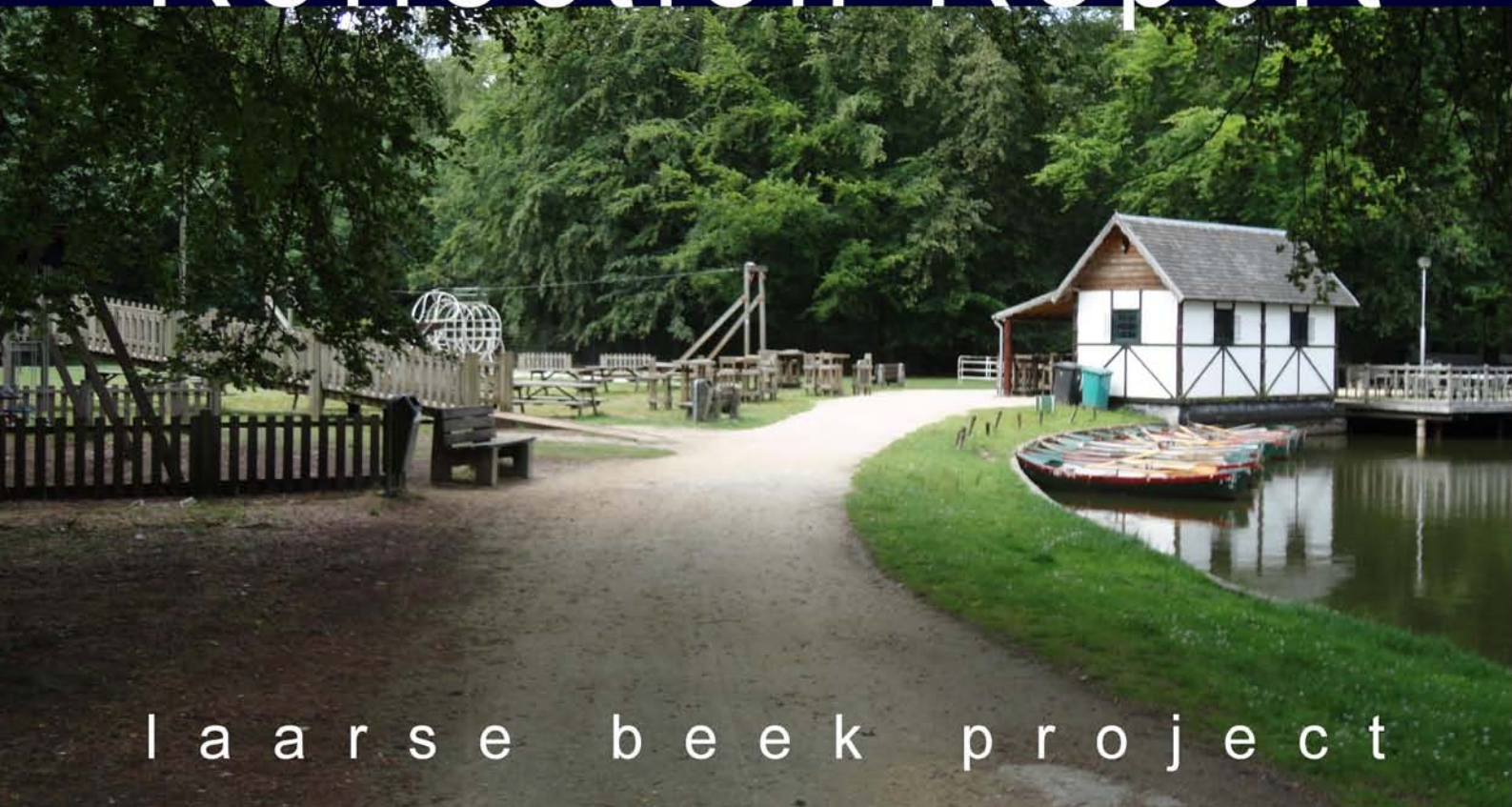




**Sustainable**  
URBAN FRINGES  
SURF

# Province of Antwerp Reflection Report



l a a r s e b e e k p r o j e c t



European Union



European Regional Development Fund

## 1. Introduction

The Province of Antwerp has been engaged in the creation of accessible green spaces around the major cities. Because of the typical characteristics in the urban fringes surrounding these cities the provincial government needs to develop integrated and interactive processes with all authorities, stakeholders and inhabitants concerned, in order to create sustainable, long-term results.

In this project we have started a multi-actor, multifunctional project in the UF structured around the valley system of the river Laarse Beek in the north west of the Province of Antwerp. More specifically the project aimed to generally improve the quality of the open space in the urban fringe in the north east of the city of Antwerp, structured around the Laarse Beek watercourse. Several approaches were used to reach this goal. We formed a steering group of local authorities and stakeholders to bridge the existing gap between government and governance. We are defining landscape quality objectives and landscape services through a process of communication and participation with the local inhabitants, stakeholders and authorities, with a strong emphasis on increasing the accessible green space. For this, we used best practice models from a former project in and along the river Koude Beek and best practices that can be obtained through regional and transnational learning. Keywords are landscape quality, accessible green space and participation.

We acknowledge the importance of quick-wins in order to keep stakeholders involved in projects that last several years. As such, it was decided to work on fish migration as the fish species bullhead, a fish species which is protected under the EU Habitats Directive, is experiencing problems with migrating in the Laarse beek. One of the reasons for this is the playing behaviour of children who tend to move the stones of the existing bypass which prevents the bullhead to move upstream. By creating a playable fish stair, we combine ecology, recreation and education.

To determine landscape quality objectives we used two approaches: creating an online communication tool and a questionnaire. The purpose is to question the broad public about how they experience the urban fringe around the Laarse beek. To reach the broad public the questionnaire was put in public places as a town hall or library. Further, it was presented to the environmental and nature council of a municipality. The questionnaire was also put on the website and publicity was made to show people the way to the website.

The function of the communication tool is to inform people about the landscape and its green spaces with 360° views, lots of information on different themes, a downloadable walking trail, etc. and to question the visitors of the website about the value of the urban fringe. The tool includes a desktop and a mobile internet part. The results should show us, amongst others, if and where accessible green spaces are needed. This could then be realised through different approaches as for example creating or restoring slow roads or bicycle tracks



## **2. The opportunity for change**

Our project started at the beginning of 2011. In the beginning there was a lot of working 'behind the scenes' and as such there are no major changes yet compared to the first SWOT. The SWOT exercise that will be performed with the members of the environmental and nature council and the members of the municipal commission on spatial planning of the four municipalities in the area should give us valuable information to determine landscape quality objectives. We are also curious to see if our ideas about the opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses of the urban fringe align with their ideas.

## **3. Unlocking the potential of the urban fringe**

Participation is the backbone of our project. Participation gives stakeholders a voice and because they are heard they feel more connected with what is going on in their area and they will more easily engage with local projects. Participation creates a positive climate of cooperation. Our focus is on the maximisation of landscape quality, amongst others through the creation of accessible green spaces in the urban fringe, together with the different stakeholders. Our approach is manifold:

### **Bridge the gap between different government levels**

Two steering groups were founded: one considering the urban fringe in the valley of the Laarse beek as a whole and one considering fish migration as the fish species bullhead, a species which is protected under the EU Habitats Directive, experiences serious problems with migration in the area. These steering groups consisted of representatives of the governments of the Flemish, provincial and municipal level. We also invited Regional Landscape the Voorkempen, an association working on nature and landscape which unites municipalities, province and associations from the nature, agricultural, hunting and tourism sector. The meetings were an opportunity to get remarks and suggestions about planned projects. As such it was easier to see if there are possibilities to cooperate. This participative bottom-up process should lead to a well-carried vision for the future of the urban fringe. Being well-carried, this offers the best chances for a translation of this vision into spatial planning and ultimately into concrete initiatives. During our project the suggestions of the steering groups have proved to be very valuable and have guided amongst others the design of the playable fish stair.

### **Quick-wins**

When it takes too long to see actual results in an area, there is a risk that local stakeholders will pull out from the participative process. A former project in a similar urban fringe has learned that quick wins are vital to create 'patience' and a 'platform' for long term spatial processes. The project invested in a quick win that tackled some actual concerns of the local communities and government agencies involved by creating a playable functional fish stair, thus integrating ecology and recreation, leading to an improvement in the ecological and social quality of the area. Through the steering group we involved the municipalities as well as the necessary Flemish Agencies, as the

Flemish Agency for Nature and Forest, the Flemish Land Agency and the Flemish Agency for Space and Heritage.

### **Engage the broad public / stakeholders**

In order to engage people it is important on the one hand to inform and on the other hand to give them a voice. This so-called 'stakeholder democracy' aims to involve stakeholders even before the start of more defined projects. In our project we used different tools to accomplish this: a more conservative questionnaire and poster, a big event and an online communication tool.

The questionnaire and poster were developed to question people about how they experience the urban fringe around the watercourse Laarse beek. A first result is that there is a clear need for better accessibility along the watercourse and between existing green spaces; also that litter is a problem.

To bring people back to connecting with the Laarse beek and the green spaces in its vicinity, we organised a public event together with local stakeholders. The event consisted of two main parts: an info market and guided walks. The info market brought together local associations and governments from the municipal, provincial and Flemish level. Visitors were able to get acquainted with what is going on in the urban fringe and we used this opportunity to inform and to question the visitors about their ideas for the urban fringe. During the guided walks the visitors received lots of information regarding ongoing or planned projects, amongst others regarding accessible green spaces, which enhances local involvement.

The online communication tool is intended to inform the people about the area and at the same time asks their opinion about specific issues in the urban fringe. By combining a desktop website with mobile internet we intend to involve also younger people. Communication about the tool will be crucial.

### **Look beyond your own daily scope**

We engaged with the 'role and value of green spaces' theme group. Accessible green spaces remain our main focus and we have learnt a lot by having to fill in specific questionnaires during SURF and through the discussions within the theme group. During the peer review and through SURF it became clear that branding and economic competitiveness are also very important. By including tourist information in the communication tool we make the first steps to take this into account.

Moreover, our department of spatial planning has started with a new project to determine a vision and an action plan for the 'built peripheral landscape' to which part of our urban fringe belongs. A cooperation between our departments has been set up by exchanging information on ongoing and planned projects in the area and by cooperating for the preparation of the municipal SWOT-analysis. The results of the SWOT-analysis will be disseminated to the Department of Spatial Planning in order to use in the project of the built peripheral landscape.

## **4. The Project Team View**

A project takes time to grow. In the beginning a lot of time goes to informing people about the project. This includes both internal and external communication. As the project has evolved, we noticed that more stakeholders feel engaged and are willing to cooperate and 'spread the word'. We assume that because of the communication and questionnaire people become more aware of the potentials and threats of the urban fringe.

In our urban fringe different administrations from different government levels are active. Before the project everybody had their own goals and cooperation in the area was ad hoc. Since the start of the project, the cooperation between these different levels and between different departments within the Province of Antwerp, has improved. This is a firm basis for further cooperation in the future. To maintain the cooperation a continued effort to communicate with each other will be necessary.

It is clear that the work in our urban fringe will not be finished by the end of SURF. A certain dynamism has been created that will lead to different realisations in the future, realisations that meet the needs of the users of the urban fringe. This means that we will have to keep informing and supporting local stakeholders in the urban fringe.

Through SURF we learnt that it is important to take the multiple functions of the urban fringe into account, such as economic value, tourism etc This has for example influenced the information included in the communication tool.