



A ULI Advisory Services Panel Report

Maasmechelen, Belgium

June 2011



Urban Land
Institute

About ULI

ULI – the Urban Land Institute – is a non-profit research and education organisation supported by its members. Founded in Chicago in 1936, the institute now has over 30,000 members across 95 countries worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines and working in private enterprise and public service. In Europe, ULI has over 2,000 members supported by a regional office in London and a small team based in Frankfurt.

ULI is a think tank, providing advice and best practices in a neutral setting – valuable for practical learning, involving public officials and engaging urban leaders who may not have a real estate background. By engaging experts from various disciplines, the Panel is able to arrive at advanced answers to problems which would be difficult to answer independently.

ULI brings together leaders with a common commitment to improving professional standards, seeking the best use of land and following excellent practices.

ULI shares knowledge through discussion forums, research, publications and electronic media. All these activities are aimed at providing information that is practical, down to earth and useful so that on-the-ground changes can be made. By building and sustaining a diverse network of local experts, ULI Advisory Panels are able to address the current and future challenges facing Europe's cities. We are focused on best practice urban development – providing 'thought leadership' in what makes a city great and how to achieve it.

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About ULI Advisory Services

ULI Advisory Services Panels provide strategic advice to sponsors on land use and real estate development issues. Panels link developers, public agencies, and other sponsors to the knowledge and experience of ULI and its membership.

Since the first Panel in 1947, ULI has delivered over 600 Panels across 12 countries and four continents in cities including New Orleans, Philadelphia, Hong Kong, Brussels, Shanghai and Barcelona. Sponsors praise Panels for their comprehensive, pragmatic approach to solving land use challenges.

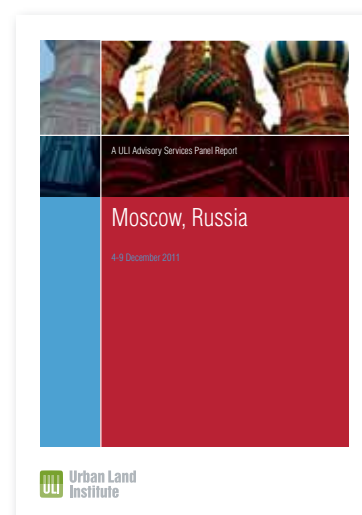
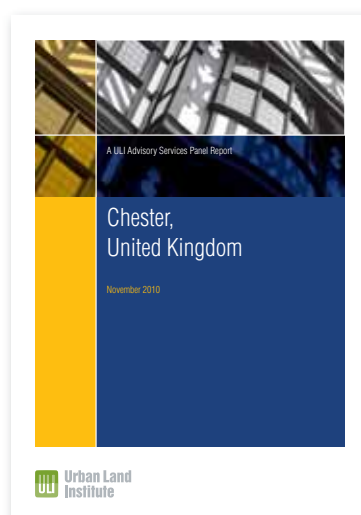
ULI's Advisory Panels bring together experienced real estate and land use professionals to develop innovative solutions for complex urban challenges, land use and real estate development projects and government-delivered programmes.

Panels help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as urban redevelopment, land management, development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, workforce and affordable housing, and asset management. ULI's services diverse clients including local governments, private developers, community development corporations, and many other public, private, and nonprofit organisations sponsor advisory services assignments.

The objective of a Panel is to provide a consensus view that offers an alternative vision and approach to how a city might deal with the key challenges facing it and take advantage of opportunities on offer.

Panelists are not compensated and freely volunteer their time in order to:

- connect, learn and share with each other as a unique team of experts;
- experience an exciting and special city in a unique way; and
- employ their expertise and play a rôle in helping a city shape its future.



Acknowledgments

The panel would like to thank Mayor Georges Lenssen, Tourism Alderman Erik Kortleven and the people of Maasmechelen for inviting the Urban Land Institute to comment on the challenges and opportunities facing the city. Their openness and generous hospitality was greatly appreciated – particularly in giving time to meet with the panel and hosting the stakeholder interview day at City Hall.

The panel also wishes to thank Value Retail for their sponsorship of the panel, in particular David Winkels for his help and preparations of the panel briefing, on site

logistics and support throughout the week. David and his colleague Jack Quinn provided invaluable assistance and support during the panel process without which the panel would not have been able to do its work.

The panel hopes that their recommendations and comments will provide new ideas and also help to effectively deliver existing plans for Maasmechelen to capitalise on its existing assets, tourism potential and the opportunities presented by the National Park.



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Sponsoring Organisations

The ULI advisory panel team were invited by the community of Maasmechelen and the stakeholder interviews were hosted by the Mayor, Georges Lenssen, at City Hall.



The Maasmechelen municipality comprises the former mining communities of Mechelen-aan-de-Maas, Vucht, Leut, Meeswijk, Uikhoven, Eisden, Opgrimbie, Boorse and Kotem. Each maintain their own identity yet operate effectively as 'Gemeente Maasmechelen' with a population of 37,118 people¹ – making it the fifth largest municipality in the province of Limburg.

Maasmechelen has a very strong Flemish identity as part of the Flanders region of Belgium but also has a thriving and diverse immigrant population and is able to capitalize on its very close proximity to the Netherlands, and, in particular, the European hub of Maastricht.



Founded in 1992, Value Retail is the only company that specialises exclusively in the development and operation of luxury outlet shopping villages in Europe. The Value Retail network includes nine leading outlets within reach of European gateway cities, including London, Milan, Dublin, Munich, Barcelona, Paris, Frankfurt and Brussels/Antwerp/Cologne/Düsseldorf. Consumers are offered the world's leading luxury brands in their own outlet boutiques, with prices up to 60 percent off year-round. Since opening the first village, in Bicester, Oxfordshire, in the UK in 1995, the collection of villages has experienced double-digit gross sales growth each year. In 2010, the collection of villages attracted more than 26 million visitors, a 10 percent increase from the previous year.



Strategically located at the crossroads of Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany, Maasmechelen Village lies at the centre of one of the most densely populated and affluent regions of Europe, with more than 30 million people within the village's communication area. Maasmechelen Village has 104 stores, with plans to increase to 112 by the end of the year. In the first quarter of 2011, sales at the village were up by 23 percent versus 2010. As part of the official tourism recognition received by the town of Maasmechelen, Maasmechelen Village received special permission to trade on Sunday, and is the only outlet shopping destination in Belgium open on Sunday. Value Retail Maasmechelen Village were the sponsors of the ULI advisory panel in June 2011.

¹ As of November 2010 – source www.Maasmechelen.be

Introduction

The city of Maasmechelen sits on the Meuse River at the crossroads of Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany. Throughout the city's history, this enviable location has attracted a diverse mix of residents and visitors. Once a flourishing mining town, Maasmechelen attracted inhabitants from neighbouring countries as well as from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. Today, about 80 different nationalities (18.7% of the population) – including Dutch, Italian and Turkish – can be found in Maasmechelen, which lies in the Belgian province of Limburg.

With a population of 37,118,² Maasmechelen is the fifth largest municipality in Limburg, which is in the Flanders region. The city is geographically large, as well, with 7,628 hectares of land.

The municipality has about 405 kilometres of road infrastructure and 78 kilometres of cycle roads that make up part of the “8th world wonder,” the Limburg cycle route network. Invented by a former mine engineer from Maasmechelen, the cycle network boasts more than 2,000 kilometres of signposted cycle paths and draws many locals and visitors.

From the 1920s to the late 1980s, Maasmechelen was home to a thriving mining industry. As workers immigrated to the Eisden coal mines, the demographics of the region became more diverse. This had an impact on the cultural mix of the community, which is still felt today, for example, in the numerous international restaurants in the area.



In 1987, the mine closed, causing Maasmechelen's unemployment rate to rise dramatically. As of August 2009, the unemployment rate was 15.2%. The agriculture sector has all but vanished, with only 1% of the population – about 55 people – working in this sector. Of employed residents, 7,620 work in the building sector and 6,644 work in the “third” sector, which includes government workers and those in leisure, education and commerce.

² As of November 2010 – source www.Maasmechelen.be



However, regeneration efforts and the rise of the tourism sector in Maasmechelen have helped employment in the municipality to rise in recent years. The community got an economic boost in 2001, when Value Retail opened Maasmechelen Village, a chic outlet shopping village. This helped Maasmechelen achieve recognition as an official tourism zone, allowing local merchants – including the more than 2,300 independent merchants – to open for business on Sundays. There is great potential for Maasmechelen to do more with its official tourism status but although many conversations are underway there is, as yet, not so much action in this area.



Hoge Kempen National Park

Maasmechelen lies just on the eastern side of Hoge Kempen National Park, which is the largest woodland and nature reserve in Flanders. Maasmechelen contributed half of the land to form the 6,000-hectare park, the only national park in Belgium. Opened in 2006, the national park gave Maasmechelen another significant asset with which to attract visitors. The park boasts large lakes, 100-meter peaks with magnificent views and large stones that date to the last ice age. It also is home to an abundant array of wildlife, including many rare and exceptional animals.



Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen. © Paul Hermans

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hoge_Kempen_028.jpg

Five locations, including Mechelse Heide in Maasmechelen, have been selected as gateways to the national park. Works are in progress to create a better reception at these gateways, including information kiosks where visitors can purchase walking and cycling maps. The five gateways will serve as ideal departure points for the 36 round walks, which vary from 3 km to 14 km in length, around the park. The park also includes an extensive cycling route network and opportunities for ranger-led tours. Admission to the gateways and the National Park is free. The local economy has already benefited from its proximity to the park and revenues from sustainable tourism in Hoge Kempen are forecasted to reach 24.5 million euros per year by 2012.

In addition to being one of the five gateways to the park, Maasmechelen is also a potential site for development of the Main Gate to the National Park on the location of the Eisdien mine site (adjacent to Maasmechelen Village). The Main Gate development project – scheduled to get under way in late 2012 – is to be the new tourism attraction for Maasmechelen containing state-of-the-art visitors' centre, field study centre, exhibition and conference space.

The Panel's Assignment



Panel on site visit in 39degree C heatwave!

Once an active and bustling mining community on the Meuse River, Maasmechelen found itself at a crossroads in the 1980s, when mining activity stopped, leaving the community's economy devastated and unemployment skyrocketing. Steeped in history, natural beauty and culture – as well as an enviable location in the heart of Europe – Maasmechelen needed to reinvent itself.

Knowing that a return to heavy industry was not an option, community leaders developed a new zoning plan that attracted medium and large multinationals south of the E314 highway. To the north, however, the community needed to find a purpose for the former Eisden mine site, which sat empty.

Maasmechelen opted to pursue a tourism-driven business model and, in 2001, a new factory outlet centre – Maasmechelen Village – opened. With Value Retail as the centre's operator, Maasmechelen became a “fun-shopping” hotspot. A decade and millions of visitors later, Maasmechelen has been put firmly on the map, not by heavy industry as in the past, but by the leisure industry.

Despite this success, Maasmechelen has not leveraged its position as a tourism and leisure destination and, thus, has not seized the opportunity to attract more investors, businesses and visitors. A group of key stakeholders agreed that an independent “outside-inside” opinion on leveraging Maasmechelen's assets to secure inward investment and to provide a more complete visitor experience for current and future tourists was needed. Stakeholders were keen to get the objective, expert-oriented approach provided by the ULI Advisory Services Panel. In preparation for the Advisory Panel, stakeholders identified several challenges they felt Maasmechelen must overcome in order to build on its foundation as an international tourist destination.

- **Shopper retention** – Many shoppers combine their visit with other activities or attractions in Limburg, but not necessarily in Maasmechelen. Upgrading local sites and adding new attractions could better retain these tourists.
- **Budget** – The community must have the budget and funding to implement its tourism projects. In the past, Maasmechelen has developed ideas – such as its city marketing plan – but not supported it with adequate funding.
- **Lack of hotel accommodation** – Maasmechelen offers nice B&B's, but does not have sufficient and high-quality hotels needed to attract and retain corporate and leisure guests.
- **No established landmark** – The lack of big cities in Limburg makes the provincial identity stronger and the tourism “product” broader, but it also makes it more difficult for a community like Maasmechelen to stand out and carve out its own identity.
- **Nature** – Maasmechelen has been designated as one of five gateways to the 5,000-hectare Hoge Kempen National Park and the Eisden mine site adjacent to Maasmechelen Village is a leading contender to be the site of the Main Gate to the park. This gives Maasmechelen an opportunity to expand its economic development, business attraction and visitor retention efforts through nature-based tourism.

The Questions

The following two questions were agreed by stakeholders ahead of the panel's visit.

1. What does Maasmechelen community need to do to better leverage its tourism assets to secure inward investment?
2. How could Maasmechelen provide a more complete visitor experience to the next generation of tourists?



http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leut_-_Sint-Petruskerk.jpg

The Panel Process



The municipality officials and city stakeholders agreed to invite the Advisory Services Panel immediately before the Fifth Annual Tourism Ambassadors Seminar, which would be held 30th June 2011, in Maasmechelen. This yearly event, of which Maasmechelen Village is one of the main organizers, brings together private and public professionals from the tourism industry and has become a key event on the regional and national tourism professional calendar. The other sponsors include; Toerisme Limburg, Provincie Limburg, Gemeente Maasmechelen, TVLimburg and Het Belang van Limburg.

The format proposed by ULI aimed to provide objective analysis of the Maasmechelen Village and its future as a tourism destination. While the panel was a shorter format than other ULI panels, it allowed ULI expert members to provide their objective analytical advice and to participate in the Tourism Ambassadors Seminar.



ULI then proceeded to select an international board of panellists from their membership, with experience and expertise in the fields required for this particular panel. Each panel is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI without remuneration. After panel briefing calls, a briefing book was circulated several weeks prior to the site visit to allow panellists to study background information and become familiar with the assignment.



Day 1:**Presentation Eisden mine site development**

Stijn Bijmens, director of LRM, gave the panel members an overview of the Eisden mine site development plans.

Site tour

Panellists were taken on a tour around Maasmechelen by Mayor Georges Lenssen and David Winkels of Value Retail. Sites visited included:

- Maasmechelen Village
- Eisden mine site (mine towers, Euroscope cinema, hotel, English garden, music academy)
- Mine Hill (Maas Valley)
- Eisden (Garden City, church, casino, sports stadium, canal)
- Mechelen a/d Maas (Town Hall, chapel)
- Eisden coal railway station
- Sibelco (visit of sand mine site, sub gateway National Park)

Dinner with key stakeholders

Day 1 ended with a working dinner with key stakeholders including the Mayor, Tourism Alderman and local business and community leaders.

**Day 2:****National Park Hoge Kempen presentation**

Robert Majchrowicz, project manager Main Gate National Park, provided a presentation about Hoge Kempen national park.

Interviews

The panel and ULI staff conducted two rounds of interviews with another group of invited stakeholders, including local citizens, business owners and academics.

Panel working sessions

The panel and ULI staff undertook intensive working sessions, taking previous research and the information gathered from the interviews, presentations and site tours so far.

Day 3:**Tourism Ambassadors Seminar 2011**

The panel and ULI staff attended the Tourism Ambassadors Seminar in Maasmechelen.

**Presentation**

The panel and ULI staff gave a presentation, followed by a Question-and-Answer session. Following the presentation, the panel members and ULI staff met with the media for interviews.

Once the panellists returned home, they continued to work together to produce this report, outlining their recommendations in more detail before publication of the agreed text.

Strategic Themes

The panel's first action was to break down the broad assignment questions. Both the Tourism Ambassadors Seminar powerpoint presentation and this report follow this structure:

1) What does Maasmechelen community need to do to better leverage its tourism assets to secure inward investment?

- a) Assets and Challenges
- b) Segmentation
- c) Vehicles / Mechanisms
- d) Quick Wins
- e) Big Ideas



2) How could Maasmechelen provide a more complete visitor experience to the next generation of tourist?

- a) Establishing a Brand
- b) Local Promotion
- c) Regional Promotion
- d) International Promotion

During the three-day advisory panel process, several strategic themes emerged. These over-arching themes informed the panel's discussions on the assignment and are supported by anonymous quotations from the stakeholder interviews, which are used throughout the report.

- Huge unrealised potential

"It's a hidden gem here."

"Tourists don't see what Maasmechelen has to offer outside Maasmechelen Village."

- No sense of 'place' – physically disjointed

"The place-making rules are not in play."

"We have no natural city centre or gathering places."

- Lack of integration and synergies between partners

"We need a good vision – we need to act like a city rather than a collection of elements."

"Maasmechelen has all the elements – it is a question of sharing them and bringing them all together."

Q1 – What does Maasmechelen need to do to better leverage its tourism assets to secure inward investment?

Assets and Challenges

“Geographically we are the front door of Europe, but the world doesn’t know what we have here.”

Many countries claim to be the front door of Europe ...



... but Maasmechelen could prove it! You really are in the heart of Europe - why not use that to stake a claim to bring people in from outside? Others are doing it with a far weaker story!



Map from www.maasmechelenvillage.com

Indeed, location is one of Maasmechelen's greatest assets. Maasmechelen lies at the crossroads of Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany and is at the centre of one of the most densely populated and affluent regions of Europe. More than 30 million people fall within Maasmechelen's communication area and the city draws on Belgian, Dutch and German markets.

Maasmechelen Village, which opened in 2001, gave Maasmechelen a significant economic development boost by attracting large number of visitors to the region. The upscale retail outlet village, operated by Value Retail, is located on the former Eisden mine site and lies within two-hour drive of 19.8 million potential visitors. This purchase power catchment area illustrates just how enviable Maasmechelen's location is. Further, a July 2009 survey by the University of Munich found that 78% of all first-time visitors to Maasmechelen Village want to make a return visit.

The opportunities that come with being adjacent to the national park cannot be underestimated either. The park appeals to a wide array of visitors and, along with Maasmechelen Village, gives the city two significant tourism "anchors." With more than 200 km of signposted trails, more than 7,000 species of fauna and flora, a 39-km cycling loop as well as ranger-led walks, talks and activities, Hoge Kempen lures visitors for a few hours as well as for several days.

Another significant asset for Maasmechelen is its official designation as a tourism zone. This recognition enables Maasmechelen merchants to be open for business on Sundays. The designation has significantly helped Maasmechelen move toward its goal of becoming a year-round tourist destination, now and in the future. As a recognised tourism zone, Maasmechelen also can compete with other Belgian tourism zones, such as the Belgian coastal communities of Ostend and Knokke.





Despite its array of enviable recreational, historical, natural, gastronomic and shopping options that appeal to tourists of all ages and backgrounds, Maasmechelen suffers from a lack of integration of its tourism and marketing efforts. This has resulted in missed opportunities to leverage its assets to attract inward investment. The fragmented, piece-meal and isolated approach to business and visitor attraction means that Maasmechelen's tourism strategies lack focus; send inconsistent messages and fail to develop the Maasmechelen brand.

With various stakeholders working independently, instead of as a unified, comprehensive team, in Maasmechelen's tourism message lacks the power it could have. Maasmechelen has a solid foundation to make it a premier tourism destination, but without an organised, strategic and comprehensive approach, Maasmechelen will continue to miss opportunities to draw visitors and investment with the region's beauty, character and leisure activities. The panel outlined Maasmechelen's assets, as well as the challenges the community faces.

Assets	Challenges
Entertainment <ul style="list-style-type: none">• MMV• Retail• Cinema Nature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Park• Cycling• River & Waterways• Garden City Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mining history• Chapel building• City centre/commercial street• Festival/carnival	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor signage• Poor Communication/marketing• Lack of Accommodation provision• Need for improved Integration & connectivity• Need for a clear vision for the future & strong ambition• Mobility & Connectivity

Segmentation Strategy for Placemaking

"We lack here a sense of place and need to be clear on the personality."

As emphasised throughout this report, Maasmechelen has a strong set of assets and distinct features which contribute to its tourism and investment offer. It is well-placed to respond to a number of economic, business and consumer trends that many cities and places face today. However, Maasmechelen, like many other regions adapting to global shifts, is a place in transition.

Although it has responded to changing economic circumstances, it has not done so at a consistent pace. And, given the significant scale of changes since the coal industry's decline, the urban development has not been even. In fact, Maasmechelen suffers from a fragmented sense of place. There is an overarching theme that Maasmechelen can realise, but given the level of place fragmentation, the city needs to begin by segmenting its placemaking strategy.

The panel identified three distinct areas that contribute to the overall make-up or "place" of the city and that have a specific set of investment needs and audience appeal.³

³ The panel did not highlight the National Park as a distinct area, as it has its own placemaking strategy and momentum. The national park is of such significance for the brand of the entire area that the gateway into the park will signify its importance within this current categorisation.

- The first area the panel identified is the 'Maasmechelen Shopping Village' and its surrounding area, including the coal mines and the future gateway to the national park.
- The second area the panel labelled as "The City Centre," but indicatively of Maasmechelen's fragmentation, this area is not a natural "centre." It does have significant landmarks, including the Het Heilig Hart College and stretching up to the commercial centre and retail cluster of Pauwengraaf.
- The third area encompasses a number of natural and heritage features that the panel temporarily termed the "Cycling/River/Community/Heritage." This area runs from Lanklaar in the north through Mechlen-Aan-De-Maas, down to Geulle in the South, and includes the valley cycling route. The conceptual place of this area might be extended to include a number of other important heritage and community sites, such as the Garden City and the Mill.

Maasmechelen has the potential to be this ...



... but it has only achieved this ...



Segmentation Strategy for Placemaking in Maasmechelen				
Place/Product (Places with distinctiveness and key assets)	MM Shopping Village <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Shopping- Hotel (Mine Office)- Cinema	City Centre <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Commercial centre- Concert Hall (converted chapel)	Community <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Garden city- Cycling route- River trail- Heritage sites	Nature- EcoTrail- Reconnecting
Consumer Profile	Local Shopper			
	International Shopper			
Investment Type	Heritage Visitor/ & Cyclists			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developer- Developer Investor- Fund Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Shop frontage funds- Regeneration branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Shared narrative- Owner of vision- Center Parcs?	
Flagship Projects	National Park Main Gateway	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Piazza- Concert Space/Chapel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Integrated Information Centre	

Each of these areas demands a different strategy for different types of consumers, although some may overlap and together they might make a total tourist experience. The following table sets out how these “places” and specific projects within those areas demand various types of investment and might be identified with certain flagship projects. Segmentation Strategy for Placemaking in Maasmechelen Place/Product

In segmenting these places into their distinct characters and responding with appropriate investment plans, Maasmechelen might form a coherent place-making strategy and most significantly be well-prepared for future developments in the National Park. The lead promotional identity for the city-region over the coming years should be driven by the scale and importance of the National Park. One of the central pillars of the National Park philosophy being the idea of ‘reconnecting nature with nature’ – this idea fittingly tells the story of the Maasmechelen region over the past 20 years. The region has skilfully created natural features in an urban context. As one interviewee said ‘Our nature is Urban’. Maasmechelen’s tradition of respect for heritage, its creation of leisure infrastructure, and its vision of future tourism trends integrates well into an overall ‘ecotrail’ tourism brand.



Fresco's in the Saint Dimitrios orthodox church (picasaweb.google.com)



Vehicle/Mechanisms

"We need a good vision – we need to act like a city rather than a collection of elements."

To have a professional touristic service the city of Maasmechelen needs to organise the structured manner to achieve that. Now we can notice that a lot of people had interesting ideas and a vision about the tourist possibilities of Maasmechelen. However, the city is lacking a structure that brings all the ideas together so that they can be executed. Whilst there are a great number of organisations this single structure does not exist.

A simple structure can be found by a "Commission for Tourism" or the "Maasmechelen Tourism Commission". In this commission you find the politicians (decision-makers) together with the touristic stakeholders. The Commission would be chaired by the Mayor and include the Alderman for tourism, representatives of the difficult political parties – both majority and opposition. The Commission would also feature representatives of the touristic stakeholder community: hotels, restaurants, local businesses and bodies such as the National Park, Maasmechelen Village and LRM.

When there is open communication between the members of the Commission, they can discuss and share a lot of interesting ideas for the touristic development of the city. At the moment many of these ideas exist but are not properly communicated or shared.

A functioning Tourism Commission would allow the ideas to find their way to the decision-makers and be properly debated. Procedural bureaucracy is minimised when all the decision-makers are together i.e. forms can be signed by all relevant parties at once. The politicians have to give an answer and be accountable to the stakeholders. All of which ensures the Commission remains delivery-focused and plans are not allowed to stay in circulation for 10 years or more without anything happening!

This direct contact and discussion between the touristic stakeholders and the political representatives in a form of basic democracy – and fits with the 'Belgian Way' that informs all of our recommendations! The plans and ideas from the Commission can be executed by a social enterprise (in the form of a foundation or a city company) with a few professional touristic workers and a creative director / director of tourism managing the secretariat function.

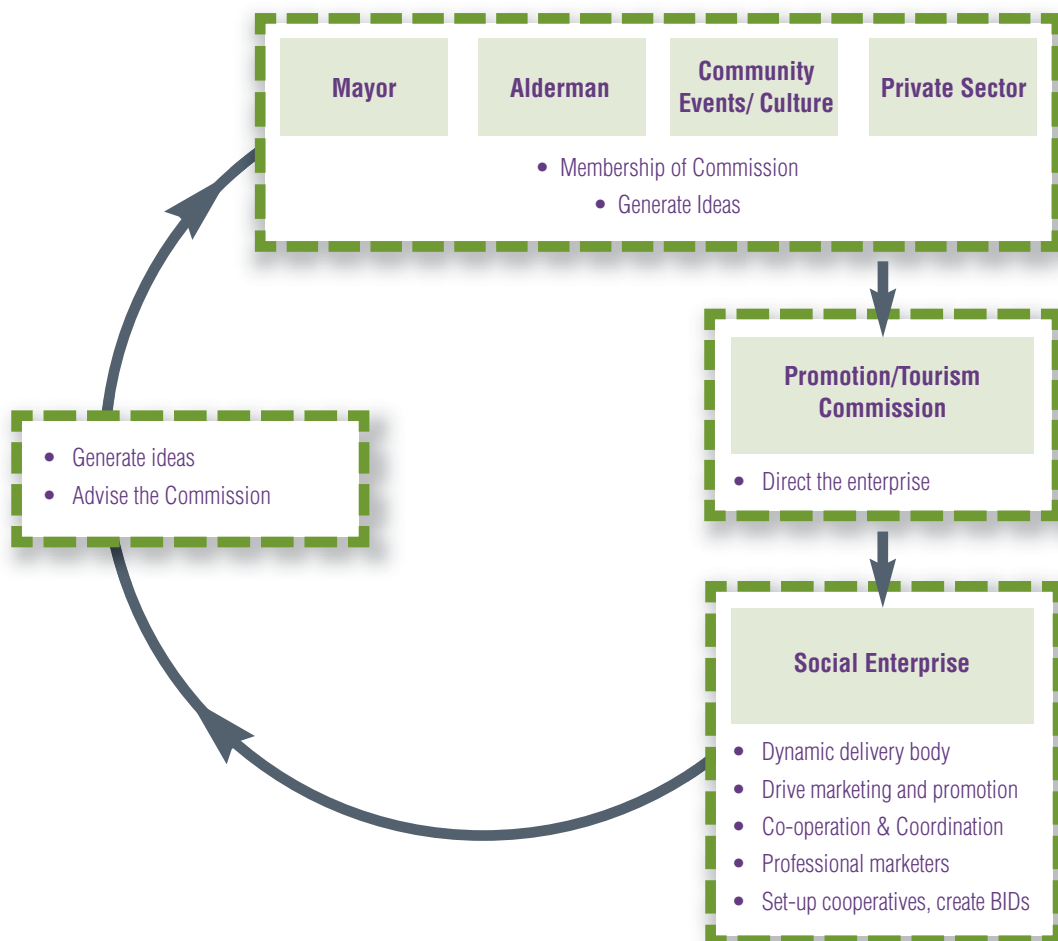
The task of the social enterprise is not just to execute the ideas of the Commission, because it should also be responsible for the whole tourism marketing and promotion. The social enterprise is the owner of the brand and has to awaken this brand.

The enterprise also has to make contact with and work together with investment companies and help them to realise their plans by working together to solve problems and ensure effective delivery for the company and the community.

Social enterprise which generates further mechanism – investment companies, community co-operations, brand owner, creative director, such as:

- Promote London Council
- Destination Edinburgh marketing alliance
- Knokke-Heist Tourism Commission
- European style BIDs (Business Improvement District)
- Turisme Barcelona

An effective operating structure



Quick Wins

Although the report so far aims to demystify city branding, it is still something of an abstract concept, particularly for local citizens and business owners. Therefore the panel recommends this selection of quick wins that can be enacted with minimal cost or workload to deliver results visible to the community of Maasmechelen.

"Nobody wants to invest because of the legal uncertainty (around planning permits) so everyone is waiting, sometimes for years." –

1. Create a promotion/tourism commission to agree on priorities and a small, effective social enterprise to deliver the work programme.

If the story is clear – if it's understood what's on offer and who is responsible for each element, then an investor is likely to come in. It's never easy to ask people to give up large amounts of money but if they can see an opportunity then they will. Value Retail has already understood there's an opportunity here and there are other investors here saying "let's do something more" so that should build momentum and help people to get behind something.



2. Write a shared place-making agenda:

Maasmechelen has moved from the coal-mining industry and jumped straight away into the tourism industry as its next economic future but as a result, things have happened at such a pace that it hasn't had the chance to catch up and create a total sense of place. That is the next thing that needs to happen.

- A manifesto set out by the Mayor but delivered through an independent workshop with key stakeholders
- Undergo a process of assessment, evaluation and recommendations

3. Agree on a unified brand:

*Maasmechelen Leisure Valley is a **phantom!***

- The Maasmechelen Main Gateway to the National Park
- Maasmechelen Village
- Maasmechelen Festival
- Maasmechelen Cultural centre

The exciting part of Maasmechelen is that you have all the potential – all the elements of a really successful destination are here but you have to pull together, share information, connect these elements and make them work together. Maasmechelen is your hero brand!

4. Signage – an international destination?

- Needs to be consistent and multi-lingual
- Maintenance needs to be improved
- If the taxi drivers are getting lost (as ours did) – then you have a problem!

Maasmechelen has the music, food and restaurants to hold a bigger Festival that attracts many more tourists. You have almost all the practical assets you need to be an immensely successful tourism destination – except the accommodation and the co-ordinated experience to make tourists feel welcome!

5. Understand the accommodation issue

- Research the potential demand for tourist accommodation
- Invite investors to assess



Maasmechelen's Winter Carnival



6. Create an annual signature event during the summer to complement winter carnival.
 - A multi-cultural focus, to celebrate diversity and multi-cultural roots of the community
 - “Maasmechelen Mediteranee” through the arts, theatre, culture, food, dancing
 - Look for inspiration to other smaller cities in Belgium that host festivals such as Mano Mundo – an annual world culture festival held in Boom attracting 10,000 visitors each year.



Big Ideas for Longer Term

“We need to connect the dots”

1. Create 'gathering places' within the city, and a mechanism to link them together which is walkable and cyclable to create a connected network to discover all of Maasmechelen
 - Maasmechelen Village > Pauwengraff > Church Square
 - Derelict buildings around the church square could be developed into Hotels
2. Convert the Chapel to a concert hall/cultural centre
3. Inventory of derelict buildings to be restored and invested in:
 - Charming and characterful buildings
 - Hotels, Bed & Breakfasts to fill current gap in accommodation provision
4. Harness the power and investment of existing partners to ensure the brand resonates
5. Attract strategic investment such as foreign wealth funds from Asia for capital projects
6. International Marketing – via MMV and Retail offer to Asia and emerging markets through promotions. 'China day' 'Maasmechelen day'

Q2 – How could Maasmechelen provide a more complete visitor experience to the next generation of tourists?

The future market

The future market will consist of international visitors who are much more eco-focused. The National Park gives Maasmechelen a huge lead here. Further ahead, we should look to the Asian markets.

Profile of the future consumer

- Social media & Digital tourism
- Anticipate how users will interact with destination
- Connectivity between users
- Virtual information centre

Establishing a brand

The branding of Maasmechelen is a critical part of developing the identity and the story of what Maasmechelen represents. The branding should reinforce the positioning and should communicate the tangible and intangibles associated with Maasmechelen. The brand should be a powerful tool for promotion at a local, regional and international level. Moreover, it should be a promise and guarantee of what the visitor will experience in the city.

Maasmechelen IS your brand – in fact it is your ‘hero’ brand! It is already established and can act as an umbrella for the wide range of offers in the municipality – there is no need to create new, confusing and contradictory identities.



Maasmechelen is already your brand:

- The Maasmechelen Main Gateway to the National Park
- Maasmechelen Village
- Maasmechelen Festival
- Maasmechelen Cultural centre
- – and whatever else you choose to develop here

“We need to keep aware of what’s around us (Maastricht, Genk etc) and make a complementary offer – not to give the same thing. We cannot compete but should celebrate our differences!”

Trend of responsible tourism

“Maasmechelen is a collection of manmade landscapes... Even our nature is urban. We should do something with that.”

The brand itself can be created through association with other brands which are already developed and recognised by the clients. Value Retail has already created great public recognition for the name ‘Maasmechelen’ through Maasmechelen Village. Other Value Retail villages Las Rozas or La Roca Villages in Spain, for example, have perhaps leveraged this even better for the destination as a whole and not just the retail outlet. There is an opportunity here for the city authorities to take a more active role in owning and actively managing the branding of their city alongside the existing success led by Maasmechelen Village but it can’t be reliant on the shopping village – it needs to have a wider and a broader story - encompassing the National Park and other local assets and opportunities.

Effective use of the brand “Maasmechelen” is created it can also be used to create sub-brands.

Turisme Barcelona has done this very successfully with the “Barcelona Shopping” and “Barcelona Sport” brands; Maasmechelen Main Gateway to the National Park, Maasmechelen art festival, Maasmechelen Carnival, Maasmechelen Shopping, etc. These sub brands send a clear message to the consumer of the experiences which are being focused on the destination.

City Branding Case Study: Destination Edinburgh Marketing Alliance

Despite regularly ranking as one of the top 10 destinations in Europe, the city of Edinburgh had a fragmented approach to its marketing efforts. A wide range of organisations promoted the city to a variety of audiences, but the city had not harnessed this activity to create a consistent message.



In 2008, a task group formed by the city to look at tourism, talent and trade found that the city had a fragmented approach to promoting Edinburgh. The group also identified a need for clarity of common purpose, a need to create a Destination Promotion Strategy and a need for leadership. This would lead to an opportunity to capitalise on assets and maximise cross-selling.

In response, Edinburgh created the Destination Edinburgh Marketing Alliance, a public-private body organised to promote Edinburgh as a destination by drawing on the city's strengths and delivering a unified image and message. DEMA brings together a coalition of leading businesses and organisations to promote the city through fresh co-ordinated planning and to enhance Edinburgh's reputation as a place to visit, invest, live, work and study.

Networks of public- and private-sector organisations, support DEMA by lending crucial expertise and resources to promote Edinburgh.

Since being established, DEMA, which is focused on the customer, has used comprehensive market intelligence to refine the city's Destination Promotion Strategy. A strong sense of leadership exists and a strategic focus has been created. Organisations, businesses and other stakeholders can access a "one-stop-shop" for help aligning their promotional activities. And, professional expertise is shared readily. This has given the city the tools it needs to manage its competitive identity in a way that stands out.

For more information, visit

http://www.edinburgh-inspiringcapital.com/about/creative_edinburgh/our_partners/dema.aspx



A brand needs to be promoted at different levels and to different audiences:

Local level

- Virtual The future generation that will live and work in Maasmechelen
- Virtual Cater for local residents & visitors
- Virtual 'My Maasmechelen'

Regional level

- Virtual European neighbourhood

International level

- Virtual Existing and new partnerships with other cities



London while advising on the development of a single brand for London. This overall strategy involves advising the mayor on the long-term approach to promoting London; how the city could be promoted as a whole by its visitor attractions, cultural, sports and other organisations; market opportunities, geographically and sectorally; and the most cost-effective marketing methods for each market. Although the Council primarily focuses on external promotion, it does provide input on specific promotion initiatives targeted at Londoners.

The Council consists of representatives from London's promotional agencies and business groups and reports to the Mayor.

City Promotion Case Study: Promote London Council

According to the Greater London Authority, London's promotion has always been ad hoc rather than systematically professional. The upcoming 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games made this apparent. As a result, the Promote London Council was established as part of the Mayor's Economic Development Strategy to oversee "the future promotion and rebranding" of the British capital with "one all-encompassing vision."

Established in 2009, the Council, which concentrates mainly on promoting London overseas, provides leadership and focuses on attracting new visitors and business to

Customer Experience Lifecycle

Manage the experience of the visitor throughout the whole customer experience lifecycle (before, during and after they travel) to ensure that the maximum relationship is built with the client. Establish emotional links between the visitor and Maasmechelen as an international destination throughout the experience.

The elements that will need to be focused on will be of two kinds:

- Hard : infrastructure & equipment (e.g. colours, lightning, green spaces, signage, urban furniture,...)
- Soft: human factors (e.g. entertainment, opening hours, diversity of the supply, welcoming,...)

Every component in Maasmechelen will have certain key elements which are intrinsic to Maasmechelen and flow between the different communities creating an integrated leisure destination



Connectivity with the future generation

Smartphones and the use of social media have radically transformed the way that visitors experience a destination. A visitor experience for the next generation should react to and anticipate how connectivity between visitors and between visitors and the village will change in the future.

- Connectivity between users: Maasmechelen Village and other retail organisations already use tools like Facebook, Twitter etc. as a way to enhance the relationship between the users and between clients and the destination. The City of Maasmechelen should also take advantage of and use connectivity between users to develop the relationship with the users, particularly around the new Gateway to the National Park.
- Anticipate how users will interact with the destination on site and create content to support this. The virtual information centre is already a key part of our search and must be used more interactively

Tourism experience based on what the future generation needs:

- Responsible tourism: will be part of our DNA, it will no longer be a nice to have but rather a prerequisite. RLKM exemplifies how this is already happening.



Deserted town square in Maasmechelen



(Re)Connection Model used by RLKM

RLKM Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland
The panel believe this model is perfectly applicable for Maasmechelen:

- (Re)Connect nature with nature
- (Re)Connect people with nature
- (Re)Connect business with biodiversity
- (Re)Connect policy with practice
- The visitor experience should anticipate this and every aspect of the experience should be based on sustainable initiatives (which are communicated to the visitor)
- Authenticity: create experiences which are authentic and create the relationship between the City of Maasmechelen and its visitors
- Time limitations continue to be a key challenge and the resort should ensure that it maximises the time available to enjoy and have experiences. This means maximum ease of movement: no queues, no waiting etc.
- A stay in Maasmechelen should represent quality time. Quality time in itself the luxury that will attract people.



Sociability, traditions and rituals help to create entertainment that attracts people and engages people to return for repeat visits.

Sociability

- It means a welcoming, interactive, friendly, diverse place. A space with life, diverse, it can be defined also by social networks, street life, evening uses
- A place where you want to meet, to share to enjoy and where you want to come back
- A successful place needs Gathering Places — piazzas and squares where citizens and visitors can congregate and thrive.



Rituals, customs and traditions

- Bring life to a city and are an integral part of the character and spirit of the place
- Example of rituals, customs, traditions:
- Venice carnival, Social rituals, Wine rituals, Historical Festivals, Fun rituals like Maasmechelen's carnival,
- People naturally take pride in their local food, places, history, landscape, and businesses
- It is time to make sure that the City of Maasmechelen gives these local assets as much support as they need

Ideas to integrate in the Maasmechelen Main Gate

- Give the destination a new image and create a new focus of interest in this area known for its natural setting
- The idea was also to combine shopping, sport and entertainment with nature, using new technologies
- "Placemaking" to be used to create and give life to the centre all year round.

Source: © T&L Top G. 2019

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Consider Entertainment / Edutainment

- Build on the success of the Maasmechelen Carnival to Create other events, shows, street life, or exhibitions to create life, movement within the place and the commercial streets
- These should include everybody, local residents and visitors alike
- You can have active & passive entertainment or more educational 'edu-tainment'
- Leverage the opportunities presented by the National Park to build on the success of the Limburg bike trails and offer more outdoor activities integrated with a broader offer within the city itself – including culture, shopping and gastronomy
- Provide a unique experience to visitors
- Maximise the results for investors
- Enhance the natural beauty of the site

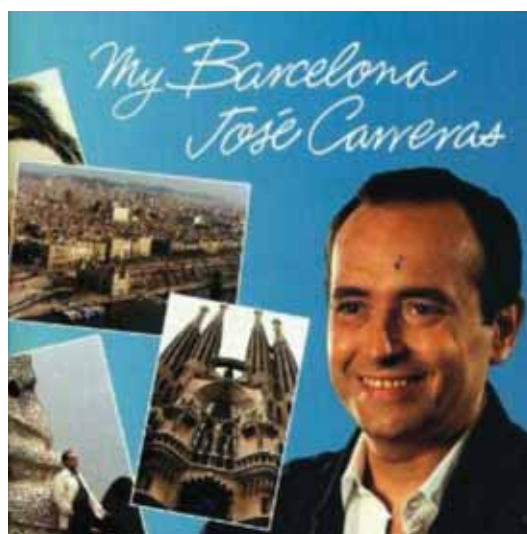




Organisation of collaboration

The experiences in the City/destination should already be well thought out, planned and organised to allow the seamless enjoyment of the visitor. This requires coordination between the different products and services in the destination so that the visitor can move around the city/destination as he/she pleases.





Promotion

Local promotion (150 kms around)

The future generation that will live and work in close proximity to Maasmechelen. The city must be a place which is built for the needs of the local as well as regional and international visitors. Local promotion means engaging the local community in the Maasmechelen experience. Barcelona Tourism has developed very successful campaign in 2011 which invites the local community to experience the city as a tourist. This concept could be applied to Maasmechelen and should allow the local population to experience and explore the city.

A special effort must be made to give ownership of the tourism/edutainment/leisure experiences of the village to the local community so that they identify with it and are proud to be associated with it. Initiatives should also be created which give special care and offers to local people. A practical way to do this is to allow local people to tell their story on story boards in the village which explains "my Maasmechelen" and tells their story of why they enjoy it (from a local's point of view).

Regional promotion

Regional promotion should leverage the proximity of Maasmechelen to a variety of countries. It should be an invitation to European countries to explore something special close by, while at the same time providing the opportunity to escape from their day-to-day. Regional promotion should create links and connections between the other offers in the region, thereby enforcing relationships with other destinations and providing a varied offer. For example, this could build on the existing regional cycling network.

Regional promotion should also focus on specific circuits which could be developed, for example gastronomy routes. These routes have worked very successfully in many destinations (Spain, Italy, France) and continue to be an important part of regional product/experiences in these countries. Even the most successful destinations focus on building regional links which enhance and support the individual destinations and the regional destination.



International promotion

At the moment there is no international destination image or brand here in Maasmechelen. International promotion should leverage its location in the HEART OF EUROPE. It should be an invitation to Asians, North Americans and Middle Easterners' to explore Europe starting at its heart. International promotion should create links and connections between the other similar tourism/retail/cultural offers around the world, thereby enforcing relationships with other destinations and providing an instant identity. International promotion should also focus on specific customers like Chinese citizens who already identified themselves with certain aspirational brands and places. This has proved very successful developing destinations in South Eastern Asia associated with luxury Europeans brands. Even the most successful destinations focus on building international links which enhance and support the individual destinations identity and image as an international destination.

Top Recommendations

- Use the identified quick wins aim to leverage the extensive local assets to create a consistent, coherent brand that you can promote locally, nationally and internationally to create more success for Maasmechelen in the future.
- Share information, ideas and results that are already here among the business and civic community.
- Demonstrate new results and communicate them clearly.
- Do not be afraid to have a bigger vision
- Take the opportunity for Maasmechelen to brand itself as gateway to national Park and key to Region of Limburg. Claim that identity before somewhere else does!

“It’s a hidden gem here – it felt very much like we were in the country but also in the heart of a cosmopolitan place – it’s very exciting. If Maasmechelen can organise itself and overcome some of its existing hurdles in terms of accommodation, capacity and some of the difficulties that it has in being quite fragmented... If it can pull together to create a total, coherent story, then there are definitely lots of assets here that will be of interest to people from all around the world.”



Public art at Maasmechelen Village

Panellist Biographies



Panel Chair, David Adam is Founding Director of Global Cities, a strategic consultancy specialising in advising cities, commercial and cultural organisations on positioning themselves in global markets.

David has held roles such as Head of Emerging Markets at the London Development Agency and led on positioning London in the key markets of China, India, Russia and South America. He spearheaded Mayor Livingstone's branding and market activation initiatives in India in 2007 and - with Mayor Johnson's administration - was responsible for London House: London's brand platform during the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

Global Cities has advised London, Beijing and Shanghai on brand development and implementation. They are currently working with the city of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city on their brand development and international promotion strategy. Global Cities is also currently developing a research project for London - a Global Cities Cultural Index - and advising on London's brand implementation during 2012.

Global Cities is also currently developing a research partnership to secure EU funding on the topic of how cities can capture and secure investment from the global market place.

David graduated with 1st Class Honours in Politics and International Relations. He has previously worked in policy formulation at the Institute for Public Policy Research, one of the UK's leading think tanks, and as an independent consultant in the economic development industry.



Eduardo R. Lafforgue is an Associate at T&L Europraxis. He has over 27 years of experience in product development, development of hotel and residential-tourism projects in more than 15 countries in Northern Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North and South America.

Before joining T&L, Mr. Lafforgue was Director of International Expansion of Grupo Marina D'Or where he developed the North African, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern residential-tourism market emphasising acquisitions of emblematic land properties and business development, establishing strategic partnerships, opening offices and hiring teams in Turkey, Egypt and Morocco. Prior to that he was Vice-president of Acquisitions Europe at INTRAWEST's European offices in Lausanne, Switzerland and Murcia Spain. He has also acted as Vice-president for CDP-Groupe Expordev, the commercial branch for CDP-Capital (Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec) where he collaborated in the development of several hotel and commercial development projects in Argentina, Brazil and Poland. Mr Lafforgue has held top management positions in several companies operating in the real estate development sector including Eagle America Canada Inc (Canada), CDP Capital's Groupe Expordev Inc.(Canada), Carea Inc. (Canada), Quebecar Inc (Canada), Corporación Targa S.A, ND Construcciones S.A. and Dez Construcciones S.A. (companies of Grupo DEZ in Mexico).

At T&L EuroPraxis he has specialized in product development, Real Estate management and strategic hotel expansion acquisitions. He stands out for his long experience in the international residential-tourism market.

He holds a MBA specialized in Real Estate Management and Urbanism from Fundesem, as well as a Diploma in Marketing from the Ibero American University and a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture from the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

He speaks Spanish and French (mother tongues) and fluent English and working knowledge of Italian and Portuguese



Fons Theerens

Studies:

Master in Modern History (KUL 1980)

Bachelor in History of art (KUL 1982)

Graduate in documentation and library science (Brussels 1984)

Professional career:

1985 - 1995 : docent at the Provincial Library School (Brussels)

1985 - 2005 : Head librarian of the Public Library of Knokke-Heist

2005 : Director of the Leisure Department of Knokke-Heist (tourism, culture, museum, library, sports, ...)

Publications

Many books about the history of the region

Inside back cover
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