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# Province of West Flanders Reflection Report





# SURF reflection report Province of West-Flanders

## 1. Introduction

### ➤ Foundation of Stad-Land-schap 't West-Vlaamse hart

The region Mid-West-Flanders is traditionally known for its strong and dynamic entrepreneurship. That's one of the reasons of the region's top level ranking in Flanders and even in Europe in matters of socio-economic indicators (high employment grade, scarce unemployment, growing population,...).

However, the economic dynamics put a stigma on the landscape of the region: scattered landscape, loss of quality and authenticity, open space under pressure,... Typical for this conurbation is the network structure with high spatial dynamics in the open areas while there is less intensive dynamics in the centres (60% of the firms are situated outside industrial and business centres and 45% of the housing is outside city centres). This has formed a typical urbanscape.

And still there is a growing demand for land-use: industrial ground for SME's and firms, a flourishing agrarian sector characterized by high tech and modernized agriculture, alimentary industry (e.g. frozen vegetables), development services sector (new regional hospital, business park,...), creation of new shopping centres, transportation infrastructure,... Besides there are also needs and attempts for more recreational possibilities, recovery of landscape and nature development in this region.

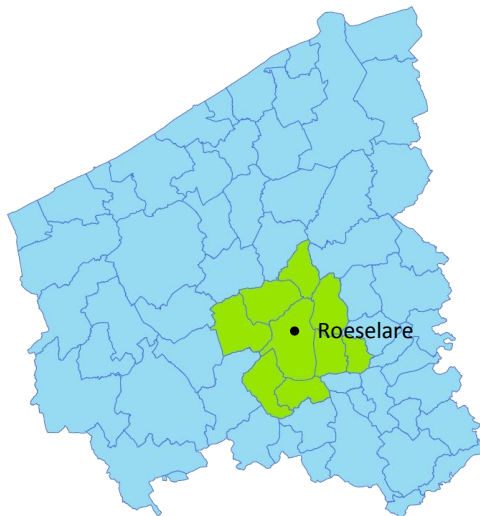
In a charter the labour unions, employers confederations and politicians of the Roulers-region agreed that investment in economy and job-creation should stay the main goal to maintain the leading position in Flanders. Pursuing the status of an important economic region implies a raised attention for the liveability in the region. Therefore **'advancing liveability in the urban, peri-urban and rural areas'** has been integrated as well in the mission of this regional charter. Measures for increasing liveability are e.g. recruiting a global vision on landscape and recreation, developing recreational supplies, sustainable greenmanagement, sensitization for landscape quality and attractive public locations,... Besides these regional ambitions there is also a growing aspiration at the local level for sustainability, for recreational investments (products, infrastructure,...), for strengthening the (peri-urban) landscape, for spatial quality, for image building and regional branding,....

In that perspective **the Province of West-Flanders** raised in 2009 an interlocal cooperation of nine municipalities of Mid West-Flanders and the Province itself. The cooperation has been baptized **'Stad-Land-schap 't West-Vlaamse hart'**.





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*Green: the city region 't West-Vlaamse hart consists of the city Roulers and its eight surrounding municipalities (30.000 hectare / 153.000 inhabitants).  
Blue: Province of West-Flanders (314.433 hectare /64 municipalities)*

### ➤ **Mission of Stad-Land-schap 't West-Vlaamse hart**

Stad-Land-schap is an innovative concept of cooperation between local governments and provincial government with the ambition to increase the overall spatial quality of the landscape in the urban area of the city Roulers in connection with its surrounding municipalities. This should lead to a better interaction and link between urban, rural and 'in between' (UF) area, with respect to the complementarity and the diversity of these areas. The 9 municipalities and the Province of West-Flanders investigate how they can work together on the attractiveness, the landscape, recreational and nature potential of the region, so called 't West-Vlaamse hart. These efforts should keep people living and working in the region and offer them opportunities to get nature and recreation in the proper area.

The challenges in the Roulers-region in matters of working on the liveability and spatial quality are different from the challenges in other regions. So far regional governance in matters of spatial planning for this typical urbanscape was non-existing. There are policy plans for urban development and for rural development. But until the founding of Stad-Land-schap there was no regional governance and program dealing with spatial issues in the urban, peri-urban and rural areas with attention for the interaction/link between those areas of this urbanscape. With the founding of the Stad-Land-schap the province and the nine municipalities give expression to the need and will to work on the liveability in this region as a whole (instead of separated approach for rural and urban area).







To fulfil the mission Stad-Land-schap looks for common impulses and new initiatives on the domains of landscape, nature, recreation, education and heritage.

Furthermore, with the innovative concept Stad-Land-schap the partners want to be a pioneer in / role model of good governance dealing with landscape quality in lookalike conurbations.

### ➤ **A project of governance and valuable green spaces**

The Province of West-Flanders joined the SURF **theme group 'governance'** with the **implementation of the interlocal cooperation Stad-Land-schap 't West-Vlaamse hart**. This cooperation is an example of new governance dealing with the urban fringe (challenges, problems, vision determination,...) through a regional approach. The Stad-Land-schap plays a role as an interlocal cooperative governing platform, but also as a network, a point of intersection where different dossiers interfere, a lobby, a sensitizer, a region marketer, a laboratory, prime example of integrated approach,....

One of the actions of the Province in close cooperation with Stad-Land-schap taking place in the Roulers-region is the **reconversion of the Storoute**, a former railway track from Roulers to Ypres, cutting through the UF of Roulers. It forms an interesting case of sustainable linking of urban, peri-urban and rural area. Therefore the Province of West-Flanders joined the SURF **theme workgroup 'role and value of green spaces'**. As the Province of West-Flanders becomes the owner of almost all former railwaytracks in order to reconvert them into safe, green cycle tracks, the case of the Storoute forms a good exercise/ test case for a sustainable process, approach and result in forming green axes and in developing a sustainable UF. The Storoute and other former railroads will form the frame of a green blue recreational network in Mid West-Flanders. These reconversions are important instruments for the Province and Stad-Land-schap to enhance existing landscape qualities and create new ones. In that way the Storoute formed an interesting case for the partners of Stad-Land-schap and the SURF-project.

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

### ➤ **Concept of cooperation looking for links between urban and rural area is favourable for UF**

An interlocal cooperation, embedded in the provincial organization with its regional approach (regional houses and managers), dealing with the overall spatial quality (landscape, attractiveness, recreation possibilities) in urban, urban fringe and rural area, with respect and attention for the interaction between those areas, working through



integrated projects and activities, proofed to be successful and complementary in the range of organisations and cooperations dealing with UF's. After a two-year test case period all partners of the Stad-Land-schap agreed that the cooperation is fruitful and worthwhile to continue and expand.

Since the founding of Stad-Land-schap the sectoral services of the province (spatial planning, nature & landscape, recreation, ...) gradually go for a more integrated way of thinking, approaching and acting. Gradually Stad-Land-schap also got involved in all kinds of platforms, plans, programmes, ... of other public and private organisations. This proves that the concept of Stad-Land-schap has built up credibility/ legitimacy and is capable to bring convergence and synergy.

### ➤ **Economical dynamics as catalyst for landscape quality in UF**

The Roulers region is well known for its high tech and modernized agrarian sector and its alimentary industry. With support of the EFRD-fund the Province and some other partners launched in 2009 a regional branding-project 'Thought4Food'. This project in favour of competitiveness and employment is aiming to raise an agrarian and food platform to support and fortify the agrarian and food sector in the region. The project bets on innovation (spin-offs, cleantech, knowledge- and expertise cluster), fitting education and labour market and the raising of the Flemish House for Food so called 'Miummm'. A fourth cluster being introduced into this regional branding-project is **the forming of a landscape vision for this vegetable region**. Thanks to the Province and Stad-Land-schap this landscape chapter has been added to this rather economical project 'Thought4Food'. **That's how the Province and Stad-Land-schap succeeded in linking economical dynamics to spatial quality. Economical dynamics as catalyst for the landscape.**

### ➤ **Create your own darlings**

The saying is 'kill your own darlings'. But what if there are no 'darlings'? Following the severe criteria the UF-region of Roulers seems to have no kind of valuable green spaces or determining identity elements (e.g. heritage, ...) being worthwhile to recover and/or upgrade. That's why Flemish funds for landscape/nature/heritage development hardly find their way to this UF region. The absence of value doesn't necessarily mean a weakness. It encourages the region and its stakeholders to go and look for their own valuable elements (darlings) and to explore new ways of creating landscape, nature, identity, recreational supplies, .... Communication / regional branding plays an important role in this aspect.



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

#### ➤ Stad-Land-schap as an exemplary concept

Stad-Land-schap as an innovative concept of cooperation may be interpreted as an exemplary on how to deal with a sustainable fringe.

Stad-Land-schap began as a new **interlocal governance model** of the province and nine communities dealing with the urban fringe through a regional approach. By working out year action plans the partners try to pursue their mission. With quick wins and larger projects the partners made acquaintance with each other, the region and its challenges. During this walk-in period partners were able to tune their ideas about the vision-forming the Stad-Land-schap has to do. So as you can see, **you can start pursuing a mission without a vision**.

	2009	2010	2011	2012
organisational	Founding temporary cooperation Stad-Land-schap with nine municipalities and the province  Establish organisation structure	Establish and expand organisation structure	Evaluation cooperation  Continuation Stad-Land-schap as a non-temporary cooperation  Search for structural funding from Flemish government-level	Optimizing organisational structure  Search for extra funding to safeguard continuation and to higher the ambition level  Embedding Stad-Land-schap in transforming organisational field
strategic	Involvement KATHO University > project public greenmanagement  ...  Partnership SURF	Involvement Flemish Land Agency in steering group > cooperation in editing landscape vision  Involvement private partners in workgroups  ...  Partnership SURF	Meeting Flemish Minister responsible for Nature and Landscape  Meeting Agency Nature and Forest  Meetings Regional Landscapes of West-Flanders	Cowriting dossier strategic spatial project greenhouse development and landscape formation  ...  Partnership SURF
operational	Year action plan : * Introduction landscape business plans * Try out cases greenmanagement with KATHO * Prospection Stroroute * ...	Year action plan: * www.westvlaamsehart.be * 2 editions magazine 't West-Vlaamse hart * Coproductions with other organisations (e.g. walking brochure) * landscape business plans * Optimizing greenmanagement (KATHO) * vision + plan Stroroute	Year action plan: * distribution magazine (2 editions) * cooperation with Flemish Land Agency in forming landscape vision * landscape business plans * Partnership SURF Stroroute (phase I) * Landscape business plans * Public greenmanagement	Year action plan: * Greenmanagement (KATHO) * Construction Stroroute and dissemination process * Seminar landscape vision * ...

Gradually Stad-Land-schap also began to play a role as:

- a **platform** for different actors, partners and stakeholders involved with issues about qualitative landscape, spatial planning, livability, ...
- a **network** linking different government levels and administrations, public and private partners, different sectors, experts....
- a **region marketer** in favor of building region identity, promoting strengths, calling for



ambassadorship, enabling a global emancipation movement for a qualitative urbanscape....

- a **pioneer** and **lobby** for sustainable urban fringes

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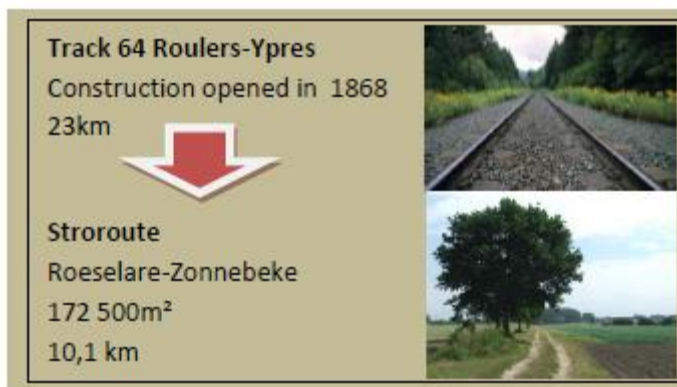
By joining the SURF-network the Stad-Land-schap and the province of West-Flanders got inspired by other regions in working out a sustainable urban fringe.

The scheme above gives an overview of the process Stad-Land-schap went through during the SURF-period.

### ➤ **Reconversion of old railwaytracks reinforces the green-blue recreational network in the UF**

An important goal of Stad-Land-schap is to reinforce the green-blue recreational network in the UF-region of Roulers. A temporary staff member with the profile of a landscape architect is dealing with plans for linking valuable green space areas, reconversion plans for old railway tracks in the region, with a regional plan for verges of the road, with better access and amelioration of the green and recreational network and link, landscape business plans,....

One of the main tasks the staff member is dealing with, is the process towards a vision and plan for former railwayroads eg. Storroutte in the UF of Roulers.



The Storroutte-case formed the main theme of the excursion of the Flanders Conference of SURF in November 2010. During an 'implementation lab' all SURF-partners have formulated ideas and suggestions on how to deal with the reconversion of this railwaytrack. The input has been inspiring for Stad-Land-schap and will be very useful for the reconversion all other disused railtracks in the Province of West-Flanders. The case of the Storroutte

stood also exemplary on how UF's can be sustainable developed.

The Storroutte is a former and disused railway track between Roulers and Ypres. Since the last train passed in 1970 the Storroutte became a green axis. The Province of West-Flanders is being reconverting the track into a safe and green cycle track. The Storroutte and the other disused railway tracks will form the framework of a new green-blue recreational network. That network has to link valuable heritage sites, green zones, and cities. The provincial policy is to buy most the former railway tracks and to manage and coordinate the conversion of these tracks into safe, green cycle tracks.

The Storroutte links rural and urban area and the city of Roulers with the city of Ypres. The





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track is in disuse since 1970. The section between Ypers and Zonnebeke has been converted into a motorway. The section between Roulers and Zonnebeke remained unused until now. This axis has to be converted into a stepping stone for animals and plants while the route functions as a green zone and connection route for people living nearby.

Based upon a landscape SWOT and several terrain visits with experts (multidisciplinary team / SURF-partners) a vision on the Storoute has been made. All stakeholders and inhabitants were informed through an information meeting. The conversion of the route started in 2011. A first phase has been finished in March 2012. The Storoute formed an interesting case for SURF on how multifunctional and sustainable development can be made in the UF. The conversion of the Storoute has partially been funded by the European SURF project.

The role of Stad-Land-schap 't West-Vlaamse hart in cases of converting former railwaytracks consists in supporting the process through communication, participation, linking different services, advise, dissemination, ....



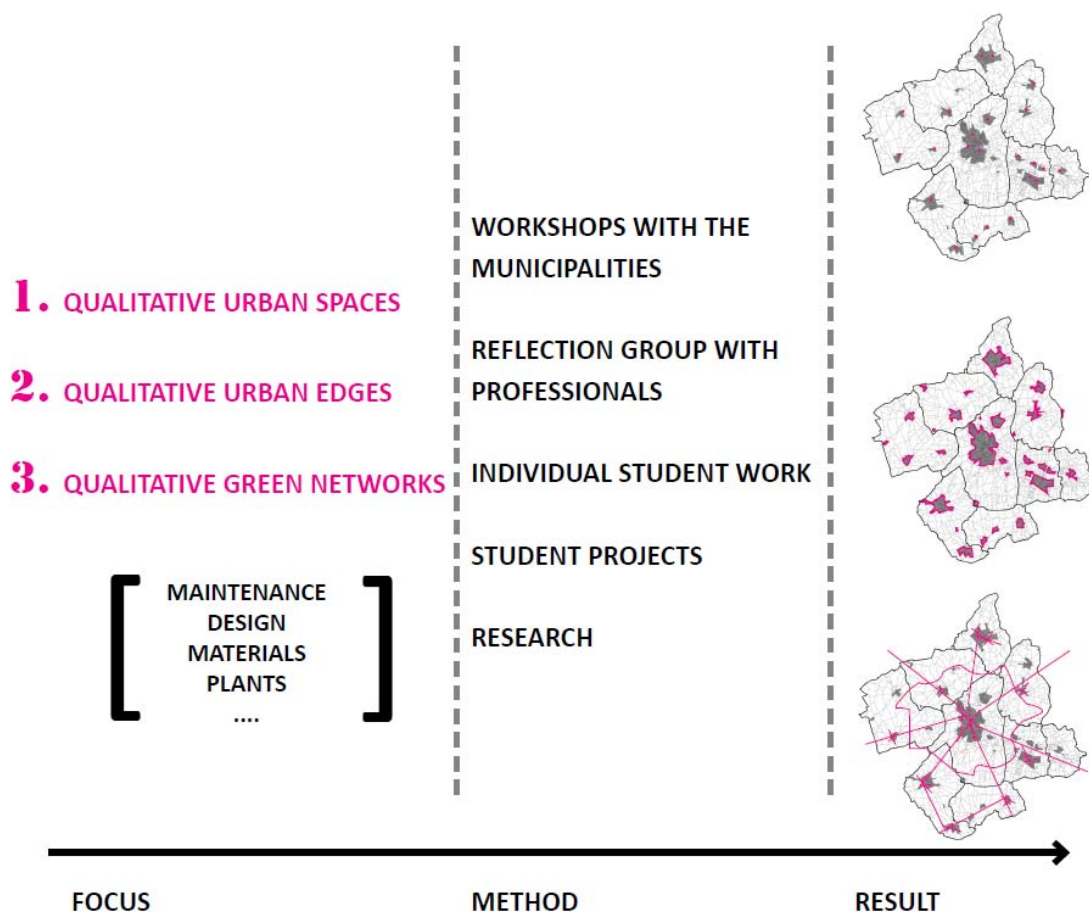
An other important instrument towards a qualitative green-blue recreative network is '**landscape business plans**'. A landscape architect draws in close dialogue with private landowners (especially farmers) a landscape plan for their property. The plan consists of typical seedlings and valuable interventions e.g. puddles, high trees,.... Secondly, a project manager deals with the implementation of the plan (funding, gardener team (social employment), evaluation, greenmanagement,...). These landscape business plans enhance existing landscape qualities. During the Flanders conference in November 2010 the SURF partners were introduced to this innovative landscape tool. During the SURF project an important landscape business plan has been implemented along the Storoute in Moorslede. LBP are a very important tool to enhance landscape and emphasize vistas along the former railwayroads.





➤ **Implementing innovative green management contributes to qualitative green networks**

Public green areas play an important role in the quality of environment and UF's. The municipalities better take good care of them. For example by treating them with a professional and sustainable greenmanagement. Therefore Stad-Land-schap signed a cooperation agreement with Katho Expertise Centre for Greenmanagement of Roulers for optimizing public greenmanagement. Through workshops, dissertations, student-projects, reflectiongroupes... on specific cases of the region innovative greenmanagement is introduced to the civil servants responsible for public green areas. Focussing on public spaces delivers qualitative urban spaces, qualitative urban edges and qualitative green networks. (see scheme below).



In 2010 the province of West-Flanders has introduced this innovative and successful project of Stad-land-schap and KATHO into the other regions of the Province. During the SURF conference in Flanders the project has been presented to all SURF-partners.



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## ➤ Call for ambassadorship for the UF

Creating interaction between city and rural area, increasing attractiveness, promoting recreational possibilities, information about initiatives for landscape and nature development, ... all these efforts need a well thought-out communication support. Therefore a **magazine** and **website** were launched. These initiatives inform and sensitize about the efforts of the Stad-Land-schap in matters of a sustainable urban Roeselare fringe and West-Vlaamse hart. These instruments are also very constructive to the forming of a regional identity.



The website is not only a communication tool for keeping inhabitants informed about the SURF and Stad-Land-schap project. The website also functions as a forum for those inhabitants: delivery of photographs, blogs, polls, reports,.... In that way [www.westvlaamsehart.be](http://www.westvlaamsehart.be) is also a virtual way of UF experience.





## 4. The Project Teams View

In the chapters 2 and 3 the view of Province about the SURF-project has already been described extensively. Below a listing of some important insights. Together with the above chapters, they give an overview of the insights gained during the SURF-project.

- An interlocal cooperation dealing with the overall spatial quality of city and countryside as a whole and with the focus on the link/interaction in between the two, is an excellent starting-point for a global emancipation movement (with public and private partners) in favor of qualitative landscapes, region identity and livability. (Stad-Land-schap = interlocal cooperation + network + platform + lobby + ...)
- The concept of Stad-Land-schap draws attention to the UF.
- Integrated approach (cfr. Stad-Land-schap) is an eye-opener for several sectors, services, stakeholders,... and a guarantee for sustainable development.
- A transparent communication about the mission, work and challenges of Stad-Land-schap is an important accelerator. It brings rumour around the brand. It helps stakeholders to convince about sustainable development of the region.
- Work on the field (e.g. reconversion Storroutte) makes the concept of Stad-Land-schap more concrete.
- Economical dynamics can be transferred to attention, recovery and construction of landscape.
- The SURF project formed an excellent facilitator to aspire the ambitions of Stad-Land-schap.
- ...

## Transition of the SURF-project of the Province of West-Flanders

All partners have signed the renewed cooperation agreement of Stad-Land-schap in 2011. The new agreement is a non temporary one. As the ambition level for the Stad-Land-schap becomes higher, extra and structural funding is needed. Therefore the partners investigate whether and how the cooperation can be acknowledged by the Flemish government level. Nowadays there is no programme or instrument 100% according with the concept and working of the Stad-Land-schap. In Flanders nowadays there's a process of state reform going on. Maybe this will give opportunity to Stad-Land-schap to gain more structural support.

Stad-Land-schap keeps being embedded as a strategic project in the provincial organisation. In this way Stad-Land-schap is linked to other strategic projects in the region.

For 2012 an important new strategic spatial project for the Roulers-region is being made. It's about linking greenhouse development linked to qualitative landscape forming. Stad-Land-schap will be involved very closely.

*March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Myriam Deboysere and Koen Vankeirsbilck*