

# Curated Routes: the notion of routes as a design tool for the conception of urban environments in Belgium

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The paper discusses the starting point for the conceptualization of the ‘curated routes’ design tool. By investigating different applications of the design tool, we seek to contribute to the general discussion on the user approach in design theory. The project limits its research to urbanized environments that have been developed in the geographical area of Belgium from the World War II till the current times. In this frame the Horizontal Metropolis is approached as an urbanization concept rather than a definite image. From this point of view a breeding ground for discussion is provided on the spatial patterns and socio-cultural logics that different urban paradigms introduce.

## The ‘curated routes’ design tool

The scope of the paper is to present a first outline of how we would like to proceed on the analysis of a design tool. Starting point on researching the notion of ‘curated routes’ in urban design was ‘a priori’ interest on the way urbanized environments are perceived by the users along a route of movement. A certain group of studies (Augoyard 1979, Ingold 2000, Offenhuber 2003, Desportes 2005, Cresswell 2010) relates the perception of the environment to its spatial attributes, and the transportation medium one could use. These scholars stress that the effects-results of the itinerary are defined by the way the environment unfolds along a route of movement. By dissecting urban environments into ‘routes’ we aim to gain insight on the terrestrial and successive experience of space, and thus to reveal interesting information on the user approach in design theory.

The ‘curated routes’ is a ‘research on design’ project. In general terms research on design investigates methodologies that ‘translate’ concepts into designed forms. By doing so it bridges two research fields: the historical-theoretical research and the design research (Van Der Voordt and De Jong 2002). Our project is a critical analysis on theory and history of urbanism. The methodology that we follow is a reflexive work on selected design methods and approaches (test-cases). By researching why and how the ‘curated routes’ have been used as a design tool in a range of test-cases we wish to come on critical conclusions on the user’s approach in design theory. Studies that analyze urbanized environments by examining their relation to exterior fields of knowledge (e.g. transportation systems, supply networks, state policies, etc.) could be useful methodological references for our research.

The title ‘curated routes’ reflects on the one hand on the intellectual function of curation, and on the other on the notion of ‘routes’ as it has been applied by certain designers. While ‘routes’ are commonly used in urban design as a way to apply organization and hierarchy in space, curation is rather a new term in the field. Etymologically, curate, in the sense of the Latin *curare*, is the activity of taking care. Today specialists curate collections mainly on an interpretational level and less from a conservation point of view. In this frame the verb curate refers to the intellectual practice of arranging the material of a collection, in a way that a new understanding of the world is revealed. In our case curate assigns to the interpretation of the historico-cultural information that is contained in urban environments. As Bunschoten puts it, “with the help of players –any actors and agents active in an urban environment– the curator animates games that reshape these trends into scenarios” (Bunschoten, 2001, 39).

By the new term ‘curated route’ we aim to introduce a common ground between different patterns and logics that urban designers have applied. In other words, the research picks up the *cupola* term of ‘curated route’ to interpret the history of a design tool which has been used by urbanists in different circumstances and contexts. Each one of the spatial patterns organizes urban space by pointing towards a different worldview. Our aim is to examine urbanized environments that have been developed in the geographical area of Belgium from the end of the World War II till the current times. In this frame the research project could be helpful on analyzing historical examples such as historical city centers and industrialized districts, but intention of ours is to enter as well in current debates oriented to new urban extensions and the Horizontal Metropolis. The selected test-cases will be analyzed in depth by focusing on the design method, the user approach and the broader historico-cultural trends of the period. Our readings will include history books, periodicals and manuals in the fields of urban design history and theory, anthropology, and cultural geography.

## The ‘curated routes’ in relation to different urbanization concepts

Over the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a number of important shifts occurred in the urban design theory

–both internationally (Taylor 1998) and nationally– (Albrechts 1999, Ryckewaert 2011) with each one of them leading to different terrestrial models, styles of living and valued ideas. Secchi argues respectively that “The reality of the urban landscape is not one of an eternal continuity but is subject to a continuous transition, resulting in an on-going fragmentation.” (Secchi, 2006, 21-36). Marcel Smets has formulated a critical hypothesis for the relationship between the economic development and modes of operation (*modus operandi*) that led the urbanization practice in Belgium (Smets 1990). More precisely, he divided the timeline in three characteristic periods: time of ‘confidence’ (1951-1959), time of ‘casualness’ (1960-1973) and time of ‘hesitation and challenge’ (1974-1991).

In our project we are particularly interested to explore how the different historico-cultural periods could be linked to urban design patterns with a particular user approach. The research hypothesis is that different expressions of the ‘curated routes’ tool (e.g. normative routes, horizontal systems, routes that celebrate free choice, etc.) might be able to interpret significant shifts that occurred in the post-war urbanization of Belgium [tab. 1]. In the context of this paper we would like to briefly refer to two exemplary test-cases. Our intention is not to present these test-cases as a definite study, but rather as a work in progress that initiates an interesting discussion on the design tool and its relation to spatial patterns and socio-cultural logics.

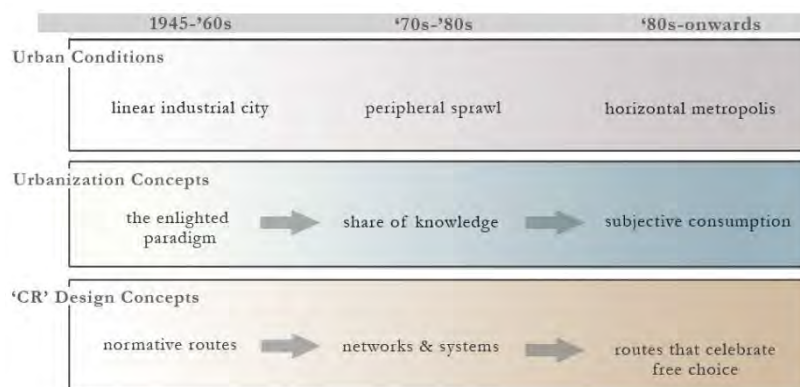
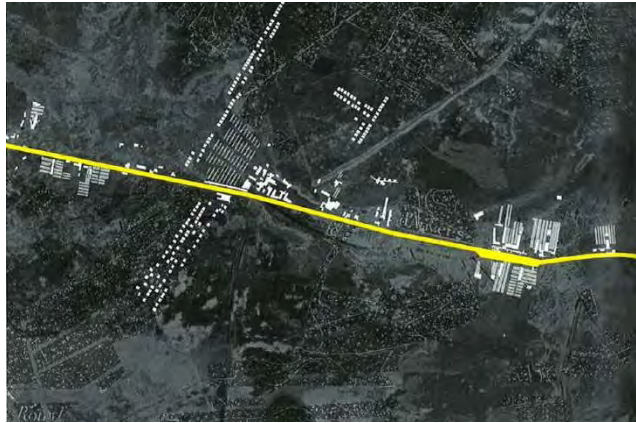


Table 1: Illustration of the conceptual process we followed to study three exemplary test-cases. In each test-case (vertical columns), design concepts of the ‘curated routes’ (bottom line) appear in relation to urbanization concepts that the designers were studying (middle line) and the urban conditions (upper line) of that period. Source: elaborated by the author.

*Normative routes’: The productive and residential pattern of the linear industrial city in Campine.*

In the 1950s, with the end of the post-war political instability and the gradually development of a greater political constancy, a coherent urbanization regime emerged in Belgium. During this period large-scale operations occurred primarily in the peripheral regions of the country, such as the coastal areas and the heavy-industry basins in the mainland. At this period a significant evolution in the urban design theory generally occurred with the shift from an exercise in physical design to a rational process that was examining the city in social and economic terms (McLoughlin 1969, Taylor 1998, Hanocq 2011).

The linear industrial city was a model that was shared by many in the modernist planning circles in Belgium as a guiding image to the emergent urbanization needs. The modernization of the waterways in the Campine region went hand in hand with the establishment of heavy industries and companies along the Albert Canal. A basic pattern of parallel water and high-way infrastructure was considered as the ‘working zone’ for a set of adjacent urban zones [fig.1]. Social housing for the working force was built by the industries in ribbons or aligned to roads transversal to the canal (Van Acker 2014). Ryckewaert states that “the emergence of linear settlement patterns in the post-war years is due to the mutual reinforcement of two models –a territorial model for organizing production, and the urban model of the linear city” (Ryckewaert, 2011, 168). The modernization of the waterways not only aimed to provide the industries with process-water and connection between points of production, but encouraged as well the accommodation of new points of production in areas where any urban fabric was absent (Delmer 1952).



[fig.1] Distribution of cement factories (white) and dwellings (bright white rectangles) along the Campine Canal. Source: from Van Acker, 2014, 96.

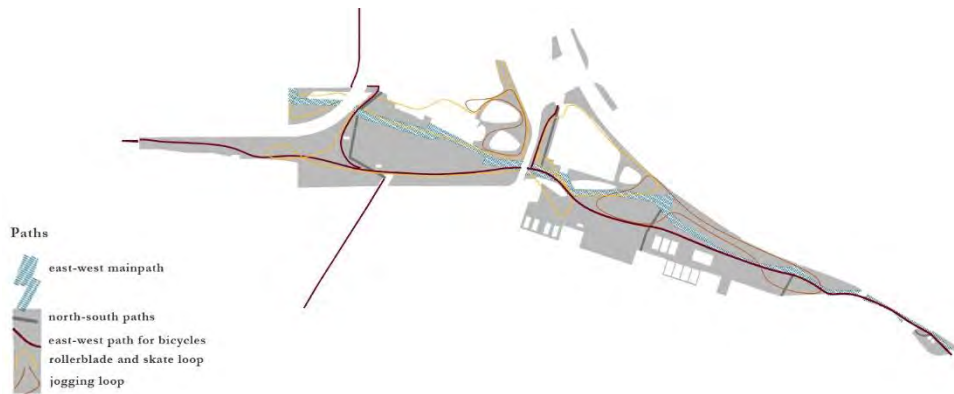
One could argue that in the test-case of the linear industrial city the ‘curated routes’ tool has been applied in the form of ‘normative routes’. The reception of this model could be interpreted in different ways. To a broader perspective the ‘normative routes’ pattern reveals a rather clear emphasis on changing the existing society. It appears that the agglomeration of industry along the waterways was related to Paul Otlet’s vision for a national plan for Belgium (Otlet 1935). An ideological vision linked to the models of Victor Bourgeois and Renaat Braem who perceived the whole territory of the country as a long production corridor between main cities (Braem 1971, Strauven 2005). By having a closer look at the developments on the sides of the canal one begins to realize the characteristics of the ‘normative routes’ pattern. The linear industrial cities were a new realm that has started to shape the everyday experience of an increasing number of people. The strings of fuming chimneys, the adjacent brick dwellings of the working force and the larger units of the directors, were ‘emitting’ a specific communicative image of an autarkic and coherent urban fabric. This image was primarily advertising the economic development and welfare of the area. It was perhaps admired by the prospective investors and passing-by visitors, but had most probably different value for the everyday users of the territory.

*‘Routes of free choice’: Park SpoorNoord Antwerp, Secchi and Vigano*

Smets refers to the urbanization practice of the years 1974-1991 as the time of ‘hesitation and challenge’ (Smets 1990). Looking at the broader reality we could assume that it was the general rise of social awareness in the 1960s that rattled the approach of the designers. Consequently, urban design has shifted from an educational-normative activity to a horizontal process that was reinforcing the subjective consumption of the environment (Taylor 1998). As far as Belgium is concerned, Smets relates the shift in the urbanization practice to the crisis years of the 1970s-80s and the transition to a Post-Fordist regime. In this frame the ‘horizontal city’ could be studied as a ‘structure of knowledge’ which is opposed to hierarchical urbanization attempts. Accordingly, forms of spatial order that were strengthening the horizontal relations were employed in order to foster the free choice in urban environments (Harvey 1989, Sandercock 1998). Secchi and Vigano elaborate on this ideological shift by enumerating two cognitive strategies that lately captured the attention of many researchers and urban planners (Secchi and Vigano, 2009, 9). The first consists in a return to experience as a primary source of knowledge, in the place of the common sense. The second strategy refers to the project’s fundamental capacity to produce new expertise. In other words, the use of the project not so much as application of a priori knowledge but as a producer of new knowledge.

At this point we would like to refer to the park SpoorNoord as a test-case that could shed light on another possible application of the ‘curated routes’ design tool, the routes that celebrate ‘free choice’ in urban space. The field of SpoorNoord, located to the north of the Antwerp’s city center, does not really belong to the body of the city where everyone is daily living. In general, the area is a patchwork of several neighborhoods and communities (Uyttenhove 2003). Main points of the proposal elaborated by the team of Secchi and Vigano<sup>1</sup> were connectivity and the realization of a collective *topos*. The park was re-designed as an open space that interweaves with paths the internal areas to the adjacent neighborhoods [fig.2]. Numerous enclosures (e.g. street facades, side walls of buildings, fences, etc.) and openings were handled in a special way. Some enclosures stayed fixed while others remained flexible depending on the hour of the day, the season, the activity or the event (Palmboom 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Studio 03, Buro Kromwijk, Meertens & Steffens and Iris Consulting



[fig.2] Allocation of paths in park SpoorNoord based on the design proposal of Secchi and Vigano. Source: from Antwerpen Stad, 2005. BPA Stedelijk Park Spoor Noord. [online] and De Wever, 2003, 86.

One could observe that in this test-case there might have been a couple of different reasons-why the implementation of the ‘curated routes’ tool was a favorable choice for re-designing the area. The concept of ‘routes of free-choice’ was well related both to the architectural program of the project and the general concerns of the urbanists of that period. The main scopes of the program were the design of a green recreational area and the gentle connection of the east-west and north-south areas (Geerts et al. 2003). Therefore we could advocate that the use of ‘routes of free-choice’ in the form of paths was a favorable interpretation of the program. A second reason might have been the general ideological shift in the urbanization practice towards the subjective consumption of the environment. In this context, a design proposal that was aiming to cover the needs and aspirations of the people living in the vicinity of the park was ideologically welcome by the research community.

With the introduction of the project’s framework one begins to realize the opportunities that the design tool could offer to the general discussion on the user approach in design theory. The overall research project might assist us as well to broaden our understanding on the logics that guide the design of urban space in general. The test-cases will allow us to investigate to what degree the design tool has been used and what opportunities could offer to designers in the future. Design concepts such as the ‘normative routes’ and the ‘routes of free choice’ are prominent test-cases, but they are certainly not the only ones. Further research is required in order to broaden our understanding on the design tool and the cases-circumstances where it has been used.

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