

**Urban Renewal  
in Flanders — (2002-2011)**

**A PARTICULAR  
PRACTICE IN EUROPE**

Els Vervloesem, Bruno De Meulder and André Loeckx

Since the end of the last century, a notable amount of urban renewal has got under way everywhere in Europe and, after some hesitation, in Flanders too. However, urban renewal practices in Flanders differ fundamentally from large-scale European urban projects. The unique context of Flanders, with its almost total urbanisation of the land and the fine, fragmented mesh of its urban sprawl, prompted the authorities and towns and cities to take a quite individual approach to urban renewal projects.

This book shows 37 urban renewal projects in 25 Flemish towns and cities that have been awarded grants by the Flemish authorities over the last ten years. They include large cities such as Antwerp, Ghent, Kortrijk and Leuven, and also smaller towns such as Deinze, Geel and Lokeren. Their story is that of a risky and sometimes unmanageable 'trialogue' between designing and building, social emancipation and administrative innovation.

The book puts the 37 Flemish urban renewal projects into a historical and European perspective and puts Flemish urban renewal on the European map. The book addresses urban planners, policy makers, architects, urban engineers, sociologists, residents, academics and students and anyone who is concerned with the future of the city.

This book is in line with its predecessor on the 'conceptual grant': A. Loeckx, *Framing Urban Renewal in Flanders*, 2009.

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The railway currently forms a barrier between the city centre and the Krottegem district. The project for the area around the station is partly focused on reinforcing the relationship between city and suburb once more.

Negotiating design

**An unattractive station environment with difficult access to the rear, a banal railway viaduct and chaotic traffic flows: this, in a nutshell, is what the people of Roeselare wanted to do away with.**

The masterplan was submitted to the Flemish government for a project grant in the framework of urban renewal but was met with a great deal of criticism. The biggest complaint was that it did not deal adequately with the integration of Krottegem, the suburb 'behind' the railway: instead of improving the connection between Krottegem and the town centre, the barrier between the town and the suburb formed by the railway embankment was reinforced. However Roeselare was not sent home empty-handed. The town council was awarded a concept grant intended by the Flemish government to enhance the promising urban renewal projects that did not meet their strict quality criteria. The uapS design company was appointed to carry out additional design research, in addition to two specialist process supervisors with expertise in urban design.

Even though a situation whereby an external design company is brought in midway through a project is anything but straightforward, cooperation with the EIS designer was very constructive. Partly thanks to the intermediary role played by the mayor, and the detailed formulation of the problem and project definition devised by the project leaders, the concept grant formed the beginning of an exciting negotiation process. The design for the area around the station was no longer seen as an end product, to be treated with indifference, but as a medium for systematically transforming the project's ambitions in such a way that all parties could identify with it. In an intensive process of moves and countermoves, uapS and EIS presented new design variants that ultimately led to a master plan acceptable to everyone. This dialogue between administrators, experts and partners, whereby design choices had

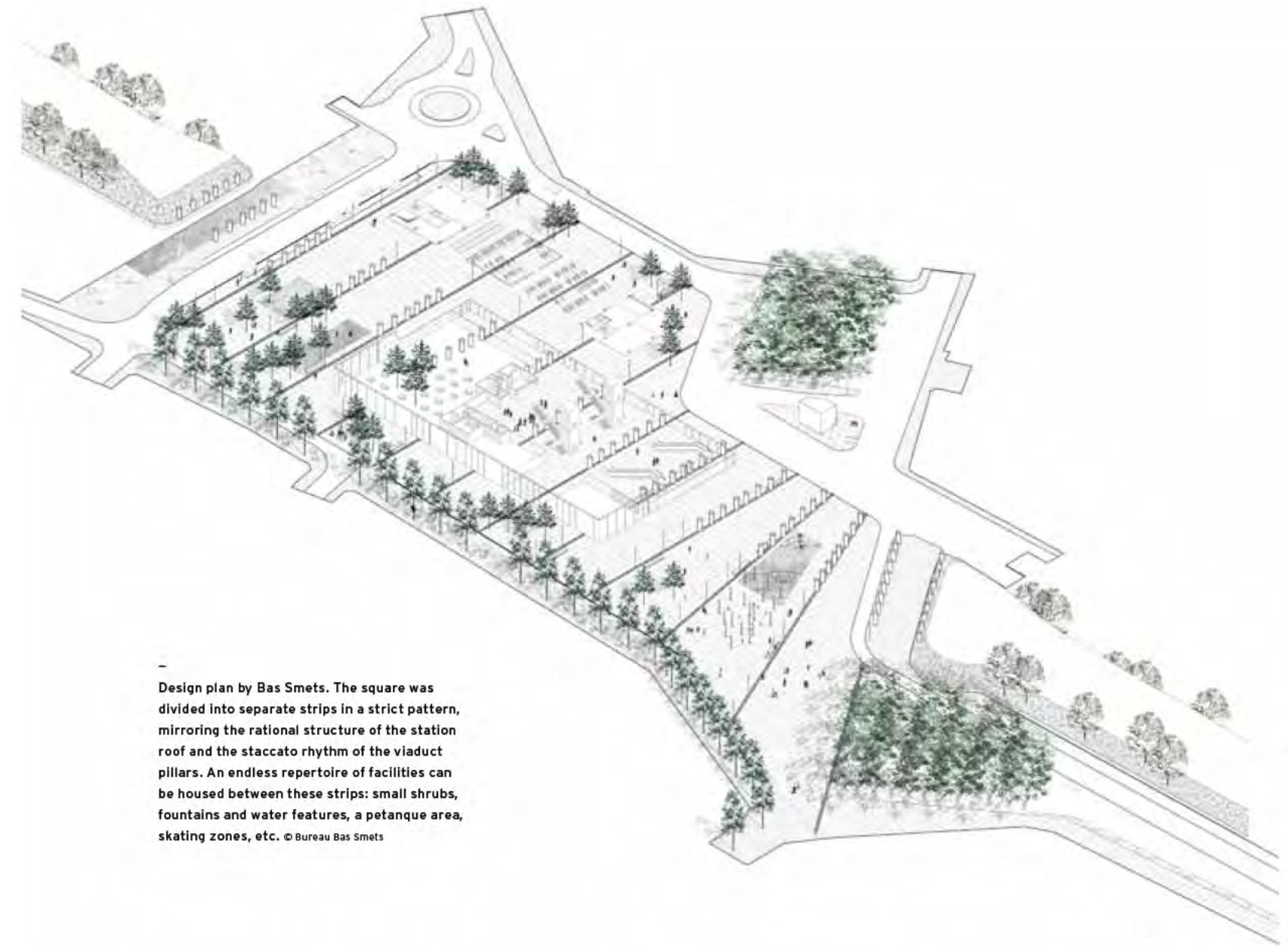
to be systematically justified and defended, either from a commercial point of view, or from an urban development or technical traffic management perspective, led to a masterplan that offered much more than what had originally been on the table. This enabled the project to make important progress in its spatial integration into the environment. In the current masterplan, the unique, open character of the Roeselare railway and canal landscape, which contrasts sharply with the surrounding, densely built-up urban fabric, is respected and honoured once more. The experience of the vast station square is improved by a variation of form, relief and structure. A more equal distribution of commercial facilities around the square (and not just within the station building) is a first step in making the station square more appealing. This could be further enhanced with cultural programmes so that this space becomes a fully-fledged usable space and more than a mere transitional area.

The intention to transform the area around the station into an attractive urban environment is also evident in the development plan designed by landscape architect Bas Smets. A number of strategic interventions mean that the plural and connective character of the station area is given special emphasis. The mineral station square with carefully placed groups of trees links up with the paved network of inner city squares. Differences in height are smoothed out to restore the square's unity. The neighbouring 'green' square is planted with indigenous valley trees that allude to its location in the original Mandel Valley. This intervention once again links the station area with the series of existing green parks in the valley. To minimise the barrier effect of the train viaduct as much as possible, the dimensions of the bridge's side panels will be optically reduced. The dreary underside of the railway viaduct will be adorned with strategically positioned reflective panels, which bounce off the sunlight and which simultaneously reflect the throngs of people and traffic

flows. In reference to the rational structure of the station roof and the staccato rhythm of the viaduct pylons, the square becomes a clever interplay on lines divided into different strips. The possibilities for filling in the strips are endless: small areas of urban woodland, fountains and water features, a pétanque court, skating areas, etc. Careful selection of lighting, detailing and materials will bring the renovated station square to life, both in the daytime and in the evening.

Lastly, the new masterplan also improves the link to Krottegem. This was achieved by improving the flow of traffic, transforming the ring-road and constructing a cycling tunnel, by creating a more spacious and more appealing passageway under the viaduct and also visually by constructing a transparent station building. Furthermore the area at the rear of the station building can no longer be considered inferior. Equal access on the side of the centre and on the Krottegem side ensures that the station is no longer a barrier, but a link between these two parts of the town. Krottegem's

reevaluation is also aided by the start of various development projects on former industrial sites. The former Dumont-Wyckhuysse weaving mill has been converted into a residential complex by a public-private partnership, with lofts and social housing for rent and sale. On the Rodenbach bottling site, the Province of West Flanders is setting up a 'Huis van de Voeding' (an information point for nutrition) and an entrepreneurs' centre. In time the town wants to create an arts centre in the cichorei-ast (former chicory factory) in cooperation with a private developer. Since the plans for the redevelopment of the area around the station, there have been many signs of activity in Roeselare and the surrounding areas. Nevertheless, intensive negotiations involving the area around the station diverted the attention from an important concept that arose out of uapS' design research. The potential offered by the open character of the Roeselare railway and canal landscape, to act as a sort of communal structure for Roeselare and Krottegem, must be kept in mind in the future.



Design plan by Bas Smets. The square was divided into separate strips in a strict pattern, mirroring the rational structure of the station roof and the staccato rhythm of the viaduct pillars. An endless repertoire of facilities can be housed between these strips: small shrubs, fountains and water features, a pétanque area, skating zones, etc. © Bureau Bas Smets

With a number of strategic moves, landscape architect Bas Smets has transformed the previously grey station area into an attractive urban square. © Bureau Bas Smets



Euro Immo Star and uapS in turn submitted new designs, which eventually led to a master-plan that was acceptable to everyone. © Euro Immo Star



The Watersite, a stretch of about 100 hectares between the canal and the railway, is one of the oldest industrial areas in the city.

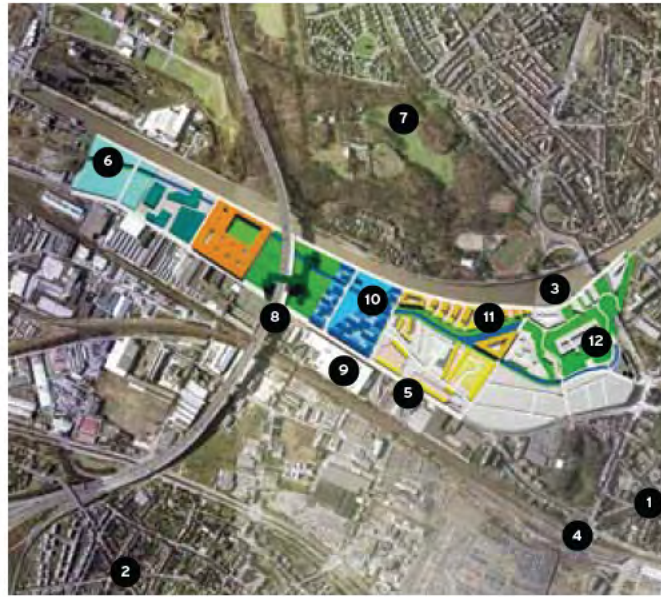
Metropolitan violence

**Renault, ça-Va Seul, Delacre, Forges de Clabecq; these are just a few of the resounding names that were forced to close their factory gates in the heavily industrialised Vilvoorde at the end of the 1970s. But despite the resulting social tragedies such as the closure of the Renault factory, which is still engraved upon the collective memory, the demise of these industries offered Vilvoorde local authority new opportunities.**

The closure of the steel company Forges de Clabecq in 1988 was a particularly significant turning point. Not only was the town freed from one of its worst polluters, but it also represented the definitive beginning of Vilvoorde's redevelopment. The Flemish Government allocated resources from the special fund for restructuring national industries. However, rather than spending the money all at once, Vilvoorde decided to invest it in property development. This led to the founding of the Novovil redevelopment company, which over the next few years concentrated on the remediation and redevelopment of the Vilvoorde region. One of the company's first projects was the redevelopment of what is now called the 'Watersite'. This strip, measuring approximately a hundred hectares, located along the Willebroek Canal in the peripheral area between the metropolitan centres of Brussels and Vilvoorde, is one of the town's oldest industrial areas. In collaboration with a number of partners, local authorities hope to achieve three important objectives in this area's redevelopment. Their first ambition is to create a new urban district: thirteen hundred new homes should once again make Vilvoorde attractive to new residents who want to return to the town. In addition it is expected that the transformation will contribute to the town's economic recovery (and re-profiling). Vilvoorde wants to attract new business by investing in office and business premises. Finally, the Watersite will be viewed as the

new face of Vilvoorde within the wider Brussels region. This is also reflected in the high expectations in terms of transport. There are plans to construct a new HST station, new motorway links and an RER stop (Regional Express Railway or fast rail link between Brussels and its hinterland).

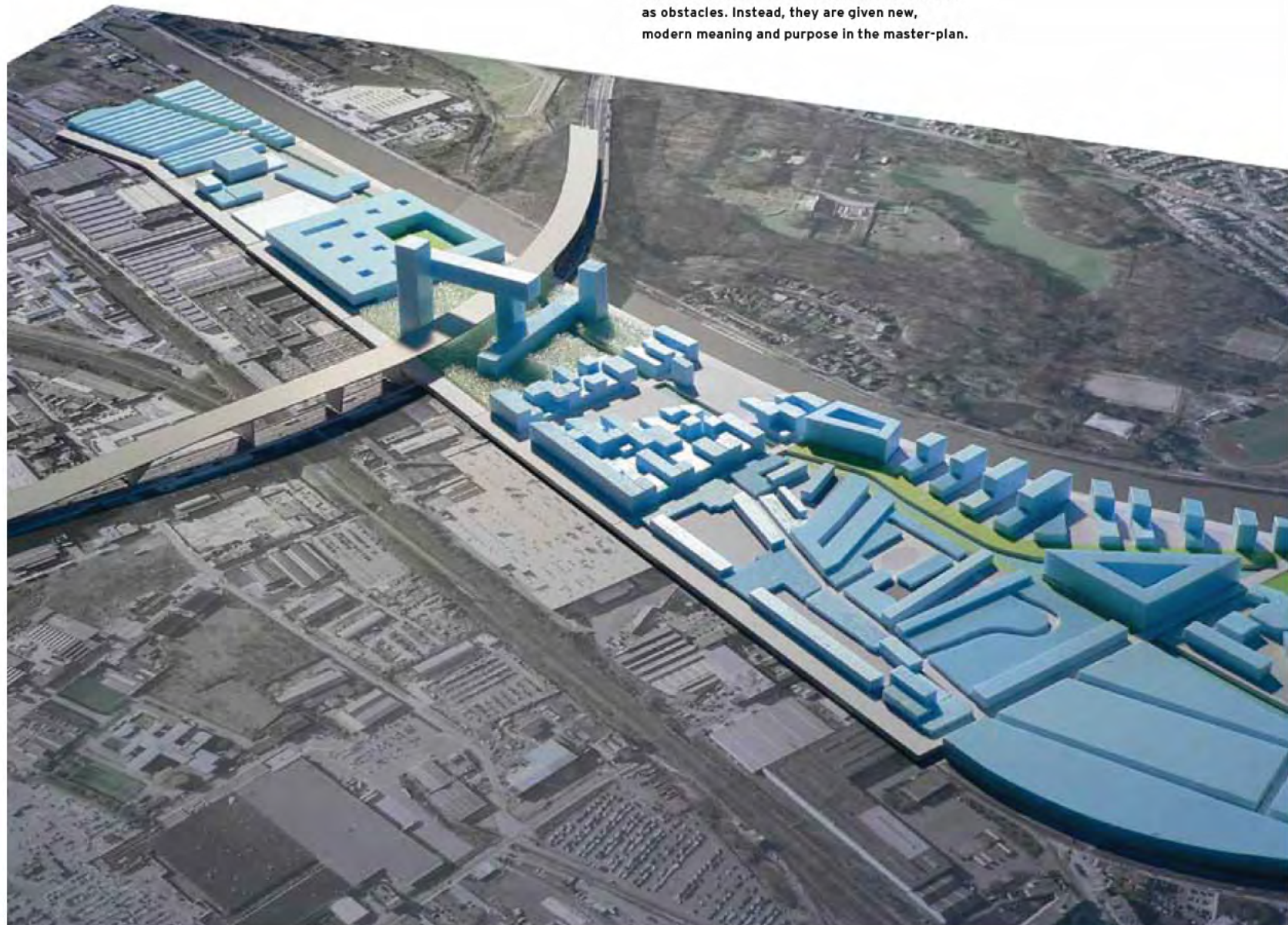
The Watersite project was first outlined in the urban development concept study commissioned by Novovil and PSR Brownfield Developers N.V. and carried out by Xaveer De Geyter Architects. The design's strength lies in the intelligent way the architects dealt with the peculiarities of the site and looked for new objectives for this currently unclassified transitional area. Valuable spatial elements from the environment are used to generate a new, multiple identity for this 'terrain vague'. A number of strong landscape elements such as the Zenne and the Three Fountains Park, as well as the impact of the infrastructure, which has determined the face of Vilvoorde since its industrialisation, are allocated a prominent place in the design. The canal, the Vilvoorde viaduct and the former car assembly plants on Schaarbeeklei are no longer seen as obstacles but are assigned a new, contemporary purpose and meaning in the master plan. The architects define a number of 'pockets' or quadrants in the project area, the elongated strip between the canal and Schaarbeeklei, which have their own character, programme and urban typology. Each pocket seeks a unique connection with its environment. The Zenne and the canal act as connectors between the different pockets. The urban design explicitly presents itself as an open spatial framework that can respond in a flexible manner to undefined parameters and unforeseen circumstances such as market forces, remediation methods, future programmes and functions, the impact of noise pollution etc. The three pockets to the north of the viaduct, located in the vicinity of Vilvoorde's town centre, are mainly focused on housing, employment and leisure. Plans for this area include large-scale housing develop-



Xaveer De Geyter's master-plan for the Watersite divides up the area into six rooms, each with its own character, programme and urban development typology. © Xaveer De Geyter Architects

- 1 Vilvoorde
- 2 Machelen
- 3 Sea Canal
- 4 Vilvoorde Station
- 5 Schaarbeeklei
- 6 Zenne
- 7 Drie Fonteinen Park
- 8 Vilvoorde viaduct
- 9 Renault factory
- 10 De Molens
- 11 De Vaert
- 12 Canal Park

The heavy infrastructure, like the canal, the railway and the viaduct, are no longer regarded as obstacles. Instead, they are given new, modern meaning and purpose in the master-plan.



The eighteenth-century house of correction has been completely renovated. At the rear there will be new flats designed by Robbrecht and Daem and Styfhals & Partners.



The flats in the BOB361 design are connected so that they enjoy the best possible view of the water. The once industrialised canal embankments are almost as appealing as a holiday destination. © BOB361



Layout plan for the Kanaal Park by KuiperCompagnons. A network of roads and paths that branch out into streets in the surrounding neighbourhoods ensures that the Kanaal Park is firmly anchored in its surroundings. A wharf-front boulevard has been laid along the water. © KuiperCompagnons

ments, a school, a hotel, office blocks, a museum, sports grounds and playgrounds, a park and a cycling and pedestrian quayside along the canal. The remaining pockets located more to the south are reserved for economic activities: offices are planned under the viaduct and further along there is space for logistics companies and SME units.

In 2003 the Kanaalpark or the 'green pocket' was the first sub-project to get underway in the Watersite redevelopment. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century 'Tuchthuis' (house of correction) occupies a central position. After its former lives as a reform school, a barracks and a prison and periodically plagued by destruction and degradation, the local authority, in association with a private developer, has completely renovated this historical complex. It now provides space for socio-cultural facilities, a hotel with conference facilities and in a few years may even house a museum. There are plans for new flats at the rear that allude to the form and outline of the original complex. The new building alongside the prison is a design by Robbrecht and Daem Architects in collaboration with Styfhals and Partners. Four spacious plots along the canal are reserved for housing developments. The first complex of flats, a design by BOB361 architects, is already under construction. With its radial design in which the flats are positioned so that they benefit from maximum sunlight and views of the water, the highly industrialised canal banks almost take on the appearance of a holiday destination. There is a stark contrast between these new housing complexes and the surrounding districts. The elevated plinth of the last project means that the building is set apart from the surrounding public space. Caution will be needed to prevent the Kanaalpark from developing into a 'gated community'. The adjacent Kanaalpark is also slowly taking shape. A structure of roads and paths branching out into the streets of surrounding neighbourhoods ensure that the park is firmly anchored in the environment. A quayside promenade will be constructed along the water and with the construction of sports grounds and playgrounds the space under the Vuurkruisen viaduct is transformed from an inhospitable place that bisects the area into a meeting place for young people that reconnects the large-scale open spaces under and adjacent to the viaduct: young people who are already considered as a nuisance by some local residents.

Plans for the 'De Molens' and 'De Vaert' sub-part projects are advancing well. Before the master-plan for the sites was created, landscape architect bureau Bas Smets was tasked by Vilvoorde town council,

Waterwegen and Zeekanaal and PSR Brownfield Developers with creating a land use plan. The bureau took advantage of this opportunity by translating architects Xaveer De Geyter's rather abstract scheme into a plan that was closely linked to the landscape context. In Bas Smets Bureau's landscape design, the three existing linear structures, the canal, the Zenne and the Schaarbeeklei were (re)defined as the backbone of the whole Watersite development. The differences in scale and atmosphere between these parallel structures are exploited to the full. The canal's hard, stone banks and large scale contrast with the soft, natural, green banks of the Zenne and the Schaarbeeklei, which are transformed into an urban boulevard. The diversity of the underlying landscape offers the opportunity to design a range of residential and office typologies to chime with these different characteristics. Thus, the wide, urban canal banks lend themselves perfectly to residential towers, while the banks of the Zenne invite lower buildings. Involving landscape architects at an early stage of the project means that their input is not reduced to the landscaping of whatever outside space remains, as is generally the case in Flanders. In Bas Smets Bureau's landscaping plan, the landscape helps to feed the design vision.

After this, Stéphane Beel and Lieven Achtergael architects, together with landscape architect Bas Smets, developed a master-plan for the sites, for the same organisations. Because of the strategic location, the designers renamed 'De Molens' the 'urban linchpin': the area acts as a nexus that reconnects the currently fragmented relationships and links between the various parts of the city. A new cycle and pedestrian bridge over the canal will connect the Watersite to the Three Fountains Park. With the creation of a central square, the design also takes into account the crossing over the River Zenne and the planned axis that links the church at Machelen to the Willebroek Canal, where a succession of public spaces and facilities (such as the new RER stop) are planned. As the hub of these new connections, the site takes on the appearance of a new urban centre and future development pole. A new urban district will be built here, offering a mix of residential, business and hospitality premises and a school that will be constructed around a central square and along the canal. This will undoubtedly be the Watersite's most densely built-up area, with more than half of the project's additional residential, office and commercial premises.

In the run-up to the Watersite redevelopment project, close collaboration between Novovil, the redevelopment



The area under the Vuurkruisen Viaduct has been transformed from an uninhabitable place into a meeting place for young people.



The River Zenne forms a link through the whole site. The soft banks contrast with the power of the big city.

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**“There is a fear and perception that a gigantic urban renewal project such as the Watersite will mean that a great many of the city’s resources for investing in the public domain will go to this one project. And then the city council will have to explain why the pavement in district x has not yet been repaired. That is something that also has an effect on politicians. The new residents of the Watersite are not today’s electorate, because they don’t live there yet. That is causing a lot of tension.”**

Eva Fonteyn — project leader for Watersite, Vilvoorde

company, Vilvoorde town council, Waterwegen and Zeekanaal N.V. and the private developer was crucial. The redevelopment company used the Cargovil resources (a credit that was built up from the proceeds of the sale of industrial sites to the north of Vilvoorde with the aim of using them as a rolling fund) to proactively acquire derelict land or polluted brownfield sites and subsequently develop them in collaboration with private parties. This is a fundamentally sustainable approach: areas that risk remaining frozen as a result of high remediation costs are recycled instead of cutting into new open spaces. Because of their large scale and strategic location, right next the town centre and close to major roads, these abandoned industrial areas are among the most suitable sites for major urban development projects. Thanks to the rolling fund, the sites and land can be sold at the most appropriate moment. During negotiations with potential investors this offered Novovil the possibility of imposing ambitions other than commercial ones, such as good-quality public spaces. In 2007 collaboration between the various parties began to disintegrate. In this period Jean-Luc Dehaene, the mayor (and former Prime Minister) and the Watersite project’s pacesetter, lost his post. Novovil’s objectives as a redevelopment company were partly cut back and its proactive policy in terms of acquiring strategic property for redevelopment in industrial areas was abandoned. Investments are no longer made due to the unacceptable financial risks involved. This represented an end to the redevelopment company’s role as a spur to urban development processes in areas where the private sector (still) does not take any initiative. Instead Novovil, focuses on remarketing its remaining strategic sites. It resigned from the Watersite management committee and the project management was transferred to the local authority. This had drastic consequences for the further development of the area to the south (classified as a business zone). Before the Watersite project began, the entire area was still owned by several landowners, however in the meantime speculation had transformed this scenario into a multitude of fragmented properties (and increased purchase prices). This shifting ratio limits the financial muscle on the public side and means that the implementation of the Watersite project as a whole has become increasingly dependent on grants.

The fact that there is the potential for Vilvoorde, which historically evolved as an offshoot of the Brussels metropolis, to expand once more into a focus of development within the broader Brussels Region is both an opportunity and a risk. So with regards to the

Watersite expansion, Vilvoorde town council is largely dependent on political decisions over which they themselves have no control. The transport issue (more specifically congestion on the infamous Vilvoorde viaduct and the uncertain timing of the RER stations) remains unanswered for the time being. The chances of the Watersite project succeeding also depend on the coordination of developments taking place outside the project. Parasitic developments such as the planned ‘shopping and leisure’ centre in Machelen, which is focused entirely on its own interests, not only runs counter to sustainable urban regeneration, it also threatens to completely consume the momentum slowly built up in the canal area, to worsen current congestion problems and to jeopardise the future of surrounding commercial town centres and the Watersite redevelopment.

Vilvoorde’s ambivalent position, on the one hand a small satellite town with few resources, on the other struggling with metropolitan issues, constitutes an additional challenge. In the Watersite project this is for example illustrated in the ownership of the sports grounds and playgrounds under the viaduct on Vuurkruisenlaan. Hurried along by completion deadlines related to European grants, well-designed terrains have been laid out in the middle of what still constitutes a building site. There was no attention to any kind of social control and as a result the surrounding neighbourhoods soon began to complain about loitering youths. Vilvoorde is no average Flemish borough; its metropolitan, multicultural character provides its own dynamic, but is also the cause of potential tension between current residents and newcomers, between people with higher and lower incomes, between immigrants and locals, between young and old. The Watersite redevelopment cannot ignore this reality. The development of the ‘yellow’ pocket (including Het Broek industrial district) might be the litmus test. Unlike the others, this pocket is still actively occupied and used today. In addition to the Marie-José social housing district that dates from the 1950s and 1960s, there are, in the wake of public investments, ongoing private initiatives such as the redevelopment of two former factory sheds into lofts and office space where, among others, the Woestijnvis television company has established its offices. There are also highly ambitious plans in the pipeline for this area. Will it be redeveloped in the future according to the same logic?: focused exclusively on high-quality urban developments whose main objective is to attract new functions, residents and users and which ensures that the land’s maximum potential is achieved? Or will there also be space for

urban development processes, which in the shadow of the rash of development adjacent pockets, will have the time to grow up organically, and which can help soften the potential stark contrast between present-day Vilvoorde and the new urban district. Here too only

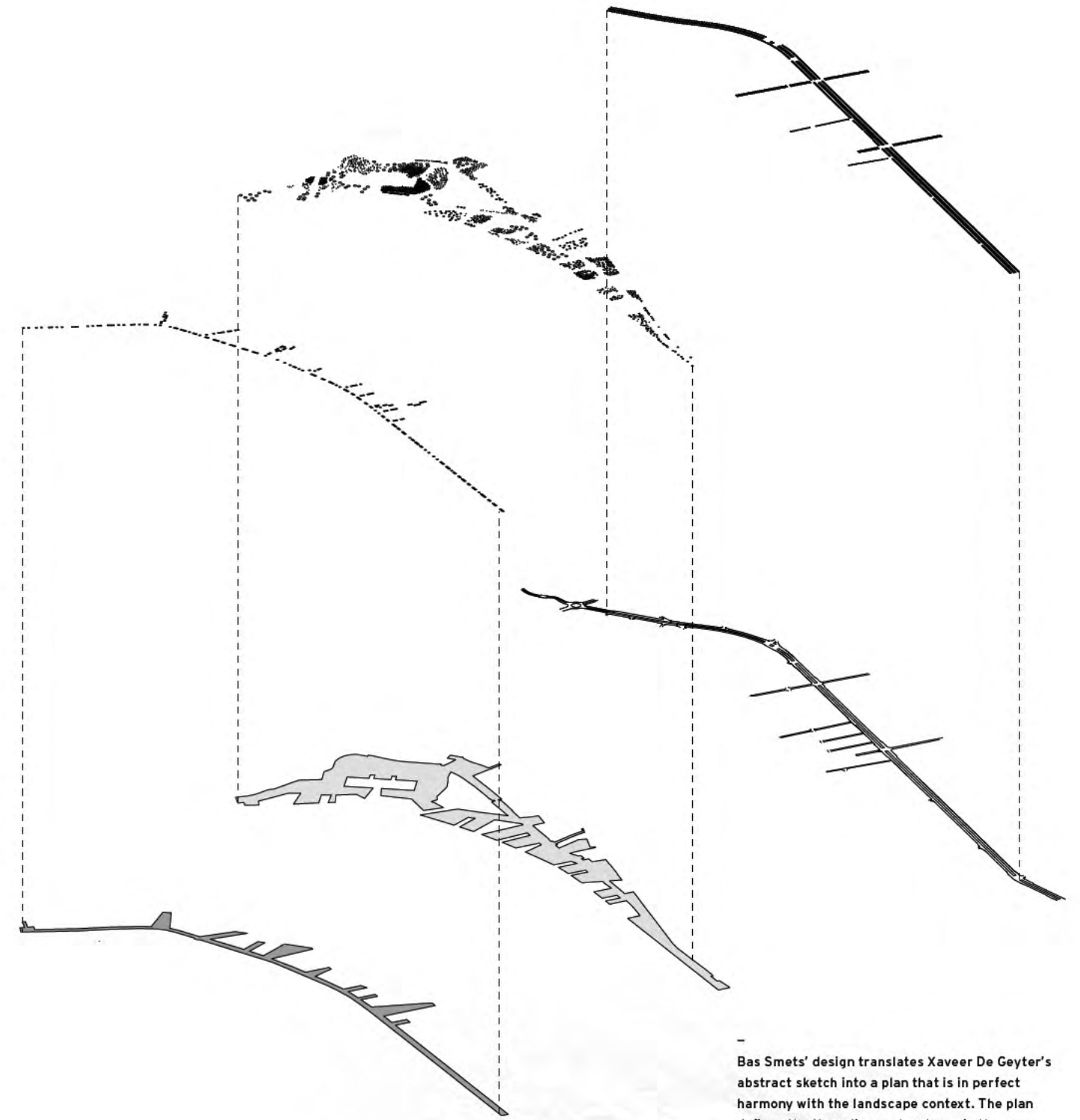
time will tell whether we will succeed in the vision that Xaveer De Geyter Architects had in mind when they designed their master plan for the Watersite: a urban district that does not stand alone but seeks connections with what already exists.



- De Molens forms a new urban centre with a GEN (regional express network) station, amongst other things. A mix of dwellings, office space, schools and hotels and restaurants will be built around the central square and along the canal.

© Beel-Achtergael - Bureau Bas Smets

- Master-plan for De Molens and De Vaert by Beel-Achtergael and Bas Smets. The area is a link that once again connects up the different parts of the city. © Beel-Achtergael - Bureau Bas Smets



- Bas Smets' design translates Xaveer De Geyter's abstract sketch into a plan that is in perfect harmony with the landscape context. The plan defines the three linear structures in the area - the canal, the Zenne and the Schaarbeeklei - as key support systems for the entire development of the Watersite. © Bureau Bas Smets





Nieuw-Sledderlo lies on the edge of the Kempish plateau, four kilometres from the town of Genk and in the middle of a pine wood. Genk town council decided to explore the future potential of this unfinished satellite town and its surroundings.

Unfinished town

**Nieuw Sledderlo: satellite town, New Town or company town? Opinions are divided on the exact title. What is certain is that, in a landscape dominated by ribbon development, Nieuw Sledderlo was at the time one of the rare attempts in Belgium to create a district using modernist planning principles.**

Only an attempt however, because only a fraction of the ambitious plans drawn up by the Dutch urban designers Embden was ever carried out. While private investors were initially relied on to build around 20,000 homes, in the end only the social housing company was found willing to construct around 600. Not much came of the planned civic centre due to a lack of support, and a lack of resources meant that the planned motorway to the centre of Genk did not materialise either.

Nieuw Sledderlo lies on the edge of the Kempen plateau, four kilometres from the town of Genk, in the middle of a pine forest close to Caetsbeek valley and the agricultural villages of Terboekt and Oud-Sledderlo. A few years ago Genk's local authority, which own the entire area, took the initiative of reconsidering the future possibilities for this unfinished town and its immediate environment. There were various reasons for this. The poor physical condition of some of the housing meant that it needed to be renovated and in some cases demolished. The fact that Sledderlo's inhabitants predominantly consisted of Turkish and Moroccan migrants resulted in the district acquiring a negative image. Its isolated location and poor access combined with a lack of facilities remained a major issue. At the request of Genk's local authority, the Onderzoeksgroep Stedenbouw en Architectuur (OSA) (Town Planning and Architectural Research Group) from KU Leuven carried out a feasibility study in 2007, which formed the basis for formulating a project definition. This led to an important shift in ideas for this area. Rather than

dutifully filling up open space between existing districts, which had been the plan up until now, the study underlined the importance of infrastructure and landscape in restructuring this area. The project submitted by the temporary association of BUUR (urban planning firm) and Bas Smets (landscape architect) was selected in the Flemish Government Architect's Open Call procedure.

In line with the findings of the preliminary study, in the master-plan by BUUR and Bas Smets the creation of additional housing was no longer an objective in itself, but a development linked to structural measures to revive the area as a whole. This special landscape structure forms the basis of the design. Against the prevailing notion that (all forms of) nature should as far as possible be preserved, the landscape architect Bas Smets proposed that the thick and unmanaged pine forest, which for many years had been purely functional and used only to produce timber for mining, wasn't actually interesting from an ecological or landscape perspective. The forest concealed the landscape. In response to the landscape's topography, hydrography and vegetation, the former pine forest on the edge of the Kempens plateau will be selectively cleared, thinned out and enhanced. A number of residential lobes will be constructed on the cleared areas. A new residential urban loop will weave new and existing residential centres (Terboekt, Oud and Nieuw Sledderlo) together into one coherent body. This loop of residential centres, alternating with green corridors, ensures that formerly isolated districts are tacked on to the surrounding road network. Broad, green corridors between the residential centres connect the adjacent natural areas in Caetsbeek valley, which is no longer concealed by the dense pine forest, with the central, accessible 'park wood' inside the residential loop. In other words, changing the landscape (reevaluation of Caetsbeek valley) and infrastructure (opening it up via the main access road) introduces a supra-local scale to the area.

The relief provides natural water drainage from the new residential areas to the Caetsbeek. The addition of four new 'residential lobes', which provide a total of 600 new homes, is used to expand the limited availability of public facilities, drastically improve the area's infrastructure, create a better social mix and revalue the surrounding countryside. The existing centre in Oud-Sledderlo will be further enhanced with many public and commercial facilities such as a school, a post office and a bank, etc. This will be boosted with recreational infrastructure such as a park route, forest paths and cycling routes that will enable the qualities of the surrounding landscape to take their rightful place. By planting the new residential districts in the midst of a green area, the plan deliberately responds to the needs and desires of a more prosperous public. The area strives for a better social mix with a combination of a wide variety of housing and a mixture of social housing for rent and private homes for sale. The town is counting on newcomers from outside the area, as well as a real demand from second and third generation migrants who have grown up in Sledderlo.

In addition to an extensive collection of draft proposals, BUUR and Bas Smets' design also provided some controversy. The Flemish government's Environment, Nature and Energy Department questioned the decision to move away from continuous building between Oud and Nieuw Sledderlo, which would mean that the forest and Caetsbeek valley would no longer be a contiguous green space. Nevertheless people still believed in the advantages offered by the proposal put forward by BUUR and Bas Smets. For this spatial concept to be achieved, new open space had to be created. Simultaneously this draft proposal took on the challenge of reinforcing the area's spatial and social capacity. To compensate, the designers were asked to reduce the drawbacks of the master-plan as much as possible and to adapt the design so that it was (even) more attuned to the ecological context. The end result is that the entire area not only qualifies as a residential area, but is also recognised as an essential part of the green corridors in Limburg's landscape. This means that the area's natural green space will be preserved at all costs and that only selective clearing will be permitted, even on private building plots. Furthermore various measures have been taken that focus on conserving

the different biotopes and which take into account the migration of animal species found in the area.

In the Sledderlo project, not only was attention paid to reinforcing the spatial structure and ecological sustainability, but social sustainability was high on the agenda too. As a result of increasing concerns about safety and the area's social stigma, people from Genk refer to Sledderlo as 'little Chicago', the local authority was becoming aware that inaction was no longer an option. This was linked to an open and innovative participation process through every stage of the project. The local knowledge of residents, users, civil society groups and other concerned players was already called on when the project definition was being formulated. The working methods used (studies, workshops, events, photographs, ambassadors and so on) are fairly traditional. However, its strength lies in the regard for groups that are normally excluded from communication and participation.

There are various explanations of why the participation process worked so well in Genk. The fact that the town has a long tradition of neighbourhood work and community development definitely played a role. The community service's know-how is closely linked to Genk's distinct history: the decline of the coalmines, the high rate of unemployment, the high proportion of social housing and the presence of a large number of immigrants. The constructive interaction between the various municipal departments is also worth mentioning here. Furthermore Sledderlo possesses an exceptionally strong social dynamic as a town where many Turkish and Moroccan immigrants arrive. It was this dynamic that had already saved the area from ruin at the beginning of the 1980s when an active group of residents successfully campaigned for a number of necessary additional investments such as the construction of sports and playing fields, the appointment of community workers and the establishment of a bus route to the town centre. The district's self-generating abilities have recently been demonstrated by the construction of a mosque financed by the Turkish community itself. With regards to participation, Genk, together with other cities such as Ghent and Antwerp, is a frontrunner in Flanders. Here participation is no longer viewed as a poor relation of urban renewal, but as an integral part of the planning process.



BUUR and Bas Smets' master-plan grasps the opportunities presented by the completion of four new 'housing lobes', with their diverse range of residential typologies, to expand the limited range of public services offered and to strengthen the surrounding landscape. A loop around the whole area eliminates the many dead-end streets and links the different areas together. The areas' radial arrangement means that the pine wood is given a far more central position, thus transforming it into an attractive, accessible 'woodland park'. © BUUR – Bureau Bas Smets

- 1 Nieuw-Sledderlo
- 2 Oud-Sledderlo
- 3 Woodland park
- 4 Connecting loop
- 5 New areas