

NEBA - “Supporting the integration of New European Bauhaus values and principles into the regional planning processes”

REGIONAL REPORT

CITY OF GEEL (BELGIUM)



This Regional Report has been developed with the support of the Advisory Partner of the Interreg Europe programme project “Supporting the integration of New European Bauhaus values and principles into the regional planning processes (NEBA)”. The research group is led by Gabriella M. Racca, Full Professor of Administrative Law at University of Turin (Dept. of Management “Valter Cantino”) and composed by Prof. Silvia Ponzio, Dr. Mara Demichelis, Dr. Paola Colla, Dr. Matteo Pignatti.

Prof. Gabriella M. Racca’s curriculum and open access publications are available online [at this link](#).

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REGIONAL REPORT

City of Geel (Belgium)

Introduction

The NEBA staged approach is based on four steps of learning and exploration. The first step, “Understanding”, includes the development of Regional Reports aiming at identifying the current policy setup relevant to the NEBA project theme, as well as identifying challenges such as knowledge and experience gaps. This will help identify possible policy learning synergies among Project Partners and regions and provide areas of interest for good practice investigation.

This report has been drafted by NEBA project staff from the City of Geel (Belgium), namely Bart Verachtert (Head of City Development, project member), Tinne Vandeven (Policy Advisor City Development, project member), Lucas Cools (Policy Advisor City Development, project member) & Rob Testelmans (Policy Advisor General Management, Project Coordinator for Geel), and reviewed by the Advisory Partner, University of Torino (UNITO). Also, UNITO carried out the state-of-the-art analysis included in Section 5.

1. Internal (organisational) factors

1.1. Expertise of the organisation on NEB’s topics

The city of Geel employs experts with a global knowhow on all the areas of knowledge connected to NEB. Only the team that is dedicated to city development is for now involved in the NEBA project. When other areas of knowledge are needed while the project grows, other colleagues can be involved as well.

1.2. Level of organisational knowledge of the NEB initiative, its characteristics and related knowledge gaps

Sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion are core values embraced by the city of Geel. The projects are guided by **principles such as the combination of global and local dimensions, active participation, and transdisciplinarity**. However, **challenges remain, particularly in effectively implementing participation and adopting a comprehensive transdisciplinary approach**.

1.3. Main sources of information on NEB's topic

As a local authority, the City of Geel can utilize **expertise from higher authorities** (federal, regional, provincial) and syndical institutions such as the Flemish Association of Spatial Planning, the Flemish Architecture Institute, and the Flemish Government Architect. These collaborations with various design offices for urban planning could bring **the latest knowledge across different disciplines**.

1.4. Key challenges related to the integration of NEB values and principles into regional/urban planning

- **Property positions:** the City of Geel has a long-term vision to preserve certain areas as a **green corridor to the city centre**. These plots are **rarely in property of the city itself**. The cost is high to acquire these plots and/or to change the underlying destination from building area to green area.
- **Understanding for the urgency of climate solutions:** the **acceptance and support from citizens and stakeholders for climate change challenges is low**. For example, mobility issues seem to be of higher importance and are mentioned as priority to solve.
- **Coworking on projects with diverse actors and a transdisciplinary approach:** Beside this project, we have city-wide many other topics related to city planning, where we currently work on. We intend to **work transdisciplinary**, but the involvement of the various stakeholders and city departments is intensive and means a **great workload for the small team that is working on city development** in the City of Geel. **Private partners are not always convinced of the need for integration of social needs** (such as green areas) in their projects.

2. External Factors

2.1. Integration of three core values of the NEB (i.e. sustainability, aesthetics, inclusion) in urban and regional development strategies

In recent years, the primary factor driving the **initiation of planning processes has been the city's commitment to its cultural heritage**. In 2023, Geel was added to the **UNESCO** List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, recognizing its **ancient community-based foster care model**. With a long-standing **tradition of care and inclusion**, City of Geel is now working to translate this **way of life into contemporary projects**. This ongoing effort represents a significant work in progress.

[Extract from the UNESCO report](#)

The Belgian town of Geel is known for its tradition of hosting people with mental disorders in the homes of foster families. A form of psychiatric care, the community-based practice encourages the social participation of mentally-vulnerable people while destigmatizing mental illness. Over time, the practice has evolved into a scientifically and medically supported programme, with laws and decrees defining the conditions, responsibilities and rights of foster

families, guests and the Public Psychiatric Care Centre. Despite its resilience, this tradition is challenged by changes in modern society and mental health care. To respond to these challenges, local organizations and councils work together on a multi-layered safeguarding programme aimed at: (a) transmitting the practice and its history; (b) researching the model from historical, medical and anthropological perspectives; and (c) cultivating a caring ecosystem.

2.2. Integration of three core values of the NEB (i.e. sustainability, aesthetics, inclusion) in urban and regional development strategies

The [Spatial Policy Plan](#) for the City of Geel has been under development for several years, incorporating an **extensive participation process**. The plan was approved by the city council in 2021. One of the primary objectives of the Spatial Policy Plan is to **establish green connections between the city centre and the surrounding landscape, including agricultural plots and river valleys**.

2.3. Integration of NEB's three key principles (combination of global and local dimensions, participation, transdisciplinarity) in urban and regional development strategies

City of Geel is working together with the Flemish government, the surrounding local authorities, and non-profit organisations on projects concerning the river valleys of the Grote Nete and Kleine Nete. This is the **global dimension that needs to be connected to the local dimension of the city centre and private properties**. The first steps on participation and transdisciplinarity are taken but need to be better exploited.

2.4. Guidelines and framework integrating NEB into the City of Geel's policy

There are [Blue Deal](#) and [Green Deal](#) intentions on regional scale, but the connection to NEB is not yet clear.

2.5. Potential funding opportunities

Projects that have been identified in the spatial plan have several objectives in common with EU programmes other than Interreg. For instance, in 2024 Geel is looking for synergies within the HORIZON-MISS-2024-NEB-01 call.

2.6. Management of local innovation processes for regional and local development in the City of Geel

The strategic local development projects are managed by a **steering group which is composed by members of the city council, the management, the administration and the stakeholders**. The preparation for the

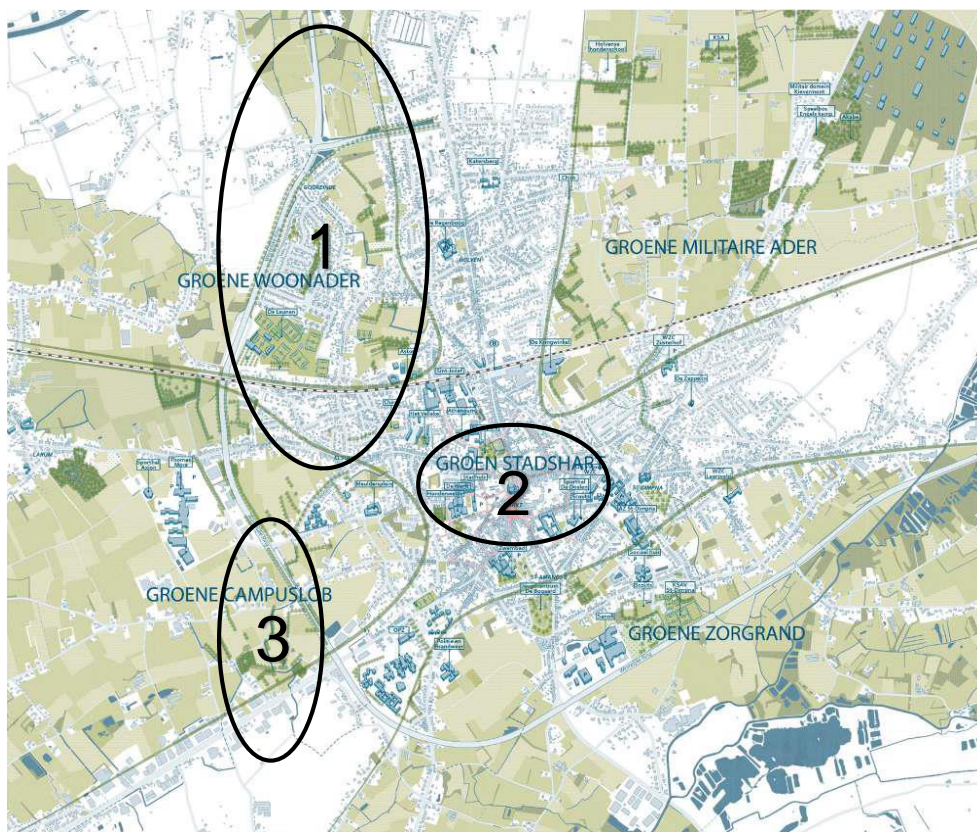
steering group is done by the project group, which is composed by members of the administration, the stakeholders and a design office.

2.7. Experiences of social and territorial inclusion, based on citizens' participation and co-creation in the City of Geel

The experiences of the past on participation were merely focused on giving information and asking for input and reactions. Co-creation processes haven't been implemented yet.

3. NEBA Project stakeholders

In the global vision for the green corridors, the City of Geel have detected three projects/stakeholders to integrate in the NEBA Project:



1. Green residential corridor

Aim: connection of nature reserve De Zegge to the city centre via watercourse Zeggeloop

Stakeholder: Regional Landscape Grote & Kleine Nete vzw

2. Green city centre

Aim: connection and enlargement of green spaces in the city centre

Stakeholder: Geel Centrum vzw / Unizo (associations of entrepreneurs)

3. Green innovation campus

Aim: green connection between the college site and incubation zone for innovative activities

Stakeholders:

- Thomas More College / KU Leuven University
- IOK (regional agency for spatial development)

4. Other references and suggestions: policies examples and the overarching goal for NEB in the City of Geel

The overarching goal of the project is to taking a start with realisation of the green connections between city and surrounding landscape.

5. State of the Art Analysis

5.1. Methodology

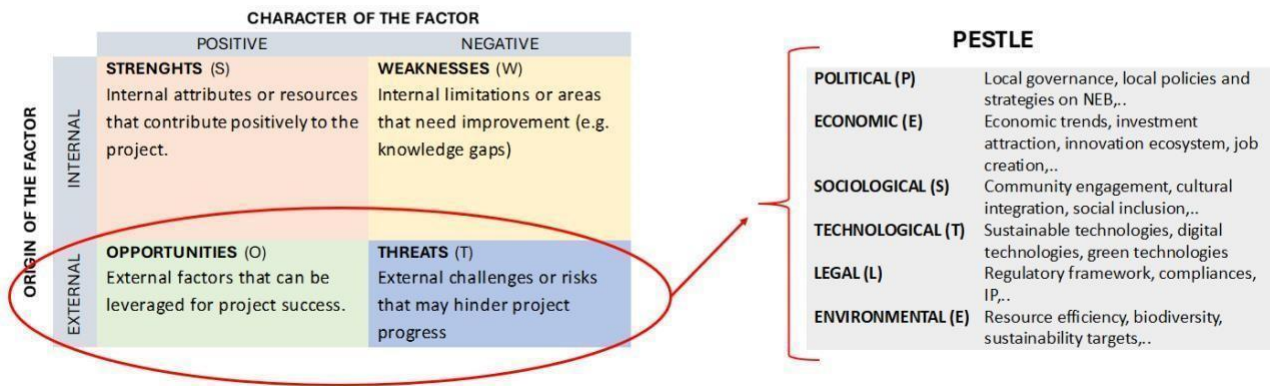
This section focuses on analysing the regional situation at the City of Geel level. The analysis follows the Methodology for Regional Situation Analysis and is based on the SWOT Analysis Framework applied to the findings presented in sections 2-4 of this report.

The SWOT analysis examines the interrelations between the internal and external environments of City of Geel concerning NEB's topic area, identifying:

- Strengths (S): Internal attributes or resources that may contribute positively to the project.
- Weaknesses (W): Internal limitations or areas that need improvement (e.g., knowledge gaps).
- Opportunities (O): External factors that can be leveraged for project success.
- Threats (T): External challenges or risks that may hinder project progress.

PESTLE factors related to political, economic, sociological, technological, legal and environmental aspects are covered, when available, within the opportunities and threats part of the matrix

SWOT MATRIX



5.2. SWOT Analysis



Strenghts	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
- projects guided by the combination of global and local dimension, active participation and transdisciplinarity - expertise from higher authorities across different disciplines (urban planning, etc.)	- not effective implementation of participation - difficulties in adopting a comprehensive transdisciplinary approach	- attention to cultural heritage (UNESCO List in 2023) and ancient community-based foster care model - long tradition of care and inclusion to be translated in contemporary projects - establish green connections between the city centre and the surrounding landscape, including agricultural plots and river valleys through the Spacial Policy Plan	- need to better exploit participation and transdisciplinarity in cooperation among authorities - public property issue and lack of interests of private investors - not yet clear connections with Blue Deal and Green Deal intention on regional scale and NEB principles

Internal Factors

External Factors

5.3. Conclusions

5.3.1 Main findings

The City of Geel embraces the three NEB core values: sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion. These values are guided by principles that focus on combining global and local dimensions, active participation, and transdisciplinarity in implementing various projects.

However, challenges remain, particularly in effectively implementing participation and adopting a comprehensive transdisciplinary approach. Other challenges include property positions, understanding the urgency of climate solutions, and collaborating on projects with diverse actors (transdisciplinary approach).

Expertise is shared from higher authorities (federal, regional, provincial) and syndical institutions (e.g., Flemish Association of Spatial Planning, Flemish Architecture Institute, and Flemish Government Architect).

Regarding current policy practices, in recent years, the planning processes of the City of Geel have considered its commitment to cultural heritage (see 2023, UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage), recognizing the ancient community-based foster care model and tradition of care and inclusion.

Extensive participation processes have also characterized the Spatial Policy Plan (2021), aiming to establish green connections between the city center and the surrounding landscape, including agricultural plots and river valleys.

Although there are Blue and Green Deal intentions on a regional scale, the connection to NEB is not yet clear.

5.3.2 Possible learning synergies within the NEBA consortium

At this stage of the project, the City of Geel can exchange and develop learning synergies within the NEBA consortium. For example, regarding the connection of the NEB values within the city development, it could be useful to provide a statement of goals, including maps and graphic representations of the development, as the Galway City Council provided (*see Galway City Council – Regional Report*). For more information on areas of interest for good practice investigation please refer to the State of the art analysis at Consortium level. In addition, further areas of interest for good practice investigation may be identified during the planned thematic workshops.