

# Urban Maestro

New governance strategies  
for Urban Design

## Vlaams Bouwmeester

Flemish Government Architect (BE)

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**UN HABITAT**  
UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

**BOUWMEESTERMAITREARCHITECTE**

**UCL**

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research  
and innovation programme under grant agreement n° 831704



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# 1. SUMMARY

The Flemish Government Architect (*Vlaams Bouwmeester*) is an independent expert appointed by the government as a public official tasked with promoting the design quality of the built environment. Leading a small team and assisted by an expert group, they deliver this mission through a variety of informal design governance tools in three ways. Firstly, by providing support and guidance to public developers in order to raise the quality of public buildings in Flanders. Secondly, by contributing to the development of a long-term policy vision and reflection across the fields of architecture and urban design, in collaboration with various administrations and external stakeholders. Thirdly, by fostering a place-making culture through different informational and persuasion tools.

## 2. CONTEXT AND ADMINISTRATION

### 2.1. Background

Since the beginning of the nineties, the Flemish government has been developing policy initiatives to promote and raise awareness on the value of architecture and urban design. One of the first initiatives associated with this vision was the publication of “Architecture in Flanders Yearbook” in 1993 (Ibelings, 2009, p. 16). Since then, the Department of Culture supports this biennial publication providing an overview of recent architectural designs and public spaces together with essays on relevant issues and developments in the fields of architecture and urbanism in Flanders<sup>1</sup> (Schreurs, 2000, p. 63). In 1994, in addition to the financial support for the Belgian participation in the Venice Biennale (where Flanders and Wallonia have taken turns exhibiting from the early 1990s), the Flemish Arts Agency has begun to provide subsidies for the local activities and projects of individuals and organizations in the fields of architecture and design (Bento, 2012, p. 39).

According to Liefoghe (interview, 2020), the architectural policy initiatives within the cultural field were a continuation of a bottom-up movement focused on architecture

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<sup>1</sup> To prepare the Architecture Yearbook, a group of national and international experts was appointed to make a meaningful selection of buildings and public spaces for inclusion in the publication.

and public interest in architecture developed by several cultural organizations throughout the eighties, in particular the activities of the former Architecture Museum Foundation (S/AM) in Ghent.<sup>2</sup> Despite its brief existence (1983-1992), S/AM played an active role in promoting architectural awareness and the work of young Flemish designers to professional audiences and the general public through a wide range of initiatives and events (Sterken, 2016). In addition, the Flemish international arts centre 'deSingel' started to include architecture exhibitions in its pluriannual program in 1985 (ibidem). All these cultural initiatives, together with the architects' association, helped campaign for an agenda setting of the development of a public policy on architecture in Flanders. Therefore, in Liefvooghe's view (interview, 2020), the government policy in the nineties followed and institutionalized a "dynamic that was already in the making."

Another important step in the development of the Flemish architectural policy was the preparation of Antwerp in the lead up to its recognition as the European Capital of Culture for 1993. According to Van Den Driessche (interview: 2020), one year before this international event, the government promoted several architectural competitions, design workshops with architectural schools and numerous other related initiatives. Additionally, in that same year, with the constitutional reform of May 1993, Belgium formally became a federal state, divided into three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Capital Region) alongside three communities (The Flemish, French and German communities, respectively).<sup>3</sup> The intention of improving the spatial quality of the built environment to raise citizens' quality of life was a policy ambition of the Flemish government, where architecture and urban design began to be incorporated as a theme in public policy discourse. According to Ibelings (2009, p. 10), the idea of raising the standards of public architecture was, in part, a way of demonstrating "what the region was capable of achieving and what it had achieved."

From the planning side, the adoption of the new 'Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders'<sup>4</sup> in 1997, the preparation of which started in 1992, also represented an important milestone. Although Flanders had regional plans since the 1970s, there was a need for an overarching spatial vision that would coordinate the desired future spatial planning in Flanders. One innovation was the introduction of the concept of 'spatial quality' as one of the two principles of the new 'Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders' (Schreurs, 2000, p. 63). In this context, the provincial and local administrations should pay explicit attention to issues of spatial quality when assessing plans and

<sup>2</sup> According to Sterken (2016, in addition to the *Stichting Architectuur Museum - S/AM*, Ghent also hosted the *Architectuur als Buur*, the heritage association *Interbellum* (which focused on modern architecture), the monographic publications in the series *Vlees & Beton* (published by the Architecture & Urban Development research group of the University of Ghent) and the Centre for Architectural Studies

(CAO) at the Saint-Lucas Institute, which organised exhibitions and issued a newsletter.

<sup>3</sup> In 1993, Belgium's political landscape was transformed when, as a federal constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of governance, it was divided into three highly autonomous regions – the Flemish Region, the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region – and three language communities: the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders in the north, the French-speaking Brussels-Wallonia region in the center and south, and the German-speaking cantons in the east. For more information see: [www.belgium.be/](http://www.belgium.be/)

<sup>4</sup> In Flemish: *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen*

projects. In practical terms, however, the effects of such a broad statement were seen more as a change of mentality rather than having any actual consequences on the ground as the structural plan did not offer any design criteria that urban planning officials could use (Ibidem).

## 2.2. The Flemish Government Architect

Despite the government's initiatives to promote better built environments, there was little evidence of higher standards in public buildings in the nineties (Liefoghe & Van Den Driessche, 2019, p. 3). The need to raise the demands of public clients when commissioning public buildings was first noticed in the Architecture Yearbooks, since only six public buildings were included in its first editions. According to Els Vervloesem and Sven Sterken (2004), until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Flemish "government commissions were regarded as infrastructural undertakings and implemented with the logic of an engineer. Government bodies chose an architect not based on their competence but more for their ideological or community background." In this context, several authors have drawn attention to the lack of architectural awareness of public clients and consequentially the low design quality of most public buildings in Flanders, as a result campaigning for the launch of an architectural policy similar to those in neighbour countries, such as in The Netherlands and in France (Ibelings, 2009).

According to Schreurs (2000), it was the continuous criticism of the quality of public buildings in Flanders that led the Minister of Finance, Budget and Health Policy, Wivina de Meester, to take the first steps towards the development of a Flemish architectural policy. In 1995, partially influenced by the example of The Netherlands, that had a Chief Government Architect, the minister announced the intention of establishing a similar position in Flanders to promote a culture of best practices by demonstrating its commitment to quality through its own buildings and to place design quality as a corporate aim across public administration (Ibelings, 2009)<sup>5</sup>. As de Meester (2000) pointed out in an open letter: "the layout and design of the living environment are an important cultural expression; it is very important that the government as client sets a good example and stimulates the private sector to also strive for optimal architectural, urban development and landscape-architectural quality."

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<sup>5</sup> In an open letter to the Flemish Government Architect published in an architectural magazine, Wivina de Meester (2000) refers to the two important moments that substantiated her decision: "The city of Antwerp organized an important

'Process Congress' in April 1998, in search of a possible practice for 'urbanity and quality.' In June 1997, on the initiative of the Dutch Presidency of the European Union, policy officials came together to reflect on architecture and policy and to formulate recommendations."

In 1997, two years later, the position of the Flemish Government Architect (FGA) was formally announced and its mission defined: 'to stimulate and inspire Flemish architectural awareness, in order to increase the cultural responsibility among the authorities, the relevant industry and the public' (Schreurs, 2000, p. 63). To do so, the FGA was required to develop a long-term vision on the quality of the built environment and to provide support to regional government in preparing and implementing an architectural policy that promote high quality environments in Flanders. In addition, the FGA would provide advice and monitor the implementation of the building policy for the Flemish government's own buildings, in order to ensure buildings of high quality and to fulfil an exemplary function in Flanders.

After a period of recruitment by a professional agency<sup>6</sup>, Bob Van Reeth was appointed the first Flemish Government Architect in January 1999. Considered one of the most prominent Flemish architects, Bob Van Reeth would benefit from his high moral authority and powers of persuasion to be accepted throughout public administration (Ibid.). As Liefvooghe (interview, 2009) mentions: "the nomination of Van Reeth as the FGA embodied an ambition from the government side, it was a clear public statement."

Since the beginning of his mandate, Bob Van Reeth, who fulfilled this function between 1999 and 2005, began to receive numerous requests to provide design advice on projects and participate in competition juries. In this framework, he decided to set up a 'quality chamber' to provide continued advice on projects and comprehensive consideration to architectural policy on government buildings. This initiative would lead to the development of the *Open Call*, a method of selecting architects for design assignments requested by public bodies, which would become one of the FGA's main policy instruments and one with a visible, demonstrable impact on the ground<sup>7</sup> (this will be further examined in following sections).

### 2.3. The Flanders Architecture Institute

Besides leading by example, there also was a political commitment to fostering a design culture and raising public awareness on the value of well-designed environments. Inspired by their Dutch neighbour that had established the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) at the end of the eighties, the government decided to establish the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAI) in 2001. Based out of

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<sup>6</sup> According to Wivina de Meester's (2000) open letter, the government hired the head-hunting agency Heidrick &

Struggles to seek out potential candidates, both at home and abroad, for the position of FGA.

<sup>7</sup> The Open Call was inspired by the model that exists in The Netherlands, managed by the Dutch Government Architect, where once a year architects used to be invited to apply for consideration for public commissions.

the international arts centre 'deSingel' in Antwerp, VAI is solely dedicated to the promotion of an architectural culture in Flanders, and therefore is responsible for delivering the cultural dimension of the Flemish architectural policy. As the former Minister of Culture, Bert Anciaux, succinctly formulated in 2002:

*"my architectural policy is (...) in the first place a consciousness-raising policy: inviting people to take a good look at that physical, designed environment, getting them to think about the influence that this has on everyday activities, bringing them into contact with good examples, and convincing them that the choice of good architecture is good not only for themselves but for the whole community."* (Ancieux, 2002)



Fig.1 – Joint policy memorandum of the FA and the VAI (2009)  
(Source: FGA website).

Since 2002, the VAI is responsible for the publication of the aforementioned Architectural Yearbooks, which intend to highlight Flemish architecture and to inform a broader public about it. Besides the yearbooks, VAI also organizes exhibitions and other activities that are aimed at making the general public more aware of architecture and urban design. More recently, the Flemish government entrusted VAI with responsibility for the Flanders Architecture Archives, which had previously been taken care of by regional and provincial authorities. In this sense, VAI manages a constantly growing collection of architectural archives, which it subsequently conserved, interpreted and made accessible to anyone interested.<sup>8</sup>

Although VAI is a private yet government-subsidised body, like others in similar positions, it has to navigate the balance of retaining its independence as well as maintaining a functional link with the administration. The current FGA sits on their executive board; although the VAI's financing comes from a different department—the Ministry of Culture. At the same time, VAI takes on a great deal of the outreach work related to the Bouwmeester's vision, bringing this vision to the public at-large via exhibitions, events, and so on. Sometimes they also collaborate to deliver policy statements, like the 'Flemish Architecture Memorandum 2009-2014,' which was published in 2009 and signed by the two institutions (Fig. 1).

<sup>8</sup> The Flanders Architectural Archives are managed by the VAI.  
For more info see <https://www.vai.be/en/>

### 3. OBJECTIVES

According to the Flemish government's 'concept note' on the role of FGA,<sup>9</sup> the aim of the FGA is "to promote the architectural quality of the built environment, conceived as a synthesis of qualities in the field of urban environment, use and experience, image value, construction technology, energy and cost management, integral accessibility, etc." (Flemish government, 2020). Departing from this holistic notion, the mission of the FGA is made tangible by "assisting clients in public and public-private projects in the field of designing and realizing buildings, public space, landscape and infrastructure" (Ibidem).

To carry out their evident mission, the FGA should focus on two main tasks:

1. Provide support and guidance to public developers (in the broadest sense possible) with a view to improving the quality of building projects and plans. This support should aim to increase the competence of the involved building owners and designers, with a view to improving the design quality of building projects and plans within their budgetary margins, but also in regards to the search for an optimal price-quality ratio for public design assignments. This means that role of the FGA is essentially that of guiding, inspiring and initiating, but never acting as a substitute for the public client (Ibid).
2. Vision development and reflection on architectural quality, high-quality design and construction in today's society. Within this second task, the FGA defines an agenda of activities and research studies that may contribute to the development of a vision and knowledge on the design of the built environment. This research should be application-oriented in serving this function of vision formation in the expertise domain of the partnerships alongside the formulation and implementation of projects.

From the government's perspective, both tasks reinforce each other: "concrete projects feed the vision formation, while insights/visions can in turn be tested or demonstrated through concrete projects in the field" (Ibid.). In order to perform these tasks efficiently, the FGA should expand its operation, reach and impact through a 'network approach' (e.g. local quality rooms, organizing training and coaching sessions, offering guidelines, etc.). In addition, the FGA handles a few other additional assignments:

- Communication and awareness raising;

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<sup>9</sup> In January 2020, the statutes and mission of the FGA's 'concept note' (in Flemish *VISIENOTA*) were revised by the Flemish Government in view of launching the new FGA.



- Advising on bottlenecks and gaps in the regulations, in relation to design quality in the broadest sense;
- Providing opportunities to young designers.

To maximize its impact, the FGA employs several communicational tools to raise awareness and call attention to the specific value of creating better places for different clients and in an attempt to engage them in the process. In this context, the FGA assumes a proactive role as design champion, placing design quality on the agenda and campaigning for excellent public commissioning, a high quality building culture, sustainable urban development, etc. as a means to deliver on the aspirations enshrined in its mission statement.

## 4. THE TOOL / INITIATIVE: DETAILED DESCRIPTION

### 4.1. The FGA position and operational structure

Looking at the Flemish administrative structure, the FGA is placed within the Chancellery and Foreign Affairs Department, under the political responsibility of the Minister-President of Flanders. The reason for being located so near to the cabinet in a department with a transversal policy domain and not in a sectoral policy department, such as environment or culture domain, is due to the cross-cutting nature of architecture and the built environment. As Leo Van Broeck (interview: 2018), former FGA, argues:

“There is no single Minister that is not doing something in, about, under, around or with building and spatial planning. It would be a handicap, to have a competent team that is supposed to work around everything that has to do with spatial planning and development, and building, that would work only for the Minister of Environment or only for the Minister of Culture. So, it has to be a transversal taskforce.”

Considering the great diversity of projects and types of public developments (e.g. care, economy, housing, education, culture, heritage, area development, etc.), the

FGA can offer support to all public departments, regardless of who takes the initiative for this (Flemish government, 2020). To do so, the FGA is required to provide an accessible platform to all sectors and agencies that develop activities in the field of the design and construction of buildings and infrastructure. In addition, the Flemish Government (and each minister) can ask the FGA to address specific *ad hoc* assignments.

Regarded as the cornerstone of the Flemish architectural policy (Ibelings, 2009, p. 8), the FGA occupies a leading role both as a person and as an institution, the latter comprised of three elements: the FGA (the person who is appointed to the position), an expert group and the FGA's team.

### Flemish Government Architect (the person)

The FGA is appointed as a contractual staff member for the duration of their mandate as an advisor to the entire Flemish government. Although the position is administratively located within the Chancellery, the FGA is expected to work as an independent expert and advisor to the entire Flemish administration, namely to provide solicited and unsolicited design advice—both as an institution and as a person—to the various departments and agencies of the public sector (Flemish Government, 2020). In this framework, he or she bears full final responsibility for the substantive operation in general, the realization of his/her 'multi-year program', and the various activities and action programs in particular. In this framework, the question of their independence from the public administration is considered a crucial element for their role as FGA. As Leo Van Broeck (interview: 2018) argues:

“The position of a Government Architect should by definition be independent (...) with the right to speak freely and give opinions on what is better, without having the power to decide; and second, the duty to provide advice if one of the Ministers asks for advice.”

This means that the FGA has the right to provide unsolicited advice and express their opinion about certain projects or developments but the FGA also has the obligation to formally provide advice when requested. As was seen in the previous section, the tasks of the FGA are fundamentally informal in nature, such as providing support and advice to public clients, developing policy visions and reflections on architectural quality, etc. This means that the FGA does not have any formal powers under the umbrella of their competences, such as managing public building projects or making decisions on planning permits. Being able to influence others without formal authority is a challenge, but at the same time, it provides the FGA with more freedom to contact various stakeholders, express opinions, and select themes for

public debate, etc. As Leo Van Broeck (2018) explains about his role as a former FGA: “I have no decision power. But you could turn it into a joke, you could say that I’m allowed to speak about everything because I have nothing to say. So, it’s the right to contradict the government, because my job is to speak from a position of professional competence.”

This independent status gives the FGA the *“freedom of saying the truth, even if the truth is annoying, or inconvenient”* (Ibid.). Despite the liberty to express their viewpoint to different public bodies and communicate it to the press, in practical terms, the FGA tends to assume a hybrid position: one of an independent voice but with a neutral stance. In another words, the FGA express its opinion without political interference but also addresses the issues from a technical and professional point of view. This is critically important in relation to projects of a wider dimension or public interest as it may raise or affect political sensitivities if the FGA were to strongly criticize a project without any proper justification. This combination of attributes is crucial to the FGA maintaining their professional status and to be able to reach and influence public clients in order to raise the quality of their commissions.

As a contractual staff member of the Flemish government, with the exception of the substantive responsibility outlined above, the FGA falls under the administrative authority of the leading official of the Chancellery Department. This means that the FGA organizes their activities in line with the administrative, financial-legal and deontological framework and organizational culture of the Flemish government. In view of the FGA’s special role, the Flemish government grants a delegation to the FGA for the duration of their mandate and within the annual operating credit for the FGA, which in turn he/she may delegate to the FGA team coordinator (see below). Nevertheless, this delegation can be reviewed and withdrawn at any time (Flemish Government, 2020).

### Expert Group

Considering the increasing complexity and diversity of issues within their current work mandate, the FGA may ask for the advice of a multidisciplinary expert group for justifying certain strategic choices, decisions and important projects. This expert group is composed of a maximum of four experts from different fields that together may provide input and substantive support to the work of the FGA (the expert group meets around six times per year). Furthermore, it can be tasked with leading the response to a strategic task/request if there is the risk the FGA’s impartiality may be compromised due to a conflict of interest (Ibidem).



Fig. 2 – FGA multi-year program for the 2017-2020 period  
(Source: FGA website).

At beginning of their mandate, the FGA defines a job profile for the members of the expert group and an open call is launched by the government. After the selection process, alongside the advice of the FGA, the group of experts is nominated by the Flemish government. Its members do not receive the status of being a civil servant and are remunerated from the operating resources of the FGA.

### The FGA's team

To accomplish its mission, the FGA has a team of fifteen people assisting with the operationalization of the various instruments at the FGA's disposal. Most of the team has been part of the FGA office since its inception, allowing for the preservation of knowledge across different FGA mandates (Van Broeck, interview: 2018). The team is composed of a group of public officials specialized in good public commissioning with broad experience in relation to architecture and urban development. They are responsible for “substantive advice and administrative-technical support for both policy and project-related subjects” (Flemish Government, 2020). Although the team works under the leadership of the FGA, it has a management coordinator for administrative and organizational tasks as well as the duty of independently representing the FGA in meetings and projects.

### Multiannual program and formal reporting obligation

At the beginning of their mandate, the FGA has to develop and define a multi-year program based on other related policies of the Flemish Government (e.g. Schools of Tomorrow, Policy Plan Space Flanders, the Flemish Energy and Climate Plan, etc.). This multi-year program should be elaborated in consultation with all relevant administrations and departments, as well as with the professional field. The program is then submitted to the Flemish Government for approval (Ibidem).

According to the FGA ‘Concept note’ (2020), the multi-year program also forms the basis for determining the necessary expertise for selecting the members of the expert group referred to above. The FGA should use the multi-year program to define an annual action plan every year, which, in addition to the concrete content of the multi-year program, also includes a link between predicted actions and resources. The annual action plans are submitted and ratified by the expert group and then communicated to the Flemish Government. The FGA then reports periodically to the Flemish Government and the expert group, with each FGA providing an evaluation report at the end of their mandate (Ibidem).

Theme	General aim	Specific objectives (summarized)
<b>Open Space</b>	To promote the view of open space as a public good to be preserved for the future, but also made accessible to people today. To protect and create open space networks with a social agenda by reducing spatial claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ acquire insight on the interplay of open space &amp; urbanisation</li> <li>▪ collaborate for more continuous open space across boundaries</li> <li>▪ actively support an open space policy</li> <li>▪ promote projects related to densification and core strengthening</li> <li>▪ generate support, raise awareness and ensure communication with all levels of government and with the general public</li> </ul>
<b>Housing</b>	To address the housing problem (spatial congestion, car-dependent mobility, large energy consumption per house) by improving housing quality through a project-based approach and by initiating research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ promote an increase in scale in residential design as an alternative to individual commissions</li> <li>▪ support housing associations and the private sector in building sustainable and affordable housing</li> <li>▪ support a professional rental sector with more collective housing</li> <li>▪ promote a location-driven housing choice, with living and working more attuned to each other</li> </ul>
<b>Heritage</b>	To promote a more active, responsible attitude towards cultural heritage, focused less on what has been inherited and more on what should be passed on to the next generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ advocate a workable balance between heritage value, residential quality, energetic performance and economic feasibility for any renovations of social housing</li> <li>▪ promote change-oriented construction, particularly for public buildings</li> <li>▪ to inform public officials and other interested parties about good examples</li> </ul>
<b>Public Principal-ship</b>	To have public organizations and local authorities that are familiar with the entrepreneurial logic of construction and the real estate market, and which can efficiently negotiate with private parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ assist public principals in creating various forms of 'negotiated urbanism'</li> <li>▪ promote a project structure that involves additional private parties, within the framework of public-private partnership projects</li> <li>▪ continue and enhance existing research on public-private collaborations</li> </ul>
<b>Regulations</b>	To have a set of regulations that function as a proactive quality tool, one that leaves scope for creativity within the design process and is flexible and future-proof	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ to specify more explicitly the intentions and results that the regulations aim to achieve, so that solutions fully or partly outside this scope can be admitted if they fulfil the intentions and are deemed desirable by the involved authorities &amp; stakeholders</li> <li>▪ to delve into the underlying mechanisms of legal and financial factors in land uses, and highlight them, in order to tackle our use of space in an integral manner</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-border collaborations</b>	To promote a broader vision for the whole area of the Meuse-Scheldt-Rhine Delta (Eurodelta), along with a collaborative, cross-border approach to its challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ to work closely and consult with other Chief Government Architects of the region</li> <li>▪ to place a focus particularly on the Brussels metropolitan area and its infrastructure</li> <li>▪ to enhance structural collaboration between Belgian and Dutch authorities in particular</li> </ul>
<b>Contributing to architectural culture</b>	To initiate and facilitate various exchanges so that architectural and spatial policy in Flanders remain in touch with developments at home and abroad in the broader architectural field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ promote knowledge sharing, debate &amp; broad communication</li> <li>▪ collaborate with the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam</li> <li>▪ raise awareness among policymakers on the importance of fair fees and a healthy business climate in architecture</li> <li>▪ create synergies with design education &amp; research</li> <li>▪ have a structural collaboration with the Department of Culture on the theme of commissioned art</li> </ul>

Table 1 – FGA multi-year strategic goals for the 2017-2020 period (Source: FGA, 2017)

## 4.2. Instruments

To deliver on its mission and assignments, the FGA employs several instruments addressing the strategic objectives defined in their multi-year program and annual action plans, which are periodically evaluated within the professional field and referred expert group. Within the different instruments, the Open Call (in Flemish, *Open Oproep*) is the most important tool used by the FGA to support public clients in raising the quality of public developments (Kroese et al., 2009). Considered an alternative selection process that places less of a burden on the designers, as will be detailed below, the Open Call is a procedure that enables public principals to select designers for commissions in the fields of architecture, urban design and landscape architecture.<sup>10</sup> According to Schreurs (2000, p. 63), the Open Call procedure is the most visible activity of the FGA and the one that gives legitimacy to its existence.

Besides supporting public clients, the FGA also contributes to vision formation and reflections on architecture and spatial design. Within this area of work, pilot projects are the main instrument used by the FGA to connect design research with a policy-preparing approach for the realization of reference projects and to address urgent issues. Both areas of work are associated with a broad communication agenda through symposia and publications to raise the awareness of politicians, stakeholders and the public in order to move further beyond standardized regulations as a means to achieve place quality (Fig. 3).

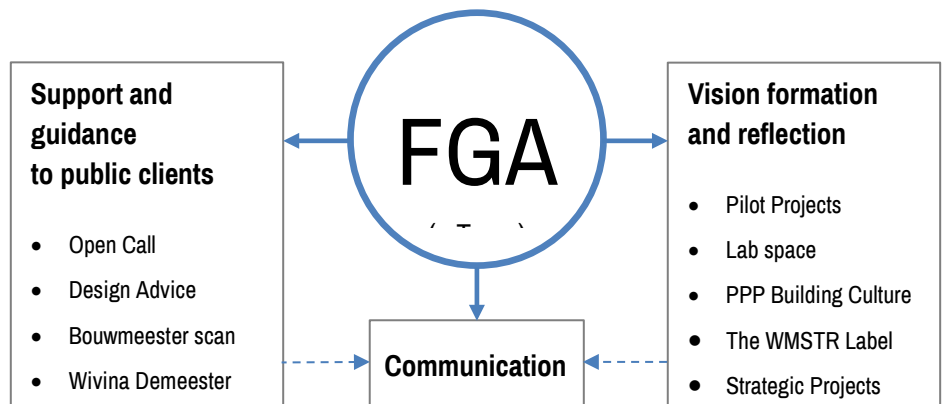


Fig. 3 – The FGA's three main lines of action and instruments.

To help describe its various focal areas and range of instruments, this section will make use of the FGA presentation booklet (2019), recently published on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, that structures the FGA's activities around three main

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/en/instruments/open-call/more-info>, viewed on 23/04/2020

lines of action: 1. Support and guidance; 2. Contributing to vision formation and reflection, and 3. Communication. This threefold structure will be used to describe the FGA's diverse range of informal tools and initiatives.

#### **4.2.1. Support and guidance to public builders**

As was pointed out in Section 3, one of the FGA's main assignments is to provide support and guidance to public developers with the objective of improving the quality of building projects and plans. To achieve this, Bob Van Reeth, the first FGA, established the Open Call procedure to help public clients in selecting designers for architectural and urban design commissions. Besides the Open Call, the FGA also assists with other procedures, such as taking part in juries, providing design advice to municipalities, setting up quality monitoring boards, etc. According to the Flemish Government 'Concept note' (2020), when supporting and assisting public clients, the FGA should pay attention to the following set of principles:

- The FGA's supervision should always be focused on the type of project and the needs of the client;
- The role of the FGA is essentially to guide, support and inspire public developers, which means that the commissioning and final decision ultimately remain with the client;
- Under no circumstances should the FGA take over the client's role in design assignments;
- The FGA should provide guidance during the concept phase, namely: thorough brainstorming about the contract resulting in a solid specification, a responsible pre-selection of possible design offices, and a thorough evaluation of the design proposals, aimed at a high-quality realization of the contract and a widely supported award.

#### Open Call

As referred to above, the Open Call represents the most important tool and activity of the FGA and their team, that which makes "the existence of the institution most clearly visible and justifies its existence" (Ibelings, 2009, p. 64). Coordinated by FGA team, the Open Call is an innovative method of selecting designers for public commissions based on a two-phase design competition principle that complies with public procurement law and European competition rules. The Open Call is a procedure divided into 10 phases, wherein the FGA team starts by assisting public

clients in drawing up a project definition before bringing them into contact with a range of designers via a biannual (twice per year) call for public commissions.

Since it was first established in 1999, almost 700 Open Call projects have been launched in Flanders and in Brussels (Liefoghe & Van Den Driessche, 2019). In its different editions, the Open Call commissions have covered a wide range of building projects and urban development plans in various fields (education, culture, housing, etc.) with different scales, ranging from subsidized housing and public buildings to infrastructural works, such as bridges and roads (Ibelings, 2009).<sup>11</sup>

The Open Call is free of charge for all public and semi-public organizations in Flanders, including regional public services, city and municipal authorities, as well as housing agencies, non-profit organizations in the care sector, etc. (Liefoghe & Van Den Driessche, 2019). According to the former FGA (Van Broeck, interview: 2018), in general, half of the commissions originate from small local authorities, usually medium-to-large-sized districts, and the other half from the Flemish government.



Fig. 4 – Open Call 0229 bridge in Vroenhoven (Source: FGA, 2019 © Stijn Bollaert)

Despite the 20 years of experience preparing the commissions and organizing the procedure that leads to the selection of the designers, the Open Call represents a heavy workload for the FGA and their team (Ibelings, 2009, p. 64). In order to optimize this process and its main phases, the Open Call procedure has been restructured several times although its main structure has remained the same.

<sup>11</sup> For a full list of projects see:

<https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/en/instruments/open-call>



Currently, according to Liefvooghe & Van Den Driessche (2019, p. 16), the procedure is comprised of the following 10 phases:

1. *The contracting authority consults the FGA* – Usually the initiative comes from the public client-side, who consults the FGA about the possibility of selecting a designer for a project through the Open Call procedure. The concrete challenges of the project and the client's ambitions in terms of quality are discussed and only then will it be decided if the Open Call is the most appropriate procedure;
2. *FGA and the contracting authority sign a cooperation protocol* – A cooperation protocol is signed by both parties, specifying the slight adjustments to procedure, available resources, the number of designers who will participate in the second phase of the competition, the timing and the fees for the designers, the awarding criteria and jury composition, etc.;
3. *The FGA's team assists the contracting authority with developing a well-structured project definition* – With the help of the FGA's team; the public client formulates a project definition, which contains the desires and ambition of the client, the functional requirements and specifications, etc. If necessary, external experts may be called in to contribute to the project definition;
4. *FGA launches a call for tenders* – Twice a year, usually in January and July, the FGA launches an Open Call for designers gathering several public commissions. The list is published on the Tender Bulletin, in the EU Official Journal and on the FGA website, where candidates may access all of the available information about the project, like its construction budget, timing, remuneration of the designers, etc.
5. *Design teams apply with a portfolio and a short motivational text* – National and international design teams can apply, individually or in collaboration, for one or more design assignments. The digital applications include a portfolio of three relevant projects and a brief motivational text reflecting on the contents of the assignment;
6. *The contracting authority selects the design teams together with the FGA* – For each project, the FGA makes a qualitative pre-selection of ten design teams ensuring that this selection includes a diverse range of design approaches, a mix of young and established practices, national and international teams, etc.<sup>12</sup> The public client then selects from a minimum of three up to a maximum of seven teams from this preselection (with an average of five), who are invited to work out a draft design.

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<sup>12</sup> Besides being published in the Flemish Tender Bulletin, the Open Call is published in the EU Official Journal, which enables any designer from the EU to apply for one or more public commissions in Flanders.

7. *The contracting authority informs the designers* – In a first briefing session, the public client explains the ambitions and constraints of the project to the selected design teams. After receiving all of the necessary information, a site visit is arranged and the teams can ask questions about the assignment. A second briefing session is arranged with the client in order to address any additional questions;
8. *The design teams submit a proposal* – The designers deliver a first draft design with a vision of the assignment in words and images; the detail of the material varies according to the project. The FGA delivers the designs to the client and to the other jury members.
9. *The designers present their vision to the jury* – The design teams present their proposals to the jury, which includes representatives of the public client and external experts chaired by the FGA. Usually, other competent administrations affected by or involved with the specific project are invited to participate as advisors (e.g. a heritage committee). The jury can interact and posit questions to the designers.
10. *The jury selects a winner and the contracting authority awards the assignment* – After a debate among the members, the jury ultimately evaluates the proposals and selects a winner. A report is then written down and the winning design team is invited to the final contract negotiation for developing the project.

After the Open Call is concluded and the contract is signed between the designer and the public client, the draft design of the winning proposal will then be fully developed in accordance with the specified terms of the contract. To guarantee the design quality follow-up of the project, the public client can still ask seek further advice and expertise from the FGA or the external jury members.



Fig. 5 – Open Call 1202 Parkloods Spoor Noord Antwerp (Source: FGA, 2019 © Stijn Bollaert)

### Design advice

Besides the Open Call, the FGA also provides design advice to public developers, which includes the entire Flemish Government, public or semi-public clients, provincial and local authorities or other public authorities. The FGA does not provide advice to private companies or individuals. For projects of strategic importance, the FGA often takes the initiative themselves and addresses public clients in order to assist them in their assignment (Flanders, 2019).

### Bouwmeester scan

The *Bouwmeester Scan* is an analysis tool available for local authorities who want to work towards a more sustainable and better use of space. The scan maps the spatial and policy strengths and weaknesses of a given municipality and provides a concrete agenda of projects and interventions. The scan assists municipalities in the transition to a high-quality living environment, linked to a more caring and sustainable approach to the environment and natural resources.

### Prize Wivina Demeester

The 'Wivina Demeester Prize for Excellent Commissioning' is a biennial award for inspiring commissioning in the realization of urban, landscape and architectural projects in Flanders, which is not only focused on overall design quality but also in the exemplary commission process developed by the client.<sup>13</sup> Initiated in 2003 by the first FGA, the prize is jointly awarded by the Flemish Government and the FGA.

### Master's Test

To promote opportunities to young designers, the 'Master's Test' challenges public clients to provide young designers and artists with the opportunity to carry out their first public contract. Under the guidance of a project director appointed by the FGA, the most innovative of solutions can be implemented following the approval of a jury. Through this selection procedure, smaller contracts are awarded to the designers through a negotiated procedure without publication (Ibidem).

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<sup>13</sup> In its eighth edition (2014), the FGA prize was restructured and given the name of the former Flemish Minister of Finance

Wivina Demeester. Previously, this prize was named the 'Bouwheer Prize' and the 'Bouwmeester Prize.'



Fig. 6 – 'Gravel bins' installation in Ghent by ROTOR (Source: FGA, 2019 © Johnny Umans)

#### 4.2.2. Contributing to vision formation and reflection

The second main assignment of the FGA is to contribute to the development of Flemish architectural policy, vision formation and reflection on relevant themes connected with the FGA's area of work/expertise that may inform stakeholders and provide knowledge about the design of the built environment. Within this area, the FGA's most important instrument are the 'Pilot Projects' that link research with design with the objective of policy-preparation for the realization of concrete pilot projects, developed in collaboration with different stakeholders. According to the Flemish Government's 'Concept note' (2020), when developing initiatives within this strand, the FGA should pay attention to the following set of principles:

- The FGA should always work in consultation and collaboration with other involved sectors and actors;
- The research is application-oriented in serving the function of vision formation in the expertise domain of the FGA, alongside the partnerships, project formulation and project implementation; with particular attention being paid to the issues that are put forward from the public commissioning and architecture field;
- The vision development is fed both simultaneously from the top-down and bottom-up by consultations and feedback from experts and stakeholders. Furthermore, it must represent an opportunity to realize the involvement of the professional field.

#### Pilot projects

Initiated in 2011, the 'Pilot projects' are an instrument that connect design research with a policy-preparing approach where alliances are established with different stakeholders to enhance reflection and extend any impact. They are intended to produce new insights into current approaches to spatial and social challenges that are considered to be 'urgent' and may require 'out of the box' thinking with a focus on the realization of high-quality exemplary projects (Flanders, 2019). According to Ahmed Kahn (interview, 2020), the introduction of the 'Pilot Projects' by Peter Swinnen (the third FGA), was a practical method of promoting cross-sectoral and network collaboration in order to critically review existing working methods and frameworks, which would counterbalance the FGA's activity that was mostly focused on the Open Call.

The proposals or suggestions for initiating 'Pilot Projects' can be formulated by the FGA themselves as well as by potential partners of both a public and private nature, with a social purpose. To provide some examples, the 'Healthcare' Pilot Projects (2012) responded to the aging population and the need for new models for healthcare provision; the 'Collective Living' Pilot Projects (2013) developed scenarios and methodologies to re-think and reconsider the current trend in housing production in

light of an increasing need for housing within a limited available space; similar to what took place in the 'Back in Circulation' Pilot Project (2014), it was investigated how underutilized and polluted industrial estates can acquire a new meaning within spatial, urban and social development in Flanders<sup>14</sup> (Ibid.).

Although the 'Pilot Projects' are based on collaboration among several partners, according to the FGA website, the management of each edition is assured by a steering group composed of key stakeholders on the topic, external experts and the FGA, who maintains an overview and monitoring of the entire process.<sup>15</sup> Each pilot project's process usually includes the development of five exemplary projects, which are selected and decided between the different partners through an open call. The limited number of projects is also a deliberately choice in order to emphasize the importance of a realization process in the short term.

According to the FGA website, the 'Pilot Projects' consist of the following components/phases:

1. Protocol-based commitment between strategic partners;
2. Composition of the steering group;
3. Prior design research;
4. Scouting potential public, private or public/private builders with relevant project proposals/expressed social ambition (via call);
5. Judging by a steering group, the selection of five pilot projects/developers;
6. Composition of five project teams (designers + clients), launch of a master plan (potential impact on design level implementation);
7. Realization phase (building), quality control by master plan designers.

The above components provide a basis that can be adapted for each pilot project, which means it can be tailored to stakeholders' demands and challenges. In particular, the accompanying portion following the master plan will have to be tailor-made and managed in practice. Nevertheless, agreements in this regard must be laid down in the protocol at the start of the process.

In addition to the above, each edition of the 'Pilot projects' is documented and broadly communicated, both internally and externally, in accordance with the agreements that have been or will be made between the co-initiators. Usually, a communication plan is carried out for each pilot project involving the main partners, as well as about the learning process through symposia and publications, and a

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<sup>14</sup> For more information see: <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/subsite/terug-in-omloop> (accessed 16/11/2020)

<sup>15</sup> For more information see: <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/pilootprojecten>



Fig. 7 - Publication of the Pilot Projects 'Collective Living - Phase 1', 2013 (Source: FGA website)

follow-up process is planned with the partners to coordinate the development of the master plans and projects (Flanders, 2019).

### Lab space

The 'Lab space - a laboratory for complex spatial issues' is an open partnership between the FGA and the Flemish administration responsible for spatial planning. Depending on the theme, the partnership may be expanded with other administrations, experts, relevant organizations and actors. In this context, the 'Lab space' is a spatial-strategic framework for design research and critical analysis within which, together with various partners and actors, concrete study paths on urgent social issues are set up. Several studies have been developed within this framework, of which several examples are:

- 'Metropolitan Coastal Landscape 2100' which investigated development possibilities for the coast up to 2100, in the context of a changing climate and socio-economic context;<sup>16</sup>
- 'Energy landscapes,' which looked for strategies that can integrate renewable energy into our landscape in a sustainable and innovative manner;<sup>17</sup>
- 'Metropolitan Landscapes,' which, together with the competent partners of the Brussels Region, explored the guiding role of 'open space' for the metropolitan area of Brussels and its hinterland;<sup>18</sup>
- 'Low countries 2030-2100,' in collaboration with the Netherlands, is a joint exploration of spatial potential and metropolitan conditions in the long term<sup>19</sup> (Flanders, 2019).

### PPP Building Culture

As in most countries, public-private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly adopted for the realization of public construction, infrastructural projects, and community facilities in Flanders. To promote spatial and other related social gains in PPP projects, the Flanders Participation Company, the PPP Knowledge Center, and the FGA developed a project seeking to identify the spatial and social gains within PPP. Based on a survey and workshops with stakeholders and experts, a state of

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/ontwerpend-onderzoek/labo-ruimte/metropolaan-kustlandschap-2100>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/labo-ruimte/energielandschappen>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/labo-ruimte/metropolitan-landscapes>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/labo-ruimte/lage-landen-2030-2100>

affairs was drawn up and a recommendation note was handed over to the professional field and policy managers in 2016 (Ibid.)<sup>20</sup>.

### The BWMSTR Label

Every year, the FGA team searches for strong spatial concepts and integrated research questions that can make a positive social difference in Flanders. In this context, once a year, the *Bouwmeester Label (BWMSTR Label)* seeks innovative and policy-relevant ideas from research and design practice, supporting unsolicited research in its early phase. The laureates receive a modest budget to further develop their project into a file that can be accessed by policy makers and various administrations.<sup>21</sup>

### Strategic Projects

The FGA team also provides guidance on a number of strategic projects, either on its own initiative or at the request of partners. For example, in collaboration with several partners in the Brussels Region, an intensive process was undertaken surrounding the development of the Reyers site. In collaboration with the (former) cabinet of the Minister of Administrative Affairs Geert Bourgeois, the AFM Facilities Department, the Department of Administrative Affairs and the Flanders Participation Company, a design study was carried out for the renovation of the Ferrari site in the Brussels North district, framed in a long-term vision for the administrative buildings of the Flemish government in Brussels. The FGA also took the initiative to undertake a study assignment to develop future scenarios for the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (Ibid.).

#### **4.2.3. Communication strategy**

Transversal to all the above activities and instruments, the FGA employs communications-based strategies to achieve their goals, namely to promote a culture of best practices and raise design aspirations across governmental sectors. Besides the communicational activities developed by their team, the FGA usually collaborates and works together with other partners (e.g. the Flanders Architecture Institute) to communicate specific themes. The FGA also actively contributes to the wider

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<sup>20</sup> For more information see: <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/pilootprojecten/pps-bouwcultuur>

<sup>21</sup> For more information see: <https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/instrumenten/bwmstr-label>



debates on topical issues through participation in and on national and international conferences, publications and other initiatives.

### Bouwmeester Office

The FGA office (Atelier Bouwmeester) is where the FGA's team operates and where all *Open Call* juries take place. The Atelier is located in the roundabout of the Ravenstein Gallery in Brussels, a location which prominently makes the spatial policy of the Flemish government and the work and efforts of the Team FGA particularly visible, for both partners and stakeholders and for the general public. Within this space, workshops and public receptions substantively linked to the operation of the FGA Team are regularly organized. The Atelier also includes a gallery for small, limited-duration exhibitions.



Fig. 8 - Workshop 'Metropolitan Coastal Landscape 2100' /Source: FGA, 2019 © Nik Naudts)

### Debate and publications

The FGA team regularly publishes publications that disclose the results of their operations and activities to a target audience. The FGA also frequently writes articles about current themes in the professional world of architecture, urban planning and spatial planning on their website or in specialized magazines, which are supplemented by targeted interventions in the general press to actively put themes and projects on the agenda. As Lisa De Visscher (2019) states: "a master builder or a quality chamber are powerful means of stimulating a critical climate. They contribute directly to the debate and their first task is to have a continuous discussion about



architectural quality with clients and government administrations.” This means that besides supporting public clients, the FGA is entrusted with the mission of advancing the Flemish government’s architectural policy, which imbues them with the legitimacy necessary to promote and foster discussion and debate and to have a strong voice within the public administration, the professional media, and the industry.

#### International cooperation

The FGA also pursues an international cooperation policy, namely through their participation in several conferences abroad. In 2012, the *Vlaams Bouwmeester* team was present at the International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam, and in collaboration with the Flemish Architecture Institute (VAI), it provided the Flemish contribution to the Venice International Architecture Biennale.

### **4.3. Selection procedure**

The FGA’s appointment is the result of a demanding procedure and each has a mandate of five years (Leo Van Broeck, interview: 2018)<sup>22</sup>. After a public announcement open to all, candidates are required to describe their vision for their tenure as early as their first application for the post. The first shortlist is determined by an independent jury representing various strata of the built environment disciplines, including both practitioners and academics. Shortlisted candidates move on to the next stage where they are presented with a fictional problem akin to what a Bouwmeester might face, and as such are asked to present their solution in a few different formats, including presentations and writing, within a short amount of time. A final stage then includes interviews with ministers who will ultimately have the final decision. The whole process is entirely anonymous, in that at no stage does a candidate know who their competitors are (Ibidem).

Nevertheless, according to Olivier Bastin (interview: 2018), one of the factors that has been most crucial to the success of the FGA is the fact that most of their team has remained the same since the office’s inception, thus allowing for the preservation of knowledge across various Government Architect mandates.

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<sup>22</sup> The first FGA was Bob Van Reeth (1999-2005), who was followed by Marcel Smets (2005-2010), Peter Swinnen (2010-2015), Stefan Devoldere (acting position; 2015-2016) and Leo

Van Broeck (2016-2020). In August 2020, the Flemish Government appointed Erik Wieërs as the new FGA for a period of five years (2020-2024)

## 5. RELATIONSHIP WITH FORMAL (REGULATORY) TOOLS

Although the FGA's mission is defined by statute, they do not have any formal (regulatory) tools at their disposal. As referred to previously, their mission is delivered through several informal policy tools in order to help others realize spatial quality projects, to launch innovative research projects, and to participate in public discourse by guiding clients in selection procedures, entering into alliances and responding to current themes. Nevertheless, as noted above, one of the FGA's tasks is to provide advice about sticking points and gaps in the regulations in relation to spatial quality. In this sense, the FGA regularly supervises whichever sets of regulations have an impact on the built environment, so that the position may function as a proactive quality tool that leaves enough scope for creativity within the design process. In this context, the FGA can ask for specific advice from a group of experts in the review of building regulations or other spatial design legislation. Nonetheless, the advice provided about the regulatory framework may or not be followed by the government, which usually also consults with other development actors and stakeholders.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. ALLIED FINANCIAL MECHANISMS

As explained above, the FGA does not have any decision-making powers when it comes to urban development projects as well as allied financial mechanisms that may influence how certain public or private investments are made. Rather, their work is accomplished by providing support and persuading public developers to pay attention to design quality, which indirectly will improve the overall quality of the public buildings and developments. Nonetheless, as explained in section 3.1, the position of the FGA and their 15-person team are employed and paid for via public expenditure. In addition, besides a specific budget for current expenses, the FGA has an annual budget of more or less €400.000 to promote studies, initiatives, pilot projects, etc., and is also allowed to enter into specific partnerships with other

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<sup>23</sup> Within the architectural sector, the representation of the Flemish Architects and the supervision of the profession are

ensured by the Order of Architects and other professional organizations.

stakeholders (e.g. universities) to maximize the outcomes and scope of the initiatives (Ibidem).

## 7. CHALLENGES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

The appointment of the FGA expresses a government's commitment to promote better places. However, the FGA's influential capacity and ability to have an impact have limitations as they rely only on 'soft power modalities' to convince others to raise design standards and dedicate enough time and resources for good design to flourish. The built environment is a cross-sectional policy domain, involving different decision-makers at various sectors and levels of public administration, as well as a wide range of private development actors, which means that it will take time to reach a desirable societal change that values design quality. Considering this long-term ambition, the FGA and their team must demonstrate their added value as a key player in the wider design governance system as a complement to the formal regulatory system, so that their position and institution are not seemingly lost amongst political alternation or economic crises.<sup>24</sup>

Related to the above, the FGA must also identify the right balance between their independent status and their governmental appointment throughout their mandate. Although one former FGA (interview: 2018) argued that he had "the right to speak freely and give opinions on what is better, without having the power to decide (...) even if the truth is annoying, or inconvenient," this represents a continued challenge. On one hand, the FGA is appointed as a contracted staff member for the duration of their mandate by the government (See section 4). On the other hand, the FGA has the status of being an independent expert entitled to provide solicited and unsolicited advice on the quality of public projects, given that they are allowed to make public statements in an apolitical and neutral manner. Considering that an FGA's recommendations are non-binding, FGAs tend to provide unsolicited advice and public statements when they want to raise or criticise certain issues, although they must also be sensible when it comes to "which battles are worth fighting" so it will not

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<sup>24</sup> In 2014, the Flemish government announced the replacement of the FGA by a board of five part-time experts: "When the mandate of the current Flemish Government Architect has expired, we will set up a Bouwmeester College with an advisory role in the Department of Spatial Planning." It

consists of five part-time expert architects with a temporary mandate and (partly) co-elected by the architectural civil society." This led to national petition against the abolition of the FGA signed by more 2500 people. Source: <https://architectura.be/nl/nieuws/6606/eerste-reacties-op-afschaffing-vlaams-bouwmeester>

create too much hostility among the ones they intend to influence, among which includes governmental bodies.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding equality issues, in general terms, the FGA promotes the development of better public buildings (e.g. a public school or a library) and improved public open spaces (e.g. a renewed park or infrastructure), which allow for a better quality of life for all citizens and especially those hailing from socio-economic groups which cannot easily access high quality environments. Within the Open Call procedure, the FGA also seeks to guarantee a proper balance between the firms selected in the first phase of the competition, making a qualitative pre-selection of ten design teams and ensuring that it includes a diverse range of design approaches, a mix of young and established practices, national and international teams, etc.

## 8. KEY INNOVATIONS, SUCCESSES AND IMPACTS

Although similar bodies may exist in other jurisdictions, a key innovation of the FGA is its broad mission to promote design quality through a ‘soft power’ approach. As noted previously, the FGA does not have any ‘decision making power’ over the development process, which distinguishes them from the ‘city architect’ position that exists in many cities across Europe. This entails that the role does not have formal competences within the spatial planning framework or development control mechanisms conferred by planning or building regulatory frameworks. Rather, the FGA is equipped with a wide range of informal (non-statutory) instruments to support and assist public developers, contribute to vision formation and reflection on urban design, as well as to influence and persuade development stakeholders, other interest groups, and the community to raise their aspirations about the quality of the built environment.

Although the FGA is administratively placed within the Chancellery Department, they are expected to work as an independent expert and advisor to the entire Flemish administration. As was seen in the previous section, this independent status presents some challenges within the wider design governance system. Nonetheless, this “in-and-out” position near to the cabinet offers the FGA the legitimacy to connect

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<sup>25</sup> In 2015, Peter Swinnen, the third FGA, was dismissed by the Flemish government before the end of his mandate as a result of an audit report. Some news agencies and newspapers

also reported the government’s dissatisfaction with the critical positions the FGA held about certain public projects. For a recap see: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/ontslagen-vlaams-bouwmeester-peter-swinnen-was-geen-onbesproken-blad-bef63b67>

with and work across the whole government, public administration and agencies of the public sector. Compared to their Dutch counterpart, the FGA also represents the innovative nature of providing support to public clients, both at the regional and local levels, as well as housing agencies, non-profit organizations in the care sector, etc. This is mainly done via the aforementioned Open Call, within a top-down and bottom-up perspective, but also through other assistance and advice tools as described in section 4.

The FGA design governance instruments also present some innovations. The Open Call procedure is considered to be less burdensome for designers compared with the traditional design competition process. Based on a two-phase design competition approach, only the teams selected for the second stage of the Open Call (five out of the initial ten) will have the opportunity to develop a design proposal, which avoids all of the applicants investing in a great amount of resources in the first phase of the competition. The 'Pilot Projects' also represent an innovative method of connecting different stakeholders in order to carry out urban design research, ultimately fostering a co-design approach and collaboration about complex spatial issues.

Over the last 20 years, the FGA and their team have been able to affirm themselves as an institution (Ibelings, 2009). Despite some uncertainty in 2014,<sup>26</sup> the FGA team has remained untouched and their main mission maintains the same remit. The FGA has also been able to successfully implement the Open Call procedure with a high rate of realized projects. Considering that public clients are not obliged to follow this procedure, it demonstrates that the Open Call is an efficient support service for selecting designers for public commissioning. As an example, despite the City of Antwerp having its own city architect, this local council "often makes use of the Open Call procedure due to the quality of all of the professionals involved" (Ibelings, 2009, p. 67).

About its impact, in a book about the first 10 years of the FGA, Hans Ibelings (2009, p. 17) observes that the current policy implemented in Flanders has been successful with mounting evidence testifying to that fact. One of the visible results would be the high-quality public buildings that received commissioning support by the FGA (ibidem). According to information on its website, in the twenty years it has existed, the FGA has launched 40 Open Calls, the last being in July 2020, which in total amounts to 688 projects. From this number, 303 projects have been or are being realized, 198 were cancelled, with the remainder still in the making, ranging from small schools to medium-sized public offices to urban planning frameworks. Another direct impact has been the vast amount of publications produced by the office, from the 'Pilot Projects' to research projects and other initiatives.

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<sup>26</sup> See Note 24.

According to Liefoghe (interview, 2020), the FGA's task of providing support has also had an indirect yet positive impact on how public clients undertake and deliver public commissioning. In fact, the Open Call also provides a capacity building activity for all participants, mostly for the principals that represent the public clients. The different stages of the Open Call procedure function as an intensive workshop for the principals, enhancing their skills, competence and knowledge. Another indirect impact has been an enormous driver promoting Flemish building culture and the public awareness of the government's responsibility in improving the quality of the built environment. In part, this has been the result of the FGA's continued activities focused on persuasion and awareness raising, such as the provision of awards, interviews, lectures and debates across Flanders.

## 9. EXAMPLES

Although the FGA and their team have several instruments at their disposal, the Open Call has remained their main tool for supporting public clients across Flanders and Brussels (Fig. 8). To illustrate some of the Open Call projects, six examples of different buildings projects and plans will be provided below.

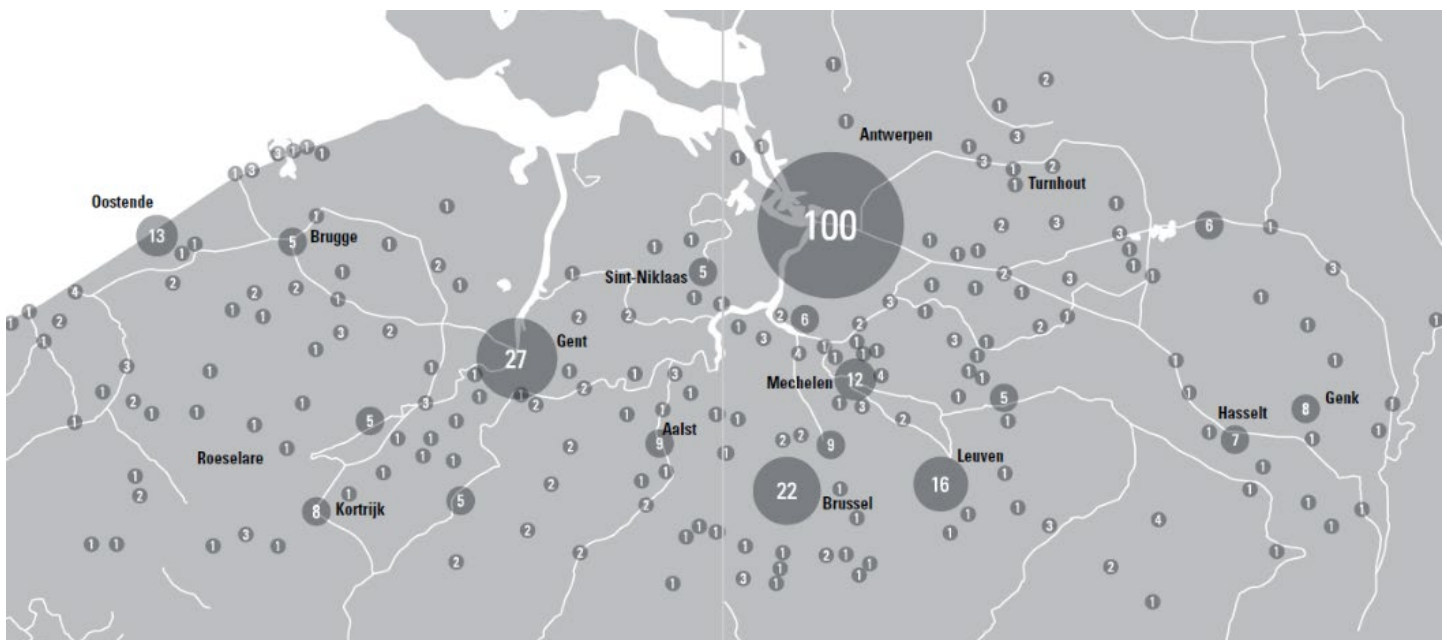


Fig. 9 - Distribution of the Open Call projects between 2000–2013 (Source: Flanders, 2013, p. 15)

## 1. Saint Ursula Primary School

Open Call: 04 Project: 08

Location: Laeken (Brussels)

Designers: Tom Thys and Adinda Van Geystelen

Year: Award: 2004 - Realization: 2009



Fig. 9 – Saint Ursula Primary School @ Jan Kempeneers

## 2. Theatre square Antwerp

Open Call: 06 - Project: 11

Location: Antwerp

Designers: Studio Associato Secchi-Viganò

Year: Award: 2004 - Realization: 2009



Fig. 10 – Theatre square Antwerp @ Stijn Bollaert



### 3. Kazerne Dossin Memorial, Museum and Documentation

Open Call: 13 - Project: 01

Location: Mechelen

Designers: AWG Architecten

Year: Award: 2008 - Realization: 2012



Fig. 11 – Kazerne Dossin Memorial, Museum and Documentation, Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights © Stijn Bollaert

### 4. Master plan and image quality plan for the centre of Retie

Open Call: 16 - Project: 20

Location: Retie

Designers: BRUT

Year: Award: 2009 - Realization: 2012



Fig. 13 – Masterplan © BRUT, LAND, Mint, O2 consultation



## 5. Residential care centre Sint-Truiden

Open Call: 18 - Project:14

Location: Sint-Truiden

Designers: Van Belle & Medina architects

Year: Award: 2010 - Realization: 2016



Fig. 12 – Residential care centre Sint-Truiden © Tim Van De Velde

## 6. Waalse Krook Media Library

Open Call: 18 - Project: 01

Location: Ghent

Designers: Cousse & Goris architecten, RCR Aranda Pigem Vilalta arquitectes

Year: Award: 2010 - Realization: 2016



Fig. 14 – Waalse Krook Media Library in Ghent © Tim Van De Velde

## 10. KEY LESSONS AND TRANSFERABILITY

The appointment of a Chief Government Architect (*Bouwmeester*), or similar governmental unit, is a practical method for the government to implement a public policy on architecture and provide leadership on design governance. Acknowledging that the state is one of the major clients of the construction industry and one of the largest property owners, it should set an example by promoting good practices as the owner, developer and user of public buildings. As has been seen, the FGA has been entrusted with promoting design quality as a cooperative aim across the various agencies and departments of the Flemish government. Through the Open Call and other support tools, the FGA has been able to influence public clients in raising design standards of a wide portfolio of public buildings and developments from different sectors and levels of public administration.

With a reduced team and budget, the FGA assumes a proactive role as an agent of change promoting new concepts and ideas. Taking advantage of their partnerships and collaborative agreements with different stakeholders, the FGA has been developing an innovative design research agenda on relevant topics, thereby producing new knowledge and evidence about design processes and the built environment. In addition, the FGA and their team has been promoting a place-making culture through the awarding of best practices and other persuasion-related activities directed towards development actors, specialized audiences and the wider public in order to raise awareness about the value of design quality.

This means that by setting up a Chief Government Architect team, or a similar governmental unit equipped with a similar set of informal design governance tools aimed at promoting design quality, the government established the institutional framework and resources to inform, influence and support development actors in achieving better places, complementing the traditional “command and control” functions of the state. Through the employment of a wide range of informal cultural and quality delivery tools, this small institutional unit can pursue a national/state design agenda with a medium and long-term view, delivering a vision on the direction that society in general and development actors in particular should take.

Regarding its transferability, the FGA position was established in 1999 following inspiration by the Dutch government’s establishment of their own government architect. Ten years later, this position was also created in the Brussels-Capital Region followed by several other Belgian cities. In 2009, Ireland established the position of the ‘State Architect,’ although with slightly different competences and, more recently, Sweden has appointed its first ‘State Architect’ (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019). Independently of the name and tools at hand, the position of ‘government

design champion' has started to be transferred and transposed to other contexts and thus institutionally adapted to the various administrative frameworks, political and historical paths regarding the governance of urban design.

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## KEY ONLINE RESOURCES

<https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/>

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## URBAN MAESTRO

This paper was drafted as an external contribution to the Coordination and Support Action “URBAN DESIGN GOVERNANCE - Exploring formal and informal means of improving spatial quality in cities across Europe and beyond”, also known as “Urban Maestro”. The Action was funded by European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 831704 and implemented from 2019 to 2021 by a consortium comprising the University College London, Brussels Bouwmeester Maître Architecte and UN-Habitat.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Design and layout: Kidnap Your Designer, Brussels  
Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA)

