

Masterplan for the Scheldt Quays

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Abstract

This masterplan does not want to be a blueprint for the future, but will rather present a strategy. It should not decide the yet undecidable, not before concrete interventions come into the scope of realisation. The location of the flood protection will define what areas will be protected from occasional flooding. The type of flood protection will redefine the relation to the river. The masterplan thus wants to set clear spatial conditions that allow for future developments, safeguarding potential for scenarios and opportunities we do not know yet or even cannot imagine at this moment. It proposes a set of decisions and guidelines that prepare the quays to absorb actual and future projections. It wants to set a long-term spatial ambition, flexible and dynamic, and able to deal with uncertainties. It will cherish existing qualities as well as prepare for new visions of urban landscape. It will balance the potential of programmatic emptiness with tourist and urban ambitions for the quays. As a referee, the masterplan tries to mediate the many claims on the quay area in an open-ended process. All for the city of Antwerp to reposition itself on a regional scale while correcting its relation to the river on the local scale of the diverse and complex urban tissue.

Key Words: flood protection, topography, city on the river, terrain vague

Report

1. Introduction – towards a MPSQ

Straitening the Scheldt-river late 19th century, and the construction of the quays in Antwerp brought about a historical breach in the city's relation to the river. Roughly speaking, the city with its well developed system of canals, inlets and ramparts that seemed almost organically connected to and interwoven with the river, got disconnected from the Scheldt. The quays became an autonomous 'intermediate' entity between the city and the river: an elongated, stone and concrete body. As an almost industrially organized platform with railway tracks, cranes and hangars, they were used for all kinds of port activities like loading, unloading, storage, customs clearance and customs entry. The quays' area was a world of its own with limited and controlled access from the city, more than 6 kilometres long from Petroleumpier to Kattendijksluis, from hangar 1 to 29. There even was a fence in between. The quays did not belong to the historic city centre, but made up a commercial-industrial transition space on the edges of the city core. They are like a large-scale prosthesis, an element that does not naturally belong to the human body. Nevertheless, the city core developed a very close relationship with the quays: a city front with impressive buildings and the intense activity (offices, shops, bars, restaurants) in the street that runs alongside the quays. At the 'Noorderterras' and 'Zuiderterras', where city and quayside overlap each other, the city got a window overlooking the river again and at the same time a view onto the industrious movement theatre of hoisting, lifting and dragging that went on at the quayside. Antwerp was still a port city.

But Antwerp port outgrew the city scale. With the northward shift of port activities, port and city became more and more separate worlds. Apart some seaport activities in the south (Mexiconatie and Petroleumcluster) and the persistent Loodswezen at Bonaparte dock, the quays are left orphaned. Occasionally a huge cargo still moors at Sint-Andries waiting for harbour access, a magnificent contrast of inner city scale and overseas horizons. Only the inland sea cruise terminal can somehow replace this experience.

Together with the up-scale of the port, grew the mobility impact on the inner city. The era of car and traffic priority left its clear stamp on the abandoned quay infrastructure. It is said to be the most unique parking location ever. Even the Zuiderdokken are filled for more car park facilities. Late seventies, the separation of the city from its river is complete. The Sigmoplan installs a concrete flood protection wall between city and quays, since then only accessible at own risk through the mobile protection gates. Meanwhile private investors rediscovered the waterfront potential for top class apartments, with privileged views on the Scheldt.

Again the quays show a mirror image of city transformations.

Nevertheless - as port life on the quays gradually disappeared - quietly, and through partial and ad hoc decisions, the port prosthesis was claimed again by the city for all kinds of purposes she did not have the space for, but which she needed, wanted and enjoyed. Banal parking needs now alternate with fantastic events. You can go to the quayside for a solitary walk along the water and have a cup of coffee on the 'Zuiderterras', watching the occasional ship sail in. You can just go and sit there, pondering on a desolate bench, doing nothing. You could stroll aimlessly, just to pass the time or wait for an appointment you made with someone, who may or may not show up. The quays are a residual space, which is no longer claimed exclusively for one sole purpose and therefore a lot is possible there: informal social occasions, but also the

more ephemeral like a circus or the arrival of Sinterklaas. Days before an elephant makes its spectacular entry into town, it is hosted on the quays without anyone noticing. The cruise terminal is a window to the world where Antwerp citizens show off their city. The greatness of the water evokes a certain modesty and serenity, but a little bit further you can just as well go dancing and partying exuberantly into the early hours. Little activities would be a nuisance here, as the generous surplus and the residual character of the quays generate loads of capacity, providing enough space, both literally and figuratively, for all kinds of activity and 'passivity'. At closer glance, the quays are a god's gift to Antwerp. They are Antwerp's ticket to the future. But as if the schism of the city from the river is not enough yet, the flood protection has to be raised to 9,25m TAW according to the actualized Sigmaplan, that is 2,25m above the blue stone. It means a more than man height wall that inhibits any possible relation to the river whatsoever. Of course this is unacceptable. However, thanks to the flood protection, the quay surface has been preserved until now, and has received its very special statute: the occasional flood risk makes it intra-muros and extra-muros at the same time. Not only is the raised water barrier necessary for better flood protection, it is also an opportunity. It can serve and precise the desired spatial statute of the quays, and doing so redefine the relation between city and river. Can we think of alternatives within the margins of safety and economy? Can in other words the new flood protection be conceived in such a way Antwerp citizens could learn to love it?

2. General Decisions

2.1 Active Harbour

After the removal of the Antwerp port towards the north, the mostly abandoned old port infrastructure becomes again available for the city. Hence a very pragmatic guideline: maximum recuperation of the quay infrastructure, together with its re-orientation towards urban port activities. The quay wall itself as a mooring device is meticulously preserved, stabilized and restored. But also the bollards, the cranes, and the cobble stone paving will be preserved, either in extended areas or at least in a service area adjacent to the quay wall and blue stone. It means that no serious disruptions of the quay wall are considered, and that specific configurations will be restored and re-qualified: the re-opened Kattendijksluis, the former Bonapartesluis, the Margueriedok, the pontoon Steen, and the former Zuiderdokkensluis. Royerssluis, the mooring masts at Droogdokken, the Belvedere as well as the Petroleumpier are considered being part of this port heritage. On the other hand, the harbour fence basically divides the city from the former seaport platform, and is therefore no longer appropriate. Keeping the fence to illustrate this previous division jeopardizes the desired re-qualification of the quays as public domain, certainly in the centre part of the inner city. A similar consideration applies for the train tracks at the city side.

Thus the quays become again a permanently available mooring device for the city itself. At closer view this mooring capacity is very diverse, and suited for a rich variety of different kinds of vessels along the length of the wharf. Let us prepare the old port heritage for a new and active role within the city. Activities can be expanded over the water through 'temporary floating programmes. The type of vessels that can (and will be able to) moor along the quays will influence if not define character and use of the quay platform.

A new logistic platform for inner shipment is projected at IPZ (with regional water related distribution centre for the city SWDC).

Re-use of the ship ramp Margueriedok.

A new pontoon (Schipperkwartier) allows mooring of smaller vessels without a bridge of their own (river cruises, leisure yachts, small historical vessels).

Re-opening Kattendijksluis, including waiting area for incoming and outgoing vessels.

Relocation and renewal of the cruise terminal.

A privileged historical mooring quay at Rijnkaai (Red Star Line).

Sheltered ports for public water transport at Bonaparte and Zuidersluis (with pontoons and covered waiting areas). On the long term a Petroleumpier-ferry to Burcht.

A new ramp at Zuidersluis.

2.2 Heritage and Archaeology

A number of late 19th or early 20th century monuments define the actual quays' character: Sluismeesterswoning Royerssluis, Loodswezen en Boeienloods, hangars, the raised terraces and their access ramps, and Noorderterras. Most of them are (or will be) abandoned, and they deserve a new programme if possible water-related. Keeping the harbour fence could exceptionally be considered where it is still functional, but it is not desirable for - because not consistent with - the projected role of the new public domain.

But the (port-)heritage is much more comprehensive, including elements of earlier as well as later periods of Antwerp's rich history. We cannot isolate and enlarge the importance of one historical layer at the cost of many others. No doubt elements of the Napoleonic period and Brialmont fortifications, of the Medieval period and Spanish fortifications, and of the old Burchtstad can be exposed through archaeological investigations, more specifically Steen and surroundings, and Sint-Michielsbolwerk en Sint-Laureisbolwerk, Vlieten en Ruien, but also Kattendijksluis and Kattendijkbrug with Limaplein, Bonapartesluis and Bonapartedok with Bassin, Zuidersluis and Zuiderdokken, or the Napoleonic quays and wharf. If underground constructions (parking) are considered, archaeological sites can become visible and accessible. Of course these underground constructions should try to avoid the actual archaeological sites.

But also the more recent 20th century heritage (interwar and postwar periods) deserves our full attention. The quays are as a 'palimpsest' (a - through scraping away and overwriting with new layers - reusable parchment, where old traces are not removed and become very apparent under ultraviolet light), where soon new contemporary layers can be added.

The guidelines define three different categories: of very high value and certainly 'to be preserved', 'to evaluate' (in principal contradictory to the desired reorganization, but at least to evaluate on the project level if maintenance could be possible anyhow), and 'to be demolished' or removed.

2.3 A new flood protection device according to the actualized Sigma plan

The Scheldt is not only the 'raison d'être' for Antwerp, it is also a threat. Tidal dynamics of the water level are evident far inland of the estuary, and even enlarged by the embankment. The river also means flood threat and possible disaster!

Since the concrete wall built in 1978, Antwerp got totally divorced from its river. The actualized Sigma plan demands a raising of the protection level to 9,25m TAW, 90 cm higher than the actual protective wall. But further raising the level of the wall means a 2,25m wall above the quay surface, that would obstruct all views to the river and render the quay surface hardly accessible. So the new flood protection cannot only be a mere protective infrastructural device. Its design should provoke the experience of the river.

So location and nature of the flood protection are defined according to the adjacent urban space or urban tissue. Located near the river, the quays become part of the urban space, whereas a location close to the city safeguards the actual character of the huge quay surface as a floodable area. Defining the nature of the flood protection - fixed or mobile - it deliberates the views on the river, and will do this within strict conditions of safety, cost and feasibility. The rather definite character of this artificial protection device demands a very accurate balancing between fixed or mobile, hard and soft... Mobile barriers will safeguard views on the Scheldt and enhance the accessibility of the quay platform (even if the results of the technical study define a minimum threshold of 7,65m TAW or a medium threshold of 7,80m TAW). Fixed barriers reach the actualized Sigma level of 9,25m TAW. They obstruct the views towards the river, but at the same time explicit the void near the city. The sequence of fixed and mobile solutions is meticulously staged.

2.4 Mobility

To carefully define the one barrier of the flood protection is inefficient, if combined mobility lines form a new barrier that is hard to cross. Accessibility of the quay area should be guaranteed in all conditions. Sometimes - in the centre - it will be more feasible than at other locations. And sometimes it is exactly because access to the quays is somewhat obstructed, that the area can maintain its special and rather desolate character.

Until Scheldestraat the quay road will still collect inner city traffic and give way to the south parking area(s). Through traffic on the quays however is minimized, by limited car access in the zone between Sint-Pietersvliet and Scheldestraat. The zone between Suikerrui and Sint-Jansvliet becomes pedestrian area, only selectively accessible for necessary local traffic. North of Londen- Amsterdamstraat and south of Namenstraat, the quay road becomes a local street only. Edge city parking will be provided immediately at the exits of the highways, and be connected to the tram network. Rotation parking limits the traffic on the quay road.

New trams will connect the parking with the inner city. In the centre part, a tramline could form a new barrier between the city and its river. Existing tramlines in the centre already bring the quays within reach. A shortcut of the tram network over the quays is possible, but seems only appropriate in case of more substantial programmatic densification of the quay area. South of Scheldestraat and north of Sint-Pietersvliet flow is guaranteed reserving a separate tram lane.

In the centre part with low traffic intensity, the tram will integrate within the lane for motorized traffic.

A clearly separated regional bicycle lane will be provided at the quayside, obviously continuing the busy dike paths along the green Scheldt banks.

And finally the masterplan pledges for a genuine public water transport: ferries, waterbuses (vaporetto's) and watertaxis can complement the existing tunnels for pedestrians and cyclists. They are part of a re-qualification of the quay infrastructure, using opportunities offered by the special protected water bodies on the quays (Bonapartesluis or Margueriedok or the new pontoon at Schipperskwartier, pontoon at Steen, Zuidersluis).

2.5 Public Space and Image Quality

So the masterplan fully promotes the Scheldt Quays as a public space, a non-exclusive space for everybody, and not only of local importance but also with a regional and international significance.

A uniform identity for the whole length of the quays does not seem appropriate: Antwerp has many characters, each one deserving a specific and unique relation with the Scheldt river. Nevertheless unity, coherence and continuity of the historic wharf remain a major concern, transcending specific nuances and shades. Of course the majestic Scheldt river itself, is the stronghold of this unified identity and coherent city-scape: the famous image of Antwerp from the left bank, underlined by the quay wall and blue stone. But the coherence of this image might be threatened, if a phased refurbishment is not supported by a clear vision on image quality for the materiality of public space.

Therefore an overall figure for the quays' public space is drawn, based on three specific characters:

Naturality: the silting soft slope of the ecological riverbank appears on the convex edges along the Scheldt on a regional scale, its character being defined by the tides of the river.

Portuarity: the actual quay cobblestone platform, sometimes flooded through the specific site conditions. And the flood frequency will increase through expected sea level rise. Its materiality, equipment and planting must be adapted to this exceptional flood situation, and must be robust, sustainable and easy to maintain. It also means that the use of this floodable area is temporary per definition. The actual quay area should be ready to be used at wish and by everyone, without specific allocations but for clearly allocated harbour activities. The refurbishment will respect the typical (historical) character of the Antwerp Scheldt quays in all its aspects.

Urbanity: the urban space behind the flood protection (but in front of the inner city) is essentially different because it is protected from flooding at any time. It approaches the city quarters and can therefore vary with more nuances and shades. But also here a coherent image is projected, defined by the transition from city to quay area and Scheldt. The flood protection should not be read as a clear demarcation line between two characters, but rather as a filter or as a zone of transition. Characters do not change abruptly, but gradually transform from one into the other. Thus the transition from city to river - and vice versa - becomes a rich experience of gradients.

The drawing includes a special role for two major urban green structures: Droogdokken park opposite the green zone at Noordkasteel, and a linear park that starts to appear at Sint-Jansvliet and gradually grows towards the south to link with Groene Singel and eventually with Hobokense Polder.

2.6 Quay Programmes

Most historical monuments are now abandoned or will be in the near future. It means that new programmes for reuse of these monuments must be considered. These programmes are preferably water related and aim for a public use and a wide variety of users. Of course they must be compatible with the existing spatial characteristics and historical architecture. They must include a surplus value for the concerned heritage.

But an explicit inscription of a contemporary layer on the Scheldt quays is desirable all the same. Likewise their historical examples, new contemporary idiosyncratic landmarks can actualize, adjust, complement or support the existing waterfront filter. But adding this layer should be carefully dosed, search for strategic locations, and be inserted leaving potential for later additions.

Finally (new) city extensions can install a different relation with the water, and approach the river: Montevideowijk as a part of the renewed harbour city Eilandje, or Nieuw Zuid, can be extended on the quay area. The masterplan examines maximum new building envelopes. Heritage and new landmarks aim at public use only. But also for these city extensions we must be very careful with private programmes on the quay area.