

Co-Producing the Future: Imaginaries at Work in Spatial Planning Practice

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Abstract

Two emblematic products of imagination reflect contrasting attitudes toward the future. The film *Back to the Future* evokes a nostalgic longing for a 'good world', while Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* embodies the inevitable trail of destruction left by progress. Such tensions are inherent in collaborative spatial planning, where stakeholders are often guided – consciously or not – by divergent imaginaries. Co-producing a shared future requires the alignment of these imaginaries. Generative metaphors can serve as catalysts for convergence. This paper presents a case study that explores how such metaphors can be used to strengthen coherence among fragmented projects and different stakeholder perspectives. While this experimental attempt yielded mixed results, the concept of 'correspondence' – supported by evocative 'thought-images' – emerges as a promising avenue for enhancing collective spatial imagination.

Keywords: imaginary; co-production; metaphor; correspondence; thought-image

Introduction: Imagining Imaginaries

Planning is fuelled by imaginaries. In his comprehensive critical introduction *The Urban Planning Imagination*, Nicholas Phelps defines this imagination as: '[...] the faculty of forming ideas, images or concepts relevant to the task of city building where these need not be entirely new but instead are the products of an historical stream and geographical diversity of ideas, images and concepts.' (Phelps, 2021:1) Considering that imagination is defined as a faculty or capacity, and images are but one of the results of this faculty at work, we are tempted to define imaginary as the mental construction of a more or less coherent set of ideas, images, concepts, narratives, fantasies, symbols, This realm of imaginative representation can vary according to the socio-geographical context and can change over time.

Imaginaries can be individual and collective. Using the terms 'image of the world' and 'universe of discourse', Kenneth Boulding describes a vivid picture of the rich and complex content of individual and shared or public imaginaries. Their multiple dimensions are coined as a complex of 'images': spatial, temporal, relational, personal, value-related, affectional or emotional. These images are modulated by scalar meta-dimensional images: certainty-uncertainty, reality-unreality, public-private, conscious-unconscious-subconscious. His 'organic theory of knowledge' (Boulding, 1977:16) opens ways to 'develop a really adequate theory of behavior' (Boulding, 1977:18). Those imaginaries are necessary for people to understand themselves and their position and role in a context. It means that imaginaries play a crucial role in human behaviour. This proposition is central to our argument: changing imaginaries implies influencing behaviours. And vice versa.

Persistent crises can be the result of ingrained behaviour. Daily, we experience the results from massively spoiling water, sealing the ground, dumping garbage, thoughtless car-driving, Stimulating alternative attitudes, knowledge, and practices can be influenced by changing existing imaginaries. Consciously or not, that is what planning processes realise when they are designed to install new conceptual frames, e.g. sustainable development, robustness, degrowth, soft mobility,

In this paper, not a world crisis is calling for alternative imaginaries, but a more modest upheaval in a former mining town. A clash about the way industrial heritage is being developed, urged the Municipal Government to appoint a project director and install a quality platform (Schreurs, 2024). From firsthand experience, as project director, I describe the context and condition of this case before embarking on a metaphorical imaginary, which was created to help change the mindsets of the principal actors and stakeholders. Next an assessment analyses the positive results, as well as some setbacks of the initiated process. Thinking ahead towards improving this situation, the concluding reflections concerning correspondence, refer back to the first part, which problematises

co-production from the perspective of imagining futures, and the power of thought-images.

1 Co-Production And The Future

1.1 The Future Caught In Imaginaries

1.1.1 A Lot Of Small Actions (Can) Make The Future

The number of challenges calling up spatial planning for transformative actions is dazzling and increasing: climate, water, biodiversity, neocolonialism, (anti)globalisation, degrowth, social injustice, migration, ... In planning literature 'crises' fight for focus. What would be the 'best' way to tackle this planetary crisis? What kind of spatial planning might help to resolve those big issues?

A picture in a street - a sentence on the wall of the UGent rectorial building - hit my imagination: 'The next big thing will be a lot of small things.' For many years, I have cultivated a sensibility to bottom-linked and bottom-up initiatives (e.g. Kuhk, et al., 2019). This explicit formulation on the façade of the university of Ghent's academic seat fueled my imagination and my hope for a potentially successful distributed and collaborative planning approach. Could 'many small things' mean: ideas and actions from many people (inhabitants, organisations, ...)? Could the sentence thus mean: ideas and actions from a large number of acting subjects can make a big difference? Then the message 'the next big thing is a lot of small things' means intrinsically the same as: our future is the result of a lot of small actions. But, how can it lead us to a better future? How to organise those many small actions as contributions to shared ambitions and aims? How to reach an immense transformative result, even without a predefined, integral plan in the 'major key' (Stengers, 2005)?

1.1.2 Expecting The Unexpected?

The future is a central issue in planning. On a regular basis, planning literature is harking back to future's uncertainty (e.g. Hillier and Healey, 2010). The character 'future' is indeed ambivalent. How drastically diverging the imaginaries about the future can be is illustrated by Jacques Derrida's witty reflection on the difference between two common French words for 'future': 'There's a future that is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir (to come), which refers to someone who comes, whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future.' (White, 2007:407) Such differences often stay unnoticed, while tacitly playing an immense role both while making plans and while discussing or implementing those plans.

1.1.3 'Back To The Future' As Imaginary

How important it is to be aware of the differences between contextual imaginaries can be illustrated by two emblematic narratives: a movie and a painting. Both implicitly value 'what comes' and the relevance of change, while they stage two different attitudes towards the future. Robert Zemeckis' movie *Back to the future* cultivates the longing for flying back from the past world of 1955 to the 'good world' of 1985. Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* captures the catastrophe of progress, inevitably driving him forward into the future. Adolescent and Angel both stand with their back to the future, however, with diametrically opposite attitudes. Marty knows the future and wants to go back, but cannot because his car needs the power of plutonium, not yet available in 1955. The Angel does not know the future but is frightened to go there because it only sees the devastation of 'progress'. For one, 'future' is a brilliant destination; for the other, 'future' is leading away from paradise.

A similar ambivalence concerning the future is looming into spatial planning. With their back to the future, planners cannot 'see' the future, but have to deal with the present, using assembled knowledge and experiences from the past. Past and present are fueling imagination. Now, imagine planning initiatives for a 'better future' when some actors around the table believe in gradual improvement (e.g. thanks to technology), while others only see further degradation (e.g. also due to technology)! How to bring them into the same imaginary? How to change their attitude?

This insight about tacit imaginaries, which are potentially contradictory, results from Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the *Angelus Novus*. This critical analysis of history's presumed linearity of progress, offers a clear example of his famous 'Denkbilder' (Richter, 2007). Interpreted as 'thought-image', Gerhard Richter not only uses

this concept as a critical lens, but also acknowledges its 'formal site for singular and unpredictable – but not arbitrary or facile – acts of conceptual creation' (Richter, 2007:18) It illustrates both the richness and the power of (tacit) imaginaries. Imaginaries help think complex issues in coherent ways, and are instruments for innovation. This touches upon the focus of this paper: how to influence or create imaginaries for the sake of a better common future?

1.2 Co-Producing A Future

1.2.1 Challenging Co-Production

During the complex quest for concepts, strategies and instruments, collaboration is a crucial factor in spatial planning. Rightfully, it is promoted by many scholars and professionals. The circulation of a multitude of terms collaboration is dealt with in literature (e.g. co-creation, co-production, collaborative, coalition, collective...) is an indication of some confusion concerning meaning, relevance, and applicability of this concept. These span from normative (e.g. Albrechts, 2012) to functional (e.g. Medina-Garcia, 2024). Multi-actor collaboration is a major condition within planning situations, not limited to analysis, research and design, but extending into operational aspects such as action programs, communication, and implementation. In this paper, such situations will be labelled as co-production.

The practice of collaboration is not obvious. 'Co-creation and co-production [...] relate to the broader challenge of combining different types of knowledge and experiences in collective learning trajectories' (Medina-Garcia, 2024:14). Actors then have to work in processes of joint problematisation and building shared meanings (De Blust, Devisch and Schreurs, 2019). Many stakeholders need to be informed, motivated and mobilised while they are preparing to invest their creativity, time, and money in realising a project. The always present diversity in values, knowledge, experience, and means does not help to bring and keep stakeholders easily on the same track. Moreover, the actual turbulences urge planners to include and integrate knowledge and goals from an increasing number of specialist fields of research and practice: climate, biodiversity, water, energy, health, food, justice... . In addition, within participatory processes, stakeholders arrive with diverging models and imaginaries of what it means 'to collaborate': some 'take part' while others 'take a share'; some work in a complementary way while others invest (care) in a common project. Different attitudes, aims, interests and means only reinforce tensions between those images. It means that collaboration is co-laborious. How to deal with those frictions? How to create coherence?

1.2.3 Metaphors As A Medium For Changing Interaction

Metaphors are an intrinsic part of our language, shape our thoughts, and influence actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Evidence from research learns e.g. that people who think about crime as a beast or as a virus defend different remedies: more police and severe penalties versus better education and more jobs (Dekeyser, 2018). Within a context where collaboration between diverse actors with divergent backgrounds is essential, metaphors can play an important role. As creative device, metaphors produce similarity. They can make actors see sameness notwithstanding difference (e.g. 'argument is war', 'ideas are objects'). Thus, metaphors integrate by making connections between unlikely ideas, aspects or objects, often in a novel and unexpected way, creating new understanding. As framing device, metaphors can serve to reframe thoughts and practices (e.g. learn to see 'argument as dance' and not 'as war'), thus offering a similar perspective to different actors in a co-ordinated way. As epistemological device, metaphors can work integrative because of the unifying meaning of their 'vehicle' or referent that conveys the comparison (e.g. 'love is a collaborative work of art'). Metaphors' emotive character (Schön, 1979) helps to engage persons into such shifts. Thus, by introducing a well-tuned mix of metaphors, the ideas of different actors can be stimulated to shift from their evident meanings towards referents with a collective or/and integrative character.

For the case analysed in the paper, three referents played a role as generative metaphors (Schön, 1979). Ship, beacon and wayfaring were metaphorically mobilised to help look in a systematic way at the 'planning ecology' at stake (Schreurs, 2024). They were introduced to respectively frame the intended change of the character of the planning process, to guide diverse projects towards coherence, and to offer a medium for the co-ordination of ideas and activities.

1.2.4 An Experimental Co-Productive Setting

This paper analyses a specific planning practice where collaboration is a structural condition. In Beringen-Mijn, a public-private-partnership (PPP) is responsible for the urban renewal of an extensive former industrial coal mining site. As project director and chair of a multi-disciplinary quality platform, I am expected to help pilot the planning process towards a high level of spatial qualities and coherence. It is my privilege to observe and assess what is happening in a real-life instance of intense collaboration among a multitude of actors.

Within each project, steps can be intentionally induced due to my responsibilities. Whenever appropriate, transformational imaginaries (e.g. 'mine-landscape') or co-creative actions (e.g. research by design) could be introduced to generate changes in ideas or practices. The resulting dynamics are at least partially motivated by such steps in the projects. Linking those effects to infused imaginaries and actions allows to learn for next (steps in) planning processes. Although this local situation is not comparable to the more global crises often referred to, I see this case and the lessons learned as a modest experimental action research concerning the power of imaginaries in strategic spatial planning.

2. How To Co-Produce In Beringen-Mijn?

2.1 A Case Of Structural Co-Production

2.1.1 A Partnership With A Vocation

One possible way of grasping the accuracy of imaginaries in a critical way, is to learn from cases. The case is 'Beringen-Mijn', a district in a mid-sized Belgian city, developed out of a huge coal mining plant. From motor of prosperity, this miner's district became a monumental burden when the mine closed down. On October 28th, 1989, status, conditions and perspectives of the historical mine site gradually tilted in terms of physical problems (large derelict land, empty impressive industrial buildings, abandoned heritage, a worn-out garden city, ...), social tensions (spatially isolated and socially divided communities of migrants and newcomers, ...), and mental disruption (loss of work and collective ethos, traumatic history, emptied signifiers, ...).

Its enormous heritage became a heavy financial burden for the central government, which had to take care of the social passive, as well as of buildings and infrastructures. Dwellings in the 'cité', the miners' garden district, were sold rather cheaply, preferentially to renting inhabitants. The empty industrial buildings and warehouses deteriorated while being 'mined' by copper thieves and urban explorers.

Typically, such burdens also have a huge potential for new developments.

2.1.2 Heritage As A Field For Development

From dynamic productive machine, the mine turned into a complex of massive heritage, which was listed in 1993 and 1994. Considerable amounts of subsidies became available for these protected buildings, but this came with an ambitious vocation. Being listed implied conserving a coherent image of a complete mining plant, enabling to demonstrate, to explain, and to experience its former role and functioning. This huge expectation was motivated by the production unit's representativity and grandeur, its age, completeness of buildings and installations, architectural and technical value, state of preservation, compactness, clarity, present complementary activities, the presence and location of two slag heaps (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, [2019]). The immense coal washing plant was the main reason for this entrusted vocation. With its four parts, it was formally and functionally the heart of the industrial complex (Figure 1, 2), and Beringen was the only place of preservation of such plant in the mining region of Limburg.

To implement this vocation, a public-private-partnership (PPP) was founded in 2009. This was formalised as a public limited company, named NV be-MINE, with the goal to restore, renovate, and repurpose the former mining site. A reconversion plan was made in which the destination of the mine site was seen as a touristic-recreational project. It had to comply with a new local legally binding plan (Bongaerts, 2000) that defined the location as a

i In this paper, I introduce the term 'mine-landscape' to denote a dual perspective: it refers to the physical landscape shaped by extractive coal mining; it also evokes a personal, subjective relationship to that space. The hyphenated form intentionally plays on the possessive pronoun 'mine', suggesting both territorial belonging and emotional or mnemonic attachment.

zone for urban development. The restoration and re-use of the plant was gradually implemented.

When the NV be-MINE asked the responsible minister to drop the heritage label for two of the four parts of the coal washing plant, the project took a dramatic turn in December 2018. The entailed compulsory public investigation provoked a gulf of national and international protest and pressure, and resulted in 1.311 notices of objections. Instead of coming to a head using legal procedures, the minister preferred to find common sense amongst the development consortium and heritage associations.



Figure 1. Painting (1957) of mine site with huge coal washing plants in the centre



Figure 2. Condition (2021) of coal washing plant

2.1.3 Problematising The Case

Looking for a way out of the conflict, the Flemish Government Architect was asked to mediate between the stakeholders. Reporting optimistic principles for a constructive consensus, he ventilated severe criticism as well of the way the PPP was managed. His report identifies a lack of coherence and co-ordination between stakeholders and their initiatives as one of the major objectionable aspects of the ongoing development on the mine site (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, [2019]). Precisely this argument convinced the Municipal Executive (board of mayor and aldermen, in Dutch: College van Burgemeester en Schepenen or CBS) of the city of Beringen to take bold measures in 2020. Enlarging and re-qualifying drastically the former 'quality chamber' (kwaliteitskamer) and installing a project director (projectregisseur) explicitly aimed at fully integrated development in co-production (CB&S, 2020a). In line with the advice of the Government Architect, success was expected from two goals. Synergy and added value had to be found within an overall long-term vision on a larger scale; coherence between projects should be steered systematically and supported by all relevant actors. It would be the project director's responsibility to guard sufficient coherence and co-ordination among all current and future projects, both content- and time-wise, while pursuing cross-pollination and societal added value (CB&S, 2020b). This decision of the Municipal Executive launched a trajectory of redirection, and the direction was clear. A vision would focus on a much broader work field than the coal washing plants and was even extended towards the complete mining site. At the same time the Executive enumerated a list of at least 15 projects that waited for co-ordination, in co-production with the many partners involved: private developers and their architects, city government and administration, provincial government and administration, Flemish Government Architect, Flemish Heritage Agency, local and regional heritage associations, organized local stakeholders, and individual inhabitants.

2.1.4 Development By Bits And Pieces

The Government Architect's evaluation quite precisely assessed the situation on the field. The ex-mining territory had been compartmentalised into lots, and the fragments were declutched under separate ownerships. About 11 ha. were split off to realise 'Houtpark', a new housing district. On newly created plots between the listed historic buildings, a private swimming pool, a restaurant, and a shopping boulevard had been constructed. Besides the existing tourist reception and small mine museum, parts of the old mine buildings had been reused for nursery classes, a climbing hall, a banquet hall, a bike shop, and offices. The former thickener of the coal-washing process had been transformed into a diving centre. The largest part of the listed buildings was still empty. However, plans

were already on the table. The main spaces would be used for an experiential museum, focusing on the 'path of the miner', to be run by the province of Limburg. The technically worst part would be partly opened up to invite trees, light and rain, and partly be transformed into a casco, to be sold piecemeal.

Ownership of the partial project on the site was already given to separate stakeholders: NV be-MINE, province of Limburg, city of Beringen, region of Flanders, social housing company, school community, private families, and investors. Only NV be-MINE had a clear development model: restore listed buildings supported by subsidies, find a new, fitting program, transmit (part of) the building to third parties, by selling or establishing a long-term right in rem (e.g. long lease). Without intervention, the demonstration of a complete and coherent coal-mining history, as the minister was expecting when listing the building, would obviously not be the result of the ongoing development.

2.2 Creating An Imaginary By Images And Metaphors

2.2.1 A Working Program Fitted For Change

From the previous section we learn that levers for easily steering the coherence between projects were already gone when the project director could start to remedy. Because of the distributed 'ownership', the situation was an amalgam of collective and individual actors, each with their 'own' goals, means and trajectories. To cope with this situation, the Municipal Executive of Beringen approved my proposal for a twofold approach: conceptual and process-oriented (CB&S, 2020b). It combined Maarten Hajer's conviction that socio-spatial transitions need a shared 'imaginary' ('denkbeeld') (Hajer, 2016), with George Brugmans' three-step approach for a 'sabbatical detour' (Brugmans, 2016). In my proposal for the working program (Schreurs, 2020), the suggestion of the Government Architect to instrumentalise the 'power of designerly research' (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, [2019]) would find a productive 'locus' in three successive workshops with the crucial stakeholders. Each workshop would deal with one of three cohesive questions. First: What do we aim at? How do we collectively look at the city-district Beringen-Mijn (including the ex-mining site)? Second: What can we aim at? How can we together articulate and discuss the desired qualities for Beringen-Mijn? Third: What will we do? How will we work conjointly while developing Beringen-Mijn?

Content-wise, the essence of each question was illuminated by supporting images. Making or choosing inspiring paintings or pictures was suggested as a guiding beacon for stakeholders' later designs. Collectively developing a 'language for quality' could eventually function as a metaphor for both understanding each other's aims and for agreeing on appropriate manners. Collectively planting and caring for a tree was foregrounded as a conceptual image for 'growing' a collaboration.

2.2.2 Becoming A Fleet

The overarching metaphor of the text was 'becoming a fleet'. The collective search for a common perspective on both the socio-physical context and the collaboration was explicitly framed within the metaphor of 'projects as ships'. Inspired by the actual, fragmented situation, I conceptualised the ongoing diverging projects as individual 'ships' with autonomous commanding officers, following a singular route towards their predefined destinations. However, to attend to coherence between these projects, captains should start thinking and acting as a collective, as a 'fleet' heading for a common destination: to realise, each for her or his part, the vocation of the ex-mine site. To reach out for that destination would demand a decisive tack, a specific twist in each ship's course. Ships' noses needed to be redirected, sometimes drastically. Imagining how wind or weight can influence the course of a ship makes us aware of the careful manoeuvre needed, but also of the energy, time and risks involved.

Since no predefined goals in terms of form and program were available, a 'beacon' for the new directions had yet to be defined collectively. And since that beacon would become defined en cour de route, a co-creative process of collective learning seemed an appropriate image to frame the future trajectories of the captains, to be defined and redefined continuously and collectively.

2.3 From A Nautical Imaginary To A Territorial Practice

2.3.1 Mine-Landscape As Common Beacon

The working program proposed to the CB&S conceptualised the quality platform as 'locus of co-production'. This platform was not only meant to be the 'place' where actors would meet to find out why and how to co-produce the different projects, but also as 'moments' of effectively co-producing a collective.

During the first meeting of the quality platform, developing shared imaginaries as 'beacons' to co-orient the 'noses' of 'ships' was presented and discussed as a success factor for co-production. As guide for qualitative development of Beringen-Mijn, the quality platform formulated a mission-and-vision statement concerning the expedient rectification of ongoing courses of the projects (Kwaliteitskamer Beringen-Mijn, 2021). In line with the Government Architect's suggestions, this text expresses enduring concerns about a mutual attuning of projects, in space and time. That mission is taken up by a vision which promotes working within interdisciplinary, integrating frameworks. The basis of their articulation is the explicit ambition to work towards sustainable development and socio-spatial qualities, but first and foremost towards a coherent mijnlandschap (mining landscape, or mine-landscape), articulated at different levels of scale. Within this perspective, open spaces, heritage and community are foregrounded as its most important facets. The focus of the vision is on links amongst, and within these facets, both on the short term (masterplan, project) and on the long term (strategy, management).

The choice for 'mine-landscape' as beacon may seem obvious, but has a fourfold motivation. First mijnlandschap is a common name in Beringen-Mijn, known and used by most stakeholders. This term does not sound far-fetched or strange, and mentally covers the territory in need of coherence. Second, 'landscape' is a concept most people can attach to easily. Everyone has an image of landscape and sees making a landscape most of the time as a positive action. Third, because of its common and positive connotations, inhabitants feel attached to the process because the term landscape – and even more: mine-landscape – makes them feel it is about 'their' habitat. Finally, because the concept is understood by most participants, but is also sufficiently plastic, landscape can work as a bridge between different individual or social imaginaries. It can be interpreted differently across social worlds, but with enough immutable content to maintain integrity. Therefore, mijnlandschap can function as a 'boundary object' (Star & Griesemer, 1989), a means of translation to help sustain coherence within the imaginaries in progress.



Figure 3. Collectively generating design ideas for Beringen-Mijn
Figure 4. Design presentation and dialogue during design week

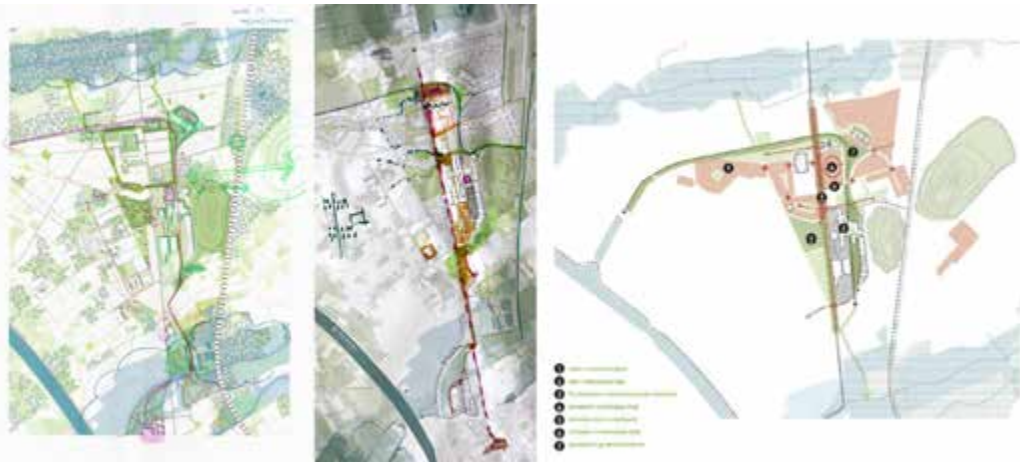


Figure 5. Strategic project interpreted by the quality platform
Figure 6. Designerly researching with the Flemish Government Architect
Figure 7. Structure sketch for Beringen-Mijn (© BUUR PoS)

2.3.2 Wayfaring Through Design-Based Workshops

An always compromising practice of priorities and agendas was responsible for a less strict working scheme than the setup of the 'sabbatical detour'. The trajectory of the projected 'tacks' involved more than three steps. Rather than rolling out a clear-cut route ahead, the pioneering search for a common definition of 'mine-landscape' turned into adventurous wayfaring. Although aims did not change, partners did fluctuate, depending on evolving dossiers, progressing insights, and personal affinities. In practice, the three thematic questions – concerning exploring aims, articulations, and actions – intertwined iteratively. This was not completely unexpected: both gradually articulating qualities more clearly and reshuffling coalitions of practice can lead to shifting ways of seeing the territory and its vocation, as well as each other's ambitions and attitudes. Nevertheless, two factors were kept constant: the middle of the table was always occupied by maps, plans, pencils and pens, and the idea of 'landscape' was never obliterated (Figures 3 and 4).

During the first 'internal workshop' of the quality platform, external experts and civil servants of the city administration prepared a new vision framework. Inspiration was found in a situation scan published by the team of the Flemish Government Architect (BUUR, 2021). This tool is offering a socio-spatial diagnosis to local governing bodies, highlighting spatial and executive strongholds and weaknesses concerning the communal territory. Stimulating a local agenda-setting of projects and policies, the scan articulates potential strategic projects. One of these projects – 'Augmenting living quality and improving the spatial structure of Beringen-Mijn' – was assessed and evaluated by the participants. Collective brainstorming produced alternative design ideas suggesting new green connectors at the scale of Beringen-Mijn. These would also strengthen cohesion between green and blue open space structures to the East and West of the central nucleus (Figure 5).

As a next step, a 'week of design and dialogue' was organised. Developers, associated designers, inhabitants, external experts, administrations, and aldermen collectively contributed by offering ideas for and comments upon the strategic project (Figure 6). Simultaneously, designerly imaginations produced a first version of what would be elaborated later into a spatial structure sketch for Beringen-Mijn. The central figure is a landscape structure of two parallel north-south axes: a functional city boulevard lined with urban services, and a recreational green connector for soft mobility. This idea was complemented by a set of seven possible actions to interconnect these axes and the surrounding cité (Figure 7).

Next, an extensive series of 'advisory design workshops' was organised, bringing together NV be-MINE, city ad-

ministrators and representatives of the quality platform. Spread over several months, this group discussed and designed innovative but feasible proposals for the use and layout of coal washing plants 1 and 3. Breaking away the worst parts of the structure should enable incorporating nature and enjoying it while growing. Although spatially invasive, this intervention was going to serve as a flag and symbol for a 're-nature' strategy, ambitiously framed as philosophy and essence of the whole redeveloped ex-mining site, and gradually applied as landscaping strategy.

In parallel, intensive 'research by design' played a decisive role in an extensive trajectory of meetings and workshops, aiming to complete the necessary plans for receiving a building permit for the new living quarter, 'Houtpark'. Starting with a declaration of intent, signed by NV be-MINE and the city of Beringen, these partners launched a steering committee, also incorporating members of the quality platform. After ten months of co-production, the result was 'Houtparkboek', an abundantly illustrated quality guideline, stimulating future designs beyond building regulations (SWECO, 2023). With its qualifying descriptions and visual references, this book gives designers and administrators tools to grasp the desired qualities of buildings and generous landscape connectors between the existing cité and the new quarter.

2.3.3 A Meshwork Of Interactions As Armature Of Co-Production

In line with favouring effective co-production, the mission-and-vision text expresses a clear intention: 'The quality platform's way of working should lead to incorporating this vision as an evident dimension of ideas and practices of crucial stakeholders and actors' (Kwaliteitskamer Beringen-Mijn, 2021; my translation). This ambition to structurally enrich the stakeholders' imaginaries was intended to be realised within a process of co-productive trajectories: during numerous conversations and dialogues, while constructing narratives about interaction, coherence and co-ordination, and during designerly research, while drawing and representing imaginative mine-landscapes.

The series of workshops already described is a good example of such trajectories. Those ran simultaneously with numerous meetings of the quality platform (hosting external experts with different backgrounds, major and aldermen, civil servants; inviting developers and designers related to the project discussed) and project-related or thematic mixed working groups. Depending on the project at stake, its character, importance, and timing, either the quality platform or ad hoc working groups (including some representatives of the quality platform) discussed intermediate proposals or engaged in more intensive dialogues with partners and stakeholders.

Gradually, the frame set during the 'week of design and dialogue' was enriched. Spatially, the structure scheme served as reference for a following series of projects on the agenda: a lightning plan for the public space on the mine site, renovation of the park surrounding the former mine director's villa, new building regulations for the garden-district mine cité, urban role of the listed former football-stadium, defining principles for the destination and development of the former water-tower, extension of the logistic park at the former coal-harbour, new policy for development and access of the southern hinge of Beringen-Mijn, destination of the restored coal-washing plant, landscape plan for Houtpark and design of the first phase of the housing-development, trajectory for a regional cycling-path, building plans for a kindergarten, renewing the school playground, ...

Analogous to the idea of 'landscape', throughout the whole process, elements were systematically situated within their context, and not given meaning without that larger picture. E.g. inspired by their original way of functioning, each coal washing plant was systematically valued in terms of complement to the three others. E.g. the relevance of building new dwellings was explained in terms of what the housing quarter will receive from, and what it will offer to the larger environment. E.g. the water tower was evaluated in terms of potential local facility, generous entrance to the park, historic demarcation, and visual signal.

All these wayfaring trajectories entangle, because – often – the same actors were meeting about many projects, in different constellations, on several occasions. Even without intersecting in conclusions or clashes, their ideas, arguments and suggestions nevertheless were influencing each other, similar to how the lines walked by pedes-

trians on a footpath develop along and with each other. Together, the bundles of narrative and designerly lines weaved a co-productive meshwork of actors, intentions and actions, into a potential armature for continuing development.

3. Evaluation And Reflections

3.1 Flourishing Development

Although turbulent at times, everyone structurally involved agrees about the positive results of four years of work. Two projects, formerly heavily criticised, were given formal permission to start implementing: the reconversion of two listed coal-washing plants and the development of a new housing quarter. Meanwhile, aspects of social and spatial sustainability improved throughout the site: re-nature became the main principle for the landscape design; stocks and infiltration of water are reinforced by new WADI's; substantial open space on the mining site is safeguarded; relationships between inhabitants and developers relaxed; collective heating is discussed and calculated for feasibility; experiments with timber frame construction are on the way to implementation; cycling and car sharing are systematically put at the agenda.

An evaluation of the process is promising. The design-and-dialogue week was emblematic of the planned approach. A co-created structure sketch shows opportunities for strengthening spatial and functional coherence between the new projects, the urban facilities and the housing district of Beringen-Mijn. Actions needed to operationalise those opportunities were identified. Moreover, designing the structure sketch staged formerly 'tacit' elements of the new 'mine-landscape': infrastructure, suburbanisation, centrality, mixed use ... and the open heath landscape where this all settled. Innovative ways of interaction between developers, the city, external experts, and inhabitants established intensive exchanges, especially during the design week, participatory dialogues, collective biking, co-visiting coal washing plants and relevant external projects. As a result, mutual understanding grew between planners, developers and inhabitants.

3.2 Flagging Imaginary

However, ambition and trust amongst the quadruple helix involved (PPP-developer, city government, social actors, external experts) gradually lost track. Looking back, several contextual reasons influenced this loss. Two key actors of the 'first hour' – the strategic manager 'environment and city development', and the director of NV be-MINE – left the scene and were replaced by less experienced and poorly networked newcomers, lacking precious contextual knowledge. As time went by, the developer gradually became more nervous about the increasing imbalance between cost and gain. Consequently economy of means burdened discussions about spatial qualities of the public space. Expenses for designers were cut, and design workshops were no longer organised.

Moreover, the option to collectively shape the beacon mijnlandschap (mine-landscape) during the wayfaring process, together with its metaphorical expression, probably led to an unthought-of flou artistique. Indeed, this option implied instrumentalising only a short description of the nautical imaginary, conveyed to the quality platform when starting, with no showing off to the public. While its facets and principles functioned as a source of inspiration during dialogues, the mission-and-vision text of the platform was never published. Probably more important was the absence of a figuration of the proclaimed beacon. The 'content' of the pursued mine-landscape was not addressed in a tangible way, other than stories. As a result, the beacon loomed up as a rather foggy silhouette. Moreover, the short narrative of ships tacking to a collective beacon might have generated a rather one-dimensional imaginary of projects with one final destination, to be reached within a limited time frame, one project at a time. The continuous and collective care, which will be needed to keep the mine-landscape in good shape, leached from the image. The time necessary for creative wayfaring, as well.

3.3 Strengthening The Landscape Of Correspondence

Regarding this situation, the motivation to hark 'back to the future' is growing. Implied questions are: How to construct a performative shared perspective on the world, that spurs a commonly supported goal-orientation and enables enduring practices? What kind of imaginary (as imagined representation of the future) can help to make the beacon 'mine-landscape' stand out of the fog?

3.3.1 Correspondence Needs A Language For Quality

Co-production is primarily social interaction, as demonstrated in the case description. Interestingly, Tim Ingold spells out two modalities of relationship among acting subjects: 'between' and 'in-between' (Ingold, 2015). For instance, communicating by letters, people bridge the distance in space and time between them by informing each other about matters of interest. These letters are written with an intention. But in sending, waiting for an answer, reading, answering, expecting, ... respondents also generate a flow of in-betweenness. 'Thus while letters may go back and forth, the correspondence has no starting point or end point. It simply carries on.' (Ingold, 2013:105) And, importantly, this 'midstream' of correspondence, this movement is sentient. 'To read a letter is not just to read about one's respondent, but to read with him or her.' (ibidem) Writing and answering embody a flow of attention.

Ingold frames continually answering to one another as a 'correspondence of lines'. According to him, this concept is relevant for many areas of human relationships, such as kinship, economy, religion and politics (Ingold, 2015). I see no reason to exclude spatial planning. To get an implementation-oriented design made, authors with diverse disciplinary backgrounds need to create occasions to communicate, with the intention to exchange ideas, test them designerly, critically discuss proposals, and translate them into decisions. In Beringen-Mijn, many such connecting moments were established between actors during every project. Those interactions served the articulation of matters of interest: functional intentions such as making timelines or setting agendas; or qualitative intentions such as goal-setting, discussing referential projects or enriching successive sketches.

The importance of an attentional 'ecology of correspondence' (Ingold, 2015:155) is, however, highly undervalued, though crucial for long-term success. City development is more than delivering enrolled projects. Upcoming projects to anchor and strengthen still vulnerable societal aims, need to be welcomed. Management and enduring care are necessary to keep results in good shape. Actions of inhabitants and builders should capture the guiding imaginary, and carry this on. To ensure this ongoing correspondence continuity, a language to articulate matters of concern becomes a crucial condition. Let's call it a 'language for quality'. Mastering and continually enriching such an in-betweening language will be necessary to capture and convey crucial interpersonal aspects of affect, such as building trust.

3.3.2 Correspondence Needs Translation

Considering some hindrances of the co-production in Beringen-Mijn (different actors depending on projects, personal changes, more projects to go, ...), it seems important to strengthen the long-term dynamic of correspondence.

Co-producing a beacon was expected from wayfaring through a collective mental landscape. During the numerous meetings, words and images of many participants were reassembled by dialogue and design along imaginative lines of thought. Often, those were open ideas and reflections, not necessarily meeting in a final design. Usually, they developed along and with each other, as entwining lines, sometimes interweaving, sometimes knotting. Together, they form a meshwork of mental paths, as memory of collective learning. This imaginative memory was, however, never grounded in a synthetic representation, e.g. an inspiring landscape design.

Within the quality platform, the idea is looming that this memory for the future might be backed up by a contextual thought-image. To make developing lines of thought of engaged actors enduringly tally with the overall vocation of a coherent mine-landscape, a 'transducer' (Ingold, 2013) will be useful. Such representation could help to translate the flow of ideas about 'mine-landscape' from the register of actors' ideas (concepts, values, engagements, interests, ...) to the register of actions (designing, qualifying, calculating, constructing, ...). Gradually, the concept for such a thought-image is being developed already by synthesising and enriching existing maps, projects and images of the mine-landscape. As a start-up, a first attempt was included in the evaluation report (Schreurs, 2024b). A collage of projects-in-the-making on the map of actual Beringen-Mijn hints at a future-to-be-made of the evolving mine-landscape: a 'landscape of landscapes' (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Future Beringen-Mijn: a landscape of landscapes (collage of 3 plans)

Figure 9. Eidetic thought-image 'seeing-being-caring' (© Jan Schreurs)

Prospect

Co-producing an open, more artistic visual representation could probably be a well-functioning and richer planning method (Phelps, 2021) to seduce or persuade actors into an engaging correspondence. Inspired by two examples from Richter (2007) – Benjamin's staging of the Angelus Novus, and the structure of Baroque emblems – the format of a three-fold thought-image seems promising.

First, the name mijnlandschap (mine-landscape) can be transformed into a conceptual 'motto' by 'estranging' the word into mijn|land|schap. In Dutch, this decomposition evokes both mine-land-scape and my-land-scape. Each component carries layered meanings: mijn (mine) refers to personal perception and appropriation, land (land) to the geological and biophysical characteristics of a place, and schap (scape) to the collective ownership and care of a shared environment. This linguistic and conceptual shift opens up the notion of landscape: from primarily optical to haptic, from individual to collective, and from static to dynamic.

Second, a triadic lens may help to articulate this broadened perspective in three dimensions: zien & zijn & zorgen (seeing & being & caring). An interpretive commentary or 'epigram' can highlight the interplay of engaging personal experiencing, social living and timely caring. These dimensions capture the mine-landscape as 'the sum total of actions that people and groups undertake to build and shape their environment' (Oles, 2014:22).

Finally, a layered 'icon' can function as an 'eidetic' image (Corner, 2014), expressing those dimensions in terms of place, meaning and use (Figure 9). As an open collage, with changeable pictures, this is an artistic/poetic invitation to 'a way of thinking that is neither instrumental nor representational but simultaneously both' (Corner, 2014:250).

This emblem or thought-image for the mine-landscape, is a potential canvas for a 'language for quality'. The combination of a vocation (motto), a grammar (epigram) and a vocabulary (icon) allows stakeholders to explore the landscape of common concerns. By collaboratively layering (representations of) place, meaning and use, they can discuss how the mine-landscape will not only be materially transformed but also personally and culturally inhabited.

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