

CITIES AS PLACES OF HOPE: GHENT

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A new wind is blowing in the EU. With the presentation of its European Green Deal, the European Commission has committed to making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

A wave of hope is also being generated by progressive cities across the continent. These cities are demonstrating how to make a difference by developing and implementing transformative, future-oriented policies, accompanied by new ways of doing politics and of reconnecting with citizens.

As part of the Green European Foundation's transnational project "Cities as Places of Hope", we are spotlighting some of these transformative green cities. Ghent (Belgium) for instance, is a city that transformed its approach to mobility to meet the needs of the people who live there as opposed to the cars that drive through it.

Towards a greener city

Welcome to Ghent, the capital of the Belgian province of East Flanders and Belgium's third largest city after Brussels and Antwerp. Ghent covers an area of 156 square kilometres and has 260,000 inhabitants. A university city, it also counts a student population of almost 80,000.

The city's first steps towards improved mobility were made in the nineties, beginning with the implementation of a cycling policy in 1993. By connecting the city's districts with the city centre, investing in awareness campaigns, and providing bicycle parking, Ghent saw its bicycle use double by 1999. But it still was very low. In 1997, Ghent rolled out its first mobility plan for the inner city. The heart of the historic centre was turned into the largest contiguous pedestrian zone in Flanders, encircled by a parking route (P-route) connecting 10 car parks housing around 5000 parking spaces. The following years saw the roll-out of a masterplan for the pedestrian-friendly reconstruction of the city's historic centre.

Meanwhile, the city witnessed a steady population increase, including the exponential growth of its student population. It also became an increasingly popular tourist destination.

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In 2012, mobility research showed that more than half of all journeys in the city were made by car, and that 50 per cent of city centre traffic was simply transiting through the city. Walking or cycling counted for only a third of all journeys, and the use of public transport for barely 9 per cent. In spite of policy efforts and the success story of the nineties, a strong growth in car traffic was driving Ghent towards gridlock: the P-route grew into a heavily used transport axis, traffic congestion was increasingly common and caused public transport delays, finding parking spaces became a real challenge, and cyclists were battling traffic. The need for a new, sustainable, and far-reaching vision on mobility became clear.

In September 2015, the City of Ghent and **Filip Watteeuw**, the Green councillor responsible for mobility, published an ambitious plan to improve accessibility and quality of life within the city. Mobility was considered as the driving force behind a sustainable living and working environment.

An ambitious mobility plan

In 2016, the City of Ghent implemented a new, people-friendly approach to combatting traffic congestion and facilitating a healthier and more viable living environment for all. The new mobility plan consisted of two major components: a parking plan and a traffic circulation plan.

The parking plan (Parkeerplan) was introduced in 2016. It comprises a parking tariff policy that encourages car users to leave their vehicles on the outskirts of the city by providing **mostly free park-and-ride services**, combined with **public transport** and **city bikes**. **Higher tariffs** apply to cars parked closer to the historic centre. More areas are being reserved for **resident parking**, and **underground spaces** are becoming more expensive for long-term parking.

The traffic circulation plan (Circulatieplan), launched in 2017, aimed primarily at relieving the city centre of through traffic. It put a **halt to traffic** transiting through the city centre in order to create more **space for pedestrians, cyclists, buses, trams, and green space**. It did so by **extending the existing restricted traffic area** in the centre, and by dividing the surrounding zone into six sections in which car traffic is looped out and **rerouted via ring roads**, rather than allowed to drive directly from section to section. Car access is still possible for those who really need to be in the city centre, and the measures allow them to reach their destinations more easily.

Other measures were also taken: the **cycling infrastructure** was extended, efforts were made to facilitate the smooth flow of **public transport**, the city was turned into a **30 km/h zone**, and the mobility policy welcomed collaboration and **co-creation initiatives** with other stakeholders including residents, schools, companies, and other organisations.

Ghent mobility: facts & figures

The Ghent mobility plan has proved that radical change is possible. An evaluation report published in May 2019 showed that the use of sustainable modes of transport has noticeably increased since the plan's introduction. The report cites a 17 per cent drop in car use, and an increase in daily public transport use of an average of 6 per cent, rising to 25 per cent during the evening rush hour. Bicycle use has increased by more than 50 per cent.

The figures are even more impressive when compared to 2012. More than a third of all trips are now made by bicycle as opposed to less than a quarter in 2012, and the percentage of trips made by public transport has risen to 14 per cent from 9 per cent (Fig. 1).

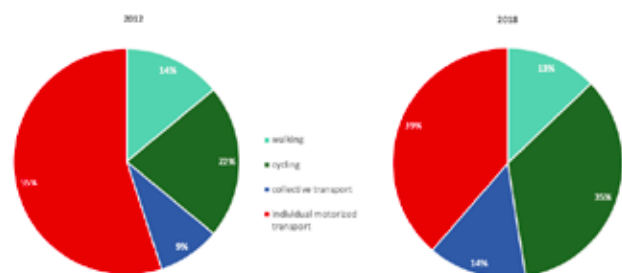


Figure 1. Modal split, indicating which means of transport are used and to what extent. ©City of Ghent

The fact that there are fewer cars in the inner city has freed up space for the creation of more green areas. For instance, the **Maaseikplein** (Fig. 2), a city centre square that had been used for parking, was recently converted into a pleasant green space with fruit trees, picnic tables, and recreational elements.



Figure 2. Maaseikplein before and after its renovation ©City of Ghent



At the same time, significant improvements were seen in terms of road safety and air quality: the number of traffic accidents in the city centre decreased by 25 per cent, while average NO₂ concentrations fell by 20 per cent.

Today, the Ghent traffic circulation plan is inspiring other cities in the world, from Birmingham in the UK to Auckland in New Zealand. In January 2020, British newspaper [The Guardian](#) wrote about how locals in Ghent felt about the mobility changes in their city: “I sold my car and switched to electric car sharing”, “People walking and talking mixed with the quiet zoom of bikes is a vast improvement”, “The cycle streets make it much safer for cyclists”.

The Ghent mobility plan has shown that bold policies aiming to bring about socio-ecological transformation really can provide a meaningful answer to the various questions and challenges of liveability and accessibility in cities. In a remarkably short time, lower traffic density has led to better air quality and safer roads, as well as a more attractive environment in which to live, work, and study.

Next steps: beyond the city centre

While the traffic circulation plan focused strongly on the city centre, the City of Ghent is now looking at the surrounding districts. By means of seven “district mobility plans”, Ghent wants to increase the liveability and safety of its districts and further reduce through traffic.



Figure 3. Underpass Rozemarijn bridge © City of Ghent

These district mobility plans actively involve each neighbourhood, for instance via info sessions, public participation exercises, and online workshops.

The City is also working towards “softening”, in which cities are reimagined as green, people-friendly environments. For example, when reconstructing streets and squares, unnecessary pavements will be eliminated in favour of green space.

The exciting thing about Ghent’s mobility policies is that, although remarkable progress has already been made, its ambition is to go even further. One of the City’s current projects is to build cycle bridges and tunnels to provide conflict-free cycle routes (Fig. 3). So whenever you visit Ghent, don’t forget to take your bike!