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Rethinking and Redesigning the Urban Landscape

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Across Europe a new urban form is arising. Since the early 1960s European cities have experienced a shrinkage in population and a rapid increase in wasteland and contaminated land. As human activities have spread over territories of unusual dimension, huge industrial zones, former military installations, and outdated infrastructure—the sites of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity—are suddenly empty.

The change has been particularly acute with regard to sites of industry. Many small factories within old areas of dense urban fabric have been abandoned, their activities spread to more peripheral areas or relocated outside Europe. Today many quarries, harbors, railways and canals—much of the infrastructural network accumulated over more than two centuries—have fallen into disuse. Such abandonment has had important impacts on employment, demographic growth, and the social, functional and symbolic geography of the city.

This story is not new. Again and again through history, European cities have been partially abandoned by their inhabitants and their activities. But each time a rebuilding has taken place that has made selective use of the old. Indeed, the European city and its countryside embody a palimpsest upon which different generations have left epochal traces, layers of their life and culture.

We are at a turning point in the history of the European city. Consistent with this historic perspective, the industrial city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is now becoming another layer. What is disappearing will not come back, and the discussion of what will replace it has reached a decisive moment.

The Disappearing Industrial City

The phenomenon of urban shrinkage in Europe has emerged over the last forty years. During the 1970s, when researchers first started to examine the importance of abandoned industrial and infrastructural land, they initially pointed to labor-related causes, such as increases in urban income and the cost of living. With the decrease in assistance from the welfare state, city living was becoming too difficult: it meant rising housing costs, time lost to congestion, and huge physical effort to access such sites of everyday life as schools, hospitals, offices and shops.

The interpretations given focused on the obvious trend toward decentralization and "deterritorialization." Businesses could cut costs by moving to less expensive labor markets. At the same time, the technology base and the geopolitical framework of the European metropolis were changing. The world economy was restructuring, and the rise of new countries was creating a global market, creating ruptures with Europe's urban and social past.

Descriptions of new urban conditions have focused on the daily experiences of urban residents. Researchers have used narrative strategies ranging from the catalogue to the micro-story, from sampling to the *mise en abîme*, to portray the character of the contemporary city, its fragmentation and dispersion, its porosity and instability.

Description is an attempt to order a fragment visible within the framework of nonsystematic knowledge. It is an attempt to order a broad spectrum of experiences.[1] Conscious of the impossibility of producing a true copy of reality, and resisting the linearity of causal explications, theorists of the declining European city have focused their descriptions only on the details that make up the city and its territory.[2]

An overly close focus on details without an examination of the context, however, brings Johann Wolfgang Goethe's critique to mind. Goethe, perhaps one of the last synthetic spirits in Europe's intellectual history, was suspicious of the microscope and the detailed views it allowed, fearing these would become an obstacle to a comprehensive understanding of the world. Similarly, the French author Erik Orsenna recently presented the dystopian story of an island city where a dictator forbids his people to climb the surrounding hills, fearing this view will reveal relations among objects and subjects that will give them an ability to judge for themselves.[3]

A somewhat similar concern might be noted today. During the 1980s European planning practices changed radically, as social critics questioned the ability of planners to provide a comprehensive approach and an affirmation of general principles about the city. The planning practices that have emerged since—misinterpreted by some as pitting architecture against urbanism—can be compared to the sixteenth-century *renovatio urbis*. This involved the reshaping of the cities of that time in visual, functional, social and economic terms through a few strategic interventions related to then-recent innovations in art, technology, navigation, and associated colonial exploitations.[4]

During the 1980s many European cities started to react to their decline and look for answers to the social and economic problems caused by the growing wastelands they contained. In particular, they began to compete against each other to employ newly vacant land to attract substitutes for lost functions. Museums, theaters and exhibition halls; office buildings and sports facilities; congress halls, airports and shopping malls were proposed as ways to fill these urban voids. But their construction has frequently
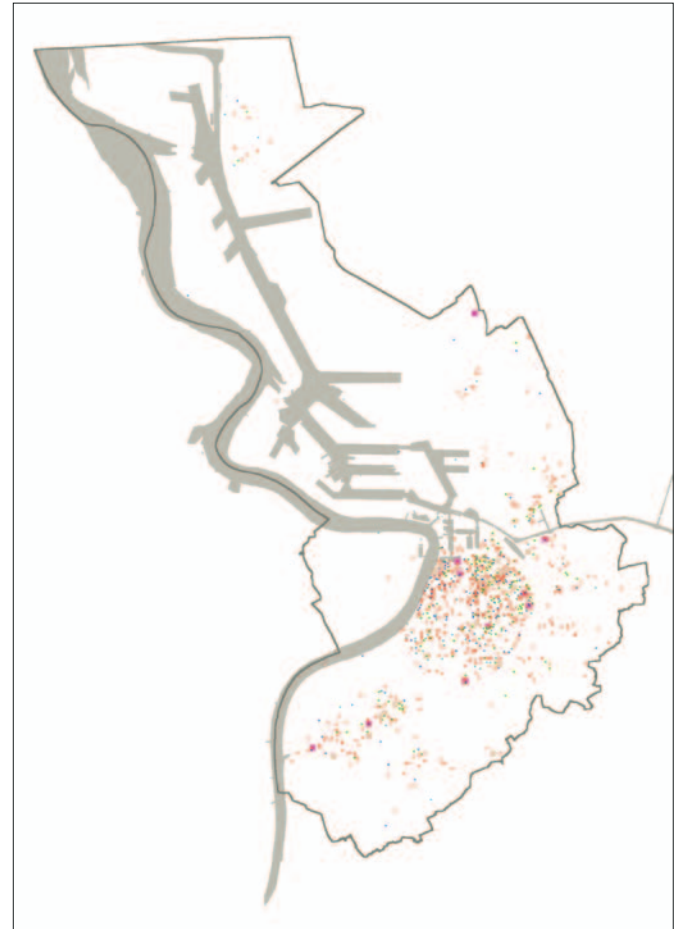
led only to further fragmentation of urban territories. Such urban restructuring has also given rise to a redistribution of monetary and symbolic value.

Every *renovatio urbis* faces the problem of its legitimacy. Why this intervention and not another? Why there and not elsewhere? Why now and not at a different time, or within a different sequence? Why this architecture and image and not a different one? Since the 1980s the answer to these questions has been to let the market drive these decisions. Such a pragmatic approach is perfectly consistent with the contemporary emphasis on uncertainty; on a belief in a communication society[5]; and on the "laws" of demand, where supply is directed by concepts like "Form follows Fiction" and "Fear, Finesse and Finance."[6]

In the nineteenth century, opera houses and railway stations were the symbols of a society inspired by the positivistic ideology of progress. Likewise, schools, hospitals, parks, and playgrounds were seen as the basic infrastruc-ture of the egalitarian welfare society of the mid-twentieth century. By the same logic, museums, congress halls, airports, and shopping malls, situated in a fragmented urban realm, are seen as the key infrastructure for our present competitive and less egalitarian society.

Architecture and environmental design remain essential tools in any process of urban renovation. However, because the amount of wasted and decommissioned land in European cities is so extensive, it is unlikely any new building program will be able to fill the present void. Few activities can compare with the industries of the past in terms of direct and indirect land consumption. And of the proposed new uses, commercial activities and transporta-

Left: Map of Antwerp and its regional area highlighting the dense fabric of small villages surrounding the city's historic core.
Right: The profusion of empty and vacant industrial buildings in Antwerp.

tion infrastructure, including parking lots, are the most land intensive.

The absence of a clear and comprehensive vision of the urban future has also led to incoherent choices about the location, dimensions and aesthetics of new building projects. And today these choices are largely dictated by specific interests and expressive of the old conflict between public and private value.

The Case of Antwerp

Recently, as a way to address more general issues related to postindustrial European urbanism, Paola Viganò and I have been developing a new vision and specific design proposals for the city of Antwerp. The importance of Antwerp to the history of Western urbanization has been largely ignored. During the sixteenth century, like Venice, Genoa, Amsterdam, Lisbon and London, it was a "hub" of trade, facilitating connections between different parts of the globe.

Today, Antwerp is a wonderful but very harsh place.

Its port is second in Europe only to Rotterdam's, and it remains the center of the Flemish diamond industry. Yet it is clearly a city in decline, a place where many industrial areas and residential buildings lie abandoned. It is also a divided city, where different social and interest groups keep distance from one another and hold different visions of the future.

Albeit poorer and less attractive than in the past, Antwerp does still occupy a fundamental place in the heart of Europe. It still has connections to a river, even if it does not profit from them, and it remains a world city, thanks to its multicultural character. But its leaders, until several years ago, had no clear vision or policies to prevent further disintegration.

Until the end of the twentieth century, Antwerp had been attempting to deal with its growing social and economic complexity through policies of separation and fragmentation. The harbor was moved to solve the conflict between the port and the city. Conflicts between old residents and new immigrants were solved by letting the
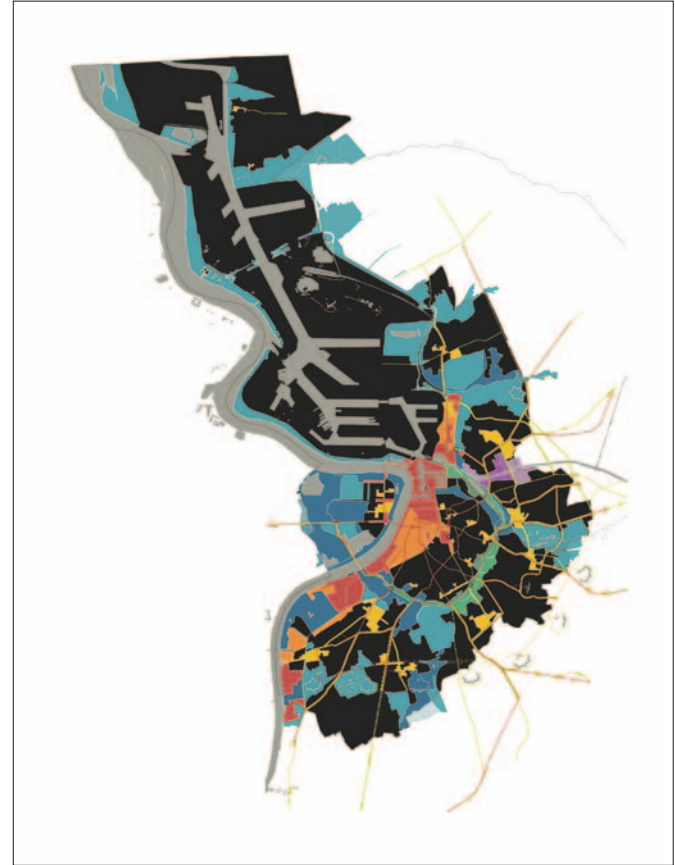
former leave the city, while restricting access by the latter. A similar strategy was pursued to resolve the conflict between industry and housing, as many industrial activities were pushed out to the suburbs, some very distant, leaving only empty spaces bordered by ghettos.

Such policies have now reached their limit. The port has reached the national border to the north, and is now planning to reoccupy space nearer the city (obviously in a different form and under different circumstances than in the past). And though the cost of land prevents most people from owning the isolated homes of their dreams, social separation has now divided the city into noninteracting enclaves. Most important, fragmentation and separation cannot support an ecologically sound urban system.[7]

Despite these problems, Antwerp is undergoing modernization, as the city and its territory are evolving rapidly and radically into a metropolis within a large megalopolis known as the Northwest Metropolitan Area (NWMA). This emerging megacity includes two national capitals—Brussels and The Hague; two of the largest Euro-

pean ports—Rotterdam and Antwerp; important regional capitals like Amsterdam, Maastricht and Köln; and historic cities such as Delft, Haarlem, Aachen, Breda, Gent, Leyden, Leuven and Utrecht. It also provides the headquarters for important national and international companies, universities, and institutions.
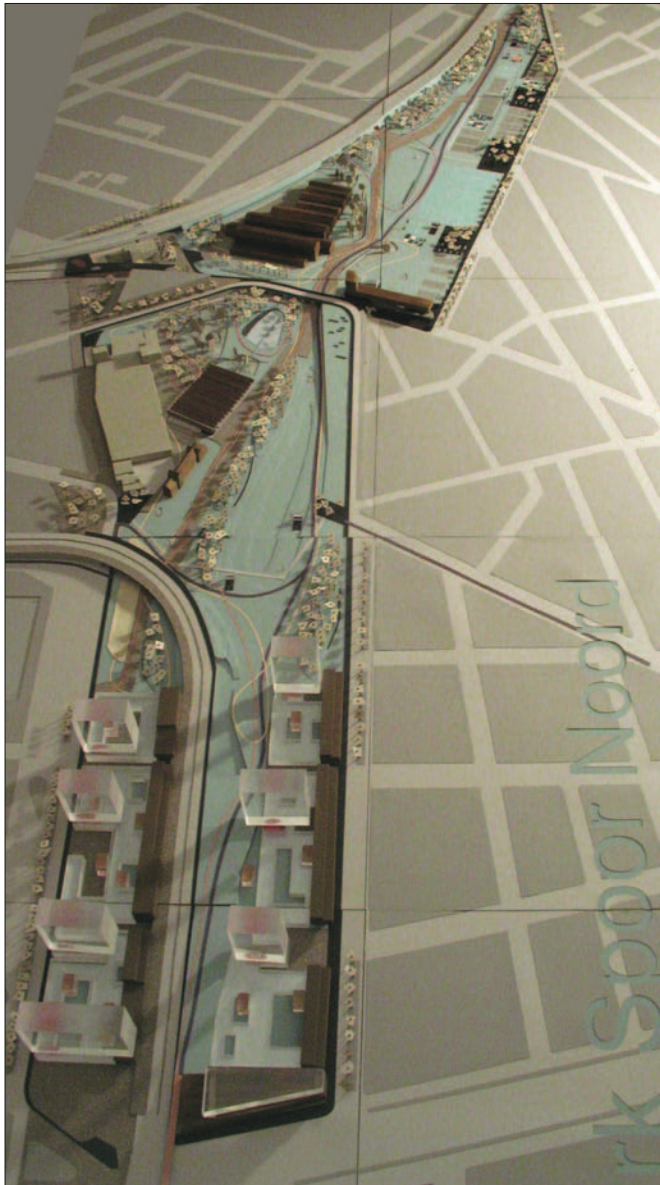
The region also boasts an extraordinary infrastructural density. As such, it constitutes a new form of city, different from traditional megacities like Paris and London, and from Peter Hall's description of new global cities.[8] The spatial character of this new megacity should be an important opportunity for the formulation of a new type of urban design practice.

Starting from the perspective of *renovatio urbis*, Viganò and I have developed a series of hypothetical scenarios

Opposite: A dense network of streams, rivers and canals make Antwerp a "water city."
Above left: Antwerp, the "porous city."
Above right: A map showing the system of strategic sites for a future *renovatio urbis*.

system. Similarly, the abandoned industrial sites and buildings within the urban fabric have turned Antwerp into a *porous city*. This porosity offers the opportunity to create a new constructed landscape within the urban region.[9] Finally, the extremely high density of infrastructure, especially of rail and tram lines, has already transformed the region between Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven into a *rail city*, where residents can live and work without being overly dependent on the automobile.

These images guided our team in a planning process for the whole city, whose outcome was meant both to inspire and legitimize specific urban design projects. Using these images to create scenarios for the future, we asked representatives of the city a variety of provocative questions.

• What would happen if we let nature grow and expand?
• What would happen if an alternative mobility network were improved instead of a highway network?
• What if we link together the existing green areas along the rivers using the abandoned industrial sites?
• What if the main attraction is a new river landscape that could accommodate ecology-supporting activities?
• What if we linked each one of the previous images to some specific design projects and used the scenarios as a tool to check their feasibility?
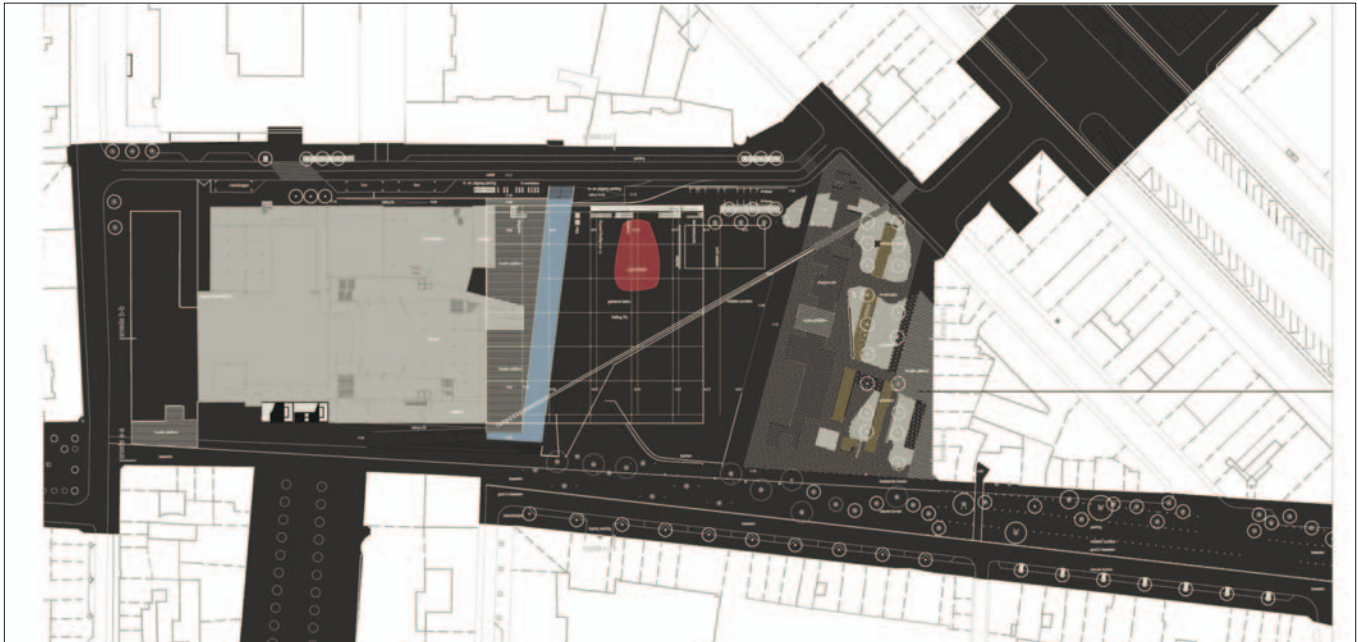
It is important in an era dominated by the rhetoric of uncertainty to pay attention to visions that help people reflect on different possibilities and opportunities. Discussing these hypothetical scenarios with the public seemed the only valuable strategy to us.

A New Metropolitan Form

Our work in Antwerp has allowed us to generalize about some of the opportunities facing the European city. At least until the 1980s, planners thought it possible to fill urban voids created by disappearing industries with traditional and new functions. But our work has shown that these strategies are ultimately ineffective.

Today the urbanized region of Antwerp consists of porous, fragmented, discontinuous and dispersed villages where a heterogeneous mix of people, activities and projects coexist. Yet Antwerp is also a city where the barriers between indoor and outdoor space are vanishing; where environmental sensitivity is growing; where policy is guided by concern for sustainability; and where public transport is being promoted as an alternative to dependence on the private automobile.

Antwerp also shows how nineteenth- and twentieth-

rooted in the collective imagination of Antwerp residents. For instance, it is clear that Antwerp is a *water city*. The water of the river Schelde—its tributaries and canals that cut across the territory—dominates its landscape. Conceiving Antwerp in this way offers an opportunity for structural transformation, using water as part of the ecological

Above: Proposal for a new park and urban redevelopment in the Spoornord area.
Opposite: Example of contemporary *renovatio urbis*: plan for Theaterplein square.

century modernity invaded the physical, social and institutional concept of city and territory with great might, using up enormous amounts of land. Today's modernity, if managed well, puts less stress on the urban fabric. Being malleable, it can also percolate into existing spaces through transformation.

While today's modernity is economically and socially aggressive, it doesn't appear to present the radical spatial demands of the first industrial revolution. Thus, today's modernity can be made more attentive to environmental sustainability than the modernity of the past. However, from a *renovatio urbis* perspective, there remains a need to articulate a comprehensive vision of metropolitan form so that designers can legitimize their work strategically and thematically.

As the case of Antwerp shows, it is not the European city that is disappearing, but certain concepts of urbanity and their traditional interpretations. The social and functional mix visible in contemporary European cities is different from traditional functions. In the allocation of new functions, an evaluation now has to be made that introduces the concept of environmental compatibility. The same can be said of the traditional concepts of zoning and land use hierarchies. Little by little these concepts must be replaced until a true porosity of uses and activities emerges.

Likewise, terms like the dispersion of density and proximity are disappearing. They are being replaced by the concept of "right distance," a distance at which people and activities are willing to connect.

The new concepts of ecological compatibility, porosity, and right distance compel us to rethink the contemporary city, and imagine a city design where form follows biodiversity, social diversity, social practices, and natural processes, rather than "Fiction, Fear, Finesse and Finance."

Notes

1. M. Foucault, *L'archéologie du Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

2. P. Viganò, *La Città Elementare* (Milano: Skira, 1999).

3. E. Orsenna, *Les Chevaliers du Subjonctif* (Paris: Stock, 2004).

4. A. Foscari and M. Tafuri, *L'armonia e i Conflitti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983).

5. M. Perniola, *Contro la Comunicazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2004).

6. N. Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

7. B. Secchi and P. Viganò, "Antwerp, Territory for a New Modernity: Strategisch Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Antwerpen," Antwerp, 2005.

8. P. Hall, "The Changing European Urban System," in *Politicas Urbanas: Tendencias, Estrategias e Oportunitdades* (Lisboa: Fondaçao Calouste Gulbenkian, 2003).

9. Porosity is used here according to the interpretation given by Walter Benjamin and E. Bloch. See W. Benjamin (1925), "Napoli, Ora," in *Opere Complete*, vol. II (Torino: Einaudi, 2001); and E. Bloch, "Verfremdungen II (Geographica)," in *Literarische Aufsätze*, *Gesamtausgabe Band 9* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965).

All images are courtesy of the author.