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New opportunities in landscape





Rough diamond

Urban renewal in Antwerp

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At the recent World Cities Summit, the mayor of Antwerp set out his vision for the City: ‘Antwerp’s unique position as a pocket-size metropolis brings great opportunities... to establish a true urban community... a common urban identity’. In saying this, he acknowledged a universal truth: cities are more than physical fabric. They are stages for people’s endeavours, crucibles for environmental change, and increasingly complex habitats. Additionally, he acknowledged that Antwerp was a port, and not an island: it had a dynamic past but to have a future, it had to plan for it.

Against a backdrop of urban flight and decay, shifts in population and demographics, and rapidly evolving work patterns, the city had to innovate new ways of planning its future. These are embodied in *Antwerp – City of Tomorrow*, a handbook for the ‘renewal of urban renewal’ as it pithily describes this manifesto for change. Its primary aim is to make sure that Antwerp ‘keeps renewing itself and remains a living laboratory for tomorrow’. More a ‘how’, and less a ‘where’ and ‘why’, then.

So how does Antwerp aim to keep itself relevant in post-industrial Belgium? How does it retain young, multiethnic talent in a revitalised city? A first step was a loosening of the regional planning processes which gave Antwerp more autonomy in planning its own territory. Second, its 2006 Strategic Spatial Plan devised a layered planning structure based on the aspirations of its residents; a new zoning for the city; and a policy of

targeted interventions, all overseen by an advisory committee of professionals from both public and private sectors. Third, collaboration has harnessed everyone’s energies for a common purpose. Vitality, the city council has an urban development company, a city architect’s department, a real estate company, and a property and maintenance arm – so it is not a passive bystander, afraid to get its hands dirty and leave it all to the private sector.

The result is initiatives that fall under three pillars: ‘Vibrant residential city’ (integrated live, work, entrepreneurship); ‘Smart network city’ (networks, incubation, smart spaces); and ‘Resilient city’ (harnessing the blue / green routes, or more prosaically, the ‘metabolism’ of the city). When assessed against these criteria, the planning process is surprisingly fluid, deftly able to respond to new challenges, but with a constant

aim: the ecological and economic revival of Antwerp.

The joined-up thinking of Antwerp’s planning authority has another vital facet: it acts as a developer. Hence AG Vespa is an autonomous agency within the city council which identifies (indeed, at times helps to assemble) sites to sponsor. Its influence is extensive and its actions help to promote the city’s objectives and values, while remaining one step removed from the private sector. This altruism is invaluable in a city where disparate private owners could stifle redevelopment and instead helps overcome cross-boundary issues, particularly in terms of landscape.

As a direct consequence of this, Antwerp’s built and planned achievements are already impressive. At first glance, the improvements seem scattergun, but on deeper examination they are targeted and focused. The effect is that the city looks like one huge building site, which must be both encouraging and frustrating for its residents. Take as an example, the old port area immediately north of the city centre, which is being transformed into a new urban quarter. The public realm is being transformed for a new community of 4,000 residents, living in both private and social housing, all with access to the river or a park, alongside new schools, workspaces and facilities. The city controls the sale of land and enacts rigorous standards of environmental



Public transport and roads are being rationalised, made greener and more cycle friendly.



The old port area is being transformed into a new urban quarter.



The city council imposes rigorous standards of environmental compliance.

6. The revitalised Zuiderdokken with its new public gardens and spaces.

© ADR Architects, Georges Descombes and Tractebel.

7. The dynamic 'Over The Ring' green space encircling the city.

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LARGEST PETROCHEMICAL COMPLEX IN EUROPE
with 37 companies

27,300
SELF-EMPLOYED CITY RESIDENTS



50% OF ALL POLISHED DIAMONDS
pass through Antwerp



1 IN 3 CITIZENS
have a tertiary education



92% OF CITIZENS
claim to be happy living in Antwerp



39% OF POPULATION
has a migrant background

compliance. New squares, such as the Schengenplein, renew the dockland environment in a strategy the city calls, somewhat axiomatically, 'renewing public realm as a red carpet'.

Another example is the Groen Kwartier, a 7-hectare site, once an old military base, now redeveloped as new mixed-use community where solid, historic Flemish architecture has been enlivened with a juxtaposition of striking new buildings. More importantly over 50% of this dense, inner-city site has been dedicated to green space.

The 'Smart network city' pillar has also led to some innovative solutions. The LAB XX project is a pilot scheme exploring how new landscape infrastructure can densify and regenerate the outer suburbs and attract investment. Professionals, businesses and the city council workshopped new ideas – such as a concentric transit system – which fed into the ever-evolving strategic plan. Seemingly anyone can challenge conventional thought and influence future planning direction.

In a city with a young, dynamic population this seems admirable. Antwerp also sponsors other initiatives like the Ecohuis, a centre that provides advice and support in the fields of building and renovation, energy and consumption for all residents, to foster incremental change. There is also a strategy called zoominopuwdak (literally 'zoom in on your roof') which thermally maps all buildings in Antwerp

and recommends actions to insulate and generate energy. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the city's public transport and roads are being rationalised and made greener and more cycle friendly, which on occasion has led to their complete removal.

The 'Resilient city' pillar demonstrates the pivotal role landscape is playing in the new Antwerp. These blue / green streams are literal (the River Scheldt, for example) and metaphorical (energy, waste, traffic) but all are involved in making environmentally responsible and climate resilient decisions. Open space is assessed so that 'economy and ecology reinforce each other'. Initiatives range in scale from pocket parks like the Munthof to the refurbishment of the Scheldt quaysides

to the huge Zuiderdokken, currently a 1970s-era car park but shortly to be a park with fields, a botanic garden and extensive meadows acting as water buffers. The most far-reaching project is called Over the Ring: a plan to cap the principal ring road and barrier to growth, to produce a multifunctional park and green icon for the city.

Antwerp City Council is being unashamedly interventionist in planning its change. Its perceived limitations as a local authority are quite elastic, being by turns more benevolent and more entrepreneurial. It has no political issue with this approach whatsoever; instead, it sees its methodology as an extension of its existing role of a pioneer of best practice. In that typically pragmatic Flemish way, it's results that count.

