

Brussels, urban governance for a metropolis

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Over a period of 30 years, the Brussels-Capital Region has evolved from a body responsible for regulation to a player that is shaping a metropolis. In addition to the municipalities that supervise and direct many projects, the Region is also seizing the initiative when it comes to large-scale urban development. What instruments does it use to ensure that spatial quality takes precedence over political and economic interests? What are the merits of 'soft-power mechanisms for design improvement' and in which kind of climate can they thrive?



The Brussels-Capital Region is a relatively young entity. It did not become a fully fledged region until 1989, when it took its place alongside its Flemish and Walloon counterparts. In just 30 years, however, the Region has been compelled to develop a robust policy by which to address the challenges faced by many cities: strong demographic growth, increasing multiculturalism, challenging mobility, and a lack of services. The complex political and administrative structure, also known as the 'Brussels lasagna', does not make the situation any easier: in addition to the Region, there is also, on the one hand, federal level involvement, and, on the other, 19 municipalities, two (linguistic) communities and a series of agencies.

Urbanism and urban planning are powerful tools for lending a face to a policy. Yet they can only make a difference if the ultimate goal, namely the quality of the built environment, is championed over the economic and political interests that inevitably play a role in every large-scale urban project. In order to safeguard this quality, the Region created the office of Brussels Government Architect (BMA: *Bouwmeester/Maitre Architecte*) in 2009, thereby following the examples of the Flemish Government Architect and the City Architect in Antwerp. The role of the Government Architect, however, was not a random development. During the first decade of the new millennium, several large municipalities such as Molenbeek, Forest and Schaerbeek, among others, worked on an architectural policy which, whether through Neighbourhood Contracts or in collaboration with the regional administration, formed the basis of an interesting contemporary patrimony. Here, too, the need for a Government Architect who could take a global approach was raised time and time again.

The Government Architect's principal task is to support clients with regard to architectural quality, urban planning and public space. The Government Architect operates independently

of all other urban-development services and can thus work across the board. The importance of this transverse approach should not be underestimated. From an independent and neutral position, the Government Architect has the opportunity to talk to the various authorities and services and to gather their representatives around the table. As the overseer of quality during these discussions, it is up to the Government Architect to always advocate the theme of spatial quality and to test the projects in terms of their integration into the urban fabric, functionality and user-friendliness. Good governance, therefore, is about developing the right tools so that these discussions not only happen effectively, but also contribute to a generally accepted definition of what spatial quality actually means.

The first Brussels Government Architect was Olivier Bastin, who held the post between 2009 and 2014. He laid the foundations for the Government Architect's task by concentrating on competition procedures and the selection of designers. In so doing, he set the tone for a positive architectural climate. As the first Government Architect, he also forged the initial links between the multiple players. 'The biggest challenge was to overcome the resistance caused by an established climate of mistrust between the different levels of power', says Bastin. 'In principle, the Brussels-Capital Region is the dominant party, but when you realize that the City of Brussels holds a larger budget than the Region, the balance of power is a little more complex. For more peripheral municipalities such as Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, Uccle or Woluwe, the Region is like a difficult mother-in-law who imposes social housing quotas. And talking to Flanders about, for example, the Canal Zone on the border with Vilvoorde, ultimately proved to be impossible.'

For a long time, the fragmentation of the various levels of power was also reflected in the Region's spatial policy. It did not develop any

major projects during the first 20 years of its existence, let alone an overall structural plan. The development of larger sites, such as the European Quarter or the surroundings of the South Station, always ended up being the sum of many small or independent projects without a clear coherent story. This absence of grand projects is striking in comparison with other key European cities. A lack of global vision caused by a fragmented decision-making system only partly explains the situation. Brussels suffered extensively in the aftermath of radical large-scale post-war urban development projects such as the North-South link, the Northern Quarter, the Administrative Centre or the administrative towers on Place De Brouckère, which are still experienced as deeply traumatic. These schemes, which were accompanied by a process of demolition, expropriation and destructive land speculation, led to a distinct lack of support for greater urban-development projects during the first decades of the newly established Region. Given this climate, it is logical that an instrument called the Neighbourhood Contract was developed, a four-year programme for the urban revitalization of deprived neighbourhoods. As Mathieu Berger writes in *Le Temps d'une politique*¹, the Neighbourhood Contract became an 'emblematic instrument in Brussels' government actions as a structural and structuring policy'. The twenty-fifth anniversary of this instrument, however, is also an occasion to acknowledge its limitations and to reiterate the need for a transformation of the policy.

'For 25 years, [the Region] has experienced a strong dynamic of urban renewal, in particular through the Neighbourhood Contracts (...) and has attracted the interest of private investors. But the various public and private initiatives are not yet working towards a common project or a well-considered overall vision²: this is the motto of the 2014–2019 Brussels Coalition Agreement. And that has to change. The po-

litical ambition is to work on a larger scale and across borders. This is reflected in a series of new measures that came into effect during the previous legislative term: now, more than ever, the government has turned the Canal Zone into a priority area and also launched 10 new priority development poles 'which require a global and transversal strategy in order to advance local development opportunities in the short and medium term'.³ The poles are: Schaerbeek-Formation and Tour & Taxis sites, which are complementary to the development of the Canal Zone, Heysel, Reyers, Southern Quarter, West Station site, Josaphat, Delta-Vorstlaan, the barracks sites in Etterbeek and Ixelles, the prison sites in Saint-Gilles and Forest, Avenue Leopold III and the NATO site. The traditional Neighbourhood Contracts have been extended to include five Urban Renewal Contracts that gather a number of much larger actors and, as such, also transcend the boundaries of the municipalities.⁴ In order to manage this, the administration was also restructured. To this end, the government wanted to develop a territorial platform in which the myriad existing players could be grouped into two levels: one for planning and one for execution.⁵ In the end, a third tier was added and today we have three agencies: Perspective.brussels drawing up the plans, the Urban Development Corporation (SAU/MSI) buying and developing the land, and Urban.brussels granting the permits and managing the historical patrimony.

'The government has placed an important focus on territorial development during this legislative term', says Bety Waknine, director of Urban.brussels. 'The reform of the Brussels Urban Planning Code, which came into force in September, also fits into this picture. This reform will simplify procedures and speed up the case management process. Of course, this is only possible if the administration is up to the job. Hence the whole administrative reorganization that preceded it.'

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The second Government Architect, Kristiaan Borret, who leaves office this year, took up his post just as the new legislation came into effect. He says: ‘There is a clear evolution in the vision and policy of the Region, which dares to think on a large scale once again. The resources are on the table. I want to tackle this large scale within a transverse project-based operation.’ Unlike in the past, when a project was transferred from one department to another, according to the stage it had reached, the divisions between the three above bodies are now gradually being removed. The staff from the various departments are consistently collaborating on the projects in hand. The ‘Canal team’ – a collaboration between Perspective, Urban, SAU/MSI and the BMA – is a pioneer of this new way of working. It was assembled after Alexandre Chemetoff had devised the urban development plan for the Canal Zone. ‘I pleaded for the emancipation of the administration and for capacity-building within that administration. A government needs an external urban planner to formulate a plan, but it must then be able to apply it itself’, says Borret. Thanks to this transverse approach, it has not only become possible to work quickly, but also efficiently and transparently. A developer who arrives for a meeting will immediately find all the key people at the table, including those from the research-by-design department and the people responsible for issuing the permits, for example. In recent years, the results have been reflected in the dynamics within the Canal Zone.

This work method did not come about without a struggle and it is still being resisted by some administrations. It seems astonishing, given that it accords with the coalition agreement and that all the administrations involved report to the minister-president (Rudi Vervoort, Socialist Party). The transverse, project-oriented approach is replicated in the formula of the ‘project group’ that is now being

applied to a series of schemes. The next step is to extend the interlocutors within this project group to include Brussels Mobility and Brussels Environment. In Borret’s view: ‘This is essential for some projects. The project group for the Hermann-Debroux urban renewal contract includes the demolition of a viaduct. In this case, it’s logical that Brussels, too, should sit down at the table to discuss mobility.’

The Urban Renewal Contracts (CRU), such as the one for the Hermann-Debroux project, are a collaboration between Perspective and Urban (as extensions of the traditional Neighbourhood Contracts). In addition to the schemes at the neighbourhood level, the government has also invested in ten new priority development poles. Says Waknine: ‘This shift in scale also demands new instruments. In place of the former *schéma directeur* [master plan], the PAD has been developed [*plan d’aménagement directeur*, or master development plan]. This not only formulates the strategic vision of the site, but can also, if desired, combine it with a regulatory framework. This is useful, for example, if a specific programme mix is required on a particular site. Perspective is currently working on a series of PADs. The purpose of this instrument is to develop a particular area more quickly and efficiently.’

One of the spearheads of the coalition agreement is the development of the Canal Zone and the strengthening of the waterway as an important structuring spatial figure. Since the coherent design of the public space is a decisive factor in the perception of this spatial figure, Kristiaan Borret proposed that an Image Quality Plan (BKP) should be drawn up for this space. The competition for this task was won by the team assembled by ORG2 and Bureau Bas Smets. The above competition became the basis for a handbook, known as the ‘guidelines’, which were once more elaborated by a transversal team. It was approved at the end of March 2019. The recommendations give

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shape to an overarching vision for public space within the entire Canal Zone and ensure that it can be consistently applied to each new project. Metrolab Brussels, an interdisciplinary academic research group that unites various faculties of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) and is supported by the Brussels Region through the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), dedicated a study afternoon to the BKP. At the event, the various partners working on the plan – Urban.brussels, Perspective.brussels, SAU/MSI and BMA – explained this unique collaboration.

In the coalition agreement, the Brussels Government Architect's commission was extended to public and private projects on a regional scale. In order to ensure that this is properly managed, Kristiaan Borret established a chamber to oversee the quality of building projects. This too is a transverse initiative that is primarily concerned with spatial quality. In addition to the BMA, the chamber comprises the designated official and both the political and administrative levels of the municipality. It discusses strategic construction projects for which planning permits are being sought. In contrast to the 'Quality Chambers' in other cities such as Antwerp, Ghent and Ostend, the Brussels organization does not call upon the services of any external architects. This is unfortunate, as their presence would allow the debate on spatial quality to be broadened yet further.

Such transverse discussions make a visible contribution to the quality of the final project. In the meantime, they have also been incorporated into law. The new Brussels Town Planning Code (BWRO/CoBAT) stipulates that any applicant for a permit has the right to a project meeting, which has the same composition as the quality chamber, extended with a representative of Brussels Mobility and Environment Brussels. Furthermore, for all projects exceeding 5,000 m², the applicant must also seek out

the BMA's opinion. In this way, developers are encouraged to organize a competition or a prior consultation process.

Based on the conviction that the government must be able to draw and design, Kristiaan Borret also established the Research by Design team. This design research might be reactive, in which a project developer's proposal is tested for height, density, open space, etc., but it can also be anticipative, whereby the possibilities are explored in areas that have not yet been developed. Borret elaborates further: 'Designing is about finding answers and building arguments. If you want to talk to a developer, you need those arguments to be able to jointly achieve a quality project.'

Since its creation, the Brussels-Capital Region has focused on the urban development of its territory. In the last decade, however, a shift has taken place. Whereas previously the focus was on the municipalities, the Region has increasingly started to take charge through an expansion of scale and ambition. Under the influence of successful programmes like the Neighbourhood Contracts, but also (academic) research and the arrival of the Brussels Government Architect, there has been an evolution in both the perimeters of the project areas and the mechanisms by which they are developed. After years of focusing on the regulatory framework, the transverse project-based approach is increasingly being used to discuss quality. This transformation is already bearing fruit and will continue to do so if the method of transverse conversations is continued. ▲■●

1 Mathieu Berger, *Le Temps d'une politique*, CIVA, 2019.

2 See the Government Declaration by the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, 2014–2019, p. 33.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 100.