

Towards a new culture of mobility

The city mobility plan in realisation at the city of Sint-Niklaas (Flemish region)

*Vers une nouvelle culture de mobilité:
Le plan communal de mobilité de Saint-Nicolas (Région flamande)*

K. Stuyven¹

The concept for the mobility plan for the city of Sint-Niklaas was not based on concentric ringroads around a town center. The basic scheme is that of a central corridor for busses (using buslanes) linking the station in the north, over the Great Market to a shoppingcenter in the south. Along this spine are situated all activities which attract a lot of public (schools, hospitals, museums...). The enclosure of the dense part of the urban tissue is organised in a complementary way to that spine, namely 'sideways' by so-called 'tangents' and linked to the highway network. The cycle paths also lead to this central spine, a lot of them being freestanding cycle paths, connecting the surrounding villages to the city center.

This innovative scheme leads to various public and private investments and new architectural standards. The author discusses the area around the train station, the Great Market and crossroad of the old ring road.

To conclude : sustainable mobility plans need this kind of architecture of public space to encourage the urgently needed modal shift.

Le plan de mobilité de Saint-Nicolas n'a pas été conçu sur la base d'un réseau viaire radioconcentrique, mais sur le schéma d'un corridor pour les bus, reliant la gare au nord, la Grand-Place, et le centre commercial au sud. Les activités polarisatrices (écoles, hôpitaux musées) sont localisées le long de cette épine dorsale. Intra muros, la partie dense du tissu urbain est organisée en complémentarité avec ce corridor, via des chemins de « traverse », ou tangentes, reliées au réseau routier. Les pistes cyclables conduisent aussi à cette épine dorsale. La plupart d'entre elles sont en site propre et connectées aux villages environnants.

Ce schéma novateur a permis divers investissements publics ou privés et de nouveaux modèles architecturaux. L'article évoque les abords de la gare, la Grand-Place et enfin le carrefour de l'ancien ring. En conclusion, l'auteur pense que les plans de mobilité durable requièrent ce type d'architecture de l'espace public afin d'encourager le report modal.

Keywords : city mobility plan, public space, modal shift

Mots-clé : plan communal de mobilité, espace public, report modal

¹ Koen Stuyven, architecte, a d'abord travaillé au sein de l'asbl Langzaam Verkeer (1984), active dans la conception de l'espace public et à l'initiative de programmes novateurs comme « Hoofdstraten » (Fondation Roi Baudouin), projet pilote du programme Leefbare Doortochten (Région flamande). Co-fondateur de l'Atelier Espace Public (1991), il dirige actuellement au sein de l'asbl Vectris un groupe d'étude sur la mobilité active, l'urbanisme et le développement durable. A ce titre, il supervise le plan de mobilité de St-Nicolas et la conception du quartier de gare. Enfin, il enseigne également l'espace public comme professeur invité à l'Artesis Hogeschool Antwerpen (Stedenbouw, Monumenten en Landschappen).



Koen Stuyven — PHOTO F. DOR

Sint-Niklaas is located in the Flemish region of Belgium, and it is part of the area called “Flemish Diamond”. The latter is a polycentric urban network between Gent, Antwerp and Brussels. As well, we can consider Wavre as part of this central business district in the heart of Belgium. So, we also have to work together in the direction of Wavre, and perhaps Namur and Charleroi as well.

Sint-Niklaas is also situated between Antwerp and Gent. Therefore, there is a bundle of infrastructures that are very lowly related to the city of Sint-Niklaas, because the railway and the highway structures are going through the town; so it is very important that it (the town) is well connected to this system (railway and highway structures). The latter is also forming the backbone of the public transport system. The railway station, which is located in the city centre, is the real node where the public transports of the region should be connected to.

Sint-Niklaas is a quite dense agglomeration – that is not so common in Flanders. It encompasses a very dense residential area. It is quite interesting that along this zone, there is a concentration of schools, hospi-



Saint-Nicolas se trouve en Région flamande, entre Gand et Anvers. Vue traditionnelle du trafic urbain : le ring, le centre et les radiales pour la circulation motorisée.

tals, market squares... brief, there are a lot of public activities that attract the populations living along this axis, and this is a very important element in our mobility plan.

You can also see that the city is crossed by a lot of infrastructure lines (look at this railway or this long road). In the 1960's, they really made two by two lane roads, just through the whole city centre, and the Great Market was linked to the highway system. These days, it was possible to drive through the city without coming across any traffic light.

In the reflexion about the mobility skins for this city, we kept a strong element in our mind: the medieval city center and the radial lanes going through the agglomeration. It is very important that we left this kind of thinking aside, to use another skin as basic concept for the mobility plan. So, like an inversion this time, we put public transports in the middle of the agglomeration, but not only focused on one spot, but like a corridor going from the bus station over the Great Market, to the big regional commercial centre. In the long term, it is even possible to prolong this axis to have a spine in the middle of the city, where the high density of this part of the urban tissue could be organised; but it is for the very long term.

Into the city, we used tangents, i.e. elements to make the agglomeration accessible, not from the heart of

the city though, but sideways. It is also important for this contribution that we left aside the ringroad model and replace it by another one to "read" the city. Of course for cycling, the radial road remains, because it is well connected to the small villages around Sint-Niklaas. Coming into the city centre, you have a fine woven structure of dense streets which are suitable for bicycles. This is the overall skin.

Something unique in Flanders is that, all the layers of decision making are involved in developing a communal mobility plan, i.e. the city, the Flanders region, the province, the bus company (De Lijn) and the train company. However, since this project is a federal level matter, it is not well integrated; but in the present case, because the very dynamic mayor of the city put his relationships in stake, he succeeded in making them work together with all the other levels of decision making.

Now I will present you four strategic projects which are realised or are in realisation. The first is the element of bus lanes through the whole city center. The two by two lanes was replaced by a lane for cars traffic for the first part, and the other was kept to make bus lanes – and this is important, – through the entire city centre. Thus, it was still possible to encounter bus lanes even in the heart of the city. This fact is not always possible in all cities, but advantage was taken from the problems they (the lanes) created in 1960's, by reinventing and re-using the ideas in a good way.



Légende : Dans tout le centre ville, des couloirs sont spécialement dévolus aux autobus.

The second project is the station area. In the former situation, you can recognise the old square where the old station was built. They planned a new one, putting a tunnel under this square and then heightening the traffic of trains on flyover. So, the local streets would not be connected with the railway system. But on the other hand, this plan left a desolated space around the station and at the plot of the bus station, the space of flows was very dominant. This was definitely not a very good environment to establish the public transports of the city.

A competition – won by a Dutch architect – was organised then, and they redeveloped the whole area densification, through a cinema, a wellness center, commercial activities, and they reconnected the new station with the old commercial street by introducing this kind of rambla ; it is a pedestrian area in the middle of the urban tissue. Nowadays, all this is completed. At that time, we also had to make a reconnection of

this new dense area with the cars traffic system. This crossroad was disconnected from this street and was replaced by this roundabout (see the map) to make a good connection with the park which is located on the side, and from which you can easily reach the station. The renovation of the entrance of the station hall was made by SNCB (you can see its transparency; or this well connected cafeteria in the middle of the traffic node). This is a very interesting contribution from the railway company.

The bus station has clients of quality, so there is a lot of design, and artwork can also be found in this area (the team is “Merkatof travelling”) like this kind of globe which reflects the whole traffic center – can you imagine yourself sitting with your love, reading in this kind of area ? – This is a standard of quality for public space you need when you have to change modal shift – theatricalising walking through the rambla is really like “putting people on a plateau.”



Situation de la gare, avant et après les aménagements



Aménagements autour de la gare : le hall d'entrée et la gare des bus.

The third strategic project was the Great Market. It was the greatest parking space in the city centre in the 2000's. Nowadays it is transformed into a public space. It is so big that it can be used as starting point for balloons. I don't want to suggest that these kinds of balloons are part of sustainable mobility, but I want to make you understand the importance of the big dimensions of this market which was very important for the people of Sint-Niklaas. Within the mobility plan, there were also already some thoughts about the need to make this area become a place of good connection to the pedestrian network, but also to the cycling network. So, a few and very structured lanes were set at this time into the plans.

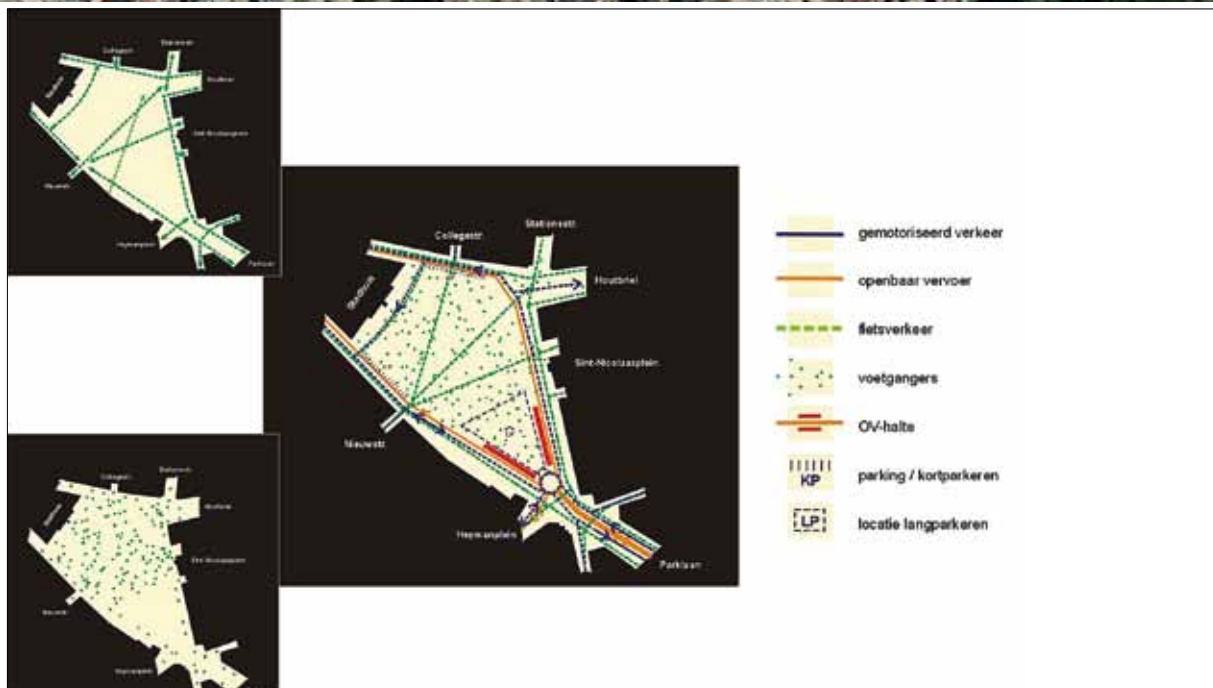
The architects of the station that pleased the mayor so much that he commissioned them to redesign the Market Place, took some ideas from the former plans. In fact, the mayor had organised an election around the theme of building an underground parking when he

was in the opposition. He won this kind of referendum. But after some few years, when he was in charge, we said "yes making an underground parking space under the Great Market is a better solution" but since he had a political problem, we had to reinvent an underground parking. So, we said "we don't fully make an underground parking, but we make something in between. We make a ground level, which will slowly enter into level minus one, but with a lot of light coming into this space, and we can use the roof of that garden as a tribune, or something like this kind of auditorium. Some of the ideas were taken over by the architects and from this space, they made a real public space. Parking areas in this kind of renewal of city centers are part of the game. And to make them profitable you have to invest (a lot) financially ; so they should have at least some basic and intrinsic quality as public spaces.

There is a boardwalk around the whole Market Place, well connected to the underground parking, but it is

also a place for galering (for circuses and things like that). Furthermore, it is important to mention that, this area is also an important place to step out from the different buses in the city centre.

The theater of walking is designed like a canopy. When entering this place, you feel like you are entering a very chic hotel. There is some accommodation for the structural lanes of traffics by soft movements.



La Grand-Place, situation et cheminements



La Grand-Place, rendue à l'espace public.

The last strategic point is node on the former ring road. You see the very complex situation with the sharp angles of this crossroad. All the buses of this bus station had to leave this route, going to the city center, but this is the point where there was a structural bottleneck in the system. Buses lost some three minutes,

just to cross this node. Nowadays, this is put on the table, and we are looking for some new solutions for this kind of environment.

You see the flyover; you also see the difficult situation underneath the flyover; at the central point, the left



Le carrefour vers le ring : un nœud urbain qui nécessite une réflexion à diverses échelles.

movements are very difficult to organise. It was a very difficult situation then. We could not find a good solution until we gave up the idea of the continuity of the ringroad. So, this remark is very important: the concept of the greater scale can influence the kind of solutions you find on the smaller scale, as far as the organisation of public space is concerned.

We could use this kind of spaces (where there was a little of more spaces for organising the conflicts) and we tried to make some two roundabouts within the central point, just crossing two lanes for car traffic. All the pedestrians and the cyclists are in the centre of the system. There is such a dense cyclist traffic – at least during the pick hours – that we had to put a small traffic light in between the system, just to have small cycles of 20 seconds, so people could go and connect to the city center every ten seconds – let's show some simulations.

The gain of these solutions – in term of delay time for cars and for buses, from north/south and south/north – is very good, but it can become better.

Let's show some last slides about the idea of having those flyovers accepted as part of the city forms, and to reintegrate them in the heart of the city, just like an artwork. And nowadays, we are studying the form this infrastructure should have.

To conclude, the new mobility concept, in combination with architecture of public space, will contribute to a new culture of mobility, so that the needed modal shift we have can be part of our daily life, part of our life style, so that it would not anymore be a problem that we have bear over us. This is one of the statements of this contribution.