

Ghent – Innovative Strategic Urban Development: New Transitions in the City and along the Old Dockyards

Agnieszka Zajac

(Master civil engineer architect Agnieszka Zajac, sogent, Volderstraat 1, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, agnieszka.zajac@sogent.be)

1 ABSTRACT

The city of Ghent is a very interesting example of a city with a double relationship towards its own water infrastructure. There are three main reasons for this relationship. First, the historical reasons for establishing Ghent along the water were based purely on living conditions and economic considerations (textile industry, water for drinking, and canal waterway support...). Later, however, the polluted water infrastructure had to be filled up to make room for another economic reason: free mobility access for cars, extra parking and open space. The third – and fairly recent – reason is that the city council, together with urban planners, discovered the water-backbone again, and gave it a third life as the regenerator of the city, as a way of making the city "full of pleasure, with open perspectives and open sustainable public spaces" again. Ghent shows how a city can reuse its inner structure and how the water structure can change a city's future. Sustainable water infrastructure can truly be the basis for city evolution and urban planning.

Keywords: waterfront, circulation, spatial planning, docks, temporary use

2 GHENT, NEW TRANSITIONS

2.1 Room for Ghent

Ghent is a city in Belgium of approximately 320,000 inhabitants (250,000 inhabitants and over 70,000 daily college and university students). The city holds an innovative and sustainable future vision. The policy and different realisations of the last years are based on a strong tradition of strategic urban planning, first steps towards a circular economy, successful introduction of a new mobility plan. Innovative city regeneration projects bring together companies, institutions, businesses, governments and citizens on their journey to reinforce the attractiveness and to create a liveable city.

Like most cities Ghent is facing several global challenges that have an impact on the way we spatially plan the city: climate change, migration, unemployment, financial crisis, shortage of houses. Nevertheless Ghent is appointed as most liveable city of Belgium according to the study of 2018 of the Wuppertal Institut commissioned by environmental organization Greenpeace.

This successful story can be shortly explained by picturing four theorems:

- A strong tradition of strategic urban planning
- Discovering and re-using the water-backbone
- Small scale 'acupuncture' interventions
- An innovative, city centered design of the Spatial Structural Vision 2030

2.2 Creation of a liveable city

First of all there is a strong baseline created by the Spatial Structure Plan of Ghent 2003 that was renewed by the Spatial Structural Vision 2030, 'Room for Ghent' based on spatial capacity and spatial quality. The plan offers an overall vision on urban planning now and in the future. Five key-concepts formulate answers to the different challenges the city faces:

- Smart densification and aerating: this means doing more with the available space. For instance building new homes in easily accessible places, and providing more open spaces in other locations.
- Cleverly interweaving functions: we create proximity and microcentrality. This means that housing, work and facilities are found in close proximity to one another.
- Stimulating sustainable mobility: a network for pedestrians and cyclists forms the basis for urban development. This is called bicycle urbanism.
- Green and water facilities.

- The human focus: our point of view when we shape space is the living environment of the residents and users of Ghent. We are creating a city for everyone, with everyone (cocreation).
- The liveability challenge: transforming the city into a liveable environment for young and old with sufficient and well distributed green areas.
- The climate challenge: sustainable and climate proof spatial development.
- The demographic challenge: tackling the growth and altering the composition of the population in a sensible way.
- The mobility challenge: the need for selective access of the city and its region.
- The economic challenge: spatial support of the growing, changing and innovative economy.
- Opting for a crowd-sourced design of spatial planning.



Fig. 1: Children at work in one of the “Room for Ghent”-workshops. ©Stad Gent

2.3 Circulation Plan

The most penetrating and discussed challenge was the decision of an implementation of a new circulation plan. To meet the mobility needs in a vibrant, growing and busy city, Ghent implemented the Circulation Plan in April 2017. The plan creates more space for pedestrians, cyclists, buses and trams. From one day into another Ghent became another city.

Emergency services, public transport, refuse collection vehicles (IVAGO), taxis and healthcare providers with permits, (electric) bikes, cargo bikes and class A and B mopeds are allowed to pass through streets closed for motorized vehicles. The ultimate goal of the Circulation Plan is to unburden the city center of ongoing traffic. Whoever needs to be in the city, will get there easier.

The effects are astounding. Citizens experience that it is much easier and quicker to walk, take public transport or to cycle than to use a car in the city centre. After one year it was scientifically proven that the air quality had increased.

This first step has to be maintained further on with developing bicycle traffic and public transport as fully-fledged mobility systems. But we all learned one important lesson: the mobility of the city based on cyclists and pedestrians can make cities safer and cleaner.



Fig. 2: Implementation of the Circulation Plan. ©Stad Gent

3 REVIVING THE WATERWAS

3.1 Water city

For centuries Ghent has been a water city. Ghent is founded at the confluence of two rivers, the Lys and the Scheldt. The historical reasons for establishing Ghent along the water were based purely on living conditions and economic considerations (textile industry, water for drinking and canal waterway support...). Later, however, the polluted water infrastructure had to be filled up to make room for another economic reason: free access for cars, extra parking and open space.

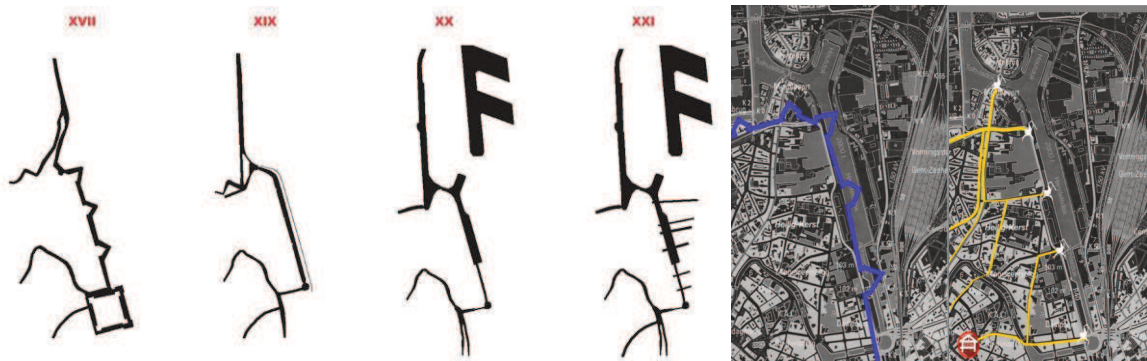


Fig. 3: The evolution of water infrastructure in Ghent, @ sogent

3.2 Rediscovering water-backbone

Now Ghent has discovered its water-backbone again. We seek to enhance this with our spatial vision. Green and water make the city a pleasant place to live and relax. This is why we are creating a network of blue and green throughout the city. Waterways bring green into the centre and provide cooling, reducing the heat island effect. We green the banks and improve the water quality. Waterways that were covered or filled in, are restored.

We not only enhance the visibility of the water, but also the liveability. Space on and along the water can – certainly in urbanized areas – fulfil various functions: transportation, recreation, nature and green, ecology, housing ...

In the meantime the city discovered the water-backbone again, and gave it a third life as the regenerator of the city, as a way of making the city facing his water backbone again. Several new bridges were build, the water is unfilled again and a brand-new vivid quarter is now arising at the Old Docks. All this made the city become a water city again.

3.3 Braving a new life into the Old Dockayrds

The site around Ghent's three oldest docks (ca. 25 ha) is being refurbished into a new neighbourhood along the water, the "Old Docks Waterfront". The area between Dampoort and Muide will be home to about 1,500 housing units, green areas and open spaces, leisure facilities, retailers and public facilities, including a school, a day-care centre and a sports centre. Bridges for pedestrians, cyclists and cars will link this new neighbourhood to the city centre. At least 20% of the new dwellings consist of social housing and another 20% of affordable housing. They fulfill the promise to deal with housing shortage for each citizen of Ghent.

In addition, the Old Dockyards is more than a simple housing project and will be focusing on constructing new low-energy and passive houses. Thanks to innovative technologies, some residential buildings in the Old Dockyards will use heating systems based on biogas from black water. Such systems reuse the warm air produced by industrial factories, as well as captured heat and nutrients from used water from dishwashers and laundry machines.

Thanks to the regeneration of the area, new business models such as car and bike sharing have developed, and the city has launched activities that challenge residents' linear lifestyles. Indeed, throughout the Old Dockyards, people can already experience the circular economy through the presence of temporary buildings constructed with recycled materials, guided walks, a 'circular dialogue café' as well as short-term exhibitions that demonstrate the different possible uses of city infrastructure.



Fig. 4: Aerial view of the first PPP project by cvba Schipperskaai @ DND

3.4 Temporary use as a beginning

The concept of the waterfront in Ghent is therefore different than in other cities. The focus does not lay on financial aspects, but on creating a liveable and vibrant new city district by fulfilling the needs of the city's inhabitants. Between the planning phase and the effective realisation of the project, years have gone by. Those delays were transformed into opportunities, giving special attention to the possible temporary use of the grounds, allowing the city to renovate the quay walls and building a bridge for pedestrians and cyclists during that time. By offering all kind of happenings for the neighbourhood and for Ghent's inhabitants – including films, exhibitions, theatre, sports, a city farm, urban agriculture, flea markets, handicrafts – the Old Dockyards has already become an integral part of the city. Today, the neglected dock area is alive and now on the mental map of the inhabitants. At the same time, it offers enormous opportunities in terms of communication. In a pleasant way, the City of Ghent can inform all visitors about future plans.

Even though the Old Dockyards site is still under construction, it has already become an integral part of the city. We are all looking forward to the first school day on docks, on 2th September 2019!

The Old Dockyards Project also maintains the remnants of a rich industrial past. Several historical industrial cranes form a new skyline for Ghent, as a gateway from the train station Dampoort to the city centre.



Fig. 5: Temporary use of the Old Dockyards area in 2013 @ City of Ghent archives

4 ACCUPUNCTURE INTERVENTIONS

4.1 Small scale big influence

The city of Ghent is redeveloping very fast. As the Old Dockyards Project is an example of a successful big scale waterfront project for the coming generations, the city of Ghent is also an innovator in creating small scale projects. Those specifically ‘acupuncture’ interventions are modest of scale but they are as important and meaningful as waterfront development.

They are situated all over the city and are often the result of unexpected opportunities: empty spaces because of bankruptcy, public sales or simply a lack of ideas for a destination.

The most recent realisation, opened in September 2018, is the redevelopment of the Standaert site, situated in the heart of Ledeborg, a densely built district of the city. When the do-it-yourself shop announced its bankruptcy, the City of Ghent bought the land. It was immediately clear that these buildings, given their central location, offered a great opportunity. Residents unified in ‘Ledeborg Doet Zelf’ and put forward ideas to redevelop the site. They focused on creating an open, green and traffic-free outdoor space where residents can meet and room for Ledeborg organizations. An important condition was that ‘Ledeborg Doet Zelf’ could rely on the final implementation of the Standaert site and its management.

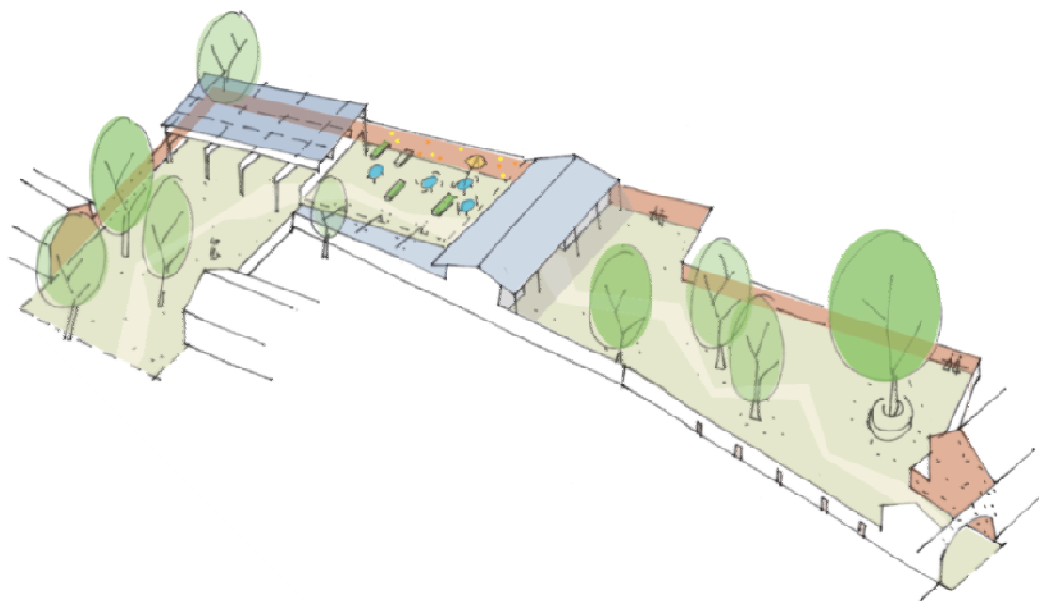


Fig. 6: Redevelopment of the Standaert @ site AE-architecten, murmuur, Carton 123, H110 ingenieurs, Arne Deruyter

In the center of the site the most beautiful warehouse was restored. This warehouse forms the beating heart of the site. On the two flanks of the community center a roof - a ‘porch’ - was placed. This gallery between the garden and the building forms an ideal sheltered meeting place. From the community center and from the

benches beneath the shelter, visitors have an overview of a large part of the park. In the future neighbourhood parties, markets, small performances, ... can take place here.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Ghent shows another kind of approach of city development. Not only based on real estate development but based on the needs of and in cocreation with all inhabitants and users of Ghent.

Ghent also shows how a city can reuse its inner structure and how the waterways can change a city's future. Sustainable water infrastructure can truly be the basis for city evolution and urban planning.

Another important, and very complicated, facet is time. A city is not a static fact. A city evolves, together with its community and its people. Urban planning has to foresee the challenges of the future. We plan for the present, but far more for the future generations. Every day, the progress of the different urban renewal projects in Ghent face the complexity of the city's evolution as a living organism. Every day, the city, the politicians, and the developers are striving for a perfect equilibrium between urban planning, economic reality and a liveable environment.

6 REFERENCES

- AGNIESZKA ZAJAC: Braving a new life in the Old Dockyards – towards an integrated approach, 50th Isocarp Congress, 2014.
PHILIPPE VAN WESENBEECK, VLOEBERGH: Inspire and be inspired: an innovative, crowd sourced design of the Spatial Structural Vision 2030 'Room for Ghent', 52th Isocarp Congress, 2016.