

# City profile: Ghent, Belgium

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## Abstract

The various phases of Ghent's urban development read like a textbook on urban history. Emerging as a political and religious centre at the confluence of two rivers, Ghent developed from the end of the eighteenth century on into an important centre of the textile industry. Its independent attitude ensured that the city developed well into the nineteenth century within the straitjacket of the military ramparts, where both trade, industry and academe found fertile soil. After the city toll was lifted, the city boomed, while the seaport went through a new wave of industrialisation in the mid-twentieth century. First the CIAM doctrine and later on the postmodernist approach has clearly left its traces on the urban fabric. Today, urban policy is received critically by civil society organisations, while on-going debates focus on the balance between tourism and habitation, on the architecture of the central squares, on bicycle facilities and tram lines, on the poor housing conditions in the nineteenth-century neighbourhoods, on the lack of greenery in the city and on the development of peripheral retail outlets.

## Word count

6350 words

## Introduction

The historical course that was traversed by the medium-sized city of Ghent (Belgium - Flanders region) seems to meet the entire range of stereotypes from the urban geography literature. Interestingly, Ghent's history indeed appears to have influenced the stereotypical image of the origin of the medieval city through the writings of Henri Pirenne, who was an influential historian at Ghent's university at the beginning of the twentieth century (Pirenne, 1927). And although with respect to the Industrial Revolution an equally clear link with the literature is not present, Ghent has also acquired its place in the historiography of this period too (Mokyr, 1974). However, being to some degree a model city does not imply dullness, considering the recommendation of Lonely Planet, which describes Ghent ("Gent" in Dutch, "Gand" in French) as a hidden gem for tourists (Lonely Planet, 2010). The town originated as a medieval political and religious centre at the confluence of two rivers, after which trade and industry started flourishing. After a series of more or less successful attempts to keep its autonomous standing in the midst of the various conflicts in which the Low Countries have been involved, in the nineteenth century Ghent became a local exemplar of the Industrial Revolution.

The prosperity earned from this development supported the growth of today's second largest university in Belgium. In the post-World War II period, the expanding port managed to promote interactions between the city, industry and the university. The appeal of Ghent's labour market has traditionally resulted in an influx of workers from the surrounding regions, while in more recent history migration flows tended to reorient towards Turkey and the newest EU Member States.

The large proportion of students, the impact of social-democratic movements, and the image of a progressive cultural and intellectual urban centre have constituted the basis of a critical civil society with a strong influence on urban policy and development. Today, visions are driven by debates about quality of life, low-traffic environments, climate neutrality and innovative regeneration. Inspired by the geological metaphor of Massey (1979), in this article we will chronologically outline how Ghent's urban area has developed into its present form and function. The urban development pathway of the city was taken as a guidance for the narrative. This choice is naturally reflected in the way particular details are discussed or omitted, meaning that certain aspects of Ghent's society and social, cultural and economic development will necessarily be underexposed.

## Origin and early history

Although today Ghent is generally presented as being located at the confluence of the rivers Leie (Lys) and Scheldt, the ninth-century castrum, which was at that time the military centre of the town, was in fact located where the Lieve, a much smaller river, flows into the Leie (Van Werveke and Verhulst, 1960). As in several other cities in Flanders, the castrum was built to protect the various existing settlements and monasteries following repeated incursions by the Normans (Verhulst, 1977). At that time, St Bavo's and St Peter's abbeys, both of which were already established in the seventh century, contributed to an important extent to the development of the various settlements in the surrounding marshy lands where a number of winding and tidal rivers flowed together.

St. Peter's Abbey, which still exists today, was founded near the highest point of the city, on a sand hill called Blandijnberg. Although relief and hydrography strongly determined the first settlements, we see that throughout later centuries watercourses have been channelled, diverted and filled up according to the needs of the moment, where military security was usually given priority (Coene and De Raedt, 2011). In the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries territories were systematically annexed to the city, and consequently surrounded by canals. A substantial part of the territory remained undeveloped and in agricultural use. In 1384, the city covered about 644 hectares, and was in that sense one of the largest cities of Europe. Around 1550, Ghent counted about 47,000 inhabitants, making it the third largest city in the Low Countries (Dambruyne, 2001, quoted from David, 2004) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *"Ganda Gallie Belgice Civitas Maxima" (view of Ghent), 1534, Ghent City Museum*

From 1577 to 1584, Ghent became temporarily a Calvinist stronghold, that managed to tear itself from the Catholic Spanish rule by means of the construction of a city wall. This enclosure was much more radical than the old canals which until then guaranteed safety, and would function as a physical development boundary until 1860. Outside the fortified city walls, defensive ditches were constructed which were again surrounded by floodplains that could be inundated if necessary (Despretz, 1966). Although in the course of the nineteenth century their military function faded into the background, the city gates were re-established as toll gates between 1816 and 1860, in the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, only from 1860 did the city start to develop beyond its walls.

The reconquest by the Spanish regime in 1584 was followed by a number of successive recessions (Dambruyne, 1989). Consequently, the population fell back slightly around 1650, and it took quite some time before a few engineering works improving the connection with the sea (among which the digging of the Coupure canal around 1750) (Fig. 2), and the arrival

of the first cotton mill from 1800, would award some importance to Ghent as an industrial player.



*Fig. 2 Coupure canal, finished in 1753, today an important bicycle route*

## Industrial development

Unlike the Walloon coal basin in southern Belgium (Vandermotten, 1998), Ghent's Industrial Revolution was not based on coal, steel and glass, it was textile production that put the city again on the map (Neven and Devos, 2001). Flax processing in the Leie valley had not stalled during the eighteenth century, wherefore a lot of expertise in textile processing was still concentrated in Ghent, which was easily accessible via the dense waterway system.

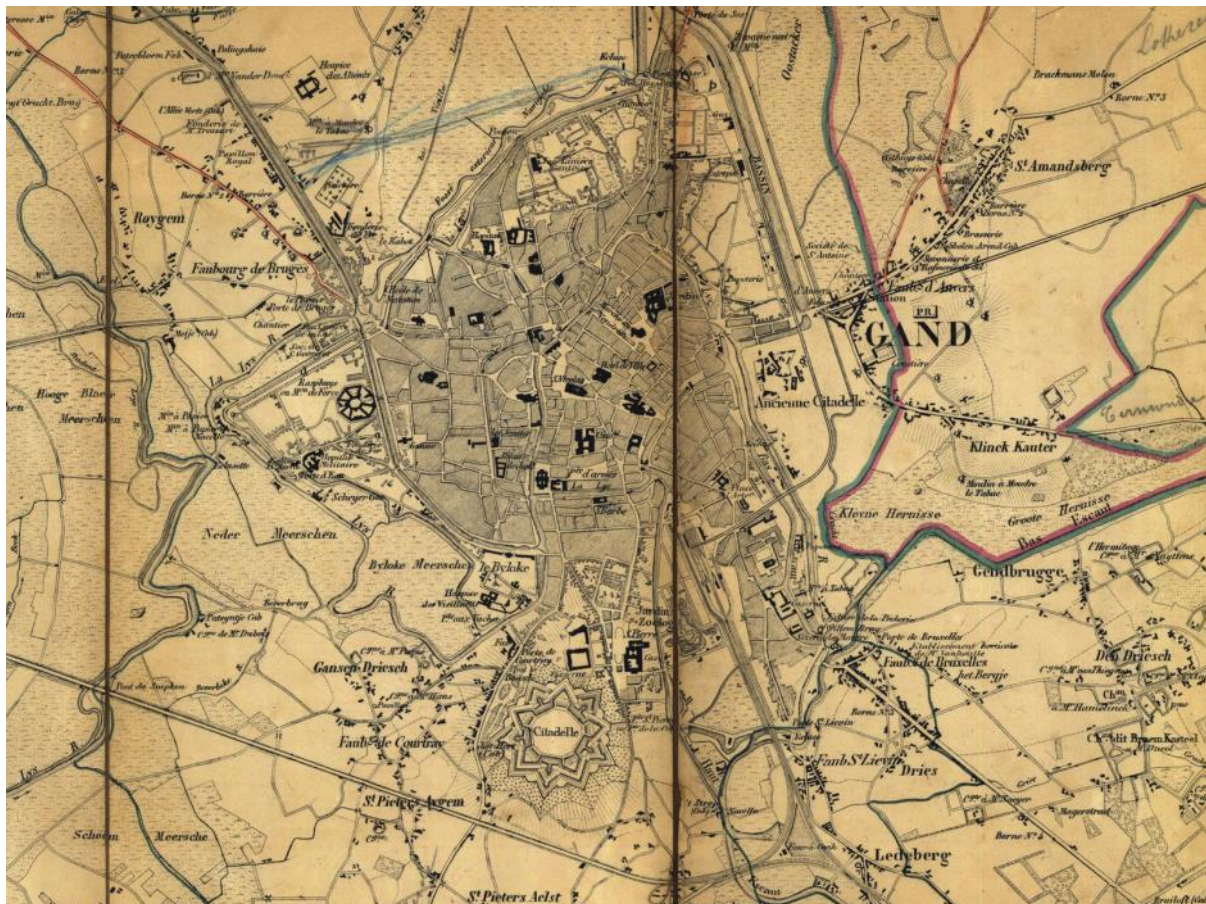
Meanwhile, also cotton had become a well-known type of fabric in Ghent, and the introduction of the steam spinning machine led to rapid expansion of the textile industry, in which linen too retained an important position (Mokyr, 1974).

In the build-up to the automation of the industry, Ghent's population increased again from about 44,000 inhabitants in 1740 to 51,000 half a century later (Deprez, 1957). The waterlogged grounds outside the city fortifications proved an insurmountable urban



development boundary, especially in combination with the toll that was until 1860 levied on all goods that entered the city. Nevertheless, part of the defensive walls were already dismantled at the end of the eighteenth century, while some canals were filled in and converted into public promenades. The numerous spinning and weaving mills, print houses and auxiliary metal workshops had to find shelter inside the city walls, just like the thousands of workers who found a job in these new workshops and factories.

The Castle of the Counts, a fortress that was built in the twelfth century on the site of the former castrum, was in 1807 transformed into a cotton mill, where outbuildings of the castle sheltered some fifty workers' families (Coppejans-Desmedt, 1986). Similar developments occurred in former convent buildings, while extremely high density workers' districts developed in courtyards and between existing buildings. Scarcity of space caused the emergence of narrow dead-end alleys with small terraced houses composed of one single room per floor, sharing three walls with the neighbours, and no private sanitary facilities (Steensels, 1977). The number of these so-called “beluiken” increased rapidly. Also, some new urban facilities such as the Rasp House, a prison where some 1,500 vagrants were employed, required additional space. On the other hand a number of urban agricultural areas were maintained, because the toll on food imports made urban agriculture rather rewarding. In addition, a number of no-build areas were enforced around military fortifications, which resulted in an early de facto zoning system (De Clercq, 2005). Between 1819 and 1831 the Dutch Citadel was founded on the higher areas to the south of the city, stressing the importance of Ghent as a garrison town (Fig. 3).



*Fig. 3 Vandermaelen's map in 1856, just before city toll was abandoned*

The government that controlled the new nation state of Belgium since 1830, developed an alternative to the city toll in the form of a municipal fund, closing the toll gates in 1860 (Segers, 2000). The city could now develop outside its walls too, an option that was attractive to the industrial enterprises. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, some large textile factories and metal construction plants expanded just outside the city gates. These companies also parcelled the adjacent land in order to build the new working class neighbourhoods that should accommodate workers in the vicinity of their factories. Consequently, between 1856 and 1890 the built-up area of the city doubled (Dumont, 1951), which allowed for the first time a reduction in the city's population density (Fig. 4).





*Fig. 4 Military map in 1892, just after city toll was abandoned*

## Sanitation, Haussmanisation and urban expansion

While Haussmann's 1852 plan for Paris is perceived as a role model, in the development of Ghent we may observe traces of such a vision several years earlier. In the years after the construction of the first rail station (De Block, 2011), the surroundings of the railway terminus were redeveloped, with new straight boulevards and squares providing light and air while simultaneously connecting the railway with the commercial inner city districts (Ryckewaert, 2011). The architecture of the houses and buildings flanking the new streets was of a markedly classical nature. Also in the vicinity of the citadel, a new neighbourhood of large townhouses was built.

The layout principles as applied to the station area were then reused for the rehabilitation of a number of densely populated working-class neighbourhoods in the city centre. The popular uprisings of 1848 played a role in the development of a public support base to this. The removal and regeneration of such districts took place during the second half of the 19th century, and affected many neighbourhoods. Zollikofer-De Vigne's plan from 1882 was the



largest of these projects, and included the demolition of nearly a thousand homes (Adriaensen, 1986).

In addition to the expansion and construction of roads and squares, public buildings were erected on the sanitized sites. Next to the Coupure canal, a casino and a prison were built, near the Kouter square the Opera House and the Palace of Justice were established, the old Bijloke Hospital was expanded and modernized, and academic buildings were constructed with the "Palais de l'Université" and the later "Institut des Sciences" as major showpieces of the University.

But waterfront activities were in full expansion too. In 1827, the Commercial Dock was built, which offered through a new northbound channel a connection to the Westerscheldt estuary. This dock was the cornerstone of what would eventually become the Ghent seaport. The independence of Belgium in 1830 would complicate the access to the sea via the Netherlands, and led in 1863 to the construction of the New Waterway canal linking the Commercial Dock with the old canal to Bruges.

Meanwhile, in what is known today as the nineteenth-century belt, new districts grew rapidly outside the former ramparts. Existing intermunicipal roads were retained as principal axes, and churches were erected at very central positions, usually long before the housing rows were finished. Although the streets were relatively narrow, these were planned according to a geometric pattern of visual axes (Fig. 5). The terraced houses followed uniformly the grid, while spaces within the blocks were filled by smaller scaled industrial activities (Heughebaert, 2007). Although some of the new dwellings were larger than the miniature alley houses they were to replace, also quite a few of such substandard alley estates with one-facade houses were built in the new districts, again resulting in poor living conditions for the future.

Between 1862 and 1864 a number of canals were filled in and replaced by boulevards that would later constitute the basis for the inner ring road (De Clercq, 2005) (Fig. 6). Ghent's population increased steadily, exceeding 160,000 in 1900.



*Fig. 5 Typical residential street in the nineteenth-century belt*



*Fig. 6 Historical centre, restored in the early twentieth century based on a romanticized vision*

## Aestheticization and Belle Epoque

Influenced by the ideas of Camillo Sitte and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, at the end of the nineteenth century the focus shifted towards the idealization of the medieval scenography and Gothic Revival (Van Impe, 2008). Around 1900, the surroundings of the Belfry became the subject of a beautification project, houses were demolished, and new squares were developed, which were flanked by a new theatre, a neo-Gothic post office, and an impressive new bridge over the Leie river (Fig. 6). The Cloth Hall was enlarged, the Town Hall was given a new facade, and the Castle of the Counts, the old fortress that was not so long before in use as a textile factory, was restored on the basis of a rather romanticized vision.

The strongly aestheticizing renovation of the historical centre was the build-up to the World Exhibition of 1913 (Van Acker et al., 2013). Through its industrial image Ghent had managed to attract the Expo, to lift the cultural development of the city to a higher level. The area of the former citadel was transformed into an exhibition park, including permanent buildings such as the Festival Palace, the expansion of the Museum of Fine Arts, and a new rail station in eclectic style that was built along the through railway between Ostend and Brussels (Cleppe and Uyttenhove, 2010).

Where in the 19th century both architecture and urban expansion were dominated by the industrial class and the bourgeoisie, at the beginning of the twentieth century the working class emerged. Ghent was the cradle of the socialist labour movement in Flanders, visible in trade unions and cooperative enterprises (Strikwerda, 1988). In the years before the First World War, the cooperative society “Vooruit” (which means “Progress”) developed into a conglomerate including bakeries, People’s Houses, pharmacists, a weaving mill, a brewery, a sugar factory and a bank. Around 1900, the cooperative society erected an imposing building in eclectic style at the Friday market square, with the head office and a department store (Fig. 7). A second building in eclectic style, the leisure centre which also got the name Vooruit, was built in 1913 and became an important meeting place and recreational facility for the working class (Pieters and Deneckere, 2013).





*Fig. 7 Headquarters of the socialist labour movement, 1902*

But in addition to architecture and culture, technology gained importance too. The water balance was accurately mapped and better regulated, aiming to reduce imminent flood risks while keeping the city accessible for boats. Tramways were introduced in 1874, first in the form of a horsecar, which was replaced from 1889 by battery powered carriages. In 1906, five lines were operational, which were then all powered by an electrical overhead line. Gas and water was already fairly well established at that time, and from 1913 electricity.

## The Interbellum

Although the main battlefields of the First World War were situated in Belgium, the occupied city of Ghent survived the conflict relatively unscathed. After the war, urban development became strongly influenced by a modernist vision and New Objectivity style architecture. The port had gained a new dock (Strubbe, 1990), the tram lines were extended into the parishes (De Block and Polasky, 2011), and new railroads were built, connecting Ghent and Brussels in less than forty minutes. The municipality increased by annexing parts of neighbouring municipalities to facilitate port development.

A few modernist public buildings left their mark on this period. The most eye-catching landmark is the 1939 tower of the university's central library, also known as the Book Tower, by architect Henry Van de Velde, which rises sixty metres above the Blandijnberg hill and thus became the fourth tower of the Ghent skyline (Fig. 8) (Van Peteghem, 2006). But also in housing, we can speak of a change of style. The townhouse was no longer the only possible way of living since the former site of the World Expo had become a spacious villa neighbourhood, which is today still known by the name Miljoenenkwartier, meaning "Millions District" (Bervoets and Heynen, 2013). Although the first detached houses obviously foreshadowed the suburbanization processes that would occur mainly after the Second World War, the construction of apartment buildings accelerated, and population growth peaked at about 170,000 inhabitants in 1939, after which suburbanization led to decline for 40 years.



*Fig. 8 The Book Tower, 1939*

The vision for the Greater Ghent area that was made up during the war exhibited a large-scale and technological-optimistic perspective. Main roads would stretch out right into the centre of the city, while the absence of ring roads or other bypass roads is notable. For the first time, the idea of a ring canal was introduced, the first part of which would connect the seaport with the canal to Bruges (De Naeyer and Van Cauwenberge, 1945). Also, these plans show the finally selected route of the Ostend-Brussels motorway south of the city. Both the ring canal and the motorway would be completed only many years after the war.

## Post-war development and suburbanization

Although many urban planners who were employed during the war were removed from the scene in 1945, many ideas remained intact. Throughout Belgium suburbanization was stimulated by the De Taeye law (1948), a brainchild of the Christian Democratic government partners which provided subsidies to families for the construction of a new home, usually in the outskirts of the city. However, in 1949, this law was complemented with a social-democratic inspired counterpart, the Brunfaut law (Gosseye and Heynen, 2010), which focused on the financing of collective housing projects, including social housing. Where the De Taeye law was mainly applied in the suburbs, in the fifties a number of large-scale social housing projects were realized in Ghent.

The first remarkable project dates from 1950 and is located on the Malem river island, where the garden city idea was combined with the concept of social housing. This neighbourhood consists of single family homes and low-rise apartments with a garden, grouped around a church with basic amenities and ample space for greenery and water. Another interesting project is the 1955 high-rise district of the Water Sport Strip (“Watersportbaan”), a pure materialization of the CIAM ideas in which a huge water sports infrastructure was central, which is surrounded with apartment blocks in a parkland (De Decker and Pannecoucke, 2004) (Fig. 9). The central water surface was designed for the International Rowing Championships in 1955. However, these social housing projects could not prevent that outward migration started to become significant, making the population slowly to decline, especially since some of the high-rise blocks were merely designed as a replacement dwelling for residents of dilapidated housing (Van den Broeck and Verschure, 2007).





*Fig. 9 The Water Sports Strip project, 1955*

The ring canal was completed in 1960, ensuring that flooding in Ghent became something from the past and provided a smooth waterway connection between the Scheldt river and the larger canals. The Ostend-Brussels motorway (E5) was finally opened in 1956, but had only a limited impact on Ghent's spatial development during the next few years.

## The new industrial wave of the Golden Sixties

Although during the fifties Ghent remained an industrial centre, employment in the textile industry was systematically declining due to efficiency increases. This development did not pass unnoticed, and the authorities raised efforts to attract new industrial companies. The strategic location of Ghent, the access to the sea, the available expertise both within the existing industry as well as within the university, and the great potential of yet undeveloped land in the port area played an important role. In 1962 the new steel plant of Sidérurgie Maritime was established along the canal in the north of Ghent, followed by Volvo's car and truck plant in 1964 (Warren, 1967). Also the extension of an existing paper mill (today's

Stora Enso), the construction of several power plants and some chemical companies contributed to the development of the northern port into a new industrial centre.

It is striking that when steel production began in Ghent, the historical coal and iron centre of the Walloon basin started declining (Vandermotten, 1998). The main reason was that it had become cheaper to obtain foreign coke through the port instead of mining Belgian coal, while iron ore was at the time already massively imported. In addition to the industrial development in the port area, also traditional transshipment activities grew substantially, with an emphasis on bulk commodities such as coal and agricultural products. The development of the harbour complex shifted the centre of gravity of the Ghent employment market to the north. The new steel plant, for example, was built seventeen kilometres north of Ghent, causing also growth in the population of the adjacent villages.

The university proved to be a second major growth pole, manifested in the construction of a modern campus on the former grounds of the World Expo, the expansion of the academic hospital campus, and the construction of a number of high-rise student's residences.

In 1964, for the first time a comprehensive vision of the future development of Ghent was published in the form of the brochure "Ghent, city of tomorrow". Although this publication was a political document that was ordered by the Flemish nationalist party, it documents many of the recurrent ideas on the development of the city. The maps show for the first time a sketch of an exterior ring road, connecting northern new towns and peripheral shopping malls, as well as a new motorway from Kortrijk to Antwerp. Other novelties are the concept of a green belt, as well as the construction of two peripheral large-scale shopping malls.

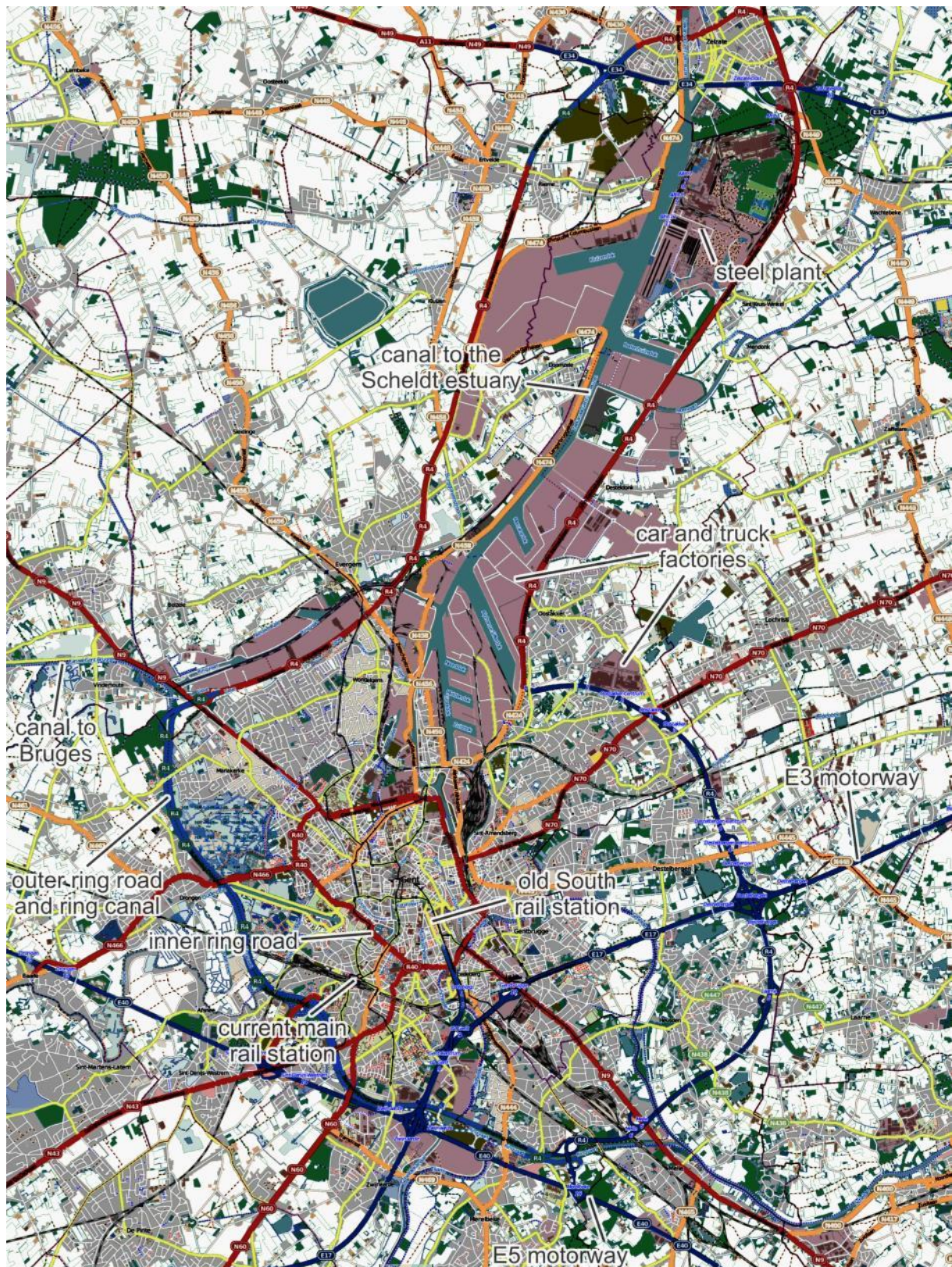
Another idea was the development of a narrow interior ring road near the city centre which would be complemented with car parks. The main public transport axes were devised as a semi-underground metro system. The outer ring would be realized as planned, just as the second motorway and some fragments of the green belt as well as complexes of peripheral retail and expanded harbour villages. But large-scale shopping malls far outside the city, new high-rise towns, or a metro network have been forgotten in the meantime, just as the interior ring which is today not inside, but rather just outside the historical centre, replacing the former city wall (Fig. 10).



*Fig. 10 Inner ring road, located on the former ramparts*

Although the impact of the E5 motorway has been rather limited due to the distance from the centre, the new E3 was cutting deeply into the urban fabric on its way from Kortrijk to Antwerp. This motorway, which was built between 1963 and 1973, follows a route that passes nearby the centre (Druwé and Lalush, 2012). In addition, an exit ramp was built in the form of a viaduct replacing the old railway line, connecting the motorway with the former South Station, right in the centre of city (Fig. 11). Ever since, the south-eastern suburbs have been faced with a massive infrastructure that rises high above the houses and is a source of traffic noise and air pollution since 1970. Moreover, the viaduct attracts significant traffic flows to the downtown area where once again livability was affected. Although during construction the viaduct was praised as a technological marvel, the construction has now become a source of frustration for both drivers and policy makers (De Clercq, 2012). However, the ultimate dream of the traffic planners of the seventies was a connection of this overpass on an underground inner ring so that the cars could just drive underneath the city.



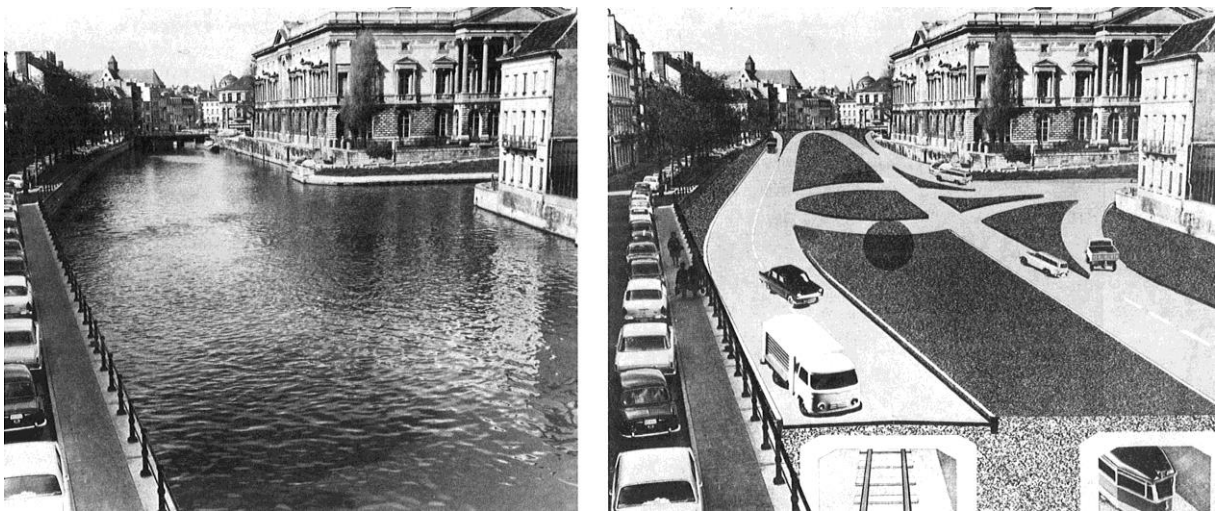


*Fig. 11 Ghent today (source: Open Street Map)*

Rail infrastructure was also subject to big plans. Ideas were developed for an underground railway that would connect the station with the north of the city. Parts of the Lieve and Leie



rivers would be drained, so that the railroad could be built in the riverbed. According to one view, this would become a metro system, while others saw a full-fledged railway that would also be used by freight trains. On top of the railway, a road would be built to give way to car traffic in the city centre (Fig. 12). Also the idea of an inner ring at walking distance from the Belfry, was part of this vision.



*Fig. 12 Metro plans, 1969*

A Preliminary Structure Plan (“Voorontwerp Structuurplan”) (1967) and a Preliminary Regional Zoning Plan (“Voorontwerp Gewestplan”) (1972) were prepared in which many of these radical proposals were granted a status. Ultimately, it was a combination of concerns with respect to the heritage and the quality of life in the inner city and the oil crisis of 1973 that ensured that these plans would never be realized. With regard to the public transport system, the interest in an underground metro network could not prevent that seven out of the eleven former tram lines were removed to be replaced by diesel buses, although the remaining tram lines were in 1971 equipped with modern rolling stock.

## Germens of urban revitalization

By the end of the sixties, urban flight and resulting population decline began to leave its marks. Despite the economic growth and the consequent inward migration of mainly Turkish guest workers, in 1970 Ghent’s population had already decreased by 13% compared to its historical maximum (City of Ghent, 2013). The ample possibilities to build an affordable new house in a suburb did certainly contribute to this development, but the reduced livability of the downtown and the 19th century neighbourhoods played a role here too (Joos, 1988). The

fact that families with higher incomes left the city also ensured that urban problems were not on top of political agendas. The influx of cars in the city centre, dilapidation, soaring vacancy rates, and the stench of the canals that functioned as sewers played a role in the process of degeneration. In the mid-seventies about 5,300 empty properties were counted (Coene and De Raedt, 2011).

The first signs of concern about the decay of the city were in 1968 reflected in the revitalization plan for the Patershol district, which clearly expressed fear of demolition in favour of yet another high-rise estate. The plan aimed to restore its original 17th century character to the historical district and to introduce a tourist attraction. The second part of this plan in particular ran into fierce protests from residents, including artists and students. At the end of the 70s, this process provided the basis of a citizens' movement that became actively involved in urban development and revitalization, and was characterized by a very critical attitude towards large-scale construction and infrastructure projects (Oosterlynck and Debruyne, 2010). The observation that at the time several high-rise blocks were under construction in the 19th century neighbourhoods, while the downtown area suffered from real estate speculation, suggests this attitude was justified. Thirty years later, the Patershol district had become the prototype of a gentrified neighbourhood, with streets dominated by picturesque facades and quality restaurants (Fig. 13).



*Fig. 13 Gentrified Patershol neighbourhood*

In 1971, an urban design competition “Ghent Tomorrow” attempted to reconcile new urban amenities, car traffic, and historic morphology, while the CIAM doctrine was replaced by a postmodernist approach. The contest was an important turning point, establishing the idea of urban development on a human scale, with less space for automobiles and more importance attached to water and greenery (Oosterlynck and Debruyne, 2010). Also, the idea that traffic should be routed as much as possible in concentric rings around the city had become commonplace (Buchanan, 1966).

In the same period, plans were made to disconnect the sewerage system from the canals. Also, in the early 70s parking problems were put higher on the agenda. Public transport and pedestrian facilities came to the forefront again. New ideas from 1972 left the plan of the underground railroad behind and suggested a north-south oriented fast tramway, combined with a reduction of car traffic in the city. However, the debate about a possible metro remained topical, which led to further speculation and dilapidation of the buildings that were located on the probable routes. The effects of the 1973 oil crisis, however, were felt in government budgets, which happened in parallel with environmental awareness. The aversion to the asphaltting of the Ghent waterways and increasing concerns towards heritage preservation led in 1975 to a large-scale protest campaign, after which the tunnel plans were



finally abandoned (Daska Film Archive, 1976). Interestingly, the role of the bicycle was not yet recognized in Ghent's traffic plans from that time, although even then the use of this means of transport was significant. Typical for the tilting vision of urban issues is the Master Plan from 1976 that envisaged the improvement of the living environment in the city, with the explicit objective of countering urban flight.

Despite the increasing congestion and lack of parking space, downtown remained a thriving trade centre. In 1974 the city council recognized the importance of the commercial function of the city centre, and actually started pedestrianizing some shopping streets. Although this policy was aimed at increasing the attractiveness of the city, each measure received loud protest from retailers. However, the measures were not necessarily directed against the car, witness the various parking garages that were built in the city at that time. Meanwhile, in Ghent also peripheral supermarkets and various ribbons of retail warehouses developed, which were hardly directed by any policy.

## Focus on the urban fringe

In 1977, the Belgian government imposed a merger of municipalities (Voets and De Rynck, 2008). The city of Ghent was merged with its neighbouring municipalities, resulting in a new territory and a population increase from 140,000 to 249,000 inhabitants. The merger obviously had political implications, and the emphasis shifted to the interests of the former suburbs, where many native inhabitants from Ghent had moved over time. Meanwhile, the population of the core city had become increasingly heterogeneous. Besides natives from Ghent, the old neighbourhoods became increasingly populated with immigrants, students and recently graduated newcomers from other parts of Flanders.

For Ghent, the advantage of the merger was that urban services could now be financed with taxes collected from the entire conurbation. Also, the urban public transport system could now more easily operate lines exceeding the former city limits, just as the water treatment could now be organized at a larger scale and thus more efficiently. The national planning process for the regional zoning plans resulted in 1979 in a land use plan that comprised the entire region of Ghent (Albrechts and Meuris, 2000). Although largely inspired by the principle of separation of functions, it is striking how the plan managed to confirm existing sprawl, encouraging speculation in unbuilt land in often very peripheral locations. Since this plan is legally binding, it serves first and foremost the legal certainty of the land owner, rather than supporting the development of new visions. Moreover, the plan was designed to provide an ample stock of construction land in order to avoid scarcity. Therefore, unlike the vision of the

environmental movement at that time, the expansion of the built-up area was not interrupted. On the other hand, the principle of legal certainty is equally valid to natural and recreational areas, forests and valuable landscapes, which are traditionally under pressure because of urban expansion. In this way, the regional zoning plan for Ghent has been successful in protecting some natural areas and park landscapes in the outskirts against development. Despite the merger, the urban revitalization projects in the city just went on, while the focus shifted slowly towards some of the working-class neighbourhoods north of the downtown area with a high concentration of immigrants. Meanwhile, under the Friday market square in the centre the first large underground car park opened in 1982, allowing the removal of all cars from the square.

In 1987, a first attempt was made to introduce a traffic circulation plan, which would prohibit through traffic in the centre. Although after a few months the plan was withdrawn under a storm of protest from the local shopkeepers (Oosterlynck, 2010), traffic calming measures were progressively introduced since 1976, when the first pedestrianized street was inaugurated. Over the next few years a number of other squares were made car-free by providing a car park building below. By pedestrianizing the squares on a permanent basis, temporary events such as weekly markets, fairs, and winter markets were supported, and the annual ten-day Ghent Festival. Ever since, mobility planning has importantly contributed to the transformation of Ghent into an attractive environment for living, working, shopping and cultural activities.

In 1993, the city drafted a new spatial development perspective for the entire territory (Fig. 14) (City of Ghent, 1994). The plan contained important extensions to the port area, including a new dock and a phasing out of some homes (Albrechts and Van den Broeck, 2004). The urban natural reserve of Bourgoyen was reconfirmed as protected area, while some peripheral retail ribbons were maintained and even expanded, especially where the neighbouring municipalities allowed such developments too. Another important element was the development of the former airfield south of the ring canal into a new project area for large-scale urban facilities under the name of The Loop (Debruyne et al., 2008).

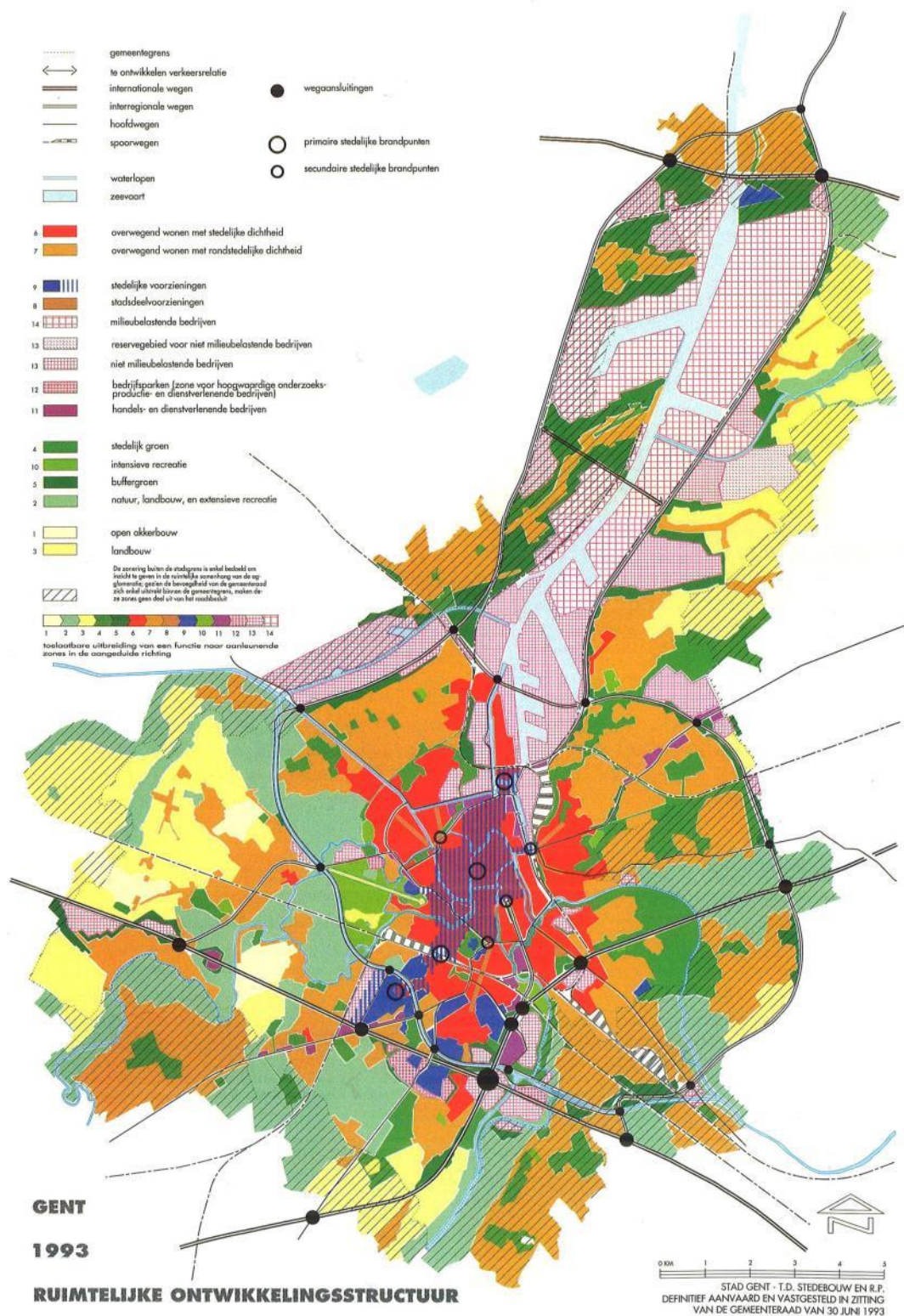


Fig. 14 Spatial Development Perspective, 1993

In 1997, a comprehensive mobility plan was introduced, which expanded the pedestrian zone, introduced a bicycle network, set up a parking route, and established a standstill principle regarding the number of parking lots in the centre. Since 1982 the tram network was also

expanding again, a process that proved to be slow but managed to reconnect new developments and suburban neighbourhoods slowly but surely to the public transport system. Between 1989 and 2009 one of the former tram lines was replaced by a trolleybus line. In 2003 Ghent's municipal spatial structure plan was approved. Although in this new development plan many concepts from the 1993 development perspective reoccurred, the original vision was refined and was as well granted a status, since it was now in line with the new Flemish spatial planning decree of 1996 (City of Ghent, 2003).

## New initiatives and future perspectives

Recent urban development projects follow various tracks. Today, the Social Democrat and Green representatives in the city council, including the mayor, stress the supply of additional housing for both middle and lower-income classes, small-scale social housing projects, the extension of public transport and cycling networks, and the increase of livability standards. In addition, emphasis is on the 19th century neighbourhoods that are today faced with a number of urban social problems (Van Bouchaute, 2012). The Liberal-Conservative representatives in the council attach more importance to the role of the city as a shopping experience, a setting for events, and a business centre. Both sides are also concerned with the image of the city to visitors and tourists, and with the visibility of the council's achievements. Critical voices within Ghent's civil society constitute a permanent sounding board for policy makers, and denounce the vision of the city council as viewing Ghent too much as a "fun city", where the interest of the visitors is overemphasized, to the detriment of the inhabitants (Debruyne et al., 2008; De Decker and Meeus, 2012).

In the 90s, the city managed to catch up in the field of social housing. The large-scale development strategy that was common until the 70s was replaced with a pointwise approach of townhouses and low-rise apartment blocks (Fig. 15). At the same time a number of brownfields were redeveloped, some of these into public parks. In the densely built-up areas of the 19th century neighbourhoods, innovative revitalization projects were set up, in which homes were demolished only if they could be replaced by the same number of contemporary dwellings combined with a piece of public green space (Debruyne and Oosterlynck, 2009). Although it is interesting to see that both active social urban renewal and gentrification have recently moved from the downtown area to this 19th century belt, it is as well important to recognize that such pointwise initiatives are clearly insufficient to meet the needs in these neighbourhoods in terms of poor housing quality, intercultural tensions, and poverty. In the most southern part of the harbour, a new residential area is being developed under the project



name "Old Docks", where innovative architecture and high density aims at middle-class families who want to live in an urban atmosphere. The underlying policy goal is that the city needs to be appealing to two-earner households with children, in order to counter urban flight, while stressing the diversity and the financial capacity of the city. But expanding housing supply also fits a sustainability discourse, since more housing in the city is hoped to discourage uncontrolled urban sprawl in the fringe while promoting ecological lifestyles. The relatively small ecological footprint of the urban population also plays a role in the goal to make the city of Ghent climate neutral by 2050 (Nevens and Roorda, 2014). This objective is made visible by means of a number of concrete projects, such as the planned demolition of the viaduct that connects the city centre directly to the motorway network since 1972, and the development of an urban forest (Van Herzele, 2006).



*Fig. 15 Social housing old style (70s - background) and new style (late 90s - foreground)*

But besides strengthening the residential function, Ghent is also working hard on the city's prestige, including the development of a new railway station precinct, consisting of a complex of residential towers and offices. By turning the neighbourhood of the station, which serves

54,000 train passengers a day, into an activity centre, the council hopes to discourage car use. Also the new courthouse and football stadium fit in this series of projects, as well as the development of the urban activity zone "The Loop" where an exposition hall, offices and homes are combined with a large-scale retail outlet (Van Keymeulen, 2006).

Current debates on urban development are focused on finding a balance between tourism and habitation, on the architecture of the central squares, on bicycle facilities, on low quality housing in the nineteenth-century neighbourhoods and on the lack of greenery in the city. A fascinating discussion concerns the development of peripheral retail warehouses, in which Ghent tends to pursue a rather restrictive policy while some neighbouring municipalities show a markedly permissive policy in this. In the field of public transport, a similar debate is on-going: while the city wants to have its tram lines get through as far as possible into the periphery, some neighbouring municipalities disagree with this. However, the suburbs' demographics are becoming more heterogeneous too, starting to mirror the population of the inner city. Since 2000, Ghent encounters population growth again, which is due to immigration and a slowdown of urban flight. Since the suburbs become more and more integrated in the urban agglomeration, it is clear that one of the challenges of the next decades is the intensification of supra-municipal cooperation, targeted on countering policy discrepancies and attuning urban service provision.

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