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## City profile

### City profile: Ghent, Belgium



#### Kobe Boussauw\*

Civil Engineering Department, Centre for Mobility and Spatial Planning, Ghent University, Vrijdagmarkt 10/301, B-9000 Gent, Belgium  
 Geography Department, Ghent University, Krijgslaan 281/S8, B-9000 Gent, Belgium

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#### ABSTRACT

The various phases of Ghent's urban development read like a textbook on urban history. Emerging as a political and religious centre at the confluence of two rivers, Ghent developed from the end of the eighteenth century on into an important centre of the textile industry. Its independent attitude ensured that the city developed well into the nineteenth century within the straitjacket of the military ramparts, where both trade, industry and academe found fertile soil. After the city toll was lifted, the city boomed, while the seaport went through a new wave of industrialization in the mid-twentieth century. First the CIAM doctrine and later on the postmodernist approach has clearly left its traces on the urban fabric. Today, urban policy is received critically by civil society organisations, while on-going debates focus on the balance between tourism and habitation, on the architecture of the central squares, on bicycle facilities and tram lines, on the poor housing conditions in the nineteenth-century neighbourhoods, on the lack of greenery in the city and on the development of peripheral retail outlets.

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## Introduction

The historical course that was traversed by the medium-sized city of Ghent (Belgium – Flanders region) seems to meet the entire range of stereotypes from the urban geography literature. Interestingly, Ghent's history indeed appears to have influenced the stereotypical image of the origin of the medieval city through the writings of Henri Pirenne, who was an influential historian at Ghent's university at the beginning of the twentieth century (Pirenne, 1927). And although with respect to the Industrial Revolution an equally clear link with the literature is not present, Ghent has acquired its place in the historiography of this period too (Mokyr, 1974). However, being to some degree a model city does not imply dullness, considering the recommendation of Lonely Planet, which describes Ghent ("Gent" in Dutch, "Gand" in French) as a hidden gem for tourists (Lonely Planet, 2010). The town originated as a medieval political and religious centre at the confluence of two rivers, after which trade and industry started flourishing. After a series of more or less successful attempts to keep its autonomous standing in the midst of the various conflicts in which the Low Countries have been involved, in the nineteenth century Ghent became a local exemplar of the Industrial Revolution.

The prosperity earned from this development supported the growth of today's second largest university in Belgium. In the post-World War II period, the expanding port managed to promote interactions between the city, industry and the university. The appeal of Ghent's labour market has traditionally resulted in an influx of workers from the surrounding regions, while in more recent history migration flows tended to reorient towards Turkey and the newest EU Member States.

The large proportion of students, the impact of social-democratic movements, and the image of a progressive cultural and intellectual urban centre have constituted the basis of a critical civil society with a strong influence on urban policy and development. Today, visions are driven by debates about quality of life, low-traffic environments, climate neutrality and innovative regeneration. Inspired by the geological metaphor of Massey (1984), in this article we will chronologically outline how Ghent's urban area has developed into its present form and function. The urban development pathway of the city was taken as a guidance for the narrative. This choice is naturally reflected in the way particular details are discussed or omitted, meaning that certain aspects of Ghent's society and social, cultural and economic development will necessarily be underexposed.

## Origin and early history

Although today Ghent is generally presented as being located at the confluence of the rivers Leie (Lys) and Scheldt, the

\* Address: Civil Engineering Department, Centre for Mobility and Spatial Planning, Ghent University, Vrijdagmarkt 10/301, B-9000 Gent, Belgium. Tel.: +32 9 331 32 56.

E-mail address: [kobe.boussauw@ugent.be](mailto:kobe.boussauw@ugent.be)

ninth-century castrum, which was at that time the military centre of the town, was in fact located where the Lieve, a much smaller river, flows into the Leie (Van Werveke & Verhulst, 1960). As in several other cities in Flanders, the castrum was built to protect the various existing settlements and monasteries following repeated incursions by the Normans (Verhulst, 1977). At that time, St. Bavo's and St. Peter's abbeys, both of which were already established in the seventh century, contributed to an important extent to the development of the various settlements in the surrounding marshy lands where a number of winding and tidal rivers flowed together.

St. Peter's Abbey, which still exists today, was founded near the highest point of the city, on a sand hill called Blandijnberg. Although relief and hydrography strongly determined the first settlements, we see that throughout later centuries watercourses have been channelled, diverted and filled up according to the needs of the moment, where military security was usually given priority (Coene & De Raedt, 2011). In the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries territories were systematically annexed to the city, and consequently surrounded by canals. A substantial part of the territory remained undeveloped and in agricultural use. In 1384, the city covered about 644 ha, and was in that sense one of the largest cities of Europe. Around 1550, Ghent counted about 47,000 inhabitants, making it the third largest city in the Low Countries (Dambryne, 2001, quoted from Nicholas, 2004) (Fig. 1).

From 1577 to 1584, Ghent became temporarily a Calvinist stronghold, that managed to tear itself from the Catholic Spanish rule by means of the construction of a city wall. This enclosure was much more radical than the old canals which until then guaranteed safety, and would function as a physical development boundary until 1860. Outside the fortified city walls, defensive ditches were constructed which were again surrounded by

floodplains that could be inundated if necessary (Despretz, 1966). Although in the course of the nineteenth century their military function faded into the background, the city gates were re-established as toll gates between 1816 and 1860, in the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, only from 1860 did the city start to develop beyond its walls.

The reconquest by the Spanish regime in 1584 was followed by a number of successive recessions (Dambryne, 1989). Consequently, the population fell back slightly around 1650, and it took quite some time before a few engineering works improving the connection with the sea (among which the digging of the Coupure canal around 1750) (Fig. 2), and the arrival of the first cotton mill from 1800, would award some importance to Ghent as an industrial player.

### Industrial development

Unlike the Walloon coal basin in southern Belgium (Vandermotten, 1998), Ghent's Industrial Revolution was not based on coal, steel and glass, it was textile production that put the city again on the map (Neven and Devos, 2001). Flax processing in the Leie valley had not stalled during the eighteenth century, wherefore a lot of expertise in textile processing was still concentrated in Ghent, which was easily accessible via the dense waterway system. Meanwhile, also cotton had become a well-known type of fabric in Ghent, and the introduction of the steam spinning machine led to rapid expansion of the textile industry, in which linen too retained an important position (Mokyr, 1974).

In the build-up to the automation of the industry, Ghent's population increased again from about 44,000 inhabitants in 1740 to 51,000 half a century later (Deprez, 1957). The



Fig. 1. "Ganda Gallie Belgice Civitas Maxima" (view of Ghent), 1534, Ghent City Museum.

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