

## **Landscape characterisation in Flanders? Evidence-based spatial policy requires integrated landscape research.**

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Landscape protection and management as well as spatial planning in Belgium are a regional authority. The institutional landscape policy in the Flemish Region has mainly been developed from an heritage perspective. The spatial policy on the other hand has a strong functional and legal approach in which zoning plans are being established and social functions are being assigned. Assessment of the impact on landscape quality is in many cases not the main concern, and the evaluation of the spatial feasibility of actual projects mainly focuses on the functional alignment with the zoning plans.

Fortunately both policy fields do try to reach out to each other. Landscape for instance was a key-issue in the *Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders* (1997), and has been consequently adopted in many local spatial structure plans. Most of these policy intentions however do not seem to be implemented in zoning plans or in actual realisations. Furthermore a real structural cooperation or an integrated vision for a landscape approach in spatial development processes does not exist. Therefore Flemish landscape policy tools are based on a sectorial approach and mainly focus on the cultural heritage dimension. To date the potential for a wide social interpretation of landscape as mentioned in the European landscape convention has not been consolidated.

Currently Flanders is developing a *Spatial Policy Plan*, a successor of the *Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders*, in which long term policy intentions for spatial development are being expressed. This planning process opens up a possible discourse for a landscape approach when dealing with environmental challenges in a complicated contemporary spatial reality. On the other hand the general demand for evidence-based policy is growing, which creates a need for scientific research on landscape related issues.

### *Resilient landscapes*

Due to successive waves of suburbanisation in the twentieth century Flanders is highly fragmented and urbanised. The identity of these postmodern landscapes is unclear and difficult to comprehend. The Spatial Policy Plan Flanders will try to deal with important environmental challenges in terms of demographics, climate, mobility, food, economics, energy and biodiversity. This will not be an easy task knowing that, just in terms of population growth, recent forecasts predict a augmentation of more than one million inhabitants by 2050 in the Flemish region. Nevertheless Flanders also has the ambition to diminish impoverishment of the landscape identity and to improve spatial quality without ignoring the inherent complexity of the contemporary postmodern landscapes.

To support the achievement of these policy goals a conceptual framework for *resilient landscapes* is being developed. The transformation to a resilient territory aims to reduce the spatial sensitivity to shocks or disturbances caused by climate change, transitions in energy production and usage, demographic trends and fluctuations in economic conditions. This transformation can only be established by means of new spatial interventions at different levels of scale and will be initiated or carried out by various spatial actors. Landscape should not only indicate how these new initiatives can be integrated in the existing natural and cultural setting. These interventions are also an opportunity to add a new cultural layer with a high potential to enhance spatial quality, to clarify the identity and character of the landscapes and contribute to a more profound experience of the landscapes.

In this vision landscape specifies how the transformation to a resilient territory, in which the identity can be enhanced, restored and preserved for future generations, can be implemented. Landscape should be considered as a basis for spatial development and plays a prominent role in the different stages of the planning process, the assessment of land-use claims of different spatial actors, the localisation of social functions, the implantation of new infrastructure, management and maintenance.

#### *Landscape characterisation and scientific research*

Improving the knowledge of our landscapes, their characteristics, the valuation and appreciation of stakeholders and population and the driving forces or influences that lead to change are essential in order to guide the mutual interaction of landscape and spatial processes in order to achieve these policy goals.

In Flanders the *Landscape Atlas* and the *Map of Landscape Features* can be considered as instruments who provide insight into valuable relics of traditional landscapes, evolution of these landscapes and their dominant characteristics. The *Landscape Atlas* is a set of digital maps, linked to a database with descriptions of traditional landscape relics. The atlas distinguishes 381 areas that contain the most valuable and intact landscapes of Flanders. These areas, so-called ‘anchor-places’, include a wide variety of landscapes of different sizes and cover approximately sixteen percent the Flemish territory. The *Map of Landscape Features* is an inventory of landscape feature on a regional level as an elaboration of the *Landscape Atlas*. Both instruments do not cover the entire territory since urbanised areas are not included. They are important instruments for the protection and management of valuable landscapes, but certainly cannot be seen as a profound landscape characterisation.

Past decade research on landscape characterisation and assessment in Belgium was carried out in academic circles, namely at the *Ghent University* by professor *Veerle Van Eetvelde*, PhD.. This research or at least the used methodology in this research could be inspiring for policy making instruments in Flanders, for instance when handling areas of less importance from a cultural heritage perspective such as common or degraded landscapes. To date the expertise in landscape research at the Flemish Government is mainly located within the *Flemish Heritage Agency* (agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed), which has of course very specific tasks, goals and resources. Hence less attention was paid to research on less obvious or contemporary landscapes. In the future the spatial policy field will try to bridge this gap.

In accordance to the general growing demand for evidence-based policy, a scientific research group has been established during the recent reform of the *Spatial Development Department Flanders* (Ruimte Vlaanderen). The research group aims to elaborate the knowledge on landscape issues from a spatial planning perspective, thus providing a solid support for implementation of the *Spatial Policy Plan*, in particular the development of *resilient landscapes*. Furthermore the research results could serve as an inspirational resource for an integrated approach to address spatial challenges, for the development of more flexible, dynamic or evolving spatial instruments or for finding ways to incorporate people’s perception and experiences into the assessment of spatial quality in spatial developments.

In this setting researchers of the *Spatial Development Department Flanders* and the *Flemish Heritage Agency* intend to join forces in development of a profound landscape characterisation. This territorial characterisation will offer a solid basis to express specific quality goals for all Flemish landscapes. Moreover landscape capacity should be enhanced continually through exchange of ideas and information with key actors, experts, academics, other regions and countries. Do so landscape

characterisation can be used in Flanders as a widely accepted tool to achieve the objectives of the European Landscape Convention.

### *Conclusion*

A real integrated landscape policy in Flanders based on landscape characterisation is yet to be established. The development of a new *Spatial Policy Plan*, the intention to create a framework for *resilient landscapes* and the general demand for evidence-based policy results an increased interest for landscape research in Flanders. In cooperation with the *Flemish Heritage Agency*, the *Spatial Development Department Flanders* wants to grasp these opportunities to develop a landscape characterisation in Flanders as a valuable tool for an integrated landscape policy and are looking forward to exchange thoughts, good practices and engaging in discussion to enhance our landscape research capacity. Therefore our gratitude is being expressed to the *Council of Europe* for the invitation to this meeting and to the *Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism of Montenegro* for their hospitality.