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BELGIUM, GHENT

The Port Area – Converting a Polluting Port into a Socio-Economic Hub

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Ghent is a city located in the Flemish Region of Belgium, and the capital of the East Flanders province. The city began as a settlement in the confluence of the Rivers Leie and Scheldt and its port soon became one of the most relevant commercial hubs of Europe. Today, the Ghent Port Area is an important logistic, industrial and residential area, with housing developments and small villages scattered around the Port Area. Through port activities, the port area population grew to 30,000 local inhabitants, as more than 300 companies provide approximately 65,000 jobs. In the early 1990s, local residents faced the increasingly negative effects of surrounding industrial sites, including car and steel manufacturing, coal terminals and warehouses. The piecemeal historical development of these different human activities gradually degraded the spatial structure of the area, leaving an uncoordinated urban environment that was generating widespread environmental problems.

In 1993, leading policy officials started the integrated Ghent Port Area Project. The main objective was to tune different government levels and sectorial policies towards an integrated spatial, environmental and economic development of the area. A group of spatial planners and officials was constituted by the regional government in order to explore the different issues at stake, screen for relevant actors and listen to their main concerns and interests. This resulted in the development of a strategic spatial concept, delivering a coherent and common vision for the port.

A steering committee was put in place, composed of leading politicians and civil servants from different governments (local, regional, and national) and the Ghent Port authority to guide the development process. Several small and medium sized private and public projects were implemented to address the environmental and living quality in the residential areas. A number of strategically chosen mobility problems were also tackled by regional mobility authorities. For the last two decades the spatial development process has been based on a three tier methodology; delivering a coherent and sustainable long term spatial vision; the development and application of concrete instruments (e.g. development plans, environmental subsidies and creation of funds); and an effective on-the-field implementation based on budgeted projects.

The Ghent Port Area Project has been acknowledged as an example of integrative regional development, receiving the 2009 European award for the social integration of ports. Integral to its success was the projects transparency, providing stability and the opportunity for locally grown operational project management structures. This method has also led to the creation of tailor made institutional solutions to address specific processes, such as housing relocation inside the port area. Furthermore, the diverse member composition of the steering committee ensured social inclusion and prioritization of projects that were beneficial to the majority of the society.