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CITIES



## Antwerp - The Big Link

# Co-creating a liveable mobility solution

In 2016 Antwerp, introduced innovative governance methods to overcome public opposition to a ring road extension project. The resulting co-created plan to cover over the road not only resolves citizens' main objection by reducing pollution from the motorway. It also creates new green spaces for communities and a more cohesive and connected city.

Since the ring road was built in the sixties, Antwerp has grown ever further beyond the ring, which is now in the middle of the city. Used for both passenger and freight transport, the road is renowned for its congestion, pollution and safety issues. These are compounded by the fact that one segment of the ring - the Oosterweel (north west) - is missing. For 20 years, plans to complete the ring, thereby improving traffic flow and access to the city's busy port, were deadlocked. Citizens and action groups made their objections known, including via a local referendum and court proceedings.



The 'curator' started with workshops where city administrators and non-profit groups came together knowing there was no hierarchy in the room and that what was said in the room stayed in the room, so everyone had freedom of speech and we eventually found a solution to take to the politicians.

*Jan Verhaert, director of mobility, Antwerp*

## Finding shared values and goals

In 2014, a novel idea was put forward by a group of local citizens including architects, engineers and teachers. Their proposal for covering the ring as a way to improve mobility, promote better air quality and healthy living, and create more green spaces quickly gained residents' backing. After decades of controversy, the city and Flemish government recognised that this was the first solution for closing the ring citizens had ever supported and that it united both parties through a shared commitment to sustainability and liveability. But how could they transform the situation from confrontation to a co-productive collaboration, capitalising on the citizen knowledge and momentum that had been mobilised?

cities in action

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where: Antwerp, Belgium  
what: cooperation  
when: 2016-ongoing

The inspired answer was to appoint a fourth, neutral party addition to the three already involved - NGOs, governments and citizens - to bring everyone together on an equal footing and take the idea forward. This new role, known as 'curator', was given to Flemish architect, engineer, urban planner and mediator Alexander D'Hooghe by the city of Antwerp and the Flemish government. The approach taken by Mr D'Hooghe and his team was to focus attention on what was common to all rather than where differences lay in order to harmonise discussions and achieve compromise and consensus among citizens, governments, urban planners and technical engineers.



The plan people had in mind may not be the best one to realise the principle they are striving for. Once they realised that, we were able to look for shared principles or principles people might not consider a priority but could support. Then something wonderful happened: government and action groups suddenly started looking for solutions together.

*Alexander D'Hooghe, curator,  
The Big Link project*

## Creating a customised governance model

This approach led to an agreed ambition statement for the project to cover the ring road and to develop innovative ideas for the new areas of land created on top of the resulting tunnel. Reaching this point involved 50 workshops, 100 working sessions, 3,500 experts and policymakers and 3,000 citizens and organisations. An alliance was then formed that developed a tailor-made governance structure to manage the project. This long-term collaboration model for preventing conflict and jointly dealing with problems is enshrined in the Treaty for the Future. The treaty also included funding commitments: €250m each from the city and the port of Antwerp and €1bn from the Flemish government for 'liveability' projects.



Innovation characterised the way communities were inspired to come up with concrete 'liveability' pilot projects for their neighbourhoods' new green spaces. The ring road was divided into six sections, with each one given its own on-site office and design team. These multidisciplinary teams, which had responded to an international call, used participation and co-creation tools to develop and shape input from citizens. Projects were presented and discussed during 'ring days open to all'. An annual ring festival organised by citizen organisations attracted 20,000 visitors, helping to mobilise broad collective interest. This goal was also aided by community workers, information caravans and home and school visits.

## Ensuring impact and safety

Of the 31 feasible projects generated, 18 were selected for implementation. From a bicycle bridge connecting river banks to urban agriculture greenhouses with holes pushing polluted air up and away, all these quick-win projects had strong popular support and the capacity to deliver measurable community benefits. The complexity involved with marrying up the projects on top of the tunnel with the safety and traffic regulations applicable within it, was handled in the project's characteristic collaborative and systematic way. Instead of operating separately as is usual, the disciplines of spatial planning and infrastructure design worked hand in hand throughout.

By turning what used to be a controversial mobility project into a collective urban development project, The Big Link has unlocked and accelerated progress of a vital city strategy. It has also unified the city by resolving the obstructive barriers between the city centre and the 20th century districts and opened up appealing opportunities for communities deprived of recreational space and amenities. The project proved to be so successful that that Mr D'Hooghe has been retained for a further eight years to ensure its principles and insights inform the next phases of the ring road capping scheme.

