Integrating Metaphors for a Planning Ecology. Evaluating the Work of a Local Quality Platform

Jan Schreurs
Affiliation: KU Leuven, Belgium
Email: jan.schreurs@kuleuven.be

Biographical Note

Jan Schreurs is Emeritus professor at the Department of Architecture, University of Leuven (KU Leuven). He graduated as engineer architect, urban designer and spatial planner. His research interests are grounded in the will to enhance socio-spatial qualities of man-made environments. His PhD focused on the role of visual metaphors in creative design practices. His research has always been interwoven with practice: as designer, as director of Physical Planning at KU Leuven, as expert in numerous public commissions. As member of the Management Team Urban Policy (*Regieteam Stedenbeleid*) in Flanders, he is actively involved in managing 'concept studies'. He is appointed as external project director by the city of Beringen and is chairing the quality platform.
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Abstract

Multi-actor collaboration is a major condition within planning situations which include not only analysis, research and design, but also action programs, communication, and implementation. For the sake of integration, five metaphors are introduced to frame a major change in an ongoing planning process, to guide projects towards coherence, and to offer a medium for coordination. The installation of a quality platform offered opportunities for transdisciplinary action research. Through the lens of a *planning ecology* the paper focusses on the fabric and dynamics of correspondence between contextualized planning actors.
After introducing theme, approach and method, the paper elaborates on the notion of 'planning ecology', then problematises the case Beringen-Mijn, next reflects on findings concerning metaphors mobilized for and of collaboration. Conclusions reflect on the findings and evaluate the relevance of 'planning ecology' as approach.

Keywords
collaboration, metaphor, planning ecology, correspondence

1 Introduction

1.1 Collaboration As Challenge

Reflecting on means and ways of managing local change must investigate 'collaboration'. Multi-actor collaboration is a major condition within planning situations which include not only analysis, research and design, but also operational aspects such as action programs, communication, and implementation. Actors have to work in processes of joint problematization and building shared meanings (De Blust, Devisch and Schreurs, 2019). 'Co-creation and co-production also relate to the broader challenge of combining different types of knowledge and experiences in collective learning trajectories' (Medina-Garcia, 2024, p.14). Indeed, many stakeholders need to be informed, motivated and mobilised before they are prepared to invest their creativity, time, money… in realising a project. Their diversity in terms of values, knowledge, resources, means, experience, … does not help to bring stakeholders easily on the same track. Moreover, actual (global) 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 images of what it means 'to collaborate': To be part or to take part? To work in a complementary way? To invest (care) in a common project? Different attitudes, aims, interests and (knowledge of) means only reinforce tensions between those images.
Collaboration is co-laborious. Nevertheless, during the complex quest for concepts, strategies and instruments, collaboration is a crucial factor. Rightfully, it is promoted by many scholars and professionals (Albrechts, 2012). But the practice of collaboration is not obvious. The circulation of a multitude of terms collaboration is dealt with in literature (co-creation, co-production, collaborative, coalition, collective….) is an indication of some confusion concerning meaning, relevance, and applicability of this concept.

1.2 Collaboration Is Interaction

Let's explore a promising image of (and for) collaboration. Since a bunch of threatening environmental and social issues provokes the need to plan more effectively, we need to understand better the interactions within and between biophysical and human ecosystems. Many ideas, proposals, reflections, and discussions about making a better – more healthy, resilient, robust, enduring, sustainable, just – environment, appeal to 'ecology' (cfr. References for e.g.). Advocating that 'urban, design and ecological thinking emerge as important disciplinary threads that need to be intertwined' (McGarth, 2013, p.9), clearly indicates both the importance of ecology and the intensity of the interaction needed.
In planning, even the best ideas (concepts, scenarios, designs…) need to be 'processed' within intricate constellations of many, diverse actors. To process not only means to innovate and articulate, but also to exchange, combine, negotiate and deliberate, and thus always involves qualified interactions with others. Understanding better the logics and mechanisms behind actors' (ex)changing interactions can help to get good ideas and concepts implemented. Within the available research, not much attention has yet been paid to the fabric and dynamics of interactions between contextualized planning actors, in other words, to what I will call a 'planning ecology'.
Convinced that local change is heavily depending on productive collaboration, central questions are thus:

- How can we stimulate diverging lines of attitude, thought and action to converge during collaborative planning processes?
- (How) can the notion of *planning ecology* contribute to generate insights into collaborative dynamics?

1.3 Metaphor As Art Of Integration

As a hypothesis, answers to these questions can be generated by focussing on metaphors, for three reasons. As creative device, metaphors create similarity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). They make us 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 coordinated way. As epistemological device, metaphors can be integrative because of the unifying character of their 'vehicle' or referent that conveys the comparison (e.g. 'love is a collaborative work of art').
For the case analysed in the paper, generative metaphors (Schön, 1979) will help to look in a systematic way to the planning ecology at stake. Five referents will be metaphorically mobilised. *Learning ecology* and *meshwork* generate perspectives to analyse the case. *Ship*, *beacon* and *wayfaring* generate frames which played a role within the planning ecology of the case. These are introduced to respectively frame the intended change of the planning process, to guide diverse projects towards coherence, and to offer a medium for coordination of ideas and activities.

1.4 Participant Observation As Action Research

Looking for answers to the central questions, a case is analysed. In a medium Belgian town, Beringen, a public-private-partnership (PPP) was founded to restore, renovate, and repurpose

a former mining site. Looking for a 'director of projects', the local government asked me to take the responsibility to mediate between private developers, city government and administration, Flemish Government Architect, heritage associations and inhabitants. Moreover, as chair of a multi-disciplinary quality platform (with external experts representing the disciplines industrial heritage, architecture, urban design, landscape design, strategic planning, mobility, participation, local governance), which helps to mediate the planning process in terms of steering for coherence, I'm sitting in the first row to observe and assess what is going on in a real-life instance of collaboration.
This situation offers opportunities for transdisciplinary action research. Because of the setting – PPP and quality platform – every project within the case develops according to the string: action-observation-evaluation-reflection-action… Within each (part of a) project, steps can be intentionally induced because of my tasks and responsibilities. Whenever appropriate, transformational imaginary (e.g. 'mine-landscape') or co-creative actions (e.g. research by design) could be introduced to generate change of ideas or practices. 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.
This action research is partially self-induced within the case: learning by doing and understanding in practice. Therefor an objectifying counterpart was created by an initiative of self-evaluation by the quality platform. Several drafts and successive discussions iteratively evolved into an informal evaluation document. After completion, this was discussed with key stakeholders (mayor of Beringen, director of development company NV be-MINE, director of investment vehicle LRM, municipal strategic manager of environment & city development, and local coordinator inclusivity) to learn from their experiences with the quality platform. This assessment started after two and a half years and was finished within half a year. The paper firmly builds on that evaluation, which is enriched by a metaphor-based analytical frame of reference.
The paper first elaborates on the notion of 'planning ecology', then problematises the main lines of the ongoing case, next reflects on findings concerning metaphors mobilized *for* and *of* collaboration. Conclusions reflect on the findings and evaluate the relevance of *planning ecology* as approach.

2. A Lens On Planning Ecology

While turning the centennial page, 'ecology' became a dominant discursive term within man-environment-studies. One could argue that 'ecology' replaced 'sustainability' as a leading idea behind arguments favouring much needed transitions (Waldheim, 2016). In search for complex interventions, science, politics, activism, and professional disciplines such as urban design and planning, seemed to find common ground in 'ecology' (Niemelä, 1999).
Without going into detail, three aspects of mobilising ecology in this case-study should be touched upon. To avoid misunderstandings, it makes sense to explicitly differentiate the vested term *ecological planning* from *planning ecology*. Furthermore, in preparation of the case discussed, a central concern needs to be highlighted: bringing coherence between projects, and productive coordination between stakeholders. Finally, perspectives on improving coherence and coordination are created by generative metaphors that serve interaction and integration.

2.1 Ecology As Logic Of Interactions

Ecology is no longer solely interpreted in the original, biology-focused way as 'the study of the complex relations between organisms and their environment' (Lister, 2010, p.536). In a

certain way, ‘ecology’ has even become an empty signifier because the term has been overdetermined. Niemelä (1999) identifies at least four different meanings of ‘ecology’. As science, ecology investigates interactions within nature's ‘economy' (flows of matter and energy or distribution and diversity of organisms). As nature, ecology has become the resource base for humans and an object of science. As movement, ecology refers to ‘green’ political attitudes and activities focusing on ecological and environmental issues. As concept, ecology views human existence in relation to the science ecology (e.g. ‘human ecology‘). Consequently, a clear meaning of the term ‘ecology’ is lacking. Using the term ecology does not hint in an evident way towards intentions, expected roles, nor its agency. Thus, a focus is needed.
As a key-concept within the biological sciences, ‘ecology’ has given impetus to the broader science of living systems. Relationships between humans and their various environments – natural and constructed – became a plausible subject. With ‘urban ecological design’ in mind, Palazzo and Steiner include human species, noting: ‘Ecology involves the relationships of all organisms, including humans, to one another and to their environments’ (Palazzo & Steiner, 2011, p.18). As noted by Lister (2010), ecology can be even broader ‘used in the vernacular plural to describe human relationships with everything from urbanism, culture, and religion, to food, fear, and pizza’ (Lister, 2010, p.536). For our purposes, ecology will be primarily used as metaphor or as model for social and conceptual interactions.

2.2 Planning Ecology And Ecological Planning

Evidently, as disciplines with a focus on the environment, urban design and spatial planning are at the front of harvesting concepts on the ‘ecology’ field. The term ecology has pervaded academic literature in the field of urban and landscape design and planning. Lister notes e.g. ‘Ecology is now central to the vocabulary and language of the contemporary landscape.’ (Lister, 2010, p.536; cfr. also References) As Waldheim notes, ‘ecological planning’ is a ‘long-standing tradition of planning the city through ecological knowledge’ (Waldheim, 2016, p.6), and stands for ‘environmentally and ecologically informed planning practices’ (Waldheim, 2016, p.8). According to Palazzo and Steiner:

> ‘Ecological planning may be defined as the use of biophysical and sociocultural information to suggest opportunities and constraints for decision making about the use of the landscape’ (Palazzo and Steiner, 2011, p.18)

A similar concern to combine environmental and sociocultural knowledge can be found within ‘ecological urbanism’ that develops ‘the capacity to incorporate and accommodate the inherent conflictual conditions between ecology and urbanism’ (Mostafavi, 2010, p.17), by developing frameworks ‘through the conjoining of ecology and urbanism’ (Mostafavi, 2010, p.13). *Ecological planning* can be defined as a projective culture, focusing on interactions among living species and between living species and their environment, combining environmental and design knowledge.

Looking for *planning ecology* instead, literature is sparse. According to Browne and Keil, ‘[p]lanning ecology is understood as an exercise in planning democratic participation.’ (Browne and Keil, 2000, p.159) This definition is broad and vague. Also their ambition to ‘yield a set of sharp tools to understand urban environmental politics in Los Angeles‘ (Ibidem) shows their focus on (political) environmental issues, which makes the concept too small and sharp for our purpose. Focussing on ecology to help understand conditions and ways of decision making within urban design and planning processes, seems like studying an

ecology of knowledge. No wonder that Star's definition of 'ecologies of knowledge' comes close to what I have in mind:

> Ecologies of knowledge […] means trying to understand the systemic properties of [planning] by analogy with an ecosystem, and equally important, all the components that constitute the system. This is not a functional (or functionalist) approach, with a closed-system organic metaphor at its core. As Sal Restivo (1988) notes in his description of science as a social problem, we want to approach [planning] as a set of linked interdependencies inseparable from "personal troubles, public issues and social change agendas. (Star, 1995, p.14; [planning] = my intervention)

Since science as well as planning thrive on knowledge, it is not surprising that replacing 'science' by 'planning' in this quote, simulates rather accurately my imaginary of the term 'planning ecology'. Interestingly, public, social, but also personal issues enter such an ecology. This offers room for an approach which considers persons in complex situations. I stick to the term 'planning ecology' however, because the singular focus on knowledge would distract from the intense interactions within and between several ecological registers: environmental processes, social relations, and human subjectivity (cfr. Guattari, 2000; Lister, 2010; McGrath, 2013), within spatial, social, and temporal contexts. Thus *planning ecology* further refers to (interactions between) multiple ecological processes between diverse actors within a specific, multidimensional planning context. Different from *ecological planning*, *planning ecology* would rather invite a research culture focusing on how 'ecological logics' (Ellin, 2013, pp.61-63), and systemic dynamics, both of 'natural' and human ecosystems, play a role within projective cultures, such as urban and landscape design and planning.

2.3 Integrating Metaphors For A Quality Platform

As an analytical frame, this investigation uses a composite lens to describe, analyse and asses the *planning ecology* in a case. This lens is composed of metaphors, because metaphors make us see, albeit in a certain way (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Ecology is the basic metaphor. Looking at a planning process as an ecology makes us see only part of it. Because ecology is all about interaction, this lens will make us primarily look for relations. This will help to focus on major challenges of the case study: collaboration of people and coordination of projects. To see different aspects of that planning ecology, the lens can be polished into several facets. These facets offer different perspectives, which might help to articulate a planning ecology more precisely. For the case study, two perspectives are used: 'reading' the context and 'writing' interventions.
The reading perspective, in section 3, will explain the case Beringen-Mijn in an essential problematisation. To reveal different perspectives on coherence and coordination, *learning ecology* is mobilised as main metaphor, and *meshwork* as subordinate one. These metaphors are mobilised *for* the case, not *in* the case. They are part of my theoretical framework, and thus available before the analysis.
The writing perspective, in section 4, recalls three main attempts to stimulate coherence and coordination *in* the case Beringen-Mijn. According to the project director and the quality platform, three metaphors frame respectively: the favourable way of working, (*projects are a fleet*), the goal every project should reach for (*mine-landscape is a beacon*), and ways to find common ground for coordination and coherence (*designing is wayfaring*).

2.3.1 Learning Ecology

In this reconstruction and assessment of a planning case, ecology is evidently the driving metaphor. Eager to better understand how planning works, we look at the situation as (if it is) an ecological system. This is similar to Lynch, who describes a neighbourhood as 'local system of social groups, behaviour, mental images, and physical form' (Lynch, 1981, p.330). His reflections on how to make 'Good City Form' with these components, rely on the view of a city as an 'ecosystem of human groups', or as a 'learning ecology' (Lynch, 1981, pp.328,115). Indeed, 'cities are the product of beings who can learn' (Lynch, 1981, p.97). Thus, they can learn to care for continuity and connection as basic conditions for a qualitative learning ecology:

> So that settlement is good which enhances the continuity of a culture and the survival of its people, increases a sense of connection in time and space, and permits or spurs individual growth: development, within continuity, via openness and connection. (Lynch, 1981, pp.116-117)

Being open to development, a good city is an 'evolving "learning ecology"', richly characterised by Lynch:

> To the familiar ecosystem characteristics of diversity, interdependence, context, history, feedback, dynamic stability, and cyclic processing, we must add such features as values, culture, consciousness, progressive (or regressive) change, invention, the ability to learn, and the connection of inner experience and outer action. (Lynch, 1981, pp.115–116)

2.3.2 Lines And Meshwork

If 'change, invention, the ability to learn' are characteristic for a learning ecology, this must be a living ecology. But what does it mean 'to live'? One of L's returning themes develops 'the idea of life as lived along lines, or wayfaring' (Ingold, 2011, p.xii). To give this a more concrete, and collective dimension, his key concept is 'meshwork, understood as a texture of interwoven threads' (Ibidem). This concept replaces the strongly distributed idea of network of connected points. In the 'web of life' (Ingold, 2011, p.63), this 'meshwork of wayfaring, […] the lines of the meshwork are not connectors. They are the paths along which life is lived.' (Ingold, 2011, p.151)

> Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot. (Ingold, 2011, p.148)

It is easy to see an ecology in this web of life. But how then, do inhabitants learn in that learning ecology? Learning involves exchange of knowledge. Misguided by the famous 'conduit' metaphor, we take it for granted that ideas are objects (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which can be transferred as a product from one person to another. But true learning needs learning *with* and *from* (Ingold, 2013, p.2). Knowing, and broader, learning and being cannot be separated. Knowing 'belongs, at the heart of being' (Ingold, 2013, p.6). Since life develop along lines, so does learning. We take it that an ecology of learning is developing along interacting lines, with others on entwining trails, meeting into a meshwork of relational interactions.

2.3.3 Correspondence

Thus, as a metaphor, *learning ecology* highlights complex planning processes as the weaving together of storylines about better environments, from engaging actors, enacting ideas, programs, and values into collective practices of correspondence. From that perspective, *planning ecology* turns out to be the generation, transformation and survival of knowledge, actions, and attitudes of all relevant stakeholders. In the words of Ingold, it is 'an ecology of correspondence' (Ingold, 2015, p.155)

3. Problematising A Case: Beringen-Mijn

One way of grasping the accuracy of 'collaboration' in a critical way, is to learn from cases. Since collaboration is a practice as well as a principle, valuable lessons can be learned from dialogues between facts and frames. Therefore, the paper looks at a specific PPP planning practice, where collaboration is a structural condition, reflecting on ongoing practices developed during several years. This case is 'Beringen-Mijn', a district in a moderate Belgian city, developed out of a huge coal mining plant. From motor of prosperity, this miner's district became a monumental burden 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, …). Typically, such burdens also have a huge potential for new developments. To capitalize on this potential, a specific multifaceted planning approach has been introduced by the city government. Typical for this approach, the idea of integration steers the heart, head, and hand of the stakeholders.

3.1 A (Re-)quest For Coherence And Coordination

Desperately seeking someone to interrelate and coordinate ongoing and upcoming interventions in the historically important former mine site, was probably the reason why I received an email form the administration of Beringen, in august 2020. Would I be available for co-operation with the city government of Beringen, a town of 50.000 inhabitants, with an enormous, valuable mine-heritage? Three weeks later, after a site-visit, together with the mayor and the strategic manager city development, my role as 'director of projects' was outlined, and the installation of an ambitious 'quality platform' ('*kwaliteitskamer'*) was prepared. Both decisions were formalized in October.
These decisions of the Municipal Executive (Board of Mayor & Aldermen; in Dutch: *College Burgemeester & Schepenen*, or *CB&S*) had a context. As a result of a tumultuous trajectory, the development of one of Europe's most important mine sites had to prepare for a drastic turn. Now, three and a half years later, my experiences offer much to reflect upon how to approach a strong change in regime. Essentially, development had to shift from fragmentation to coherence, and from autonomy to coordination.

3.2 Coal Washing Plant As Stumbling Stone

On October 28th, 1989, status, conditions and perspectives of the historical mine site tilted. Its enormous heritage became a heavy financial burden in the pockets of the central government, who had to take care for the social passive, and for buildings and infrastructures. Dwellings in the 'cité', the miner's 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. From dynamic productive machine, the mine turned into a complex of massive buildings, listed in 1993 and 1994. Considerable amounts of subsidies became available for this protected heritage, but this came with an ambitious vocation. Indeed, from the seven coalmines in the Flemish Campine region, Beringen was selected as the only lasting complete testimony of former grandeur, technical functioning, and socio-spatial organization. Being listed as a heritage implied conserving a coherent image of a complete mine 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, age, completeness of buildings and installations, architectural and technical value of interventions, state of preservation, compactness, clarity, present complementary activities, the presence and location of two slag heaps (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, s.d. [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), and Beringen was the only place of preservation.

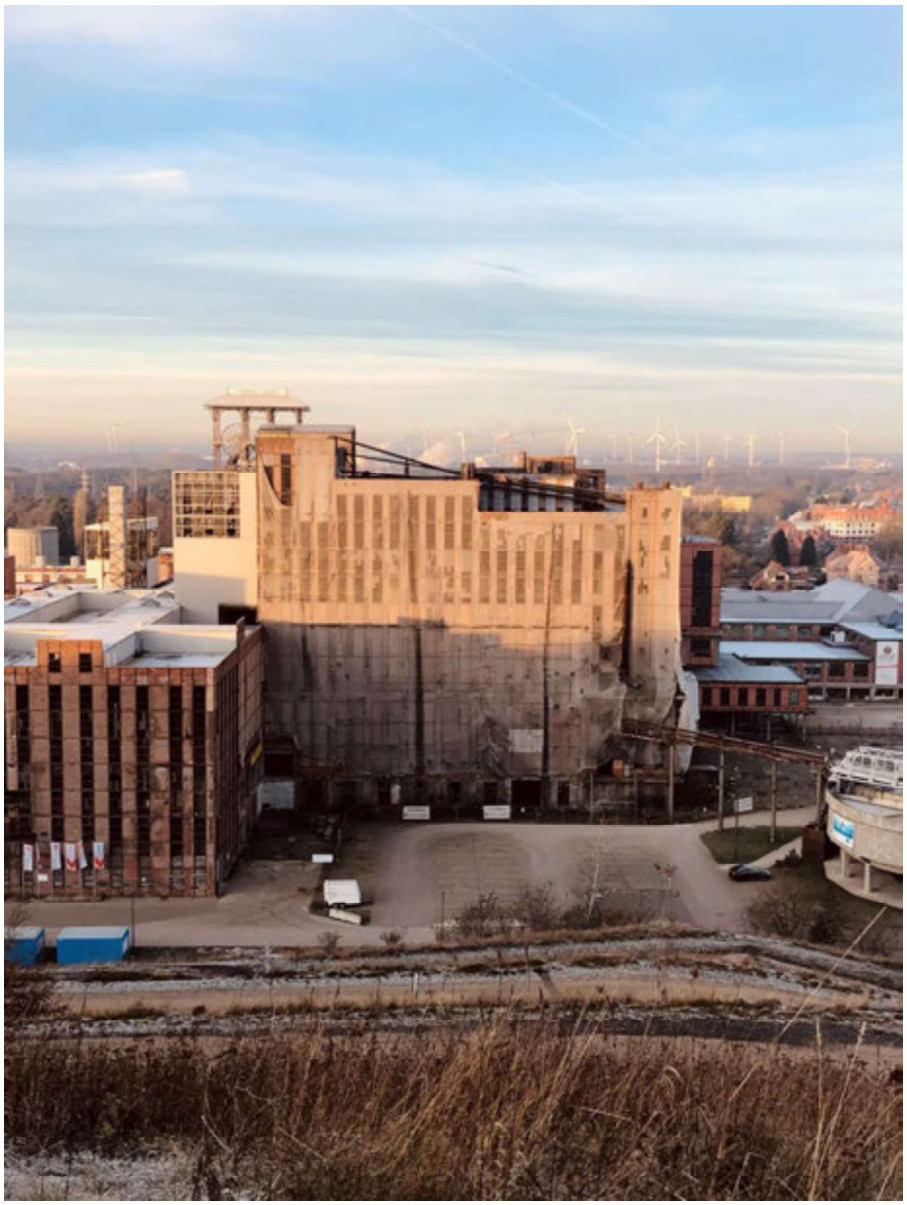

Figure 1. Part of mine site with huge coal washing plants

To implement this vocation, a reconversion plan was made by a PPP, formalised as a public limited company, named NV be-MINE. From then on, the vocation of the mine site was labelled as a touristic-recreational project. It had to comply with a local legally binding plan (Bongaerts, 2000) that defined the location as zone for urban development. The restauration

and re-use of the plant was gradual implemented. When the PPP 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. According to the developer, lifting the conservation status was necessary because the combination of lamentable physical conditions and complicated spatial situations made reconstruction not affordable. 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.

3.3 Coal Washing Plants As Pars Pro Toto

To find a way out, in May 2019 Minister Geert Bourgeois asked the Flemish Government Architect, Leo Van Broeck, to play a mediating role in this open conflict. He was asked to guide a participatory trajectory with all relevant stakeholders, trying to find consensus. Bilateral and collective discussions ended up in a hopeful report (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, s.d. [2019]). Van Broeck perceived common support for a scenario of principles. Further designerly research and stabily studies would be needed to find out if that consensus would withstand.
Together with this optimism, the Flemish Government Architect ventilated severe critique on the way the PPP was managed. His report assessed lack of coherence and of coordination between the stakeholders and their initiatives as one of the major objectionable matters of the ongoing development on the mining site (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, s.d. [2019]). Precisely this argument convinced the Municipal Executive of the city of Beringen to take bold measures. Enlarging and qualifying drastically the former '*kwaliteitskamer'* (quality chamber) and installing a '*projectregisseur'* (project director) explicitly aimed at fully integrated development in coproduction (CB&S, 2020a). In line with the advice of the Government Architect, success should be built upon two pillars. Synergy and added value should be found within an overall long-term vision on a larger scale. Coherence between projects should be steered on a systematic base by an overall vision and supported by all relevant actors. It would be the project director's responsibility to guard sufficient coherence among all current and future projects, both content- and timewise, while pursuing cross-pollination and societal added value (CB&S, 2020b). By this decision of the Municipal Executive, a trajectory of redirection was launched, and the direction was clear. A long-term vision for the larger scale focussed on a much broader work field than the coal washing plants and was extended towards the complete mining site. Simultaneously the Executive enumerated a list of at least 15 projects that waited for coordination. The Government Architect's plea for coherence and coordination did not fall on a cold stone.

3.4 The Ex-mining Territory Fragmented

The Government Architect's evaluation quite precisely assessed the situation on the field. The ex-mining territory had been compartmentalised into lots, while the fragments were declutched under separate ownerships. About 11 ha. were split off to realise 'Houtpark', serving a new housing district for approximately 600 houses, apartments, and service flats. On plots around 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 to invite trees, light and rain ('re-NATURE'), and partly turned into a casco to be sold piece by piece. Depending on the partial project on the site, 'ownership' was already given to different stakeholders: NV be-MINE, province of Limburg, city of Beringen, region of Flanders, social housing company, school community, private families, 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). Despite all those realisations and plans, the PPP expected to be confronted with a large unused (and probably unusable) surface in the coal washing plants at the end of the development term. Without doubt this would become a burden for a yet-to-be-created management structure. Without intervention, the demonstration of a complete and coherent coal-mining history, as the minster was expecting when listing the building, would not be the obvious result of the ongoing development.

4. Diving Into A Planning Ecology

4.1 Projects As Ships

From section 3.4 we learn that levers for easily steering on the coherence of all projects, were already gone when the project director could start to remedy. Because of the distributed 'ownership', the situation was an amalgam of actors, each with 'own' goals, means and trajectories. To cope with this situation, I suggested a twofold approach to the Municipal Executive: conceptual and process oriented. It combined Hajer's conviction that socio-spatial transitions need a shared 'imagery' (Hajer, 2016), with Bruggemans' three-step approach for a 'sabbatical detour' (Brugmans, 2016). Therefore, I conceptualised the diverging projects as individual *ships*, with autonomous commanding officers. These should instead think and act as a *fleet*, heading for a common destination: to realise the vocation of the ex-mine site, each for his part. To reach out for the same *beacon*, would demand a decisive 'turn', a specific twist in each ship's trail. The suggestion of the Government Architect to instrumentalise the 'power of designerly research', (Team Vlaams Bouwmeester, s.d. [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 look at the city-district Beringen-Mijn (including the ex-mining site)? Second: What can we aim at? How can we together discuss and articulate the qualities aimed at for Beringen-Mijn? Third: What will we do? How will we work together, while developing Beringen-Mijn? This proposal was approved as a working program by the Municipal Executive (CB&S, 2020b).

4.2 Mine-landscape As Beacon

At the first meeting of the quality platform, developing shared imaginaries as 'beacons' to co-orient the 'noses' of 'ships' was presented and discussed as success factors for coproduction. As guide for a qualitative development of Beringen-Mijn, the quality platform formulated a mission-and-vision statement concerning the expedient rectification of ongoing trails of the *ships*. 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 to work 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* (mine-landscape), articulated at different levels of scale. Open spaces, heritage and community are seen as its most important facets. The focus is on links between and within these facets, both on short term (masterplan, project) and on long term (strategy, management). The text also formulates an unambiguous intention: 'The quality platform's way of working should lead to incorporating its vision as an evident dimension of ideas and practices of crucial stakeholders and actors' (Kwaliteitskamer Beringen-Mijn, 2021). This ambition to share ideas was actualised by many long conversations and dialogues, while constructing stories about interaction, coherence and coordination, and by designerly research, while drawing and representing imaginative mine-landscapes. Analogous to the idea of *landscape*, elements were systematically situated within their context, and not given meaning without that larger picture. E.g. as a result, one of the coal washing plants was systematically valued as a complement to the three others. And 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 lager environment.

4.3 Design As (Co-creative) Wayfaring

An always uncompromising practice of priorities and agendas was responsible for a less strict scheme than the 'sabbatical detour' had in mind. The trajectory of the projected 'turn' involved more than three steps. Although aims did not really change, partners did fluctuate, depending on evolving dossiers, progressing insights, and personal affinities. In practice, the three thematic questions (aims, articulations and actions) intertwined, functioning in an iterative way, thus in-betweening for correspondence. This was not unexpected: gradually formulating qualities more clearly, and reshuffling coalitions of practice, can lead to different 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 and plans, pencils and pens, while the landscape was never obliterated.

During the first, internal workshop, the quality platform prepared a vision framework. Inspiration was found in a situation scan prepared by the team of the Government Architect (BUUR, 2021). This is a tool offering a socio-spatial diagnostic to local governing bodies, highlighting spatial and executive strongholds and weaknesses about the communal territory. Stimulating a local agenda-setting of projects and policies, the scan articulates potential strategic projects. The most appropriate of these projects - *augmenting living quality and improving the spatial structure of Beringen-Mijn* - was assessed and evaluated. Collective brainstorming produced alternative design ideas suggesting new green connectors at the scale of Beringen-Mijn, which would also strengthen cohesion between green and blue structures to the East and West of the central nucleus. (Figure 2)

As a next step, a week of design and dialogue was organized. Developers, associated designers, inhabitants, external experts, administrations, and aldermen collectively contributed by offering ideas for and comments upon the strategic project. (Figure 3) Simultaneously *designerly imaginations* produced a first version of what would be elaborated later into a spatial structure sketch for Beringen-Mijn. The central landscape structure contains two parallel north-south axes: a functional urban boulevard with services, and a recreational green connector for soft mobility. This idea was complemented by a set of possible actions to interconnect these axes and the surrounding cité (Figure 4).

Figure 2. Quality Platform collectively generating ideas for Beringen-Mijn
Figure 3. Design presentation and dialogue during design week

Figure 4. Structure sketch for Beringen-Mijn (© BUUR PoS)

Next, a series of advisory *design workshops* was organized, bringing together NV be-MINE, city administrators and representatives of the quality platform. Spread over several months, this group developed innovative but feasible proposals for use and lay-out of coal washing plants number 1 and 3. Breaking away the worst parts of the structure should enable to incorporate nature, enjoying it while growing. Although invasive, this intervention would serve later as flag and symbol for a 're-nature' strategy, ambitiously framed as philosophy and essence of the whole redeveloped ex-mining site.
Finally, intensive *research by design* played a decisive role in an intensive program of meetings and workshops, aiming to complete the necessary plan for receiving a permission to develop 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 coproduction, the result was 'Houtparkboek', a well-illustrated quality-guideline. With its qualifying descriptions and visual references, this book gives designers and administrators tools to grasp wanted qualities of buildings and generous landscape connectors between the existing cité and the new quarter.
Although turbulent at times, the results of the 3-year process show progress. Two projects, formerly heavily criticised, the reconversion of two listed coal-washing plants and developing a new living quarter, were given formal permission to start implementing. According to the quality platform, aspects of social and spatial sustainability improved substantially. The design-and-dialogue week was emblematic. A co-produced structure sketch shows opportunities for strengthening spatial and functional coherence between new projects and the district of Beringen-Mijn. Actions needed to operationalise those opportunities were identified. Moreover, designing the structure sketch demonstrated dimensions of the new mine-landscape: industry, infrastructure, city, suburbanisation, heritage, centrality… and the open heath landscape were all this settled. Innovative ways of interacting between developers, city, inhabitants, external experts, and the quality platform, established intensive coproduction: a design week, collective biking, visiting coal washing plants and relevant projects, designing with the Government Architect. Words and images of many participants were carried along entwining flight lines, by open ideas and reflections, not necessarily meeting in a final design. They rather develop along and with each other, in an ongoing dialogue, sometimes converging, sometimes not, meeting as interweaving lines, a meshwork as memory of collective learning.

5. Conclusions: About the Relevance of 'Planning Ecology'

The paper describes the rationale of an ecology-inspired approach to urban planning, assesses the way it is accomplished in a case study, and evaluates its results.
As 'director' of projects within an ex-mining city, I describe a local *planning ecology* as it has been developing over the last three and a half years. The motivation to do so is twofold. Primarily it is an attempt to assess and evaluate the mediating role of a quality platform, and its results. Such evaluation is useful, especially in case the city decides to continue this process. Second, I hope this assessment also reflects the relevance of using the concept 'ecology' as metaphor and model within processes of urban planning and design. The following conclusions reflect on the findings and evaluate the relevance of 'planning ecology' as approach.

5.1 Reflections

This investigation is based on a case study. It involves a meaningful confrontation between abstract frames of reference and concrete processes in the field. Investigating a process by someone with personal involvement has pros and cons. According to Ingold, participant observation is 'knowing *from the inside*', opening up 'our perception to what is going on there, so that we, in turn, can correspond to it' (Ingold, 2013, pp.5-7). This subjective relation of '*correspondence*' receives a compensating inter-subjective check by also relying on an evaluation by the quality platform, which brings this information *of* the world back *into* the world.
Conclusions are preliminary. First because the projects discussed are not finished yet. At this moment, they only recently received a building permit or a go to start developing. The relative positive results might be tempered after detailed designs and constructions. Second, the approach is young and hesitant: I have no previous experience in diving into the intricate interactions of a planning ecology. Thus conclusions concerning the agency of metaphors and the characterization of planning ecology are tentative.

5.2 Relevance of Approach

Problematising collaboration in planning generated as first research question: *How can we stimulate diverging lines of thought and action to converge during collaborative planning processes?* Since metaphors have integrative power, two sets of metaphors are mobilized as theoretical framework. Together, they form a composite lens to describe and analyse the case Beringen-Mijn. *Learning ecology* and *meshwork of lines* act as generative metaphors *for the case*. Together they help to read the contextual situation (city, actors, projects, …) and modes of interaction between actors. They provide a guide for focusing on socio-spatial coherence. A second set of metaphors, *projects are ships*, *(mine-)landscape is beacon* and *designing is wayfaring* have been deliberately brought *into the case*. They serve specific but varied intentions: to offer an imaginary for the dynamics of projects, an image for the feasibility of converging autonomous projects, and a medium for correspondence between diverse actors.
Many converging and constructive interactions could be identified within the planning process. The intended 'sabbatical detour' was incorporated within the decisions of Municipal Executive, as articulation of the transformative *fleet* imaginary. This imaginary was presented and discussed during the first meeting of the quality platform. The mission-and-vision text prepared by the quality platform articulated the 'mine-landscape' as *beacon* for that *fleet*, and explicitly formulated that imaginary as an evident goal to be incorporated in every project or action. Several long trajectories of designerly research and dialogues amongst overlapping groups of actors, effectuated a productive correspondence within a *meshwork* of activities. As result of a collective design-and-discuss week, a structure sketch was produced, synthesising the concerns and wants of a broad array of various participants. This sketch is constantly referred to within the following projects.
Thus, three 'functional' metaphors have helped converge Municipal Executive, developers, quality platform and – indirectly other stakeholders. The hope that the project leaders, the captains of *ships* would implement the 'turn' needed to orient all projects towards a coherent whole, was redeemed for the projects described in the paper. Coproduction amongst stakeholders of the two most delicate and precarious projects gradually improved. All stakeholders finally agreed with the plans made up during and after many dialogues on the quality platform. However, one important project never surpassed the consultation stage, and fell out of the fleet.
The second research question, *if and how the notion of 'planning ecology' can contribute to generate insights into collaborative dynamics?* is harder to answer. This question was launched with the aim to better understand how collaboration works at the micro-level of

urban design and planning. Although the condition of transdisciplinary research based on participant observation was promising, the available time, and the rather closed character of some niches in the planning ecology, were limiting factors. Investigating at the micro-level needs time to observe and interview many actors, many times. Availability, mutual understanding (literal and figurative), and – more important – mutual trust, are necessary conditions, which can only be realised relatively late in the process.

The sphere where these conditions are fulfilled rather well, are intense occasions of research by design. Design-week, substantial and/or successive workshops, where ideas and designs gradually try to correspond, without the need to come to a conclusive decision, offered favourable conditions for creating multiple collective trails, and offer valuable insights about density and intensity of active meshworks. At least, design proved to serve the intention of making lines of thought intertwine.

A conclusion from these observations also is, that continuous lines are the better trails. During the process, several persons changed position, disappeared or entered the scene. The consequences of such discontinuities are sometimes dramatic because they hamper trust. Moreover, because ideas are not objects which can be handed over to someone else, but results of correspondences amongst multiple lines of thought, discontinuity hinders imagination and ambition.

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Figures

Figure 1. Part of mine site with huge coal washing plants
Figure 2. Quality Platform collectively generating ideas for Beringen-Mijn

Figure 3. Design presentation and dialogue during design week
Figure 4. Structure sketch for Beringen-Mijn (© BUUR PoS)