

# Urban Renewal in Flanders — (2002-2011)

A PARTICULAR PRACTICE IN EUROPE

Els Vervloesem, Bruno De Meulder and André Loeckx



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Photography Michael De Lausnay

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The Quartier Ecoparc in Neuchâtel arose on a railway site of about 5 hectares and provides space for new housing, lofts in existing buildings, a music conservatoire and a campus.

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Building a city on a cityBruno De Meulder

**Urban expansion is not a very sustainable form of urban development in present-day Europe. Large-scale expansion is not necessary for coping with limited demographic and economic growth. The current problem is therefore more one of transforming the existing urban area.**

Building a city on a city has long been a credo of urban development. The 'compact city' has long been postulated. After all, it allows for compression, which is of economic as well as social benefit. If we look at the city as a material culture, such operations are also a form of cultural compression.<sup>1</sup> This was surely the starting point for the sustainable Quartier Ecoparc in Neuchâtel, when a railway domain of about 5 hectares next to a station came up for redevelopment. After a competition in 1990 the redevelopment of the site and its immediate environment was entrusted to the design agency Bauart. From 1998 onwards, when the Federal Office of Statistics (OFS) took up residence there, the development of the area accelerated, with new housing, lofts in existing buildings, a music academy and a college campus (TransEurope). The establishment of the Ecoparc foundation,<sup>2</sup> in which the public and private sector and also academics and clubs are represented and active, stimulates sustainable development with all kinds of activities (platforms, publications, forums, debates, websites, etc.) and helped Quartier Ecoparc to become a real-life laboratory of sustainable development. Theory was put into practice and vice versa.

In this context, sustainable development is understood to be the simultaneous inclusion of environmental parameters and economic, social and cultural factors. As an *in situ* laboratory of sustainable development, the aim of the Quartier Ecoparc was to convert theoretical sustainability concepts into practice. One of these concepts is denser building in the immediate vicinity of a public transport hub with a mixed programme (this is incidentally also used in Flanders). Compliance with all the technical criteria of sustainability is also part of the package: reduction of energy consumption (heat recovery), use of renewable energy (storage of seasonal solar energy, passive cooling etc.) and ecological building methods.<sup>3</sup> All the buildings in the neighbourhood have been

awarded all manner of sustainability labels and have won several prizes. The programme is mixed. Diversity and variety are the buzzwords even within the individual programmes. The range of housing on offer is varied. It is also targeted at an intergenerational public (and adapts the facilities to this purpose). The mixed programme allows for the creation of functional synergy (shared communal areas, joint operation of technical installations, etc.). The project also forged active partnerships between public and private players (for the joint implementation and operation of parking systems). Finally, the neighbourhood (and the previously created Ecoparc foundation) has become an important medium for highlighting sustainability, first of all to the area's users, but in equal measure to a broader public. It almost serves as an 'eco museum' of sustainable neighbourhoods where receiving visitors and providing them with explanations and demonstrations is on the agenda every day.

However, between the users and the outside world there are also the surrounding neighbourhoods. The Quartier Ecoparc has succeeded more than any other urban renewal project in stimulating and steering the development of its surroundings. Like every good urban development project, the Quartier Ecoparc ensures that it integrates well with its surroundings, by means of new (pedestrian) connections with the city centre and the adjacent neighbourhoods. With neighbourhood-oriented facilities such as a cultural centre (at the foot of the OFS tower), a conference centre and community businesses, it also contributes to the environment into which it was inserted. But this is just the beginning. Today, the Quartier Ecoparc is, as it were, the bridgehead of sustainable development, pushing through into the existing surrounding neighbourhoods by means of renovation and new building.

First and foremost, the Quartier Ecoparc in Neuchâtel is a fully integrated architectural project of the highest quality. Every construction is an exquisite architectonic performance, while at the same time the interplay between the individual buildings creates an ensemble. The quality of the architecture is not regarded as an extra dimension here, alongside other parameters of sustainability, but as a means of attaining sustainability, and that on a cultural level too. In the housing, flexibility is also or perhaps primarily an important resource. As an illustration of this, dwellings are built without corridors.

This obviously leads to a more efficient use of space, but also contributes to making the various spaces more 'indeterminate' as to their functionality. While this means more flexibility of use over time, it also blurs the borders between the different ambiances in a residence: representative and

intimate, day zone, night zone, etc.<sup>4</sup> Doorways in the dwellings are oversized so that they can be converted into offices and vice versa. This is all implemented in that extremely precise architecture on which Switzerland has a patent.

1 **Bauart #2, Quartier Ecoparc, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2009 and Bauart #1, Quartier Ecoparc, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2004.**

2 See, for example, [www.ecoparc.ch](http://www.ecoparc.ch)

3 *Construire la ville sur la ville. Quartier durable Ecoparc à Neuchâtel, Présentation succincte du projet.* August 2011: [http://www.bauart.ch/upload/File/Document%20Ecoparc\\_F.pdf](http://www.bauart.ch/upload/File/Document%20Ecoparc_F.pdf)

4 B. Marchand, "L'esprit de la ville", in: *Bauart #2, op cit.* p. 31.



The Quartier Ecoparc in Neuchâtel is a complete and integrated architectural project of the highest standard. Each element is a work of superior architecture. © Yves André / Bauart