How to stay a Smart City? Inspiration from a Place-Based Spatial Policy in Ghent – Working Together with Local, Smart Citizens

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1 ABSTRACT

Spatial planning in Europe and in Flanders is changing fundamentally. In the Europe 2020 strategy (2010-2020) Europe introduced the idea of a 'place-based approach' as an alternative or addition to traditional spatial planning. It refers to the context-dependent nature of efficiency and equity problems that the policy deals with, and to the fact that design of integrated interventions must be tailored to places, as it largely depends on the knowledge and preferences of the people living in it. Nevertheless, little research has examined the use of the place-based approach in Flanders.

In this paper the place-based approach, also called area development, is referred to as a proactive planning approach, characterized by an intensive coordination of initiators, plans and projects in one specific area, in order to implement the plans and projects in the field. Participating with citizens in planning processes is not new. In general, we can distinguish three generations in citizen participation: from consultation by the authorities, to co-creation initiated by the authorities, and recently to citizen initiatives which are only supported and stimulated by the authorities.

This paper reports results from a case-study in Ghent, Flanders. Within the neighbourhood around the main railway-station inhabitants and the local government are working together to create a new concept for the area, and are co-realising these new ideas in the field.

We found earlier that authorities have been experimenting with place-based planning in Flanders for several years, but that results, actors and instruments differ. The new insight from the local, urban case in Ghent can be used to develop future place-based planning, programs and projects in Flanders and in cities within Flanders.

2 INTRODUCTION

Developping spatial policies is traditionally a task for the authorities. Of course, this policy is created together with other actors, from local municipalities, to experts and citizens. Recently the top down planning model has switched to a more open interactive planning proces in which public and private partners become more equal, and civil initiatives demand their place in the network (Van Damme, 2013).

Traditional land use planning – being a more passive planning approach aimed at controlling land use through a zoning system and regulations - has not always been able to deal with the new actors that come forward (L. Albrechts, 2006). Planning authorities are struggling with the growing importance of citizens, and more general with the broad range of actors involved in a planning process. There is a need for cross-fertilization between model-based and top-down planning views, with bottom-up experiences, to construct an integrated approach. In current policy settings, spatial planning tends to emphasise the achievement of policy intentions through realisation of actual spatial interventions and growing importance of citizens as spatial actors (Sager, 2011).

Meanwhile Europe introduced the so-called 'place-based approach' as an alternative or addition to traditional spatial planning, referring to the context-dependent nature of efficiency and equity problems that the policy deals with, and to the fact that design of integrated interventions must be tailored to places, since it largely depends on knowledge and preferences of people living in it (ESPON & Politecno di Torino, 2014). Place-based development policy can be defined as 'a long-term development strategy whose objective is to reduce persistent inefficiency and inequality in specific places, through the production of bundles of integrated, place-tailored public goods and services, designed and implemented by eliciting and aggregating local preferences and knowledge through participatory political institutions, and by establishing linkages with other places; and promoted from outside the place by a system of multilevel governance where grants subject to conditionalities on both objectives and institutions are transferred from higher to lower levels of government.' (Barca, 2009, pag. 5). Place policy making is embedded in multiple institutional domains and arenas, which challenge the hierarchical setting of planning levels and the traditional administrative

boundaries. All relevant actors (public and private) need to be involved in new planning processes, for different reasons: procedural competences, acceptance and legitimacy, substantive contributions, etc.

This place-based planning approach is related to a more general approach of strategic planning. In the nineties, in many countries a different type of planning was needed, moving away from regulatory policy and instruments to a more development-led approach that aims to intervene more directly, more coherently and more selectively in social reality and development (L. Albrechts, 2006).

A place-based environmental policy was already introduced in Flanders in the Flemish Mina-2 plan 1997-2001 and has been more recently developed within the context of spatial planning. Albrechts et al.(1999). It can be considered as a specific form of strategic planning, with special attention to the organization of planning processes, and dynamic networks of various actors from different policy domains interacting in arenas and fora (J. Van den Broeck, 2001). Since that moment, different experiments with this planning methodology have started, but the regional authorities have decided not to formalize this planning method in the legacy system. Recently, several Flemish authors have described actual trends in the planning system, using keywords related to the place-based planning such as strategic planning, project-planning, transitions, governance and co-production (Boussauw & Boelens, 2013; Coppens et al., 2014; P. Van den Broeck, 2008).

Participating with citizens in planning processes is not new. In general, we can distinguish three generations in citizen participation (Lancksweerdt, 2009): from consultation by the authorities, to co-creation initiated by the authorities, and recently to citizen initiatives which are only supported and stimulated by the authorities.

The first generation is based on consultation. In the past participation was mainly achieved through the organization of a public inquiry or by the organization of advisory boards. Consultation is basically one-sided and does not offer the opportunity for a real dialogue. More and more of these kind of planning processes are ending in court, with groups of citizens appealing the decisions of the authorities.

The last fifteen years however the step of consultation to real interaction between the government and civil society actors is made more often. Within interactive policy the government and participants are cooperating from a very early stage. In the field, authorities and citizens meet each other on a regular basis in advice councils, informal meetings, local platforms, … These initiatives fit participation processes in which different actors develop spatial plans and projects together.

While the second generation of participation is still a top-down approach in which the initiatives still originate from the government, the third generation of participation starts bottom-up. Today, citizens are not only involved in what the government does, but also the other way around: the government must respond to the citizens' initiatives and support it. The third generation of participation is linked to a government that is withdrawing more and more. The critical assessment on which tasks are a governmental responsibility and which tasks should be left to the society, has its impact. Together with the increasing assertiveness of citizens, self-organization and initiatives are becoming more frequent. This implies that the government should support and stimulate spontaneous citizen initiatives.

This can be related to more general, societal changes (Van Damme, 2013): protesting residents, weak government and failed democracy. The rise of social media makes it easier for likeminded people to organise themselves in new groups. People develop new projects and strategies for different reasons. Within a recent Dutch research (WRR, 2012) two main drivers for civil initiatives are distinguished. At first they describe a fear of changes, next an exploration of new futures. In the first case, they describe a conservative reaction against recent modifications, such as new traffic circulation plans or a new housing block, but also against more slowly evolving situations which, in the end, can no longer be accepted, such as the increase of local traffic. Within the second case, people aim to improve their current situation and are developing ideas to innovate, inspired by other projects. They share concern about the local living environment and the aim to maximise their own wellbeing.

Cooperating with people, policy makers can use their knowledge, experience and holistic perspective to develop spatial initiatives which can improve wellbeing and living quality. During a recent debate about the spatial policy plan of the city of Ghent, the city launched the concept of 'planning for and by humans (mensgerichte planning)'. They refer to planning which (1) gives more attention to the daily use of the area by the people; (2) and which is developed by cooperating not only with experts, sectoral organisations and policy makers but also by co-creation with civics (Oosterlynck, 2016).

The paper deals with diverse bottom-up initiatives in the area Sint-Pieters-Buiten in Ghent. Firstly, the local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten is introduced, and consequently four different projects are described. These illustrate the general trend towards more participation, a more active cooperation with the inhabitants and fit within the 'planning for and by humans (mensgerichte planning)' as introduced by the city of Ghent, and within the place-based approach described in reports by the European Union. The projects can be understood as a reaction against recent modifications, as well as attempts to improve the current situation with innovating, inspiring ideas (WRR, 2012).

The four projects allow to reflect on the coexistence of top down and bottom-up initiatives in a specific spatial context. Also they introduce new themes like health, wellbeing, sustainable mobility, … which were addressed by the local inhabitants and are typical examples of themes that are recently introduced in traditional planning.

3 LOCAL COMMITTEE SINT-PIETERS-BUITEN

Since the beginning of the nineties, the local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten, organised several activities within the area around the main railway-station of Ghent. At first they focussed on the prevalence and development of natural values within the neighbourhood. More recently, under impulse of the real estate project of Ghent Sint-Pieters, they welcomed new local members and broadened their focus.

The local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten distributed in 2012 a "local manifesto". Some fragments:

"We want a nice neighbourhood in which people like to live, work and pass by. Our district is traditionally a quiet, hospital neighbourhood. People visit our area because of the availability of public transport, schools, local shops, …

Besides this our living environment is extremely important for the city and region as:

- mobility hub for commuters
- entrance for visitors arriving in Ghent by train, tram or bus
- educational centre for students and scolars in local schools, high schools and university

We believe that to develop and maintain a sustainable living environment it is important to support and keep families and house owners in the area.

In the future we would like to develop different initiatives to create a more attractive and sustainable area, together with all people living in this area."

In the months before the local elections of 2012, this local manifesto was discussed with politicians at a debate organised by the local committee.

Because of this, the cooperation between local residents and authorities grew and up till now this has led to several initiatives, which will be developed in this article: a traffic circulation plan, projects to re-open pedestrian and bicycle roads, a demand to start a participation process for the Queen Mathilde Square, and the idea to make the Voskenslaan more green.

3.1 Traffic circulation plan

In 2015 the neighbourhood of Sint-Pieters-Buiten was on a regulary basis present in the (regional) news items because of a bottom-up initiative of the local committee to reduce the increased mobility in the residential area between Voskenslaan and Kortrijksesteenweg. During a test period the city placed traffic cones in the Maaltebruggestraat, Reigerstraat and Tuinwijklaan. The cones created three separated circuits in the area, and made it impossible for cars to drive directly through the neighbourhood (see figure 2).

In 2013-2014 the local committee informed the city of the problematic situation of increasing mobility and the growing unsafety in the neighourhood between the Kortrijksesteenweg and the Voskenslaan. Countings done by the inhabitants and later on by the city itself showed that cars were driving too fast, and that the acceptable vehicle capacity for residential streets was exceeded by far. In the Tuinwijklaan, more than 3300 vehicles/hour were counted. 60 tot 70 % of the traffic had no destination in the area, but was just passing through. Because of several real estate projects in the area, for example the residentials towers and offices at the railway-station, it was expected that the traffic would only increase durig the coming years, so it was necessary to try to reorganise the mobility in the neighbourhood. In total the local committee organised three

information and discussion meetings, besides two discussion events organised by the city. During these evenings all possible options to decrease the mobility were studied: speed humps, one-way streets, or other tools for traffic calming. For each meeting more than 3000 inhabitants were invited. Finally the inhabitants, together with the local authorities, chose the introduction of three separate circuits in the neighbourhood, realised by the placement of traffic cones in strategic places. During the coming years, this concept will be introduced in the city in different places, because it fits into the more global mobility plan that is developed by the local authorities.

Fig. 1 photograph of traffic cones, 2015

The city realised the circulation circuits, but always communicated this as a temporal situation. After six moments, all adults living in the area could deliver their personal opinion about the plan. This referendum must prove that the new circulation plan in the area was supported by a majority of the inhabitants.

In reality, the circulation plan led to a heavy discussion between supporters and opponents of the plan. Local inhabitants, but also a broader group of individuals (often not living in the neighbourhood), had strong opinions, resulting in news paper articles, facebook groups and facebook insults, but also in physical threats and in the burning down of one of the traffic cones during the night. Because of this, the city decided to organise the referendum much earlier, only two and a half months after the implementation of the plan. The result of the referendum was not decisive: 50% of the inhabitants favoured the new situation, 50% wanted the traffic cones to be removed, but most of them stated that there was a problem with the increased traffic in the area.
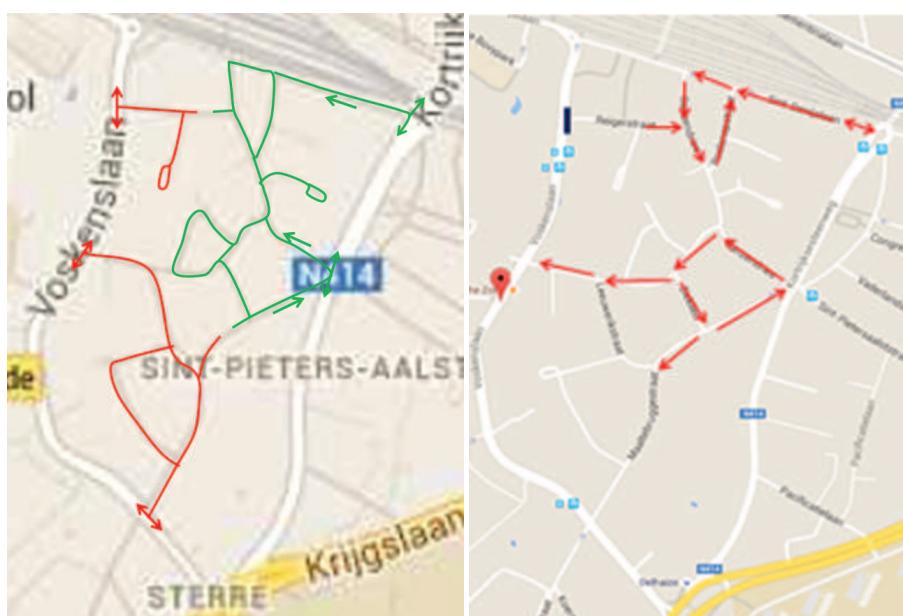

Fig. 2 original proposal traffic circulation, Fig. 3 compromise traffic circulation, end of 2015

Finally it was decided to remove the traffic cones immediately, and to work on a compromise between both parties. In December 2015 the civil council of the city decided on the compromise proposal (figure 3). This plan has the same goals as the original plan, namely to reduce the traffic in the area, but realises this not by cutting the streets but by introducing a few one-way streets. Today this plan is not realised yet.

3.2 'Ruimte voor Gent': designing the Voskenslaan as a greener alley

In 2015, because of the actualisation of the spatial structure plan for the city of Ghent 'Ruimte voor Gent - structuurvisie 2030', the city launched an online-platform for inspiring ideas. They were looking for ideas and projects that could mean something for the city in the future, and they engaged themselves on the short term to support a selection of these ideas by doing studies, creating maquettes and 3D-representations, organising exhibitions, … All proposals were documented and an online voting was organised to search for the most popular or inspiring projects.

The local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten used this initiative to launch some of their ideas of the local manifesto. Finally the city withheld 8 pilot projects. One of the pilots was introduced by the local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten. They proposed to make the three main roads in the area: Voskenslaan, Krijgslaan and Kortrijksesteenweg, all connectiong the main railway-station of Ghent to the southern part of the city, more green. This idea fits in a more global dynamic to introduce more green in the urban tissue (Agentschap Natuur en Bos i.s.m. Ruimte Vlaanderen, 2015; Departement Leefmilieu-Natuur en Energie. Afdeling Lucht-Hinder-Risicobeheer-Milieu en Gezondheid, 2011; Technum & VITO, 2015).
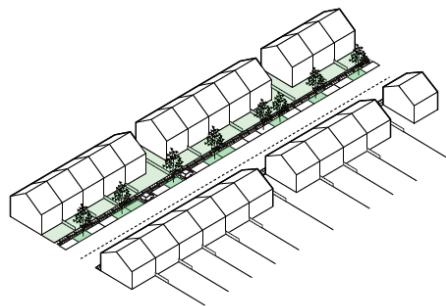
7. DE STRAAT

Fig. 4 Typical solutions for local challenges: the street (Technum & VITO, 2015, pag. 74)

At the beginning of 2016, the city talked this idea through with the local administration and engaged themselves to develop in the short term a roadmap to realise a small-scale network of green structurea, in co-creation with groups of local inhabitants. They were thinking about green walls, green pavements or other green elements, … . The students of green management of the university college Ghent were challenged to visualise the possibilities in 3D. Inhabitants, supported by public servants of the Participation Department and the Green Department, will work together during a planting day, and will be asked to manage the green infrastructure after realisation. Firstly, they will focus on one axis, Voskenslaan. The general purpose is to upscale this concept, participation and realisation to the rest of the city.

3.3 Slow roads: roads for pedestrians and bicycles

At the beginning of 2016 the local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten undertook some actions for slow roads in the neighbourhood. This was facilitated by 'Trage Wegen vzw' in cooperation with the city of Ghent and the provincie of East-Flanders. They started, in the mid year of 2015 (untill 2018), a project in which the inhabitants of Ghent can develop a vision for the slow road network in Ghent. The final aim is to introduce this network in 'Ruimte voor Gent – Structuurvisie 2030', the new policy plan for the city. To make this possible, Trage Wegen vzw, has put maps online with indications of historical and current pedestrian and bicycle roads. These maps can be manipulated interactively, everyone can introduce new roads, comment on pavements, …

The local committee Sint-Pieters-Buiten organised guided walks in the area, looking for the remainings of these alternative connections. They (re)discovered slow roads which connect the area with the natural area Overmeers, the recreational centre Blaarmeersen, the railway-station or the Parkbos Ghent (an urban forest).

An online inquiry was designed to address more residents with the following questions:

- Which among the current slow roads do you think are necessary, which ones are not?
- Do you think we need new slow roads in the area? Where?
- Do you have any other suggestions? For example about the realisation of a public seating bench or a public playground? Are there specific places where the pavement can be approved?

Fig. 5 entrance to the natural area Overmeers from Sint-Denijslaan

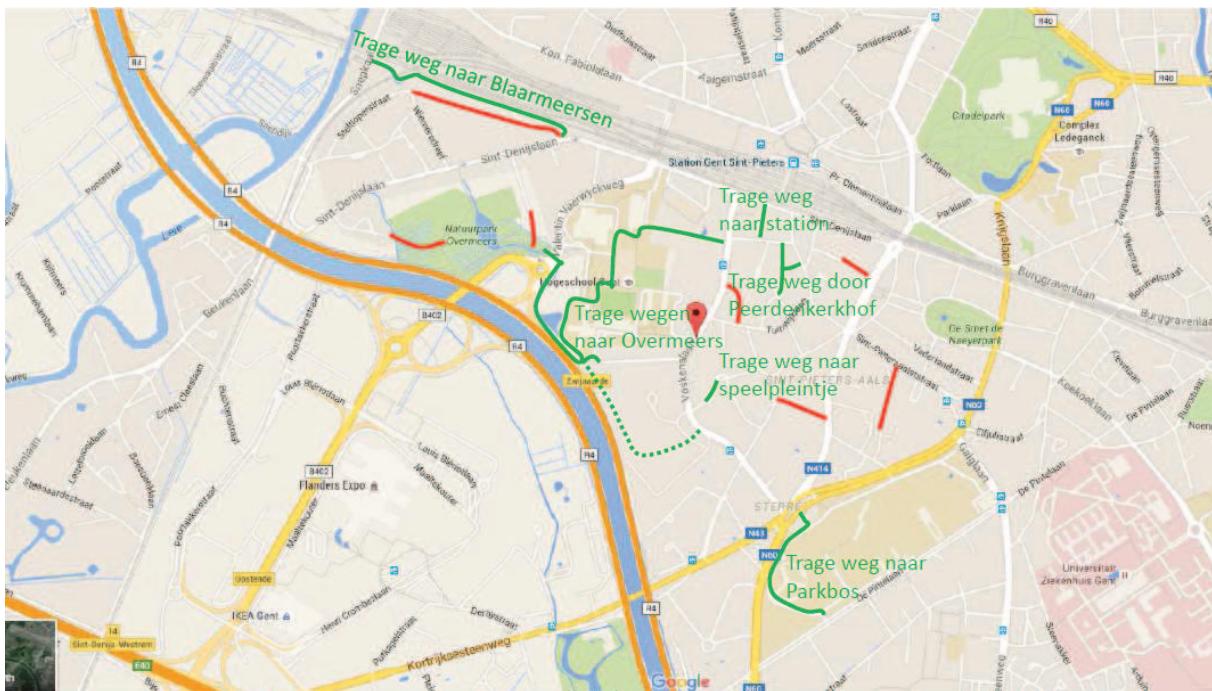The map 6 gives an overview of the potential slow roads in the neighbourhood.

Fig. 6 most important slow roads in the neighbourhood (based on field observation and discussions with residents)

3.4 Wanted: a participation process for the design of the Queen Mathilde Square

From the beginning of 2010, demolition works started at the backside of the railway-station in order to realise a square. Several houses and cafés were disposessed and demolished. The city of Ghent has adopted a local zoning plan for the southern part of the station. Through this plan an extra main entrance to the station

will be created, together with a new station square, and with a building that will demarcate the borders of the square. In the building, the so called S-building, new offices and houses as well as services for public transport users, inhabitants and workers will be integrated.

Six years later the terrain is partly used as a bike station, partly unaccesable and used as a construction area. The area looks chaotic and untended, travellers leaving the station at the backside are led by sideways through the construction area… It takes a lot of phantasy to discover a qualitative square.

Fig. 7 photograph of bike station on the Queen Mathilde Square

On the official website of the project Ghent-Sint-Pieters, it is found that the realisation of the Queen Mathilde Square will start in 2022, and will take approximately 14 months...

Meanwhile, the local committee has introduced this problem to the local authorities. They are represented in the advice council of the project Ghent-Sint-Pieters and used this platform to spread their ideas. For them it is unacceptable that the realisation of the public domain takes so long. They demand a quicker realisation, eventually only for a part of the square and with a temporarily character. Similtaniously they ask for an active participation process, together with the inhabitans but also with representatives of the schools in the area, the biker movement, … They already brainstormed about the design and the functioning of the terrain and the S-building. In a letter written to the elderman is noted: "We see the prinses Mathildesquare as a characteristic square where the busy station activities and the more green southern part of the city come together. On this square local people can meet and passengers can rest for a while. We imagine a square with a green area and with water, designed for young and for old people, delivering opportunities to stay and enjoy the area."

More specifically they suggest a square without cars and without loading docks, a bike parking under the railway-station and not under the square itself, a substansive number of large trees and bushes, unpaved areas, sitting equipment, green roofs and green walls on the S-gebouw, a market hall for local agricultural products and public services in the building, …

Fig. 8 Photographs of paved and less paved squares (source: presentation, by Frederik Lerouge, expert workshop BRV 21/03/2016)

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper addresses the place-based environmental policy that has recently been developed within the area of spatial planning in Flanders. The place-based approach, also called area development, is a proactive planning approach, characterized by an intensive coordination of initiators, plans and projects in one specific area, in order to implement the plans and projects in the field. In this paper local initiators for this planning approach have been identified.

Only four cases were analyzed, all situated in the area of the railway-station of Ghent-Sint-Pieters and in a way examples of the place-based approach. It could be interesting to elaborate this research with more cases in the future. The selection of the cases can form a basis for discussion. The specific cases were selected because of the involvement of the authors in parts of the planning processes in the past and because of previous research within these areas. All these projects are examples of holistic, people-oriented plans, linked with themes like health, wellbeing and environmental quality.

The four projects illustrate the more theoretical elaborations in the introduction of this paper.

The traffic circulation plan is an example of a real bottom-up initiave, illustrating how citizens challenge the authorities to co-create. The inhabitants counted the traffic movements, collected pictures, organised meetings, … In the end the city was forced to take an initiative and decided to change the traffic circulation in the area. What is striking in this process is the hesitating attitude of the local authorities – "does the local committee really represents the majority of the residents?"- and the initiative for a referendum. This polarised the neighbourhood and created two opposing groups. Political parties interfered in the discussion. In the end the political authority took the initiative to develop a consensus plan. Untill now this plan is not implemented, but the initial intention to minimize the traffic in the area was kept.

The slow roads and the greening of the Voskenslaan are examples of co-creation at an early stage of the planning process. The two processes were organised by external groups, namely the 'Trage Wegen vzw' in cooperation with the city of Ghent and the province of East-Flanders. New media seem to be very important in these processes (digital voting, interactive maps of ancient local roads, …). The local committee is playing an active role in this by bringing local people together in organised walks, discussions, …, and by launching projects themselves. What is striking is that several dynamics come together: the themes fit with the local manifesto of the committee, people in the neighbourhood have the expertise to launch qualitative proposals, the network is powerfull enough to get the proposals selected in digital polls, …

The most recent initiative, the demand for a participation process for the Queen Mathilde Square, is an example of consultation, the first generation of civic participation as described by Lancksweerdt. In this case the city and the real estate development company already took many initiatives without consulting the neighbourhood or societal groups, acting from a more traditional top down perspective. Today, the local committee is reacting by asking a participation process and by trying to bring in some inspiring ideas in the discussion. We must be critical about this process until now. Many decisions about the size of the square and the S-builing, the real estate programme, the traffic circulation on the square, … are already made and anchored in the zoning plan. The future will show if the local committee succeeds in influencing a few decisions still to be made in order to ameliorate the quality of the square.

In conclusion we found that local authorities together with inhabitants have been experimenting with place-based planning in Flanders and more specifically in Ghent for several years now, but results, actors, instruments and participation processes differ. In this paper we focussed on a place-based planning processes on a very local, neigbhourhood level. These results can be used to develop future place-based, smart planning programmes and projects in Flanders and in Ghent together with local, smart citizens.

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