

COST C6
LIVING AND WALKING IN CITIES
WALKING FOR PLEASURE IN BELGIUM

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Foreword

The title of this speech could be more precisely “Walking and biking for pleasure in southern Belgium”. Indeed, I'll describe here an original and ambitious project of the regional Walloon government intended for the promotion of non-motorised travelling modes. This project is called the “RAVeL project”.

The RAVeL project : where does it come from ?

Belgium a country with a dense railway and inland waterway network

In the 19th century, Belgium was one of the most industrialised countries in the world. It generated a very dense transport network, particularly railway lines and inland waterways. Just before the 2nd world war, one can count in Belgium about :

1. 10.000 Km of railway tracks (300 m per Km²), so that there were always railway tracks behind each door :
2. 800 Km of inland waterways (main rivers and canals) lined with towpaths.

A risky situation to see the network broken up and sold.

After the 2nd world war, the development of road transport resulted gradually in abandoning a significant part of those infrastructures (more than 50%). In the beginning of the 90's, after the federalisation of the public authorities in Belgium, there was a serious danger that these unused networks would be broken up and sold piece by piece.

An answer to social needs through a policy of preservation.

In the mid 90's, the Walloon government decided to save this heritage, avoiding its partition and maintaining it as a public area. At the same time, a strong social need for better environmental quality was perceptible in the population living in some of the most inhabited areas of western Europe. Those existing unused infrastructures were an ideal opportunity to answer such expressed needs, promoting quality of life through sustainable modes of travel and heritage development.

The RAVeL project : what does it mean ?

RAVeL is a French acronym for : "**R**éseau **A**utonome des **V**oies **L**entes", which means "Segregated Routes Network dedicated to Slow Traffic".

RAVeL is then :

1. **A major continuous network** covering the entire Wallonia, as a link between the cities and the villages, the natural and the cultural heritage. It has a similar administrative status to the main road network also managed by the regional government.
2. **Apart and physically segregated from the current road network**. Where this network is implemented along existing roads it's theoretically necessary to provide a specific lane for the RAVeL, apart from the general motorised traffic.
3. **Using ancient railways lines and towpaths** along rivers and canals
4. **Slow routes dedicated to stroll and leisure** (exclusively non-motorised users : walkers, bikers, handicapped people, horse riders, skaters, rollers, ...). Those infrastructures are not conceived to allow sporty uses like bike or horse races.

To summarise, the RAVeL aims to be a major network with some functional features but above all conceived with social, cultural, economic and environmental objectives.

The RAVeL project : objectives

1. **Improve the general mobility in a sustainable way**, promoting the obvious non-polluting modes (meaning the non-motorised ones), both on long and short distances, in rural and urban areas, for utilitarian journeys or leisure travel.
2. **Offer optimal safety and attractiveness conditions to the weakest users**, implementing a real adapted infrastructure (specific priority rules on some crossings, high level of investment on some other crossings or to go through cities) in a gratifying environment (improvement of landscapes, implementation of green corridors, increase in value of natural and cultural heritage).

3. **Offer better social and health environment to the Walloon population**, particularly the underprivileged one, encouraging walking and biking. Indeed, those ways to move are supposed to bring benefits in terms of health (for instance : reduction of the number of some cardiovascular diseases), accessibility to basic services for the non-motorised ones (schools, shopping, culture, ...), and social integration multiplying the meeting opportunities in a not stressful environment and developing positive attitudes towards the public facilities.
4. **Promote the natural and cultural heritage at the regional and local level**. The RAVeL project is supposed to increase the value of this heritage (to bring some means to maintain, protect and improve it) and to offer good discovery conditions as well towards the natives as the foreigners.
5. **Develop a "soft" tourist industry**. The RAVeL is supposed to generate a friendly positive image of Wallonia, contributing to a sustainable local development.

The RAVeL project : State of development in Wallonia

By now (June 2001) about 900 Km of routes (mostly on towpaths) are accessible and useful.

Nevertheless, the goal is the restructuring of the 1.100 Km still available of ancient railway lines or towpaths, which are interesting for this project.

To this, the Walloon regional government (previous and actual covering at least the period 96 - 2004) has voted expenses up to 5 million Euros per year (half dedicated to railway lines, half to towpaths) for the development of the RAVeL network.

Generally, for rehabilitation of railway lines (surfacing of 2,5 to 3 m wide path, eventual treatment of collateral area for joggers and horses, intervention on the surroundings, treatment of the junctions or the crossings, ...) the average price is till now about 100.000 Euros per Km (that is to say, the possibility to restructure 25 Km per year within the actual budget dedicated to this project).

For the towpaths along the rivers and the canals, the interventions concern mostly the improvement of strategic points to maintain the continuity of the itinerary (it's about the treatment of crossings with main roads or the building of new bridges over waterways, ...). It concerns also the treatment of the sections through urban areas or inner cities, where the towpaths disappear and are replaced by industry, main roads, ...
Elsewhere, the towpaths generally still do exist and cause mostly maintenance expenses.

The RAVeL project : positive effects

Regional promotion through the heritage's discovering and knowledge towards the natives and the foreigners.

The existing RAVeL itineraries are original supports to discover the countries travelled through. Very detailed brochures edited in 4 languages enlighten and promote, itinerary by itinerary, either the natural or built-up interesting things of the served areas (actually 6 brochures are available). Those brochures are not only "ordinary traveller's guides" but they contain a lot of details, anecdotes and enquiries in agreement with the "RAVeL Spirit" : each itinerary is divided into "sequences" never too long according to the pedestrian or the biker pace. The accessibility difficulties are clearly listed, the description focuses either on visual, hearing, smelling aspects, ...

Moreover, some buildings or amenities along the itinerary can directly benefit from the implementation of the RAVeL (for instance old railway stations or equipment, bridges, ancient locks,)

Improvement of landscape and environment quality

The RAVeL network is clearly leaning on heritage preservation and tourist development concepts. Thus, the principles of implementation (concerning accessibility and technical aspects) are appropriate to increase the attractiveness of the infrastructure through landscape improvement, maintaining of interesting biotops, qualitative furniture, respect of the distinctive features of the served areas, integration of an itinerary in the local purposes as access to gardens, meadows or houses,

Moreover, the RAVel is usually used by people avoiding causing damage to the neighbours : no atmospheric pollution, no noise, ...

Improvement of citizen's well-being and sustainability of cities

As said before, the RAVel is supposed to be a way to limit some motorised travel, particularly in dense urban areas. Therefore, in the cities, the functional aspects are certainly more important than in the rural areas, but one attempt to reach a similar quality level everywhere. The RAVel may not be only a specific lane added to the regular road's network. It's also a public area where people are supposed to meet, it's a linear greenery park, it's the spine of safe and attractive exploring walk-ways through the city, accessible to the children, the elderly and the handicapped people.

In this way, RAVel is a global project, contributing to improve the well-being of the citizens and the sustainability of the cities, as well as to enforce the social cohesion of the inhabitants. It answers a real social demand for leisure and quality of public areas in cities. It contributes to multiply the social and cultural exchanges while enjoying what has practically become a luxury nowadays : take one's time for stroll, leisure and having social contacts.

Strengthening of social cohesion through democratic procedures of implementation

Last but not least, the municipalities, the inhabitants of the villages and cities and certain non-benefit organisations are involved in this regional project.

After some bad experiences in the very beginning of the implementation process, the regional authorities decided to gather the main local actors and to let them contribute at every step in the practical definition of each new intervention, so that the project can lean on a real local democratic willpower. This willpower is expressed by the contribution of those actors in the maintenance of the provided equipment through conventions binding the regional administration (paying for the new developments) and the local actors.

The RAVeL project : European integration

During the year 2000, the RAVeL project was integrated into a trans-national European project on slow mobility. This last project is supported by the "European Green Ways Association".

It is the so called "RéVer" project, for "**R**éseau **V**ert Européen" - European Green Ways Network, in which France, Ireland, United Kingdom, Luxembourg and Belgium are actually involved.

The aim is to co-ordinate the existing infrastructure over the national borders and to develop the missing links to develop a real European slow routes network.

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