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*An Assemblage of Assemblers**The Hyper-contextualism of the 2006 Antwerp Strategic Structural Plan s-RSA*

Christian Salewski and Simon Kretz

The Strategic Antwerp Structural Plan (s-RSA), enacted by the Antwerp City Council in 2006, was a fine piece of plan-making that brought together a combination of places, wishes, and actors to participate in a profound transformation process over a period of ten years. Today, it remains an exemplary product that intelligently combined strategy, urban design, and narrative planning in an unprecedented way.¹ Despite all of these positive qualities, its success still depended on the right actor constellation in the City of Antwerp at the time of implementation; a situation that has changed in the meantime when political majorities shifted after the municipal elections of 2012. As a best practice case of plan-making, the s-RSA has remained influential and inspiring until today. In this article, we investigate its context and basic structure to explain how the plan and the plan-making process were able to make an assemblage of the heterogeneous issues, places, and actors.

We are not aiming for a general reflection on planning theory, rather for an analysis and depiction of the planning structure and processes of the s-RSA through the lens of this special issue of *disP*. Our main sources are the s-RSA itself, published by its lead designers, Italian architects and urban designers, Paola Viganò and the late Bernardo Secchi; in-depth interviews with Paola Viganò, the long-standing permanent advisor to the City of Antwerp, Prof. Jef Van den Broeck, who has also described the process in a number of publications, and Kristiaan Borret, the City Architect during the implementation period. We would like to express our gratitude to all of them for their time and support.

Background

Antwerp, located on the banks of the Scheldt River in Flanders, is one of Europe's great historic centers. Even today, its harbor is one of the biggest in the world. Since the 1940s, Antwerp has undergone several dramatic urban transformations. Grand urban and infrastructure projects, many of which were designed to

accommodate the automobile, replaced much of the large-scale destruction from World War II. The harbor grew exponentially, underwent automatization, and shifted geographically further north towards the open sea. The city center experienced a sustained and dramatic loss of population due to suburbanization, while the post-colonial influx of immigrants led to extreme ethnic diversity. Not least, turbulent politics in Belgium and Flanders and the rise of the European Union led to ongoing changes in legal, financial, and administrative structures. As a result, Antwerp became one of the most starkly divided European cities in terms of politics, ethnicity, and socio-economics, while struggling financially to keep up with the loss of workplaces and inhabitants (Secchi 2007: 8). The creation of the s-RSA has to be regarded within this context, however, as the process has been described in detail elsewhere, it will not be repeated here (cf. Van den Broeck et al. 2015).

By the 1990s, the city faced substantial urban problems. In a political stalemate that left the administration paralyzed, non-governmental institutions were founded to improve the situation through civil initiatives. Two important projects were 1) the transformation of the red-light district and 2) the development of socially oriented, integrated neighborhood schemes in deprived areas (cf. Christaens et al. 2007). Over the course of the 1990s, planning by means of federal, provincial, and municipal structure plans became mandatory.

At the same time, political pressure was building up due to the increasing success of the Flemish extremist, xenophobic and nationalistic party, notably in the municipal elections of 2000. When a financial affair eventually led to the main aldermen being replaced in 2003 and the socialist Patrick Janssens became mayor, where he remained until 2012, the municipal government saw its chance to take back control by returning such urban development projects to the city administration and by coordinating the many ongoing projects through planning. In this process, the municipal structure plan became an important tool (Van den Broeck et al. 2015: 119).

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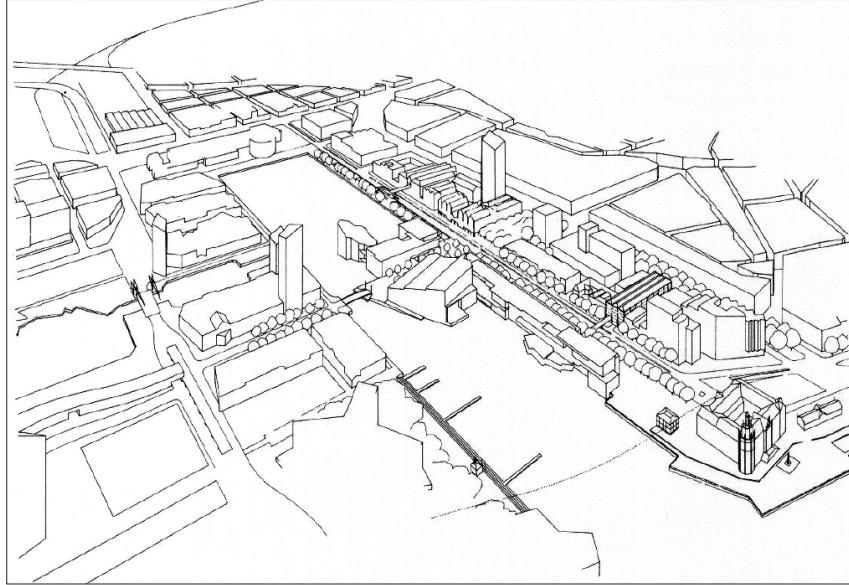


Fig. 1: Stad an de Stroom, Project Proposal for the island area, Manuel de Solà-Morales, 1990. (Source: *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen*, 78/1991, p 41)

The Open Structure of the s-RSA

The s-RSA was not a single plan, but a collection of tools, plans, images and strategies. These different parts were related in two ways. First, the overarching, but not explicitly stated, topic of "living together" (Viganò 2015) was a meta-framework that worked as a thematic selector. It related not only to the famous past of Antwerp as a flourishing trading city, a place of civic pride and tolerance, but also to the present deficiencies of Antwerp as a spatially splintered and socially segregated city. Second, the multitude of parts was organized into a sophisticated methodological structure containing and relating the following sub-frames: Scenario Zero, Images, Framing Scenarios, Spaces and Actions. The sub-frames, for example, Images and Spaces, were not linked up to rigid causal chains. In fact, it was quite the opposite: their mutual relationships were meant to be reciprocal (see Fig. 2).

The structure was neither hierarchical nor teleological, but rather an open framework, assembling imaginary, spatial and process parts. This had several advantages:

1. Its representation as a list was intellectually open and created the possibility for other actors to add images, relevant spaces or strategies. Theoretically, it was adaptable through its structure.
2. Such a framework had an open process and the ability to outlive the planners, since it focused on assembling and shaping collective memories and visions of the past, the present, and the future. The open structure of the plan

aimed not only at assembling existing actors, ideas, and spaces, but left room for yet unknown elements.

3. The framework was methodologically open and was not only a plan, but was foremost a clearly structured methodological set-up that allowed for alterations and feedback loops.

Although most contemporary plans claim to be flexible, the s-RSA had a deep structural flexibility that could actually incorporate criticism and feedback information. The structural flexibility was clearly shown in the feedback session in 2009: Although the plan had been criticized for underestimating the ecological and social dimensions, this did not lead to abandoning the structural plan, but instead to adding new topics and issues to its structural layout (Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 231). The framework of the s-RSA was at its core evolutionally conceived. Within the framework, each sub-frame played both an analytical and a synthetic role and had the function of an assembler: An assembler of different actors, spaces, documents, and ideas. In the following, the different parts of the structure will be briefly presented and their function as assemblers traced.

Scenario Zero: A Baseline

Scenario Zero was a "project atlas". It compiled images, plans, projects, and strategies of the recent past and served as an overview of the existing planned landscape, a baseline for further development of the s-RSA and, concurrently, as a delimitation of the field of study (see Fig. 3).

Scenario Zero

(A Project Atlas)

Images

(Antwerp as ...)

... Water City

... Eco-City

... Harbor City

... Rail City

... Porous City

... Villages and Metropolis

... in a Megacity

Framing Scenarios

(What if ...?)

Space for Water
(... water defines a new park network?)

Growing Nature
(... nature grows and moves?)

Contact Spaces
(... the port hosts some urban functions?) etc.

A City along the Rails
(... the rail network structures the city?)

Porosities
(... Antwerp returns to the city?)

Mixing and Clustering
(... spatial policy were to increase diversity?) etc.

Living in the Megacity
(tunneling effects become dominant?) etc.

Strategic Spaces

Hard Spine

Soft Spine

Green Singel

Living Canal

Lower Network and Civic Centers

Strategic Projects

- Antwerp North: a contact space
- Eilandje: a space between
- The wharfs: one and many
- etc.

- Scheldtpark
- Zuidpark
- Schijnvallei Park
- etc.

- Singel Zuid
- Berchem Station
- Borgerhout
- etc.

- Merksem border
- Deurne border

- Parkway
- Civic Centers
- Hoboken
- etc.

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Fig. 2: Structural diagram of the s-RSA. (Image by the authors)



Fig. 3: Scenario Zero. (Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 18)

In Paola Viganò's view, these existing projects were not just seen as a compilation of possible development options of the past, but as "intellectual investigations" into the social and material reality of Antwerp (Viganò 2015). According to the design theorist Donald Schön, design projects are "experiments that serve to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation" (Schön 1983: 68). In this dual sense, they deserved careful study.

In addition to the learning process of re-reading existing ideas, the analysis and incorporation of these visions and plans served to both understand and assemble a multitude of actors and their motivations. Viganò speaks of the Scenario Zero as a very important device because it not only helped the planners in a reflective way to better understand the actor networks and power geometries of Antwerp, but also helped in a strategic sense to include different stakeholders and gain their needed support for the s-RSA. It is quite telling that there was no opposition from any political party in the early phase of implementation (Viganò 2015). However, the conceptualization of Scenario Zero as an "atlas" did not preclude the omission of very relevant projects: the inclusion of the Flemish Province's plan to complete the highway ring around Antwerp with a new bridge over the Scheldt River was politically not wanted by the City Council, and the entire question of future harbor development, a core element of Antwerp's economy, was left aside because its planning was not within the responsibility – nor the possibility – of the city (Borret 2015). The resulting broad consensus was therefore, at least partly, bought by a trade-off in scope, which naturally limited its influence on major urban development issues.

Images

Over the past decades, the roles played by urban design and the demands made on it have changed as a result of the alterations in its working environment. For one, decision-making processes became more complicated as they were integrated into complex democratic procedures and into diverse expert bodies with different specialist fields. Furthermore, urban design concepts now clearly have to take into account diverse networks of protagonists with different motivations and ideals. Accordingly, there is no sign of a clear urban understanding shared by everyone, nor is the urban design expert credited with having superior competence

(Meili et al. 2010). Under these changed conditions, the portrayal and legitimization of the sought-after future, and thereby both the interpretation of the present with respect to the past and the formulation of the path to be taken, have become two of the most important tasks in the urban designer's field of activity. According to Secchi and Viganò, a "shared vision" is nevertheless needed (Secchi, Viganò 2009b: 182).

The way in which the s-RSA took these considerations into account was not to use just a single image, but a handful of images: Antwerp as Water City, Antwerp as Eco-City, Antwerp as Harbor City, Antwerp as Rail City, Antwerp as Porous City, Antwerp: Villages and Metropolis, and Antwerp in a Megacity. This process of laying out the different facets of the imagery of Antwerp had the following effects:

First, the set of images assembled a multitude of actors and opened up a fruitful debate about the meaningfulness and productive use of images or ideas. In this context, using traditional and easy digestible images, as well as new and less tangible images, many actors could be introduced step-by-step into unknown intellectual territory and the new challenges of the contemporary city (Viganò 2015). As an example, the image of the Water City was a deep-rooted source of imagination in Antwerp, both in everyday experiences as well as in the collective memory (see Fig. 4).

The way in which this well-known image was accepted and internalized could be methodologically used as a model in order to shift towards more recent and less known images, such as Antwerp as Porous City (see Fig. 5). Images, not in the sense of polished project-selling devices, but as open discursive imaginaries, could be used to assemble, rearrange and relate different historical reference points, temporal frames and thematic perspectives. Each image was then turned into a framing scenario, a playful design exercise that highlighted the spatial potential of each thematic image and depicted possible futures (cf. Salewski 2012: 46–49). For example, the image of a Rail City was turned into a scenario called: What if ... the rail network structures the city? (see Fig. 6) (Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 97).

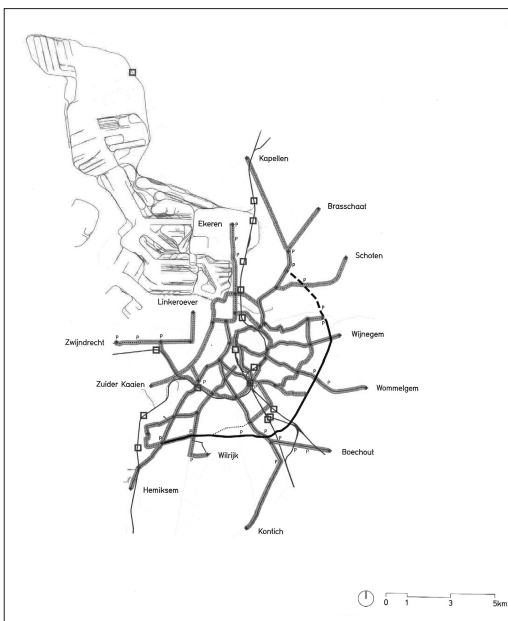
These framing scenarios located relevant spatial transformation potential through research by design investigations and therefore bridged the gap between the realm of imaginative ideas and strategic spaces. For the designers, these became instrumental in communicating the s-RSA's images through concrete spatial maps and test projects to both experts



Fig. 4: View of Antwerp with the frozen Scheldt (1590) by Lucas van Valckenborch. (Source: *Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie*. Frankfurt am Main)



Fig. 5: Antwerp as Porous City. (Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 110)



and lay people, even if the precision of the maps were sometimes misinterpreted as project proposals (Viganò 2015; Borret 2015). As discursive tools, the images eventually proved quite useful and long-lasting, as they “initiated always interesting discussions between the members [of the Commission of Spatial Planning who advised the City Board] on the ‘vision’ level,” as Van den Broeck recalled (Van den Broeck 2016b).

Strategic Spaces, Generic Spaces and Strategic Projects

The set of Images was mirrored by a set of Strategic Spaces, each including a set of strategic projects: Hard Spine, Soft Spine, Green Singel, Living Canal, Lower Network and Civic Centers. Images and Strategic Spaces were not

Fig. 6: Framing Scenario: What if the rail network structures the city? (Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 100)

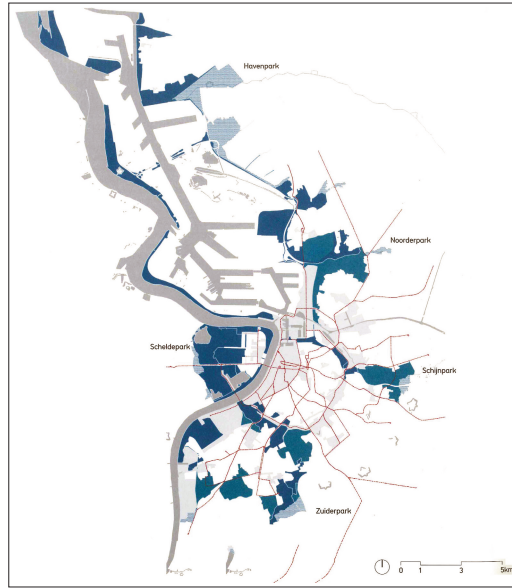


Fig. 7: Soft Spine: Programs and Projects.
(Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 200)

in a linear relationship but in a dialogic relationship and co-constituted the heterogeneous thematic-spatial argumentation of the s-RSA, being at the same time spatially precise and open for different interpretations. “Both are the result of a design-oriented approach, where description and interpretation forcefully play selective and constructive roles” (Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 177).

The Strategic Spaces were chosen and delimited after a careful evaluation of the Scenario Zero and its existing projects and plans (Aerts 2014: 48). Each one created a continuous territorial link between the core city area and the fringes of the metropolitan region, and thus became relevant for both. The Soft Spine, for example, was a park network consisting of five parks and several connecting landscape elements in order to provide a large-scale green



Fig. 8: Soft Spine: Spoornoordpark, February 2009.
(Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 204)



Fig. 9: Green River. Design Investigation.
(Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 216)

continuity for humans, as well as flora and fauna (see Fig. 7). This trans-scalar design approach did not stratify different planning scales or professions, but connected the spheres of architecture, urban design and regional planning thematically and spatially (see Fig. 8). In this context, the Strategic Spaces set forced regional plans and local plans to embrace a strong reciprocal relationship and become assemblers of different scales and their corresponding challenges, documents, planning offices, infrastructures, and political agendas.

The Strategic Spaces were meant to be the areas in which the city should invest its main resources and were therefore related to the Strategic Projects, which were concrete de-



Fig. 10: Built Strategic Project: Saturday Market on the square, February 2005. (Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 190)

velopment projects assembling local developers, the neighborhood communities, future inhabitants and, of course, the city's planning bureau, all of which were coupled to the city's budget planning. The distinction between Strategic Spaces and non-strategic spaces, later coined Generic Spaces, was a core strategy of the s-RSA (Borret 2015). The Strategic Spaces not only channeled the transformation process, it also led to a fundamental restructuring of the municipal planning office. In a new, generously funded and politically well-supported administration, the *Autonom Gemeentebedrijf Stadsplanning* (AG Stan), is a group of planners who are each responsible for implementing projects for one of the Strategic Spaces. However, the planning responsibility for the non-strategic spaces still resides with the existing, but dramatically reduced planning administration (Borret 2015; Van den Broeck 2015).

This concentration of resources was highly debated, since its selectivity served not only to focus on the most relevant spaces, but also excluded other areas from development. In a feedback workshop in 2006, the problematic issue of the non-strategic spaces was already being debated (Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 230). From then on, the Generic Spaces were also taken care of individually and no longer treated as leftovers from the Strategic Spaces. However, Antwerp as Porous City became the leading image for their urban development, mainly small-scale urban renewal, and eventually, an additional municipal planning team was set up at AG Stan to investigate and plan

them (Borret 2015; Van den Broeck 2015). The fact that additional structural and process elements could be invented and added to the s-RSA showed critical awareness and the deep structural flexibility of the s-RSA, especially its integrating potential for unknown actors and their motives.

For Paola Viganò, urban transformation takes place in a “framework of non-monolithic and separated knowledge”, and the process of translating concepts and ideas expressed in a plan makes an urban project a vital “producer of knowledge” that helps enable and guide that transformation in an open yet directing manner (Viganò 2012: 24 f). That is why the open, evolutionary framework of the s-RSA is as important as its ideas: In combination, it is a platform that opens multiple possible futures across scales, spaces, policies, and actors to conceptualize upcoming transformation processes.

During its ten years of implementation, the trans-scalar and non-linear relationship of Images and Spaces became essential in defining the boundaries of a field of political negotiation and interpretation for each project that was realized: Not the plan, but the built spaces eventually defined how the parts of the s-RSA came together (see Fig. 10) (Borret 2015). The use of Scenario Zero ensured that this was true even for core projects that had already been in planning or execution before the s-RSA was conceived. A good example is the new Palace of Justice by Richard Rogers as the southern grand finale of the Hard Spine: they too, were “assembled” into the plan (Aerts 2014: 48).

Jef Van den Broeck, Professor for Spatial Planning at SCHOOL and a permanent advisor for the City of Antwerp, supervised the team responsible for the design of the s-RSA (2003–2006). On the one hand, the Italian architects and urban designers Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò, who took the lead of the external team they formed together with Iris Consulting and Steffens en Meertens; and on the other hand Katlijn van der Veeke, project leader for the city-internal team (Van den Broeck et al. 2015: 121). Secchi and Viganò had been chosen in a closed call for offers. This choice for designers who did not speak Flemish and had no previous experience in Northern European projects proved to be very fruitful: Initially closely guided by Jef van den Broeck, their outsiders' perspective combined with personal charm and inquisitiveness helped to overcome vested interests and suspicion – or, as Paola Viganò recalled, the process of translation in public and official meetings could be useful in de-fusing tensions or initiating a collaborative effort to better understand each other's argument (Van den Broeck 2015; Viganò 2015).

The academic affiliations of the main protagonists also helped, as it led to support from Antwerp University's Institute of Architecture and Planning, where students drew spatial development scenarios to test possible consequences of concepts and ideas of the s-RSA. The resulting combination of open-mindedness for foreign designers, academic investigation, and a communicative culture on matters of urban development did not emerge spontaneously. In hindsight, Van den Broeck emphasized the importance of the long lead-up of academic, professional, and civil society debates on urban development that made the project possible, and the political and legal preconditions, such as the new 1996 Flemish planning law and the changes in the city government that brought politicians into power who wanted to improve urban development in Antwerp (Van den Broeck 2016a).

In Van den Broeck's words, "The vision was based upon existing ideas, opinions and concepts which were mainly developed by the different stakeholders in civil society in the years prior to this" (Van den Broeck 2016a: 5). One example is the origins of an important innovation of the s-RSA: its focus on spatial quality with the use of design, which would have been unlikely without the previous experience of the privately initiated events *Stad an de Stroom*

(City on the River) from 1990 to 1994 and the 1993 Antwerp European Cultural Capital's thematic focus on urban issues (see Fig. 1).

Van den Broeck argued that any change in urban development needed a "movement" of stakeholders, and "charismatic individuals and planners" (Van den Broeck 2016a: 7). In Antwerp, a long history of urban development had created just such a momentum in civil society, along with a crucial role of academia in the form of the planning schools and their protagonists who took part in the organizations, events, and debates, with Van den Broeck and the Italian architects being some of those "charismatic planners" with substantial influence (Van den Broeck 2016a: 10).

By not focusing on "norms and values" beyond influence, the network of planners, cultural entrepreneurs, administrators, and others put their efforts into changing what Van den Broeck calls the context: "Characteristics [...] of an area and of the planning, property situations, existing views, ambitions, interests, clashing values and relationships of power tensions between stakeholders, their role, their mission and mandate" (Van den Broeck 2016a: 7). This was a pragmatic attitude because "agreements will be based on common interests rather than on common – often clashing – values" (Van den Broeck 2016a: 11).

For the architect Luc Deleu, one resulting weakness of the approach was that "the s-RSA walks on well-beaten paths" (Deleu 2007). Yet, in contrast to the plans and projects that had beaten those paths before, the s-RSA was enacted and major elements implemented. Besides its pragmatic, or maybe even conservative attitude in content and the favorable political context, two important factors for its success were the structure of the s-RSA itself and the reorganization of the city's administration and budgeting that mirrored that structure (Van Den Broeck 2016a: 11; Aerts 2014: 51).

In the first year of the implementation process, the interaction between the designers and the city's planning department had been difficult. According to Viganò, the young members of the official team were interested, professional, and ambitious, but had a complete lack of imagination with respect to their new vision of city development and its consequences in testing out new forms of processes. These problems were overcome by drastically restructuring the planning department according to the structure of the s-RSA, hiring a new team, and, most importantly, the work of Katlijn van der Veken who became responsible for the implementa-

tion. In the following years, the designers could eventually draw back from the implementation process, as the s-RSA proved clear enough to provide guidance, but was also flexible enough for interpretation, refinement, and further development by the city planners (Borret 2015; Van den Broek 2015; Viganò 2015).

While Van den Broeck lauded the changes in the mode of urban planning and urban transformation as a finally achieved turn to a professionalization of the process and an achievement of “urban quality”, a concept with a focus on the spatial quality of public space and architecture; critics saw the s-RSA as one step in a larger shift of power, goals, set-up, and actors in a decades-long urban transformation process in Antwerp.

According to Etienne Christiaens, Frank Moulart and Bie Bosmans:

“These changes can be summarized as a gradual transition from a creative division of labor between civil society organizations on the one hand [...], and City Hall on the other, to a situation where City Hall has regained full control over urban development by integrating successful social innovation-based initiatives from neighborhood organizations into the city administration, and by replacing the social focus of the 1990s with a real-estate-driven urban policy, supported by new methods of public management and ‘fitting’ discursive technologies justifying the new urban policy wave, a development that was influenced in varying ways by the parallel evolution of financial funds, e.g. EU, federal or regional, a succession of political majorities in City Hall, and changing relationships with civil society.” (Christaens et al. 2007: 239)

These views reveal stark political differences, echoing “a vicious ideological discourse” about urban transformation in the 1990s (Christaens et al. 2007: 245). They help to place the s-RSA into a broader and historical context of a city in a rough, on-going, deep transformation process in its economy, its politics, and its society.

Accordingly, the successful implementation of the s-RSA may be owed mostly to the confluence of factors that led to a decade in which one particular view on urban development became prevalent, or at least held together a new network of able and increasingly empowered actors with a shared belief in urban quality, professional planning, a belief in the public benefits of public space, and preference for selected strategic projects that had leverage to improve the city beyond their building perimeter. Or, as Secchi put it, a market-driven approach in which “museums, congress halls, airports, and

shopping malls, situated in a fragmented urban realm, are seen as the key infrastructure for our present competitive and less egalitarian society” (Secchi 2007: 7).

From Renovatio Urbis to Organized Complexity

The designers were sensitive to the existing situation in the city, which became their starting point for the design process of the s-RSA, and worked closely together with the administration, but also with politicians, which eventually became an important factor for the successful enactment (Van den Broeck et al. 2015: 121). Right from the beginning, Secchi and Viganò made clear that no new vision was needed, but that “all building pieces are there and it is only necessary to put them together, to choose a clear direction and to realize the vision” (Van den Broeck et al. 2015: 121). The s-RSA eventually became an assemblage of artifacts and actors, bound together by strong narratives, both visual and verbal, and powerful institutional frameworks.

Consequently, they called their most important key concept *renovatio urbis*, a 16th-century term used for great urban transformation in Italian Renaissance, such as Pope Julius II’s projects for Rome (see Fig. 11). With a reference to Foscari and Tafuri, Secchi described it as “the reshaping of the cities of that time in visual, functional, social and economic terms through

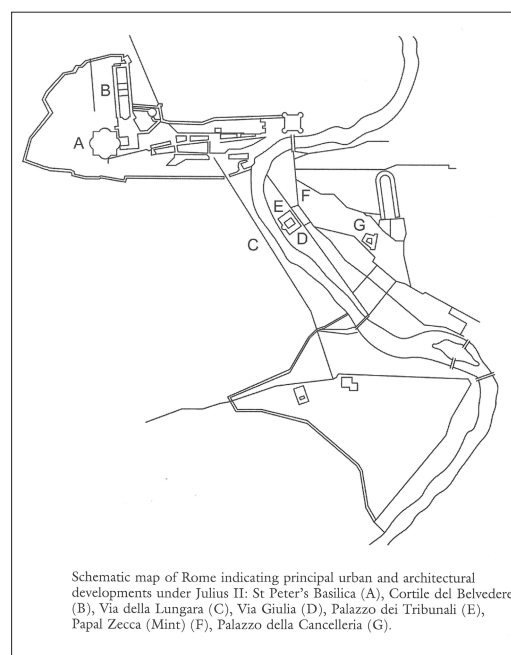


Fig. 11: *Renovatio Urbis*. Schematic map of Rome indicating principal urban and architectural developments under Julius II. (Source: Temple, N. (2011): *Renovatio Urbis: Architecture, Urbanism and Ceremony in the Rome of Julius II*. London: Routledge, p. 46)



Fig. 12: An Illustration of a Strategic Project: Parkway, Wijnegem, Design Concept. (Source: Secchi, Viganò 2009a: 226)

a few strategic interventions related to then-recent innovations in art, technology, navigation, and associated colonial exploitations,” thereby connecting to the dynamic social, political, and economic situation they were confronted with in Antwerp (Secchi 2007: 6). Since the 1980s, Secchi had developed this approach in a succession of projects for Italian towns and landscapes.

For Antwerp, Secchi and Viganò’s project “developed a series of hypothetical scenarios rooted in the collective imagination of Antwerp residents in order to inspire and legitimize specific urban design projects” (Secchi 2007: 10). In their view, this was necessary for two reasons:

1. The previous Antwerp policies of separation and fragmentation had led to non-interacting enclaves and could not support an ecologically sound urban system.
2. Because every *renovatio urbis* faces the problem of its legitimacy: Why this intervention and not another? Why there and not elsewhere? Why now and not at a different time, or within a different sequence? Why this architecture and image and not a different one? (Secchi 2007: 7, 9f).

Essentially, the s-RSA was critical in supporting the political choice of concentrating efforts and resources on certain “strategic” projects and intervention areas, with the belief that these interventions were also able to exert a substantially positive influence beyond their perimeter. Consequently, it proposed a grand spatial framework of mainly linear infrastructural elements to bind together the dispersed, fragmented city.

These linear elements were not the classic urban axes, but mostly successions of public

spaces held together by strong, clear and maybe even somewhat over-simplified themes – and not by a strong spatial dispositive, such as the dead-right façades of Haussmann’s boulevards. The resulting coherence of these elements, the Strategic Spaces, was partly owed to procedural reasons – simple, easily understandable themes connected to the collective memory were better for communicating the ideas (Viganò 2015). For a better part, though, this coherence seemed a necessary means to achieve a grand unifying momentum within an existing urban fabric by connecting found spaces and situations with minimal interventions. The s-RSA makes no statements about interfaces between the Strategic Spaces, nor between them and the Generic Spaces. It achieved what its authors laid claim to: a call for a pre-modern *renovatio urbis*, a grand unifying spatial framework for Antwerp. For Secchi and Viganò, this was less of a hegemonic project by the designers than an unearthing of the city’s character, both in space and in society. Accordingly, the s-RSA can be read as a process tool in which the designers enable the city’s society to become what they are and what they want to be. In that sense, one could call it hyper-contextualism: not only in the sense of blending new structures into the existing urban morphology, but also into Antwerp’s history, its collective imaginaries and into the present actor network – effectively the “context” that Jef Van den Broeck had identified as the main target for planning (Van den Broeck 2016a: 7).

The project became key in exerting influence on the transformation of the urban realm. In Viganò’s view, “the project as producer of knowledge traverses the operations of conceptualiza-

tion [...], the operations of description [and] the formulation of sequences of conjectures about the future” (Viganò 2012:14). Design is therefore essential for the project, but it is not a design of a solution, but a tool for research, determining plausibility, and illustration. In the s-RSA, spatial (urban) design is used accordingly on different scales and for different aims:

1. As research for the Framing Scenarios that helped to conceptualize the Images.
2. To support the plausibility of the Strategic Spaces as conjectures of the future.
3. As an illustration of the Strategic Projects in order to describe its atmospheric and spatial consequences (see Fig. 12).

The overall plan framework remained, however, the main design contribution and was achieved in a series of iterative operations. The most important ones were collecting, selecting, and bundling existing projects, problems, and imaginaries on the one hand, and translating, making plausible, and communicating them, on the other. Rather than a passive transcription, the s-RSA was therefore the result of an active, thorough process of translations of the existing contexts, complemented by feeding-in new strands of thought and concepts for new spaces.

Conclusion: An Assemblage of Assemblers

The s-RSA did not deliver a clear image of the future of the City of Antwerp and could not be used as a comprehensive plan. Instead, it provided a kaleidoscopic view into a broad range of possible developments by bringing together fragments of knowledge about the city’s character (or collective memory) and its spatial potential on multiple scales. It brought together heterogeneous elements, most importantly, grand narratives, images, detailed spatial maps, and project plans. Research by design was essential for developing, testing, and illustrating the key strategic spatial propositions of the s-RSA.

By avoiding an explication on a direct relationship between the precision of the spatial proposals in the maps and plans, and the general narratives in the images on the other, the s-RSA opened a field in-between that enabled guided decision-making on concrete projects for implementation. The s-RSA was therefore not only a spatial framework, it was also a procedural framework, giving credit to its apparent combination of strategic and structural planning. Its strength came from building on a precise and exhaustive analysis of the status-quo

and the planning history of the city, summarized by its call for a *renovatio urbis*, which may be translated into making improvements of the urban situation while seeking continuity of historic pathways and patterns.

The exclusion of some major issues for political reasons, such as the development of the port and the completion of the ring road, notwithstanding, this position had great advantages in legitimizing overall planning and design by connecting to existing projects and the city’s history. While it may also have limited the possibilities of proposing new and innovative solutions for unprecedented challenges in urban development, the heterogeneity of the plan also allowed for the inclusion of new spatial concepts.

The implementation of the s-RSA over the course of ten years was not least the result of a favorable socio-politico-economical context, helped along by a re-interpretation of existing projects, but mostly it owed very much to its most important innovation: A structure that enabled bringing together previously incompatible actors and claims in an open yet guiding way. While its many-colored image of the future could not be directly implemented, it did provide a powerful combination of desirable images, choices of means and spaces, and fuzziness that delivered deep-rooted arguments for debates about spatial projects and therefore empowered actors to coalesce: essentially, the s-RSA was an assemblage of assemblers. As such, it helped to bring and hold together the main protagonists in its creation and implementation, who in turn can be regarded as ultimate critical success factors: the mayor who saw a formal legal requirement as a unique chance to re-think the city, the planning academics who had developed new planning concepts and structures, the civil society with its long-standing initiatives concerned with spatial development, and, not least, the constant interaction of the Italian architects and urban designers with the city planners, and both together with stakeholders, politicians, and the interested public.

Notes

- 1 According to Jef van den Broeck, municipalities smaller than Antwerp, such as Bornem and Ghent, had previously enacted combined structural and implementation plans, however, without any research by design (Van den Broeck 2015)

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