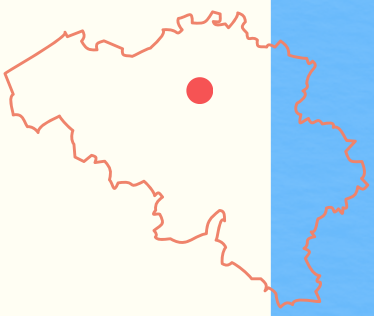
Citizens' Assembly on the River Dijle

City of Mechelen

INTRODUCTION

I**n 2024, the City of Mechelen organised a citizens' assembly to set the guiding principles for Masterplan Binnendijle.** The assembly's brief covered the river in full: banks, quays, walls, water quality, the balance between public and private space, urban biodiversity, adaptation, accessibility, social cohesion, and awareness. In short, placemaking not just for people, but for the wider ecosystem too.

The city planned the assembly deliberately as the starting point of Masterplan Binnendijle. Planning began already in 2023, well before Masterplan Binnendijle itself formally launched in March 2024. The assembly then ran in April and May 2024, so its 15 guiding principles could steer all that followed.



BELGIUM



ENGAGEMENT LEVEL

- ○ Inform
- ○ Consult
- ○ Involve
- ● **Collaborate**
- ○ Empower

MANDATE

Mechelen's governing parties agreed on the idea of a citizens' assembly even before Masterplan Binnendijle. It was part of their coalition agreement: at some point during this term, they would organise one, chosen by lottery. The city's executive board, the College of Mayor and Aldermen, formally approved the citizens' assembly's setup, methodology, and launch through a series of decisions between October 2023 and March 2024.

Political backing stayed consistently strong throughout: the mayor, aldermen, and city leadership were directly involved, repeatedly endorsing the process and assigning resources. The citizens' assembly also got backing from several advisory councils. These represent specific groups in the city: youth, culture, people with disabilities, diversity, elderly residents, and spatial planning. Their support gave the process broader legitimacy.

The city made a clear promise upfront: whatever participants recommended was meant to shape real decisions on the Masterplan. Their recommendations would be distilled into a set of guiding principles, and turned into a practical checklist, so they could actually guide the project's design. Every principle would go to the College and the project's steering group, and every relevant department would have to check it for feasibility. If something turned out not to be feasible, the city promised to explain why, openly. And later on, a public feedback moment would show everyone exactly how citizen input shaped the final plan.

RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Participants were chosen through a lottery. The city randomly drew 5,000 residents from Mechelen's population of 90,000, using an open source tool called Python, and then narrowed that group down further through **stratified selection**, a method that deliberately balances a group across specific characteristics, in this case age, gender, origin, education level, and neighbourhood, so the final panel would genuinely reflect the city as a whole.

The lottery and the stratified selection each ran as their own step. All 5,000 residents drawn, aged 16 and up, received an invitation by mail. Of those, 250 responded with interest and filled in a short questionnaire about their background. The city used those answers to run the stratified selection, narrowing the group down to 45 people. In the end, 35 of them took part in the full assembly.

Diversity wasn't left to chance at any point in this process. Beyond the stratification itself, the city called every selected participant personally, to ask about practical needs: language support, accessibility, transport, childcare, or dietary requirements. This personal check-in and focus on the wellbeing of the assemblymembers which the city calls its "hospitality line", also included a dedicated helpdesk and cooperation with the local poverty network, so people could find their way into the process with support, even before the first session started.

That same attention to diversity continued once the sessions began. **The city built an inclusive setting throughout**: clear communication, accessible explanations, multilingual support where needed, and a mix of plenary discussion, small groups, and microgroups, so people who might stay quiet in a large room still had a real chance to speak.

Participants received no financial compensation. Instead, the city's approach was to remove practical and social barriers wherever possible, so people could take part on equal footing, and feel genuinely welcomed rather than merely tolerated.



PROCESS DESIGN

Planning for the assembly began in 2023. During this **preparation phase**, the city defined the assembly's focus on the river project, chose its drawn-and-stratified format (as described under Recruitment and Participation), and worked out the practical requirements needed to actually run it.

The assembly then unfolded over several weeks in 2024. It opened on 17 April with an i**nformal introduction**. Participants took a boat trip along the river, experiencing firsthand the different perspectives at stake, both human and non-human. Afterward, a presentation explained the ambitions and meaning behind the transformation project.

Three full panel days followed: 27 April, 4 May, and 18 May 2024. Together, these three days formed one clear process, with a set structure and a clear end date. Each panel day combined several formats: plenary briefings, expert presentations, small-group work, and deliberation exercises. Concretely, this meant thematic group discussions, persona-based exercises where participants represented "the voice of nature" to bring non-human interests into the conversation, visualisation techniques to make abstract ideas concrete, and repeated rounds of refining and clustering the group's emerging recommendations.

A significant part of the three days went into **educating participants themselves**, on topics like ecology, urban design, water quality, and landscape philosophy, so that a genuinely diverse panel could form an informed opinion before making any recommendations.

A **neutral facilitator** led the sessions throughout, tasked specifically with keeping participation inclusive and balanced across the group. Outside experts joined at different points to contribute their specific knowledge during plenary and group sessions, keeping the deliberation grounded in evidence rather than opinion alone.

The City of Mechelen designed and coordinated the whole process itself, through internal staff from marketing and communication, strategy and ICT, and the Masterplan Binnendijle project team. Two **external partners**, Particitiz and Alteritas, were brought in specifically to create the script of the deliberation process and handle facilitation. **Thomas More University College** also partnered with the city, contributing to how the process itself was developed. That combination, city staff driving the process, external partners handling facilitation, and a university college contributing academic input, gave the assembly both legitimacy and methodological strength.

OUTPUT & FOLLOW-UP

The assembly produced two outputs. First, **detailed recommendations from each thematic working group**, covering quays, riverbanks, water quality, open water swimming, biodiversity, and public space design. Second, fifteen overarching Basic Principles, created by clustering and distilling those recommendations into a smaller, higher-level set. Together, the **Basic Principles** describe what it would take for the river Dijle to become an accessible, respectful space, shared by people, animals, and plants alike.

Both outputs were handed over during the assembly's final session, on 18 May 2024, to an official delegation from the College of Mayor and Aldermen.

From there, the principles moved into the city's actual planning process. They were placed on the agenda of both the Masterplan steering group and the College itself. Every relevant department then reviewed each principle in writing, explaining how it could be integrated or implemented, or, where that wasn't feasible, why not.

For the wider public, the city organised a dedicated feedback moment during the Construct Europe city festival, on 21 September 2024. There, using visualisations, the full panel of participants could see exactly how their input had shaped the Masterplan. Beyond that single moment, the assembly and its outcomes were also covered more broadly: on the city's website, in local news and on television, and on information towers placed at the project's future sites.

As for actual implementation, **the Basic Principles now function as a baseline for ongoing design and participation work.** The city has shared them with the external design bureaus now developing the project further. That design phase includes layered participation tracks: additional rounds of engagement with residents, passersby, stakeholders, and specific target groups, building on what the original assembly started.

The city expects to fully implement the Masterplan by 2027.

RESOURCES

The process was part of the larger, EU-funded Masterplan Binnendijle programme. Several College decisions approved the project's resources, expert involvement, and logistical support along the way. **The total budget came to around €30,000.** This covered facilitation, venue costs, communication, and evaluation.

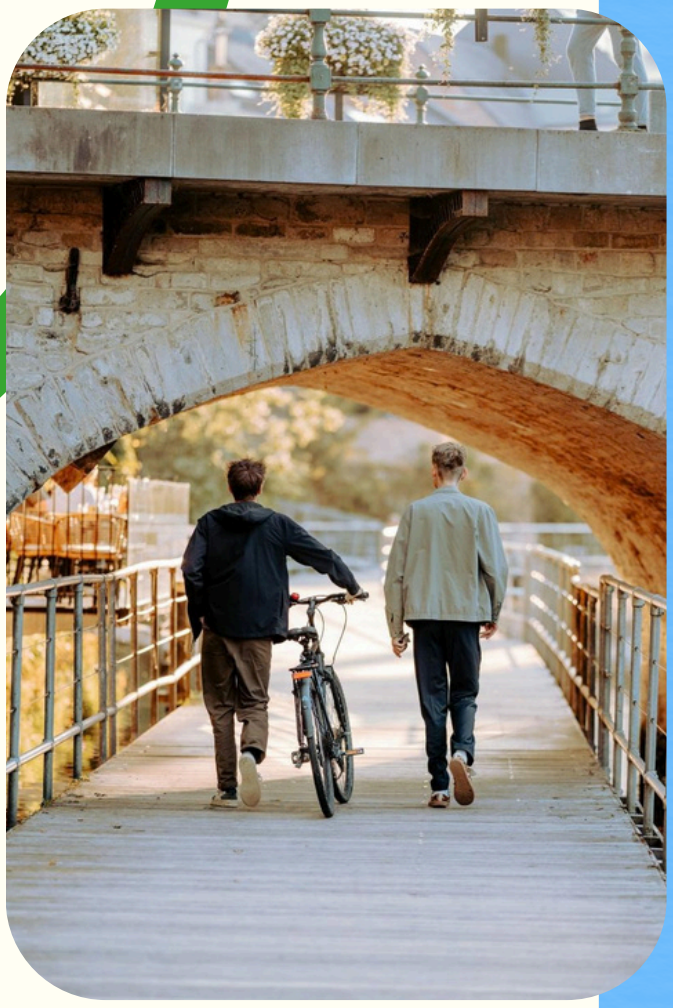
A wide range of **municipal staff** contributed: the mayor, aldermen, the general director and management team, and staff from strategy and ICT, the Masterplan Binnendijle project team, marketing and communication, and administrative services, who coordinated recruitment, logistics, and follow-up. **Five staff members worked directly and continuously on running the assembly itself**, drawn from strategy and ICT, marketing and communication, the climate department, and the project management office.

Beyond staff, **external resources** covered script design of the deliberation process and facilitation, expert speakers, and visualisation of the outputs. **Thomas More University College** also supported the definition of a clear and comprehensive central question, providing access to city venues and materials, and later carried out the formal evaluation (see Evaluation).



EVALUATION

Thomas More University College carried out the formal evaluation, through surveys after each session. It found high participant satisfaction, growing clarity and trust as the process went on, and strong appreciation for the expert input. It also flagged a continued need for clearer information and better language accessibility. After the final feedback session, participants also reported high satisfaction with the relevance of their own contribution.



STRENGHTS

- The process set high standards for **inclusion and hospitality** throughout.
- **Strong educational tracks** gave participants a genuinely immersive experience.
- The process built **a well-designed path toward final deliberation**, structured but not rigid.
- The city placed the assembly **at the very start of the project**, so its principles could actually shape what came next, rather than reacting to decisions already made.
- The city followed through politically and administratively, backing **real commitments** with a **public feedback moment**.
- The assembly generated **broad media coverage**, and a real increase in **public awareness** of the project.

CHALLENGES

- The process took **a lot of time** to design and run well.
- Meeting its own **inclusion standards** took real, **sustained effort** from the city, since hospitality has to be actively organised, not assumed.
- **Reaching lower-income residents**, and **people with lower cognitive or linguistic capacity**, required extra, deliberate effort.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest real time in the **selection process**.
- Build an **inclusive media plan** from the start, and involve stakeholders early.
- Treat **hospitality** as a design problem in its own right, not an afterthought.
- Think in terms of **service design**. Invest in accessible, comprehensive education. The more tangible you make the topic for a diverse group, the stronger the deliberation.
- **Mix different formats**, such as plenary sessions, small groups, and microgroups across education, recommendations, and deliberation, so everyone gets a seat at the table.
- **Secure political commitment before launching**, specifically a commitment to respond to the results.
- Invest in **professional, neutral facilitation**.
- **Plan follow-up early**, before the process even starts. Decide in advance how recommendations will be reviewed, who signs off on them, and how the results will be shared publicly.
- **Bring in the right experts from the start,** not just once deliberation begins. Early expert input helps set a realistic scope for what the assembly can actually influence.



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