment for services and programming. Post-sprawl design leaves behind a social contract, based on the same and distributed treatment of the territory everywhere similarity and the temporary illusion of independence, and radically chooses for spatial differentiation, selectively introducing urban forms of organisation within the *de facto* urbanised landscapes produced by urban sprawl.

### 12.4 Urban design as a scaling practice

Whilst urban design is the subject of degree programmes offered in universities and colleges around the world, the link between the urban and design is anything but obvious. The urban is not simply the object of design. Cities are not simply designed, the way a car or a piece of furniture is. The ethos of urban designers differs from that of many other

design disciplines, in the sense that it is permeated by a strong awareness that there is a limit to the extent to which society, and cities for that matter, can be engineered. The return of design to the fields of urban and spatial planning, in the eighties and nineties, went hand-in-hand with a critique of top-down, blueprint planning and the notion that one can plan or design for an end state. The critique of planning informed new design theories and vice versa. A first generation of critics identified planning as a particular type of knowledge practice, requiring other forms of rationality and a new understanding of the planning process. Planning was not to be understood as a hard science but a science of muddling through (Lindblom 1959). It was praised as a reflective practice (Schön 1982) and planning problems were identified as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973). In a second phase, these theoretical works came with an acknowledgement of the need for design (Cross 1982, Broadbent 1973) and design thinking (Rowe 1987) in city making. Today, urban design is still tempered by the tension between the relative autonomy of design intervention and the heteronomy of urban form as the exponent of complex, socially-embedded urbanisation processes. (Dehaene 2015)

The critique of comprehensive end-state planning not only criticised the anti-urban nature of much planning discourse, it also enabled a more historical and evolutionary take on change agency, moving away from a technocratic, functionalist and instrumentalist understanding of the role of planning and design. This culminated, in the 90s, in what was identified by authors such as Manuel de Solà-Morales as the tradition of the urban project. De Solà-Morales described the return of designerly and project-driven forms of city making. The origins of such ways of working belong, he explained, to 'another modern tradition' rooted in the process of building the modern metropolis in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast to the tradition of the CIAM movement that had replaced the hard work of design at an intermediate scale with ideological principles and universal models, this other modern tradition of the urban project grew out of a direct commitment to the particular, to context and to process. In his text De Solà-Morales summarises the working proposition of the urban project in five points: (1) impact outside the contours of the project, (2) mixed use, (3) intermediate scale (to be understood also in terms of an intermediate time horizon), (4) voluntary use of urban architecture, and (5) the strategic input of public means (de Solà-Morales 1990).

The practice of design in the context of the urban project is not just a technique, a method or a particularly effective way of working. The design tradition of the urban project makes a statement for the particular rather than the universal, celebrating the historical contingent in contrast to the seemingly necessary. Design in this context is part of a general critique of modernity, and is backed up with theoretical positions that draw on the simultaneous cultural, spatial and urban turn. Design wanted to bring back the hard work of transforming cities in particular situations, at defined scales, answering localised problems through concrete interventions that could be definitively imagined. In discussions, Bernardo Secchi often insisted on the fact that making the effort to design literally kept planners and designers from colossal mistakes because they took it upon themselves to test concrete solutions, in concrete, and concretely scaled settings.

In the Belgian context, the urban project was promoted as a fully-fledged paradigm based on a commitment to both design and the urban condition. It was officially adopted as a way of shaping urban renewal processes in the Flemish urban renewal policy programme (Vervloesem, De Meulder, Loeckx 2012), and to a certain extent in the Brussels Neighbourhood Contracts (Degros 2014). The techniques of the urban project produced a specific design ethos, yet at the same time tried to get to grips with the constraints of an emerging public-private development logic, and the consequences of a neo-liberal urban development landscape (Oosterlynck 2010). The full assessment of whether or not the working hypothesis behind the urban project was successful in its implementation within the Flemish Urban Renewal Program goes beyond the scope of this paper. In retrospect, however, both in its development as a practice and the conceptual elaboration of the paradigm, most attention went into thinking about the role of design and also of design as a facilitating tool. Design was celebrated for its capacity to help deliver effective solutions in building vital coalitions, in enabling participative processes as well as in shaping more integrated transdisciplinary solutions and working processes, etc. While reflection on the urban condition and urbanity created the conditions in which a new role for design could be imagined, in practice particular attention to the urban quickly receded into the background in favour of investing energy into the strategic importance of proceeding through design-based and project-driven forms of governance. It is important to remind ourselves that the urban project, as defined by de Solà-Morales and others, was not just a pragmatic choice for the procedural benefits of design in city making. It was an explicit commitment to urbanisation as a cumulative process in which layers of meaning can be stored, multiplicity and diversity can be celebrated, inherent contradictions can be staged and overlapping logic can be articulated.

The qualification 'urban' frames projects in cultural terms. Urban can only be interpreted by acknowledging what it means to live in a particular and historical context. Adopting such a cultural, interpretative perspective produces a specific concept of change. The change affected by a project is not simply understood as a physical transformation, but is also informed by changes in the meaning attached to a particular condition and the way in which people relate to their environment. Change in such a perspective not only requires changes in spatial configuration, but also changes

in use and practices of re-appropriation, both in the practical and symbolic sense of the word. Places become urban not merely by virtue of an increase in built density or because of the increase in the number of people living in the same place. They become urban because of the way people interact, renegotiate their positions and acknowledge their mutual interdependence.

What is interesting about such a particular, interpretative and localised understanding of the urban is that it is not simply scalable. It shares characteristics of non-scalability with ecological and other relational conditions (Tsing 2015). Relations that are reproduced locally can be embodied locally; relations that are embedded into a context cannot be imagined at other scales. Think of how place-based solidarities and identification with a particular context depend on actual people functioning within a given context. Many of the ecological problems the post-sprawl situations are facing stem from the denial of that interdependence. They have broken the link between localised forms of resource stewardship, local feedback loops and forms of local knowledge, and continue to generate consequences that escape urban control, both in the sense that they generate negative external effects elsewhere, but also due to the collective inability to socially reproduce the positive external effects that traditionally define the urban and the benefits of living in cities. The hard work that is needed, then, is to identify settings in which the larger environmental challenges can be related to specific conditions and specific arrangements in which people can act and begin to mobilise as a moving force their strong sense of interdependence and attachment to a specific place.

The remainder of this paper looks at a series of design experiments that try to redefine the regional planning context in Flanders. Many of these experiments draw inspiration from the relative success of the urban renewal projects from the past 20 years. Each is discussed below in terms of its effort to translate an urban reflection in a regional design context.

## **12.5 Design laboratories of urban scaling?**

The following five practices represent some of the more prominent design exercises taking place at the regional scale in Flanders. Part of the material is drawn from a study conducted within the context of the spatial policy research centre. In that context, these experiments were conceptualised as collective learning practices<sup>1</sup>. In the context of this chapter, however, the cases are discussed in light of the distinctive contribution made to formulating an urban regional agenda (Kuhk, Dehaene, Schreurs 2016). Most of these exercises explore geographies and geometries within which metropolisation is taking place in Flanders/Belgium, around Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and along the coastline.

### ***12.5.1 LABO XX – Choosing the twentieth century belt***

Labo XX is an umbrella term for a series of design investigations that explore the prospect of accommodating the future growth of Antwerp within the so-called twentieth-century belt, i.e. the older suburbs within the municipal boundary situated outside the urban motorway (Verhaert et.al. 2014). In 2012, when Labo XX was set up by former city architect Kristiaan Borret, the general aim was still very much focused on answering the question, which part of the predicted population growth could best be housed within the municipal boundaries of Antwerp? Today the discussion has shifted more towards a general reflection on how urban densification can be used as an investment process from which the city can benefit. Within LaboXX, densification is not looked upon as a goal, but as a reality to be accommodated in such a manner that it leads to the balanced growth and development of urban agglomeration. The first round of design work, conducted by four different design firms, was explicitly organised as a test of the urbanisation perspective. The offices explored complementary themes that linked the question of densification to urban assignments. BUUR focused on mobility issues. MAAT-POSSAD explored the link between densification and the improvement in amenities and urban services. PALMBOUT-DENIJL-BLAUWDRUK looked at the balance between density and public, open-space provision. 51N4E-CONNECT&TRANSFORM looked at financial mechanisms that could help accelerate redevelopment, in a setting where land is typically in private hands and property structures are highly fragmented.

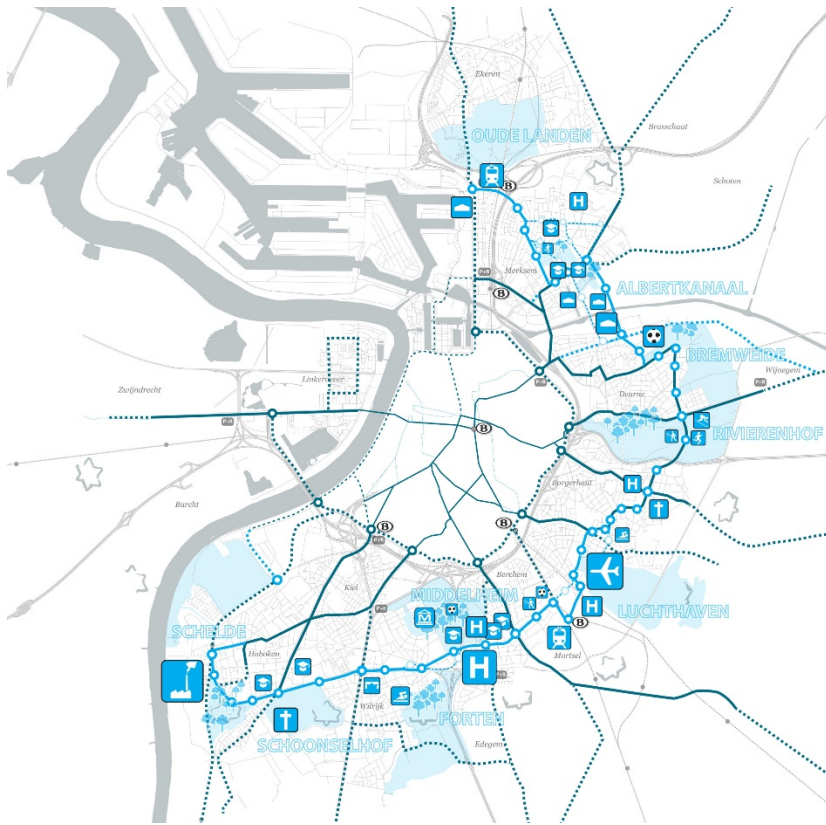
The teams were not asked to answer the question where to densify and where not, but rather to ask which ways of densifying were preferential and where those could be best accommodated? Which areas were more suitable for implementing specific principles? What form would densification take if mobility were leading? What if services were key? What about open spaces? What about the possibility to redevelop? Each of these exercises presented different visions on how to urbanise further. The teams developed samples and tentative maps indicating spaces that, given some additional investment, could intensify the current state of urbanisation.

Perhaps most illustrative of this approach is the work of BUUR. At first sight their work may read as a classic implementation of transit-oriented development principles. But upon closer inspection, the office presented a clever reading of how the existing tram network could be shaped in line with a densification strategy. BUUR moved the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ruimtelijkeordening.be/SteunpuntenBeleidsrelevantOnderzoek/SteunpuntRuimte/Toekomstverkenningen>

focus from current discussions about how the radial lines should be extended further into the suburbs, to the incremental development of a circle line. This line, which they named the 'Rocade,' is designed to serve the existing centres of the fringe as well as the larger amenities and public services (sports clusters, hospitals, the university and the airport). The Rocade creates new nodes in the tram network and makes secondary locations along the main radial corridors accessible. The main effect is a leap from singular radial lines offering new stops to the creation of extra nodes. BUUR shifts the criterion for densification from 'the simple presence of a tram stop' to proximity to true nodes which allow residents to access a broad range of amenities and make use of multiple lines and modes of transport. The tram is no longer an excuse to pave over the last greenfield location at the end of the line, but a tool to make the leap from suburb to city.



**Fig.3** Team BUUR. Above. The trace of the Rocade designed to service both residential districts and the regional functions of the university, hospital, airport and sports campuses. Below. From stop to hub. The further expansion of the tram network is modelled as a qualitative leap in service level [credit City of Antwerp].

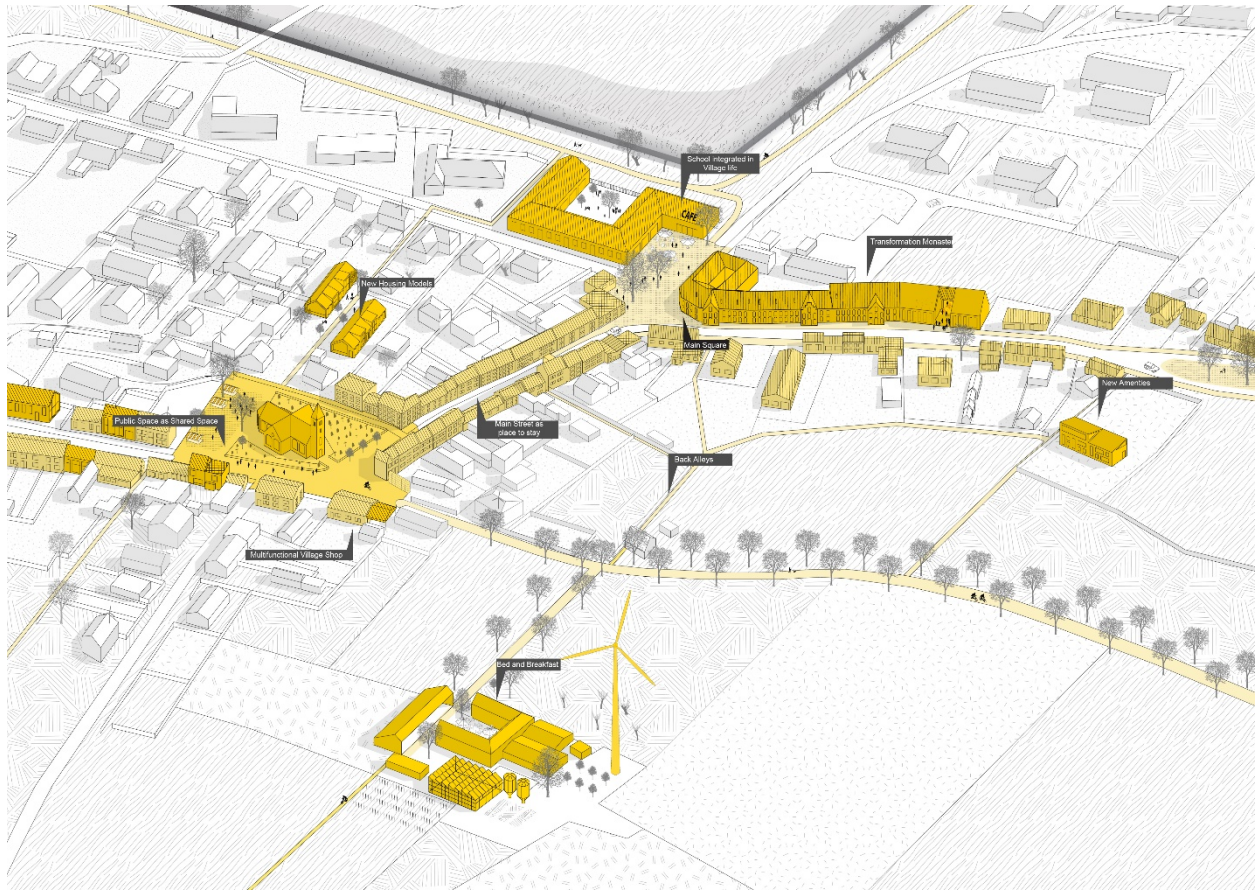
### ***12.5.2 Metropolitan coastal landscape lab: the urban coastal System***

Over the past seven years the Flemish spatial planning department and the Flemish State Architect sponsored a series of design explorations that looked at the relationship between climate change, coastal defences and the possible development of the urbanised area along the Belgian coast. Part of this design research was conducted in the form of exploratory scenarios depicting extreme alternatives: raising dikes versus letting water in. When the public presentation of these scenarios met strong resistance from local political actors, the Flemish government put the exercise temporarily on hold. In 2015, the planning department commissioned a new study from a consortium formed by Tractebel, FABRICATIONS and H+N+S. The consortium was asked to explore with local actors concrete possibilities of re-organising the coastal urban system. In an effort to rebuild the legitimacy of this long regional design trajectory, 18 municipalities were included, both the coastal municipalities and the neighboring municipalities more inland.

This setting created a context in which there was a direct confrontation between the status quo of municipal autonomy on one hand, and the quest for a well-structured, climate-robust coastal system on the other. Historically, municipal autonomy has contributed to sprawl and non-selective forms of urban growth. Letting each municipality decide for itself has led to the pursuit of similar development plans everywhere. In an effort to counteract this effect, the design exercise chose to actively translate urban challenges by highlighting differences. One of the evident spatial consequences of urbanisation is, after all, spatial differentiation and spatial specialisation. This is typically manifest in the development of central spaces, but also in residential districts, arrival spaces and commercial districts etc. Urban sprawl begins by breaking with a tradition of uniformity.

This quest for difference was undertaken by the consortium in a process that organised design workshops in 4 different municipalities. Each was selected because of the markedly different dynamic present in that locale. Oostende is the centre of the urban system with a concentration of supra local functions. Blankenberge holds a place within the periphery of the coastal system, facing changes in the nature of the city as a popular coastal resort. Zevekote (a small polder village in the municipality of Gistel) hardly grows and is facing vacancies within the historical centre. De Panne is part of a larger piece of coastal landscape with great ecological and recreational value. The design workshops tried to imagine mechanisms of redevelopment that could valorise local potential and shift the focus from the progressive consumption of open space to the production of more resilient urban infrastructures. This took the form of redevelopment schemes for the suburban fringe of Blankenberge. Efforts to cancel new residential allotments in favour of the redevelopment of vacant public buildings were made in Zevekote. Exercises rethought the infrastructure of housing estates built in the Dunes of De Panne. Design schemes imagined new combinations of housing and productive functions within the port of Oostende, etc.





**Fig. 4** Synthetic representation of the design workshop in Zevekote. Zevekote is barely growing. The Cloister and the village school are empty. Rather than discussing where the next residential allotment should go, the workshop proposed reprogramming the old core of the village, including the possible reuse of the empty buildings there. [Credits Fabric]

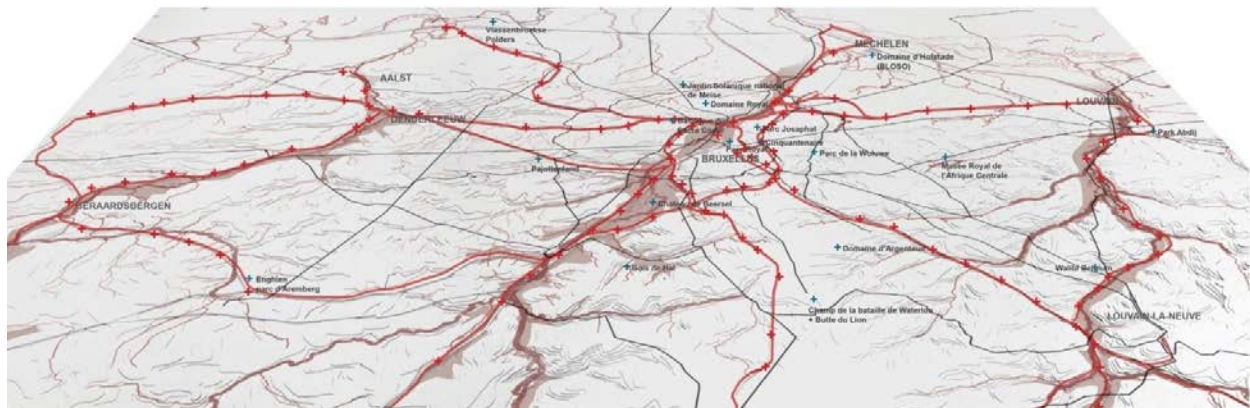
The design work in this study steered a precarious course between the demands of local authorities and the development of a regional agenda. By focusing on different dynamics, the workshops made clear that a regional urban agenda should be negotiated around different issues within different sections of the territory, and at different scales. The design work was successful in identifying local actions that could contribute to a territorial differentiation strategy.

### ***12.5.3 Brussels 2040 – the horizontal metropolis***

Brussels 2040 was a very open consultation regarding the future of the wider agglomeration of Brussels, exploring a territorial area that covers both the jurisdiction of the Brussels Capital Region (the authority commissioning the study) and a large section of Flanders (Dejemeppe, P., Périlleux, B. 2012). The Brussels Agglomeration is the only metropolitan area that has an integrated public body that can implement some form of metropolitan governance. The territory governed by the Brussels Capital Region is significantly smaller than the functional urban area and is surrounded by Flemish municipalities that historically have tried to resist the expansion of Brussels on their turf. The Brussels Capital Region invited three design teams to present a vision for the shape that metropolitan growth could take: a team around the office of Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò (including Carbon and ), a collaboration between L’AUC and 51N4E, and finally KCAP.

In particular, the Secchi-Viganò team worked at the intersection of regional design and urbanisation. They looked at the direction urban growth has historically taken, asking the broader community of the urban agglomeration to temporarily suspend highly-charged and contentious discussions. Secchi-Viganò presented the provocative vision of Brussels as a horizontal metropolis, rethinking the legacy of sprawl against the background of a discussion on the *longue durée* of metropolisation. [See also the text by Paola Viganò on the horizontal metropolis in this volume.] The Horizontal Metropolis presents a vision of the wider metropolis as structured by two sets of three valleys: three valleys inside the urban core (the Zenne, and the tributaries of the Molenbeek and Maalbeek) and three river valleys

within the agglomeration (the Dender, Zenne and Dijle). This produces reflections on the role the biophysical system may play in structuring further urbanisation of the region. The metaphor of the horizontal metropolis also serves as an alternative reading for a development model that plays off the centre against the periphery. It shows a metropolitan area with a long history of urbanisation in which benefits were shared and distributed within an open geography. The study shows how the metropolitan region incorporated a finely-grained and diversified geography of old settlement patterns that reflect local circumstances and mark subtle differences between contrasting hydrographic and soil conditions. This valley system was later reinforced by the introduction of an elaborate railway system that, in its morphology, echoed the structure of the valleys. It produced a distributed development pattern that translated equity into distributed geographies, combining the benefits of generalised mobility with the relatively cheap availability of land.



**Fig.5** The metropolitan region around Brussels, structured as a horizontal metropolis grafted onto three river valleys. [credit Studio012 Secchi-Viganò]

This structural work is combined with the investigation of concrete samples, in which speculative scenarios are combined with concrete representations of the new urban spaces that could follow from these proposed alternative development pathways. The no-car scenario, for example, leads to efforts to renegotiate the use of public space between new users, new mobilities and new parking policies, for instance. The horizontal metropolis presents a vision in which regional dynamics are translated into local practices that may gradually change the conditions of living together in the city. While the direct impact of the study may have been limited, the representations were well-suited for the exhibition that resulted from this design consultation. The design experiments focusing on the renegotiation of public space speak directly to the grassroots struggles that seek to restrict the use of cars within the centre of the city, including the successful movement ‘picknicking the streets’ and more recently the design activism of ‘bye bye petite ceinture’ [byebyepetiteceinture 2018]. These exercises explicitly mobilise how urbanisation is negotiated through the direct conditions that specific communities are subjected to, and they produce alternative imaginaries as the intellectual support and inspiration for these communities in their struggle to break the status quo.



**Fig.6** Speculative models representing the alternative use of public space in a no-car scenario [credit Studio012 Secchi-Viganò]

#### **12.5.4 Atelier Brussels: A Good City Has Industry**

Atelier Brussels was a design atelier taking place at the 2016 Rotterdam Biennale, funded by the Brussels Capital Region, the Flemish waste management company and the Flemish Spatial Planning department (AWB 2016). The exercise focused on the conflict between industrial production and urbanisation, trying to amend the logic surrounding urban renewal and densification which fuelled the systematic replacement of former manufacturing areas with housing and office development. Premium real estate projects do not only produce gentrification but also push out activities that have economic value but do not reflect high(er) land values.

Within the context of this exercise, three architects' offices were invited to conduct design research on how the manufacturing industry can be preserved within the urban mix of functions or proactively incorporated into new developments. The design explorations took two main approaches. How could production space be created by combining it with functions that can pay for the land? Other investigations looked at complementary programs creating value within the mix of functions, creating urban milieus that value the positive external effects produced by the presence of productive functions, from the use of residual heat to shared services.

The design research reaffirms that the urban is first of all a use value, and that it can only be reproduced if we install mechanisms that protect accumulated urban (use) value against land speculation.

Here too the results were presented within an exhibition and in a series of well-attended accompanying debates. Both the exhibition and the debates were structured around 10 principles that translated the findings of the design research into possible action points. Perhaps more interestingly, the design research in turn served as material to engage in discussions about these broader principles, the relative success of which led to the consolidation of Atelier Brussels. The theme of the productive city is being explored further at the 2018 Architecture Biennale, Rotterdam.



**Fig.7** Plus Office explored different configurations in the Brussels Canal zone, combining productive and residential typologies. The industrial footprint defines the residential morphology rather than the other way around [credits plus office].

#### ***12.5.5 IABR 2018 The missing link: atelier central urban core East Flanders***

This project atelier is part of the 2018 and 2020 International Architecture Biennale, Rotterdam. The atelier focuses on demographic growth in the metropolitan area of Ghent and explores how investment in the area may also facilitate a transition towards more sustainable urbanisation. The work within this atelier has only just started. What is interesting is the specific methodology proposed under the title of 'the missing link' [Alkemade, Declerck, Van Broeck 2017]. The missing link points to the gap between the broad sustainability goals that have been defined on the one hand (climate goals, halting land consumption, ambitious modal split), and particular projects and experiments set up as part of operational efforts to meet some of these goals. What is missing are the specific political pathways that could describe how projects would be scaled or accelerated to meet these strategic goals. Aware of the limitations of resorting to direct impact through projects, this atelier has launched an alternative methodology. Rather than trying to design possible futures at the regional scale the atelier put out a call for actors to mobilise partners in the region to come together around a set of common/recurrent problems. It will then run design workshops with groups of partners working around similar issues that they themselves have identified as worthwhile. Design is deployed as a way of articulating the actions of many, and to set up a process of collective learning [AWB 2017].

#### **12.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at concrete design work that seeks to renew the Flemish regional planning practice as it attempts to come to terms with the legacy of sprawl. It presents the argument that rather than looking at these experiments as efforts to explore the role of design at the regional scale, we might better understand their merit as an effort to introduce urban considerations and properly organised urban collective arrangements in a landscape that has historically been deprived of them. In doing so, the questions of scale figures differently, and design appears as a practice introducing scales at which urban considerations may be articulated, rather than as a practice aimed at scaling up (or down).

In this effort to negotiate the dynamics of urbanisation, designers mobilise skills that have been deployed regularly in a context of more traditional urban projects. The model of the urban project has been hailed because of its capacity to steer complex urban transformation, using design skills to bring parties together around a set of common goals that can be placed under a form of project management. In Flanders, over the past 15 years, consistent efforts have been made to introduce project-driven logic at the regional scale. This has been translated through efforts to scale up and produce area-based, integrated projects.

By placing the emphasis on the urban rather than the project, this chapter seeks to position the agency of design differently. Design is not just a facilitator of project-driven logic but it plays an important role in scaling urban questions in such a manner that they can be the subject of concrete, localised, concerted action. In the context of a regional planning agenda that attempts to confront the anti-urban legacy of sprawl and distributed development patterns, this framing is pertinent. This interpretation opens up an understanding of design processes that do not simply produce regional equivalents of actions previously tried at larger scales. The design of the urban condition is understood part of crafting relations of place-based solidarity and the valorization of relations of proximity that cannot be simply scaled. The design efforts show a process in which regional challenges are rescaled to be structured as urban questions around which newly shaped urban coalitions and local communities can be rallied.

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