Abstract

Over the last decades the ambitions and results of post-industrial urban renewal became a key theme in urban studies and spatial planning. Renewal takes place in a global context of accelerating neoliberalisation, privatisation and increasing deregulation. In line with a parallel shift towards governance, the ad hoc ‘urban development project’ (UDP) became increasingly popular as a planning and policy device for reshaping run-down and impoverished (parts of) cities, most of them relics of previous post-war industrial activities. Regardless the actor initiating them, such UDPs envision changes in the built environment and social-cultural space. Consequently, UDPs are processes in which visions, policy-making, participation and urban design are closely intertwined in a setting of different spatial scales, different policy scales and multi-actor environments. Most studies focus on participation or on the urban design of UDPs, but little theoretical and empirical research has been done on the normative visioning that take place in such a multi-actor setting. This study takes up this endeavour through a case study on the Brussels Canal Zone, one of the most dynamic areas of the city that includes 25 districts and houses over 220,000 inhabitants.

The area is an example of post-industrial reconversion, where private and public actors, and civil society forge and negotiate visions on future renewal. These visions are studied in detail in a qualitative way using urban regime theory, discourse analysis and Lefebvre’s approach on the social production of space. First, the visions in a series of spatial planning documents are analysed from 1989 onwards. Second, the various visions expressed for four UDPs are discussed in detail. The reconversion of the Tour & Taxis site and the renewal of the Belle-Vue brewery in Molenbeek principally deal with renewal of the urban fabric. The citizens’ movement of Platform Kanal and the branding project of the Canal Zone by the regional government aim at changing the negative image of the area. Whereas both focus on alleviating stigma, the region equally aims at attracting real estate investors. Data were obtained by mixed methods, combining literature review, policy analysis, thematic cartography and 26 expert interviews.

The study provides a detailed insight on how spatial visions are negotiated in complex urban renewal processes and how long-term visions for the future may mobilise private actors, civil society, urban professionals and policy makers around convincing storylines. Furthermore, this is the first academic research that provides a transversal, historical and contemporary socio-economic geography of the Brussels Canal Zone. Finally, the research offers a multidisciplinary theoretical approach to visioning that includes discursive, spatial and contextual dimensions. This work proposes a framework that is not only an analytical and comparative tool for researchers, but also an instrument of reflection for policy makers, urban professionals and social movements.