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In Search of Landscape Structures in the Open Space around Louvain

BAS SMETS

In early 2007 Bas Smets, architect-engineer and landscape architect, founded a design studio in Brussels. The studio's projects range from the design of landscape strategies to the realization of public space. Recent projects include the design of the 20-ha park around Estonia's new National Museum in Tartu and studies for the public space in a 45-ha residential area developed on the Tour & Taxis industrial site in Brussels. Bureau Bas Smets has already devised a string of 'landscape master plans' in Flanders and has helped draw up the template for green structures at the local policy level.

The built-up zone in Flanders is very distinctive: the areas between the urban centres are characterized by scattered development with a virtually constant density. On a European scale Flanders' layout is unmistakable. Its scattered development shows up as a grey stain that stands out from the surrounding territory.

The absence of any strong landscape features reinforces this state of extensive and sparse urbanity. Belgium possesses neither France's natural nor the Netherlands' man-made landscape, giving the Belgian landscape little in the way of resisting any kind of pressure to develop. This is certainly the case in the open space around the city of Louvain, which is under great pressure to expand the housing and recreation areas for its residents, while the forces that safeguard the preservation of the open areas, such as agriculture, appear to be weakening.

The landscape's feeble resistance is compounded by the current fragmentation of the open spaces. Yet the landscape retains its structuring role, even in those areas that are neither inner city nor open area. On the outskirts of Louvain, the relationships between village centres, paved roads, rivers, streams and inundation areas have had a major impact on the development of the original open spaces. This case study explores the importance of the search for the greater, underlying and stable systems, precisely there where the urban landscape becomes sparser. The topography of an area forms such a continuity and cannot be modified overnight. The hydrography follows the contour lines and establishes strict conditions for land use and drainage. Because of their relatively unchanging nature these 'long-term landscape' elements offer a foundation for the structuring of the open spaces.[1]

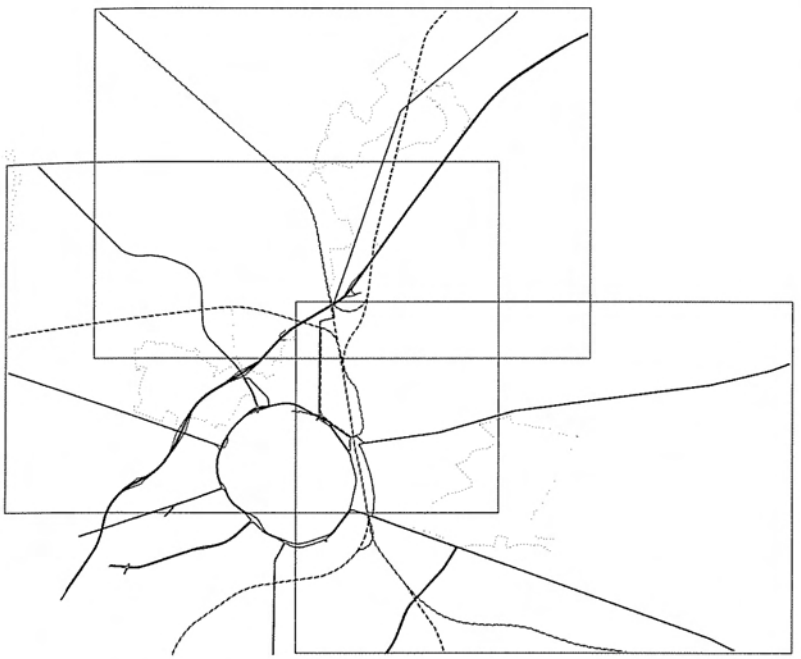
The outskirts of Louvain: a new design brief

In the current landscape the impact of the topography and hydrography has been reduced to a minimal, local obstacle, ranging from a dammed river to a wooded hillside. Their structuring role becomes more apparent on the larger scale that crosses the administrative boundaries of the municipalities and cities, thus creating a need for a new kind of design brief.

Late in 2008, the Flemish government's Spatial Planning Department issued a commission for a 'preliminary study for the design of a regional spatial plan for the layout and realization of peri-urban open spaces in or around the urban region of Louvain'.[2] The commission explicitly called for

1. Planning & Development Research Group in conjunction with Research Group Urbanism and Architecture (OSA), KU Leuven and Bas Smets, *Het Vlaams restgebied. Ontdekking van het andere landschap*. Brussels: Flemish Government Architect, 2007. (unpublished, available in Flemish at http://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/thema's/landschap/onderzoek_restruimten/onderzoek_restruimten.aspx)
2. The study was ascribed to the partnership of Bureau Bas Smets and URA. The maps and drawings of the Louvain case study herewith published were drawn by Bureau Bas Smets.

The scattered development of Flanders shows up as a grey stain on a map of built-up space in Europe



Peri-urban open spaces near the urban region of Louvain

the exploration – through research by design – of the 'concrete possibilities' for realizing additional woodland, landscaping agricultural areas and opening up these areas for recreational use. The study was to bridge the demarcation of the natural and agricultural spaces and the demarcation of the urban region. The latter demarcation was already in the making. This design brief for peri-urban spaces is unique in Flanders, because it stipulates that the demarcation of the natural and agricultural space must be taken as the starting point for further exploration.

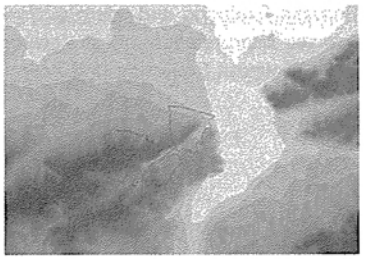
Research by design: exploring the design brief and the landscape

Regional assignments present a double challenge: a bigger scale and a large number of actors. The increase in scale makes it impossible to fall back on familiar design formulas, while the confrontation with a range of actors, each of which possesses a wealth of specialist knowledge on the area under investigation, calls for a different way of visualizing our knowledge. The actors involved in Louvain's open space include elected politicians, urban planning administrators and Flemish government representatives, as well as other designers hired by the towns and municipalities.

This multi-actor context calls for a new document that does not simply reiterate what these various actors already know, but can show the area in a new light. Given the wealth of knowledge, the first thing needed was a fresh look at the territory, without any preconceptions and without a surplus of specific knowledge. We stepped back and began by looking for a scale that might illuminate the brief. We strayed from the subject area proper in order to find the right scale on which to visualize the issues at stake.

In the process it became possible to explore the brief itself, and to momentarily abandon the questions posed by the client – in this case those about, for instance, the way the edges of the housing developments would be finished. The research-by-design process led to a reformulation of the brief, during which the designers continued their dialogue with the client. We proposed to start with a layer-by-layer reading of the landscape: topography, hydrography, infrastructure, housing development, vegetation, parcels of land. The complexity of the physical reality is thus unravelled in a series of black-and-white maps showing a single layer per drawing.

This working method starts off with a representation of that which is already in place, without offering any immediate interpretations of future possibilities. Unlike the layer approach that has enjoyed such momentum



TOPOGRAPHY

HYDROGRAPHY

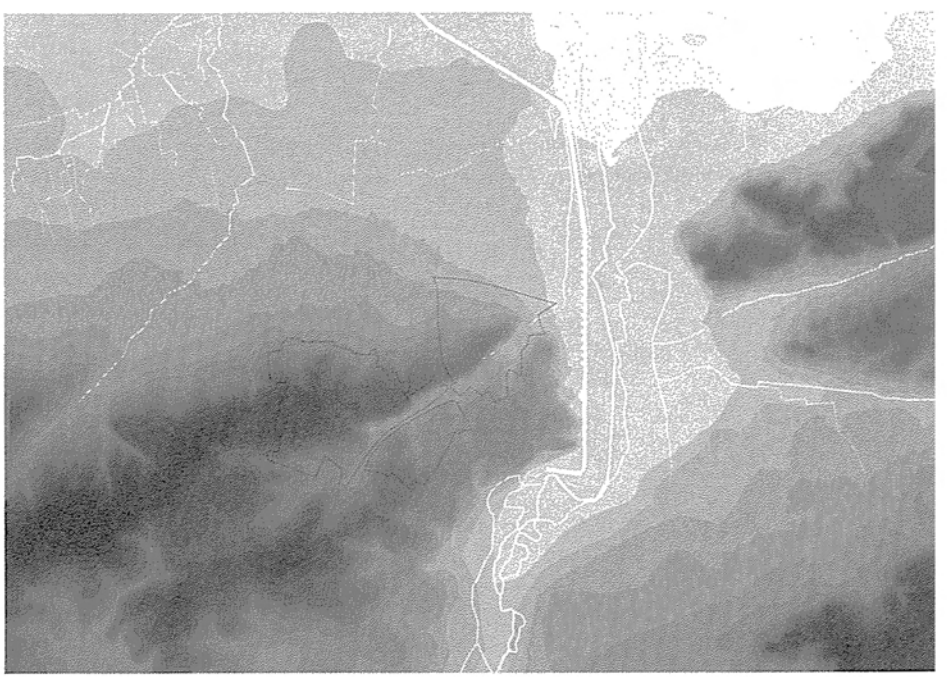
INFRASTRUCTURE

BUILT-UP AREA

VEGETATION

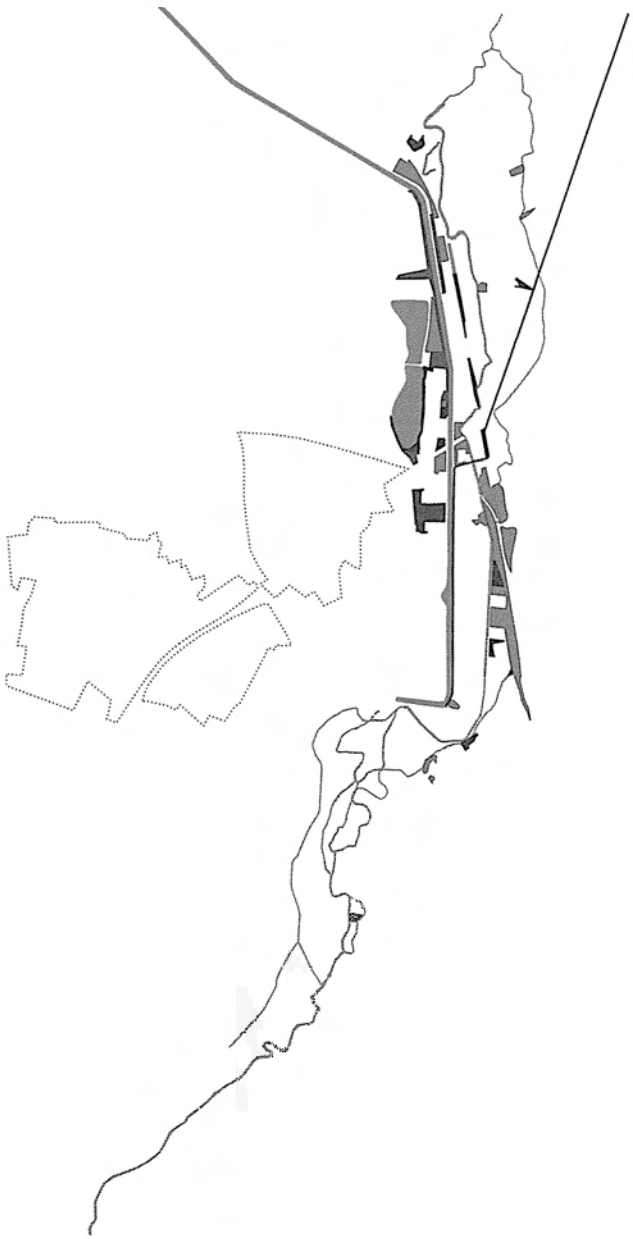
LAND PARCELS

Case West: reading the landscape



Case West: topography and waterways

3. Dirk Sijmons, 'Vliegtuigstrepen in een wolkenlucht. Het lagenmodel in zijn natuurlijke omgeving', in: Dirk Sijmons, *Landkaartmos en andere beschouwingen over landschap*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2002, pp. 116–134.



Case West: infrastructure cluster parallel to vegetation

in the Netherlands over the past decade,[3] we favoured a relatively modest presentation of the material here, leaving the 'colouring' and accumulating for later. The areas of study have been traced on these maps by fine dotted lines, as reminders of the original questions in the design brief.

Underlying landscape structures

The various layers together form the most exact representation possible of the existing landscape. The combinations of individual layers yield a number of less common readings of the present situation. This led to a search for those combinations that represent the landscape's underlying structure. The moment of intervention is postponed and the design act is transformed into the examination of the existing landscape structures.

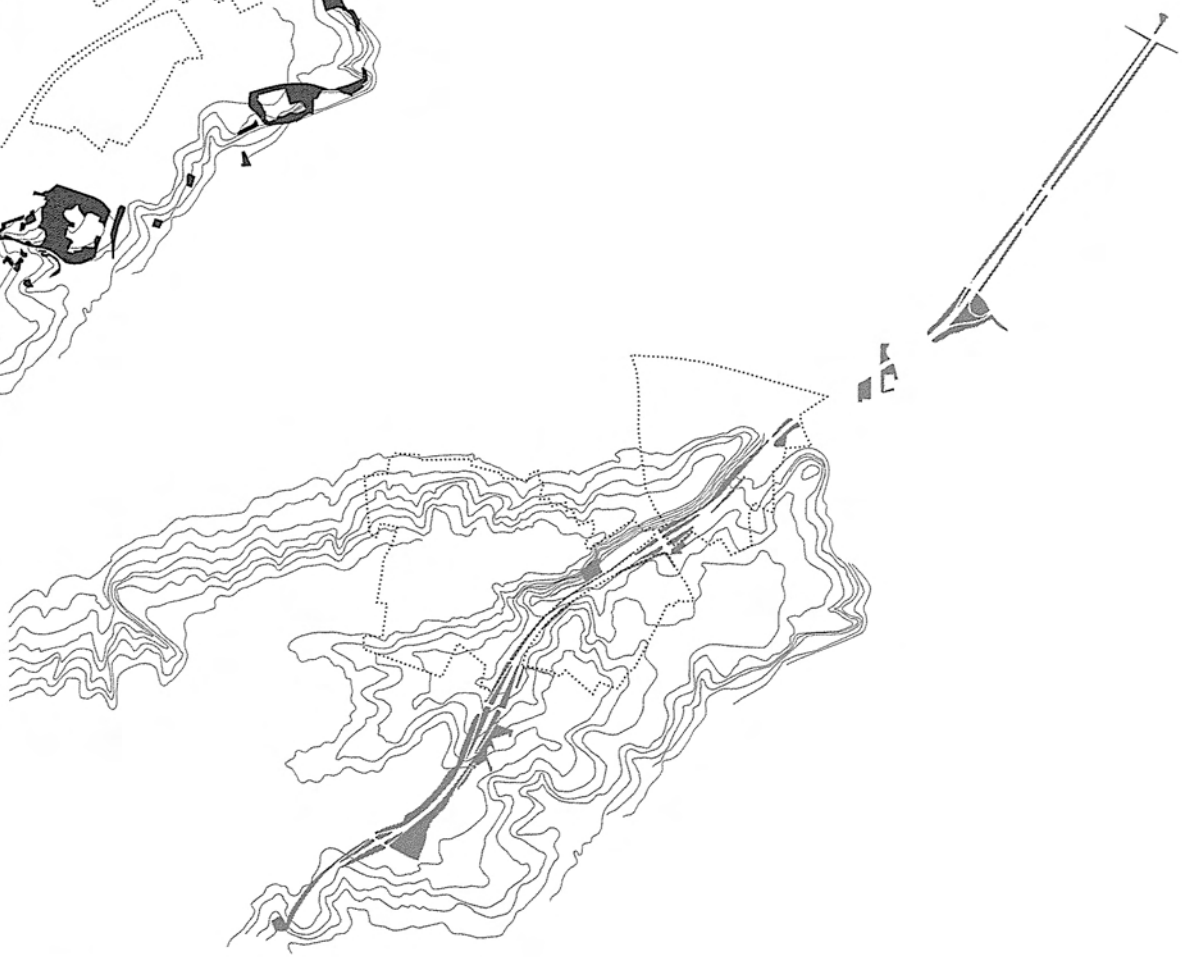
The exploration of the relationship between the topography and hydrography led to questions that were freed from their usual interpretations. Where exactly does the Dijle Valley end and what does it consist of in a material sense? How noticeable are the hillsides that demarcate this valley and what do they look like?

Other relationships that were examined include the patterns of vegetation in relation to the cluster of waterways in the flat landscape, and the hillside topography in relation to the built-up city centre and the larger woodland areas. The latter figure showed that larger green areas, which at first sight appear to be unconnected, do relate to one another. The western hillside of the Dijle Valley, for example, is dotted with a series of public and private institutions, characterized by a large area of parkland (Lemmens Institute, Keizersberg and the green perimeter along Vaartkom).

It became apparent that compared to the hillsides, the river valley that drains the water from these higher areas is a secondary structure. This structure is characterized by successive strips of shrubbery. This raised a question about the relationship between the motorway in this asymmetrical valley and the shrubbery there.

The outcome of this exploration was a superposition of several combinations of layers that were found to be significant. The resulting drawings showed the problems posed by each area of study in relation to these greater structures, allowing us to reformulate the original question in a way that is informed by the existing landscape.

Case West: hillside and vegetation



Case West: asymmetric river valley and shrubbery

Case West: superposition

Critical reading: illustration and visualization

During our research of Louvain's peri-urban area, the main role of design, besides the actual drawing, proved to be the determination of the rules of the 'combination' game. These rules are aimed at neutralizing inevitable automatisms. This is why we deliberately included the working method of the design process as a kind of handbook for handling such large areas.

First of all, the right scale must be found. This scale will be informed by the area's landscape features. In the case of Louvain's peri-urban area these included the Dijle Valley and its hillsides. The next step in the process is a systematic, layer-by-layer reading of the existing landscape, which is then recorded and examined. This enables the examination of the relationship of each of these layers with the overall landscape. The third step in the process is the combination of the different layers. This 'combination' constitutes a search for mutually reinforcing landscape layers which, collectively, can form a meaningful landscape structure. The fourth step consists of selecting the interesting elements yielded by the different layers in order to illustrate the possible landscape structures.

At this stage the study focuses exclusively on the situation at hand and does not add any new elements to the mix, so that researchers can refer back to these core maps at each of the later stages. The maps also serve as points of reference on how to achieve maximum effect with minimum intervention.

The black-and-white representation supports the exploratory character of this alternative reading; after all, green, blue and red are inextricably linked with a programmatic legend and ambition. Each drawing features just a single theme. This underlines the fact that the process is not merely about addition, but about a combination of the existing landscape layers. This method of notation reflects the awareness that the regional level of scale demands an intelligent approach to the available means.