



## Ghent and Urban Competitiveness

*Cities need places, not spaces*

### URBAN STRATEGY: AN INTERACTION OF THREE FACTORS

The City of Ghent has been following a major urban redevelopment strategy for a number of years. ULI Belgium members, partners and city leaders gathered on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2015 to explore the drivers of Ghent's revival in the last decade and the factors influencing its future growth and development...

Brecht Lootens, of the creative economy department at the city of Ghent, opened the discussion with his thoughts on re-urbanisation projects both in the USA and Europe. He argued that we have to re-imagine the urban space according to the three sequential elements of a city:

**Physical assets.** These are made up of all the public and private areas and assets (houses, streets, parks, squares...) and are conceived – that is to say designed and organised – to stimulate new forms of connectivity and collaboration. They create the necessary conditions for the emergence of solutions/innovation for, for example, traffic management, waste collection, the creation of micro-habitats largely opening onto shared public areas, the instigation of new soft mobility networks (bikes, walkways...) woven between the different districts of the city.

**Economic assets.** These involve revenues and employment

**Networking assets.** Networking the flow of information...

It is the interaction of these three elements which gives birth to an innovative eco-system, that is to say somewhere/something which offers the best conditions for a mixture of activities to develop and flourish (housing, culture, education, trade and industry...).

## GHENT/ THE AXIS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The second largest city in Flanders, Ghent is a small European metropolis (150 square kms), with a total population of around 500,000, of which 250,000 live within the city limits (around 75 square kms). The city is also characterised by a substantial student population which is constantly growing (some 70,000 students today).

Having been initiated in the 1970's, the city's urban development strategy is based on a modern approach whose axis are identified as follows:

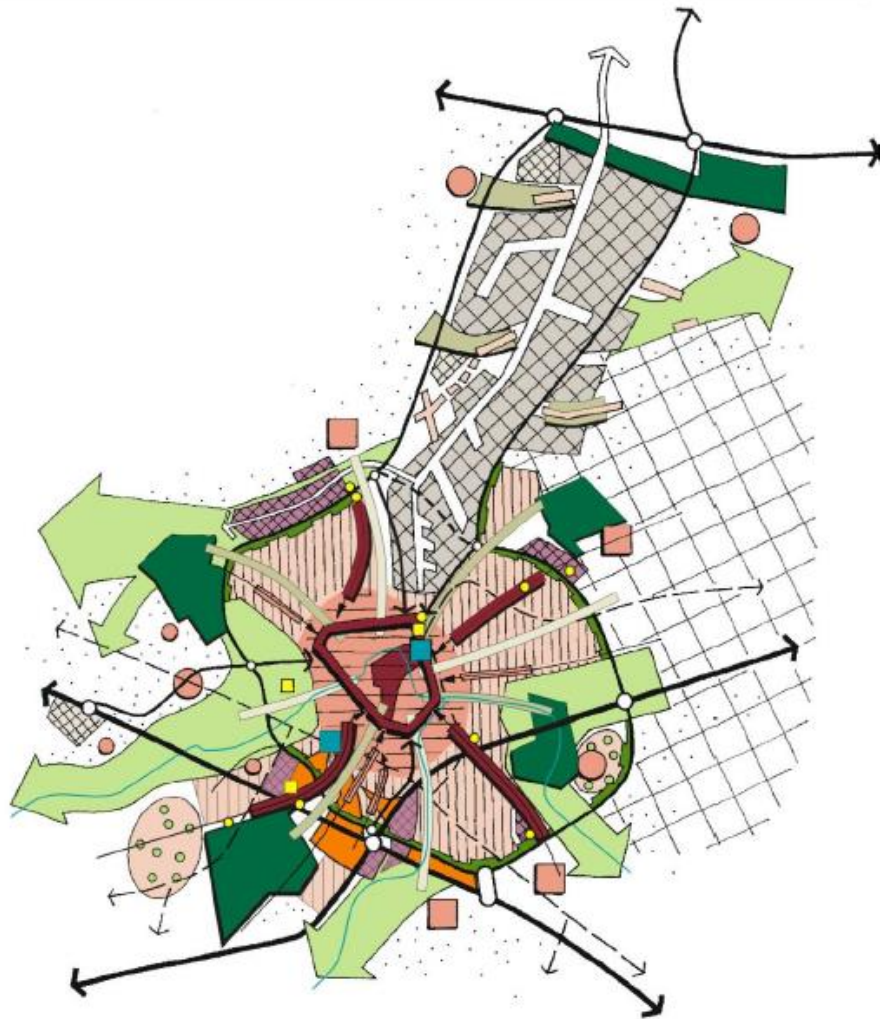
- **A Global Vision** (established in 2003 by the Spatial Structure Plan of Ghent) of urban development centred on the historical elements (buildings), and the landscape elements (parks, squares, public areas) of the city. This approach proves to be all the more effective in that it creates synergy and complementarity between the visions of the public sector, the private sector and those involved in the economy.

Responding to this vision are both concepts (which elements are necessary for the desired development of the city?) and strategic projects. Ghent therefore made its choices. These fall within a framework of a quest for authenticity which leads to a preference for rehabilitating old buildings rather than constructing new architectural references.

And thus, by contrast to Antwerp which built the MAS (Museum aan de Stroom, or Museum on the River), Ghent invested in De Krook, a new multi-functional urban axis developed in the city centre and including, among others, the renovation of the Winter Circus. As Peter Lacoere explains: "This approach also involves making best use of the public space - open and luminous - along with creating more greenery, as demonstrated by the rehabilitation of the Moscow district (the name of a city district which includes the terminus of a tram line), whose economic activity is organised around the 'De Porre' park.

- **The composition of the city.** Ghent is a mosaic of urban fragments (districts) each of which has an identity. Behind this general characteristic, Ghent is also:
  - A high quality residential city
  - A university town
  - A place of wide-ranging cultural, and creative economic, life
  - A city of towers and water, including the port (the second largest in Belgium, 33 km from the sea) and the Ghent/Terneuzen canal.

In order to be effective, an urban development dynamic has to bring together all of these elements. For Ghent is not a port town, a cultural town, or a university town, but a collection of all these elements.





## THE CHALLENGES

To speak of urban development and, beyond, that of urban competitiveness, implies responding to the challenges of the 21st century. These are many. Philippe Van Wesenbeek summarised that some of these challenges include;

- **Viability:** a city has to represent an environment which satisfies the aspirations of the young and the old populations alike, and which has a harmonious connecting network between the green areas. It also has to provide **a response to the questions of identity and density;**
- **The Economy:** Economic growth, and, above all, a modification to the structures of the economy have 'spatial' consequences for the city. We have to ask questions about the type of offices/companies of the future and where they are located. For example, we might place established companies on the periphery, while start-ups would find an incubator inside the city (centre). This system – apart from the fact that it asks questions in terms of the conversion of older buildings and of derelict industrial sites – requires space to be created. The Tech Lane Ghent Science Park (also known as Eiland Zwijnaarde) is one of the responses that has been provided. Located to the south of the city, it will enable offices and warehouses for logistics activities (preferably allied to the canal) etc., to be accommodated on a 57 hectare site, with a total built area of around 350,000 square meters;
- **Sustainability:** This is a matter of responding to the climactic question, particularly in the light of COP 21, Paris 2015
- **Demographics:** Understanding and responding to the needs of a changing and growing population;
- **Mobility:** This involves guaranteeing selective access to the city and its peripheral districts (suburbs).

## CONDITIONS FOR ATTRACTIVENESS

Confirming its desire to be one of the first European neutral energy cities by 2030 (Structural Vision 2030), the city of Ghent translates urban competitiveness into urban attractiveness. This signifies highlighting the urban characteristics and identity of the city **through a number of action points:**

- **Creating** a relationship between all of the functions of the city according to an analytical table which takes account of socio-economic, socio-ecological, political (structures and lines of power) and cultural factors etc.
- **Seeking** a compromise between quality and efficiency in areas destined for a number of objectives (housing, economic, cultural...);
- **Starting** the thought process, beginning with the principle that the city is a place of ownership and of coproduction which has to remain accessible and affordable for all. This implies taking account of the 'quality' of all users, including the weakest;
- **Abandoning** the notion of nimbyism (Not in My Back Yard) and considering the city as a place for the spatio-social process;
- **Recognising** that an urban layout is not neutral and reflect on whom (which socio-economic groups) it benefits.

With a concern for providing the population with a quality of life marked out by cultural, historic, geographical or even communal sports references, the city of Ghent has drawn up and put in place an urban development strategy based on the integral quality of the public areas. Through concrete programmes such as Kobra, Krook, Academiestraat, Schpperstraat and the Rabot site, this strategy now makes the city one of the most attractive in Europe.

## Coming up...

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Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2016, Charleroi roundtable and city tour  
Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016, Emerging Trends in Real Estate, Brussels  
Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016, Competitive Cities Conference, Brussels

For more information contact [belgium@uli.org](mailto:belgium@uli.org)

## About ULI

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The Urban Land Institute is a non-profit research and education organisation representing the entire spectrum of real estate development and investment. ULI was founded in 1936, and now has circa 30,000 members in 95 countries worldwide. In Europe, we have over 2,300 members.

## ULI Belgium Executive Committee

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ULI Belgium features an active membership and varied annual programme of events, our meetings involve regular exchange between public and private sectors on all aspects of urban planning and development.



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