



Music city profile: Ghent

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MUSIC
ESTONIA 

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PREFACE

Context of this profile report

This report is part of a trio of music policy profiles of three cities: Aarhus, Berlin and Ghent. They are written as additional case studies for a music policy analysis for the city of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia and a UNESCO City of Music from 2022.

The profiles are based on document analysis, including music or more broadly cultural strategies and various reports, as well as interviews with music sector representatives and city officials. The profiles describe broadly how the city as a political and administrative organisation interacts with the music life in the city, whether through policies and regulations, subsidies and other support, as urban planners and real estate managers or facilitators of local, regional, national or international collaboration. It is clear, however, that a comprehensive review of all the ways that these cities interact with their music life would easily fill a book in each case.

What is music policy?

Most states or cities do not (yet) have explicit music policies. Therefore, the phrase “music policy” as used in these reports refers to a synthesis of all those ways the city impacts the music life in the city, whether through political strategies or administrative regulations, subsidies to organisations and projects, or activities carried out by the city itself. Therefore, even if the city never mentions music explicitly in any policy document, it would, in this view, still have a music policy – it would simply be a set of goals, resources and processes already in place, but not necessarily explicitly articulated within music context.

Descriptive and analytical approach

The profiles are mostly descriptive and only moderately analytical. They mostly describe the ways the city governments have made rhetorical commitments, that are articulated in political strategies about why the music ecosystem matters, what value it creates and how the government intends to empower it; and institutional commitments, setting up programmes, projects, committees, units or other structures and committing funding. The reports have not aimed to critically evaluate the implementation of the various policies described as this would exceed by far the capacity allocated. The reports themselves do not have a comparative component and do not reference each other. A separate brief comparative analysis was created for the City of Tallinn and Music Estonia.

1. GHENT – A MUSIC CITY

Ghent is a city and municipality in the Flemish Region of Belgium. It is the capital and largest city of the East Flanders province and the third largest in Belgium, after Brussels and Antwerp. Ghent's population in 2024 is estimated at 272 778, a steady increase from 230 543 in 1990.¹ It is one of thirteen cities officially acknowledged as “centre cities” (*centrumsteden*) among the 300 communes in Flanders, a status that affects their funding.²

“Ghent is a pocket sized metropolis, combining the intimacy of a small city with the openness of a metropolis”, notes Charles Landry in his Creative Cities Index.³ Considered widely a hotbed of artists and creators and a vibrant cultural hub, Ghent is currently preparing for a bid for the European Capital of Culture in 2030.⁴

1.1. WHY IS GHENT A MUSIC CITY?

Ghent was among the earliest cities to gain the UNESCO City of Music label, but its vibrant music and cultural life predate any such designation. Often referred to as an “epicentre” for art and culture, Ghent ranked fifth in the “cultural vibrancy” category of the 2019 Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor.⁵ Music has long played a significant role in Ghent's cultural life.

The city boasts diverse venues for performing and enjoying music, including the historic Music Centre De Bijloke, formerly a city hospital from 1228 until 1980; the Flemish Opera, considered one of Europe's most beautiful opera houses; the VIERNULVIER arts centre, housed in the Vooruit building of the Ghent-based labour movement; and de Handelsbeurs, a magnificent 18th-century building now home to HA Concerts. But music thrives beyond these beautiful venues. Ghent hosts numerous festivals, most notably the Ghent Festivities, which fill the city with music for ten days each summer, from concert halls to bars, parks, and street corners.

The Ghentian identity is often described as rebellious and freethinking both in conversations with sector professionals as well as in the city's official promotional materials.⁶ Ghent's music scene has always embraced experimental, bizarre, and bold artists and scenes, often leading the way before others. The unique concert production organisation Democracy, which emerged from a youth centre in the early 1980s, exemplifies this spirit. It programmed diverse genres like grunge, punk, noise, avant-garde, garage, blues, metal, hardcore, rockabilly, reggae, and surf, building a cult following beyond Belgium. A “quintessential Ghent musical city myth” even claims that Nirvana performed in front of a relatively small crowd before achieving global fame.⁷

Perhaps Ghent's idiosyncratic character as a music city stems from particular individuals, role models with strong musical ideas who attracted and inspired each other. The highly regarded Ghent Conservatorium, now KASK & Conservatorium / School of Arts Gent, certainly plays a role, attracting many young musicians. Ghent also fostered a scene for creative cafe owners who cherished and experimented with music, giving rise to the saying that when starting a new bar in Ghent, one must build the stage before installing the infrastructure to sell beer. This is one of the cultural phenomena that has later suffered due to increasingly strict sound regulations.

Specific data on Ghent's music scene is limited, but it's common knowledge that Ghent's music ecosystem is important in and for Flanders. For example, 29% of all Flemish music organisations are based in Ghent.

Regarding the creative economy, Ghent has around 500 active companies in the creative industries sector. These companies account for 4% of total employment in the city and provide a working environment for 18% of Ghent's self-employed individuals. Media and culture-related activities make up 65% of creative employment. Notably, Ghent has a higher density of creative industry jobs per 10 000 inhabitants compared to other Flemish central cities (146 vs. 139) and Flanders as a whole (73). As a result, Ghent contributes 20% of the total added value in the creative economy of Flemish central cities.⁸

1 World Population Review. (2024) Website. Available online: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/ghent-population>

2 Leenknecht, S. (2020). Country profile BELGIUM: Flanders. In: Association of the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends, “Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends,” 20th edition 2020. Available under: <http://www.culturalpolicies.net>. ISSN: 2222-7334.

3 Quoted in the City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p12.

4 See more information: <https://stad.gent/en/city-governance-organisation/ghent2030>.

5 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p 8.

6 See visitgent's website: <https://visit.gent.be/en/people-ghent-breed-apart>.

7 More information about the colourful history of Democracy can be found here: <https://www.democracy.be/geschiedenis/>.

8 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p10.

2. MUSIC POLICY SYSTEM IN GHENT

2.1. LEGAL BASIS AND DIVISION OF ROLES

Belgium is a federal constitutional monarchy with a complex structure. Cultural policy-making is primarily the responsibility of the language communities, included in the Flemish government.⁹ Belgium played an active role in establishing the Council of Europe after World War II and the principles of political and cultural democracy, as well as references to human rights, remain deeply ingrained in Belgian cultural policies. Cultural policy-making adheres to the subsidiarity principle, meaning the federal level provides a strategic cultural policy framework, including general regulations and support measures.¹⁰

Regional level

There are three important regional-level regulations, or decrees, that shape cultural policy:

1. Arts Decree of April 23, 2021
2. Amateur Arts Decree of January 1, 2024
3. Supra-local Culture Decree of March 8, 2024

The Arts Decree defines the key terms and the framework for providing grants as well as outlining the grant programmes delivered directly by the Flemish government. These programmes include: operating and project subsidies, scholarships for artists and creators, residency scholarships, support for international activities and support to arts institutions.¹¹ Operating subsidies are granted for the whole five-year period of the Decree.

Overall, the Flemish Arts Decree provides a “relatively flexible framework that allows organisations with a predominantly private income structure (such as music clubs) to apply for public funding”.¹²

Local level

After reforms in 2016, cultural policy-making was further decentralised to the local (municipal) level, away from the provincial level. A separate Decree on Supra-local Cultural Activities was created to continue to incentivise and support cultural collaboration between the communes. Furthermore, the resources for the cultural policy of the Flemish municipalities have been integrated into the Municipal Fund. There are no more conditions or reporting obligations and the municipal authorities are now fully responsible for designing their local cultural policy.¹³ This does not mean that regional cultural policy, through the design of the Arts Decree, for example, would not influence a city’s cultural policy. It does tie in with the local level and shapes the overall “dynamics of the cultural ecosystem in Flanders”.¹⁴

Therefore, artists and arts organisations in Ghent need to actively engage with two levels – the regional level and the city level. Important subsidies are granted through the Flemish Arts Decree and to some degree the city complements or adds to this.

2.2. MUSIC AND CULTURAL POLICIES

Every political coalition articulates their vision in a coalition agreement. For the electoral period of 2019-2024, the coalition was made between the Open VLD (conservative liberals), Groen (green), Vooruit (social democrats) and CD&V (Christian Democrats) parties. The coalition agreement also covers themes of culture and clarifies the bigger goals. Ghent’s cultural policy priorities and framework

9 In Flanders the Flemish government includes and integrates the competencies of the community and region. Cf. Leenknecht, S. (2020). Country profile BELGIUM: Flanders. 1.2.1. Organisational organogram: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/category/?id=5&g1=1>.

10 Leenknecht, S. (2020). Country profile BELGIUM: Flanders.

11 The Arts Decree defines two categories of organisations: Arts Organisations, a legal entity that is professionally active in the arts sector within the Flemish Community; and Arts Institutions, an arts organisation that occupies a sustainable, leading position within the arts field and is specifically recognized for this. The latter status provides essentially an indefinite subsidy. See more: Flemish Codex. <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1035656¶m=inhoud>.

12 Leenknecht, S. (2020). Country profile BELGIUM: Flanders. 1.3.1. Overview of cultural institutions.

13 Department Of Culture, Youth & Media. Local Cultural Policy. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/nl/cultuur/lokaal-cultuurbeleid>.

14 Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent, p16

are outlined in a policy note (*beleidsnota*), created by the city government for each legislature term, the current one being for 2021–2025.¹⁵ There is no policy note specifically for music.

2.2.1. COALITION AGREEMENT 2019-2024

The coalition agreement, named “Ambition and courage for Ghent”, sets out to invest in greater diversity, both in terms of the cultural offer as well as among audiences. The new coalition notes: “We increase the participation of vulnerable groups for whom participation and participation in leisure activities is not self-evident. We focus on an accessible, available, usable and understandable offer. Above all, we ensure that everyone can participate in the rich cultural and leisure life”.¹⁶

The agreement puts forward the phrase “Culture challenges” as a heading, recognising the importance of art to challenge politics and society. The main themes with regard to culture covered in the agreement are:

Support to the “artistic backbone” of the city – continued investment in major cultural houses, companies, and festivals, so that Ghent would remain a sanctuary for artists and creatives, offering space and support for their work.

Strengthening diversity and inclusion – continuing and expanding the Green Track initiative to further environmental sustainability within the cultural sector as well as developing a Social Track initiative to promote diversity and inclusion.

Reviewing existing subsidy flows to ensure support for local and international players, amateurs, and individual artists.

Expanding and improving cultural infrastructure, including presentation and creation spaces, in both the city centre and in neighbourhoods. Promoting the shared use of cultural infrastructure. Activating vacant commercial properties as creation and presentation spaces through incentives for owners and exploring temporary uses and repurposing of spaces like churches to create additional cultural venues.

The agreement also reconfirms the commitment to a highly collaborative and consultative approach to policy-making (see 2.6).

2.2.2. GHENT CULTURAL POLICY NOTE 2021-2025

The policy note broadly follows the themes outlined in the coalition agreement and outlines three broader thematic threads:¹⁷

1. **Community building, social cohesion and participation** – according to the policy note, participation in culture cannot be reduced to attending a concert, a dance performance or a lecture, or visiting an exhibition or a monument. A visit to the library or cinema, being on stage or helping out in the wings at an amateur theatre company, being an active member of a photo and film club, and taking a course in non-formal education – to name but a few – are also forms of participation in the rich cultural life of the city.¹⁸
2. **Ghent as an age-, child- and youth-friendly city** – the policy note covers many themes, from mobility, accessibility to information, price of participation and cultural education.¹⁹
3. **Diversity: with a focus on supply, creators and audiences** – the document notes that Ghent has also grown in recent years into a super-diverse city with more than 170 nationalities. 40% of Ghent residents have a migration background. However, this is still not sufficiently reflected in the cultural sector. This also means making the process of applying to subsidies more accessible as well as emphasising diversity in grant agreements with subsidised organisations.²⁰

In addition, 8 ambitions are outlined which refer to concrete projects and initiatives. These start with the ambition of Ghent to become the European Capital of Culture in 2030, and include many

15 The current document is “Cultuur, het Verbindende DNA. Koesteren en versterken wat ons Gent maakt” and covers the period for 2021–2025. (Henceforth referenced as the Ghent cultural policy note 2021–2025. Available online: <https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Beleidsnota%20Cultuur%202020-2025.pdf>).

16 City of Ghent. (2019). Bestuursakkoord Gent 2019–2024. Available online: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/wat-doet-het-bestuur/bestuursakkoord>.

17 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021–2025, p 8.

18 *Ibid*, p 14.

19 *Ibid*, p 16–18.

20 *Ibid*, p 20.

infrastructural projects, such as a “House of Cinema”, a library of the future, the Bijloke site developments, and end with an ambition to make a cultural infrastructure master plan. As noted in the Ghent cultural “Landscape Drawing” of 2021 – a review of the cultural ecosystem –, it’s striking that the majority of these ambitions are related to infrastructures and actually just represent the tip of the infrastructural iceberg.²¹

There are also other themes emphasised in the policy note:

The policy note stresses that **Ghent** should be seen **as a breeding ground and support network for artists and creatives** and that there is room for large, medium-sized and small players, and support for established actors, re-starters and emerging talent.²² To achieve this, the policy note introduces an updated tiered subsidy system (see 2.4.1.) that provides longer-term agreements for organisations that play a key role in as well as gradually smaller subsidies. Among other points that are to receive extra attention, Ghent as a music city and UNESCO Creative City of Music is highlighted, meaning that support to many music groups as well as for setting up sound-insulating rehearsal rooms continues.

There is also a further focus on **cultural infrastructure**, which is considered a *sine qua non* for a rich cultural life. This means both venues with specific functionalities for various cultural sectors as well as “white space” for more *ad hoc* work; permanent places and temporary arrangements for project-based research, experiment, and development. The biggest projects are mentioned in the policy note, including the Ghent opera, the Maternity on the Bijloke site²³, and the “pop and rock” hall in the Winter Circus.²⁴ In addition, investment subsidies are marked as an instrument in cultural policy.

Finally, in the cultural policy note the **creative economy** is mentioned only briefly and generally, noting that around 500 companies are active in the city in the creative economy, accounting for 4% of employment. Also, Ghent accounts for 20% of the total added value in the creative economy in the Flemish central cities. This theme, however, is not developed any further. There is also a city website for the creative economy,²⁵ but it offers only general remarks. Among fields of activity accounted for as creative economy are “culture-related activities” and “creative services”, but no further information or explanation is provided. The only document that is referenced for further information is a brochure “Ghent puts knowledge to work”, which focuses on innovation and knowledge-intensive sectors with very little attention to cultural themes.

2.2.3. UNESCO CREATIVE CITY OF MUSIC

Ghent became a UNESCO City of Music in 2009 and was among the first seven cities to do it. At least two music subsidy programmes are credited to this – subsidies for amateur music groups and for furnishing soundproof rehearsal rooms. It is unclear what the meaning and use of the label in today’s terms in the city’s cultural policy is. In the beginning, there was a fixed budget specifically for the UNESCO City of Music label, but not any longer.

There is a website dedicated to Ghent UNESCO City of Music²⁶ which provides various topics and links with regard to music life in Ghent. It also contains a section “Music policy”, featuring links to four types of subsidies relevant to artists and music professionals as well as mentioning the programme “Artist seeks...” (see 3.1.). In that sense, the basic use of a City of Music label is to bring together information about resources for a particular cultural sector – music – and thus highlight it as a theme. However, the website is somewhat out of date with several links broken and information not up-to-date.

The Cultural Department of the City of Ghent has recently rebranded itself as “Cultuur Gent” and built a [new web portal](#) with information for citizens as well as cultural professionals made more accessible and easy to find. While all the music-relevant subsidies and other programmes can be found on the new site, the UNESCO City of Music label has not (at the time of this report) been included there.

As articulated in the music sector thematic section of the 2021 “Landscape Drawing”:

“The title of UNESCO Creative City of Music is a well-deserved and prestigious sign that in itself does not have much substance or momentum, but does indicate

21 Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent.

22 *Ibid*, p 8.

23 The Bijloke is a historic site that has been turned into a concert hall. The Maternity is a building from 1863 that will remain the home of several performing arts groups. More info: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/nieuws-evenementen/renovatie-materniteit-op-bijlokesite-van-start-voorjaar-2024>.

24 The Winter Circus is a new site which will also house a music club with a seated capacity of 350, hosted by 404 and Democracy. More information: <https://www.wintercircus.be/en>.

25 This can be found here: <https://stad.gent/nl/ondernemen/economische-speerpunten/creatieve-economie/creatieve-economie-gent>.

26 Ghent city of music. Website: <https://stad.gent/en/city-promotion/ghent-city-music>.

worldwide recognition that Ghent plays all registers of music with verve".²⁷

Discussions with sector representatives largely confirmed that the City of Music label can mostly be seen just as that – a label that can be attached to an undoubtedly vibrant and rich music life of Ghent. Whether the label had more policy content in the early years after acquiring it, remains up for debate, however, by now, it seems to have mostly lost all practical relevance – meaning, it is not really used to build a more holistic music policy, to marshal political attention and policy resources around it, nor used as a brand for both local and visiting music lovers.

However, the special mention in the 2021-2025 policy note signals intentions or even plans to revive and strengthen the UNESCO City of Music label are in the works. It remains to be seen where this can lead to.

2.2.4. POLICY THEMES AND VALUES

One possible reason for having no well-articulated sectoral policies can be the seemingly well-rooted tradition of culture as a horizontal and transversal policy theme. Also, the interest representation on the city level is not sector-specific. The most important sectoral policy-making partners in the city are platforms for all fields of art or culture in general.²⁸ This has possibly good reasons – boundaries between different kinds of creative activities are porous at best and there are many arguments to avoid building too clear distinctions between them organisationally. The sector specificity comes into play through particular programmes.

Another reason why the need for a music ecosystem policy might not be felt strongly enough is that Ghent has had such a vibrant music life, and more broadly, cultural life for so long which has developed on its own without any holistic or sector-specific strategising. The music life in Ghent will also most likely continue spectacularly without any broader strategy, fueled by the intrinsic energy, numerous artists and collectives, and places to perform and enjoy – all accumulated over decades of general vibrancy of Ghent as a music (and cultural) city. Even then, there might be much to discover from a more holistic perspective of a sector such as music. Investigating, discussing and articulating such a perspective can also serve as a kind of future-proofing. The circumstances, not least political, that have allowed Ghent's musical life to flourish might change and shouldn't be taken for granted. Having a clearer understanding of how the ecosystem works can help to navigate changes and safeguard what's considered valuable.

It is notable that nowhere in the policy documents, consultation reports or discussions is there any mention of **"music industry"**. Perhaps it's a preference of terms and all sorts of private operators such as record producers or music publishers, artist managers and booking agencies are implicitly considered among the various organisations in the sector. This seems to be confirmed by music companies such as Zephyrus Music and Kinky Star (see 2.4.1.) receiving multi-year operating subsidies. Also, perhaps the entrepreneurialism necessary for operating as a freelancer or as a company is implicit in the very nature of how music actors work, as subsidies are never enough and one's own contribution is needed. Or, it's a conscious value position of focusing on the creative aspect, ensuring the "breeding ground" conditions, including subsidies and infrastructure, and leaving the rest to the sector actors to figure it out on their own.

It is also notable that while Ghent has a **nightlife** action plan, a nightlife coach and a council, this is not mentioned in the context of culture. The coalition agreement briefly set out the goals to create a nightlife action plan²⁹ and from there, the coach and council were installed, but these are placed within the economy service in the Department of Urban Development, together with catering and services to entrepreneurs, among other things. The nightlife action plan does link the nightlife to music life, noting that "Ghent's nightlife - in all its creativity and diversity - is part of the DNA of the city and of Ghent as a UNESCO Creative City of Music".³⁰ (see more 2.4.4.).

There is a strong emphasis in policy, but also in practice, on **cultural participation** and **inclusivity**. This seems to be another value-driven emphasis that runs not only through the policy documents, programmes but also through the discussions with sector representatives. A lot of thought and action is spent on figuring out how to empower the citizens to participate in culture, not only as passive spectators but also as active creators and experiencers.

27 Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). Sector Snapshots 2021. Bijlage Bij Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent. Available online: <https://express.adobe.com/page/v6JYuaSWCpf9H/#muziek>.

28 On the Flemish level, VI.BE can perhaps be seen as one music specific organisation that helps cities develop more holistic approaches to music policy.

29 Coalition agreement (2019), p 22.

30 City of Ghent (2021). Nightlife Actieplan. Available online: <https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Actieplan%20Nightlife%20Final.pdf>, p 5.

2.3. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Ghent is governed by a municipal council of 53 elected members, including the Mayor and 10 Aldermen. Cultural policy is in charge of the **Alderman for Culture**, Urban Development and Spatial Planning, currently held by Sami Souguir.³¹ The Alderman has a personal **cabinet** of advisors and administrators, including an advisor on culture.³²

In the city government, cultural policy and implementation is overseen by the Culture Service of the **Department of Culture, Sports and Free Time**, recently branded as **Cultuur Gent**.³³ There are other units relevant to culture. The Ghent Festivities and other elements of public events (including providing permits, etc.) are managed by the Festivities and Ambulatory Trade Service, also in the Department of Culture, Sports and Free Time. Nightlife, however, is part of the Economy Service in the Department of Urban Development.

There is also a **Cultural Council** operating within the city government providing mandatory and spontaneous advice. The most important sector-led initiative for cultural policy-making is the **Ghent Arts Consultation**, or *Gents Kunstenoverleg* (GKO).

2.3.1. ALDERMAN FOR CULTURE AND THE CABINET

The Alderman for Culture, with his cabinet, is in charge of making the cultural policy note at the beginning of the legislative term. The policy note reflects the political commitments of the coalition agreement and provides a broad strategic vision for cultural policy. This process is consultative and includes advice from the Cultural Council which in turn reflects wide input from the sectoral stakeholders, most importantly coordinated and organised by the GKO.

2.3.2. MUNICIPAL COMMITTEE OF LEISURE, PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND PENSIONS

There are six municipal committees in Ghent, consisting of 17 municipal council members each. A committee does not make decisions but prepares the meetings of the municipal council. Cultural policy is among the themes overseen by the Leisure, Public Affairs and Pensions Committee. The committees meet once a month and the meetings are public (except in specific cases) and hybrid.³⁴

2.3.3. CULTUUR GENT – CULTURAL DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY OF GHENT

Cultuur Gent is the recent brand for the city's Cultural Department, directing urban cultural policy and serving as the point of contact for cultural producers and culture lovers in Ghent. Cultuur Gent provides subsidies and advice in order to support the "artistic backbone" of the cultural sector – cultural venues and centres, companies and organisations, and festivals – as directed by the cultural policy note. They also directly manage a number of programmes and initiatives (see 2.4.).³⁵ There has been a tendency in the past for the city to do projects on their own, but in recent years there has been an increasing trend towards partnerships with the sector.

22 staff members have been listed on the Cultuur Gent website, organised into three teams managed by a management board of two people.

2.3.4. THE CULTURAL COUNCIL

The Cultural Council is the advisory body on culture for the City of Ghent. The Cultural Council (CC) can express its views on the cultural policy in several ways:

31 More information: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/over-gent-stadsbestuur/de-gemeenteraad>.

32 More information on the website of Sami Souguir: <https://www.souguir.be/nl/Bevoegdheden>.

33 The organogram of the City Government of Ghent can be found at: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/organisatiestructuur-van-het-stadsbestuur>.

34 More information on the municipal committees: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/het-bestuur/gemeenteraadscommissies>.

35 See more information on the Cultuur Gent website: <https://cultuur.stad.gent/nl/over-cultuur-gent>.

- by providing **mandatory advice** on concrete policy proposals submitted by the city council. Such advice is required on the basis of laws and decrees;
- by issuing **preliminary opinions** on policy proposals that are still being developed;
- by issuing **spontaneous advice** on themes that the Cultural Council itself considers important.

The Mayor and the Alderman responsible for culture do not need to agree with the advice of the council, but they do need to consider it and provide a formal answer and explanation in such cases.³⁶ The impact of the advice given might be more discursive, raising an issue higher in the political discourse and securing more attention for it, or more directly impactful, influencing political decisions.

Previously, under the Local Cultural Policy Decree, the city governments were required to have cultural councils for seeking advice and consultation with the sector representatives. After the reform that abolished that Decree and gave the municipalities full discretion to design their cultural policies, they also have more leeway to decide how to consult the sector. Ghent has retained the council format.

The CC has 15 members, nominated and officially appointed by the municipal council.³⁷ Each contributes their own specific expertise and does not represent any particular organisations or city districts. Together they bring experience from the professional arts, amateur arts, the heritage sector and the socio-cultural sector to the table. Before the structure was reformed in 2018-2019, the CC was more of a council of representatives from particular city districts, neighbourhoods, or sectors, resulting in too much fragmentation. In the current form, the experts provide a broader view.

The CC meets monthly and the membership is essentially volunteer work (though a small meeting fee is provided). The city provides some administrative capacity and support for the council to carry out its work – conduct research, write up reports, provide administrative support, etc. Once a year the CC reports to the mayor and aldermen on the operation and expenditure and can present an annual report to the municipal committee responsible for cultural policy affairs, or put together a delegation for a consultation with the committee.³⁸

The council provides its advice in written form and the documents are publicly available on the council's website.³⁹ Examples would be the “Memorandum 2025-2030 Ghent Cultural Council” – a look to the future after a difficult immediate past of the Corona pandemic. The memorandum was carried from opposing impulses of learning from the past and looking to the future. The first was driven by taking stock of the shortcomings of Ghent's cultural ecosystem as exposed by the pandemic. The second was by setting up Ghent's candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2030.

*“With this memorandum, the Cultural Council anticipates the changing cultural and urban dynamics with a proposal for a new ‘route planner’ for cultural policy: a guideline in a new, polyphonic reality to find the way to solutions”.*⁴⁰

Among the so-called spontaneous advice, the council has recently produced documents on the temporary use of space (2021), the needs of innovative creators (2022), and organising cultural life on a district level (2023).⁴¹

Due to its limited capacity, the CC does not actively coordinate networks of sector professionals. For this, they work closely with the GKO.

2.3.5. THE GHENT ARTS CONSULTATION

The Ghent Arts Consultation, or *Gents Kunstenoverleg* (GKO) is a platform for structural consultation within the arts sector. The main aim of GKO is to “stimulate and facilitate collaboration:

- within the Ghent art and culture sector;
- between the Ghent art and other sectors (tourism, education, economy, urban development, media, etc.);
- between the Ghent art sector and the public authorities

36 The Statutes of the CC details that: “If the mayor and aldermen do not follow the advice of the cultural council, it has a period of 50 working days to communicate its reasoned position regarding the advice issued in writing to the municipal cultural council”. (Article 9). The City of Ghent (2019). Statuten gemeentelijke cultuurraad Gent. Available: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/cultuur/cultuurraad>.

37 See more information on the Cultuur Gent website: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/cultuur/cultuurraad>.

38 The City of Ghent (2019). Statuten gemeentelijke cultuurraad Gent, Articles 10, 11, 16.

39 See more information: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/cultuur/cultuurraad>.

40 Cultural Council (2024). Memorandum Cultuurraad 2025-2030. Available online: <https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Memorandum%20definitief%20compr.pdf>.

41 All documents can be found (in Dutch) on the CC website: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/cultuur/cultuurraad>.

... to broaden impact and from there develop concrete actions that contribute to the large and small cultural imagination of the city”.⁴²

GKO was created in 2019 after broad discussions within the arts sector, captured in the founding notes of the organisation.⁴³ The circumstances that were noted as a basis for the felt need for such a platform were varied. Ghent has been growing in size and diversity of population (since the majority of the growth comes from various forms of immigration). Given that Ghent takes pride in being a “super-diverse” city,⁴⁴ this also sets enhanced and changing requirements for the city’s cultural services. The prices for real estate have gradually been outgrowing the capacity of both young families to build a more permanent home in the city as well as cultural operators to maintain spaces to create and present culture in various forms. While Ghent is among the most culturally vibrant cities in Flanders, the international offering was felt to be weaker than in Antwerp, Brussels and elsewhere. The professional cultural offering is no longer only developed by recognised and subsidised cultural players - more and more citizen-led, pop-up, and commercial initiatives play a role in the mix. This can make the role of public policy in securing a diverse cultural offer more ambiguous. A new generation of managers in cultural institutions are looking to take a more active role in the city’s policy-making.⁴⁵

The need for a platform for structural consultation within Ghent’s arts sector was thus articulated in three broader areas:⁴⁶

1. **Common focus** – the arts sector needs to transcend the concerns of particular projects and develop a policy-level perspective. While a common front is often formed to address certain issues, it has an *ad hoc* character and no longer-term sustainability. Also, as there is too much to keep track of for cultural operators, there is no capacity to consistently monitor policy developments in adjacent fields that can impact cultural affairs.
2. **The importance of cities is rising** – after the local cultural policy reform, the city’s discretion to design their own policy has grown and therefore, the arts sector needs to be more organised and have stronger representation in consultation with the city.
3. **A stronger voice and regular consultation** – the Ghent City Council is accessible and approachable, but sustainable conversations around structural policy themes need to take place regularly, not only at the start of the legislature. An arts consultation platform can develop and maintain the capacity of being a discussion partner for the city in policy making.

It is important to note, that GKO in Ghent is not the first of its kind in Flanders. There are similar consultation platforms in other cities, such as Brussels, Antwerp and Kortrijk, but these have been limited exclusively to the more traditional cultural institutions receiving public funding. GKO in Ghent is unique in going beyond any such borders and declaring radical openness to all operators in the arts field.⁴⁷

In the five years since the founding of GKO, it has quickly grown into the key bottom-up platform for the arts sector in Ghent. The organisation is dynamic and lean with a constantly evolving, somewhat fluid structure. GKO is governed by a board of five people, overseeing the yearly budget planning and implementation and legal affairs. The main link to the various art sectors is through a “Petit Committee” of 16 members, meeting monthly to discuss sector issues. The members of the committee can stay for a maximum of three years and are renewed on a rolling basis: every year one-third of the members give space for new people to join. The core of GKO consists of a team of permanent employees (both employed and on a freelance basis), temporary employees (on a freelance basis) and interns. They ensure that the regular operation of GKO is guaranteed. As of 2024, GKO is co-coordinated by two full-time team members with a group of various contracted freelancers and volunteers engaged in initiatives and projects.⁴⁸ Previously, GKO used to have a “travelling” office space at various cultural organisations, but to tackle the growing organisation and new challenges, GKO has a permanent office at CAMPO Victoria from May 1, 2024.⁴⁹

Until now, GKO has been using a working group structure to organise consultations on various topics. The permanent working groups have been on space (cultural infrastructure and availability of space), diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability (“Greentrack”). Both the Space and

42 GKO webpage: <https://gentskunstenoverleg.be/wat/>.

43 Available on the GKO website: “Startnota Kunstenoverleg Gent” (2019). Available online: https://3bb548ed-6bf6-4ee5-92e7-0a3c00e02a92.filesusr.com/ugd/579a66_2038634b18d444fdb1a1bf6601e0dd38.pdf.

44 According to the GKO founding note, in 2019 30% of the inhabitants had a background in migration (*ibid.*). The cultural policy note of the City of Ghent suggests it’s 40%. The Landscape Drawing notes that “53% of children up to 9 years of age in Ghent have a migration background” (Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent, p 5).

45 GKO (2019). Startnota “Kunstenoverleg Gent”.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent.

48 The governance, team and workflow aspects are described in some detail in the latest annual report: GKO (2024). Dit was Gents Kunstenoverleg 2023. Available online: <https://gentskunstenoverleg.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Inhoudelijk-verslag-Gents-Kunstenoverleg-2023.pdf>.

49 *Ibid.*

the Greentrack predated GKO itself as working groups, but have by now been integrated into GKO. However, going forward, working groups will not be the main structural element GKO wants to work through and more organic, flexible and inclusive formats are being looked into (see also 2.6).

There are many initiatives, projects and formats GKO is or is planning to be working through:⁵⁰

GKO Party is the new version of the annual Big Meeting, where the focus will be on networking and celebrating the past and coming year together.

GKO WALK-IN opens its doors at certain times every week for people in the sector who have questions that are too complex to handle by email or questions that require an individual conversation to tackle.

GKO CAFÉ is a monthly meeting with an agenda set by the GKO team, mostly based on issues arising from other working groups and actions. Guest speakers are invited, but in general, the aim of these meetings are to share information, ask for input from the sector, formulate needs, inspire each other, and keep a finger on the pulse of the cultural issues of the city. A variant of these is GKO INVITES, starting from partners with a specific question/need and where GKO is mainly asked to communicate and facilitate the event.

GKO ACADEMY/LEARNING CENTER taps into the expertise within the broad GKO team to share it with the Ghent network in a train-the-trainer manner and linked to other insights and experiences.

GKO ADVICE reflects GKO's function as an advocate for the broad Ghent cultural sector towards the local government or in collaboration with other consultation platforms or network organisations, whether on a local or regional level. GKO does not provide formal policy advice but bundles insights and questions from the sector that is then passed on to the culture department and/or the Culture Cabinet, in coordination with the Cultural Council.

GKO HELP DESK offers customised solutions at the request of an organisation that cannot be provided through the other regular means of GKO work.

An example: Advisory group for space

As mentioned, the working group around cultural infrastructure and space predated GKO but is now integrated into the platform as a working and advisory group. In 2023, the group was actively involved in the consultations for the Strategic Framework for Cultural Infrastructure study, providing collected insight into the needs of the sector. The advisory group is active, having frequent consultations with a focus on transparency and an eye for division of tasks and cooperation around cultural infrastructure in Ghent. GKO plans for future operation along four tracks:⁵¹

1. Composing a miscellaneous **sounding board group** around cultural infrastructure to share information and reflect on citywide spatial themes, with an agenda determined by current projects.
2. Organising **networking meetings** via GKO cafés: 5 meetings planned for 2024 on the current state of existing cultural sites, rehearsal rooms and studio spaces, sustainability, infrastructural accessibility, and meetings for less visible and vulnerable groups.
3. **Targeted actions** from a learning perspective (GKO Academy) or **facilitating sector actions** (GKO invite)
4. Investigating the **helpdesk-role** (GKO advice): Coordination with the Culture Department and other actors.

Since 2022, GKO has been developing an online platform "**Open Creatives**" to map all creative and cultural spaces in Ghent.⁵² The aim is to create an overview of the available spaces for creatives in Ghent so that they can more easily find suitable locations to realise their projects.

50 *Ibid*, pages 11-15.

51 *Ibid*, pages 32-34.

52 Open Creatives platform can be found: <https://opencreatives.gent/dashboards/home>.

2.4. THE ROLE OF THE CITY IN THE MUSIC LIFE

2.4.1. SUPPORT TO ORGANISATIONS AND PROJECTS

There are nine different subsidy programmes at the Cultuur Gent website, some general and so also open to music projects, some music specific.⁵³

Project subsidies for art, culture and cultural heritage (2021-2025) – There are four subsidy rounds per year with fixed submission dates. Four types of projects are subsidised, including cultural and artistic projects: high-quality cultural projects, and innovative and experimental projects that give an impetus to the cultural and arts landscape in the city. The applicant can be a legal entity with a “disinterested purpose”⁵⁴, a “de facto” association, or a natural person.

Subsidies for amateur music groups – this subsidy is created explicitly in the context of Ghent’s recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Music. Aimed at harmonie, fanfare and brass band music as well as choirs, the applicants must have performed at least once during the last season, be recognized as a socio-cultural association by the Ghent city council and not be among the recipients of structural subsidies by the city government.

Subsidies for furnishing rehearsal spaces – this subsidy is created explicitly in the context of Ghent’s recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Music. Ghent offers subsidies for adult individuals or socio-cultural organisations to create soundproof rehearsal spaces in their homes or buildings. The space must be used by at least three music groups for a minimum of five years. The subsidy covers up to 80% of eligible costs (building and insulation materials only), with a maximum of €2500 per room.

Multi-year operating subsidy for agreements below €25 000 – for organisations focusing on creation, professionalisation, talent development and presentation of the arts across disciplines. The ongoing subsidy period is 2023-2025 and recipients include the Spectra Ensemble (creation); Inside Jazz, Jazz Lab Series, Zephyrus Music, and Kinky Star (development and presentation); and other numerous projects for experiment and innovation.

Subsidy agreements above €25 000 – for structures that are seen as the major pillars in the arts landscape, serving as a basis for sufficient development space and presentation areas for other, often smaller players, for co-production and collaboration. These include for example, the Flemish art institutions Opera Ballet Flanders and Arts Center VIERNULVIER; music venues and halls of various sizes: Music Center De Bijloke, De Centrale and HA Concerts (previously known as Handelsbeurs); the festivals Gent Jazz and Flanders Festival Ghent; producing and performing collectives: Collegium Vocale Gent, music theatre LOD, Flat Earth Society, B’Rock, Flanders Symphony Orchestra; and other important actors such as Democracy (concert producer), Trefpunt (cultural centre), Urgent (media lab & radio), and Geuzenhuis. These subsidy agreements run for the duration of the legislative term plus one year. The sums allocated start from €25 000, but can reach up to €1,2 mln as in the case of the Bijloke and Opera Ballet Flanders.

The organisations that receive structural support from the city are not allowed to apply for other project funding. While applying for funding on the Flemish level through the Arts Decree can be demanding and require a lot of specifics, the city of Ghent does not earmark the subsidy agreement with many requirements. One of them is for a structurally subsidised concert hall or a venue to provide some days for other subsidised organisations to do their events, as the city doesn’t have its own cultural centre. This can be done through a city service by requesting “city days” for free cultural locations. Qualifying organisations looking for a space to organise their events can contact Cultuur Gent and will receive assistance in finding a suitable place and time.⁵⁵

53 More information: <https://cultuur.stad.gent/nl/subsidies>.

54 A non-profit organisation, or, in case a for-profit entity, then sufficient documentation needs to be submitted convincing that no profits are being shared with the shareholders.

55 More information available: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/cultuur/ondersteuning-en-subsidies-cultuur/aanvraag-stadsdagen-voor-gratis-cultuurlocaties>.

2.4.2. CITY PROGRAMMES

Cultuur Gent runs many programmes and initiatives itself.

Cultural Prize – The Cultural Prize of the City of Ghent goes annually to a person, organisation or institution that occupies an important place in the cultural sector and thus contributes to the image of Ghent as a cultural city. In 2023 the prize went to dancer and actor Oskar Stalpaert, in 2022 to poet Dominique De Groen, and in 2021 to trumpeter Bart Maris. In previous years, the winners included illustrator Jan Van Der Veken and filmmakers Lukas Dhont and Nathalie Teirlinck.

City Poet or City Composer – is appointed every two years. For the period 2023-2024, Lara Rosseel, a musician, composer and a permanent fixture in the Ghent jazz scene, was appointed city composer by a panel of experts from the Ghent music sector. In an initiative “*Lara Wijkt Uit*”, Lara Rosseel travels through Ghent neighbourhoods with her mobile stand for a series of unique concerts. For this, Rosseel and the City of Ghent are working together with several Ghent neighbourhood programmers and inviting local talent to take the spotlight in front of their own audience.⁵⁶

“*Artiest zkt ...*” – the programme, translated as “Artist looking for...”, is a platform that brings a selection of Ghent’s artistic talent into contact with the many organisers of neighbourhood parties and living room concerts. Ghent community organisers can book a quality live performance paid for by the city at their neighbourhood event once a year (see more in 3.1.)

Local Heros Gent – *Lokale Helden* is an initiative by VI.BE that empowers local music promoters across Flanders. It was launched in 2015 and is coordinated by VI.BE. Local Heros works by coordinating a nationwide event where local promoters organise shows, creating a vibrant showcase of the local music scene. The program provides support through extensive outreach to promoters, national and local press promotion, and connections to resources. In Ghent, Local Heros was organised by Cultuur Gent and took a slightly different approach (see 3.2.).

There are other programmes relevant to cultural policy, not directly managed by the Cultuur Gent, such as UiTPAS – a savings and discount card program implemented in Ghent, as part of the wider “UiTPAS” initiative across Flanders and Brussels. UiTPAS is a project of the Flemish government in collaboration with various municipalities, aiming to stimulate leisure participation, particularly among people in poverty. In Ghent, the UiTPAS card can be purchased for a small fee, with the price varying based on age and circumstances. Users earn points on their cards by participating in cultural and leisure activities in Ghent and the surrounding area. These points can then be exchanged for discounts, gifts, or other benefits at participating locations. The UiTPAS program is run by the city of Ghent in collaboration with various cultural and leisure organisations, making it available for all residents of Ghent and even individuals from outside the city.⁵⁷

2.4.3. EVENTS ORGANISED BY THE CITY: GHENT FESTIVITIES

The famous *Gentse Feesten* (Ghent Festivities) are among the largest folk festivals in Europe and are recognized as Flemish intangible heritage. During the ten days of the event concerts and performances take place everywhere in the city.⁵⁸ The Ghent Festivities date back to 1843. As the capital of the county of Flanders and seat of the diocese, Ghent had a rich tradition of celebrations such as royal inaugurations, processions or episcopal celebrations. In the mid-19th century Ghent, a flourishing port and industrial city, the upper bourgeoisie sought to replace numerous parish fairs and neighbourhood festivals with centrally organised “Community Festivals.” These festivals were intended to enhance the city’s image and redirect workers away from cafes, as the existing celebrations were deemed to lack prestige and encourage excessive revelry. The sheer number of these events, averaging two per month from July to October, contributed to prolonged periods of worker festivities, a concern for the bourgeoisie. The Municipal Festivities became an annual meeting point for the citizenry.⁵⁹

In spite of various gaps, not least due to the two World Wars and occupation, the festivities are still happening. They are coordinated by the Festivities and Ambulatory Trade Service of the City of Ghent

⁵⁶ More information: <https://cultuur.stad.gent/nl/activiteiten/lara-wijkt-uit>.

⁵⁷ More information: <https://stad.gent/nl/uit-in-gent/uitpas/uitpas-hoe-werkt-het>.

⁵⁸ VisitGent. Ghent Festivities. Website: <https://visit.gent.be/nl/agenda/gentse-feesten#:~:text=De%20Gentse%20Feesten%20horen%20tot,geen%20honger%20of%20dorst%20hebt>.

⁵⁹ More information on a city’s website of the history of the Gentse Feesten: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/evenementen-van-de-stad-gent/geschiedenis-van-de-gentse-feesten>.

and not by Cultuur Gent. Many of the events within the programme are organised by various private actors in the city – from big concert venues and festivals to small pubs and bars. The City of Ghent supports such initiatives with a subsidy of up to €7500.⁶⁰ The festivities are an economy unto its own and an opportunity for the bars, restaurants, and cultural establishments to earn extra revenue.

2.4.4. CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

"A city needs as much and just as diverse cultural infrastructure as there are cultural disciplines. There is also a need for 'white space' that allows for ad hoc work and/or future developments. Cultural infrastructure is a sine qua non for a rich cultural life. Ghent generally does not score badly in terms of cultural infrastructure".⁶¹

Cultural infrastructure in Ghent means, among other elements, performing arts infrastructure as well as temporary arrangements for project-based research, experiment and development. Two important overall considerations in maintaining and investing in cultural infrastructure are a commitment to limiting CO₂ emissions, as Ghent has declared an ambition to become a climate-neutral city by 2050; and accessibility which is key to increasing cultural participation for various target groups.⁶²

The 2021-2025 policy note expressed an ambition to make a cultural infrastructure master plan. Between 2021-2023 IDEA Consult carried out a study on a Strategic Framework for Cultural Infrastructure⁶³, including mapping, gap analysis and benchmarking with other cities. The study provided a new policy vision and organised it into five strategic objectives:

1. **Space for cultural functions:** Provide ample and diverse spaces for cultural activities, including presentation, experimentation, development, and creation.
2. **Distribution of cultural infrastructure.** Ensure optimal distribution of cultural infrastructure across Ghent, catering to diverse needs and functions.
3. **Temporary use.** Encourage and facilitate temporary use of spaces to optimise utilisation and foster innovation and experimentation.
4. **Shared use:** Promote shared use of infrastructure within and beyond the cultural field to maximise benefits.
5. **Climate and accessibility.** Utilise cultural infrastructure for climate action and ensure integral accessibility of urban heritage.

To achieve these, the strategy proposed roles for the city in four areas:

- **Leadership and coordination:** Cultivate a diverse landscape of permanent, short-term, and temporary cultural spaces, recognising autonomous initiatives and incorporating public spaces for temporary use.
- **Investment:** Prepare land and buildings for temporary use with basic amenities.
- **Facilitation:** Prioritise sustainability, find a balance between goals and legal requirements, and offer clear agreements for temporary assignments with minimum durations defined.
- **Matchmaking:** Connect sites with administrators and users to facilitate temporary use projects.

A crucial partner for the city in developing policies towards cultural infrastructure is the advisory group of space, now coordinated by Ghent Arts Consultation (GKO, *Gents Kunstenoverleg*).

As outlined in the 2021-2025 policy note, there are a number of infrastructure projects in the works.

With regard to the “big yards” or major infrastructure projects relevant to the music sector, the Opera Ghent building will be thoroughly overhauled between 2024-2028. The implementation of the Bijloke Site Spatial Master Plan will continue with renovating the Maternity and surrounding buildings. For the city, this is a priority file for the Cultural Infrastructure Fund (FoCI) in Flanders. Finally, the Winter Circus has been finished and is due to open for concerts in September 2024. The premises hold a music club with a capacity of 450-500 people. It will provide a venue for an innovative, high-quality, diverse and original range of musical acts and DJs, with a focus on genres such as hip-hop, pop, alternative rock, folk, electronica, metal, dance, funk, soul and reggae. The music club will be operated by Democracy in collaboration with VIERNULVIER.⁶⁴

60 More information about the subsidy: <https://stad.gent/nl/cultuur-vrije-tijd/zelf-ee-evenement-organiseren/gentse-feesten-subsidie-voor-activiteiten>.

61 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p 39.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Janssens, J., Bervoets, W., Cardon, C., Berckmoes. (2023). Strategisch kader culturele infrastructuur Gent. Basisrapport. IDEA Consult. Available online: https://cultuur.stad.gent/sites/default/files/2023-12/20230202_EindrapportCultInfraGent_basis.pdf.

64 *Ibid.*, p 42-45.

Investment subsidies as an instrument in cultural policy is another way to strengthen the infrastructure of the Ghent arts and culture sector. Further investments are being made in a number of important buildings, including Capitole Gent, and The Bijloke Music Center. The rationale is that these venues are not only important for their own programming, but also play an important receptive role and offer playing opportunities to Ghent and other event producers.⁶⁵

Temporary space

Ghent prides itself on being a pioneer in the temporary use of space for cultural purposes. The many grassroots cultural initiatives often manifest themselves within temporary activities and places. “Partly fueled by that humus layer, the City of Ghent started developing a policy for vacant places in 2007”; In 2014, a Temporary Use Fund was started and Ghent was also the lead partner in a European network, REFILL.⁶⁶ By now classic examples are the DOK and De Site and there are several others currently ongoing.⁶⁷ (See more 3.3.).

2.4.5. NIGHTLIFE

As mentioned previously, the City of Ghent has recognised the value of Ghent’s vibrant nightlife as “part of the DNA of the city and its residents”, and that it also “attracts tourists and students, provides valuable employment, serves as a meeting place for people and ideas, and is even important when choosing foreign workers for Ghent companies. In short: the creative, social and economic added value of nightlife in a city like Ghent cannot be underestimated”.⁶⁸ In 2021, the City of Ghent made a nightlife action plan, as requested in the coalition agreement of 2019, appointed a nightlife coach as well as formed a council. The action plan specifies a number of aspects of nightlife that need coordinated action, such as noise problems, drug policy, urban planning, public space, local police and fire brigades, inclusivity, sustainability, mobility, etc., and proposes the next steps.⁶⁹

The nightlife coach acts as the first point of contact for the sector and is responsible for the implementation and further follow-up of the nightlife action plan. The coach is seen as a bridge builder, translating questions and ambitions from the sector into policy and vice versa, as well as a field worker and a strategist with a network within the Ghent nightlife.⁷⁰

The nightlife coach chairs the nightlife council: a forum that meets four times a year for current affairs and consultation. It can also convene at the request of the nightlife coach at any time in case of urgency. The council consists of sector representatives and independent experts on noise, inclusivity, night economy, drug use, ecology, etc. The mandate of the sector representatives and independent experts is limited to two years but can be extended for two years at a time.⁷¹

The Economy Department has committed to €10 000 annually for the operation of the nightlife council as well as €30 000 for an in-depth study on the nighttime economy, planned to be finished by the end of 2021, though no such report is at least made available in the city nightlife website.⁷²

2.5. MUSIC BUDGET

The budget plan for the city is made for the entire legislative period plus one year. The total cultural budget for 2020-2025 is €367 million, €61,2 million on average per year. This makes up about 6% of the total budget of the City of Ghent (ca €6 billion). It is divided into investment (€56 million) and exploitation (€311 million) chapters. The budget is also grouped according to operational objectives.⁷³

The investment budget includes, for example, investment subsidies to Capitole, De Bijloke, Winter Circus and Opera Ghent infrastructure projects.

65 *Ibid*, p 46.

66 Janssens, J., Bervoets, W., Cardon, C., Berckmoes. (2023). Strategisch kader culturele infrastructuur Gent. Basisrapport. IDEA Consult, p 22.

67 See more on projects where Ghent is experimenting with forms of temporary use for vacant lots and vacant buildings: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/tijdelijke-invulling-van-terreinen-en-gebouwen>.

68 City of Ghent (2021). Nightlife Actieplan, p 4.

69 *Ibid*.

70 *Ibid*, p 12.

71 *Ibid*, p 13.

72 See the website for more information: <https://stad.gent/nl/ondernemen/nightlife-gent>.

73 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p 62.

INVESTMENTS		2020-2025	Per year
De Bijloke	Structural annual investment subsidies (OD10030)	€4,759,554	€793,259
Capitole	Structural annual investment subsidies (OD10030)	€1,956,000	€326,000
De Bijloke - (artist) foyers, Kraakhuis, Auditorium)	One-off investment subsidies (OD10030)	€1,690,000	Varia
De Bijloke site. First phase spatial master plan for the Maternity	project subsidy (PO10042)	€2,300,000	one-off (2020)
Winter circus	project subsidy (PO10037)	€1,200,000	one-off (2022)
Restoration of the opera and expansion of the Gerard Mortier Music Theater	project subsidy (PO10041)	€16,500,000	one-off (2025)

TABLE 1. INVESTMENT SUBSIDIES FOR MUSIC-RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE AND ORGANISATIONS.⁷⁴

In the exploitation budget, most music-related budget lines are incorporated into the objective: “Optimally directing cultural life in the city by organising groundbreaking projects and facilitating the cultural sector and cultural participation for everyone” (OD10063). The aggregated overview provided in the policy note 2021-2025, as seen in Table 2, does not contain sufficient cues for distinguishing music-related items.

EXPLOITATION	2020-2025	Per year (av.)	%
Subsidies (varia)	€60 801 370	€10 032 084	60,0%
Operation and programming in neighbourhoods	€2 160 000	€360 000	2,2%
UitPAS	€2 250 000	€375 000	2,2%
Amateur arts	€600 000	€100 000	0,6%
Collaboration and coordination in the cultural sector	€600 000	€100 000	0,6%
Operating subsidy EVA De Centrale	€9 951 870	€1 658 645	9,9%
Operating subsidy EVA De Bijloke	€6 620 430	€1 103 405	6,6%
General operation of the cultural department	€17 074 527	€2 737 862	17,1%
TOTAL	€100 058 197	€16 466 996	

TABLE 2. EXPLOITATION SUBSIDIES IN THE CULTURE BUDGET.⁷⁵

According to the analysis provided in the 2021 “Landscape Drawing” report, performing arts and music receive ca 71% of subsidies (investment excluded).⁷⁶

Subsidies awarded by fields of activity	Sum per year	%
Performing arts	€5,332,184	57.6%
Music	€1,211,900	13.1%
Visual Arts	€595,800	6.4%
Audiovisual arts	€397,000	4.3%
Books and literature	€92,800	1.0%
Architecture and design	€10,000	0.1%
Transdisciplinary	€218,700	2.4%
Museums and heritage	€80,000	0.9%

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p 62-65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p 67.

⁷⁶ Dewaele, L., Soete, M. (2021). *Landschapstekening Kunsten Gent*, p 9.

Social artistic / inclusive	€876,100	9.5%
Social cultural / amateur arts	€424,200	4.6%
Nightlife/events/festival	€14,400	0.2%
TOTAL	€9,253,084	

TABLE 3. AWARDED SUBSIDIES (PER YEAR AVERAGE) BY FIELD (INVESTMENT SUBSIDY NOT INCLUDED).⁷⁷

More than 87% of the subsidies go to multi-year agreements and only about 5% to project subsidies and another almost 6% to operational and nominative subsidies.

Awarded subsidies by type	Sum per year	%
Multi-year budget agreements	€8,107,184	87.6%
Operating and nominative subsidies	€543,400	5.9%
Project subsidies	€480,000	5.2%
Support for amateur associations	€122,500	1.3%
Total	€9,253,084	

TABLE 4. AWARDED SUBSIDIES (PER YEAR AVERAGE) BY TYPE (INVESTMENT SUBSIDY NOT INCLUDED).⁷⁸

2.6. MUSIC POLICY MAKING PROCESS

Policy-making in Ghent follows a five-year electoral cycle. In the beginning of the new legislative period, the City Council publishes a new political plan, essentially the coalition agreement. While these are mostly prepared by the administrative services of the city, each coalition can, of course, insert or emphasise themes they want to tackle. Ahead of the elections in October 2024, work has already started on preparing for the next policy note.

The City of Ghent prides itself in a highly consultative policy-making culture. The coalition agreement of 2019-2024 commits to a collaborative and consultative approach to cultural policy-making, noting: “We work bottom-up as much as possible, in collaboration with the various cultural partners in our city. We are organising a ‘States General of Ghent culture’” to foster bottom-up collaboration with cultural partners.⁷⁹ The cultural policy note of the city administration confirms:

*“Ghent has a tradition of consultation, dialogue, participation and participation in many policy areas. A strong and, above all, supported cultural policy is not a ‘one-man job’. A horizontal approach makes it possible to further expand the cultural landscape in co-creation”.*⁸⁰

The policy note points out the Cultural Council and GKO as the key partners in co-creative cultural policy-making as well as the several working groups that have by now all been integrated into GKO: the space, diversity and inclusion, and the “Greentrack” groups.

It must be noted that on that level there is rarely any mention of sector-specific (such as music) policy-making consultations, though according to city officials, attempts have been made in the past few years to pull together music sector actors. Some progress has been made, but this work is ongoing. The music sector actors are naturally involved in the broader processes coordinated by GKO where themes tend to be more horizontal and less sector-specific. The holistic and more horizontal approach is emphasised by the sector actors and has been picked up by the City: “We also want to focus on this during this policy period, with the sector’s recommendation in one of the dialogue moments: ‘let go of thinking in departments, work on a holistic horizontal approach’.”⁸¹

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p 10.

⁷⁹ City of Ghent. Coalition agreement 2019-2024, p 50.

⁸⁰ City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p 8, see also p 48.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p 48.

2.6.1. A CULTURAL POLICY IN CO-CREATION

There is an organic interplay between the city's political and administrative level, the Cultural Council which is a city unit, but consists of sector experts, and the GKO, which is a fully bottom-up platform. An important moment in the political and policy-making calendar is naturally the beginning of the new legislative term when the five-year political plan is put in place. There are preparatory processes to involve the sector on various levels.

One aspect is gathering up-to-date information about the current state of the cultural sector and its needs. A specific approach in Flanders and not only in Ghent is the creation of so-called "Landscape Drawings", *Landschapstekening Kunsten*⁸². These documents are in-depth stocktakings of the arts sectors and aim to provide policy-making, mostly on the Flemish regional level with regard to the new Arts Decree, with sufficient insight into the current state of the art.

Next to such broader mappings, cultural policy-making is also informed by the more rapidly evolving work and insights emerging from the various consultation processes and working groups, such as the ones coordinated by GKO, or surveys and other research. These insights can be communicated in more or less formal direct meetings and discussions with the city political and policy levels; or expressed in more elaborated written form, such as the memoranda or spontaneous advice issued by the Cultural Council.

All in all, the GKO is first and foremost a coordinator and facilitator of various discussions and consultations with very diverse groups from the sector. GKO is able to organise this collection of insights and synthesise them into a more coherent and ordered input to "higher" levels of policy making. While GKO has direct meetings and communication with the city officials and politicians, for more formal requests and proposals, the Cultural Council with their advice formats will be leveraged to bring certain issues to the policy and political decision makers' table. The Cultural Council, in turn, gains a lot from GKO's capacity to engage the sector broadly, regularly and at the same time in such a flexible and responsive way. The synergy between these two organisations seems to have developed a fruitful symbiosis.

Ghent is seen by many actors in the sector as quite unique in the level of bottom-up engagement among other Flemish cities. There is a lot of consultation taking place on multiple levels, speeds and depths of detail. This has, in turn, further intensified the process of Ghent's bid to be the Capital of Culture in 2030.

2.6.2. AN EXAMPLE: GHENT2030

Ghent is running to be the Capital of Culture in 2030. The process of designing the bid is done with close collaboration with the sector, in fact, the sector is in the lead. The bid book contains 35 questions and all of these will be answered by the people of Ghent, the sector representatives. The story needs to be broader than purely about culture. The EU wants culture to be a tool for change in the city and the plan needs to be about more than just a programme of concerts, festivals and other cultural events, but rather about the broader societal impact. Also, the story presented cannot be a shallow narrative portraying everything as great, rather it needs to highlight real issues in the city and ways that culture can help to address them.

In February 2024, an artistic narrative for Ghent2030 called "Have you tried turning it off?" was presented. It was created by an 8-person artistic team who processed all previous input and inspiration from various sources, including a #Ghent2030 Doers and (re)thinkers festival in October 2023.⁸³ The artistic narrative proposes four themes and sets the heading of "failing forward" as a core principle of collective learning, which is needed for a true transition.⁸⁴ Ghent has a long tradition of bottom-up initiatives, but the process of preparing the Ghent2030 bid is still more radical than what the city administration and political level is used to. As the artistic narrative document notes:

"The Ghent2030 process was set up from the start with a strong focus on participation. We are extending this radically and [...] are leaving the old paradigm of 'outreaching' behind us. The idea that one group of smart people has to reach the rest no longer fits our vision. Instead, we put the citizen first: from 'target group' to co-owner. Minimum rules, maximum respect. Everyone can contribute ideas, experiences, know-how or enthusiasm".⁸⁵

82 Such a "Landscape Drawing" is created on the Flemish regional level every five years by the Kunstenpunt. The last one from 2019 can be found here: <https://www.kunsten.be/dossiers/de-kunsten-in-vlaanderen-en-brussel/landschapstekening-kunsten-2019/> and the ongoing process to create a new one, scheduled to be published in 2025, can be viewed here: <https://www.kunsten.be/dossiers/kunstenbeleid/landschapstekening-2025-een-analyse-van-het-vlaamse-kunstenlandschap/>.

83 See more information on the Cultuur Gent website: <https://cultuur.stad.gent/nl/gent2030-europese-culturele-hoofdstad-wij-zijn-kandidaat>.

84 GKO (2024). HAVE YOU TRIED TURNING IT OFF? Artistic narrative Ghent2030. Available online: https://gentskunstenoverleg.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240119_ArtistiekNarratief_integratieleernarratief-1-1.pdf, p 13.

85 *Ibid*, p 17.

3. THEMES IN FOCUS

3.1. “ARTIEST ZKT ...”

“Artiest zkt ...”, translated as “Artist looking for...” is a platform that brings a selection of Ghent’s artistic talent into contact with the many organisers of neighbourhood parties and living room concerts. The platform provides a list of (currently) 225 artists, mostly semi-professional that can be booked for free and publicly accessible non-profit street or neighbourhood initiatives on Ghent territory. The events may take place both indoors and outdoors and in both private and public domains. If meeting the requirements the artist’s performance will be paid by the city from the programme.

Every year artists can apply to be on the list. These applications are evaluated by a jury who compiles the list every year. The list is very diverse and contains affordable acts that were judged by a jury of professionals from the Ghent cultural world.

The programme grew out of the perceived need to find more stages for artists in Ghent, also semi-professional ones. On the other hand, this initiative encourages Ghent’s neighbourhoods to engage music in their own cultural projects and endeavours. The programme is set up to incentivise street events or living room concerts. To apply for the paid artist performance, the application must be submitted by at least three initiators who live in the same street or in each other’s immediate vicinity as well as be ratified by seven signatures of other local residents.

For the City, running this programme is interesting as it also gives a sense of what is going on in the city neighbourhoods. The programme funds around 200 such events a year, but the artists and musicians involved get two to three times more offers as an indirect outcome.

3.2. LOCAL HEROES

As noted above, Local Heroes (LH), an initiative by VI.BE, is a unique program designed to empower local music scenes. It works by coordinating a nationwide event every two years where local promoters organise shows, creating a vibrant showcase of the local music scene. LH acts as a leverage project, connecting venues, bars, and cultural houses through extensive outreach efforts. The program also offers communication support to both national and local press, helping to raise the profile of local events.

By working closely with local promoters, VI.BE as the coordinator on the Flemish level gains valuable insights into and data on the musical life and needs of each city. This is crucial in advocating for sustainable music policies at the local level. By collecting data on the economic and social impact of local music events, VI.BE helps to provide evidence-based arguments to local governments and it has proven effective in convincing policymakers of the value of music scenes and has led to the development of music policies in various cities and municipalities.

In Ghent, Local Heroes was organised by Cultuur Gent and took a slightly different approach. Given that in Ghent, there are more opportunities to perform for musicians than in other Flemish cities, the most urgent needs for young artists are different. Therefore, in Ghent, LH has evolved beyond its traditional format, focusing on networking, creating opportunities for local musicians to connect with industry professionals and furthering their careers. For example, speed meeting events were set up where local musicians could meet with booking agents, managers, and festival organisers.

3.3. TEMPORARY SPACE POLICY

Temporary space policy refers to the city’s role in mediating and coordinating between unused space on the one hand and cultural or other kind of use of that space for a limited period on the other. As noted in the study on Strategic Framework for Cultural Infrastructure:

*“Temporary uses are seen by both sector and policy as important for culture in Ghent, to create space and enable experiments in the use of space. Ghent played and continues to play a pioneering role in this area and there is a lot of experience, expertise and learning points in this area from both the sector and from urban government policy”.*⁸⁶

Temporary space needn't be seen only as a pragmatic filling for a closed number of years, but it's an expression of a deeper need for cultural space in the city. The Council of Culture in their 2021 spontaneous advice noted that “temporary use provides a ‘white space’ for experimenting where small initiatives can flourish, provided the right context and support. Temporary use can therefore be a lever for cultural development”.⁸⁷

One highlight among past projects was the DOK which occupied a vacant lot between 2011 and 2019, offering ‘support for creative urban dynamics, (artistic) innovation, experiment and encounter’ and preceded the development of the new Oude Dokken district.⁸⁸ De Site was another 10-year temporary space experiment turning 4000m² of the former Alcatel factory floor into a place of “fertility” with 160 mini vegetable gardens, a football field, a traffic course, an urban farm with eight chickens, a greenhouse, two urban fields, and so on.⁸⁹ A similar recent initiative is ‘De Meubelfabriek’ in the Brugse Poort, where an empty furniture factory is being transformed into a creative place prior to a future urban development. 22 organisations find a home there and aim to become ‘a creative sanctuary where entrepreneurship and social commitment go hand in hand, and where everyone is welcome’.⁹⁰

Between 2015 - 2018, Ghent led a European project REFILL⁹¹ within the framework of the European Urbact programme, which aimed to leverage temporary use projects to actively engage with societal forerunners, influence city policy and planning, and adapt its administration for streamlined, intersectoral collaboration, ultimately fostering a smarter city through empowered civil servants.⁹²

The City of Ghent established a **Temporary Use Fund** already in 2014 and it's still ongoing. The aim of the programme is to “encourage applicants to reactivate disused places (such as vacant lots and buildings, etc.) in a safe and accessible manner and to develop a temporary operation with social added value for the neighbourhood or city”. The subsidy is intended to prepare the site for use and to start up the temporary initiative. The amount requested must be in proportion to the duration of the temporary assignment and if succeeding €25 000, a more specific agreement will be made with the city.⁹³

While the temporary use of space theme is clearly incorporated in the policy plans, the funding programme is not culture-specific and at the start of this legislature, authority over the coordination of temporary uses of space was transferred from the mayor to the alderman for Equal Opportunities, Welfare, Participation, Neighborhood Work and Public Green (Meeting and Connecting department). This might not have any substantive impact, but still, as the study on the Strategic Framework for Cultural Infrastructure notes, there is concern about the space for culture in temporary uses.⁹⁴

In their spontaneous advice, the Council of Culture underlined the importance of ensuring that the cultural function does not shift into the background. The advice emphasises the need for freedom of experimentation as a primary cultural importance of temporary space arrangements and calls for avoiding rigid formulas for judging when a temporary use is or is not valuable.⁹⁵ This is confirmed by the IDEA Consult study, suggesting that “future-proof thinking about cultural infrastructure also means paying attention to hybrids and crossovers and new forms of cultural creation and experience, beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines”.⁹⁶ The Council of Culture therefore asks the city, at the proposal of the Alderman for Culture, to formulate a policy vision on cultural temporary uses.⁹⁷

86 Janssens, J., Bervoets, W., Cardon, C., Berckmoes. (2023). Strategisch kader culturele infrastructuur Gent. Basisrapport. IDEA Consult, p 5.

87 Council of Culture (2021).

88 See here for the timeline of the DOK development: <https://stad.gent/nl/oude-dokken/tijdslijn-oude-dokken> and for more information on some of the initiative: <https://stad.gent/nl/oude-dokken/tijdelijke-invullingen-de-oude-dokken>.

89 More info on the project: <https://persruimte.stad.gent/159088-10-jaar-de-site-of-hoe-tijdelijke-invulling-buurtbeheer-op-de-kaart-zet>.

90 City of Ghent (2021). Cultural policy note 2021-2025, p 47.

91 More info on the project: <https://refillthecity.wordpress.com/>.

92 *Ibid*; and City of Ghent. (2018). REFILL Conclusies. Tijdelijke Invullingen Maken Stad. Available online: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/15KIFJ-lsZygBNwkiDmpwyqS8ljoVAJsj/view>.

93 More information on the temporary use subsidy: <https://stad.gent/nl/over-gent-stadsbestuur/stadsbestuur/samen-stad-maken/ik-wil-mee-doen/zelf-aan-de-slag-met-tijdelijke-invulling/subsidie-fonds-tijdelijke-invullingen#>.

94 Janssens, J., Bervoets, W., Cardon, C., Berckmoes. (2023). Strategisch kader culturele infrastructuur Gent. Basisrapport. IDEA Consult, p 5.

95 Council of Culture. (2021). Tijdelijke invullingen als hefboom Tijdelijke invullingen als hefboom voor een bruisend cultureel Gent. Available online: https://stad.gent/sites/default/files/media/documents/Cultuurraad-SpontaanAdvies_TijdelijkeInvullingen.pdf.

96 Janssens, J., Bervoets, W., Cardon, C., Berckmoes, T., Cornips, X., De Vleeschouwer, A. (2023). Strategisch kader culturele infrastructuur Gent. Bijlagen. IDEA Consult, p 6.

97 Council of Culture. (2021).

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