



Improving the quality of life in Large Urban Distressed Areas

Spoor Noord, Antwerp, Belgium

E-Compendium: Good Practice Case Studies



Introduction

The purpose of the e-compendium case studies is to provide information about the experiences of large urban distressed areas in Europe. All of the case studies are linked to the LUDA project, either as partner cities or as reference cities. This case study focuses on Spoor Noord in Antwerp. Antwerp is one of the twelve reference cities in the LUDA project, and Spoor Noord is a large area which has undergone regeneration in recent years.

This case study gives a brief outline of the area's history; the challenges it faces and the potential it has for redevelopment. The case study then discusses the current approach to regeneration in Spoor Noord, setting out some of the innovative elements of the process as well as the lessons learned.

The e-compendium is designed to be used online. The text includes interactive links which allow you to move around the document, to link to other handbooks, or to open websites. Links are shown as **coloured text**. You can also find the links by looking for icons in the page margins, as shown here.



If you prefer to read this handbook like a normal book, then you can print it out. Please note that all of the handbooks are designed for double-sided printing.

Acknowledgements

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The cover photo shows construction works in Spoor Noord in 2001. Photo: IOER.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. Overview	5
2. History & background	5
3. Challenges & potentials	6
4. Approach	7
5. Tools & methods	8
6. Innovation & unusual features	10
7. Results	10
8. Lessons learned	11
9. Further information & links	11



Derelict railway infrastructure in Spoor Noord, Photo: Planningscel, City of Antwerp

I. Overview

Spoor Noord is a former-industrial area, located between the port, central residential districts and the 19th century urban ring. The whole area covers the districts of Dam, Stuivenberg and Seefhoek (325 ha) although the former maintenance yard at the centre of the regeneration (future park) covers only 29 ha. Both Stuivenberg and Seefhoek are residential areas with a complex community of immigrants, relatively few Belgian nationals, and high levels of population turnover. The living density is four times higher than the rest of the city, with more than 2,200 inhabitants per km². The Dam district on the other hand, has lost 70% of its residents due to the northwards expansion of the port over the last 70 years.

In terms of land use, Spoor Noord itself is mono-functional and derelict former industrial land. It creates an enormous barrier between the neighbouring areas. The surrounding neighbourhoods include a variety of residential uses with small-scale services and local shops. The introduction of the HST fast train (northwards from the Damplein) has further damaged the continuity of the urban structure and created a new barrier in already divided area.

2. History & background

Spoor Noord was formerly used as a shunting yard and maintenance depot by the Belgian Railways (NMBS). When NMBS relocated to the port zone, this created an opportunity for the

area to be regenerated through new commercial and residential developments and upgrading. The central areas of the city are densely developed, with many hard surfaces. However, green spaces are focal theme and their scarcity influences the citizens' feeling of well-being. These feelings have an impact on the 'value' of the areas both in terms of real-estate and community building. Due to the financial difficulties experienced by the Municipality of Antwerp in the past, much of the regeneration in the city is funded by federal and European sources (ERDF, URBAN, etc.)

3. Challenges & potentials

The city of Antwerp has a diverse character. It is known for its internationally important harbour and petrochemical facilities, as well as being a centre for the diamond trade. At the same time the city includes a great amount of underused industrial and harbour space, as well as high density residential areas and little public green space. Spoor Noord and the surrounding districts are similar: they have a high population density and problems of social deprivation and isolation. One of the biggest challenges in Spoor Noord is the integration of migrants into the resident community. In addition, the area is characterised by a chaotic traffic situation. There is a lot of rat-run traffic (the most important junction, De Schijnpoort, forms an important barrier for smooth traffic flow from and to the city) and public transport services are poor. In addition, the districts have an undersupply of green areas and public open spaces, and few sport, recreation and cultural facilities.



Underused industrial land in the Spoor Noord area. Photo: Planningscel, City of Antwerp.

The aim of the municipality is to attract investment in residential and commercial land, and generate public support for the on-going regeneration process. In this situation the great advantage of Spoor Noord is the amount of open land available for public use. According to a survey of local residents, green and open areas, space and light were identified as the main priorities of the regeneration process. The urban landscape park project in the heart of Spoor Noord is intended as a catalyst for new development. It will help to create a new urban structure, bringing the air back into the densely developed north of the city. The park is the starting point for a wider regeneration process.

4. Approach

After the relocation of the NMBS railway company to the port zone, Spoor Noord has begun a process of transformation. At the core of the regeneration strategy is the creation of a large urban landscape park covering 17 ha. The park will provide space for active and passive recreation with an emphasis on green, light, space, entertainment, culture and sport. The intention is that the park is a stimulus for regeneration in the surrounding districts. Through this project, the local administration hopes to encourage new forms of land use within the old-industrial and harbour areas and to upgrade the residential neighbourhoods. The key issues are the enhancement of social and economic qualities, cooperation with stakeholders and an efficient strategy for multiple funding.

Alongside the urban landscape park, a plan for the new Spoor Noord area has been developed. This plan concentrates on the areas not included in the park, developing the idea of multi-functionality. This includes the development of training clusters, a top event venue, a steam bath complex, all-in sport halls in converted hangars, new ideas for the Lobroek Dock, upgrading the slaughterhouse site and the north-south railway connection area. Together with the landscape park, this plan provides a completely integrated programme for the regeneration of Spoor Noord.

Although the programme is quite complex, the municipality has adopted an implementation strategy based on 'small steps forward'. The reason for this is because it has not been possible to fund the programme from a single source. Multiple funding sources are being used to support the projects, within the overall programme. The main benefits of the programme should be: an improved image; increased participation; greater social understanding and confidence; lower density development; more accessible open space; infrastructure improvements; an increase in property and land values; better accessibility and public transport provision; and, intensive cooperation with the national railway company— a key stakeholder. The main elements of the programme were assured by the consensus brief, which was signed by all of the main stakeholders.

5. Tools & methods

The programme for the regeneration of Spoor Noord was developed using a strategic spatial planning methodology. This method has been developed by professional planning offices to meet the needs of local authorities, and it was recently introduced to all levels of public administration dealing with planning issues in Flanders. It follows a structured approach to planning issues in order to avoid the spatial chaos of the former development. The methodology has the three parallel strands, which influence one another and together create a system of the moving goal.

The strands are:

1. creating the vision
2. the action level: checking and generating the improvements in the framework
3. communication and participation

The method also makes extensive use of GIS (geographic information systems) techniques.

The main stakeholders in the regeneration of the Spoor Noord area are the Municipality of Antwerp, represented by the *Stadsontwikkeling, Planningscel* (department of city development, independent planning unit) and the Belgian Railways, the former owner of the area. Local communities are also encouraged to take part in the process, and the technical side of the regeneration is supported by various subcontractors, consultancies and design offices.

To begin with strategic spatial planning was only used at the operational level. The method helped to introduce structure into the actions within the projects (this first phase can be described as 'learning by doing', following from the action to structured planning). Later the method was applied at the strategic level in the preparation of plans and policies. The main steps of this method are: diagnosis, visioning, forecasting and implementation. To improve and develop the regeneration framework, the city uses three main sources of evaluation and assessment:

- community feedback;
- external evaluation by funding institutions (European and federal level); and,
- academic research carried out by universities.

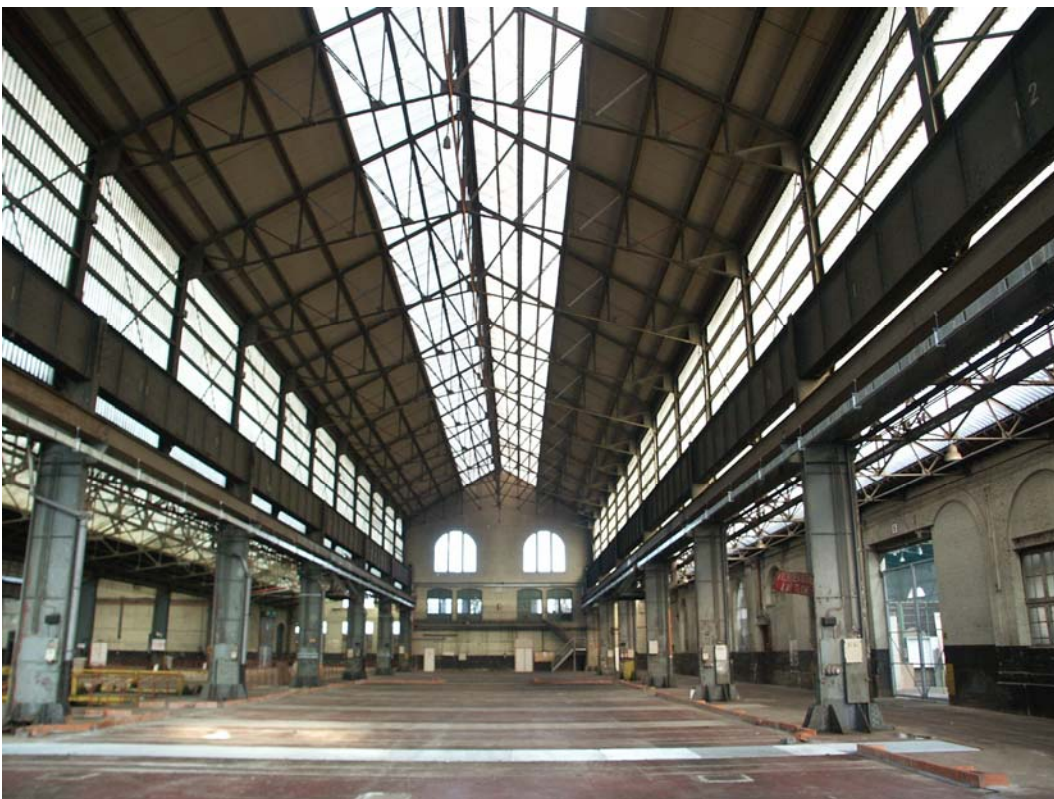
The city uses these three sources to improve and develop the regeneration framework.

Strategic spatial planning is a new tool that has not been used before. Its strategic nature has caused some confusion and there is a fear that it overlooks detailed issues and local peculiarities. The method has also been problematic as it is not yet well understood by all stakeholders. While the clear framework and definition of the project is useful for planners, some administrators, politicians and authorities find it too abstract to assist with decision making. Because the method is new, it requires those involved in the regeneration to be flexible and willing to learn. There is generally little experience of strategic large-scale planning, and some of the innovation relates to the lack of routine patterns. The strategic spatial planning method covers both short and medium-term timescales, and operates from between 5 to 20 years.

The planning team (Planningscel) has administrative responsibility for the regeneration process. The team is independent from the planning department of the municipality, and operates on a not-for-profit basis. Much use is made of GIS techniques in the regeneration process. This includes assisting the municipal government with the management of the spatial form of the city; monitoring policies; selecting data for programmes and projects; providing data about spatial planning; and developing indicators.

Current funding levels are around €20 million per year for the regeneration process as a whole (including projects). Funding for strategic spatial planning comes from a range of sources including: federal and European funds, developers and private corporations.

Technical implementation of the programme began with the preparation of some basic opening documents (3 months). This was followed by a debate within the city and with the public. Background studies of accessibility issues, mobility and specific requirements were then completed. A conceptual scheme was also prepared. This was the starting point for an international design competition to choose a design team for the regeneration of the area. Then a deal with the railway was established, and a design team was selected. The team has worked on the selected concept, transforming it into a design that will be implemented from November 2005 onwards. The design concept was transmitted into legal form (in accordance with Belgian practice) to enable it to influence local law.



Vacant industrial buildings in Spoor Noord, Photo: Planningscel, City of Antwerp.

The implementation phase of the regeneration will involve demolition, renovation and the removal of waste and contaminated soil. The majority of buildings in the area are not protected

by conservation laws, and can be demolished readily. However, the 2 railway hangars, an old office building and the water towers will be retained and renovated to help maintain a sense of place, and protect their cultural and historical value. The two-water towers in particular are protected because of their status as important pieces of industrial architecture.

6. Innovation & unusual features

There are many positive aspects to the regeneration process in Spoor Noord and the city of Antwerp. For example:

- developing strategies to deal with large infrastructure projects (e.g. the high speed train link) in the area;
- using a design competition to develop the overall concept for the new park;
- supporting the programme with three levels of public participation; and,
- using academic research and community feedback as part of the programme monitoring and evaluation.

Perhaps the most significant of these is the development of the urban landscape park (mentioned earlier). Overall the city has a shortage of green and open space. The creation of a new public park is thus a very significant step in the regeneration of Spoor Noord. It has helped to create public support for the regeneration strategy by responding to one of the citizens greatest concerns.

The improved provision of green space in the city, and the location of a new city part in the district of Spoor Noord helps to break the spell of the area as an insecure and neglected space. The creation of the new park has helped change the mental maps of local citizens. Now, the Spoor Noord park is part of the network of parks and gardens in the city along with the Park of the Nightingale and City Park. The park helps to increase the attractiveness of the neighbourhood, and will assist in the stabilisation and connection of the community.

7. Results

Since the regeneration process began there has been a considerable improvement in the area of Spoor Noord. This is seen in the number of young families moving into the area, and the increased sense of identity among local people. As a result of extensive public participation and information about the regeneration of the area, Spoor Noord and neighbouring districts have regained their place on the citizens' mental maps.

8. Lessons learned

Antwerp's experiences of regenerating Spoor Noord and the neighbouring districts have revealed a number of key lessons, including the following:

- It can be difficult to involve minority ethnic groups in public participation, making it difficult to resolve cultural differences;
- The requirements of external funding bodies may not fit well with local objectives, resulting in a 'chameleon' approach where objectives change to fit the funding available;
- It is very difficult to solve problems to do with crime, drug abuse and prostitution—and they tend to relocate to another part of the city;
- Innovative forms of public participation which offer individuals many different ways of getting involved (including information, involvement and canvassing) have brought measurable results within the communities;
- Collaboration with research institutions has helped in the process of systematic analysis, monitoring and evaluation of the distressed areas;
- It is possible to make use of European funds (ERDF, URBAN, INTERREG etc) without neglecting local needs and local goals;
- The use of GIS helps municipal units to work together, and supports planning activities across the city.

9. Further information & links

If you would like more information about the Spoor Noord story, then the following references will help you.

City of Antwerp (2003) 'Antwerp Spoor Noord – A City Park Off the Beaten Tracks', Ludion.
 Salet, W. and A. Faludi (2000), 'The Revival of Strategic Spatial Planning', Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), KNAW Ed, Amsterdam

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- http://www.acturban.org/biennial/ElectronicCatalogue/Antwerp/antwerp_rail.htm
- <http://www.antwerpen.be>
- <http://www.antwerpen.be/spoornoord>
- <http://www.esprid.org>
- http://www.somavzw.be/pc/content/presentatie_spoornoord.html



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