

## **Spatial Planning can Deal with Transformation and Changes in the Urban Sprawl Laboratory called Flanders**

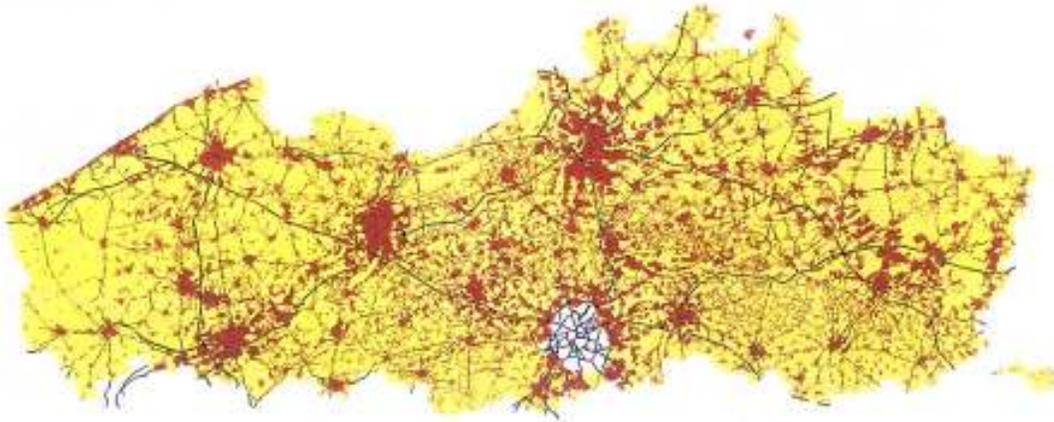
### ***Two cases: the spatial structure plan of the city of Ghent and the spatial policy of the municipality of Brasschaat***

#### **Developing livability on a regional scale**

Flanders, the north region of Belgium, is one of the most built-up areas in Europe. Planners have to deal with the phenomenon of 'urban sprawl'. The Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders (1997), a regional spatial policy plan, established a powerful view of the political agenda expressed by the metaphor 'Flanders, open and urban'. Four spatial planning principles constitute the main themes for the spatial development of Flanders:

- deconcentrated clustering or absorption of expected growth with regard to new homes, infrastructure, business premises and recreational facilities in those places where a concentration of these functions already exists; in other words, unbridled sprawl is counteracted;
- structuring power of the physical system or the reevaluation and strengthening of stream and river valleys and continuous open spaces;
- ports as a driving force for the development or expansion of harbours in an international context;
- uniting power of infrastructures or a commitment to the relationship between the mobility profile of activities and the accessibility profile of the location.

In order to realise a sustainable spatial development and a related change of ongoing trends, these principles are translated into spatial policy measures for urban areas on the one hand and open spaces on the other. This means that urban areas are specifically delineated in urban boundary plans. Before taking a more in-depth look at two specific cases, we will briefly consider this planning strategy.



*Fig. 1: fragmentation of the built-up area in Flanders .*

#### **Delineation of urban areas and open space**

The Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders referred to the unstructured sprawl of towns and the continuing urbanisation of the countryside. For this reason, this regional spatial policy plan stated that urban areas must be selectively expanded with a clustering and interweaving of functions (housing, work and recreation) associated with high density. A policy which strengthens the core areas is of paramount importance here. For around 10 years, urban

boundary studies have been implemented and urban boundary plans have been produced. Following these plans, a supply oriented policy regarding housing, business premises and green and recreational spaces emerged. Specific measures with regard to urban development such as the selection of strategic urban projects and related subsidy flows have supported this policy. Drastic changes to the settlement structure are hardly possible in Flanders, but still many urban projects have considerably improved the livability and attractiveness of the cities during the last 15 years. As a result, suburbanisation of open spaces has generally been slowed down. By introducing a minimum norm of 25 dwellings per hectare in urban areas, densification has occurred and more compact building (more apartments) has undeniably taken place compared to the 1970s and 1980s.

In the open spaces, that is to say the complement of the urban areas, the existing open space (nature, forestry and agriculture) is primarily given maximum protection and working and living are concentrated in existing rural centres. To this end, the settlement structure is differentiated into rural centres, peripheral landscapes, ribbon developments and sprawl. However, the aim of the Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders to reduce suburbanisation of open areas has only partly been realised. This is due to the political and technical complexity of reducing or cancelling existing development rights. It is easier to do 'more' in urban areas than it is to do 'less' in open areas.

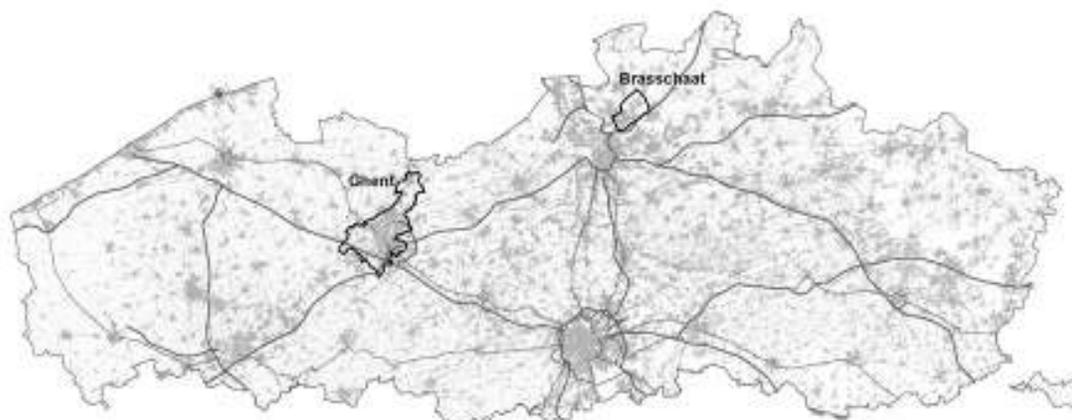
Spatial policy in Flanders including the Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders are currently being evaluated and updated. This provides an opportunity to evaluate how political leaders and spatial planners wish to adjust or replace spatial strategies and instruments, considering the new challenges they face. Examples are climate change, internationalisation, etc.

In my opinion this updating should start from the strengths and positive results of the Spatial Structure Plan of Flanders. Certain shortcomings can be improved, but the continuity of spatial policy and its implementation using available tools, is of particular importance. The two 'cases' presented below show that very dynamic and ambitious spatial planning can be developed locally within the framework of existing Flemish policy both in urban areas (the city of Ghent) as well as in open areas (the municipality of Brasschaat). Within the guidelines of the Flemish Spatial Structure Plan, they are pursuing different strategies.

On the one hand, there is the city of Ghent (15,618 ha), the 'planning mindedness' of which seems to be appreciated, among others, by the well-known 'Lonely Planet' travel guide. In its 2011 edition, Lonely Planet ranked Ghent seventh in the list of must-see cities. 'Lonely Planet' describes Ghent as Europe's best kept secret. Ghent is a historic city, but is at the same time a contemporary one. The modern daily life of the city's active 300,000 inhabitants takes place against a gorgeous historical backdrop. In Ghent, the residents live, work and enjoy life over and over again each day. The famed stubbornness of the inhabitants has grown in the course of history. Over time, Ghent has been transformed into an attractive and lively city. And the inhabitants of Ghent demonstrate their forward-looking approach and open-mindedness every day. This makes for a colourful city scene, a rich (multi-)cultural appeal and a swinging nightlife. 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 accepted by the city government as a framework for the elaboration of its 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. An annual monitoring system has been introduced. As a result of the evaluation, it is possible to identify which projects require a change of track or need to shift to a higher gear.

On the other hand, one of Flanders' 'greenest' municipalities named Brasschaat (37,000 inhabitants, 1,540 ha) has very different spatial and socioeconomic characteristics. It is situated near to the city and the port of Antwerp, a typical (rich) suburb. Brasschaat presents

itself as a high-quality residential area and tries to keep and improve its spatial qualities. The local government works with ambitious strategic plans on housing, parks, public spaces and local economic areas. In 2006, Brasschaat won the 'golden' International Award for Livable Communities (LivCom Awards China). During the last 5 years, OMGEVING cvba has drafted various spatial plans with regard to both the development of housing as well as the use of green spaces as public spaces. Spatial planning strategies are to a large extent based on the creation of networks and alliances, in which Brasschaat manifests itself as coordinator.



*Fig. 2: Position of Ghent and Brasschaat within Flanders.*

In both cases, strategic planning for urban development does not just mean drafting a vision and guidelines. The ambitions and projects must also be implemented in practice. Results of a strong spatial policy can be measured with a view to a far-reaching monitoring of the structural plans. In Ghent, the monitoring of the implementation of tasks is a continuous process. It may form a starting point for new policy decisions: indicators may relate to a reference point or an opportunity. At the same time, good monitoring brings objectivity to the city's own spatial planning policy. The quantitative and qualitative analysis and evaluation of strategic projects may lead to validating or adjusting prior policy decisions. In Brasschaat, the focus lies on the realisation of projects implementating its spatial structural plan on the one hand and a dynamic of networking and co-operation beyond the limits of the town on the other. New alliances are created as a result of this.

## **Case 1: the City of Ghent**

### ***Planning history***

The Ghent municipal authorities have been creating 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 experimenting 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'. Although many useful ideas were not taken any further, the competition succeeded 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. In the years 1978 to 1992 a great deal of work was carried out on a first structural plan for the merged city. However, due to elections this plan was not approved. It was not until 1993 that

the the Ghent Spatial Development Structural Plan as a first global structural plan, was approved. The spatial structure envisioned by this plan had no legal framework. It was only in 1996 that the Flemish Parliament approved a new planning decree which consolidated the structural plan as an official planning tool in addition to the land use plan. Since then, structural plans have had to be formulated at three policy levels: Flanders (Flemish Spatial Structural Plan), provinces (5) and municipalities (308). The city of Ghent immediately took advantage of this opportunity and began formulating a new spatial structural plan in 1997. OMGEVING cvba was appointed as designer, working in close collaboration with the city's Urban and Spatial Planning Administration.

### ***The Ghent Spatial Structural Plan***

The Ghent Spatial Structural Plan (RSG in Dutch) was approved in 2003. The plan includes important and ambitious statements about how space in Ghent will be ordered and designed for the planning period up until 2007 and a further period of implementation up until 2012. The structural plan approaches the city as a single coherent whole into which all important spatial planning decisions must fit. The structural plan is not a development plan; its primary purpose is to provide a strategic vision of the future city as a whole and a basis for new projects. Guiding principles are the delimitation of the city, the grouping of functions in order to accommodate 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 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 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 peripheral residential areas, a city boulevard and a large ring road, with development space at the crossings with the main roads, two structuring train station areas and 4 green poles connected with the city centre via green axes. The RSG defines tasks regarding housing (1,300 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 plus the application of the standstill principle concerning nature and green spaces) and traffic and transport. The implementation of the RSG is guided by 12 strategic key projects.

### ***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 after the approval of the RSG, an annual monitoring and evaluation system was established. 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 the emergence of new trends. The city of Ghent is, therefore, the only city in Flanders to strive towards a far-reaching monitoring of the structural 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 reference 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 ensure the optimal fulfillment of 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 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 co-ordination. Besides consultation with the various city services, other authorities and private partners, communication with a wider public is also important with a view to maintaining broad support for the RSG.

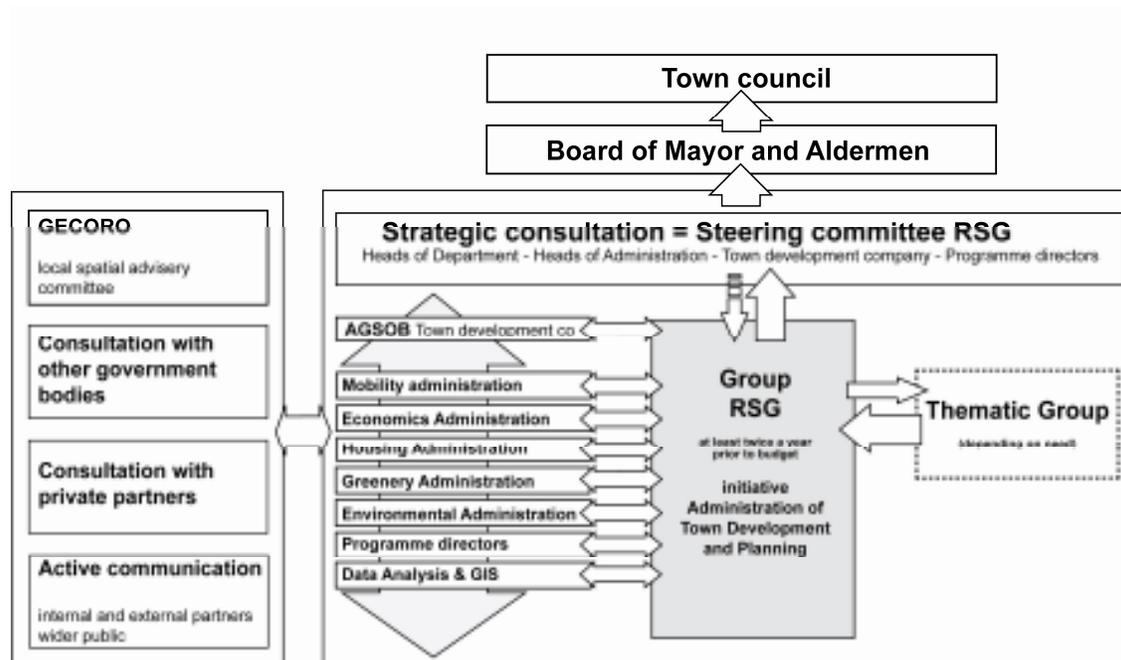
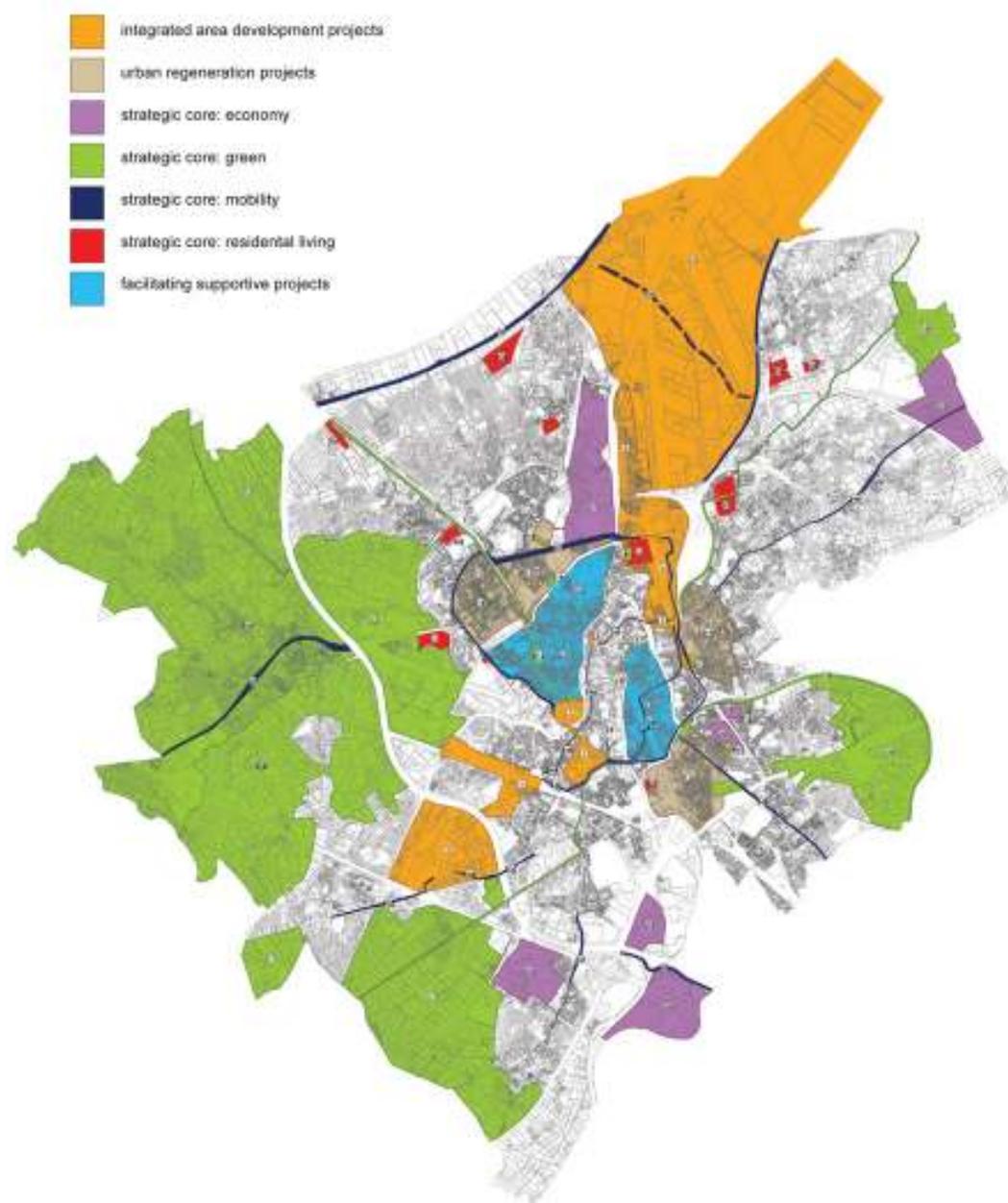


Fig. 3: Consultation structure for the implementation of the strategic spatial structural plan for 2008-2012.

### **Interim results at the end of 2010**

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

The evaluation and monitoring has led to the addition of new strategic key 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.



*Fig. 4: Annual report of the RSG: location strategic key projects.*

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. Actual implementation on 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 emerging from the RSG require clarification. After all, the structural 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 have applied far too rigidly.

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

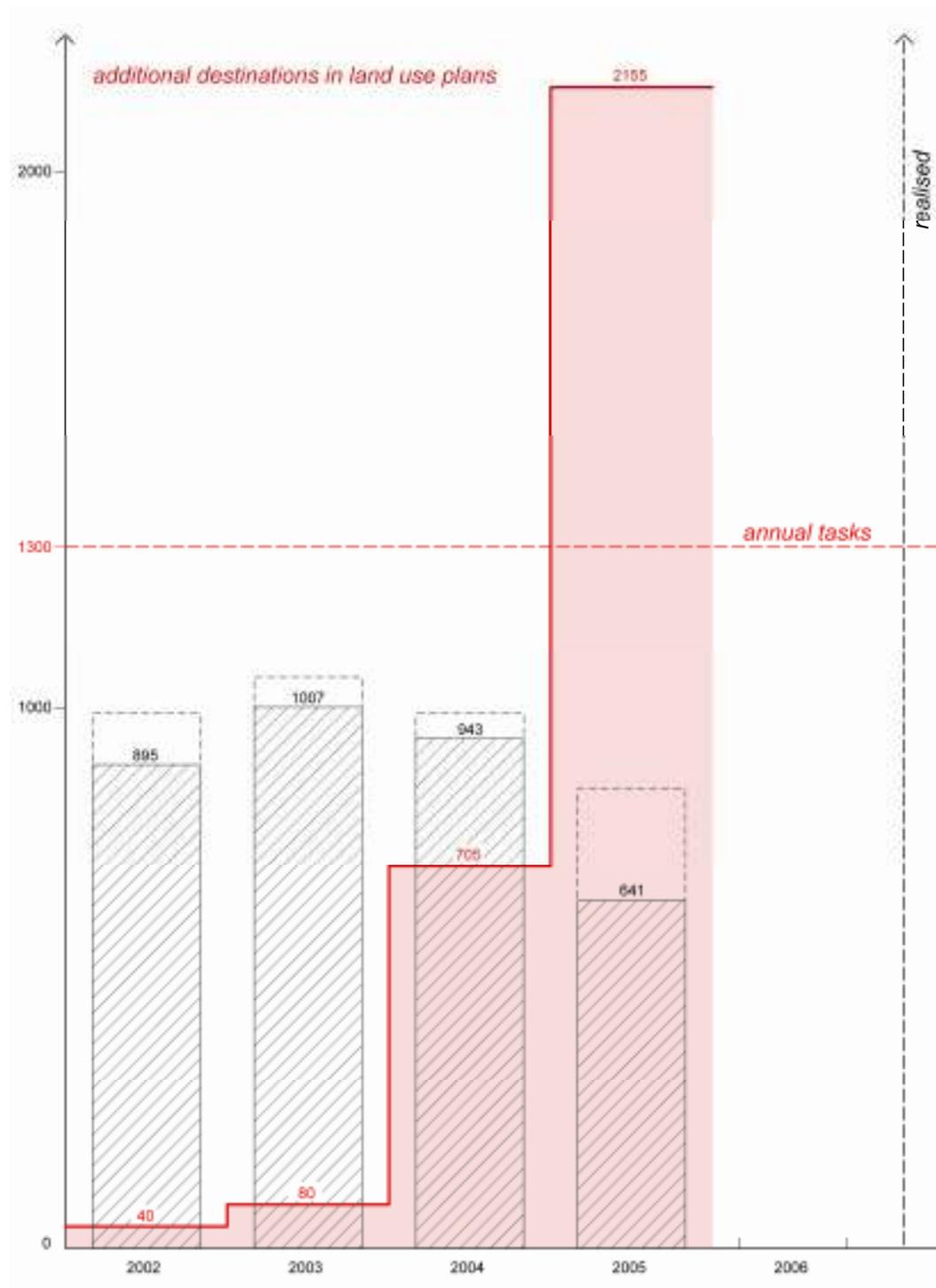
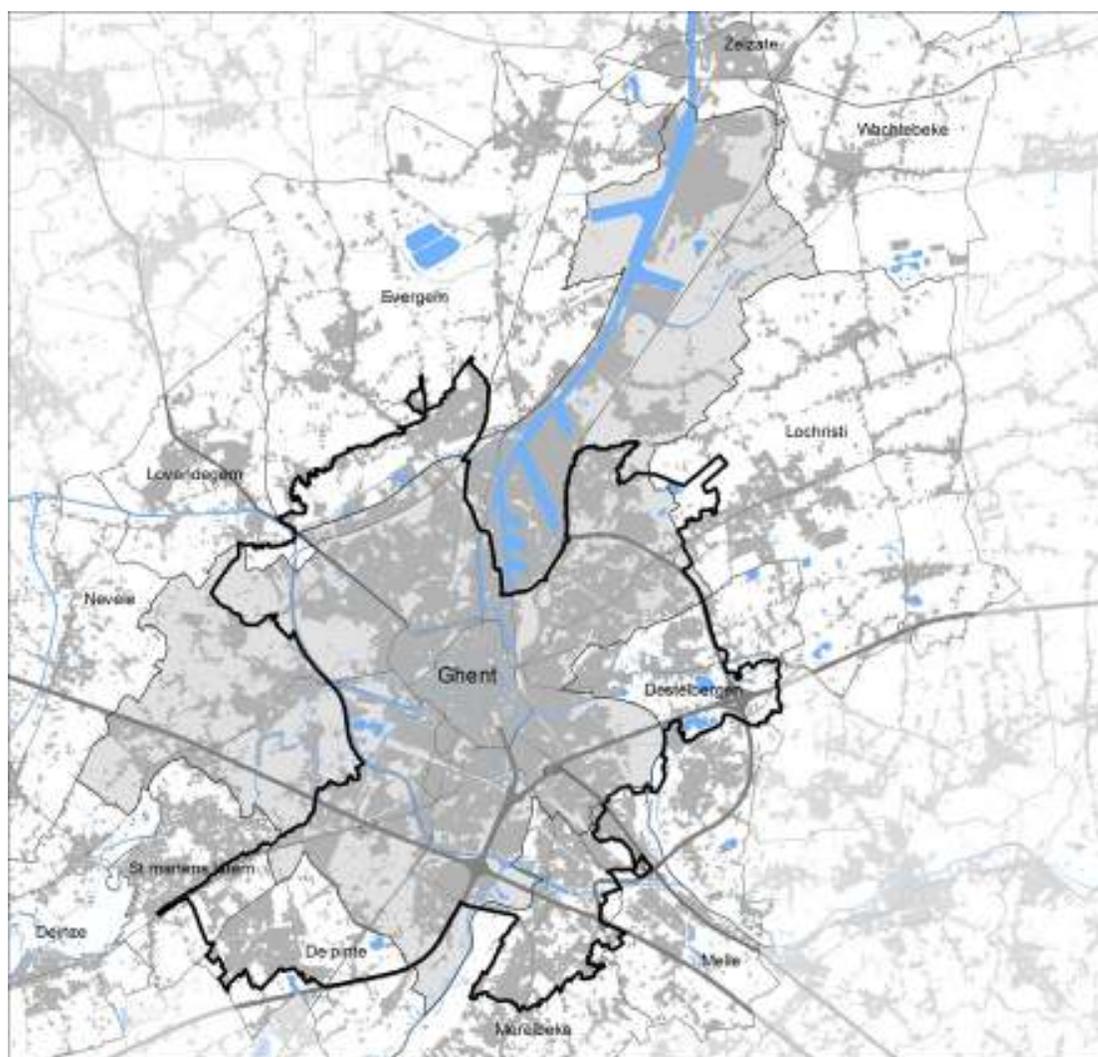


Fig. 5: Monitoring tasks related to housing policy.

### **Shortcomings**

In its own territory, the city of Ghent manages to realise a whole series of strategic key projects. However, time and again Ghent is confronted with its territorial limits. Nevertheless, in 2005 the Flemish authorities demarcated the urban area of Ghent. This urban area extends over 7 municipalities: besides the city of Ghent, it also includes (parts of) the municipalities of Evergem, De Pinte, Destelbergen, Melle, Lochristi and Sint-Martens-Latem. However, the city of Ghent has no say in the implementation of the urban programme in the other 6 adjacent (peripheral) municipalities. No structure of co-operation has been established with regard to the demarcated urban area. The reason for many unrealised tasks can be found here. As a result of the absence of an alliance for the urban area, there continues to be an atmosphere of suspicion and competition between the city and its peripheral municipalities. Moreover, instead of eliminating this shortcoming and further realising the principles and tasks of the Spatial Structural Plan of Flanders, the Flemish government is now more and more questioning these principles, at the cost of the continuity of policy.



*Fig. 6: Demarcation of the urban area of Ghent according to the spatial implementation plan.*

## **Case 2: The municipality of Brasschaat**

### ***Planning history***

The municipality of Brasschaat was also a pioneer in the field of structural planning in Flanders. As early as in 1982, Brasschaat had a structural plan *avant la lettre*, a vision of the required spatial development with an extensive action plan. In the 1996 planning decree, each municipality in Flanders was obliged to produce a new spatial structural plan. The new municipal spatial structural plan of Brasschaat was approved in 2005 and gave a local interpretation to the provisions of the Spatial Structural Plan of Flanders and the Spatial Structural Plan of the province of Antwerp. A new element provided in these regional plans, was the concept of 'peripheral landscape', a specific policy category in the settlement structure of the rural areas. As well as Brasschaat, the municipalities of Brecht, Kalmthout, Kapellen, Schilde, Schoten and Zoersel also formed part of the peripheral landscape. In these 7 municipalities, living and working should be concentrated in existing densified areas or in areas where further densification is desirable. In other words the goal is selective densification. Internal cohesion and the strengthening of the identity of the different fragments of the peripheral landscape are also of great importance. In fact, the intention is to create a large urban park in which densification areas are further developed, including a considerable package of facilities (hospitals, schools, businesses, etc.). A supramunicipal green structure must also be developed. A suitable mobility policy with particular attention to public transport and slow traffic must ensure good accessibility and livability.

### ***Actions taken***

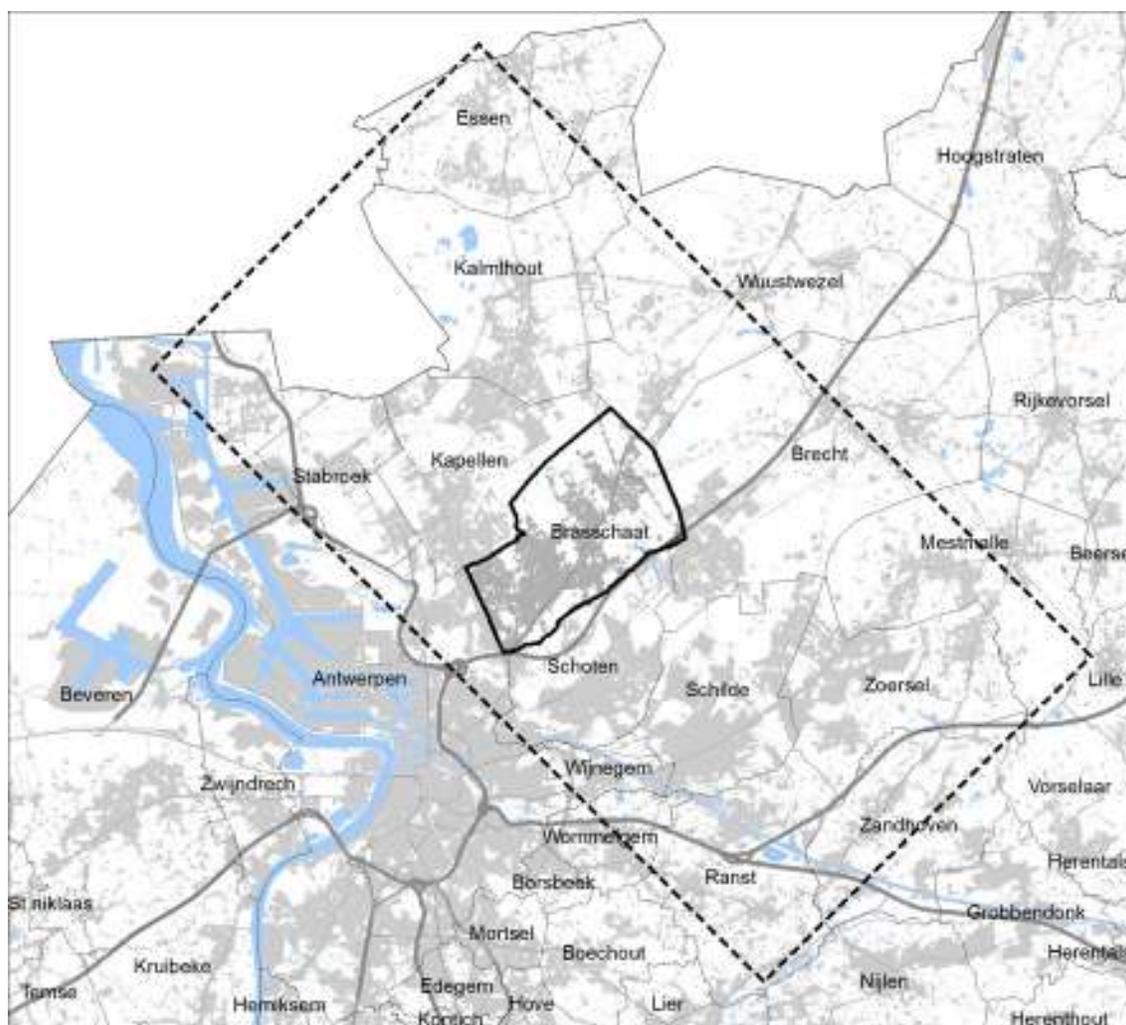
In order to shape its identity as a municipality in the green area on the edge of the urban area of Antwerp, the municipality of Brasschaat has implemented an impressive programme of action during the last six years. Here is a random selection of the actions taken:

- the central park which has much to offer in terms of cultural history and landscape has been developed and protected as a green and recreational area;
- an empty military base has been converted into a permanent new business centre;
- the main street (Bredabaan) has been completely refurbished, which has increased the attractiveness of the commercial centre;
- a feasibility study on the extension of the tramline (over a length of 10 km) from Antwerp to the centre of Brasschaat has been completed;
- with the help of a zoning plan, the extensive residential parks have been protected against densification by the building of apartments;
- various housing projects, both residential and social, have been completed in the central district which is to be densified;
- ...

### ***Networks and alliances***

Typical for Brasschaat are the municipality's initiatives in creating and/or supporting various supramunicipal networks in order to increase its impact on spatial developments. Two examples illustrate this ambition.

Together with 6 adjacent municipalities, the municipality of Brasschaat wishes to create an alliance to interpret the concept of 'peripheral landscape'. With the help of the provincial government, the municipality of Brasschaat wishes to play a co-ordinating role in the search for cohesion in spatial developments which are to give the whole area a stronger identity. A preparatory phase was completed this last year; the alliance must have a definite form by the end of 2011.



*Fig. 7: Positioning of the municipality of Brasschaat in the 'peripheral landscape'.*

Another network for the 'Schelde Landscape Park' has also been developed. This is an alliance of 15 municipalities situated along the river Schelde. The municipality of Brasschaat is also the driving force here. Through this Intermunicipal Alliance created in 2008, these 15 municipalities are working together to increase the international character of the Schelde region between Antwerp and Ghent. In the form of particular projects in the domains of living, working, recreation, mobility, safety and the environment, this alliance is on the search for a new identity. OMGEVING cvba assists the municipality of Brasschaat in the development of this project.



A challenge will be to generate interaction and cross-fertilisation between the two strategic planning routes. The way in which the city of Ghent continuously monitors and evaluates its spatial structural plan can be an interesting line of inquiry. However, the city of Ghent can also learn lessons from Brasschaat's dynamic networking in its pursuit to form alliances at a city level.

Both examples, situated in urban area on the one hand and open space on the other, however in particular show, that qualitative and strategic planning can take place within the current Spatial Structural Plan of Flanders, and that this strategic planning offers much scope for experimentation and realisation. Towns and municipalities in Flanders are not helped at all by a new regional policy plan which guarantees insufficient continuity in spatial policy. Improvements are possible both regarding the tools to be mobilised as well as in the content of the plan's development perspectives, but no one is expecting a 'tabula rasa'.

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