

## Eilandje. A case of waterfront pioneering

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### Abstract

Eilandje ('islet') is a unique 172 ha former port-area between the city centre and the modern sea-port of Antwerp. Eilandje has a rich history as a former, bustling port neighbourhood. But it has also played an important role in the city's search for succesful urban development strategies.

This search was intensified from the late 1980s onwards, after concerned and involved citizens had succesfully conveyed their desire to the city administration for a *renovatio urbis*, central to which was to be a renewed bond between the city and the River Scheldt.

From that point onwards Eilandje embarked on a long and often hard learning process. A journey which Eilandje not only survived, but which in hindsight translates as a step-by-step guide for workable and succesful urban planning and development strategies, particularly in the specific context of Antwerp.

As Antwerp's oldest long-term and large-scale urban development project, Eilandje helped create planning instruments that today are central to Antwerp's urban development policy. It demonstrated the advantages – and necessity – of working with an integrated vision as a strong framework within which continuity can be ensured and progress can be stimulated. Even in periods characterised by a lack of political and financial support.

**Key Words:** waterfront, development strategies, *renovatio urbis*, former port-area, large-scale urban development, planning instruments

# Report

## 1. The Antwerp waterfront. An introduction

Antwerp is one of those world cities deeply in debt to its river: once a small settlement in a curve of the River Scheldt, which then increasingly entwined with its River's curves, growing into a Medieval city. This 'organic' and spontaneous relationship was based on the obvious advantages of proximity to the water, but would rapidly gain economic complexity in the late Middle Ages.

As did the Medieval city itself, which grew in spontaneous, erratic patterns of narrow streets, hugging the centre. With each concentric expansion, new defence canals were dug, which were rendered obsolete and used as inland port infrastructure with each next expansion.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the growing population and shipping business necessitated new housing and port infrastructure. One area to the north of the city centre would accommodate both. Former military defence canals were recycled into new inland port infrastructure. At Nieuwstad ('New City'), everyday life was closely interwoven with the network of canals, as some even ran in the middle of the streets.

In the second half of this 'Golden Century' (1490-1585), Nieuwstad boomed, as it welcomed English shipments of textiles, Portuguese cargoes of spices, Dutch grain and German wine and silver. The Fall of Antwerp (1585) introduced a period of stagnation and impoverishment.

Figure 1. Historic port area (© FelixArchief)



Nieuwstad would not thrive again until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Napoleon Bonaparte claimed the area as a military base because of its strategic location – particularly threatening to the English. Napoleon ordered the construction of Bonaparte dock and Willem dock. These and later docks amidst the network of canals, inspired Nieuwstad's current name: Eilandje ('islet').

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial revolution necessitated the accommodation of larger and more ships. So, between 1877 and 1884, the natural course of the River was straightened to make way for the Scheldt Quays. A traumatic event, involving the destruction of areas and houses that were in the River's new path.

The Scheldt Quays became the scene of heavy port activities and were closed off from the inner city by iron fences. Two raised terraces, Noorderterras and Zuidoosterterras, allowed for people to walk along the river and watch ships come in – grand cruise ships in particular always attracted large crowds.

Meanwhile, the dock structure of Eilandje was expanded further and further towards the north. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion climaxed with a 'Ten year plan' (1956-1967) for a large-scale port expansion, doubling the length of the quay wall and more than doubling the total dock surface.

Today, the modern sea-port takes up almost half of the city's territory.

## **2. Demise of the waterfront**

The consequences of the move of port activities to the north were detrimental for the port infrastructure in the city. Former bustling port neighbourhoods Eilandje and Schipperskwartier ('Sailors' Quarter') were practically abandoned and slowly but surely fell prey to neglect.

As did the Scheldt Quays, which were further estranged from the city by the 1.35m concrete flood-defence wall that was constructed as one of the protective measures described in the 1977 Flemish Sigma plan (tackling flood risk in the Sea-Scheldt basin area).

Citizens, however, spontaneously claimed the quays for activities ranging from romantic strolls to jogging and even large events. Other parts of the quays were degraded to free parking space. The quay road, too, was invaded by the car. The road – passing south, centre and north of the city towards the present-day sea-port – became another barrier between city and river.

Even though Eilandje and the Scheldt Quays began to attract private investors and, here and there, buildings were converted into modern and luxurious apartments and lofts 'with a view', private initiatives could not turn the tide for neglected and under-populated Eilandje, and public space on the quays was left untouched for years.

## **3. A city on the stream**

The 1980s introduced difficult times for the European city. All over Europe, the reality of new economical dimensions and increasing international mobility, had hit hard and slowly but surely left inner cities deprived of their once flourishing bars, cinema's, retailers and entrepreneurs, who – like their clients – left the city in search of space or went bankrupt.

Moreover, the city of Antwerp fused with eight surrounding municipalities in 1983, doubling its surface to 20000 ha, and worsening existing financial problems. The alderman for spatial development at that time, decided that Antwerp needed a global vision for the development of its enlarged territory.

This decision led to the first Global Structure Plan for Antwerp (GSA). Even though the GSA never came to realisation, it contained concepts and ideas that are still key to Antwerp's urban development today. Most relevant today are 'a ring forest with new bridge gates', 'the 19<sup>th</sup>-century belt: a vital part of the city', 'the suburbs: cores with their own character' and, last but not least, 'a city on the stream' (Vanreusel, 1990).

By the late 1980s, it had become apparent that the GSA had not gathered sufficient political support to instigate the desired regeneration of the city. In reaction to this impasse, architects, urban planners and other involved citizens formed a movement: City on the Stream. One of City on the Stream's main objectives was the renewal and reinforcement of the relationship between the city and its river. So, City on the Stream drew attention to port related urban areas that they felt deserved a new lease of life.

The efforts of City on the Stream were rewarded. In 1989-1990, the city organised an international design contest for Eilandje, the Scheldt Quays and Zuid ('south').

An extensive complementary cultural and educational programme was organised, including an exhibition, theatre and music performances, an international congress and an educational dossier for teachers: 'Dream up a city on the stream'.

The contest attracted renowned planners and architects, six of whom were selected to elaborate their proposals. Elisabeth Gali (Spain) and Bob Van Reeth (Belgium) were selected for the Scheldt Quays, Rem Koolhaas (the Netherlands) and Toyo Ito (Japan) for Zuid (Nieuw Zuid and Zuider docks) and, finally, Yves Lion (France) and Manuel de Solà-Morales (Spain) were selected to elaborate their ideas for Eilandje.

Unfortunately, in 1994, progress for City on the Stream came to a halt when the city ceased to make available budgets for the project. As the disappointing experience with the GSA had foreshadowed, the city of Antwerp was in far from ideal circumstances to commit to this new type of large-scale and long-term urban development projects. What is more, the city lacked experience with planning, managing and executing projects of this scale, neither was its urban development department sufficiently equipped to take them on.

But the idea of a City on the Stream was here to stay, and the vision that Manuel de Solà-Morales had elaborated for Eilandje would stand the test of time and even prove to be relevant for the future development of the city (Borret, 2009).

#### **4. Manuel de Solà-Morales' vision**

Rather than imposing a fixed end-image from a top-down approach, de Solà-Morales proposed surgical interventions in the existing fabric of Eilandje (Van Alsenoy, 1997).

He distinguished a number of areas based on identity and function, but above all stressed the relationships between each part. Central to de Solà-Morales' vision for Eilandje was preserving its maritime character. Also, ties with the inner city were to be reinforced and Eilandje was to be optimised as a hinge area between city and modern sea-port.

An essential part of Eilandje, the docks deserved new functions that would relate again to the surrounding housing blocks and quays in a present-day context. Small river boats and

culturally and historically important ships would still have their place in the docks but would be complemented by water recreation and tourist activities.

The historic axis between Schipperskwartier and Eilandje was to regain relevance with new, strategically located hubs of urban activities, for example at Hanzestedenplaats (where the Museum by the Stream has recently arisen), Nassaustraat, Kattendijkdok (west quay, where 6 residential towers are being built today) and the Montevideo hangar. This axis would help rekindle ties between the city centre and Eilandje.

Figure 2. First two of six new residential towers Diener, Chipperfield, Gigon & Guyer architects  
(© Henderyckx fotografie bvba)



Manuel de Solà-Morales saw great potential in Montevideo and Cadix as new residential neighbourhoods. Montevideo, with its multifunctional character, would attract people who love city-centre living, and accommodate offices, updated port activities, culture and other public functions. At Cadix, the existing mix of housing, bars, restaurants, schools, small office areas and recreational facilities was to be reinforced. And the existing port-related functions would serve as a foundation for further developments.

Manuel de Solà-Morales opted for residential towers at Eilandje. High-rise buildings would allow for a level of density that would otherwise not have been possible but, according to de Solà-Morales, was a precondition for a lively, dynamic urban area. The towers would mark specific areas and at the same time contribute to the recognisability of Eilandje as a whole. Moreover, the towers would provide fantastic views on the Scheldt, the city centre and the modern sea-port.

In order to improve access to the area from the east (the Singel and Leien), an avenue would be constructed on the railway sites Entrepot, Dam and Stuivenberg. And finally, de Solà-Morales saw potential in the scale and multifunctionality of the Scheldt Quays for opening up Eilandje to the river and to the rest of the city.

## 5. Gaining ground

In 1996, a guideline note issued by the alderwoman for spatial planning, introduced a period of steady progress, characterised by a formalised, rationalised and tightened thinking- and planning process that would ultimately result in a comprehensive planning framework.

Soon after the guideline note, followed a Structure sketch by Mens en Ruimte and a Spearhead note, which served as a guideline for the strategic process up to 1998. This note allowed for the simultaneous execution of smaller interventions and projects, which ensured concrete progress during the planning phase.

In 1998, the city invested in external expertise to secure progress for Eilandje. 'Projectbureau Eilandje' was founded by René Daniëls and manned by experts of his Buro 5 Maastricht. Projectbureau Eilandje took office in the project area and, over the next years, provided the crucial competences and organisational skills that were lacking within the city services. Another important decision that was taken around this time, was the appointment of René Daniëls as the city's first 'stadsbouwmeester' (loosely translated: architect-in-chief). Between 2000 and 2006, Daniëls was the city's (part-time and free-lance) chief advisor on architecture and urban design.

Projectbureau Eilandje steered and guided the planning process, safeguarded continuity with respect to progress on the terrain and guided the public-private initiatives that were taken at that time. Projectbureau Eilandje took up a coordinating role between the different partners involved and regularly organised meetings between the city, the port company and other (private) organisations involved.

This coordinating role was crucial, as the city would face several difficulties with land ownership and real estate. Fragmented ownership patterns are typical of Flanders, and have always been problematic in terms of governments' ambitions for the renewal of their territory. But in this particular instance there was one major owner of property at Eilandje: the port company.

By the end of the 1990s, the Antwerp port company had become the owner of a vast amount of property at Eilandje. This was part of an agreement arranging the port to become an autonomous municipal company. The property value was estimated, and when sold, these amounts would go to the port company's pension fund. Profits over these estimates would be shared between city and port and were to be reinvested in the further development of Eilandje.

An unfortunate effect of this agreement was that it did not leave both parties with shared interests in terms of selling the property with the same speed or amount of profits. A steering committee with representation of city and port was founded, but agreements were reached only with great difficulty. In spite of these difficulties, the city and the port company kept working on formulas for efficient cooperation. By means of sale or as part of more complex agreements, the city would acquire property and the port would pre-finance port patrimony renovation projects that had been approved for subsidies. The port company's pension fund burden was relieved by the federal government.

## 6. Extensive planning framework

In 1999, Buro 5 elaborated a Strategic Action Plan for Eilandje. The Plan proposed the creation of an integrated planning framework for Eilandje, which would greatly facilitate its development in the years to come. Central to this framework would be the 2002 Masterplan Eilandje, designed by René Daniels and Buro 5 Maastricht.



The Masterplan Eilandje outlines a vision for the developments at Eilandje in two phases. Phase 1 is in execution today and encompasses the Oude Dokken ('the old docks' ordered by Napoleon Bonaparte), the Montevideo Quarter and the Cadix Quarter. Phase two comprises of Droogdokkeneiland ('dry dock island'), Mexico-Eiland and Kempeneiland.

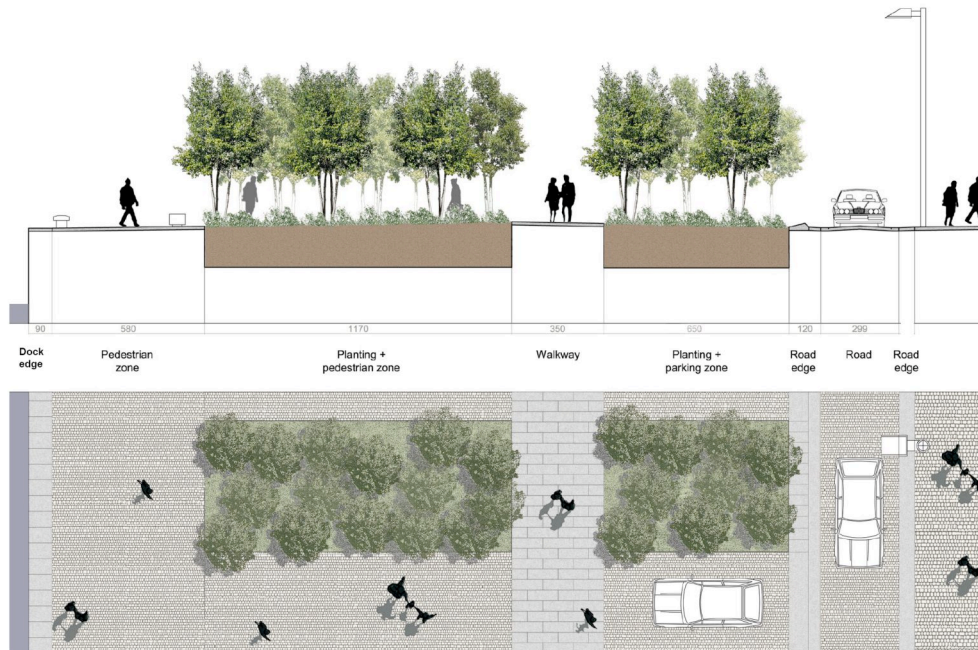
The extensive planning framework, translating and complementing the Masterplan, contains a 'visual quality plan for the outside space', (Beeldkwaliteitplan Buitenruimte, 2002) by atelier JPLX, landscape architect Michel Desvigne and Rob Cuyvers), a 'visual architectural quality plan' (Beeldkwaliteitplan Architectuur, 2004) by JPLX, a Water plan (2004) by Urhahn Urban design and Rob Vrolijkx and a Green plan (2005) by Michel Desvigne).

The visual quality plan for the outside space proposes guidelines for the development of public space. Key elements are 'water' and 'port' and priority is given to the development of 7 themes: traffic, green, type-profiles for different project areas, street lighting, terraces, advertisement, street furniture and art.

The visual quality plan for architecture formulates a vision on the development of the existing and future built space. The aim is threefold: clarifying the potential of and

ambitions for Eilandje, offering an operational frame for evaluating private and public initiatives and, finally, providing a substantial juridical base and motivation for the special plan of construction, the spatial execution plan.

Figure 4. Green Plan (© Michel Desvigne)



The Water plan formulates a vision on the integration of a water programme and, as such, forms an instrument for guiding new (re)developments combining land and water functions. Aspiring to a qualitative correlation between water functions and developments in the public domain (on land), the Water plan encourages initiatives regarding water related recreation-economy.

Finally, the 2005 Green plan tackles the task of subtly introducing green to a rough, industrial and historically green-less landscape. The plan formulates guidelines and rules, but does not impose a fixed image or end result. This way it can serve for years to come, translating the vision of the quality plan for the outside space into a series of concrete projects.

## 7. Conquering city-hall

In the mid-1990s, the European government had begun formulating answers to the ‘degeneration’ of the European city, that had been caused by the same economical shifts and scale enlargements that had affected the quays and Eilandje so badly. The Flemish and Belgian governments soon followed, and developed their own support programmes and initiatives for urban development. (The Flemish government would provide substantial funding for the development of Eilandje and the future Museum by the Stream at Bonaparte dock in 2001.)

By the end of the 1990s, the increased involvement of the Flemish government in local urban development policies, had resulted in a Flemish decree for spatial planning that,



among other things, demanded every Flemish municipality to design a structure plan for its territory.

The strategic Spatial Structure Plan for Antwerp was designed by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò and approved in 2006. Eilandje and the Scheldt Quays were integrated in the s-RSA as crucial programmes within the strategic space of the Hard Spine, which was conceived as the main structuring element of the city and consisted of a vast urban/metropolitan area along the River Scheldt.

With the selection of both programmes in the 2007-2012 policy agreement, the current city administration has committed to the necessary budgets and progress.

## 8. Infiltrating city services

In 2003, the city founded its own autonomous municipal company for real estate (AG VESPA). Land and property acquisition had proven to be crucial instruments for Eilandje, but also for the renewal of Central Station area and Schipperskwartier, where the city – having acquired funding for priority areas in the north of the city – had started investing in the renovation and conversion of dilapidated houses, abandoned shops and prostitution buildings in the second half of the 1990s.

In 2004, external expertise of Projectbureau Eilandje was internalised by the appointment of a programme leader for Eilandje within the city's department for urban planning. Meanwhile, concrete projects had already been started or even completed. The idea of the Falconplein-Montevideo axis began to take shape with the start of the construction of the Museum by the Stream, the renovation of the St. Felix warehouse (which since 2005 houses the city archives) and the renewal of Falconplein at Schipperskwartier.

Figure 5. Museum by the Stream (Neutelings-Riedijk architects), Willem dock marina, renovated warehouses (Dries Van Noten's HQ and St-Felix Archives) (© Henderyckx fotografie bvba)



When Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò elaborated the strategic Spatial Structure Plan for Antwerp, Eilandje and the ideas and projects of Manuel de Solà-Morales, Mens en Ruimte and Buro 5 were integrated into the programme for Eilandje as a part of the Hard Spine.

The department for urban development was reorganised to match the specific project-structured s-RSA. And in 2007, a new municipal company, Planning Cell was founded within which a programme leader and project-team for Eilandje were responsible for the coordination of progress for Eilandje, in a tandem-structured cooperation with AG VESPA.

Figure 6. Aerial view of Eilandje anno 2010, with Museum by the Stream and first two of six residential towers (© Henderyckx fotografie bvba)



In order to further facilitate negotiations about financial and property transactions with the port company, a political Task Force was founded in 2007.

Anno 2010, the urban waterfront stands before interesting times. Eilandje is one of the most well-progressed and well-known urban development projects in Antwerp. The development of the Cadix quarter launches the finale of phase 1 of the Masterplan for Eilandje. The development entails the exploration of new possibilities in terms of public-private partnership and sustainable development with a 'Sustainability Master Plan for Cadix'.

For the Scheldt Quays, a new era is dawning. This year, the final Masterplan for the Scheldt Quays, designed by PROAP and WIT architects, is up for approval. In a unique way, the Masterplan studies and integrates the flood-defence as a precondition and a structuring element for public space, whereas the desired public space in turn determines possibilities for the flood-defence.

## 9. Conclusion

Eilandje has been a constant and stubborn presence in what in hindsight can be considered the city of Antwerp's long and difficult search for effective urban development instruments and policy. Its history reads as a rather long list of confrontations and disappointments. Which actually makes it a step-by-step guide for urban development in the specific context of Antwerp (and Flanders, for that matter).

Eilandje was carried by external enthusiasm, impulses and expertise from day one. For the first time, an elaborate and inspiring participation process was organised, inviting the public to look at their city in a different way.

Persistence and at times sheer stubbornness from outside and within the city administration and services, carried Eilandje into city hall. Where – albeit in a few attempts – a number of key decisions and initiatives secured steady progress in the planning process of Eilandje.

As the city's oldest long-term and large-scale development project, Eilandje has demonstrated the importance and workability of concepts and vision as a spatial framework within which ideas, plans and projects can progressively be integrated or recycled.

As the first integrated, area-oriented project, Eilandje has motivated the search for solutions to land- and property issues, and has particularly been important for the development of PPP formulas as a catalyst for the renewal of public space. Eilandje has also stimulated internal capacity building, which eventually resulted in the radical, project-structured reorganisation of the Planning department.

Another fundamental addition to the core of urban development policy in Antwerp, is the function of 'stadsbouwmeester', which was awarded to René Daniëls in 2000 as a part-time freelance assignment. In 2006, the function was reinforced with a mandate and at the same time integrated within the department for urban development, where today, the stadsbouwmeester's mission is monitoring spatial quality, city-wide and over the different projects and 'design disciplines'.

And finally, Eilandje delivered the key to the definitive break with centuries of concentric development. Manuel de Solà-Morales' Falconplein-Montevideo axis introduced the notion of north-south development. As such, it was the first clear-cut spatial translation of the concept of City on the Stream, with the River once again as the obvious spatial point-of-reference.

As current stadsbouwmeester Kristiaan Borret points out, this axis would serve as a "pars pro toto" for the s-RSA's Hard Spine. In the same way that "[t]he urban design for Eilandje culminates [in] the design for the city itself," (Borret, 2009) the extensive and rich planning- and development process of Eilandje has forever changed urban (master) planning and development in Antwerp.

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