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Vlaams Bouwmeester Team  
Multi-annual programme 2017-2020



Vlaamse  
overheid

**BWMSTR**  
Creating space  
for people **2017–2020**  
and nature

# Renewing the role of Bouwmeester

In June 2015 the Flemish government approved a concept paper on renewing the role of the Bouwmeester. Since then, the post of Vlaams Bouwmeester – Flemish Government Architect – is **three-part**: the Bouwmeester is flanked by the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team *and* by a group of experts. The **mission** reads:

*‘The aim of the post of Vlaams Bouwmeester is to promote the **architectural quality** of the built environment, understood as a synthesis of qualities in terms of urban environment, use and perception, image quality, building technology, energy, cost management and so on. This commitment is demonstrated in the support of principals in public and semi-public projects for the design and construction of buildings, public space, landscape and infrastructure, and always related to the changing social challenges and from a cross-sectional perspective of collaboration with players and sectors involved.’*

Two **core tasks** are prioritized:

1. Providing support and guidance to public principals on projects within the framework of concrete developments. Based on intensive and customized support, and drawing on research by design, the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team assists ambitious principals in realizing innovative projects.
2. Contributing actively to the development of vision and reflection, resulting in policy advice and initiatives related to social challenges and their implications and possibilities in terms of high-quality design and construction.

In addition, a number of **additional tasks** are specified:

- communicating and raising awareness about topical issues and creating an everyday environment of high-quality architecture
- advising about sticking points and gaps in the regulations, in relation to architectural quality in the wide sense
- providing opportunities for young designers.

As an independent expert and advisor to the entire Flemish government, the Bouwmeester is a **bridge builder** who approaches projects from a **cross-sectoral perspective**, across policy areas. The aim is always to consider various interests in relation to spatial and social quality.

# The Vlaams Bouwmeester Team: almost 20 years of knowhow

The concept paper on renewing the role of Bouwmeester reaffirms and strengthens the post of Bouwmeester, as it has developed since the appointment of the first Flemish Government Architect. Since 1999 the Flemish government has worked continuously on an excellent architecture policy and to act as an exemplary principal. The efforts of my predecessors bOb Van Reeth, Marcel Smets, Peter Swinnen and Stefan Devoldere<sup>1</sup> have been extremely productive: over the past two decades, the role of public principals has been taken to a higher level throughout Flanders. This increase in quality is widely recognized, both in Flanders and internationally. To achieve this goal, and to tackle new challenges, successive Bouwmeesters have gathered around them a **team** that has spent almost twenty years building up expertise in the area of public principalship across policy fields, putting topical issues on the policy agenda and, in that context, entering into alliances with various partners within the government and elsewhere. Together with the team, a series of specific **working methods and procedures** have been developed to serve the common good, by guiding public principals and to draw the best out of the rich design potential that exists in Flanders and internationally. An overview:

## Open Call

The Open Call, the oldest and best-known tool at the disposal of the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team, has over the past decades developed into a 'strong brand'. The Open Call is a procedure that enables public principals to select designers for commissions in the fields of architecture, urban design and landscape architecture. The Vlaams Bouwmeester Team brings public authorities into contact with a wide range of international design offices, assists them in defining the scope of a project, and supervises the whole procedure. The Open Call has resulted in the completion of projects of exceptional quality throughout Flanders. Because three to five design teams each develop a proposal for every design assignment, the Open Call demonstrates the power of research by design time and again. In the future I want to consolidate and optimize this procedure, taking into account the concerns of both public principals and designers.

## Advice

The Vlaams Bouwmeester Team also offers advice on projects. For public and semi-public projects of a certain size, this advisory role has been specified in a decree. For projects of strategic importance, however, the Vlaamse Bouwmeester often takes the initiative and seeks out public principals to assist them with their commissions.

1 Acting Vlaams Bouwmeester 2015-2016

## Pilot projects

Pilot projects link thematic research by design carried out in the policy preparation phase to the realization of pioneering projects. Specific alliances are entered into for each pilot project. Besides completing the project, this involves a broad communication plan about the learning process through symposiums and publications, and the partners undertake a follow-up to harmonize regulations and tools and optimize them at all levels of government. Pilot projects respond to current and pressing themes (care, housing, agriculture, commissioned art, contaminated sites, student accommodation and so on).

## Labo Ruimte

Labo Ruimte is an open collaboration between the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team and Ruimte Vlaanderen (Spatial Development Department Flanders), and, depending on the theme, extends to include committed administrations, experts, relevant organizations and parties. Through design and social debate, Labo Ruimte examines in thematic processes how to influence the evolution towards a more sustainable society. At the core of Labo Ruimte are four principles: long-term focus; space to think and talk freely; collaboration across functional, disciplinary and organizational boundaries; and the combination of design and research. Examples of Labo Ruimte processes are: 'Urban System Coast', 'Energy Landscapes', 'Antwerp: Circular City' and 'Lowlands'.

## Master Class

The Master Class challenges public principals to offer young designers and artists a first public commission. Under the supervision of a project director appointed by the Vlaamse Bouwmeester, the most innovative and fresh solutions can also be realized.

## Wivina Demeester Prize for excellent principals

The biennial Wivina Demeester Prize is awarded by the Flemish government for inspiring principalship that leads to the realization of urban, landscape and architectural projects in Flanders. The prize showcases the exemplary process organized by a principal to facilitate a high-quality result.

## Bouwmeester Label

Because the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team is convinced that research by design can make a genuine social difference, it wants to encourage and support interesting research topics proposed by researchers and designers themselves. Projects that are rewarded with the Label receive modest funding for research, networking, drafting a text, making a first visual proposal and holding a public presentation. Moreover, the Team is committed to putting the selected research intentions on the political agenda.

Over the coming years, I want to make grateful use of the accumulated expertise. In light of new social challenges, I hope to strengthen the trusted method and add to it where necessary. In addition, I am delighted that in elaborating strategic visions I can count on the support of the four-man **Vlaams Bouwmeester expert group**, which acts as a quality assessor and sounding board, and contributes to broadening support for the post of Bouwmeester.

# Challenges and opportunities

Human settlements, food production, industry, transport and the growing deployment of land as an investment product for spatial developments: all these exert pressure on open space all over the world. A new form of 'spatial modesty' has therefore become a civic duty. In the case of Flanders, a number of problems heighten this tension further. About 70% of Flemish people live in very low-density suburban areas. This wasteful residential model evolved historically and was encouraged through post-war housing policy. The consequence is that, at 33% (in 2015), we top the European table in terms of spatial footprint. Although Belgium has the third highest population density in Europe, Flanders has one of the lowest densities in terms of inhabitants per used hectare of 'human space'. Moreover, this space is very fragmented and, accordingly, we are almost entirely dependent on the private car for mobility.

The scattered spatial model results in weak cities that are too sparsely populated and home to too few tax-paying inhabitants to fund the societal responsibilities of cities (employment, transport, culture, restaurants, shopping, security...). A similar 'diluted urbanism' also affects the countryside, however: land parcelling and ribbon development have displaced nature, and living in green surroundings has become almost impossible. Coupled with all this, Flanders can claim many more depressing European 'records' and faces structural problems that impact all policy areas:

- the disappearance of six hectares of open space every day
- the loss of biodiversity
- the record in terms of kilometres of road per living unit and of kilometres of utility lines (sewage, water, gas, cabling...) beneath those roadways, the cost of which weigh heavily on the government budget
- the record number of hours spent in traffic jams per employee, adversely affecting the health of the economy and reducing quality time
- high public expenditure for services such as homecare, postal delivery and refuse collection
- public transport that cannot operate adequately because its given task is practically impossible to carry out, such that public transport and tax-deductible company cars are heavy items of expenditure
- a high level of traffic deaths and a heightened risk of loneliness among an ageing population in suburban areas, both as a result of living in car-dependent areas that are increasingly difficult to access.

The good news is that (public) principals and designers, who for years have boosted the consumption of open space, can for that very reason be retrained to become its most active defenders. They possess the most powerful tools to create a sustainable future. Moreover, each of the previously mentioned problems can also be considered as opportunities, chances for transition, for development and qualitative growth. These are the challenges that we have elaborated into a strategic vision and series of objectives, outlined below.

# Promoting integral sustainability

As the new Vlaamse Bouwmeester I want to dedicate the coming years to developing a building and design agenda aimed at a more pleasant, healthier, better-equipped and more inclusive environment, complemented by a more careful and sustainable treatment of our surroundings and natural resources. Architecture and research by design can, in the **transition to integral sustainability**, make a significant contribution by devising, testing and implementing future visions and innovative solutions.

The transition calls for safeguarding and creating **open space** through a quality-controlled heightening of **spatial efficiency**. The development of **new forms of housing** and careful treatment of **heritage** are, in that context, crucial themes. To bring about the required change, research and reflection are essential in improving **public principalship** and **spatial regulations**, and **inter-regional and international alliances** are indispensable. By making use of monitoring, data and research, I want to create a solidly scientific basis for the Flemish design agenda that considers long-term effects. Within the framework of our cross-sectional mission, I want to link space-related knowledge in the various administrations and use it as a basis for creating new architectural and urban concepts and preparing transitions.

Because of the importance of spatial problems, structural collaboration with the Spatial Development Department Flanders is an obvious measure. A start had already been made during the tenure of the previous Bouwmeester. Since then, agreements have been made to continue and intensify that synergy.

But the cross-sectional nature of work by the Bouwmeester extends much further. Collaboration with public principals on a project basis, through an integral approach to **concrete architectural commissions**, touches on policy themes such as housing, culture, energy, care, mobility, school infrastructure, government commissions, housing tax and so on. Building bridges to other policy areas, from a broad understanding of quality, is therefore a necessary precondition. Moreover, in collaboration with partners such as the Flanders Architecture Institute, the Bouwmeester has traditionally played a role in nurturing and promoting **architectural culture** in Flanders. Through my involvement in the establishment of Stad en Architectuur in Leuven, and later the Flanders Architecture Institute, I am fully aware that reflection, discourse and debate on architecture should always be promoted.

In keeping with that, attention will be paid to **design education**, to ensure that future architects and designers master the latest insights and possess the right reflexes concerning natural structures and more efficient land use. Finally, I want to focus on broad and accessible **communications** that highlight 'good practices'. This must ensure that architecture, urban design and landscape are part of the conversation between citizens, policy-makers and specialists.

# STRATEGIC GOALS

## 1 ——— Designing and building differently for a better quality of life and open space

We need open space for nature, biodiversity, food production, recreation, relaxation, water supply, water management and so on. In addition, amenity value is important: we value open landscapes because we think they are beautiful, because they contain traces of the past, because we can find peace in them, because we can move through them freely, because we like to holiday in them... If we want to protect and create open space and achieve other sustainability goals (improved mobility, more efficient provision of services) in the Flemish context, then reducing spatial claims is a first, essential precondition.

As Bouwmeester, I want to deploy the full creativity and innovative power of designers in reducing the fragmentation of Flanders, increasing the density and strengthening town and village centres, enhancing and expanding the green-blue network, and creating green areas of increased ecological value. In addition, I want to actively help in defining and rapidly achieving the broad objectives set down in the Policy Paper of the Spatial Development Department Flanders, with a focus on creating a more pleasant, better equipped and more inclusive environment.

Furthermore, open space in all its diversity can be viewed as a public good that we should preserve for future generations, and that should also be at least partly accessible or observable for people today. In view of that social concern, we must seek a better balance between individual and collective interests. I want to help ensure that open space is not simply a matter for the privileged few. Working towards densification and strengthening centres does not necessarily mean that we should build less or build smaller, but that we should search for new models that benefit everybody.

To tackle this problem adequately, the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team was strengthened with an **open space advisor**. In the support offered to public principals, particular attention will be paid to:

- acquiring insight into the interplay between open space and urbanization, and in the value of landscape and ecosystems, to justify choices in spatial projects
- collaborating for more continuous open space, across administrative and sectoral boundaries
- actively supporting an open space policy by, among others, participating in the Open Ruimte Platform – a collaboration between the Flemish Land Agency, the Spatial Development Department Flanders, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities, the Association of Flemish Provinces and the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team
- promoting projects related to densification and core strengthening by devising innovative solutions and completing concrete exemplary projects, with a social agenda
- generating support, raising awareness and ensuring communication with all levels of government and with the wider population.

## 2 ——— Housing based on quality of life and sustainable development

Current residential developments have caused Flanders to become spatially congested and burdened us with a very difficult and environmentally harmful mobility scenario (car dependence, misery of traffic jams...). This in turn has adversely affected the quality of life. Moreover, Belgium consumes 72% more energy per square metre than the European average. Because the average size of our homes is significantly larger than that in neighbouring countries, our energy consumption per home is more than double the European average. That is why 'Smart living and housing' is one of the seven transition priorities that was defined within the framework of Vision 2050, the long-term strategy presented by the Flemish government. The Vlaams Bouwmeester Team is already involved in this transition process. I want to address the housing problem by improving housing quality through a project-based approach and by initiating research, with attention for the following aspects:

- A location-driven housing choice. Living in the city or in a village centre, close to amenities and public transport interchanges, ensures a richer and more diverse range of housing, and also of care, greenery and so on.
- Increase in scale in residential design as an alternative to individual commissions. Collective private commissioning of housing, private collective housing for the free market, cooperatives, community land trusts, cohousing, and housing in multi-occupant buildings all provide keys to more affordable, higher quality (for example, through the provision of shared spaces and services) and more energy efficient living.
- Increased housing mobility as a function of living quality. Strengthening town and village centres offers opportunities for community building, more efficient home care and so on.
- living and working better attuned to each other (through stimulation of the service sector and adapted manufacturing industry in the centre, multi-occupant buildings...).
- Social and affordable living. Supporting housing associations in building sustainable and future-oriented projects and helping the private sector to build affordable housing in more hybrid residential environments, with a healthy social mix.
- A professional rental sector. More collective housing, preferably by providers who, because of their role as property managers, focus more strongly on the sustainability of the housing they build.

## 3 ——— Careful treatment of heritage for a better quality of living environment

Deploying design and research by design in dealing with our built and landscape heritage can significantly increase the quality of life in towns and villages. Moreover, both the cultural value and the possibilities for reuse (of building components, materials...) and redevelopment should be carefully considered on every occasion. By sufficiently considering all these aspects, we can 'do more with less' and also generate historically layered, versatile and exciting living environments. I want to work

with the Flanders Heritage agency to help realize high-quality contemporary interventions. Together, we can engage in constructive dialogue with public principals on the subject of heritage. Set up at the start of 2016, the Project Office for Church Redevelopment and the 2017 edition of Master Class, devoted to ‘Heritage and Redevelopment’, form the first steps towards further collaboration. In general, in the attitude towards cultural heritage that has been handed down to us, I want to promote a more active, responsible attitude, in which we see ourselves less as inheritors (what have we been left and what should we preserve?) but as *bequeathers* (what do we want to pass on as heritage to the next generation?). We will devote particular attention to:

- Heritage and social housing. Housing associations today are grappling with the exorbitant cost of renovating historical neighbourhoods with ground-access dwellings. For the renovation of valuable social housing, I want to advocate a workable balance between heritage value, residential quality, energetic performance and economic feasibility.
- Change-oriented building. ‘Cultural sustainability’ was already a key concept in the vision articulated by the first Vlaams Bouwmeester. Public buildings give today’s authorities a face, express certain values, and set an example, but they are also tomorrow’s monuments, and should therefore be successfully handed down to future generations. Sustainability in this regard means that we should build not only to meet current demands but also to accommodate future needs and hence to anticipate change.
- Learning from our own heritage processes. The Bouwmeester has continuously advocated a high-quality treatment of heritage, based on the conviction that a careful approach is based on knowledge and insight into existing heritage, combined with design talent for new functions. Each renovation or redevelopment includes interventions that need to be precisely designed. This calls for an expert and inventive approach. Over the past sixteen years, therefore, the Open Call has featured a great many heritage projects. These involved various visions that often confronted or complemented each other. With a view to creating broader support for dealing dynamically with our heritage, I want to inform public principals and other interested parties about good examples, through the Open Call and in other ways. This ‘corpus’ can nurture the development of new visions.

## 4 ——— Efficient public principalship and entrepreneurship

In order to optimally achieve the objectives of spatial quality, densification and added social value, I want to ensure that public organizations and local authorities are familiar with the entrepreneurial logic of the construction and real estate market. With limited government resources, we can draw on this insight to generate added spatial and economic value and to reinvest economic returns for social aims. Such insight will also lead to balanced negotiations with private parties, and a fair division of social and private profit. One could think, for example, of various forms of ‘negotiated urbanism’, in which additional density is permitted in exchange for more green space (or relinquishing building rights elsewhere), for creating high-quality public space, for creating housing in areas well served by public transport, for injecting additional support functions.

In a number of cases, such operational and financial optimization can benefit from a project structure that involves additional private parties, within the framework of public-private partnership

projects (PPP). The current DBFM programme Schools of Tomorrow, which involves the design, construction, funding and thirty-year maintenance of 182 school buildings, for which the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team, as operational partner, helps in selecting designs and providing advice in their elaboration, already offers a good example. Within the framework of the issuing of the decree concerning alternative funding for school infrastructure through project-specific DBFM agreements, potential principals can call on the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team for similar advice and support. In 2014-2015, a subsequent exploration of the possibilities for generating social profit through PPP projects in various sectors formed the subject of a research project carried out in partnership with the Vlaams Kenniscentrum PPS (Flemish PPP Knowledge Centre) and PMV. I hope to continue a structural collaboration with both partners.

## 5 ————— Regulations as proactive quality tool

Spatial and architectural designs are created within a complex legal framework. To qualify for a building permit, a project must take regulations and standards into consideration. These can be of a general nature (civil code, Energy Performance and Indoor Climate [EPB] regulations...), relate to the function of the building (housing code, accessibility standards for public buildings, fire safety standards...) or relate to the location (land-use plans, land parcelling regulations, local parking norms...). These regulations are dictated by quality standards related to certain themes (hygiene, safety, health, aesthetic appearance...), and translate this concern into quantifiable and verifiable regulations. In this process of translation, however, the original concern of the legislator sometimes recedes into the background. Moreover, alternative solutions to achieve the same goal are rendered impossible.

I would therefore like to call for a set of regulations that functions as a proactive quality tool, one that leaves scope for creativity within the design process and is flexible and future-proof. To that end, I think it is necessary to specify more explicitly the intentions and results that the regulations aim to achieve. Each solution that fully or partly falls outside the scope of the regulations can then be admitted if it achieves the intended results, and is considered desirable by all stakeholders and authorities involved. In this case, the approval of an independent quality control body will be needed. In concrete terms, I want to apply this approach in various projects and in advice offered or formulated by the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team, and also draw attention to it in all forms of consultation that take place within our cross-sectional activity in collaboration with all policy domains.

Besides regulations governing construction and space, legal and financial factors contribute to ill-considered land use. For example, various negative spatial effects are caused by the law on municipal funding, the law on agricultural leases, the limited transferability of registration rights, the calculation of the cadastral income, the one-sided approach to sustainability in EPB regulations (Energy Performance and Indoor Climate), the law on joint ownership, tax incentives for company cars and home ownership (at the expense of renting) and so on. I want to delve into the underlying mechanisms and highlight them, in order to tackle our use of space in an integral manner.

## 6 ——— Cross-border collaboration

The territory of Flanders forms part of a much larger orohydrographic, economic and culturally coherent system: the Maas-Schelde-Rijn Delta, also known as the Eurodelta. This area shares a development history in which population growth has always been dispersed across the many cities, towns and villages within the region. That deconcentrated growth has led to a unique urban system with twenty million people living in relatively close proximity to one another, one that is fundamentally different to other metropolises such as London and Paris. The extensive urbanized area is not delimited by governmental or administrative borders, but extends as far as North Rhine-Westphalia and Wallonia. Brussels also forms an integral part of it. Within this system, there are a number of spatial problems and challenges that do not stop at the edges of regions or countries. Questions of spatial planning, environment and mobility do not recognize borders, so tackling them demands a supralocal vision and collaboration.

To promote this broader vision, I want to first and foremost work closely and consult with my fellow Bouwmeesters. The Chief Government Architect of the Netherlands, the Architect for the Brussels Metropolitan Region, the Cellule architecture de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, as well as the various city architects (Antwerp, Charleroi and soon Ghent) are invaluable partners for the Vlaams Bouwmeester.

Collaboration between the regions is imposing itself particularly in relation to the metropolitan dynamics and problems of Brussels. Densification and core strengthening are very important in the Flemish zone around Brussels to safeguard the green belt from further land parcelling and to create sufficient critical mass for a high-performing suburban network of public transport. Moreover, a supra-regional approach is essential for the large 'fixtures' of the Brussels region, such as Zaventem Airport, the ring road around Brussels and the Sonian Forest. Supervising Flemish projects in Brussels will involve close collaboration with the Architect for the Brussels Metropolitan Region.

Structural collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment and the Chief Government Architect of the Netherlands is obvious. Accordingly, we have already started to develop a shared agenda for spatial research and policy, and are working further on Belgian-Dutch research by design launched within the Labo Ruimte – Lage Landen.

## 7 ——— Contributing to architecture culture in Flanders

From the very start the post of Bouwmeester has extended beyond project-based advice and support for public principals. Through organizing study days and contact days, initiating research, releasing publications, and organizing workshops and lectures, it has continuously acted as a platform where not only designers and public principals, but also critics, researchers, designers and artists could talk with one another. With the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team, I want to continue to initiate and facilitate research, reflection and exchanges, so that public principalship and architectural and spatial policy in Flanders remain in touch with developments at home and abroad in the broader field of architecture and are constantly inspired by them. My objectives are:

- Knowledge sharing, debate and broad communication. Opened in 2012, the Atelier Bouwmeester in Galerie Ravenstein has proven to be a powerful tool for this and an engine for the cultural dimension of the functioning of the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team. In order to further promote knowledge sharing and debate, to highlight good examples and raise awareness, I wish to share an exemplary and accessible infrastructure in Brussels with various partners: the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi), the Vlaamse Vereniging voor Ruimte en Planning (VRP), the Spatial Development Department Flanders and so on.
- Collaboration with the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR), with a view to creating a cultural learning platform for spatial and urban development to highlight pressing social themes. The workshop series Designing the Future (with IABR, AWB, the VRP and the Brussels Bouwmeester), which took place at the Atelier Bouwmeester from December 2016 to February 2017, formed a first step in this direction.
- Attention for fair fees for design and design research: acceptable fees for the core business of the architect, the recognition of the value of conceptual thinking in design and – coupled with that – the importance of a healthy business climate in the architecture sector, form areas of attention about which I want to raise awareness among public principals and policymakers.
- Synergy with design education and research programmes, as one of the most important channels for promoting new insights concerning open space, densification, construction and housing and effecting crucial cultural change in this area. As a neutral partner, the Vlaams Bouwmeester Team can bring the various schools together, for instance within the framework of themed design studios.
- Structural collaboration with the Department of Culture concerning the theme of commissioned art. The concept paper ‘Renewing the post of Bouwmeester’ determines, among other things, that ‘commissioned art’ no longer forms part of the mission of the post of Bouwmeester. On 1 January 2016 the art team was therefore transferred to the Department of Culture, Youth and Media. Within Culture, the art team is currently being relaunched as a national centre of expertise, and the knowledge and experience gained is deployed to define a full-fledged policy on commissioned art for public space. As Bouwmeester, I remain involved in this process of defining, and our team will work structurally with the art team to provide the necessary support for public principals who wish to commission works of art as part of a construction project in order to promote high-quality results.

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