

Park Railway North

ANTWERP,
BELGIUM

Antwerp is Belgium's second largest city with a population of 514,000. Situated in the centre of Europe's economic core area, it is a prominent port city and the motor of the Flemish economy. Its economic power is based on three sectors: the port and maritime cluster (second in Europe), the petrochemical complex (second in the world) and the diamond sector (global trade centre). Like most European port and industrial cities, economic progress – recently trailing behind that of Brussels – has been accompanied by serious social problems including unemployment, polarisation and deprivation.

Project overview

With social problems high on the agenda for Antwerp officials, the Park Spoor Noord project is a key example of the city's urban renewal policy. Previously an abandoned inner-city railway yard, the space is now an 18 hectare urban park (involving more than 40 million euros public investment) and a six hectare commercial zone. Once the marshalling site of the Belgian national railway company NMBS, the converted land now connects a number of deprived districts under the vision to create 'a garden for the neighbourhood and a park for the city'. The area now incorporates sporting grounds, playgrounds and restored historic railway buildings that serve a number of public functions. The commercial site is still under development, with a university college campus (for 5,000 students) set to open in 2015 and a large hospital (opening in 2018) expected to be complemented by high rise residential units, a customs office and retail services.

Results and impact

Since its opening in 2009, the park has attracted visitors and Antwerpians from all over the city. As a neighbourhood upgrading initiative, effects appear to be moderately positive. Adjacent neighbourhoods now meet

internationally accepted district green criteria, house renovation permissions have risen (with a peak around the park opening), the degree of vacancies have decreased substantially and real estate prices have increased for locations with a view of the park. Displacements – a feared consequence of gentrification – have been limited. However, despite the success of the park as an amenity, it has yet to markedly impact deprivation in adjacent neighbourhoods. Currently, it is not possible to assess the impact of the 40 million euro investment, as by choosing to establish a park, the city council focused more on social, rather than economic, return. However, one clear impact has been the development of increasingly innovative urban planning by city officials. The traditional approach of planning (waiting for private initiatives to approve or disapprove) has been replaced by integrated proactive municipal planning and with the establishment of autonomous municipal development companies, the project has signalled a more entrepreneurial approach to urban regeneration.

Enablers

A combination of factors facilitated the momentum needed to make this project happen over an eight year period. Firstly, the ambition of local government to give priority to urban regeneration was key. Secondly, the project aligned with the 1999 Federal Urban Policy created explicitly for large cities, allowing the project to receive impressive funding from various government levels. Thirdly, citizen participation was also a crucial factor, with residents exerting considerable influence over matters such as the conservation of historic railway buildings. Lastly, local organising capacity was a significant enabler; with an innovative governance structure allowing a multidisciplinary planning team to focus entirely on the project whilst having the autonomy to sign contracts, facilitating the first large scale development scheme carried out by the city itself. Having followed a consistent, proactive approach with a strong link to residents, several other large projects have followed the Park Railway North innovative urban renewal approach.

