The process of jointly devising a vision by consultation was at least as important as the end product. The making of the structural vision took three years and consisted of three phases: reconnaissance, integration and ratification. Citizens and organizations were involved in these phases in various ways. By contrast with the previous structure plans, the formulation of the structural vision was managed as an integrated whole – both bureaucratically and politically – with the municipal departments involved in spatial matters working as a team and co-authoring the structural vision. This brought the tasks facing the various disciplines into the equation.

The great political engagement was terribly important for the process. The coordinating alderman, Maarten van Poelgeest, was in attendance at a great many meetings and also entered into smaller-scale discussions, with organizations such as the Amsterdam Centre for the Environment (Milieucentrum Amsterdam, or MCA), with students, allotment holders and the citizens who participated in the public campaign.

Reconnaissance: gathering expertise and ideas
During the first phase of the process (2008-2009) the emphasis was on the organization of the process and determining the important themes for the future of the city. To do this it was necessary to ‘gather’ the expertise and ideas that are alive in the city, not only in order to be working with the right information but also to arrive at a broadly shared outlook for the future. Citizens, the private sector, interest groups and planning professionals were consulted in discussions, conferences and workshops. A ‘Memorandum of Starting Points’ (Vertrekpuntennotitie) was drawn up prior to the dialogue, incorporating the basic
principles, trends and developments that are decisive for making choices in spatial development. One important guiding framework was the ‘Development Scenario for the Amsterdam Metropolis Area’ (Ontwikkelingsbeeld Metropoolregio Amsterdam), with Amsterdam as the core city of an economically robust metropolitan region.

The metropolitan idea was already supported by the administration and the body politic, but the outside world was still insufficiently involved. It is city residents, social organizations, businesspeople, project developers and government bodies who together make the metropolis; they shape the identity and appearance of their city. What are their ambitions and wishes for Amsterdam in the context of the Metropolitan Area? During this phase the City Council wanted to raise awareness and inspire people to action. In the ‘wards discussions’ the parties and stakeholders organized according to the points of the compass – including the relevant neighbouring municipalities – sat down at the conference table to talk about the city’s future. The participants valued this regional orientation and were conscious that interdependence on a regional scale is increasing.

One outcome of the planMER was the heralding of a Wind Vision in the Structural Vision. Another product that stems from the environmental report is a mobility test, which provides insight into which combinations of infrastructure and spatial developments score best. This is useful in complying with diverse viewpoints and provides input for the fine-tuning of the phasing of projects.
The ‘within 30 minutes’ public campaign

During the drafting of the Structural Vision, Amsterdam’s inhabitants were presented with the opportunity to share their opinions about the future of their city by means of a large-scale public campaign. The campaign prompted people to think about the future. Reactions were received from across the metropolitan area and sometimes even from far beyond. The title of the campaign was inspired by the fact that the city is bigger than you might think: it used to take half an hour to travel from the Central Station to the Muiderpoort gateway on the city’s eastern perimeter, but nowadays you can reach Zandvoort on the North Sea coast or the city of Almere in Flevoland by train in those same 30 minutes. The website www.binnen30minuten.nl (‘within 30 minutes’) played a pivotal role. The online campaign was closely aligned with the phasing of the Structural Vision and encouraged the people of Amsterdam to continue sharing their thoughts. The reactions could be read on the site immediately and by everyone.

It was clear that Amsterdam’s residents and visitors are keen that the green space in the city will be improved in the future. More possibilities for recreation, more cycle paths, fewer rules and measures to improve the city’s cleanliness and safety were other themes in the campaign. The city’s continued growth and the attendant densification was often appreciated, though high-rise must be inserted with due caution. A greater diversity of neighbourhood amenities ranked particularly high on the wish-list of Amsterdam’s citizens. A marginal note is that Amsterdam must retain its human scale. Opinion is divided about the prospect of hosting the Olympic Games.

When formulating the Structural Vision, the comments and heartfelt cries of the campaign participants were integrated wherever possible. The vision therefore assigns an important place to investment in the city parks and improving cycle routes into the countryside surrounding the city. The decision to give all the spatial tasks a place within the existing urban footprint, at least where that was possible, means that the majority of amenities are within cycling distance.

The fact that everything can be found in the proximity of people’s homes contributes to the feeling that the city retains a human scale: it is not a sprawling city where you are forced to take the car, but a city where amenities are still be found around the corner. A special policy was formulated for the integration of high-rise development, so that there will be no unbridled growth in which the human scale is lost. These are just a few examples of the citizens’ wishes that have been given their rightful place in the vision. The public campaign proved to be an important gauge during the Structural Vision’s elaboration.

Integration into a well-balanced narrative

In the second phase (2009-2010) the emphasis shifted to the framing of a well-balanced narrative in which the ambitions and the long-term outlook for the spatial development of Amsterdam within the Metropolitan Area was pivotal. The initial impetus was ‘The Pillars for Amsterdam’s Spatial Development’ (De Pijlers voor de ruimtelijke ontwikkeling van Amsterdam), a document outlining the ‘10 pillars’ which provided the foundations for the definitive structural vision. The document describes the most important spatial tasks and issues. During the development of this document into a Draft Structural Vision, the stakeholders, adjacent municipalities and borough councils were once again invited to provide input. Amsterdam’s citizens were consulted via www.binnen30minuten.nl (‘within 30 minutes’), a public campaign using the web and social media. The ‘Free State of Amsterdam’ (‘Vrijstaat Amsterdam’) exhibition was staged, with a public programme of narratives and discussions about the future of the city. This presentation employed unorthodox methods to coax city-dwellers and visitors into thinking about urban development and speaking their minds. Phase two drew to a conclusion in January 2010 with the City Executive’s adoption of the ‘Draft Structural Vision for Amsterdam in 2040: Economically strong and sustainable’ (Ontwerp Structuurvisie Amsterdam 2040, Economisch sterk en duurzaam) along with the accompanying planMER environmental impact report.

Ratification: Responding and moving the procedure forward

During the third phase (2010), everyone was given 12 weeks to voice opinions about the Draft Structural Vision and the planMER in a letter to the City Council, whether they were a city resident or an organization.
'The interconnection of various parties and themes was central to the production of the Structural Vision.'
An integral narrative?

Ronald Wiggers  Department of Social Development (DMO)

In front of me there is a hall full of inquisitive faces. As best I can, I endeavour to explain the substance and principles of the Structural Vision to my colleagues from the Department of Social Development (Dienst Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, or DMO). My narrative prompts a throng of reactions:

But how does combating poverty come into it? What about the neighbourhood approach? How do you know what the world will be like in 2040? And where is the body of thought from the Social Structure Plan? None of these are questions that the Structural Vision answers directly.

At the dawn of the 21st century, when we were in discussion with the whole city about metropolitan dynamism, human capital and a liveable environment, which resulted in a wonderful document: the Social Structural Plan 2004-2015, with the subtitle ‘What drives Amsterdam?’ And the idea back then was that we would never produce separate spatial and social structural visions again. The forthcoming Structural Vision would be a wholly integrated document.

Is this Structural Vision that integral document? No, but it is perhaps an initial step. The maxim that ‘People make the city’ is most prominent in the section about the vision and the social aspect of sustainability with room for greater flexibility, diversity and stakeholder responsibility is also distinctly present. It is just a shame that the human scale and socio-spatial tasks, such as those for sports and education, have often been obscured again in the elaboration. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could also simply sketch in a new small-scale sports park, combined with education and childcare facilities as well as amenities for youngsters, on the Northern Banks of the IJ?

The social vision for the city’s development calls for a spatial elaboration as well, and in my view that might have been embodied more emphatically, but we will do that next time.

A field of tension in several respects

Fokko Kuik  Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Traffic and Transport (Dienst Infrastructuur Verkeer en Vervoer, or dIVV)

It was an honour to be allowed to work together with colleagues from other disciplines on the future of my own city. You gain a greater understanding, of each other’s standpoints and of the choices that simply have to be made if there are many interests struggling for precedence.

At the same time I did not always feel that such a collaborative process, in which everyone sits down around a table together for each topic of discussion, necessarily leads to a balanced appraisal. Sometimes the alderman for spatial planning opted for his own line, which diverged from the advice of traffic experts. In and of itself it is, of course, perfectly legitimate that an alderman should set out his own course.

Something I am pleased with is that in the implementation section it was decided to couple the pace of spatial developments to the associated transport infrastructure. Something that pleased me less was that it upholds the long-term plan to develop the Gooiseweg into an urban avenue, despite the objections (in my opinion justified) to the transformation.

One drawback is that it undermines two of the key principles described in the vision: first develop where there is already a good public transport access, and retain the important corridor function for motor traffic. The Gooiseweg is indispensable as a major arterial road that allows the city centre to function as an economically strong entity.

In general I perceive a field of tension between the towering longer-term ambitions of the Structural Vision and the increasingly pessimistic short-term prospects, because of the economic crisis. For a vision peering into the distant future one should, of course, never allow oneself to be guided by the issues of the moment, but the chasm between ideal and reality has as a consequence grown pretty large.
Quality, time and money

Keimpe Reitsma  Amsterdam Development Corporation (Ontwikkelingsbedrijf Amsterdam, or OBA)

The Structural Vision is first of all about ambitions and opening up broad panoramas. It goes without saying that quality is of paramount importance, but at a given moment the execution comes up for discussion, the matter of making choices. That is also a necessity, because the new Spatial Planning Act (Wet ruimtelijke ordening, Wro) prescribes that in the Structural Vision the municipalities must also indicate how they expect to effect the policy’s implementation. That is a fine passage, which you could dwell upon for a long time, certainly the phrase ‘to effect implementation’. The question is how you can bring about that materialization on the basis of your spatial ambitions. And for that we have found a simple but actually quite brilliant formula: it was decided to set out the realization of the Structural Vision along a timeline. By opting for a phased realization in three consecutive decades, time has become the flexible factor and the ambitions and the final outcome have been preserved intact. The motto is that if it doesn’t materialize today, then it will tomorrow.

When the financial crisis raised its head, it happened upon a Structural Vision in the throes of development. What does this crisis mean for the Structural Vision? Relatively little in the light of the above, but it did become obvious that the ambitions for developing new housing over the first decade were too high. Shifting the construction of 10,000 dwellings further along the timeline resulted in the painting a more balanced picture of the future without it affecting Amsterdam’s ambition to realize 70,000 new dwellings. This was made possible by the chosen arrangement by decade.

But what about that other factor, the money, and doesn’t that throw a spanner in the works? Something that became increasingly apparent during the drafting of the Structural Vision was that less money would be available for urban projects than in former times. Important sources of revenue, such as the sale of land for office developments and state support for housing construction, have dried up. Sometimes it seems as if there are no longer any funds whatsoever for new projects, but this ignores the most important financial mainstay of urban developments: the ‘big-money’ demand for more city. And for the time being that demand shall not be drying up.

There will be a demand for more Amsterdam and more than before this will have to generate the means to continue building on Amsterdam. Capitalizing on that demand will therefore be an important objective of new site-specific developments. A passage such as ‘to implement’ then falls into place. You can then also deduce that the Structural Vision incorporates the necessary leeway, for which the filling in will only become obvious in the long run. Those who are not reassured by all of this might derive comfort from the words of the Nobel laureate Ivo Andric: “The most terrible and most tragic of all human weaknesses is undoubtedly his complete inability to see into the future, which stands in sharp contrast with his many talents, his knowledge and his art.”

Haarlem to Amsterdam and back

Marc Hanou  Project Manager, Structural Vision for North Holland

From a legal perspective the earlier structural plans for Amsterdam were regional plans, for which Amsterdam had received the mandate known as ‘freedom in policy’ from the Province of North Holland. But that was in the days of the ‘old’ Spatial Planning Act. In 2000, the City of Amsterdam and the Province of North Holland took the initiative to establish a platform for the North Wing of the Randstad (Noordvleugel), with the aim of devising a shared vision for the future in cooperation with the 30 or so municipalities across the region. For the region it was an unprecedented model of ‘governance’, though I wonder whether we knew what such a collaboration was called back then.

In 2007, even before the introduction of the ‘new’ Spatial Planning Act, a decision was taken to formulate the Development Scenario for the North Wing of the Randstad in 2040 (Ontwikkelingsbeeld Noordvleugel 2040), which was meant to serve as the point of departure for the formulation of all the structural visions in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. This Development Scenario was a vision for the future which had been forged by means of an open, participative and intensive collaboration among the government bodies concerned. Immediately after the ratification of this vision, the Province of North Holland began work on its Structural Vision. The preceding collaboration was well received, and had whet the appetite for more, so all North Holland’s municipalities were invited – the City of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam City Region platform in particular – to participate in the “Structural Vision for North Holland” project as full members of the team.

The involvement of Amsterdam’s Department of Physical Planning and the City Region platform in the project team for the Province of North Holland’s structural vision established a collaboration that fostered mutual trust and involved the sharing of content as well as weekly or even daily interchanges: different dishes were prepared using the same ingredients in everyone’s respective kitchens. This was a unique situation that produced two structural visions, each of which does justice to the formulated point of departure in its own way, elaborating the essential points from the North Wing Development Scenario for 2040 – the growth and prosperity of the metropolis, the city centre densification, measures for dealing with the changing climate, tackling extra- and intra-regional accessibility and the use of the metropolitan landscapes – in different ways. Locally where possible and centrally where necessary, but always founded on mutual trust and reciprocal effort.