

A Continuous Process with a Strong Vision and Frame can Deal with Transformation and Changes. Monitoring the Spatial Structure Plan of the City of Ghent

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1 ABSTRACT

Ghent is a much sought-after tourist destination. The creators of the renowned travel guide Lonely Planet seem to agree. In the 2011 edition, Ghent ranks seventh in the list of must-see cities. Lonely Planet describes Ghent as Europe's best kept secret. Ghent is a historic city, yet at the same time also a contemporary one. The modern daily life of the city's active 300,000 inhabitants plays itself out against a gorgeous historical backdrop. In Ghent, they live, work and enjoy life over and over again each day. The famed stubbornness of the inhabitants grew historically. Over time Ghent has been transformed into an attractive and lively city. And the inhabitants of Ghent prove their progressiveness and open-mindedness every day. This makes for a colorful city scene, a rich (multi-) cultural appeal and a swinging nightlife.

Part of the Ghent's attractiveness is due to its characteristics as a 'planning-minded city'. Ghent is one of Flanders' pilot cities that drew up a spatial structure plan based on the 'three-tracks methodology' (long-term vision, short-term actions and communication). In 2003, this ambitious, coherent and strategic plan was admitted by the city government as a framework for the elaboration of the spatial policy.

Over the past seven years (2003-2010), OMGEVING cvba has developed a methodology to evaluate and measure the implementation of the spatial structure plan. In this way the city can monitor whether the implementation of the structure plan is on track. A yearly monitoring system was installed. Through the results of the evaluation, it is possible to identify which projects require a track change or need to shift to a higher gear. The annual monitoring also created the possibility to develop a methodology that structures the preparations for the policy development. In this way a set of criteria was developed for the evaluation of the planning efforts and the detection of the required adjustments. All these efforts have a single goal in mind: 'to improve the livability and attractiveness of Ghent for its inhabitants and visitors'.

The criteria developed evaluate a series of quantitative goals which are of primary importance for the city government. With these goals, the city board of Ghent wants to achieve and refer to a number of additional dwellings, space for commercial activities and green (parks, forests...).

The evaluation focuses on 'core projects' that embody the spatial structure plan of Ghent in a qualitative manner. The main question is: 'is the implementation of the project in keeping with the goals of the structure plan?'

2 GHENT IS A CITY WITH A TRADITION OF PLANNING

2.1 Planning history

The Ghent municipal authorities were formulating urban land-use plans long before there was any law on town planning in Belgium (1962). The first land use plan dates from 1947, shortly after the end of World War II. Several decades of experimentation with land use plans soon made it clear that there was a need for a larger overarching plan. In 1971, the Ghent International Trade Fair organised the urban planning competition 'Ghent Tomorrow'. However, many useful ideas were not taken any further but they did succeed in drawing more attention amongst policymakers and the larger population to the historical city centre with its typical watercourses and unique heritage. 1977 was an important year for urban planning in Ghent: the regional plan (a land use plan of the Flemish government) was approved and a merger of the city of Ghent with its surrounding municipalities occurred. The years 1978 to 1992 saw a great deal of work carried out on a first structure plan for the merged city. However, due to elections this plan was not approved. It was waiting until 1993 when the first global structure plan was approved, the Ghent Spatial Development Structure. This plan structure had no legal framework. It was only in 1996 that the Flemish Parliament approved a new Planning Decree whereby the structure plan also became an official planning instrument in addition to the land use plan. Since then, structure plans have had to be formulated at three policy levels: Flanders (Flemish Spatial Structure Plan), provinces (5) and municipalities (308). The city of Ghent immediately took up this opportunity and began formulating a new spatial structure plan in 1997.

OMGEVING cvba was appointed as designer, working in close collaboration with the city's Administration of Urban and Spatial Planning.

2.2 The Ghent Spatial Structure Plan

The Ghent Spatial Structure Plan (RSG in Dutch) was approved in 2003 (map in annex 1). The plan makes important and ambitious pronouncements about how space in Ghent will be ordered and designed for the planning period until 2007 and a further period of implementation until 2012. The structure plan approaches the city as a single coherent whole into which all important spatial planning decisions must fit. The structure plan is not a development plan, its primary purpose is to provide a strategic vision of the future city as a whole and encouragement for new projects. Guiding principles are the delimitation of the city, the grouping of functions in order to achieve an economical and intensive use of space, a mixing of functions as long as the capacity of the area is not exceeded, the selection of spatially structuring elements which and finally, the search for the right cohesion of structures. Ghent presents itself as a high-quality residential city, a city of towers and rivers and a multifaceted and headstrong city of knowledge and culture. The desired spatial structure (map in annex 1) shows this spatial cohesion built around a four-part concept. Prominent features of this concept include: the physical system of the converging Scheldt and Leie rivers, a morphological hourglass pattern, 4 radial historical main roads as supporting main lines for public transport in between which are located 4 city-edge residential areas, a city boulevard and a large ring road, with development space at the crossings with the main roads, 2 structure the station surroundings and 4 green poles connected with the city centre via green axes. The RSG defines tasks regarding residential living (1300 additional dwellings per year, a minimum of 300 of which must be social housing), industry (10 ha of additional business premises per year), nature and woodland (300 ha of additional woodland, 6 new parks and 1 new sports park + the application of the stand-still principle concerning nature and green spaces) and traffic and transport. The implementation of the RSG is guided via 12 strategic core projects.

3 NEUTRAL AND PROFESSIONAL MONITORING

Strategic planning for urban development does not just mean the setting out of a vision and guidelines. The ambitions and projects must also be implemented in practice. Therefore, in 2004, one year following the approval of the RSG, an annual monitoring and evaluation system was set up. This monitoring contributes towards a more forceful control over urban development. The options contained in the RSG function as a valuable foothold in this regard. The accumulation of knowledge is essential in order to be able to manage tasks in the future and in the event of new trends emerging. The city of Ghent is therefore the only city in Flanders to strive towards a far-reaching monitoring of the structure plan. The monitoring of the implementation of tasks is a continuous process. It may form a starting point for new policy decisions: indicators may point to a sticking point or an opportunity. At the same time, good monitoring brings objectivity to the city's own spatial planning policy. The quantitative analysis and evaluation of projects may validate or adjust prior policy decisions. The quantitative analysis and evaluation of the RSG is built around 4 aspects: (1) the measurement of a number of indicators, attuned to the tasks set, (2) the establishment of a systematic actualisation of these indicators, (3) the testing of these indicators in relation to the tasks and (4) the focusing on actions and measures which can be taken in order to optimally fulfil the tasks. Good data collection and monitoring (with the help of Data Planning and GIS) supports the process. In addition to a substantive evaluation of the continued effects of the RSG, the process and the methodology are also evaluated. A good consultation structure with both internal and external partners and clear management are crucial for the correct follow-up of core projects, the fulfilment of tasks and the related actions. Links between the various projects are sought within this process, as is the retention of an overview and a balance between the various priorities by means of consultation and coordination. Besides consultation with the various city services, other authorities and private partners, communication with a wider public is also important with the aim of maintaining broad support for the RSG.



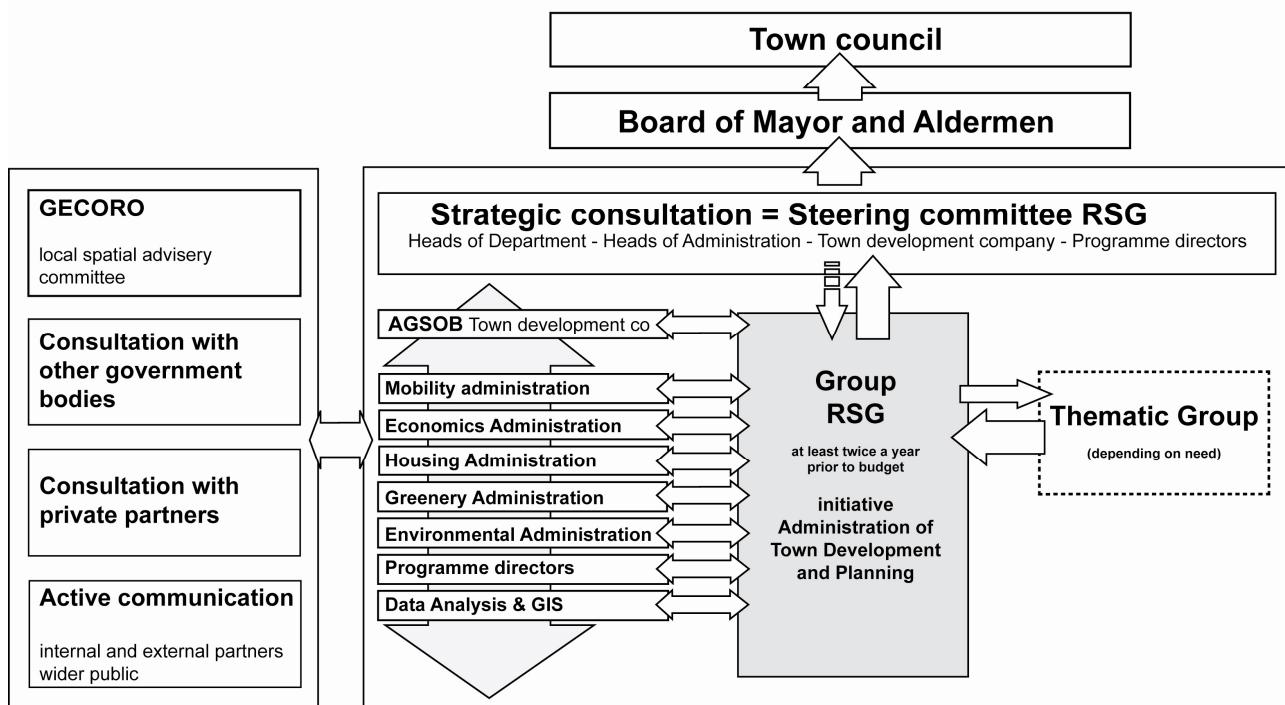


Fig. 1: Consultation structure for implementation of the strategic spatial structure plan 2008-2012.

4 INTERIM RESULTS AT THE END OF 2010

After working with the RSG for around 7 years, we can note that the options from this policy plan remain valid for most of the core projects. The content was sometimes further refined, for example as a result of the formulation of an implementation plan or by a city design or guideline memorandum. The implementation of the core projects is often far more difficult.

The evaluation and monitoring has led to the addition of new strategic core projects which further reinforce the global vision and strategy of the RSG. A refined list of priorities is being drawn up on the basis of critical success factors which are decisive for the success of projects (map in annex 2).

As regards the setting of tasks, it is important to draw a distinction between the planning and implementation phase. At the planning level, many tasks are set through the redesignated use of a number of areas. The concrete implementation on the site happens less smoothly for various reasons. An active catch-up effort is particularly needed in the area of social housing, the building up of a strong stock of business premises and the creation of additional woodland areas. A new strategy is being formulated for this purpose.

In addition, a number of aspects from the RSG require clarification. After all, the guiding section of the structure plan includes texts, figures and maps which the RSG itself explicitly describes as being indicative only and in need of further refinement, but which the higher (provincial and Flemish) authorities applied far too rigidly.

With regard to the evaluation of the process, it is clear that the managing role of the Administration of Urban and Spatial Planning is crucial in the correct follow-up of the list of priorities. It is also important that a balance is retained between the various priorities.

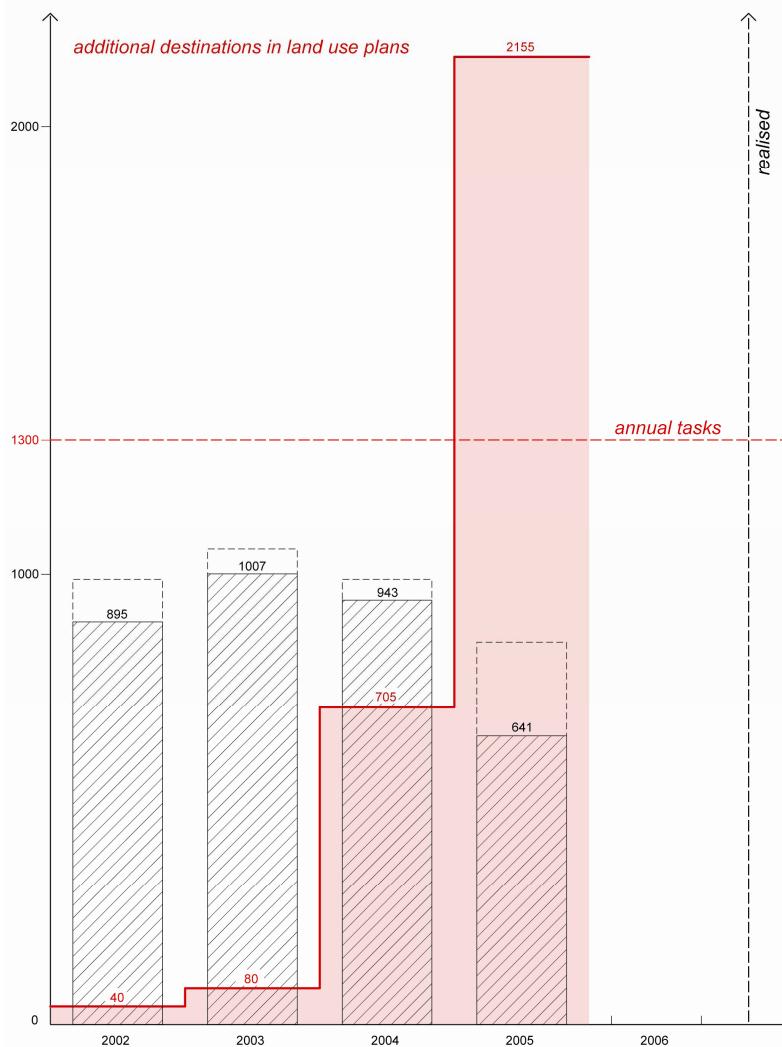


Fig. 2: Monitoring tasks dwellings.

5 CONCLUSION

An annual screening and the recording of conclusions in an annual report is a strong and accurate way of monitoring and adjusting the continued effects of a spatial policy plan in a trans-sector manner. Possible points for improvement and new points of attention are clearly presented so that policymakers can respond quicker.

A good consultation structure and management are necessary throughout the whole process. Experience shows that such consultation must have a (more) strategic character and that higher authorities must also be involved more intensely in the process because they are partly responsible for the non- or inadequate fulfilment of the tasks. Quality control during the realisation of the strategic core projects could be improved through the appointment of a city architect-in-chief.

How the results of this technical and evaluation consultation can be better communicated to the public and private actors in order to create greater support is still a tricky issue. Communication managers are involved in this. From a management perspective, it remains a difficult question whether or not to communicate to the public regarding unrealised or only partially realised ambitions, particularly with the municipal elections on the horizon (2012).

A great deal of time is being invested in monitoring and evaluation but this does deliver up a double bonus. Firstly in relation to the necessary adjustment during the current administration period and secondly with regard to the preparations for the review of the RSG after 2012. Indeed, this process is generating a large amount of material and points of attention for a new spatial structure plan for the city of Ghent.



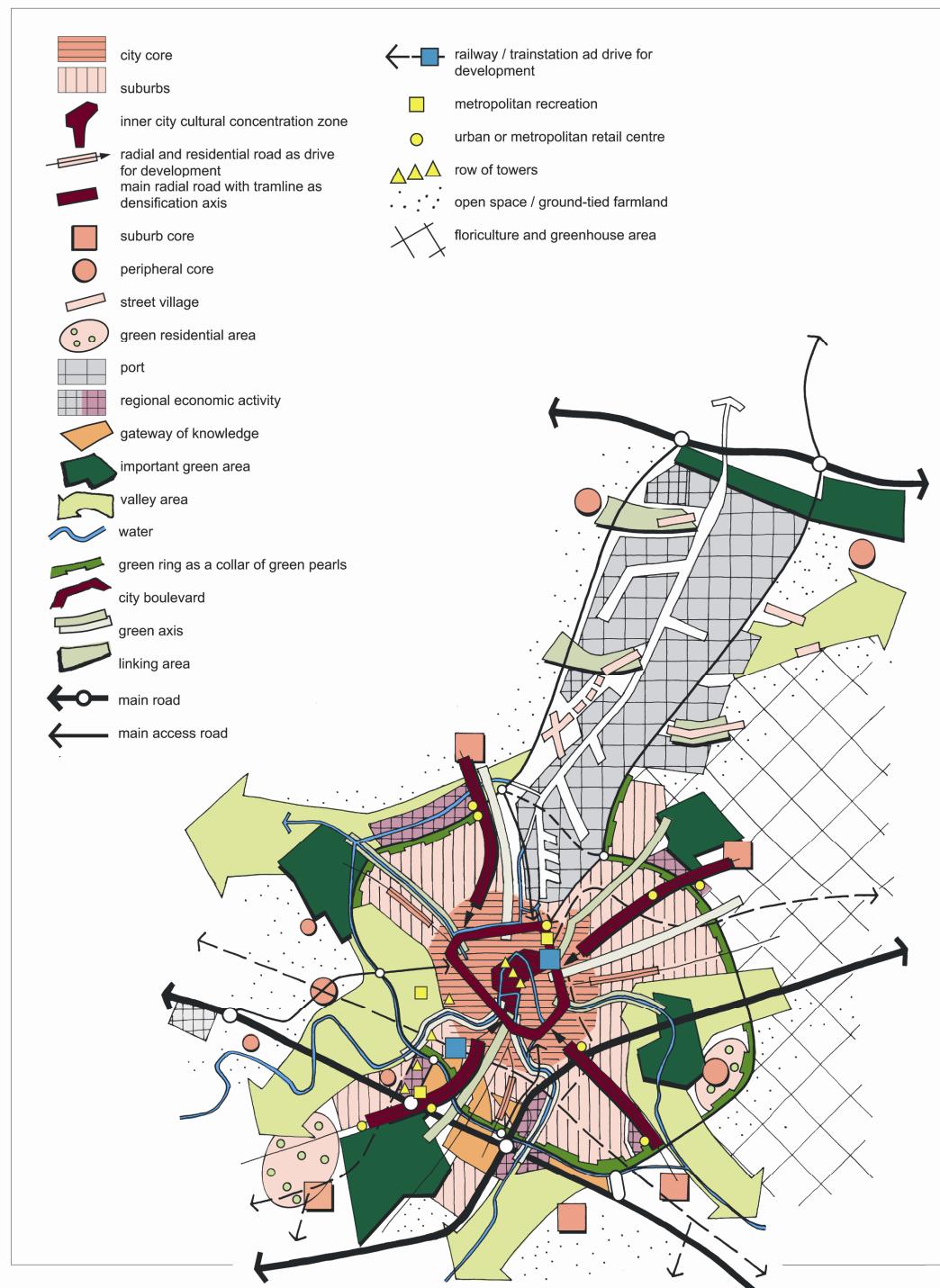
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spatial structure plan of the city of Ghent

desired spatial structure

map 1



monitoring the spatial structure plan of the city of Ghent

annual report RSG | location strategic core projects

map 2

