

WHEN ARCHETYPES GENERATE UNCERTAINTY

The case of the scattered metropolis

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Abstract

In the Low Countries, most of cities have been established during the Middle Ages, while the density of their location at large scale is identifiable since at least the early Renaissance – notably on the maps of the Dutch cartographer Jacob van Deventer. During the modern period, some concepts have locally influenced the configuration of Belgian urban cores – for example, the Leopoldian Park System and the Garden City movement in Brussels, or the modernist proposals for the Borgerweertpolder in Antwerp. However, few of them explain the evolution of Belgium after World War II, most specifically the spread of urbanization that gave rise to a large-scale urban configuration formed by major Belgian networks and centred on Brussels. It's thus the land administration process in itself that should be investigated, rather than the influence of any theoretical figure or archetype. By focusing on open spaces and infrastructures – first by commissioning railroads and waterways, after by creating a Road Fund (1955-1964) and by promulgating strong planning laws (1948, 1959, 1962) –, the instituted actor-network and its borders created indeed a 'scattered metropolis' despite the existence of a radio-concentric land division system. If, at local scale, Belgian cities seem to refer to archetypal configurations, at large scale, they are therefore no longer singular, local territories but administered ones, at the bidding of administrative circumscriptions that do not correspond to their physical boundaries. In other words, they are united in being subject to the effects of the State and to its capacity to shape forms in situ. As a consequence, in the present case, there is no point in talking about 'cities' in meeting the theoretical and environmental challenges of the urbanization process. The difficult mixture of morphology, topography and politics it represents imposes an empirical approach of the articulations between 'physical territories' and 'administered territories'. Such an approach aims to elucidate an ongoing anthropological contradiction of Modernity in a globalizing world: how to deal with spatial and conceptual processes of delineating in a context of struggle for legitimacy and resources?

Keywords:

thick description, scattered metropolis, productive landscape, planning

Uncertain archetypes

The territories stretching from northern France to the southern Netherlands – which include Belgium – may not wish to reveal themselves easily. On a small scale, their morphologies are certainly very similar to many other historic European cities. However, on a large scale, their configurations clearly distinguish themselves from other processes of urbanization. In these territories, urban systems remain 'open', to such a point that it becomes difficult to distinguish between urban centres and sparsely populated rural areas, or even to differentiate man-made interventions from natural landscapes (Van Hecke, 2009; Beyaert, 2006; Kesteloot, 2003; De Meulder, 1999).

As a consequence, viewed from the spatial framework defined by the body of city planning literature, the numerous cities that make up these territories could appear to be a constellation of small settlements that persisted over time with no significant changes. However, when we look at them as a large-scale network, they very prove to be an unprecedented situation that competes with highly centralized processes of urbanization, especially in terms of population density and economic competitiveness (Secchi & Viganò, 2011; Grosjean, 2010).

On this account, particular stress should be laid on the comparison between this particular situation and the Paris Basin. Consideration of two geographic frameworks focusing on each of these urban configurations indeed reveals a surprising factual reality. Given that such frameworks have the same area (45 000 square km) and population (approximately 16 million people), they show that, in contrast to the situation of Paris, the future of the inhabitants of the *scattered metropolis*¹ does not just depend on one radio-concentric urban model, but on political decisions related to various networks and scales of power (see Figure 1).

¹ This term refers to the elliptical configuration formed by major Belgian cities, plus the Lille conurbation and the southern Netherlands.

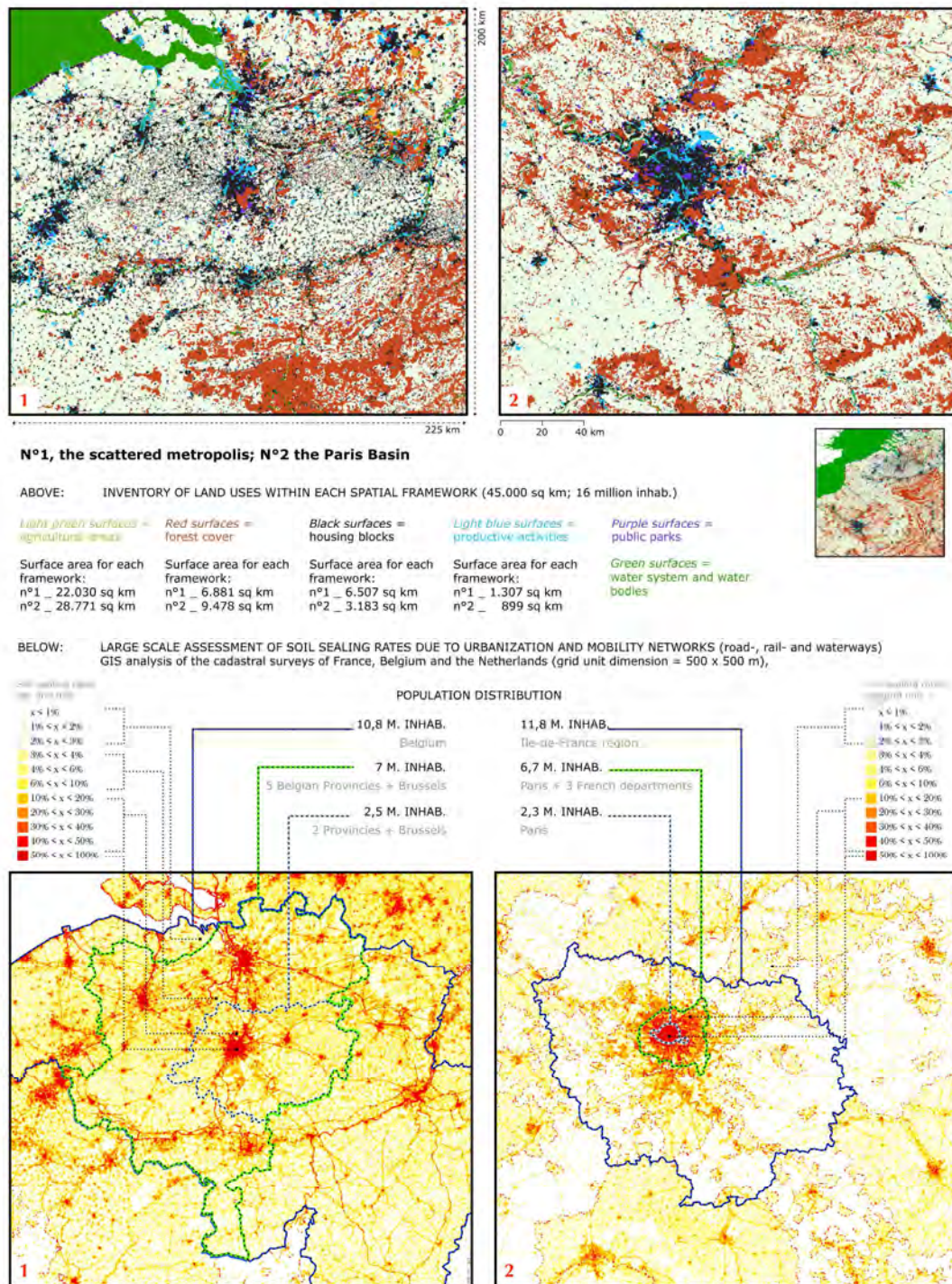


Figure 1. *The scattered metropolis and the Paris Basin, a geographical comparison.* This figure summarizes the factual findings related to the comparison of land uses, population distributions and soil sealing rates within two spatial frameworks focusing respectively on the scattered metropolis and the Paris Basin. These frameworks have the same area and population (sources: AGDP, 2009; EEA, 2006).

The widely dispersed nature of the scattered metropolis has very concrete implications for planning practices. For example, all other things equal, the total building footprint of the Paris Basin covers 486 square km (i.e. 31.476 inhabitants per square km within built-up areas) while that of the former 'Low Countries' is three times greater, with a footprint of 1.264 square km (i.e. 13.251 inhabitants per square km within built-up areas). Due to these high rates of sealed areas, not only the socio-economic consequences of planning decisions related to the built environment are difficult to tackle, but agricultural systems, open spaces and water supplies call also for increased attention. For example, within the scattered metropolis, the forest cover is almost one-third less than in the Paris Basin (7.085 square km vs. 9.794 square km). While the level of agricultural production per square kilometre of agricultural land needs to be 1,4 times higher to feed the same population (Roland, 2013).

It's easy therefore to understand that the spatial frameworks and the scales dedicated to studying and understanding the urban system under consideration here may prove to be highly sensitive and discriminating. As a matter of fact, when one tries to evaluate and manage this metropolis of 16 million inhabitants with spatial concepts drawn up from the archetypal model of the 'centralised' and 'centralist' city, a substantial part of the problem is being evade from the outset. Indeed, not only a large proportion of the urban population is not included in the chosen spatial framework, but the social, economic and environmental impacts are examined from one single centre when in fact they are several others. To paraphrase Bernardo Secchi: in the present case, the mythical image of a territory consisting of urban cores planned so as to stand out from their rural and natural background has become inoperative (Mantziaras, 2008; Corboz, 2001).

This article is thus about the performative utterances inherent in figures and archetypes used to present the work of 'naturalization' and 'culturalization' of spatiality. By retracing the history of the scattered settlements that characterises Belgium, it emphasizes the role and importance of spatial delineations that belong to the field of planning and architecture theory.

The inception of the scattered metropolis

1713-1830. From 'divide and rule' to 'connect and rule'

In Belgium, the scattered nature of the built environment is nothing new. Since at least the early 18th century, a tightly-meshed network of medieval cities and villages is already in place in both the Meuse and the Scheldt basins (see Figure 2). Such a network has mainly its roots in the work undertaken during three historical periods: the reign of the Habsburg (1713-1789), the French occupations (1792-1814) and the annexation to the Netherlands (1815-1830). During those times, successive governments undertake structural reforms: the construction of inter-city paved roads (followed by the provision of crossroads), the fragmentation of farmland properties for productivity issues and the strengthening of administrative consistency between the existing provinces (Grosjean, 2010; Beyaert, 2006; Lemoine-Isabeau, 1998, 1989 & 1984; Danckaert, 1989 & 1967).

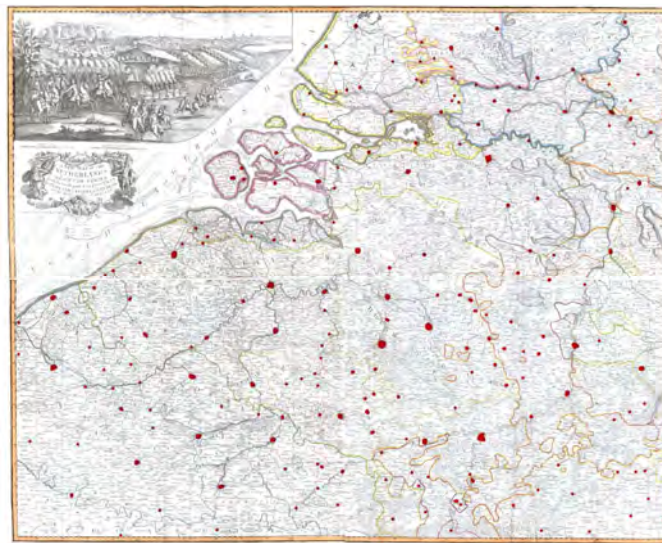


Figure 2. *A new map of the Netherlands or Low Countries...*, 1794, Laurie & Whittle, London. The figure gives an overview of the distribution of urban cores during the last quarter of the 18th century. Even at that time, urban morphologies are extremely close together. Through the establishment of an efficient transport network that connects them, the *Ancien Regime* players will therefore lay the foundations for the scattered metropolis (map source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection; the original map has been edited).

Following the creation of the Belgian State (1830), such an urban network plays a particular role in the transformation of economic relationships between major cities and their hinterlands. In the earliest stages of the industrial revolution, it stimulates a regional economic model instead of encouraging a massive rural exodus. This is particularly true in the textile sector established around Ghent and Liege where there is a strong interaction between urban initiatives and the mechanization of rural economy. In this instance, the notion of autonomous urban cores could therefore be outdated from the outset (Tempels, 2011; Beyaert, 2006).

1830-1880. Preparing the ground for dispersal

In spite of these developments the first real signs of a strictly speaking 'scattered process of urbanization' are not apparent until the last quarter of the 19th century. Contrary to what one might think, it then doesn't take place on the outskirts of an urban core, but on a much wider area: the Charleroi mining basin situated about 60 km south of Brussels (see Figure 3). In this area, worker housings and urban typologies become rooted in direct relation to the setting up of mining concerns, whatever the existing urban morphologies.

Of course, at that time, such a process is not widespread. For example, it does not yet apply to Brussels, which follows a more traditional and centralized model of development until the early 20th century, in line with other major European industrial cities. But what is important is that these two development patterns (scattered/centralized) take place simultaneously, calling into question the centralizing function associated with the archetype of the city and its role in the modern urbanization process.

As a matter of fact, this dual phenomenon is primarily due to a consistent expansion of transport infrastructures, most notably waterways and railways implemented respectively between 1800-1880 and 1834-1873. Such transport networks not only increase transmission capacity between the existing urban cores and production sites, they also connect them in a sustainable way with seaports and hubs (notably Antwerp), involving the whole spatial structure in the production process. Ample evidence of this is then the increasing

concentration of urban forms along the axis connecting the Sambre-Meuse and Scheldt basins (notably alongside the Antwerp-Brussels-Charleroi canal) up to the end of the Second World War (see Figure 3 & 5).

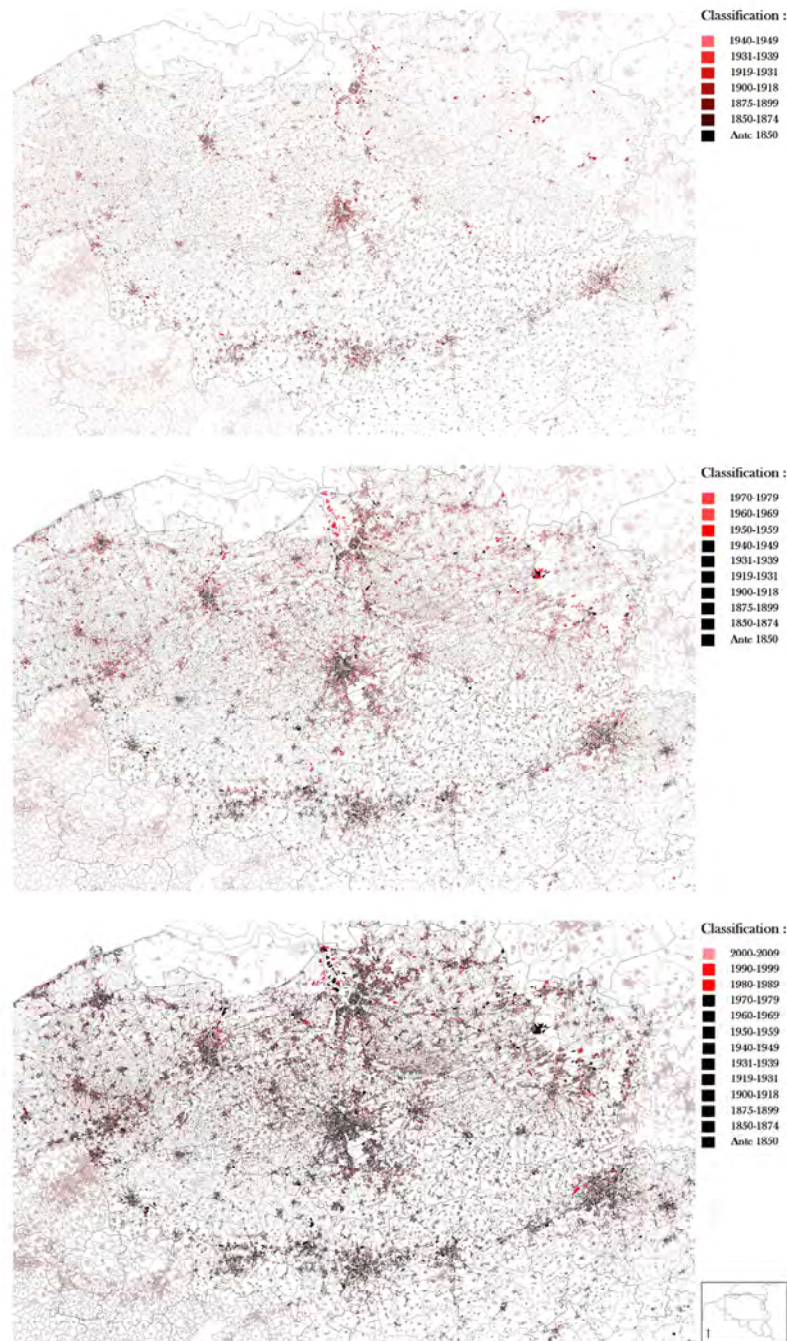


Figure 3. A graphical representation of the inception of the scattered metropolis from 1830 to 2009. The figure provides a classification of cadastral parcels on the basis of their building year (source: AGDP, 2009).

1880-1945. Shaping the landscape through infrastructure networks

The existence of an historic mesh comprising numerous cities and villages (see Figure 2), combined with the establishment of an effective network of infrastructures (see Figure 5), are therefore two key elements in understanding the genesis of the scattered metropolis. Once established, the connection between Charleroi and Antwerp indeed becomes a driving force on the scale of the newly declared State (see Figure 3).

Such a north-south industrial axis is then strengthened by two factors: the setting up of a lightrail-network and the enactment of a series of planning policies, notably the Workers' Dwellings Act of 1889 and the creation of the National Society of Small Landholding in 1935. Between 1841 and 1956, the lightrail-network connects industrial flows with the existing urban mesh, while the above-mentioned policies stimulate the purchase of housing along the lines of this network, allowing not only a non-concentric distribution of buildings, but also a situation running counter to the well-known phenomenon of rural exodus (Grosjean, 2010; De Meulder, 1999).

As a result of these investments in connectivity, by the end of the 19th century, differences in costs of property between cities and rural areas become the main defining factor of the settlement pattern of the scattered metropolis, much more so than the historic forms of the cities that make it up. This applies, of course, on a large scale (see Figure 5), but the same is true on a city scale (see Figure 4). For example, in Brussels, within the sphere of influence of the Garden City movement, an asymmetric spread of urbanization emerges as soon as the 1880s (Dubois, 2005; Smets, 1977).

Supported by the investments in land and infrastructures made by King Leopold II and aristocratic families, this localized phenomenon of dispersal extends up the edge of the Sonian Forest² by the 1880s, privileging open landscapes and railway transportation lines rather than continuity and urban integration (see Figure 3 & 4). Therefore, within a few decades (1861-1930), new transportation

² The Sonian Forest is a deciduous forest situated on the outskirts of the Brussels agglomeration. From the *Ancien Regime* till the mid-20th century, the growth of the capital is clearly based on its physical, economic and symbolic value (see Figure 4).

arteries and single-family dwellings connect the historic urban core with existing construction land situated to the northeast of the capital, thereby reinforcing the competitiveness of a large part of the hinterland (Roland, 2012; Jaumain, 2009; Demey, 1990; Ranieri, 1973).

Thus it might be said that, in this particular case, the city and its surrounding open landscape are no longer opposing polarities, but rather two planning determinants which serve the intentions of a coalition of hegemonic stakeholders operating on a regional scale. From the second half of the 20th century, it is precisely this type of development that will act as a model at the scale of the entire scattered metropolis. The artefacts of the industrial revolution will then spread out across a large geographic area (see Figure 3 & 5), not only that associated with cities' suburbs, but that of entire regions directly linked to the very organization of the State (Zitouni, 2010; Van Hecke, 2009; Maziers, 1994).

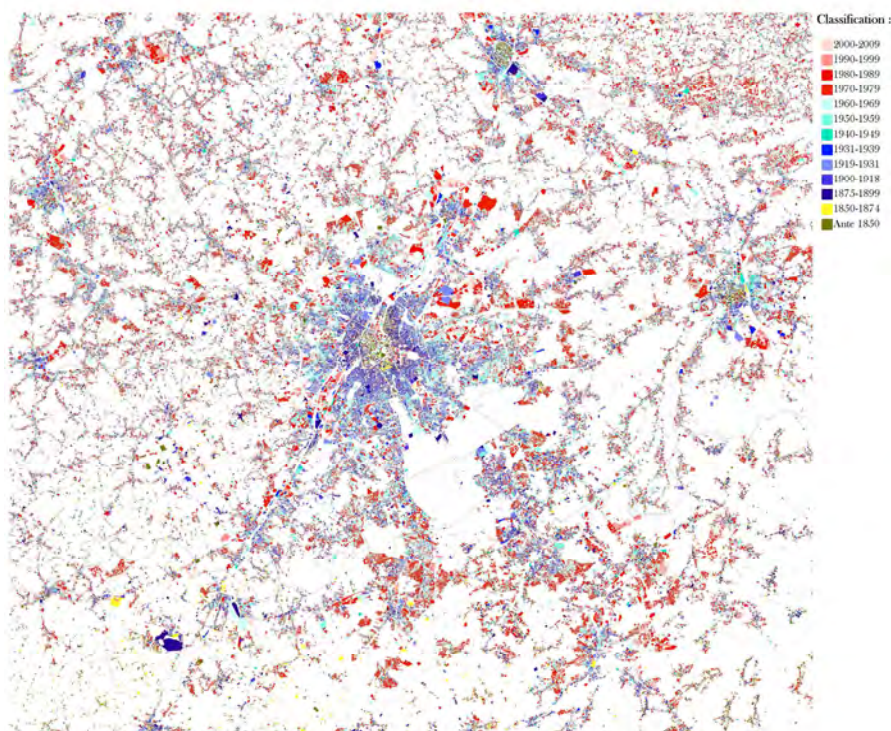


Figure 4. A graphical representation of the scattered urbanization of Brussels from 1830 to 2009. The figure provides a classification of cadastral parcels on the basis of their building year (source: AGDP 2009).

1945-1970. The laying out of a productive landscape

Although the first signs of a modern scattered process of urbanization occurred within the Meuse River basin (see above), after World War II, this process is mainly developing and strengthening within the Scheldt River basin (see Figure 3 & 5). At that time, it is no longer the result of a movement of industrialization whose location is determined by the distribution of raw materials. This new phase of the scattered settlement frees itself from site-specific constraints by making full use of mobility networks and by reorganising gradually the production system around the light industry and the tertiary sector – i.e. a series of economic activities that are independent from local resources.

In the northern part of the scattered metropolis, the spatial dispersal of buildings and activities will then increase considerably and this to a scale that has not been seen before. It is then directly in keeping with post-war Fordism favouring the creation of single-family housing estates and public housing blocks on the outskirts of urban areas, and in some cases even in remote areas. This occurs by means of a shift from rail to road³, but also by means of two laws: the De Taeye Act⁴ of 1948 and the Brunfaut Act⁵ of 1949. Their spatial impact is particularly clear on Figures 3 and 5. Until the 1950s, it takes the form of a dispersed urban fabric gradually covering the open space that develops between cities (Dubois, 2005; Kesteloot, 2003).

Such an intermediate configuration (i.e. urban forms across open spaces and landscapes) play a fundamental role in terms of planning. By establishing and confirming an in-between situation between major cities (Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent) while including intermediate ones (e.g. Aalst, Dendermonde, Lokeren, Sint-Niklaas, Bornem, Willebroek, Mechelen), it allows in subsequent decades a spatial dispersal of economic activities far beyond the historic urban/rural divide.

³ In 1950, the European Agreement on Main International Traffic Arteries (AGR) was signed. Belgium is then considered as the nerve centre of a dense highways network and as a hub between France, Germany and the United Kingdom. A Road Fund is thus created in 1955. From 1964, the investments it makes change the whole face of the scattered metropolis (see Figure 5).

⁴ The De Taeye Act encourages private initiative for the construction of affordable dwellings and the purchase of small pieces of land.

⁵ The Brunfaut Act organises public investments in the area of housing, in particular via the financing and development of a national housing fund.

During the golden years, the continuation of the dispersal of housing and population – which is at that time considered as a mass-production issue – combined with the freedom of movement offered by car provides therefore the very basis for a new territorial economy.

As a result, contrary to other European configurations, the productivity of the territory will no longer be reduced to centralized frameworks determined from each urban core. Rather, it will be regarded as a matter of State policy. Most specifically it will express itself on a spatial level that is directly linked with the authority of the State – and perhaps even that of several States⁶. As proof of that, we can mention the planning instruments of the Organic Act of 1962⁷, but also the promulgation of the expansion laws of 1959 and 1970, both based on the attraction of inward investments.

On balance, these institutional determinants – often legitimized by concepts derived from centralized urban models – will have a far more important impact on the growth of 'satellite towns', 'dormitory towns' and sub-urban neighbourhoods than on consolidated urban cores. Not to mention that many interventions within those cores will themselves be planned in direct relation to the large-scale strategy of dispersal. In Brussels, examples are the plan directly derived from the English *New Towns Act* – the Alpha Plan of 1947 –, the planning of the North-South junction (1952-1980), the upgrading of urban access roads in conjunction with the World Expo 1958, and the so-called 'Manhattan' project that starts in 1967. At that time, the capital is actually becoming a downtown business district⁸ that operates on the scale of the elliptical configuration of the scattered metropolis (Bernard, 2010: 47; Cassiers

⁶ The European Coal and Steel Community was set up in 1950. In this context, Brussels hosts the NATO headquarters in 1947 and that of the European Union in 1958.

⁷ This Act sets a framework for the publishing of regional land-use plans. In view of the spread of urbanization at that time, its primary objective is to adjudicate local land conflicts and to limit urban sprawl. However, by following the zoning principles of The Athens Charter, it finally only confirms the existing scattered process of urbanization by empowering local authorities to act in their own right in the framework of large 'housing zones' established on the scale of the whole country. There is a reason for this counterproductive effect: considering that mobility networks make this country very accessible and that many urban areas are competing to attract housing and activities, local authorities are actually given every facility to promote urbanization where land costs are lower. Those lands are obviously the strategically located open spaces which extend between cities.

⁸ Between 1945 and 1970, the office space in Brussels increases from four hundred thousand square meters to two million square meters.

& Denayer, 2009; Hubert, 2008; Lagrou, 2005; Demey, 1992).

1970-2008. Dispersal as a manifestation of a globalized system

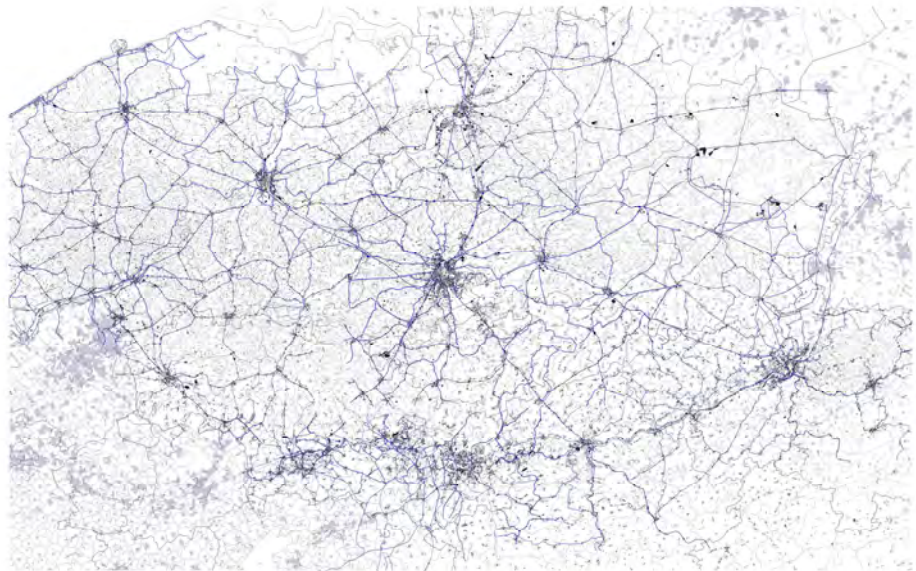
From the 1970s onwards, the density of population living in the open space becomes large enough to curb the role of major cities on the country's productive system. The large democratisation of the car and the development of highway infrastructures⁹ play then not only an important role in the ongoing spread of scattered residential settlements, they also make possible an effective decentralization of the public and tertiary sector activities. During the economic crisis that grips the Fordist model, a relocation of production is therefore taking place where land and labour costs are cheaper, but where regional networks have been set up. The most explicit example of this is the urbanization of the Kempen (Dejemeppe, 2012; Dubois, 2005; Kesteloot, 2003).

Whereas, hitherto, there was something of a balance between urban cores and the productive landscape, this new post-Fordist configuration is in many respects a rupture between the two historic components of the scattered metropolis: the densification of the open space is now being done to the detriment of cities themselves, a situation for which there is no strong reference framework in the field of planning theories (De Rynck, 2003: 46-47). In a way, it is almost as if the Hilberseimer's maxim had surpassed the wildest expectations intended by its author: *'As ruralization of the city would help to solve some of the city's problems, so also urbanization of the country may well be an answer to some of the country's problems* (Hilberseimer, 1955: 218)'.

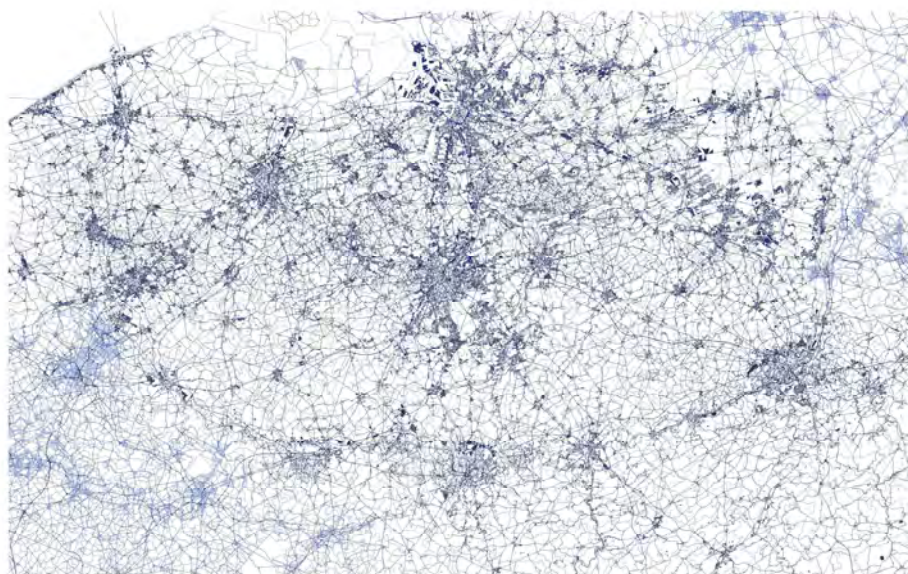
This increase of importance of the 'anti-urban' way of life has indeed very concrete implications. Between 1985 and 2000, there is a growing imbalance between the average per capita income between people who live in cities and people who live at the urban fringe and beyond, with 'rurbans' coming out on top. The reference to Hilberseimer is thus quite deliberate: through the prism of history, the spatial reconfiguration of the scattered metropolis has many times been tantamount to a reconfiguration of the social structure of the State itself.

⁹ Between 1970 and 2002, the Belgian road network grows by 57,5% and the highway network by 250%.

To describe such a post-war urban form is therefore not only a theoretical issue, it's a means of acting otherwise in the field of architecture and planning (Hilberseimer, 1944, 1949 & 1955).



Urban forms associated with the setting up of a light rail network from 1885 to 1956



Urban forms associated with the setting up of a highway network from 1950 to 2009

Figure 5. *Impact of mobility networks.* The figure provides a classification of the cadastral parcels on the basis of their building year (source: AGDP 2009).

Describing uncertainties, from archetypes to a hermeneutic of dispersal

Given the widely dispersed population of the scattered metropolis, urban issues often seem to be paltry in comparison with other major European cities. However, the high density of small and medium-sized cities that make it up, combined with developments in soil sealing around and between each of them, are making environmental risk assessment policies increasingly complex, making social imbalances difficult to detect and objectify. In addition, when one considers the population of this metropolis on a large scale, it easily competes with more centralized configurations, which puts into question the concepts commonly used to define it.

From a narrow perspective, this urban form can certainly be regarded as a modern archetype fuelled by American and German examples of the anti-urban thinking. On this account, the Garden City movement and the regional planning theories defended by Raymond Unwin and Bruno Taut, or the decentralization principles implemented by Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Christaller and Ludwig Hilberseimer, have played a key role in its inception. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the very foundations of these scattered settlements are the result of a long process of territorial interventions that had taken place both *within* and *outside* the traditional boundaries of cities. Far from being a legible and indelible figure, the scattered metropolis is therefore the very manifestation of the driving force resulting from the tension between archetypes and uncertainties.

Through the study of this particular case study, this article sets out to demonstrate that cities and open spaces are not self-contained or static systems, but the various facets of a multi-scale (physical and symbolic) structure. These figures are no longer singular, autonomous territories but administered ones, at the bidding of administrative circumscriptions that do not correspond to their empirical observation. In other words, the differences between them lie not so much in their morphologies than in the state model itself, i.e. in its capacity to exercise physical and symbolic violence at different scales while shaping forms *in situ*.

A critical review of the normative frameworks that rule planning theories could therefore be an essential prerequisite for understanding those contemporary territories, both on a practical and theoretical level. Such territories cannot be regarded as neutral descriptions or circumscribed spaces. As suggested by Bernardo Secchi, their borders and frameworks are tools that establish in themselves a spatial demarcation, and such a demarcation is also a socio-cultural situation that acts as a reference in the different areas of knowledge and in the different fields of action. It's thus necessary to consider their objectification and their production in the light of the actor network that underlies them. It's precisely due to this network that some territories are instituted and acquire a normative value while others become marginalized, irrelevant, in a very similar way as the modern distinction between urban and rural areas (Mantziaras, 2008: 12; Secchi, 2000).

The foregoing observations are therefore intended to shed light on the importance of the anthropological description process in the field of architecture, landscape architecture and planning. Such a description is actually not based on a set of pre-established frameworks and scales, or on a juxtaposition of figures and archetypes. It does not seek to set up inextricable links between the physical reality and a set of culturally charged conceptual tools, precisely because such links isolate groups and communities implicitly involved in these spatial tools. Rather than focusing on an archetypal model or figure, the *thick description* highlights the performative utterances inherent in the work of 'naturalization' and 'culturalization' of spatiality. It allows a hermeneutic of territories (Mantziaras, 2008; Corboz, 2001; Geertz, 1973).

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