



CITIES SHAPE THEIR FUTURE TOGETHER

EUROPEAN EXCHANGE IN ACTION

City dwellers are the first to feel major challenges like climate warming, high prices or poverty. That's why cities across Europe are joining forces and adopting each other's solutions.

How do you translate jackhammer to another language? How do you say façade garden? Passing on local experience can be a challenge, but the Ghent residents here manage just fine. Today they're showing a European delegation around the old Fluvius site. The story is clear: this concrete surface is making way for a green neighbourhood park. There are already test sections in the concrete: which plants thrive in which rubble? This experiment is part of the broader Rewild the City. With 5 million euros in subsidies, we're in the Champions League of European projects.

Ghent and three European partner cities are jointly exploring how they can deseal and green faster and more affordably. 'All of Europe will learn from Rewild', says Nelida Hanco Herrera from the European Urban Initiative. 'Our cities are becoming hotter and more vulnerable due to climate change. We need to act now!'

COURTYARD CRUSHERS IN ACTION

Ana Sousa from Portugal listens attentively to the plans for the park. 'They were created with local residents, I love it.' Marta Szczygielska and Martyna Gawlik from Poland want to know: how do you convince residents to break open their own little courtyards too?

The question takes the international group to places where Ghent is desealing today, such as playgrounds and residential areas. There we meet the Courtyard Crushers (Koerkrakers). These are volunteers who help Ghent residents with modest homes green their courtyards.

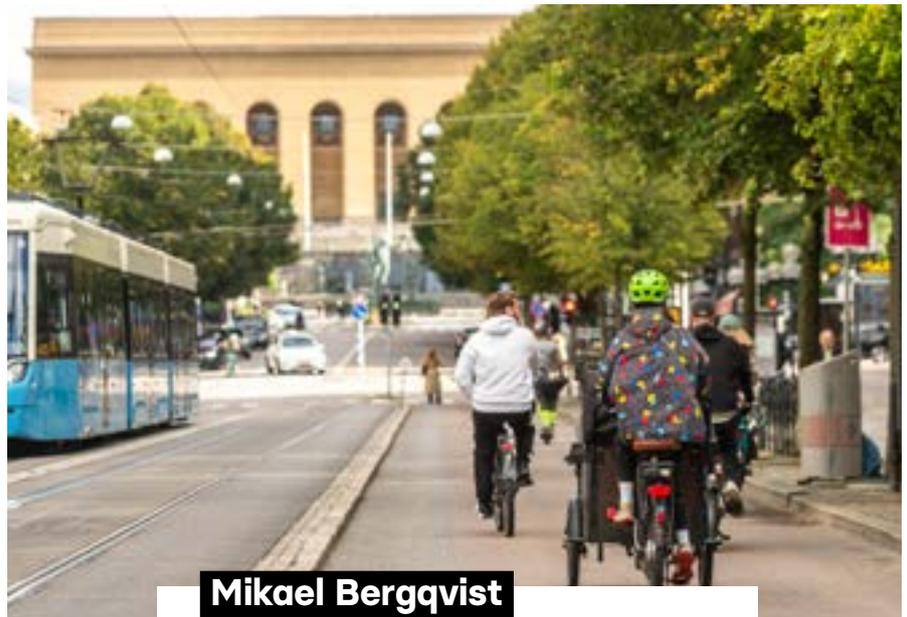
'We find the social approach here in Ghent very interesting,' says Tessa Dean from Helsinki. 'Those who have the least



space need green the most.' Rewild launches experiments like the Courtyard Crushers in Ledeborg, Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham and the neighbourhood of Ottergemsesteenweg. They'll also investigate whether contractors can immediately deliver rubble containers and topsoil in the street during roadworks. This way residents could break up their courtyard at an affordable price. Another idea the international group takes home with them.

LESSONS FROM BARCELONA

More than 25 European projects are underway in Ghent, and every year over a hundred international delegations come to see how we tackle things. 'Ghent isn't large, but is known across Europe as an innovator', says Line »



Mikael Bergqvist

› Traffic planner in Gothenburg (Sweden)

GOTHENBURG WANTS TO DO A GHENT

'So many bicycles! That was my first impression when we came to visit. We were amazed that in one street after another you could simply hear birds and voices. Cycling side by side and being able to have a conversation? Back home in Gothenburg that's barely possible with all those cars. It was a pleasant surprise for our ears. Ghent's approach has been a topic of conversation in Sweden for about three years now. To do a Ghent has become a concept among mobility experts and urban planners since a WWF report appeared in 2023 about your approach. Gothenburg has already made 3 study visits. Colleagues from Växjö and Malmö are also looking at Ghent. I think we can learn more from you than from Copenhagen, also a real cycling city. The evolution there has been much slower. Ghent showed

us how you can transform an entire city centre in just a few years. Namely by daring to experiment, thinking in cycling streets instead of just cycle paths and by organizing a dialogue with residents. Gothenburg has been stuck for too long in the idea: first we need to have a big plan. Meanwhile, we literally got stuck in growing car traffic.

You know, we planners usually talk in numbers and concepts. What we heard and saw in Ghent came in through the head and through the heart. So this is what it feels like to move around in a city that dares to make mobility choices! The experience has helped to get everyone pointing in the same direction. By 2030 we want a quarter fewer car kilometers. Now we have a better idea of how that can be done.'



TESTING WHAT WORKS

These planting beds on the Fluvius site mark the beginning of a new neighbourhood park and a school campus

» Ostyn from the International Networks and Subsidies Department. 'We're quite often asked to be an example city.' In many areas other cities are leading the way. Paris and Barcelona, for example, have more experience with how you transform old industrial sites and make densely populated neighbourhoods greener. Ghent learns from them in the Regreenation project. That will help restore the old FNO textile factory, a large but polluted site.

READY FOR THE WATER BOMB

'Whether it's managing extreme weather conditions, tackling homelessness or mobility: all European cities are in the same boat', says Line's colleague Morgane Lambrechts. 'Why would we each reinvent the wheel? Cities learn together from their successes and failures.'

What do citizens and businesses notice of that collaboration? Morgane: 'More jobs in the port, more effective integration of newcomers, healthier school meals and so on.'

However, some effects do take time. Rise-in, for example, is a European project that can help protect Ghent against severe flooding from too much rain in a short time. Cities are jointly exploring how banks, businesses and residents can invest in managing flood risks in

cities. It involves natural solutions such as floodable parks and nature areas along rivers. Together with the University of Milan, three cities from Portugal, Italy and even New Zealand are developing a roadmap and a financing model. From 2027 on Ghent will test one of the proposed solutions.

HEALTHIER AIR

We follow the water towards the Old Docks. 'Do you see those white boxes on the traffic signs?', asks Line. With sensors from the Citytraq project we measure whether the air in the Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham area improves now the ring road has moved to the other side. Other countries also want to use this sensor technology because it measures what impact mobility interventions have on air quality.

Around the docks Europe invested millions in the cranes, the promenade and even in part of the cycle bridges and the pedestrian tunnel at Dampoort. How much does Ghent actually get from Europe? 'About 25 million euros over the past five years', says Line. 'That money goes towards activation, future-oriented neighbourhoods, social interventions and a climate-resilient city.'



Janja Maras

› Researcher at Zagreb City Libraries

A GHENT INSPIRED LIBRARY

'Ghent and Zagreb are both student cities with a vibrant mix of old and new. In 2 years' time, we'll be opening our own kind of 'De Krook' library in Zagreb. Paromlin will be Croatia's largest cultural institution. You'll also be able to attend performances, festivals and cultural events there. We've been working on the preparations for 10 years now. My colleagues and I have visited libraries all over Europe. What stood out: many libraries are more than just a library but also serve as a cultural city forum. When we visited De Krook in 2024, we saw that Ghent brings together the best elements of all those other libraries. Ghent adds something new to this: collaboration with citizens. I found De Krook, which was named after a bend in the river Scheldt, very open and lively. It's not a dreary place where you only come to collect books. Rather a living room for the city and a catalyst for the entire urban life. Everyone walks in. You charge your laptop, you read, play piano, have a drink. I saw Makerspaces

and Digital Help Points for digital assistance, all very inclusive and people-centred. What I also loved are activities like Ghent Reads and reading sessions. That place radiates: reading is something you do together. That's important for young people in this digital age. What particularly fascinated me was Comon, a programme by De Krook, UGent, imec and other partners, where residents help think about technological solutions for all kinds of challenges. That connection and collaboration between citizens, institutions and the library: that touched me. We don't have anything like that in Zagreb. Immediately after our return, we sat down with our city council. I'm now strongly advocating for more partnerships with NGOs, universities, citizens. The visit to Ghent has already strongly influenced Paromlin's design. Hopefully, after opening in 2027, it will become what De Krook has been for Ghent for ten years: a place that brings people together, lets ideas mature and makes dreams come true.'

COFFEE WITH URSULA

Twenty-five million seems like a lot. But is it enough? 'Cities feel climate warming, high prices and poverty first', says Morgane. 'Collaboration works, even across borders. With our citizens, universities and businesses we find solutions. That's why we ask that Europe invests more and directly in cities, without detours via member states.'

Will that succeed now the European focus shifts to defense? Will there be more attention for cities? Morgane reflects. 'As president of Eurocities, a network of over 220 European cities, we fortunately have a strong voice at the European table. Through Eurocities we met five European Commissioners last year, and hopefully soon president Ursula von der Leyen as well. Then you're in the front row, where you capitalize on opportunities and influence European rules. That's necessary to get our cities ready for the future.' ■

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