Future Cities

Methodology used for the Ypres Masterplan ‘De Vloei’

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1. Subject of the methodology

The masterplan for the sustainable housing project in Ypres, “De Vloei“, is in fact the first outline for the project, on which bases further plans were designed. Therefore the masterplan always remained a rather simple set of planning and design decisions, visualised in a layer-scheme and an elaborated reader, explaining the correlation between the layers. It should not be confused with the “traditional” masterplan drawings, presenting the final image for a project. In this project we decided to continue to use the term ‘master’-plan since it contains the most essential spatial elements (the DNA) of the project.

2. Agreement on the project and use of a guideline

To describe the methodology that led to the masterplan it is important to give a short overview of the decision process.

The project for De Vloei is the result of an agreement between four project partners; the city of Ypres, the social housing company, the wvi (the intermunicipal organisation of West-Flanders), and the Province of West-Flanders. From this point on was basically agreed upon the realisation of a sustainable housing project and the use of a set of common ambitions, to which each process step was to be checked.

The project ambitions were written down in a guideline on sustainability, containing a minimal standard and a plus-level for each topic (such as energy-use, mobility and rainwater drainage). The purpose and the content of such a guideline is described in detail in the paper “global guideline for sustainable housing projects”. The agreement and the guideline together defined the project, and made clear on which items the project team had to focus.

3. Further research

To find an adequate answer to the ambitions, the project team decided to gather more information on different topics in the guideline, such as specific information on the project site, or general information on existing sustainable solutions. Different ‘good examples’ were visited and discussed. This research-phase proved to broaden the support for the ‘plus’ levels in the guideline, and meeting these ambitions became regarded as an image-building aspect for politicians involved.

Further research also narrowed the focus onto certain ‘key issues’, related to the specific context of the project and its site. In the case of “De Vloei” this generated three design-questions:

- How to create a suitable green-blue network, given the difficult infiltration of rainwater in the soil, the required housing density, the relief on the site and the difficult acceptation of (unsafe) water systems by inhabitants.
- How to create a smart mobility system and a safe and car-free public space, taking into account the proximity of the city center, the rather poor level of public transport in a small town like Ypres and the traditional high rate of car ownership.

- How to respond to the aim of creating social sustainability in a new housing quarter, given the required housing density, the demand for energy-efficiency, and the different segments of housing[1] the project partners will work in.

These key issues covered the greater part of the project ambitions, and were later on used as themes for the workshop.

4. Workshop

The workshop was organised by the city of Ypres, providing the infrastructure, and wvi, providing the information and themes for the workshop. The workshop was led by E. Rombaut, biologist and staff member to the architecture and urban planning department of St-Lucas School of Architecture (Ghent). Participants were

- City of Ypres – the mayor, aldermen, technicians
- The province of West-Flanders
- The social housing company representatives
- Wvi technicians
- External experts in sustainable matters.

The workshop consisted of a presentation of the available information, a site visit and two working-group sessions. The working-groups were multi-disciplinary composed and formulated concepts focussing on the key-issues:

- A blue-green network
- Smart mobility
- Density and housing

These issues were rather divergent; the 'blue-green' theme had no obvious connection to mobility. This resulted from the logical aim to cover as much of the ambitions as possible, and to maximize results from the workshop.

The results from the first session were mutually confronted and taken back into the second session of the working groups. Doing so, the workshop led to following results:

- Participants, project partners as well as technicians and experts became acquainted with the physical context of the project.
- The multi-disciplinary approach led to more confidence in new concepts.
- Support for the ambitions grew into support for the spatial concepts
- The first concepts contained a good degree of coherency, induced by the confrontation of ideas.
- The key-issues were tackled in an early stadium of the design.

[1] The project consists of a mix of social housing, private sector housing, and building lots.

- Since these issues were also rather divergent, the basic ideas for the masterplan didn't get lost into a lot of details. A distribution of themes such as e.g. 'public space, mobility and neighbourhood facilities' would have resulted in more details, but less equilibrium.

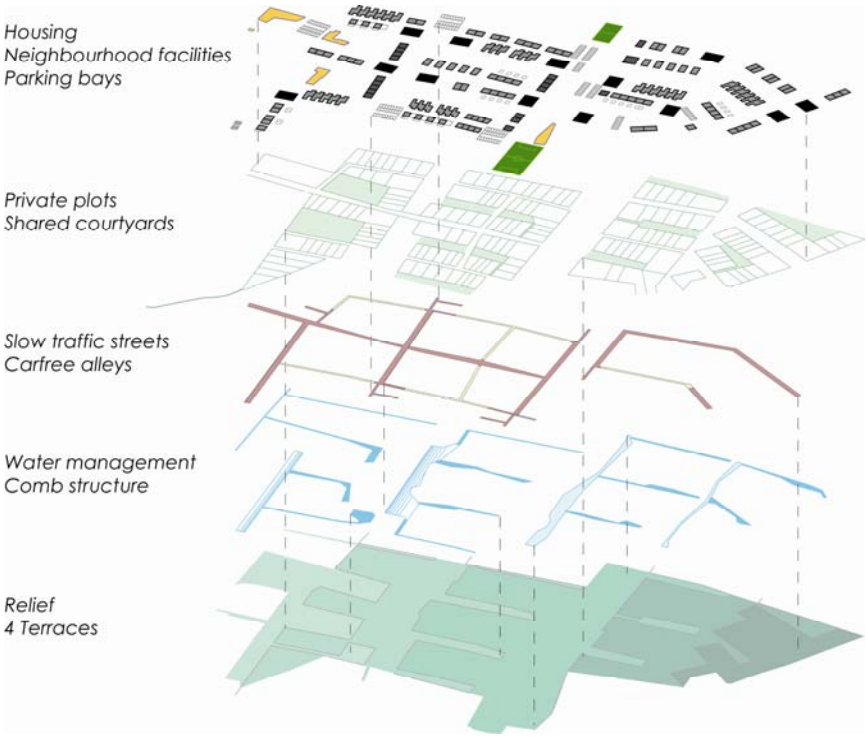
5. Masterplan

From this point wvi took the initiative to take the results from the working groups to the drawing table, and to let the wvi-architects start with the design for the masterplan. The main reason not to ask for the intervention of an external designer in this phase (which is otherwise not uncommon for wvi-projects), is not to let the coherency and equilibrium get 'lost in translation'.

The concepts that resulted from the workshop added spatial ideas to the key-issues: terraces and green axes to buffer and slowly drain stormwater; small parking docks to keep cars out of car-free streets, but close enough to the houses, a strong public-private gradient to bind different housing types…

A part of these idea's already showed a convergence towards primary spatial choices, like a strong green central axe, separating two car accesses to the quarter. A lot of them were still 'floating around'.

The main role of the masterplan was to anchor all these 'dispersed' ideas into one scheme. Because of the visual clarity, this is (like more often) done in a layer technique. By doing so, 'vertical' relations between green, water, parking docks, etc., became explicit.



A secondary role was to clarify the coherency between spatial choices. This was presented in the ‘typical section’ of the building block, showing the strong connection between the positioning of the housing, the limited section of the road, and the section of the garden and the courtyard. This is a horizontal relation.

Once this new ‘grammar’ was developed, wvi decided to stop the elaboration of the plan, and to present it to the project partners. As mentioned before, the plan –in this phase- did not get the typical aspect of a ‘masterplan’, and remained almost ‘skeletal’.

6. Deriving plans from the masterplan

All further design, production of images and calculations seamlessly fits into the basic scheme of the masterplan. A lot of it was done in a workshop form, using and testing the masterplan to meet the original ambitions.

Most of this planning was done by external designers and consultants, showing that the masterplan was easily communicable.

A short overview of derived plans:

- visual quality plan
- allotment plan
- ownership distribution plan
- zoning plan
- infrastructure design
- water study
- energy study