



Ghent's Land

(Ghent city museum (STAM), Belgium)

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Category: Planet

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Project summary

Exhibition by STAM (Ghent city museum), in collaboration with ILVO (Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

Ghent is a large landowner. The city owns vast swathes of agricultural land, most of it outside of the city boundaries. There was a time when Ghent held 5,000 hectares of arable land, meadows and woodland. Even today that figure is 1,800 hectares. What is the story behind that land? Where does its future lie? The Ghent's Land exhibition provides food for thought on issues of land ownership, the relationship between city and countryside, sustainable agriculture and food security.

The story of Ghent's farmland begins in the thirteenth century, when its charitable organizations came into possession of land outside the city walls. Those organizations acquired large swathes of land to sustain them financially and provide food for the city's poor and sick. By the end of the twentieth century that land is in the hands of Ghent's Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW). A new era had dawned: the city expanded with the port and motorways, the PCSW was confronted with new social challenges and abolished its food aid system, and radical changes took place in the agricultural sector. A good chunk of Ghent's historic farmland was sold off and consigned to oblivion.

The 'Ghent's Land' exhibition changes all that. With the help of maps, paintings, illustrations, photographs, film footage and extraordinary objects, it unearths an intriguing chapter in the history of Ghent and other cities.

Times change. Today the land in Ghent's ownership is fodder for debate. What will the future bring? Will more land be sold off to finance social policy? What will happen to today's almost two-hundred tenants and the young farmers looking for land? Could the land have a role to play in issues such as climate change, sustainable agriculture, food security and inequality? Differing views are aired in the 'Ghent's Land' exhibition and during three evening-debates, ranging from those of PCSW policy-makers to investors, through young and established farmers to food aid organizations. Can their divergent ideas be consolidated into a shared vision for the sustainable future of Ghent's land?

Contribution to Agenda 2030

Agriculture constitutes a major challenge to sustainable resource management, especially with the globalization of food production and consumption. Developing sustainable food systems worldwide is crucial to reducing climate change and restoring biodiversity. Short-chain food networks are key and local, community-based projects, like ours in Ghent, play a vital role to realize this large planetary goal. Inspired by history and fostering vivid societal debate, our project explored ways to build a short-chain food system and community project centered around Ghent's public farmlands.

Outcomes and impact

Until recently, many were unaware of Ghent's vast agricultural land holdings. The exhibition raised awareness among its almost 15,000 visitors by providing information on the history and current-day use of these lands. A highly diverse group of citizens, civil servants, and farmers left inspired to further engage with sustainable food production. In particular, the project sparked democratic discussion and strengthened the capacities of the city's civil servants to manage public farmland. The project did not mark the end, but the start of ongoing societal debate in Ghent on the future of public farmland.

Inclusion

The history of Ghent's land is closely tied to the city's history of poor relief. Since the Middle Ages, these farmlands were owned by poverty organizations and came under Ghent's public welfare institution in 1976. The exhibition showed how these agricultural lands provided income, food, and fuel for the city's poorest inhabitants. Recent land sales have seriously weakened this historic connection between agriculture and poor relief. Our project explored how Ghent's land can once again address inequality by providing local healthy food to its most needy inhabitants.



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