The St-Michel reconstruction-project in Liège: A morphological regulation case study

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Abstract. The conversion of policy intentions to policy outcomes in urban design projects is a major concern for local authorities and for developers by these times of deregulation and globalisation.

Following the assumption that organisational / political factors can play a significant role in public-private negotiation processes, we tried to identify some of them, and their possible interrelations through the analysis of a small-sized case study, namely St-Michel redevelopment project in Liege (BE).

The negotiation-system structure appears to be twofold: one concerns the urban project definition and the other one is related to the urban construction project production. These two sub-systems are highly interrelated even if each has its own logic and way of development. They evolve in parallel and need a strong regulation to secure the whole system.

1. Introduction

Deregulation, international competition, decentralisation, local authorities financial weakness: all these factors seem to have seriously reduced the capacity of an actual public control over individual initiative. In urban design, this control has usually been achieved through regulatory measures and policies, like municipal building codes, local plans and so on. Yet a growing tendency to by-pass these traditional mediating techniques by direct public-private negotiations and contractual agreements can be observed in present major urban design projects. These negotiations may occur in precise legal frameworks (incentive planning [BARN-74] and development-disposition agreements [SAGA-97] in U.S., planning gains in U.K. [CLAY-97] or country specific fiscal incentives) or through informal procedures (as in most continental European countries [COLL-97]).
The conversion of policy intentions to policy outcomes in urban design projects is more than ever at the research agenda (see for instance urban planning performance assessment methods [CURR-98] or specific EC actions like the COST-UCE Action C4 [DUPA-96]). And the relevance of public-private negotiations should be raised within this specific context. Following the assumption that organisational / political factors can play a significant role in this process, we tried to identify some of them, and their possible interrelations through the detailed analysis of a small-sized case study, namely St-Michel redevelopment project in Liege (be).

2. Case study presentation

The St-Michel redevelopment project consists in the realization of a multi-functional urban complex gathering retails, habitations and offices in the historical centre of Liege (be), place St-Lambert (figure 1). A complete description of the Saint-Michel case study can be found in [TELL-98].

![Figure 1. The St-Michel urban district within place St-Lambert (Atelier du Sart-Tilman, 1994).](image-url)
2.1 Place Saint-Lambert urban project precedents (1950-1984)

Liege municipal authorities definitely acknowledged that place Saint-Lambert required a deep rehabilitation as soon as the early 50ies [LIEG-56]. By this time, the city’s most central place qualities were deeply compromised by a largely unplanned evolution of urban transports. Even if St-Michel redevelopment, initiated in 1994, was a very indirect consequence of this early awakening, the period that separate both dates contributed to frame future urban development decision-making.

In the after-war period, place Saint-Lambert had actually turned to an intricate circulation exchange area, gathering automobiles, buses, trams and rail station, coming from the whole city and its satellites. Replaced in the late 50ies context, the problem could only get worse by the times, since the rapid growth of automobile displacements. The proposed solution consisted in connecting the place to the forthcoming peripheral motorways so that to avoid its definitive saturation and benefit from these developments.

Given these premises, Saint-Lambert urban rehabilitation process had known a tormented maturation since the decision to renew it in the late 50ies.

- A first euphorical period (1961-70) was characterized by a very global rethinking of the place organization in accordance with the whole city’s hinterland planned development.

- From 1970 to 79, local authorities adopted a much more aggressive strategy. It consisted in taking advantage of the central state discretionary legal, operational and political urban development rights.

- From 1979 to 85, place Saint-Lambert project gets more and more disapproved by the population. In 1985, the process is definitively stopped by new city officials.

3. The St-Michel urban construction project: preliminary definition

The St-Michel development project takes place within a very complex and politically sensitive urban project, namely the whole place Saint-Lambert rehabilitation project in the historic centre of Liege. Generally speaking, we consider that an urban project is the continuously developing product of a dynamic system constituted by three semi-autonomous sub-systems of definitions: political,
judicial and operational definitions (figure 2). These three sub-systems are highly inter-related and subject to the numerous perturbations induced by internal conflicts or by external changes occurring in the outer world.

The actors involved in the management of this system are continuously developing competitive or associative strategies in order to achieve the urban project objectives when trying to protect their own interests. The negotiation process used in these circumstances is peculiarly unstable and unpredictable.

![Diagram of the three sub-systems of the Urban Project definition.]

Figure 2 - The three sub-systems of the Urban Project definition.

3.1 The political definition

The political definition consists in the definition of the main political intentions underlying the project rationale. These intentions are traditionally supported by political actors, at various power levels, but can also emerge from a confuse population demand. Utopias, like Renaissance self-cantered ideal cities, are probably the best example of such political definitions where an abstract model materializes a social project. Even if the ideal star-shaped plans proposed had not often been strictly respected, they framed the urban production process during
sometimes a long period. For instance, even if not as perfect as these theoretical models, Sixte-Quint’s transformation of Rome was governed by the political will to reorganize the whole city around a 6-branches star centered on the Esquilin place and Santa Maria-Maggiore (figure 3).

The public polemic about the place Saint-Lambert reconstruction project was very intense until 1985. By this time, given the acknowledged impossibility to come to a general agreement about a plan or an urban project, local authorities adopted five major rehabilitation principles with the consensus of all local political forces.

A consultative committee, gathering representatives from all political forces, from majority and opposition, was constituted. Its aim was to guide the urban design team in its main choices and preserve the political consensus the three basic principles raised. Provided that this committee would be regularly and fairly consulted, all parties accept to retrieve the place rehabilitation from their own political agenda.

![Figure 3 - The six branche Esquilin Star as designed by Sixte-Quint (from [LAVE-41])](image-url)
Additionally, as recommended by the famous architect R. Boffill during his visit in Liege in 1984, the whole project would be coordinated by a single well-established architect, preferably coming from the city’s territory. C. Strebelle, who had successfully managed the university transfer from the city centre to peripheral campus, appeared to be the most valuable for this task. He would guide political actors with technical advices and translate their choices into an operational project.

3.2 The judicial definition

The judicial definition consists in the production of the legal context framing the urban project. In some countries, important interventions require preliminary legal formalisations (PPA : “Plans Particuliers d’Amenagement”, in Belgium; “bebauungsplans”, in Germany; the POS : “Plan d’Occupation des Sols”, in France and so on). In any case, most urban interventions are submitted to planning and / or exploitation permissions. All these documents restrict the possible transformations that could be applied either to the built environment or to its functional activities through combinations of self-assigned and prescribed rules. Even most deregulated urban projects do not evade such a judicial definition.

In the Liege project, the political agreement around the stated principles constituted one of the key events in the St.-Lambert district reconstruction process. Obviously, the 1984 consensus had deeply transformed the whole political definition of place Saint-Lambert rehabilitation.

For once, there were no resistance against these intentions amongst the local population. This tacit approval would long until the political definition would be transformed into instrumental projects which raised some conflicts, strictly limited to some NIMBY groups located in the direct neighbourhood of the place. Yet the five main political principles would not be directly questioned by these groups and the conflictuous issues strictly targeted practical interpretations of the urban project abstract intentions, like archaeological vestiges preservation, height and form of specific projects, parking areas extension. The resort had been brought to the Supreme Administrative Court of Belgium (Conseil d’Etat).

This is a court devoted to the control of administrative procedures legality. Its rationale is to check that administrations decisions are compliant with their own published standards. Planning permissions and plan adoptions are, as administrative acts, submitted to its control. This arrangement implies that administrations and political actors are no longer the only valuable “keepers” of the “rules”. Any citizen, provided that he can demonstrate that his quality of life would be affected by an administrative decision, can legimetically claim on it. As a consequence, the
State Council activity makes design control somehow more dynamic and less predictable through the triggering of new rule-keepers and the production of judicial case precedents. In the Saint-Michel case study, it progressively framed morphological regulation through the definition of an appropriate judicial definition.

What is very examplative in the resorts against the private developer’s planning permission is that public authorities obviously benefited from the progressive judicial definition, either through the application of related statements or through its progressive legal status specification. This process involved not only judicial actors, but also political ones through the decision to maintain this zone within the city historical area and establish an alignment plan, followed by a PPA.

The local interest group itself surely helped to refine this judicial definition, despite its reluctance to the development. Probably, they were somehow responsible for the rigorous application of the PPA constraints during public-private negotiations.

3.3. The operational definition

Finally, the operational definition consists in the identification of (i) activities (the physical interventions) that are needed by the urban project production; (ii) the actors that will take charge of their realisation / maintenance. These activities are not limited to physical interventions, but can also encompass economic or functional developments. Actors may be institutional or private ones. Urban development projects, like Saint-Michel redevelopment, are components of the Place Saint-Lambert operational definition.

In Belgium, it is normally formalized through a legal document defining the desired urban layout through morphological, functional and judicial statements. As such, its is traditionally conceived as a static document.

In complex operations, this definition cannot be limited to the desired outcomes since these ones are highly dependent of the actors that could realize them. Rather than a comprehensive local plan, its status will be to specialize the game of activities / actors involved in the urban project. As such, it has to be interpreted as a dynamic document. Especially when the strategy of local authorities is to internalise external actors as was the case in the place Saint-Lambert rehabilitation project. This dynamic behaviour is clearly illustrated by the evolutions that occurred within the Place Saint-Lambert operational definition. The detailed description of this process has been described in [TELL-98].
4. The urban-project negotiation system structure

By contrast with ordinary rationalist urban planning models, we consider this three definition system as dynamics and composed of partly autonomous sub-systems (figure 2). They constitute a complex multi-relational, quasi-open system whose structure is also changing in time.

- Actually the political definition is submitted to its own internal dynamics through the democratic game of elections, political disputes or even institutional evolutions. As major urban projects are more than often longer than democratic cycles (4 to 6 years), their political definition may be submitted to periodic modifications / adjustments.

- The judicial definition is itself submitted to a legal demand of internal consistency. Any rule must comply with a complex set of existing rules, from urban planning general regulations to legal administrative procedures or even constitutional principles. The permanent production of judicial precedents by appeals against previous judicial definitions makes this process somehow circular and dynamic [YANG-95]. Furthermore, when institutional modifications occur during the urban project lifetime, one can suppose they will also affect its judicial definition.

- The operational definition is also characterized by its own internal dynamics. The actors / activities pairs definition is a permanent process, governed by specific constrains : time delays, available budgets, proper adequation of activities and actors, technical limitations. Given the maturity of the urban project itself, this process will be characterized by divergent or convergent behaviours [RASM-94].

Of course, there are many interactions between these three definitions : a modification of the project intentions may lead to a redefinition of the operational framework, this redefinition may itself be submitted to legal conditions. We simply don’t consider that they are totally dependant as it is often assumed by advocators of linear political-judicial-operational causal sequences (define the basic principles, translate them into legal rules and finally realize the project according to these rules).

It’s precisely the permanent adjustment between these three semi-autonomous definitions that constitutes the urban project. All the more as their successive interactions will itself constitute a precedents base, which can also frame future developments. In our case study, it was this continuous adjustment process and its precedent bases that legitimised in camera urban development project negotiations.
5. The urban development project management system

The previous sections illustrated the dynamism of the whole place Saint-Lambert urban project political, operational and judicial definitions. Obviously this behaviour would affect the urban development project decision-making, all the more as these definitions kept on evolving even since some constructions were already designed or built. Therefore we have to consider the whole urban development project production as a double parallel negotiation systems: the Urban Project system and the Urban Construction Project system (figure 4).

For the best interest of our study we selected the St-Michel bloc and applied to it a detailed analysis. The St-Michel bloc is a major component of the place Saint-Lambert operational definition and, what is more, has been taken in charge by a private developer. Both these characteristics have definitely increased the operation development risks (and moreover its scientific interest).

5.1 The St-Michel system-system structure

Following [GLASS-92], we considered the decision-making process within a period starting with the developer’s selection (June 1994) and ending with the final planning permissions (April 1997 and June 1997). A complete description of how morphological constraints aroused all along this 34 weeks period can be found in [TELL-98].

![Figure 4. The system-system structure](image-url)
Here, the focus of attention will be put on the structures that have been organized to manage the urban construction process. We suggest to examine how the morphological constraints were discussed, negotiated or relaxed, in order to adjust dynamically the urban development project and the ongoing St-Lambert urban project.

A graphic representation of this structure is presented on (figure 4). In this diagram, the general system has been divided into two main sub-systems: the urban-project system (U.P.) and the urban-construction-project system (U.C.P.). The first one, the UP or definition system, consist in three intricated sub-systems that are the political definition, the operational definition and the judicial definition. This system produces evolutive lists of norms, standards, intentions, purposes and recommendations. Some of them being also applicable to the outer world, we consider them as secondary (from the St-Michel project point of view) outputs. The discussion of the first one, the UP or definition system, was part and parcel of the previous chapter. The second one, the UCP or production system, is itself composed of two main sub-systems : the operation system and the regulation system. (figure 4)

5.2 The regulation system

The regulation system has been constituted at the very beginning of the operation. Therefore, the definition group installed a steering committee composed of representatives of all its constitutive bodies. The objective was to preserve the definition consensus, during the project development. They also nominated an architect co-ordinator, Claude Strebelle, that would act as an interface between the definition group and the developers in close collaboration with the steering committee. In the course of the project, according to the high quality of Strebelle’s work, and the increasing confidence of the definition group, the steering committee became less and less active and finally disappeared.

The regulation system has three main functions:

- First, it can play the role of an “effector“. It would advise the definition group with requests from the technical side and draw them up in an intelligible way for non technical decision-makers. In the opposite, it would also translate the definitions in terms understandable by technicians and move the abstract purposes into concrete specifications.

  For example, Strebelle in 1994 transferred the developer’s request for a PPA (legally binding local plan) to the definition group and the latter charged the Urban Planning Department of the City of Liege to produce this document.
At another occasion he also transferred to the group, a request form the developer concerning a modification of the requirements related to the minimum cornice height. But this modification was rejected by the definition group.

- It can also act as a “sensor“, anticipating or detecting possible bias between the urban construction project under development and the purposes stated by the definition group. For example, Strebelle, on the request of the developer, informed the definition group of the advantages of having a PPA. Actually, according to the developer himself, the PPA (even if not legally demanded, as an alignment plan already existed) constitutes a very essential warrant for such a project. It demands the local authorities intentions to be approved by the wallonian region, considering the advices of the historical buildings commission and a public consultation. It is thus a legitimising act, a kind of democratic warrant for the private development rationale.

- And, finally, it also acts as a “corrector“ in reorganizing the project programme, changing parameters, adding or relaxing constraints transferred to the development teams. This asked for several co-ordination committees and a strong system action.

The corrective action of the regulation system in direction of the definition group is a little bit more difficult to understand. A first “schéma directeur” (not legally binding local orientation plan) was established by C. Strebelle urban design team 12 months after the statement of the political principle definition (figure 4). This scheme was realized under the sponsorship of the wallonian region (urban planning department) in close collaboration with local authorities [AST-86]. It formalized graphically the urban design principles decided at the political level and was deliberately “visual” : intentions, concepts and feelings emerging from the political framework were translated into possible volumes, perspective effects or open space designs. Eventually, some details like pavement, public lighting or urban furniture were also designed as soon as these earliest steps. This language, often considered as unusual by its commentators, demonstrated the urban coherence of the whole operational framework and played a significant role in the partners’ adherence to the project.

Given its consideration for detail elements, the scheme was often considered as “total design” by journalists [LEVI-86]. Some ten years later, it proves to have been very flexible instead. “Collage design”, as it has been defined by [ROWE-79], would surely be a more valuable interpretation of its rationale. Actually, it assembled symbolic and concrete elements, structures inherited from the past or projected by previous authors, regional or external details. Its vocation was
certainly not to freeze, but to stimulate, catalyse creativity and imagination [BONT-86].

Strebelle soon considered such early graphical formalisation of abstract concepts, through intention schemes rather than constraining plans, as the cornerstone of his work. It afforded a concrete communication support and avoided thereby excessive speculations about possible outcomes of abstract principles. He would proceed by this way all along the evolution of the place rehabilitation process, with numerous successive plans and models translating the incremental evolution of the operational framework.

This remark is also to be linked with a recently renewed interest of the research community for developing new conceptual tools that are supposed to improve the communication between urban decision-makers that benefit from different expertises and different backgrounds. For example, the development of advanced representation tools in urban context is specifically a domain of great concern for the LEMA-ULg. Such LEMA tools have already been presented in previous COST-UCE-C4 conferences, for instance at the Lyon Workshop on “Groupware for Urban Planning” [DUPA-98a]. Another example of such tools is to be presented in the present conference [DUPA-98b].

5.3 The operation system

In the traditional urban-development-project production process, the definition system is specified beforehand and it is then very stable. Subsequently the operation system is less stable as being strongly concerned with creative activities. In (figure 4), the bold framed elements are characteristics of this usual process.

As a large project, like the St-Michel reconstruction project, is politically very sensitive and usually spread-out on long periods of time, the definition system looks more unsteady than the operation one. This is why they generally require a strong and permanent control from different coordination teams related to specific domains (co-ordination with the regulation group, or internally between the developer’s architects, under structures and basements, ...) and from design guidance advisory committees by institutional actors (fire safety regulations, disabled accessibility,...).

Strebelle and the developer were the key actors of the urban-construction project negotiations. They were associated to all of them, keeping thereby some control of the whole process. Despite his strategic position, Strebelle always played a very valuable mediator role in all these coordination teams. He considered it was the architects own task to advocate for their specific design, but valuably defended
their work as long as they proved to be opened to discussion. For instance, when he had some remarks about the design, he always made them privately (outside the meetings), in a suggestive rather than authoritative way.

These negotiations were mostly led on a trial test basis. The architects presents successive proposals that are accepted or criticized by the different actors in the operation as well as in the regulation systems. As the time delays between the different meetings can be very short (sometimes 15 days), it can turn to a very constraining design environment. All the more as the successive adjustments between each actors demands can be questioned when new protagonists enter the game, as was the case when the investor arrived in the project.

An important source of conflicts in these system processes is the confusion of roles. It is not always clear for all parties that only the architects are in charge of producing designs, and the regulation teams are not. Very often, they are tempted to produce design proposals in place of communication concepts. This underlines again the importance of Claude Strebelle’s intention schemes and of the LEMA-ULg computer synthetic drawings as representation and communication supports.

As acknowledged by all architects and by the urban project coordinator himself, these system structures probably improved the general quality of the project. Additionally, they were quite efficient as securizing tools that avoided conflicting issues to become major impediments to the development project. Nevertheless, their criticism against the politics of general consensus appears as highly legitimate. Such a consensus may often come in contradiction with creativity, especially when the rules of the games are not clearly established. Considering the developer reticence for some “audace”, it was probably to the institutional partners to play this role, which was not always the case. In this perspective, architects’ dissatisfaction with system issues should be interpreted as a demand for a greater involvement of institutions alongside architectural creativity.

Additionally, few if any actors, may they be private or institutional, openly criticized the twofold system structure. Obviously, the main risk in such an intricate context is to be kept apart from some important system framework, which would give their participant a definitive advantage. So the point for designers to be associated to direct discussions, rather than mediated ones, in order to preserve their creative solution space.

6. Conclusion

Considering that an urban project consists in three basic definitions, political, operational and judicial one, we tried to illustrate how these definitions evolutions
must be somehow considered as autonomous, even if their interactions are essential and permanent. As morphological constraints are distributed along these three definitions, design control should not elude any of them.

There is not any instrument that would integrate these three definition domains. Plans are not necessarily suited to abstract principles explicitation. Written statements about policies and objectives can leave considerable room for uncertainty, which is sometimes mandatory for an agreement to be reached, but can lead to serious flaws once these principles are translated into operational decisions. Consequently, negotiations are probably the safer way to allow a smooth and coherent adaptation of the three urban project definitions. Provided that the negotiations are instrumented in an adhoc way.

In the St-Michel case, negotiations and concertations surely improved the regulation of the urban construction project, by allowing a better mutual adaptation between all partners demands. The general framework of the urban project definition surely helped to avoid major inconsistencies of such bargaining. If system turned to its own reference, serious difficulties would surely arise. The major risks implied by such practices are summarized hereafter.

- System can be excessively time-consuming with regard to its advantages. Time delays can then turn to an efficient power lever for some actors in fastening the convergence of opinions. In such complex political processes as in St-Michel district, it can be very unrealistic for some actor to block a decision. On the opposite, slowing down the whole process is obviously much easier and sometimes as efficient.

- Another pitfall of system is an excessive reduction of each actors initiative. Permanent system would be an attempt to informal freedom and could thereby profoundly damage design creativity. Most than often design can not be developed during negotiations, but as one of its consequences.

- Finally, system can feed the myth of a ‘no-authority’ world, where each actor’s wouldn’t have any responsibility. Not everybody should be associated to all negotiations, and all actors involved should have a precise idea about his role in the process. Then, the most important difficulty is in obtaining everybody’s adherence to the project and not only a simple consensus on it.

Basically, system can help to secure each actor’s involvement in the process, by considering all actors acceptable discussion margins. But, basically, this process must be framed by a meta-context (the urban project definition for instance) so that it doesn’t turn to a minimal compromise or real correction.
References