

Exploring the spatial dimension of ‘brede scholen’ or community schools in Flanders

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Transforming schools in Flanders to ‘brede scholen’, which is similar to the concept of community or extended schools, has been on the policy agenda in Flanders for several years. To gain a better understanding of the spatial implications of these schools, the Agency for Infrastructure in Education (AGION) in Flanders has undertaken a qualitative research based on literature, expert interviews and case studies from Belgium and abroad. This paper presents the outcomes of this research by describing the development of ‘brede scholen’ in the Flemish context, its principles, and the implications for planning practice and building management in Flanders (AGION, 2012).

The ‘brede scholen’ in Flanders and beyond

Strengthening the link between school and community has been a recurrent theme in educational facilities policy and practice in many countries since the 1970s. In 1978, the OECD published a series of studies entitled *Building for School and Community*. The report concluded that the role of co-ordinating educational facilities, from the perspectives of both everyday use and governance, must be recognised in order to establish a real link between school buildings and the community. Back in the 1970s it seemed difficult to meet the vision of integrated services for larger projects due to the challenges of co-ordination between agencies. However, smaller scale neighbourhood projects seemed to be more successful. In 1998, the OECD report *Under One Roof* drew several conclusions that remain relevant to today’s equity agenda on the role of lifelong learning and the importance of promoting wider access to educational facilities. Decentralisation has played an important part in bringing schools and communities together in that there has been a closer focus on community needs with closer co-operation between local school authorities and other community organisations. The report notes that the impetus for integration comes mainly from outside the school and emphasises the need for school to become genuine partners with local authorities and other services in redefining the school’s role in the community (OECD, 1998).

The *brede scholen* developed from a policy initiative to develop instruments to improve equity in education. In 2005, the then-Minister of Education in Flanders, inspired by examples from the Netherlands, Nordic countries and the United States, defined the *brede scholen* as “a local collaboration between different sectors, whereby one or more schools work together to create a broad learning and living environment in an effort to maximise development opportunities for all children and youngsters.”

A first step towards implementing this model in Flanders was to formulate a visionary text to define the *brede scholen* and then undertake 17 pilot projects between 2006 and 2009. An evaluation of the pilot projects in 2010 led to the development of a workable model for the Flemish context. The main conclusions were:

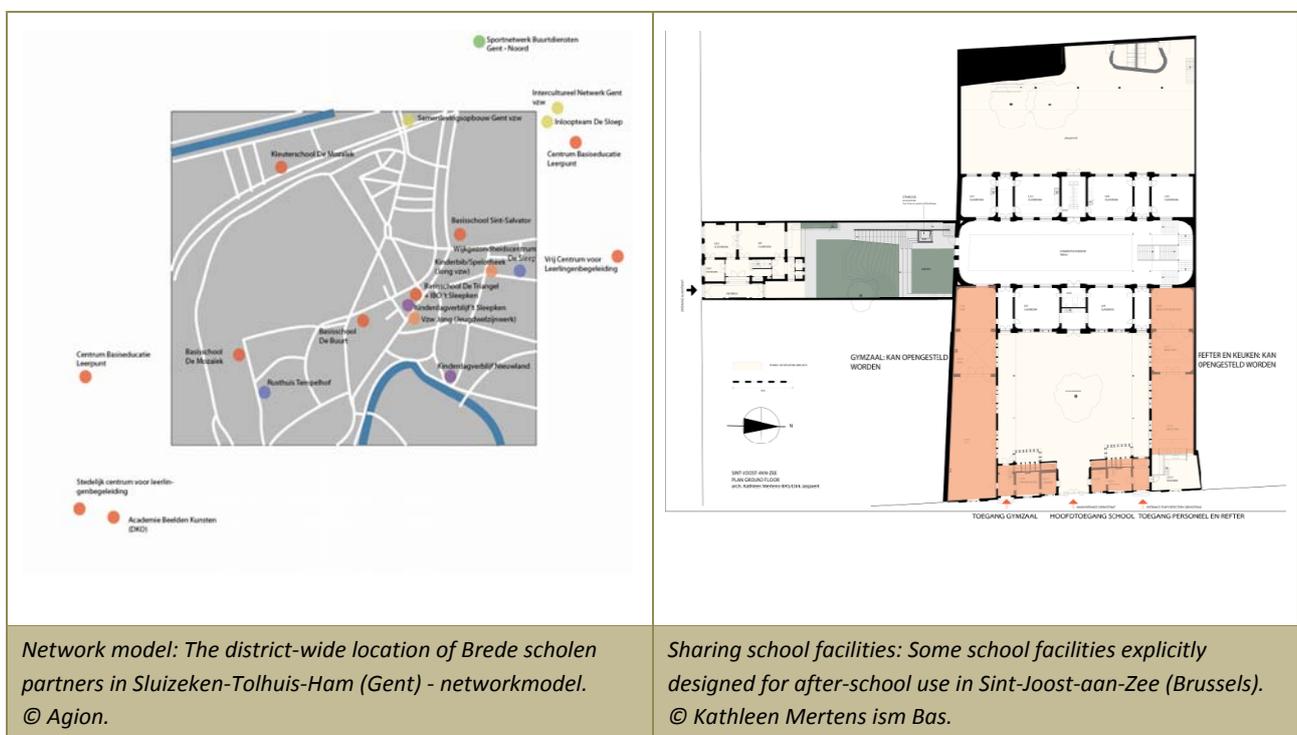
- *Driven by local needs.* The drivers of the *brede scholen* are local: local governments often co-ordinate the overall programme and local actors work in and around schools to provide better opportunities for children.
- *Inclusive.* The exclusive focus on equity was abandoned because all children benefit from this collaboration: the *brede scholen* does not single out a particular group of children.
- *Leadership.* A “driver” is needed, i.e. someone who facilitates collaboration, organises the practical and logistical aspects, ensures that goals are met, resolves conflicts, etc.
- *Vision.* A vision of the *brede scholen* is a necessary starting and reference point.

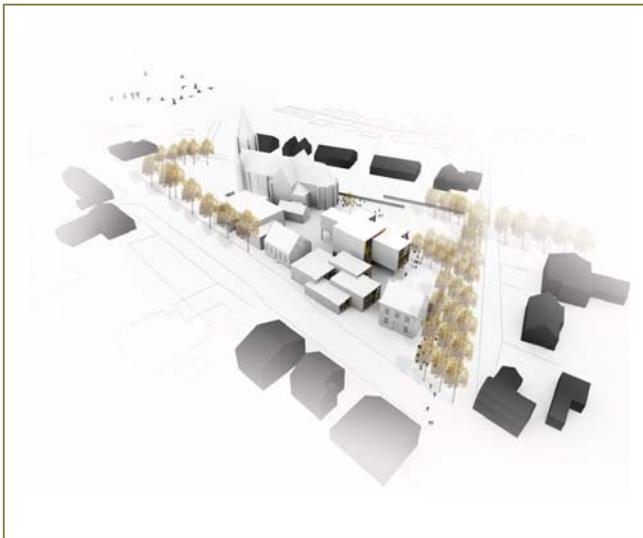
Interpreting educational spaces

The ambition to work more intensively on the development aspects of children and youngsters, inherently means a more intensive use of space, after school hours (3.30 p.m. in Flanders), on Wednesday afternoons, in weekends etc. But maybe more importantly, this new concept requires a different use of space. Spaces that, in contrast to old school building concepts, engage with society rather than withdraw from it, spaces that allow for different types of learning to happen, and spaces that allow parents and local organisations to actively become part of (and have a place in) school life.

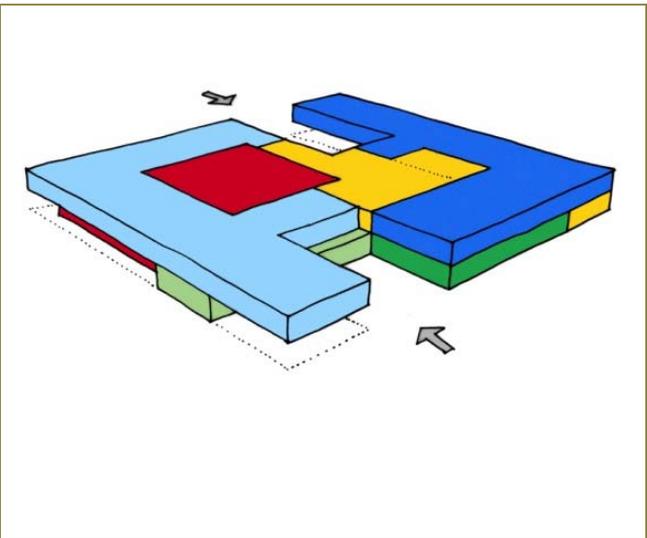
In this paper, spatial translation is conceptualised on 2 levels: the level of the spatial relationship between the partners in the *brede scholen* and the level of recurring design themes or challenges. Within the first level, there are 5 different models or scenarios:

1. *Network model.* Organisation of the *brede scholen* is based on independent infrastructures and exchanges between infrastructures, which can result in a more intensive organisation and use of buildings and their surroundings.
2. *Sharing school facilities.* The school building lies at the heart of the *brede scholen*, and other actors use the school premises for activities, programme, meetings, etc. School buildings can be adapted to accommodate this.
3. *Campus model.* *Brede scholen* partners are located near one other, but still have some autonomy over their buildings. Some buildings will be shared. Outdoor space is a key “connector” between agencies and buildings.
4. *Shared accommodation.* A shared facility is often purpose-built because function(s) specific to the *brede scholen* cannot be accommodated in existing buildings.
5. *Under one roof.* Different *brede scholen* partners are based under one roof. Different levels of spatial integration are possible, ranging from a compartmentalised building (each group has their own access, staff room, sanitary facilities, etc.) to an amalgamated and “boundary-free” building.





Campus model: A church site has been redeveloped to include a primary school, day care, community meeting rooms and a shared meeting hall (gym for the school) in Lozen.
© Lava architecten.

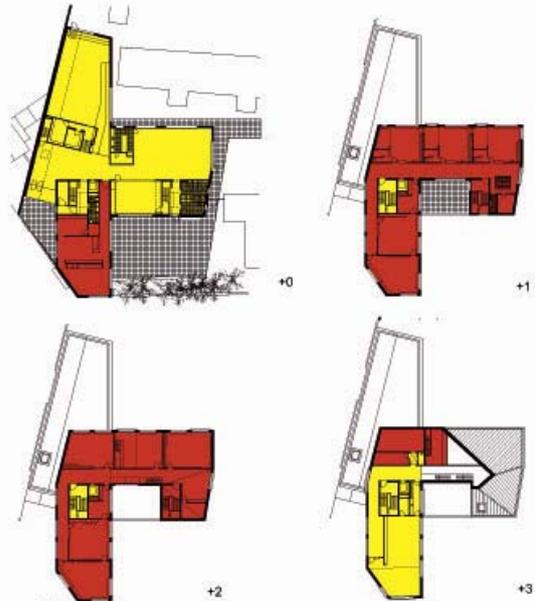


Under one roof: Multifunctional accommodation for a brede scholen in Salamander, which is composed of two schools, sports facilities, and day care and communal facilities.
© Herman Hertzberger architects.

A key dilemma when considering these models, which entail varying degrees of co-location with different partners, is whether their physical proximity positively influences the actual goals of the *brede scholen*. Does it enhance collaboration? Do children benefit from it? To a certain extent it is common sense to think it will, and testimonies from the field confirm this. It is easier to meet, to move from one place to the other, etc. This is in line with the idea that buildings are considered as “mediators” between structure and agency in the production of social processes (Giddens, 1984). In this respect, the space of the *brede scholen* is perceived as a resource that enables social actors to interact with each other and help provide structure and stability to the daily organisation of the *brede scholen* (Leemans, 2011). On the other hand, experts warn about the over-institutionalisation of children’s learning environments and the need to change the environment to create “free space and time”.

Spatial translation can also be conceptualised on a second level, according to certain recurring themes or challenges. The design-related challenges or tensions inherent in these themes can be managed and in some cases are being designed out in very creative ways.

1. *Site planning and context.* The objectives of inclusiveness and openness to the outside must be translated into the site planning. Aspects like arrival points, articulation of boundaries, views, signalisation, etc. all contribute to how a building or site is integrated into its context. The *brede scholen* can address local needs by first conducting a local needs assessment and an inventory of existing services.
2. *Communal – individual.* One aim of the *brede scholen* is to create spaces for meeting, collaboration and exchange. In the transition to a more collaborative model, new spatial relationships and identities must be established, from both communal and individual perspectives.



schema: de school als een wijkcentrum

school, afsluitbaar tijdens
avondactiviteiten

access modelle ter bereikbaarheid van de
buurt

Tom Thys en Adinda Van Geystelen i.s.m. Bureau bouwtechniek

This school was designed as a community centre, compartmentalised over the floors. © Tom Thys en Adinda Van Geystelen ism Bureau Bouwtechniek.

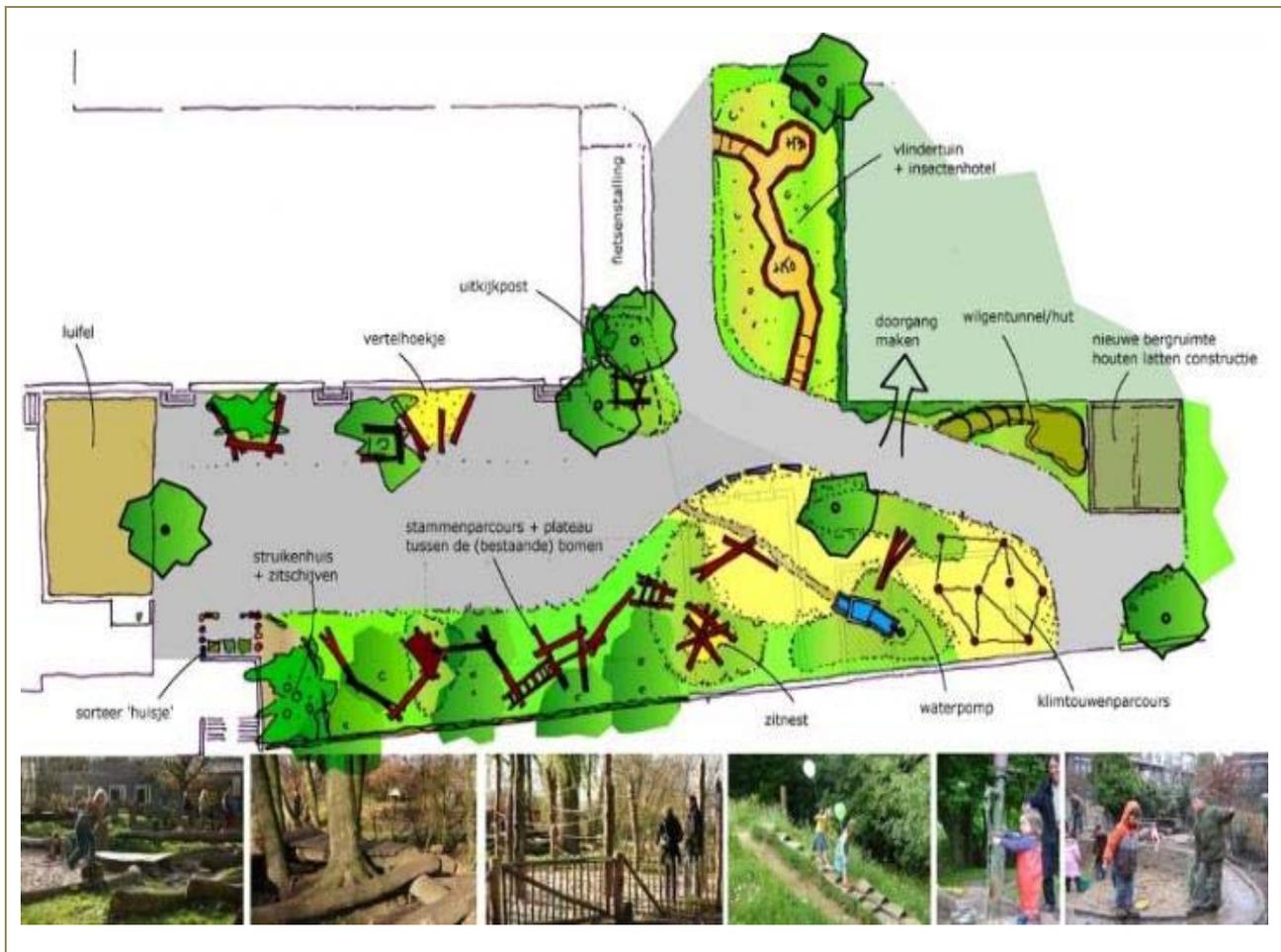
3. *Openness – safety.* This is a key tension in most *brede scholen* projects. The desire for an inclusive “open school” needs to be balanced with ensuring that children feel safe and secure in their environment.
4. *Spatial diversity and use of space.* The ambition of the *brede scholen* is to provide different types of spaces for different uses. Facilities that are part of a *brede scholen* have additional functions and rooms, such as meetings spaces for coffee mornings with mothers or for special care moments and multisensory stimulation, a reception area to organise the arrival and departure of different people, etc.



An informal sitting area for mothers to meet during school hours in the Brede scholen De Mandala (Gent). © Agion.

A flexible space in-between classrooms for meetings, small group work and individual work. There is a small collection from the local library, with afternoon child-care and a community bingo evening. © www.hetmeesterwerk.nl

5. *Multifunctionality and flexibility.* Multifunctional use is key to making the most efficient organisation and use of space in the *brede scholen*. On building sites, this can be achieved by clustering different functions; for rooms, spaces can be used for different purposes and more flexibly over time. A sports hall, for example, could be used by different groups over time, although extra measures may be needed with regard to acoustics, entrance, storage, etc.



Design proposal for the remodelling of an existing playground to a green adventurous playground, developed and built in a participatory way, Gent. © Fris in't Landschap.

6. *Open spaces as catalysts.* This aspect is often overlooked since the focus tends to be on buildings. Open spaces can be catalysts to enhancing the objectives of the *brede scholen*. This can happen on different levels. Open spaces and outdoor play areas can stimulate many developmental aspects in children (motor, social skills, natural awareness, etc.). Open spaces can also encourage interaction and social cohesion as they connect the various living environments of children.

The spatial translation of the *brede scholen* is very diverse, depending on local context and needs. A small intervention can make a big difference: a separate entrance to the sports hall can improve accessibility, a professional kitchen and restaurant can offer real-life working experiences, flexible furniture can allow for multifunctional use, etc.

Consequences for planning practice and building management

Current policies for planning, designing and building infrastructure in Flanders are not geared towards collaboration. In Flanders, each policy area (Education, Childcare, Sports, Culture, Youth, etc.) has historically developed its own logic of regulations, norms, financing and subsidies: some are still centralised (Flemish level) or partly centralised, while others have been devolved to the local authorities. There is no clear “entry point” for a *brede scholen* initiative. It is

therefore challenging to obtain support and funding. In Brussels, however, a new initiative has been launched to allow *brede scholen* to emerge.

Many lessons can be drawn from the existing *brede scholen* projects. A strong local vision on the *brede scholen* is crucial both in content and in spatial terms. This is linked to one of the key success factors identified in literature on school buildings, namely the presence of a strong client (CABE, nd; Kuypers Malliet and Troch, 2010; Lathouwers and Van Heddeghem, 2008). This becomes more challenging when the client is heterogeneous with conflicting interests. Consequentially, the architect-designer's role is changing from that of a translator to a negotiator between different interests. The architect-designer is challenged to use his or her skills to design spaces that go beyond the individual (without denying it) to represent the collective.

In many senses, the whole design process becomes more interactive. For this reason, more time is needed to go through a number of cycles of negotiation and to obtain a deeper understanding of the local context, in addition to ensuring good project management and planning.

The management of school buildings also becomes more essential in *brede scholen*, whether they are existing buildings or multifunctional accommodation. The more intensive use of space and sharing facilities presents new challenges to building management. This has been identified as a problem in many *brede scholen* and even as an obstacle to collaboration. How the building is managed is also best taken into consideration early on in the design process.

Moving forward?

The *brede scholen* remains on the policy agenda in the Flemish and local governments. Local governments in some of the larger cities like Gent and Antwerp are investing in the *brede scholen* projects. For example, the Flemish Community Commission in Brussels, facing inner-city challenges of capacity needs, language diversity, children's poverty and migration, has started transforming all primary schools to *brede scholen*. Also from a spatial point of view, shared use of school premises or clustering functions on site is increasingly being taken account in the design.

The spatial dimension is mainly supportive to the main goal of the *brede scholen*, which is to explore new ways of working together to support the development of children. But it can also be the catalyst to making the *brede scholen* work: a new concept for shared space might be the driver for other ways of working. A more multifunctional use and collaborative approach is needed in order to respond to spatial challenges, especially given that space and resources are scarce, but never as a logic on its own: the vision and goal needs to be in function of the well-being of children.

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