FRAGMENTED AND DISPERSED:
DESIGNING BRUSSELS RURBAN LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the role of design in the (re)development of a contemporary hybrid spatial condition that is labeled the 'rurban' reality. 'Rurban' points at the interface between the urban and the rural. Spatially, this rurbanity materialises in a fragmented and dispersed way, creating diffuse heterogeneous tissue that is often neither urban nor rural but simultaneously both. During the last decades, urban design has proven its value and potential as medium to formulate new answers to formerly unknown development issues within a project-based approach in urban areas (e.g. the *projets urbain*). Likewise, it is argued that 'design' (pointing at urban as well as landscape design) can be one of the possible media to contribute to the creation of innovative strategies and methods for rurban environments. Since this diffused condition gains momentum at fringe-areas of a metropolis with its mix of urbanized centers and open green areas in different shapes and sizes, Brussels metropolitan area is used as case. The paper provides an overview of different types of spatial projects in this area and encompasses a first exploration some of the roles of design in these projects.
KEYWORDS: design, rurban, Brussels, metropolitan, project, landscape scale

1   INTRODUCTION

This paper is derived from the notion that the design disciplines such as planning, urbanism and landscape architecture, are increasingly called upon to respond and contribute to the management of the social and environmental challenges and new needs of a contemporary spatial condition that I call 'rurban'. Designing within environments that contain a mixture of highly diverse urban as well as rural and natural objects, structures, and places is a relatively new task for both urban and landscape designers and planners. In these rurban environments, mostly found at the edges of cities and in-between large built-up areas, actors are confronted with the conditions' functional multiplicity (different land uses) and social complexity (many actors with various spatial claims). From a designing point of view also a larger territorial or landscape scale has to be faced. At the same time these rurban environments contain a lot of potential for redeveloping and revaluating/upgrading the living environment of urban as well as rural residents. The integration of different land uses on the one hand, and the integration of actors and their spatial claims on the other is just one example of the challenges. The aim of this paper is provide a first exploration of the roles of design in strategic spatial development projects in rurban environments.

To support the discussion, this paper draws on the example of rurban development in the Brussels metropolitan area, Belgium's capital city and its periphery. It provides an overview of the different types of strategic spatial project that are being conducted in this environment. Furthermore, the general design approach of these projects will be described, allowing me to draw some conclusions on the role of design in contemporary developments in rurban Brussels. It will be argued among others that more attention needs to be given to the capacity of design as crucial part of rurban (re)development processes and projects. This paper begins with a discussion of the relevance of the rurban focus connected with design as central issue, followed by a brief explanation of the embedding of design in a project-based approach. I will then turn to the case study and the roles of design.

2   SPACE OF OPPORTUNITY: RURBANITY AND ITS CHALLENGES

Geographically as well as socially 'rurban' points at the interface between the urban and the rural. From a spatial point of view, this rurbanity materialises in a fragmented and dispersed way, creating diffuse

heterogeneous tissue that is neither urban nor rural but simultaneously both. For instance according to Hoggart (2005:1) the city's hinterland contains both urban and rural land uses and pressures, creating a hybrid landscape or urban pressure and 'mutated' countryside. Gallent et al. (2006) on the other hand ascribe special characteristics to this 'fringe-area', differentiating it from urban or rural areas and considering it to be home to particular land uses and activities. Other authors however view this 'in-between' area as merely waiting to be fully urbanised. Each opinion probable contains elements of truth and therefore they aren't necessarily contradictory. For some rurban parts it might certainly be true that they are just in an in-between stage awaiting urbanisation, while others maintain their specific character and land uses and functions that do not fit in with urban nor rural areas.

The rurban phenomenon describe here is not new, its widespreadedness and gradual intensification however are. During the last two-three decennia, increasing amounts of rurban tissue with a particular structure and morphology appeared, challenging the development and sustainable management of it. Up till now many definitions that try to grasp its diffuse and specific character have been formulated in different context. Examples are the *Zwischenstadt* of Sieverts, the urban-rural fringe used among others by Gallent[1], the hinterland of Hoggart or the *città diffusa* of Indovina. Although originating from specific geographical, economical and institutional contexts, these concepts have similar characteristics. Some of these are a fragmented appearance, a mixture of dissimilar urban and rural functions and land uses, and a blur of territorial, psychological and contextual limits. When using 'rurban' to describe the contemporary spatial reality, I refer to these common characteristics that are evidence for the rife of the phenomenon.

The specificity of rurbanity places urbanism and planning (and other disciplines) for new challenges. As a result from the areas' position as buffer between urban and rural, its function as receptacle for 'second-degree' land-uses that were not desired in other zones (Gallent et al 2006), as well as its role as a mediator between 'place' and 'world' (Sieverts 2003:91), a heterogeneous landscape (Sieverts 2003:92) with great diversity in land uses, socio-economic activities and structures emerged. The functional and morphologic duality that characterises this rurban spatiality causes problems as well as offers opportunities for future socio-economic and spatial development. Or as Ascher indicates, 'This new, diffuse urban space, in perpetual expansion, fragmented and heterogeneous, often constitutes a challenge for architects, urbanists, and politicians, for it does not match the traditional forms of appropriation, between social life and territorial rights' (Ascher in Fort et al. 2000:414). That planning and urbanism can contribute to the management of these rurban areas has been widely acknowledge in the recent literature (Gallent 2006). However, in order to respond properly, the particular issues that ask for attention and that make of rurbanity an interesting topic from a spatial viewpoint have to be made clear.

Rurbanity – and analogous concepts – are for several reasons hot topics in current literature, policy and practice. One of these is the growing ecological concern, and another one has to do with social oriented aspects. For a long time, a compact development of cities with dense built-up areas was thought of as the most ecologic-sustainable form. Whereas it already became clear that the pursuit of this type of development model from a spatial point of view is no longer realistic and feasible in a rurban reality, recent studies also show that the idea of the compact model being the most ecological form might not always be true. They indicate that the largest degrees of biodiversity can be found in edge-areas. At the edge of urban and rural tissue a larger amount of habitat variation exists, resulting in more biodiversity. Keeping the length of the boundary between urban-rural as small as possible (as the compact city model intends) is consequently not always the most favourable option from an ecologic point of view. Also socially the compact city model has created discussion. The need for easy accessible green spaces within a reasonable distance from the living environment is increasingly considered as precondition for a liveable and social-sustainable environment. Classical concepts and models such as the compact city model are therefore being questioned in the wake of these rurban developments (Sieverts 2003). New -or rather different or better adapted- models and strategies are therefore being sought after (Busquets and Correa 2006), and as I will argue further on design can be one of the possible media to explore these new strategies, models and concepts.

The rurban environment is moreover a desired topic today because it is viewed by different parties as space of opportunity. The urban as well as the rural community claim parts of the rurban environment: the first as area for augmenting liveability through the establishment of areas for recreation or for ecological purposes; the latter as area for economic production. Furthermore, in terms of ecological balance, rurban

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[1] According to Whitehand (1988) the origin of the concept lays with geographer Herbert Louis (1936).

areas turn out to be valuable areas, as well as what concerns social issues. The rurban edges of cities are increasingly looked at to improve the liveability of the city because they still contain large open spaces that for instance can be transformed to peripheral parks providing both social (such as recreation) and ecological opportunities. Understanding grows that the use of these rurban areas with their open spaces is crucial for the development and quality of life of the urban region, for the development of a sense of place and identity, and for the environmental benefits as water retention, pollution abatement and keeping the temperature under control (cf. van den Brink et al. 2006, Woolley 2003). Czerniak et al. (2007:11-12) for example remark that these open spaces are some kind of 'bargaining chips to compensate for expansive building, but they can also assume designed dimensions of enormous social and ecological value'. The many spatial claims that are placed on the same piece of land in a rurban environment, make the organisation and management of it to a rather complicated task. The juxtaposition of claims in combination with the unconventional mix of different elements, structures and actors in the rurban area leads to calls for (different forms of) integration such as institutional, spatial, or functional integration (see Vanempten 2010). For instance Gallent (2006) speaks of integrating the urban and rural areas, functions, and uses, and predicts that (at least some) rurban areas (or fringes as he calls it) will be 'guided by a form of planning and governance that promises to be far more 'negotiated' and integrated' (2006:390). Following Gallent urbanism and spatial planning have a clear role to play in managing rurbanity since they are frameworks for bringing interests together, for facilitating change and for managing complexity (2006:389) and for coordinating the actions of interest groups and promoting integrated thinking in the rural-urban fringe (2006:384). Their role is more specifically not that of regulator but of negotiator, facilitator and coordinator. One of the possible task for the design disciplines here is thus not only to guide the development of these open spaces in a qualitative manner and combining the different social, economic and ecologic needs, but also to contribute to the safeguarding or restoration of the coherence and identity of the landscape.

Summarised, the diversity of rurbanity, although often considered as negative characteristic, is at the same time its richness. Within the complexity of this environment, potentials for different kinds of development that can boost the regions' social and economic development are present. Supported by an argument of De Meulder, I will focus attention to design as one of the possible media to explore this potential in a creative manner and to respond and contribute to the management of the social and environmental challenges and new needs of the rurban condition. The attention for design is furthermore based upon a quote of Barnett in (Krieger and Saunders 2009:108), saying that 'Today's city is a complex metropolitan organism still in the process of formation, and guiding its development is the principal challenge for urban designers.'. Not only urban designers, but all design disciplines are increasingly called upon to think of possible answers for the new development issues of rurban environments. Ways to handle the further development of them are needed, but only researched to a limited amount (contrary to the numerous studies describing it). Secondly, not only the reasons why design is mentioned by some authors as a suitable medium to come up with innovative answers, but also some of the ways how design itself is influenced by operating in a rurban condition are explored. One of the implications of rurbanity for design is for instance the requirement of another scale level, namely the intermediate, territorial or landscape scale. Also, because of the complex spatiality and current strives for sustainable development, the combination of ecological concerns and social oriented development appears frequently in the context of planning for the rurban edge.

3 DESIGNING A RURBAN ENVIRONMENT

According to De Meulder (2009), in the context of urban redevelopment urban design – inextricably connected with a project-based approach – turned out to be a medium to formulate new answers to formerly unknown development issues. His argument is among others based upon Busquets who attributes a formal and aesthetical capacity to urbanism. Following this argument, 'design' (embedded in a project-based approach) might also be one of several media to answer to the challenges and needs of the rurban environment. A first question that arises in this respect is why design and why can it formulate new answers? And furthermore: To what extent does design indeed offer new answers to the rurban development condition? Which design applies to rurban (in stead of urban) development issues? Which are the preconditions that have to be fulfilled in order that design is to be able to formulate new answers?

To start with, what are those 'new answers' that are being sought after in a rurban environment? An

example concerns this landscape's increasingly intensive land use and activities, and growing importance of green structures and nature areas. Besides providing places for recreation, augmenting the liveability of the city's urban tissue, the rurban structure is also looked upon to enhance and secure biodiversity. New landscapes that fit the multifunctional use of space in a more sustainable manner have to be designed (Antrop 2005). As a result other approaches for designing these landscapes come into sight, paying specific attention to the ecological and socio-aesthetical needs. The recent turn to more landscape-oriented approaches for instance and the appearance of a new discourse on 'landscape urbanism' illustrate this (cf. Shane 2006). Also initiatives such as the development of design guidelines for ecosystem networks (Opdam and Steingröver 2008) or a conceptual framework for sustainable landscape planning (Botequilha Leitao and Ahern 2002) are indications of some of the directions that are being explored in responding to the challenges of the rurban landscape. 'New answers' therefore can encompass certain strategies, other development models, adapted concepts, etc.

3.1   why design?

Before exploring the why, what and how, it has to be made clear which type of design I am talking about. As indicated, the rurban environment requires another scale than the urban development scale. For instance in a rurban environment, one is also confronted with a landscape perspective and a landscape scale. As a result, in several spatial projects for these environments not only urban design but also landscape design is mobilised. Methods from landscape design are also being applied in rurban development projects. Design strategies include for instance successive planting to generate new soil based on plant life cycles and different crop-techniques to rehabilitate degraded land[2], or a cultivated maintenance and mow management to create pathways and soft boundaries between recreational and economic used areas[3]. For this reason, I will take both urban and landscape design into account and speak from this point on of 'design' in general. What concerns defining 'design', there isn't one generally accepted definition. Different authors define design according to their own context, subject and perception. Likewise, I use a description of design, based on other authors and adapted to the focus of this paper. In principle, design is a process shaping an environment according to the needs of human beings in order to enhance the quality of life (based on Lang 1994). According to Lynch 'Design is the playful creation and strict evaluation of the possible forms of something, including how it is to be made' (Lynch 1984:290). In other words, through design different options of development can be imagined. Secondly, these options can be tested to the socio-spatial circumstances of the development (actors, land uses, topography, etc) and thirdly it can be explored and detailed if and how the chosen options and strategies can be transformed to measures that make them reality. These three elements are basic elements of what design does.

Although Lang (1994:70) wrote about (urban) design that its role is 'limited in dealing with the major problems and issues confronting the world', researching it as medium for thinking of new answers for rurban development issues can be validated when taking the perspective of design as a political tool. Since the layout of the environment and social change are inextricably linked, design mirrors the social world (Lang 1994). Therefore it can contribute on a limited and modest scale to determining the direction of development and the answering of challenges in the rurban world. Because solving problems, and more particularly spatial problems, is a basic objective of design (Rowe 1987), it makes sense to call upon design as one of the media to manage rurban challenges. So far, it is not entirely clear how design can do this, making an exploration of the characteristics and qualities of design necessary. What are the reasons for design being a suitable medium in the first place? To begin with, I have focused attention on what De Meulder describes as designs' capacity to 'formulate new answers to formerly unknown development issues'. Besides that, design possesses a number of other characteristics that explain why it can be a suitable medium in this respect. To my opinion, these characteristics are mainly designs' ability to take the spatial particularity into account and provide a form of quality, to act as a medium for communication, and thirdly its capacity to create correlations and integration. For instance, because design is about exploring, discovering, and showing different options of development, expressing itself with a combination of visual and non-visual means, several authors consider design as a means of communication. The different options can feed and stimulating debate between the

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[2] This is among others the case in a project called 'Lifescape' that aims at the development of a public park on the former garbage dump Fresh Kills on the suburban Staten Island, New York. Design team is Field Operations under supervision of landscape architect James Corner.
[3] In the 'Parc de la Deûle' in the metropolitan area of Lille – France, this type of strategies were used.

actors involved. People can sit around a table and start discussing on a sketch or drawing from the desired development. They can start drawing themselves, in an attempt to come up with a suitable solution supported by all around the table. Especially 'resrach by design' (as a subtype of design) can be a way to establish communication between the actors involved. At the same time, it can be used to build a public support base by involving representatives of the different associations and of the inhabitants into the design process. Furthermore, design has been called 'the art of relating' by Clarence Stein[4]. It can be a medium to relate structures to one another and to their natural setting, or land uses, communities, etc. As Lang (1994) added, it not only relates physical matter, but it can also relate these structures 'in time and over time'. Lang also remarked that (urban) design is about relating professional concerns to each other (such as health and biodiversity). In imaging different options, the person or persons that are designing frequently make use of analytical/empirical sources of inspiration in addition to their conventional wisdom. For instance, many designs start with a typo-morphologic analysis of the involved environment, and/or with a general concept that determines the direction of thought. These techniques are considered to reveal among others possible relationships to be distilled by the designer. In other words, using design can be a chance to work with existing edges, boundaries and constraints rather than ignoring them, making it an interesting tool in a rurban environment were different types of boundaries (mental, institutional or physical) are present.

The previous gives just a few hints towards the ways design can be a medium for providing new or innovative answers in a rurban environment – as integrator and communicator, as provider of substance, etc. However, not all design does 'act as medium for communication' or as integrator. The circumstances in which design operates, the reasons why design is used, and the person(s) that are designing influence the usage of the capacities of design to a great extent. Before turning to the Brussels rurban environment, I will now go on with explaining why design is studied within a project-based approach.

3.2 Design in a project based approach on intermediate-territorial-landscape scale

The contemporary way of development within urbanism is without a doubt project-based, encompassing actions and interventions that have an important impact on a larger city area (Masboungi 2002, Busquets and Correa 2006, Loeckx and De Meulder 2007, Salet and Gualini 2007, De Meulder 2009). Since the appearance of the '*projet urbain*' -spatial projects in urbanised environments- around the 1980s[5], a lot of experience has been built on how to develop inner city areas. When broadening the horizon to peripheral, rurban areas one enters however more virgin territory. Recently, it became clear that the fragmented spatiality needs its own '*projet territorial*' (Mangin 2004) on a larger scale level. This scale level transcends the scale of the urban project, in the same way as the urban developments transcended the scale of the architectural level. Some describe it as a territorial scale (De Meulder 2009), others as a landscape scale (Selman 2006) or a regional scale (Sieverts 2003). Whereas this larger scale-level is required to look at and deal with the problem issues of the rurban area today (see for instance Selman 2006, Leinfelder 2007), it also means a (re)new(ed) perspective for urbanism. Because of the different scale and the specificity of problem issues in the rurban environment, classical methods of city planning and urban design cannot be used directly in most cases. Another implication of the larger scale level is the appearance of landscape in the discussions. Landscape architecture and landscape urbanism as design-disciplines become involved in the development processes in an attempt to link the larger, more abstract territorial scale to concreteness (De Meulder 2009). Furthermore, it becomes increasingly clear that these spatial projects on a landscape scale require a multidisciplinary approach (Lootsma 2000, Krieger and Saunders 2009).

(Urban) design has been a central component of the *projet urbain* during the glossy period of urban renewal, experimenting with new concepts and strategies. Similarly, this capacity of design is exploited according to De Meulder (2009) in the current trend of *projets territorial*. Design is looked upon to crack open new problem areas of city and territory and to create new concepts and visions. In this following of this paper, a first exploration of this new practice and increasing role of (urban and landscape) design 'as a medium to formulate new answers to formerly unknown development issues' (cf. De Meulder 2009) is being carried out by means of the Brussels metropolitan area as a macro-case and several spatial projects in its rurban edge as micro-cases.

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[4] Quoted in (Lang 1994:ix)
[5] The project-mode in urbanism originated around the 1980s as an answer to the fading blueprint and bureaucratic masterplanning (De Meulder 2009).

4   RURBAN DEVELOPMENT IN BRUSSELS METROPOLITAN AREA

Brussels historically expanded radio-concentric, forming an inner circle – the so-called 'first crown', a 19th century belt and an outer circle referred to as the 'second crown' that corresponds with the extension of the tissue towards the ring road in the 20th century. Describing what is precisely meant with 'Brussels' depends strongly upon the chosen perspective. From a larger spatial perspective, Brussels is a strategic spatial and economic location situated in the hart of Europe, on a crossing of highways, linking different spatial networks such as the Randstad, Ruhr-area and Paris/London on a European scale, or the Flemish Diamond and the Walloon triangle, and North and South in Belgium. From an institutional perspective, Brussels only encompasses the strongly urbanised portion of land mastered by Brussels Capital Region (BCR), its governmental entity. The tight institutional boundaries of BCR do not correspond with socio-economic aspects, nor with the spatial reality of the Brussels metropolitan area (Hooghe 1993, Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw 2007, Vanderstraeten et al. 2009, Delwit and Deschouwer 2009). The result of this mismatch is a scattering of competences over different regions. To make matters even more complex, the authority to regulate most spatial development issues within the BCR-region is spread over its 19 municipalities. As a result, the regional level has limited control over spatial issues and land uses, and has to depend constantly on other actors such as the municipalities, the railway, private parties, etc (Marchand 2009).

Just as many vibrant metropolises, the core urban tissue of the BCR is surrounded by dispersed peripheral tissue. Large parts of these rurban areas operate functionally independent (such as Vilvoorde-Zaventem) and belong to Flemish or Walloon territory, but link on morphologic level with the BCR tissue. Brussels today is not only an urban capital with a great deal of built-up surface, it also contains many green and even rural places, especially in the fringe area. An intense functional and spatial interaction between the urban core of Brussels and its surroundings exists, making this zone 'rurban' territory in every meaning of the word. It is an edge-region in a spatial sense (urban, rural, natural elements; peripheral tissue meets city tissue; etc), but also in a socio-cultural sense (different language groups meet, mixture of different cultures). It contains both urban and rural tissue, as well as areas with valuable nature that are part of the Natura-network, or industrial zones, bundles of infrastructure, housing, rural activity, etc. Some pictures of the magnificent photo-reportage '*Over de rand*' (freely translated: about the fringe) of Michiel Hendryckx [fig. 1] illustrate this intriguing spatial mixture. All taken in this Brussels fringe-area, with a maximum of 10km distance from the city centre, these photographs show life and spatiality in the parallel worlds of urban and rural that mingle in this edge-zone. Therefore, from a spatial point of view, 'Brussels' points at an urban region, the physical agglomeration with a series of suburbs and urbanized municipalities (Kesteloot and Saey 2002), that transcends the governmental boundaries. For that reason, I speak of the 'Brussels metropolitan area'.


Figure 1   The Brussels fringe, showing Sint-Agatha-Berchem, Meise and Zaventem
(Copyright Michiel Hendryckx)

Summarised, the spatial development of the rurban fringe of Brussels is not only challenging for reasons of spatial fragmentation and dispersion, but also because of the complexity of the institutional landscape. The following provides an overview of some projects in this rurban environment of Brussels, in order to show to their variety and to provide a first scan of the different roles that design can take up. Furthermore, a focus on the way the projects deal with the tension between urban and rural (e.g. which strategies are used) is analysed.

4.1 The spectrum of spatial projects in Brussels rurban environment

As a result of the diversity and the functional and morphologic duality of rurbanity, different types of projects emerge in the rural-urban edge. They differ for instance according to the type of development (urban, rural, both), and the objectives (creating synergy, recycling areas, restructuring space, filling grains, initiating new development, enhancing and reinforcing existing potentials, etc.). Some projects seek connection with the urban centre, others with the more rural hinterland, and even others try to combine both. The land development and land consolidation projects for instance rather fit in with the rural activities and land uses. In most cases they are targeted at open space development and protection against further urbanisation, also often support of agricultural activities. The connection with urban developments remains in most cases limited to the construction of recreational networks. On the other side of the spectrum are the projects in the frame of the 'housing plan' and the allotments-projects such as the England-project in Linkebeek and the Erasmus-project in Neerpede. In between both extremes is a whole spectrum of different combinations of urban and rural measures and strategies. In each of these projects, design is used for certain reasons and with different purposes, other than creating and imagining a substance. For instance, design can be used as the 'PR' of the project, to explore different possibilities and directions of development, to attempt to create a support base among the various involved actors, etc.
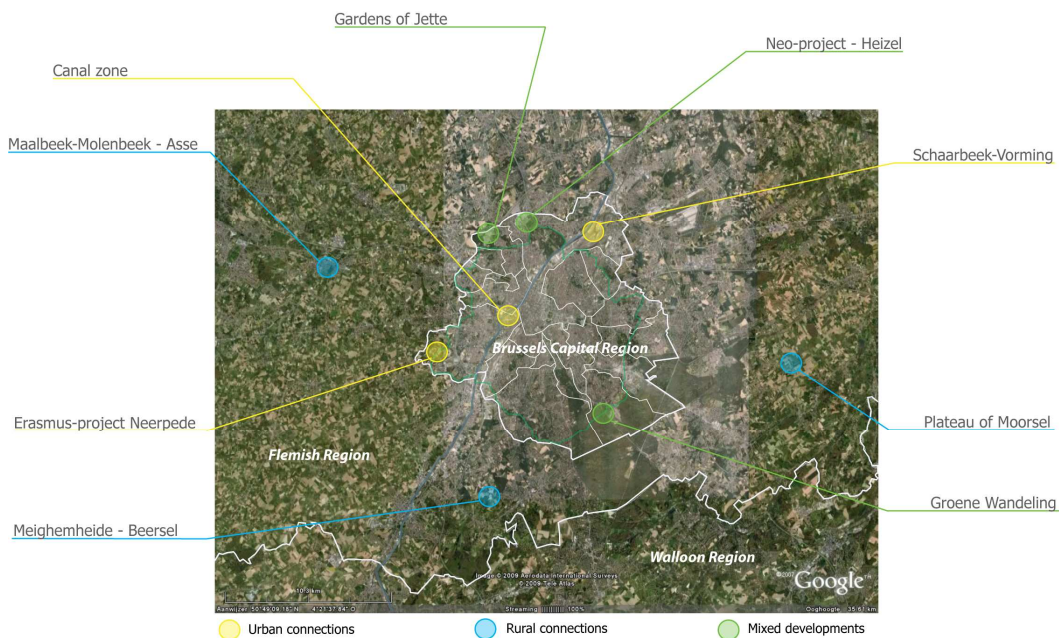
Figure 2 spatial projects in rurban Brussels

- *Urban connections:*
  The urban development Canal zone is a bit of an outsider in this analysis, since this project mainly targets at developing the banks of the canal Brussels-Charleroi in the city centre. An overall vision on the Canal and its potentials for redevelopment is missing at the moment. However, since the canal stretches out into the periphery, and since the current project is already being financed by 'Beliris' (a cooperation between the BCR and the federal government), this project could be an opportunity to pay attention to the transition and linkage of the city with its surroundings. The role of design at the moment is showing the project to inhabitants and to the different municipalities (the canal forms a border between different municipalities in the BCR), acting as a basis for discussion. Its role could however be expanded, acting as an integrator of urban and rurban structures and networks. Another interesting project in this respect is the Erasmus-project in Neerpede. This project aims to develop a green area in combination with dense housing (mainly private, small amount social housing) in a part of Brussels that still has a rural feel to it. A first design proposal encompassed the creation of 1800 to 2800 housing units on a terrain of 13 hectares. Design in this

project was used for its basic role as a provider of substance. Its role as communicator was however not being played out. From a first exploration of this project, it appears that only a line of communication existed between the designers and the developers. Probably unintended, the design for the Neerpede-development stimulated however public debate on the desired development. Especially the density of apartments and social housing, and the absence of any public services that showed from the first designs triggered the debate and resistance grew against the allotment that was largely based on singular economic grounds.

- ***Rural connections***
The land development Meighemheide in Beersel (10 km south of Brussels city centre) aims to development of a large piece of open space area. Measures are among others supporting agriculture in the fringe of the city, enhancing and safeguarding natural and landscape values, improving the accessibility, linking the place to the network of open spaces in the Brussels fringe, water retention measures, etc. Also the land development Asse Maalbeek-Molenbeek (460 ha) and Plateau of Moorsel, situated in the open space between Brussels and Leuven, have similar targets. The task for design in these projects is mainly to think of suitable solutions that are solid enough to provide a barrier against further urbanisation (for instance the planting of trees or the creation of small woodlands are a few of the used strategies). Furthermore, besides providing measures to protect the openness or green character of the landscape, another task of design in these projects is to structure the landscape to create coherence and identity (for instance by designing recreational networks that link the place to its surroundings). Whereas the role of design in the projects on the urban side of the spectrum included conducting the 'PR', showing the project to inhabitants and other parties, or acting as a basis for discussion, the role of design here seems rather to be to provide technical solutions.

- ***Mixed connections:***
An example of a mixed development project is 'Neo' at the plateau of the Heizel in the north of Brussels area. The programme for this 67ha large area encompasses a combination of services of communal importance (congress centre, hotel, shopping mall), park area and public services and was determined by political actors of the municipality of Brussels and the responsibles on regional level. The further development and design of this programme into a concrete spatial project is being conducted at the moment by means of an urban design competition. Afterwards also an architectural design competition will be organised. Design in this project is clearly forced to concentrate on adjusting the predetermined programme to the concrete site. Another mixed development project is the 'gardens of Jette'. This project combines a housing development in a landscape park of 7 ha near the boundary between the BCR and the Flemish region. Its catalysing effect seems to be limited though and it has a rather local scale, despite its ambition to realise the development within a landscape park of 7 ha. Another interesting project with rurban connections (rather than being a mixed development) is the 'Green walk' project (Groene Wandeling). This project is part of the development of a regional green network and creates a 60km long route of green and natural places in the 19th century belt of Brussels. Design seemed to play however only a very small role in this development, merely providing technical plans and a general outline of the route.

A first, rudimentary, conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of these different types of spatial projects concerns (regretfully) the often poor quality and lack of innovative design strategies. In most of the discussed projects in Brussels edge, design is forced to work within a traditional frame and lacks innovative qualities. Its role varies however widely, from merely technical plans to PR-instrument and integrator. Several projects furthermore concentrate on the local scale-level focusing on a single problem issue and showcasing only limited catalyst capacities. Especially the ones that interconnect strongly with urban development are among these. Some innovative or possibly interesting developments are present however. First of all, these projects (except for the Green walk-project) nevertheless prove that design is being used in Brussels' rurban environment and sometimes given a chance to do more than 'just' providing a substance for the development. For instance the design competition for the Neo-project could spice up its development, and also the attention for the canal zone as integrator of urban and rural can be promising.

Besides within the frame of a project-based approach, design in Brussels metropolitan environment is also used in other initiatives concerning the spatial development of the rurban fringe. Examples are the pleas for an ecopolis or loby city model that concentrate on developing an overall vision for the development of Brussels as spatial entity.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper looked at the challenges for designing in a contemporary spatial condition labeled the 'rurban' reality. The dispersed spatial condition mixing rural, urban and natural structures is not just a problematic 'evil' that needs to be dealt with. On the contrary, it offers a chance for innovative development and can be looked upon as a space of opportunity. Attention for these areas has increased lately, generating a need for new -or rather different or better adapted- models and strategies for its qualitative redevelopment. Based on an argument of De Meulder, I argued that 'design' can be one of the possible media to explore such strategies, models and concepts for a rurban environment. Elements to support this argument are being sought after in the different roles that design can fulfil (integrator, communicator, etc). Designing for the rurban reality however also means obtaining a wider scope, one that goes beyond that of 'urban design', taking the landscape-perspective into account. As such, design too is challenged by the rurban conditions. For instance when considering planning of the rurban edge, different issues need to be handled at the same time. As a result, designing for rurban areas means taking into account the complex physical-spatial structures and characteristics as well as societal concerns (such as ecology) and concerns of local communities. Another implications of rurbanity for design is the requirement of another scale level, namely the intermediate, territorial or landscape scale. After determining some of the challenges of rurbanity for design, I carried on explaining the project-based approach, and ended by looking at a concrete case, Brussels metropolitan area. It made among others clear that when conducting a project for a spatial development, design is involved and mobilized for different reasons and with different purposes, determining its role in the project.

Certainly not all the questions that were formulated in this paper have been answered. It encompasses just a first exploration of Brussels rurban context and the spatial projects that are being conducted there. Ongoing research therefore concentrates on further evaluating the role of design and the way it handles the tension between urban and rural. One of the topics is designs' role as political tool, as a social statement, leading to questions such as: what is the difference between a design that serves the needs and visions of developers and actors involved in the first place, starting primarily from formulated social, economical and cultural claims with a spatial reflexion or one that starts from characteristics of socio-physical space such as topology or existing land uses looking towards future social, functional and ecological needs?

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