



Urban Agenda Platform

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# Canal Plan: An Innovative Planning Approach for the Brussels-Capital Region

Award Scheme

Guangzhou Award

Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

## Summary

The Canal Plan tackles an issue that many metropolises across the world have to face: the physical, economic, social and environmental transformation of former industrial districts. Launched in 2015, the Canal Plan is guiding the transformation of the Canal area, the former industrial zone of Brussels, towards a more sustainable, productive and inclusive territory.

## Background and Objective

Brussels authorities wanted to avoid mistakes often made in other places, i.e. redeveloping former industrial areas along the water into merely offices or housing projects for middle/upper classes. On the contrary, the Canal Plan wants to promote functional diversity, create affordable housing, develop economic activities, maintain industrial heritage and create a liveable urban environment (public spaces, green areas and the canal as links between neighbourhoods). To achieve these objectives, the Canal Plan proposes a triple innovative shift: New spatial planning approach From a traditional blue-print planning document to an innovative, flexible and operational planning tool based on 3 principles: functional diversity, rational use of land (densification) and qualitative public spaces. New working methods From a top-down approach to a “co-construction approach” with the support and guidance provided to each project developer by a “research by design team” and by a “common plan for landscape and urban quality of public spaces”. New governance approach From a centralised managing structure to a dedicated canal team displayed in different regional administrations.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION** The Canal Plan is a project of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, implemented under the supervision of its Minister-President. The canal area has been defined as a priority territory in term of urban development in: The Canal Plan is inspired by the “integrated and sustainable urban development” concept promoted by European and international frameworks (European Leipzigcharter, SDGs, NUA...) **ORIGINS** The canal area is a strategic area for Brussels. Located in the heart of the Region, it represents 15% of the Brussels’ territory (2,509 Ha), 17 % of its inhabitants (190,000) and hosts 6,000 companies generating more than 7.5 billion euros value per year. As time went by, this area went through a de-industrialization process causing a fourfold transformation: physical, economic, social and environmental. To tackle these challenges, several initiatives at local scale were developed by Brussels-Capital Region with support of the European, national and local authorities and private actors (3 initiatives were finalists of the 2016 edition of the Guangzhou awards). Despite many concrete improvements on the ground, the need for an action at a global scale embracing the whole Canal area became vital. Thus in 2011, Brussels-Capital Region launched an international competition to develop a plan to guidethe holistic transformation of the whole canal area towards a more sustainable, productive and inclusive territory. In 2015, the Regional Government adopted the Canal Plan and started its implementation. The Canal Plan is a response to the following objectives: Develop economic activity in the city, and bring people’s workplaces and homes closer together; Create housing meeting the needs associated with population growth and suiting all household profiles; Create pleasant and unifying public spaces, and promoting the Canal crossings as links between neighborhoods; Create the conditions for a city that is opened to different functions, populations and landscapes; Achieving these objectives involves: Promoting functional diversity by working on urban forms and programs to ensure compatibility of functions; Rationalizing land occupancy and looking for ways to use it intensively; Using public spaces as the basis for shaping the city. In 2015, the Regional Government gave itself 10 years to implement the Canal Plan’s ambitions on the ground. The implementation of the project is based on a strong public-public partnership. Instead of a centralised managing structure, the Canal Plan is implemented by a dedicated transversal canal team spread across different regional administrations: Chief architect of the Region as guarantor of the overall vision and quality; Urban Development Corporation responsible for the operational implementation; Research by design team steered by the Chief architect in charge of converting Canal Plan’s ambition into design proposals; Brussels Planning Agency in charge of planning, elaborating and monitoring the regulatory framework; Brussels Urbanism and Heritage Administration in charge of delivering permits. In addition, all municipalities and regional services concerned by the Canal area are involved in the definition of the projects. Public and private developers benefit from this governance structure because they get expertise at each stage of their project, from planning to implementation phases. Finally the citizens were involved during the development phase through different information and consultation events, such as the 48h of the Canal. They are also involved in the implementation phase through the legal consultation process for each new project but also through more participatory processes related to neighborhood regeneration schemes linked to the Canal Plan. A budget of 12 million euros (13.35million dollars) is dedicated to the project team and studies for 10years. Concrete projects are developed by additional resources from public and private developers and from local, regional and European public-funded neighborhood regeneration schemes.



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## Outcomes and Impacts

Since January 2016, more than 130 studies and small to large scales projects are under development within the Canal Plan. These projects have already achieved to start reintegrating the canal area in the city and to reach the following changes: More affordable housing; Better quality of life with new parks and public spaces; More social cohesion via new cultural and leisure equipments; More circular and sustainable economy; More territorial cohesion. The following projects are illustrating these changes: Abattoir foodmet and urban farm: a food market with a 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> roof aquaponic greenhouse farm, making it the biggest in Europe. This project was finalist during the 2016 Guangzhou award edition. Private project (<http://abattoir.be/en/abattoirsurbanfarmpilotproject>) Kanal/Pompidou museum: develop a new modern art museum in former Citroën building while keeping industrial heritage and including it in the existing neighborhood. Public project (<http://kanal.brussels/en/aboutus/kanalcentrepompidou>) Interbeton: use design and architecture to keep an important concrete plant in the heart of city by reducing nuisances such as dust and noise. Private project Urbanities: develop a new neighborhood with housing, productive and logistic activities, green spaces and a school. Private project (<http://www.urbanities.be/>) CityGate: reconvert industrial brownfield into a mix-used quarter with public housing, economic activities, park and public amenities. Public project (<http://www.citydev.brussels/2016activityreport/citygate1.html>) Ninove and Beco parks: two new parks along the canal in very dense neighborhoods. Public projects (<http://www.beliris.be/projets/quaisbecoetmateriaux.html>); (<http://www.beliris.be/projets/amenagementparcportedeninove/>) Indicator of results Number of Hectares for new housing; Number of Hectares for new economic activities; Number of Hectares for new or renovated public space; Number of new jobs; Number of new inhabitants. Indicators of implementation Number of projects co-constructed; Number of meeting with developers; Number of information meeting with inhabitants; Number of contracting authorities signing up for central procurement service of the public space quality plan; Number of projects launched via the central procurement service; Number of architectural public procurements launched; Number of companies relocated in the area; Number of additional public investments. The Canal team is in charge of the measuring and uses the collected data to evaluate the implementation of the Canal Plan. The multitude of projects reveals that, alongside the existing global development vision of the Canal Plan, a more specific strategy for the public space was necessary. In 2017, a competition was launched to elaborate a "Public Space Quality Plan". This Plan will consist of: a strategic plan for future projects with open space in the canal area: vision, principles and design guidelines/recommendations; a central procurement unit (or common purchasing system). A framework agreement for the public space plan has been signed in 2018 by Brussels-Capital Region and a consortium of design consultancy teams, engineers and artists. The consortium prepares the public space plan, but can also be used for the study of individual projects. As an effective tool for the implementation of the recommendations of the plan, a central procurement unit has been launched. This tool allows each operator, responsible for projects in the public space (federal, regional or communal) in the canal area - and who signed up for the central procurement unit - to benefit from the available services of the consortium. The consortium can design, accompany or advise the design of the open spaces for public operators or private developers. This largely guarantees the application of coherence, quality and identity of the public space in the canal area.) The main beneficiaries of the changes are the inhabitants of Brussels in general and the Canal area in particular. The Canal Plan is gradually reintegrating these neighborhoods in the city and removing the mental and physical barrier created by the canal. It is creating a more sustainable and inclusive territory attracting also new inhabitants and economic activities and making the inhabitants proud to live there. Moreover, redeveloping the canal area contributes to a new image of Brussels for: Tourists: the Canal area is a new destination for tourists coming to Brussels; Investors: presentation in real estate fairs and on-site visits organized raise interest from new investors for the canal area; Media: several interviews, newsletters, press releases showing positive projects are changing the image and perception about the canal area; Urban professionals, cities, academics: presentations and visits organized, such as the ISOCARP international workshop in 2015 with 100 participants... are raising interests about the canal area and the canal plan.

## Innovative Initiative

The initiative can be considered as revolutionary in Brussels: Scale: first time a planning approach was adopted for a territory as wide, with a surface area of 2,509 ha representing 15% of the Region The Canal Plan has been inspired by the experience of life de Nantes, a former industrial area located in the middle of the metropolises of Nantes in France. Alexandre Chemetoff, the renowned town and landscape planner who developed the guiding-plan for the reconversion of l'île de Nantes was selected in October 2012 to develop the methodology of the Canal Plan. Some elements were borrowed such as the flexible planning tool and the importance to build on the industrial identity of the area but the rest was tailored-made to the specificity of the territory and the local context. The project has been considered as an innovative practice by: Policy and strategy: a new flexible and evolving spatial planning approach based on 3 principles: functional diversity, densification and qualitative public spaces. The Plan is implemented on the basis of negotiated projects. Each project contributes to raise questions and enriches the overall vision of the Canal Plan, making it constantly evolving. Design: international competition to select an interdisciplinary team to elaborate a planning methodology and not a traditional blue-print master plan. Implementation: from a top-down approach to a "co-construction approach" between public and private actors. The dedicated Canal team provides guidance to each project developer in order to ensure adhesion of each project to the 3 principles of the Canal Plan and check the feasibility of projects. Tools: "Regional Estate": the impossibility to embrace the whole 2,509 ha of the Canal Area is solved by concentrating actions and resources in a limited operational zone of 313 hectares consisting largely of publicly owned land: the 'Regional Estate'. Starting on land owned by public actors (Municipalities, Region, Port authority, public companies....) to develop projects, creates a positive spill-over effect for private estate companies to join the Canal Plan process. "Research by design": each project developer receives support and guidance, from the definition to the implementation of the project, through a process of frequent



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contacts and reconsideration in order to build a shared view. The research by design approach adds flexibility by rapidly testing sketches, by developing scenarios and feasibilities of a site as either a basic proposal or as a counter project to make the initial project evolve. “Public space quality plan”: to increase coherence between different projects and zones, a specific public space strategy is developed with vision, principles and recommendation. As an implementation tool, a central procurement unit has been launched and is available to all project developers. Governance: a dedicated canal team spread across different administration and co-construction of projects with public and private developers. Main obstacles: Resistance of economic actors to accept functional diversity in former mono-functional zones; Resistance to engage public and private developers in the process to co-construct their project with public authorities; Resistance from project developers to use the new tools (Research by design and Public Space Quality Plan); The complexity of project co-construction could slow down the processes in the design phase; Canal Plan being a project of projects, the challenge is to keep the global coherence. These obstacles were overcome by: Explanation and communication with the stakeholders in order to understand their fears, their needs and the way they work; Experiencing added-value of new approach: once an agreement is reached on the design phase of a project, the implementation phase goes quicker because all public actors involved have agreed and delivery of permit is smoother; Quick win: realisation of public projects created a spill-over effect for private partners to join; Transversal Canal team: creates trust between public actors, a shared knowledge about the different projects and guarantee global coherence. A public space quality plan: guarantees the application of coherence, quality and identity of the public space in the canal area.

## Conclusion

Relevance and significance for other cities: The globalization of production, rapid technical change and increase in all sorts of pollution are compelling many cities across the world to reconvert their old industrial districts. To succeed this reconversion, cities have to adopt an integrated approach tackling different domains of sustainability and involving different relevant stakeholders. They also have to develop new collaborative spatial planning approaches. Lessons learnt and replicability: The Canal Plan can be a source of inspiration for these cities because it proposes an innovative spatial planning approach to reconvert industrial districts into more sustainable and inclusive neighborhoods, while keeping their productive function. The main lessons learnt from the Canal Plan is the importance to make the mental shift to promote functional diversity in cities and avoid developing mono-functional zones. Pressure is high in metropolises to develop the housing at the expenses of economic and industrial functions. The Canal Plan is showing that with better urban and architectural planning, functional diversity can be achieved and economic/industrial activities can remain inside the city. Finally the Canal plan proposes changes in governance and implementation tools that can be easily tailored-made to any particular context. Transferability Brussels-Capital Region has already started sharing its experience and lessons-learned with other cities by: Showcasing the Canal Plan in Conference (ISOCARP, Eurocities, ICLEI, European Weeks of Region and Cities, OECD seminar in Amsterdam, ...) Organizing on-site visit (2017: Guangzhou delegation, ISOCARP next city seminar, URBACT European Fringe project, ICLEI Europe, delegation of Lille... and in 2018: Metropolis Pilot Project seminar and London delegation) Brussels-Capital Region is involved in several international and European networks where it will carry on promoting the initiative, such as Metropolis, EUROCITIES, ISOCARP, ICLEI, OECD, UN-Habitat... But without doubt, the recognition by the Guangzhou award of the innovativeness of our initiative would speed up this exchange and mutual learning process with other cities across the world. **RELEVANCE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS** Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable Target 1: Access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums Target 2: Access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all Target 3: Participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management Target 4: Safeguard cultural and natural heritage Target 6: Improve air quality and manage municipal and other wastes Target 7: Universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular of women, children older persons and persons with disabilities Target 9: Improving resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters and implement holistic disaster risk management Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns