

An urban boundary plan as a first step towards a metropolitan perspective for the city region of Antwerp

The 'spatial structure plan for Flanders' (1997) announced the making of urban 'boundary plans' for every urban area in Flanders. Those plans point out areas for future urban development within a certain boundary line. The paper frames, describes and evaluates the on-going boundary planning process for the city region of Antwerp. It is stated that by creating an informal network and by thinking about four key-issues, the boundary plan prepares for a metropolitan perspective for Antwerp.

Boundary plans in Flanders

In 1997 the Flemish government approved the 'spatial structure plan for Flanders' ¹. This is a strategic spatial plan containing a vision, structural guidelines for the future spatial development of Flanders and a set of decisions on spatial development that are binding for the Flemish government. As one of the actions dealing with urban sprawl the plan announced the making of 'boundary plans' for every urban area in Flanders. Between 1998 and 2003 boundary plans for one large city of about 300.000 inhabitants (Ghent) and ten small to medium sized cities (from 50.000 to 80.000 inhabitants) were started. Two of those plans were approved by the Flemish government (Aalst and Turnhout), two others are nearly finished, the rest is in progress. Boundary plans point out areas for future urban growth within a certain border line. The plans determine the new land-use of those areas and the boundary line on a scale of 1:5.000. They are binding upon civilians and their projects. The plans only deal with a limited number of areas in the concerned cities and should therefore be complementary to municipal planning.

The previous experiences in different Flemish cities show that boundary plans are not an evident planning tool, due to their often unclear goal ². The past job specifications have all included different and often contradictory goals for the boundary planning process. According to these specifications the planning process should firstly result in a selection of areas for new dwellings and new industrial areas. Secondly it should support the general urban policy of the Flemish government, define urban projects and key-issues and create consensus on these projects and issues. For that purpose an elaborated vision on the city is asked for. Thirdly the planning process should contribute to an improved urban climate in general by for instance selecting areas for new urban parks and open areas. Fourthly the process should result in a juridical boundary line on a scale of 1:5000 that delimits urban growth. Lastly, the Flemish spatial planning administration wants to use the boundary plan as a framework to judge future municipal planning initiatives.

Because of the different goals of boundary planning processes, different planning methods are often mixed. The first goal - selection of areas for new dwellings and for new industry - is more or less agreed to be a competence of the Flemish government. To realise this goal a rational/technical style of planning is the fittest planning attitude. The second goal - building consensus on key-issues and projects that are not known at the beginning of the process - requires a collaborative planning method, in which competences are spread over different interconnected stake-holders. Both planning methods require different planning tools, different ways of analyses, different processes, different timings etc. Previous boundary planning processes not only have mixed both planning styles, the requirements of each planning style have not been fully recognised nor met. Indeed on the one hand the authority required for the rational/technical approach with centrally taken decisions has not once been

executed since the Flemish government is not inclined to realise new urban developments against the will of the concerning municipalities. On the other hand the equality and interdependency of stake-holders, the openness of the process and of the timing, the will to look for win-win key-issues and the means/money to work on key-issues and to realise projects that are all required for a collaborative planning process are not provided. Apart from the mixture of planning methods, the goal to create a detailed boundary line is also problematic. When the idea to make boundary plans was launched, the boundary line was not to be a binding one. The idea was just to indicate the contours for future development, not to create a juridical boundary line. As a result there is now quite some uncertainty on the juridical implications of the line. Indeed the prescriptions on the boundary line that are for instance in the boundary plan for the city of Aalst, are vague and juridically problematic.

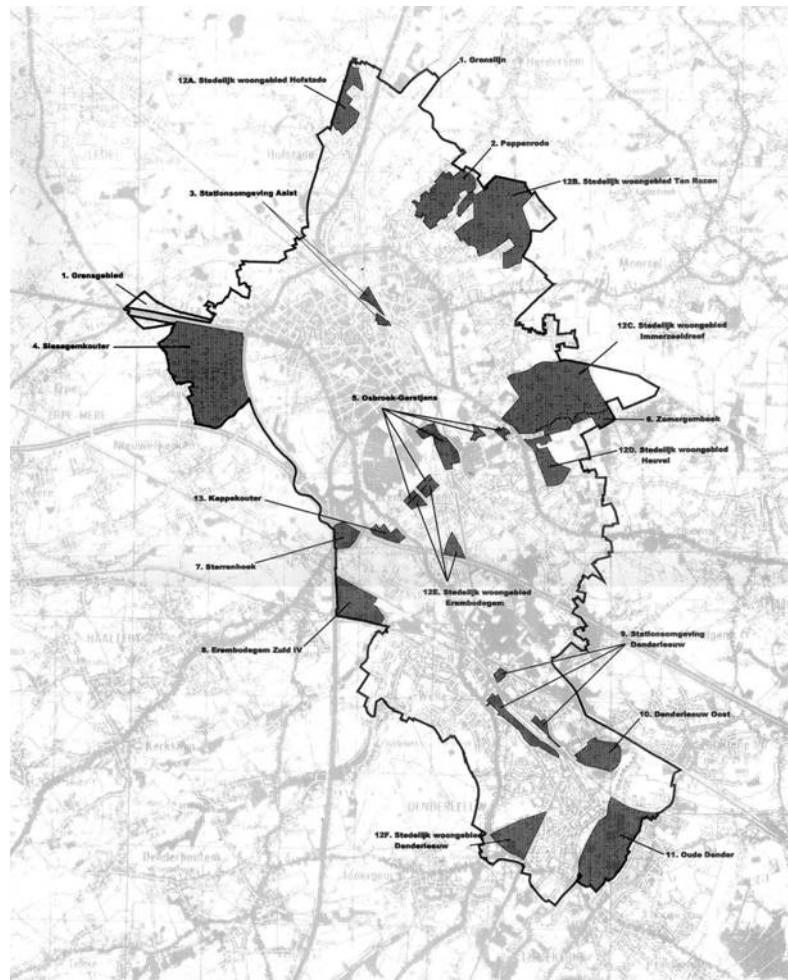


figure 1: locations and border line in the delimitation plan for the city of Aalst (80.000 inh.)

In 2003 the Flemish planning administration started the boundary planning process for the city region of Antwerp. For our office, as a contractor for the job, the challenge was to find ways to overcome the problematic goals and methods that are inherent in boundary plans. Before explaining our ideas and strategy, it is necessary to point out a second problem, which is the complex planning context in the Antwerp city region.

Planning activity in the Antwerp city region

In the recent planning history of the city of Antwerp, periods of intensive planning activity have alternated with periods of minor planning activity. The same is true for the realisation of urban projects. At the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, planning activity was quite intense. The city produced its 'global structure plan' ³ as a strategic spatial plan focussing on eight spatial concepts and many actions to realise these concepts. Following the 'global structure plan', at the beginning of the nineties a lot of planning energy was directed to the waterfront areas in the northern, the central and the southern area of the city center. The according planning process was stopped in 1993 without direct result and no realisations ⁴. This was followed by a period of minor planning activity. The city focused on the realisation of (social) urban regeneration projects in the nineteen century belt in the context of the European 'Urban' programme.

The end of the nineties and the beginning of this century can be seen as a new period of intensive planning. It is important to realize the fact that this is done by different governments with different competences. Besides that, many urban projects are being prepared and realised. A short overview is necessary

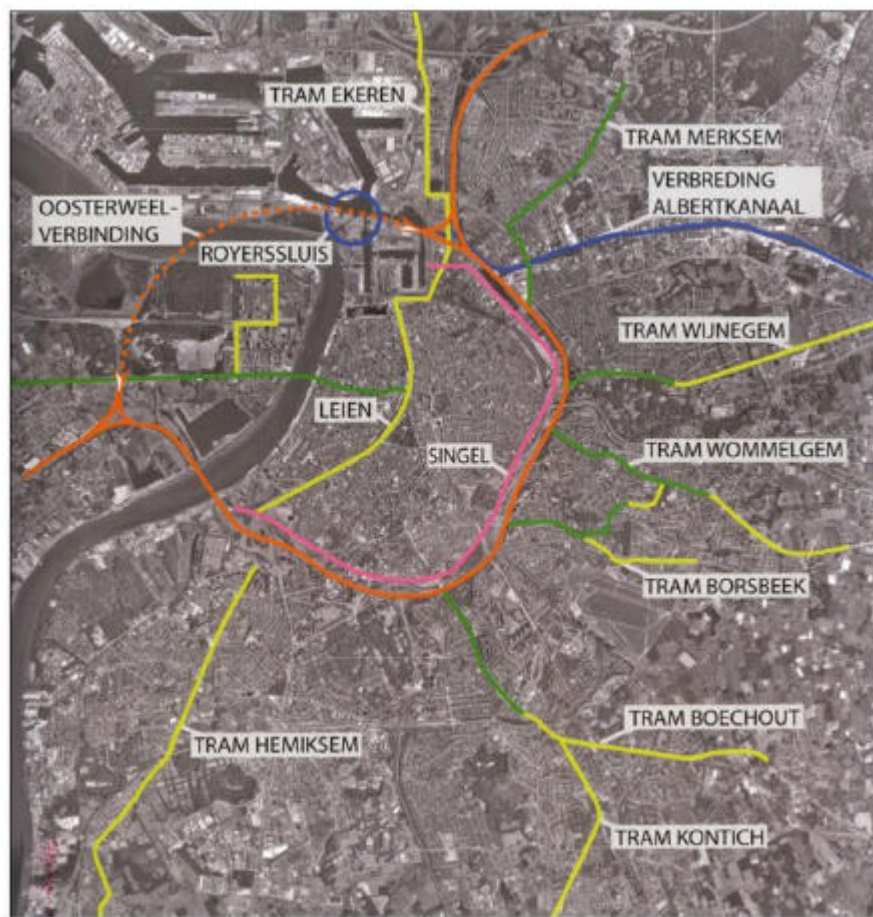


figure 2: mobility projects in the city of Antwerp

During the nineties the Flemish administration of roads and traffic and the Flemish public transport company prepared some major infrastructural changes in the city of Antwerp. At this moment the closing of the circular highway around Antwerp is being prepared to be realised by 2007. Besides that, the division of the circular highway in a city highway and an international transit highway is being planned. Also existing tramways are extended, new

tramways are constructed, two new railway connections from the Antwerp harbour to the hinterland are planned as well as the broadening of the Albert canal from the Antwerp harbour to the east. And last but not least the Belgian ⁵ railroad company is constructing the high speed train connection in a tunnel under the central train station of Antwerp, as a result of planning in the eighties and early nineties. The station is completely renewed and new offices are being realised in the surrounding area.

In this period a semi-independent administration of the city of Antwerp has been working on some large European-sponsored urban projects. This includes the realisation of a large urban park and offices in the north ('spoor-noord') ⁶, the rehabilitation of a polluted dock also in the north ('Lobroek dok'), the upgrading of the area around the central railway station with small-scale projects (realisation of a design center, realisation of an eco-house, rehabilitation of public space, renovation of houses etc.), the renewal of an area in the south ('Hoboken - Kiel') with the upgrading of a park, a new small-scale shopping center, renovation of houses etc.) and finally the re-use of an old industrial area in the south-west for new enterprises.

Since 2001 a planning process in the harbour of Antwerp has been going on. The Antwerp harbour is one of the five largest harbours in the world and one of the main economic motors for the Flemish and Belgian economy. The aim of the planning process is to make an area-oriented integrated strategic plan for the harbour area. Topics of the plan are the choice of the best position of a new dock in the left bank harbour with direct access to the river Scheldt, the possible future of three small villages near to the left bank harbour, the preservation or compensation of areas next to the river Scheldt that are part of the European ecological network, the extension of the harbour over agricultural land, the preservation of contact zones between harbour and surrounding villages and the juridical boundary of the harbour.

Since 1997 the Flemish provinces have competences in spatial policy. As a result between 1996 and 2001 the province of Antwerp elaborated a strategic spatial plan (a so-called 'spatial structure plan') ⁷. The plan contains policy on new housing, small-scale industrial areas, nature conservation areas, secondary roads etc. The city-region of the city of Antwerp is one of the parts of the province for which policy guide-lines are defined. In particular the province stresses the realisation of a metropolitan green structure and the densification of public transport nodes with a mixture of functions ⁸. At this moment the province is creating implementation plans in the area on water management, public transport and recreation areas for golf.

Finally, also the different municipalities in the area are or have been making up different strategic plans of which the most important are mobility plans, spatial structure plans and nature policy plans. At this moment between 15 and twenty municipalities in the region are working on their spatial structure plans at different speeds and with different quality. The city of Antwerp is evidently the largest municipality with about 450.000 inhabitants. The other municipalities together have about 300.000 inhabitants. The city of Antwerp is working on its spatial structure plan in order to determine policy guidelines on some key-issues, to create coherence in the projects that are being realised and to identify new strategic projects for the future. Key-issues are the use of the water in the city, the use of the railway station areas for development, the improvement of the road network, the creation of five large parks etc. Key-issues in the neighbouring municipalities are diverse. The local housing policy, mobility and the preservation of open areas are common themes. Also common is the opposition against the extension of the city of Antwerp.

A boundary plan for the Antwerp city region

In the described situation of on-going planning processes by different governments with different competences, the Flemish administration for spatial planning supported by our planning consultancy firm ⁹ started the making of a boundary plan for the city region of Antwerp. From april 2003 to april 2005, a draft of the delimitation plan should be prepared, that will afterwards be transformed in a plan with legal status. During the preparations in 2002, it was clear that the boundary plan for the Antwerp city region had to cope with a high degree of complexity. Indeed not only the planning context (many on-going planning processes) and the political context (many governments and actors active in the region, fifteen to twenty municipalities concerned, pressure from the extreme right political party) are



complex, this is also the case for the territory (city of Antwerp, Antwerp harbour, system of the river Scheldt but also the context of urban sprawl in the Flemish core area). This comes together with the mixture of goals inherent in boundary plans.

figure 3: municipalities to be involved in the boundary plan for the city region of Antwerp, according to the spatial structure plan of Flanders

To cope with this complexity it was decided to adapt planning methods to specific situations that would arise during the planning process. The idea was to work on two parallel tracks, with different planning styles, different kinds of communication, different goals and different time schedules. On the one hand a rational/technical style of planning would be used to create a Flemish vision on areas for new dwellings and for new industry, which is considered as an exclusive competence of the Flemish government. In this track there are no equal or interdependent stake-holders and no formal cooperation structure is necessary. Communication is bilateral between the Flemish planning administration and relevant actors. On the other hand a collaborative style of planning would be used to work on certain projects or

themes on the level of the city region. Projects and themes in this track are not clear beforehand and are identified according to their potentials for consensus-building between equal and interdependent partners. Communication is therefore broader and aimed at the creation of a structural cooperation platform in which city-regional policy issues could be discussed. The second relatively open track was expected to support the goals of the Flemish government in the first more closed track.

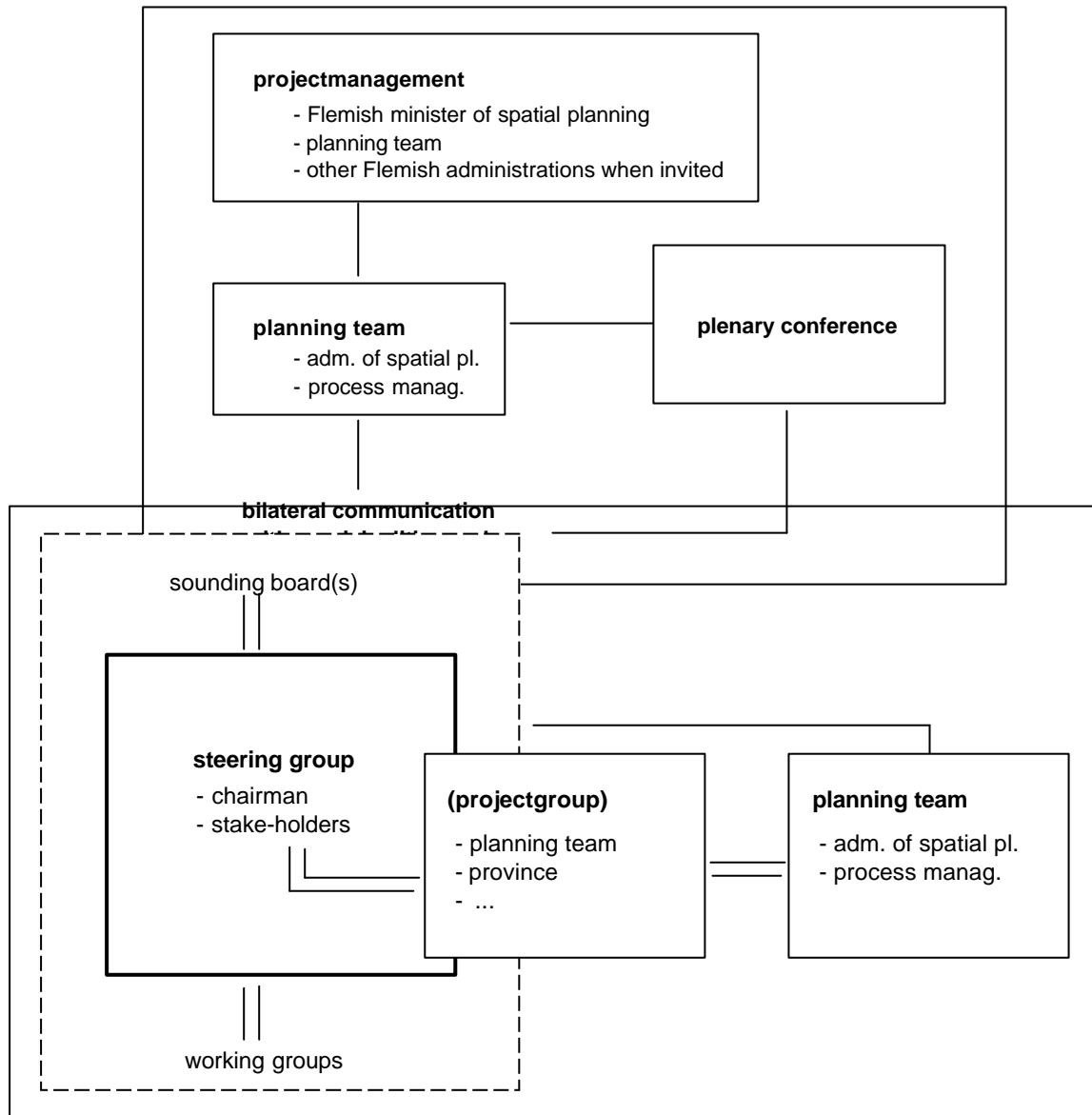


figure 4: cooperation structures in the boundary planning process for Antwerp on the first rational/technical track (upper) and the second collaborative track (lower)

After one year of the official planning process (preparations were done in 2002 but the official start was in April 2003) it is interesting to see similarities but also differences between the starting ideas about the process and reality. At first sight the idea of working on two tracks was not followed at all. The representative of the Flemish minister of spatial planning ordered the planning team to keep a very low profile and develop a Flemish vision on the problem without external communication with e.g. the municipalities. One reason for this is the organisation of the Flemish regional elections in June 2004, that had their influence back in the summer of 2003. As a result, work on creating Flemish proposals for creating new areas

for dwellings and industry in the Antwerp city region was kept inside the office. Also the elections caused an ambiguous attitude of the Flemish administration towards the process which considerably slowed down the work. When looked at in more detail the two tracks have however been present in the real process, be it differently from the ideas in advance. Instead of two parallel processes - as had been foreseen - the second (collaborative) track was on the one hand on a micro-level interwoven in the first track. Thoughts on the content of the boundary plan (first track) were shared informally with possible partners of the second track. Potential issues for the second track became ways to realise new dwellings and industrial areas (first track). Both evolutions were due to the very informal way of communicating with possible actors and to the quest for metropolitan projects and themes that could be of interest for a number of possible partners. In this way the planning style was adapted to the planning circumstances on a micro-level. On the other hand on a more global level the second track didn't run parallel with the first track and hasn't even started yet. One could say that it is under construction now, following a period of inside work on the first track.

The development of informal ways of communication with potential partners and the identification of metropolitan projects or themes that could interest a number of partners is further elaborated below. We believe that both aspects have been important for slowly making progress in the planning process in spite of the lack of support from stake-holders (including even the Flemish government due to the elections).

Formal and informal networks

Because of the complex context in the Antwerp city region and the lack of tradition of cooperation on a city regional level, informal communication was used as a starting-point to build up more formal cooperation structures. Three ways of interaction with a number of potential actors were used. The aim was to improve thinking on the content of the boundary plan. At the same time however those initiatives helped to create an informal network of possible participants in the process.

At the very beginning of the boundary planning process (April to June 2003) a first way of interacting with some of the actors in the Antwerp city region was tried out. A former influential politician of the province of Antwerp (governmental level between municipalities and Flemish government) was hired by the planning team to have a contact with every municipality (fifteen in all) in the area. The politician was accompanied by a secretary provided by the planning team who arranged the contacts and made up reports. After having spoken with the mayors, aldermen and administration of the municipalities the politician made up general conclusions on the attitude and expectations of the municipalities towards the boundary plan. The contacts were very much appreciated by the municipal authorities. The conclusions of the politician were presented to the municipalities in October 2003. The idea to make another appeal to the politician later on in the process, has until now not been executed. A second way of contributing to the creation of an informal network was the organisation of five small-scale discussion evenings (maximum 25 people) on different topics and a two-day workshop (December 2003 - April 2004). The evenings took place at the office of the planning team from 17.00 until 21.00 p.m. and included snacks and drinks. Three presentations were given by the planning team and by invited experts. Other experts and some people from the municipalities were invited to give their comments on the presented ideas and take part in a concluding discussion. The discussion evenings were highly appreciated by the participants. Interesting was the combination of progress in content and the growth of the informal network. The concluding two-day workshop was attended by about 40 people and also appreciated by the planning team as well as by the participants. It was clear however that the meetings didn't need to be extended. The informal efforts that people were willing to make reached their limits. As a third way of informal networking, members of

the planning team tried to be present at interesting debates, information sessions etc. organised by actors that could become interesting partners for the boundary planning process. The result of all the work is an informal network of people from Flemish administrations for forest, for agriculture and for economy, from the public transport company, from the administration for roads and traffic, from the city of Antwerp, from the chamber of commerce, from the university etc.

The building of an informal network takes place in a context of already existing formal networks related to other planning processes in the Antwerp city region. Among others three of those networks are of interest for the boundary planning team. Firstly, in the Antwerp harbour a strategic plan is being developed. The process is managed by a steering group chaired by the governor of the province of Antwerp. The process has an elaborated cooperation structure with planning team, process management, steering group, thematic work groups, socio-economic sounding board etc. Secondly, the making of the strategic spatial plan (the 'structure plan') for the city of Antwerp is being closely followed up. Past boundary planning processes have showed to be successful if they were closely linked to the municipal planning processes. This is due to the mixture of goals of delimitation plans and to the choice of the Flemish government to make separate delimitation plans for every city region. Like the planning process in the harbour, the city's planning process has its formal structures to manage the process. The city-council is by far the most important of them. Thirdly the province of Antwerp is interesting to mention. The province has the power to be quite an active planning partner by making its own strategic spatial plan (or 'structure plan') and implementation plans or by conducting area-oriented planning processes in specific areas in the province (one of those processes is going on in the area south of the city region of Antwerp). Moreover, because of its intermediary position, the province of Antwerp has good contacts with the municipalities. During the making of its structure plan, the province has for example been discussing with groups of municipalities, of which the Antwerp city region was one group. As far as we know, those meetings are now no longer held although they were quite promising.

It is clear that the creation of an informal network of potential partners is not enough and vulnerable. At this moment there is an urgent need to start the construction of a more formal cooperation structure on the level of the Antwerp city region that can discuss metropolitan key-issues. It could also create a background for the boundary plan. If not, the already formalised planning processes in the region will move on without taking the boundary planning process into account. Also the informal contacts happen without mandates and will therefore not provoke any change. Finally the energy spent on informal networks is finite. By July 2004 the first steps in creating a city-regional platform, have been taken. Contacts with the municipalities are being formalised individually as well as in group and preparations are being made for a formal platform meeting of relevant stake-holders to discuss a number of metropolitan key-issues. The aim is to prepare this general platform meeting by thematic working groups. Also an influential chairman for the conference is being sought. At this moment however the outcome of these preparations still is highly uncertain.

Key-issues for a city-regional perspective

Besides the work on informal and formal networks of potential stake-holders, also arguments on content make us believe that very slowly progress is being made in the boundary planning process for Antwerp. Identifying a number of key-issues on the metropolitan level, is essential to argue the need for a metropolitan cooperation platform and this platform is necessary to cope with the mixture of goals that the boundary plan is expected to fulfil. The discussion on metropolitan key-issues will deal with the urban policy and urban projects that are asked for in the job specification, will also create a necessary background for the Flemish

goal to create areas for new dwellings and new industry and will help in finding support by other partners for this goal. The question that now arises, is whether it is possible to identify some metropolitan key-issues.



figure 5: *built-on and open space in the city region of Antwerp*

From a scanning of the planning context and from the contacts with the municipalities it became clear that nobody uses a metropolitan planning framework. Municipalities necessarily work within their territory, the planning process for the harbour evidently only deals with the harbour and the Flemish administration that is preparing major traffic works is only interested in roads. As a result a number of potential conflicts arise. A few examples can illustrate this. When planning for the roads in a certain territory, different municipalities say different things about the same roads. Often municipalities downgrade roads that are necessary for the circulation in another municipality and vice versa. When dealing with abandoned industrial areas (often quite small-scale ones) some municipalities tend to change the land-use from industry to housing. This systematically decreases the economic potentials in the whole of the city region. There is however no dialogue between municipalities on this issue. A third example concerns the large shopping strip in the south of the city region. The municipalities that have parts of the shopping strip on their territory act according to different policies. One municipality tries to organize the shopping strip with small-scale municipal land-use plans, another one strictly applies the existing Flemish land-use plan and only permits industry in the area and a third one doesn't really have a policy and permits industry as well as large-scale shops. Other examples concern the opposition of some municipalities against the extension of tramlines, the use of important places for local goals etc. This kind of examples clearly shows the problems that arise from the lack of a metropolitan policy.

Besides the problems that arise without a vision on the city-region, another argument for the introduction of a metropolitan perspective, are the opportunities that this perspective would give. At this moment quite large-scale projects are prepared for the city of Antwerp. Examples have been mentioned higher. These projects create new opportunities if they are placed in a metropolitan perspective. The mobility works (for car and public transport) for example create new locations for urban development, change the positions of local roads in the road network and improve the potentials for public transport. This will not happen if municipalities keep on developing contradictory policies on the same roads. The creation of a new dock in the left-bank harbour, the realisation of a new railway tunnel for the harbour and the broadening of the Albert Canal from the harbour to the south-east will create new economic development for the city-region. Again, this will only partially happen when the municipalities keep on pushing out economic activities with a use of valuable harbour land by local companies as a result. Other examples are possible. It is clear that the cooperation between municipalities could increase the potentials of planned projects and enlarge the ambition of the Antwerp city region.

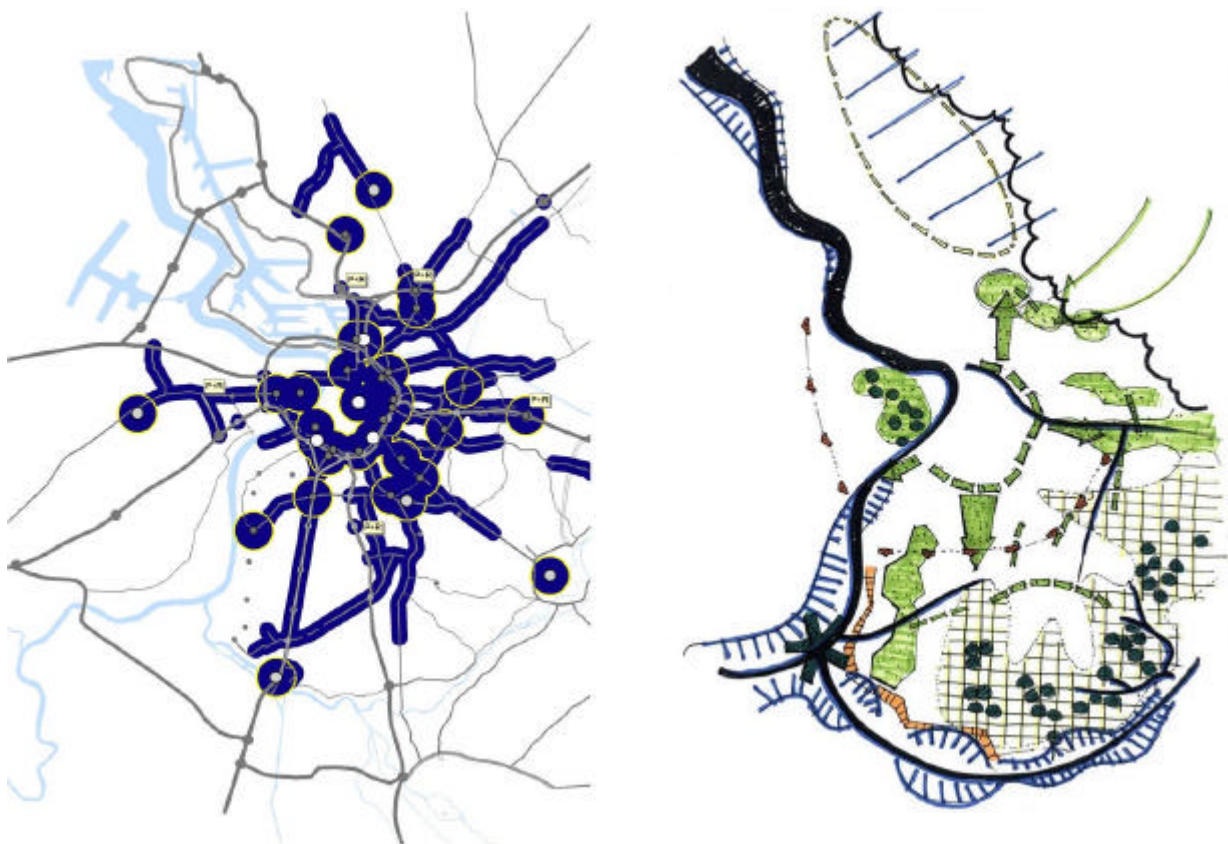


figure 6: *potential nodes of public transport, road network and accessibility of the city region of Antwerp (left), concept for a metropolitan green structure (right)*

To meet the mission of the boundary plan and to cope with the challenge of thinking on a metropolitan scale, four key-issues were identified up till now. The first issue concerns nodes and axes as concentration areas for urban development. Starting from concepts for the upgrading of the public transport network and of the interlocal road system around Antwerp, nodes of different categories on these transport networks are identified and used to locate potential urban development areas. This way the Antwerp city region is seen as a network of small- and large-scale nodes of development. Clearly, this can only be dealt with on a metropolitan scale. Municipalities - even the city of Antwerp - are too small to be seen as a network of nodes. The second issue focuses on the realisation of a metropolitan green

structure. For that purpose agricultural, nature and landscape dynamics in the city region are being explored. Also research is being done on the transformation of agriculture towards other functions (recreation, manufacture, dwelling etc.) in open areas in the city region. Strategic spaces and actions that can fundamentally strengthen the ecological, recreational and landscape quality of the metropolitan green structure are being looked for. The green structure will consist of areas in every municipality of the city region and thus cannot be realised by one municipality. Cooperation between municipalities but also with administrations of the Flemish government and the province of Antwerp will be necessary. The third issue is the development of ideas about the urban economy of Antwerp. Due to the densification of the region it has become very difficult to create new areas for economic development. This is highly in contrast with the demand for new industrial areas in the region (especially for transport, distribution and logistics). It is a key-issue for the city-region to create a vision on how to overcome this tension. Development of the office market will probably play an important role in this. Also the position of the harbour in the economic structure of the city region will have to be evaluated. Lastly the localisation of some important large-scale functions is a metropolitan key-issue. Examples are the development of new large scale sports facilities, the extension of a congress center and the support of university facilities.

At this moment the mentioned key-issues have only been tested in the informal network that was created. It is therefore not sure yet that they will be accepted as issues to be dealt with on a city-regional level. Informal reactions are slightly positive. It is clear that in a next stage, the work on the key-issues should be brought on a more formal and structural level. Only then, there will be proof that the creation of an informal network and the definition of city-regional key-issues were good options to meet the different goals that are inherent in the making of a boundary plan.

A metropolitan structure?

As was explained, the preparatory work on the boundary plan for the city region of Antwerp has been low-profile and informal so far. This is also due to the multiple goals inherent in the job specifications for the making of boundary plans. By creating two tracks of planning following two different (rational/technical versus collaborative) planning styles, we tried to incorporate those goals in a coherent planning process. This proves to be not evident. Potential partners in the boundary planning process may accuse the Flemish government of trying to use the second collaborative track for their own goals in the first rational/technical track. In that case the Flemish government may have to confine its own ambitions in exchange for cooperation of partners on metropolitan goals.

In this bottom-up and informal context, there is evidently no discussion on creating a formal administrative structure for the city-region. Within the context of the boundary planning process there will also never be a discussion on this issue for it is explicitly not a part of the mission. Moreover, discussions on creating a formal cooperation in the city region, on changing administrative boundaries or on adapting tax systems to support a metropolitan policy are politically highly sensitive and not done. One may also wonder whether the Antwerp city region is large enough to create a formal metropolitan structure.

It is to be expected however that in time the discussion on metropolitan cooperation will prove absolutely necessary. The success of subregional planning processes as in the Antwerp harbour and on the provincial level, the expected growth and change of scale of the Antwerp city region and recurrent thoughts by intellectuals¹⁰ but also by some politicians support that idea.

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- 1 Ministry of the Flemish government, Administration of spatial planning, Spatial structure plan for Flanders, 1997. (in dutch)
- 2 Wullaume, P., Van den Broeck, P., Boundaring weighed and found (too) heavy, paper for the yearly Flemish - Dutch conference day, 2002. (in dutch)
- 3 City of Antwerp and Stramien, Global structure plan for the city of Antwerp, 1990.
- 4 Van Alsenoy, J., Van den Broeck, J., Vanreusel, J., Antwerp/Belgium 'The city and the river': cultural event and city-project, paper for the international congress The port and the water, Thessaloniki, 1997.
- 5 The Flemish region is part of Belgium which has a federal structure. The railway company still is under the supervision of the Belgian government. Competences on spatial policy are divided over the regions (Flemish and Walloon region), the provinces and the municipalities.
- 6 See e.g. www.acturban.org or www.spoornoord.be
- 7 Province of Antwerp, Spatial structure plan for the province of Antwerp, 2001.
- 8 Van den Broeck, P., Dealing with fragmentation, a strategy for the city region of Antwerp, in: Stedebouw en Ruimtelijke Ordening, nr. 2, 2000. (in dutch)
- 9 The author works as a spatial planner for Studiegroep Omgeving, a private consultancy office in the field of spatial planning, architecture, public space and survey. The office was involved in the boundary planning processes for the cities of Aalst, Mechelen, Leuven and Sint-Niklaas and in the spatial structure plan for the province of Antwerp. It is now involved in the boundary planning process for the city region of Antwerp, in the planning process in the harbour of Antwerp. Figures are drawn from documents for these planning processes.
- 10 See e.g. a book by De Brabander, G., Verhetzel, A., Metropolis, 1996 on the influence of tax systems on urban sprawl (in dutch). See also the Flemish whitebook on urban policy by the administration for urban policy of the Flemish government, 2003 (in dutch).