

Ideal central location

Mechelen's position exactly midway between Antwerp and Brussels, on the country's busiest rail route, represents an enormous advantage for the city: it is just 10 minutes to Brussels and 20 minutes to Antwerp. With some impressive infrastructure projects, Mechelen is preparing to put itself emphatically on the map in the next few years for both residential developments, offices and retail.

Work in Mechelen's Station district is in full swing and is intended to improve the station's accessibility and divert through traffic around the city. Behind the new station building, an underground car park with capacity for 2,000 cars is being completed. In addition, a 'tangent' is being created – a link road with two lanes in each direction which will bring traffic leaving the E19 at the Mechelen-Zuid exit to within just one minute from the Station district and provide direct access to the car park. In the first phase, to be completed by summer 2016, the improvement of transport is central.

Greet Geypen Alderman for Spatial Planning, Housing, Urban Regeneration, Real Estate Policy, Youth & Family, Monument Preservation and Agriculture.: "This optimisation of access makes Mechelen more attractive as a residential centre than ever before. We already have 82,000 inhabitants, and are expecting a substantial population rise. The new residential properties which will be built must offer a balanced mix of upper- and mid-range dwellings, as Mechelen essentially already has a sufficient supply in the lower-range housing category."



Master plan for the development of Mechelen Station District

The Mechelen Station District will undergo a complete metamorphosis over the next ten years. The three-phase master plan provides firstly for major infrastructure works to make the station more accessible, direct through traffic pass more smoothly around the city and make the surrounding neighbourhoods more attractive. Behind the new station building, an underground car park with capacity for 2,000 cars is being completed. In addition, a 'tangent' is being created – a link road with two lanes in each direction which will bring traffic leaving the E19 at the Mechelen-Zuid exit to within just one minute from the Station district and provide direct access to the car park. Mid-2012 the Diabolo connection linking by train Mechelen and Brussels airport in Zaventem in just 8 minutes has been inaugurated.

The first phase of the Mechelen Station District project is entirely focused on improving mobility and should be completed by summer 2016. In 2015, construction will start on a new station designed by Salvatore Bono, an Italian living in Belgium who is strongly committed to sustainability. His design was inspired by the steel arch bridges that are located on the train line in the direction of Brussels directly after the existing station. The new platforms will be 280 m long. An important part of the master plan for the Station District is the development of the **Ragheno plan**, located between Leuven canal and Leuvense Steenweg. The headquarters of De Lijn and the Flanders Red Cross are already based here. The centre of this district – 73,000m² – has been earmarked for SME's and the area close to the station will be an office zone. In a similar manner to the area around the station in Hasselt, there are several office blocks on the drawing board, with Euro Immo Star acting as project developer.

New residential areas and regeneration

Building land is virtually impossible to find, which is why a new Spatial Implementation Plan has been devised, featuring three large residential areas: 'Papenhof' in the Nekkerspoel district with plots of 6 to 7 ares (under development), 'Stuivenberg' on the Leuven Canal and 'Spreeuwenhoek' in the Planckendael Estate, where there are plans for mixed construction of single-family dwellings and apartments – some 1,000 units in all. In the station area an 'eco' district will be created which is as large as Mechelen city centre. "It will be a climate-neutral district," stresses Greet Geypen.

In addition to the development of new residential areas, work is being done to regenerate and redefine certain areas in the city. This is particularly true of **Winketkaai**, where high-quality residential projects are being attracted and the **Comet factory site** on Koningin Astridlaan is being converted into an area of housing, offices and services which may extend over 20 hectares.

Greet Geypen: "With our new residential policy we are encouraging innovative architecture. The idea is to reform the building service and seek to introduce some flexibility into the planning application assessment process, which is still too rigorous. At the same time we spare no effort to preserve Mechelen's value as an historic city with more than 300 protected monuments. We are also considering entering into consultation with the church authorities with a view to deconsecrating some churches which are no longer used and converting them by means of private or PPP initiatives."

Economic flourishing

In addition to the infrastructure work at the station, priority is being given to the creation of a long shopping axis from the station via the **Bruul** – the city's traditional shopping centre – as far as the Grote Markt. The attractiveness of this axis can be increased still further by the construction of an underground car park on Kardinaal Mercierplein. Mechelen is already bucking the national trend by increasing its visitor numbers: both shoppers and tourists are making their way there with growing frequency. Turning to the Mechelen office market, Greet Geypen has

noted a lot of interest in Mechelen Noord, where new businesses are making enquiries and existing users are looking for expansion opportunities. Obviously, the development of the **Mechelen Station district** represents an additional source of supply here. Mechelen wants to attract company headquarters, and is focusing on climate-neutral developments. More hotels are also being built, with a project right in the city centre and near the station.

Finally, Greet Geypen also refers to the construction of a **new regional hospital** under the Emmaüs Group on the R6 ringroad around Mechelen. This will lead to the centralisation of a number of campuses of the **Sint-Maarten general hospital**.

interview by Eduard CODDÉ ■

“ Mechelen will continue to focus on its public land, because we know that this has a snowball effect, encouraging both property owners and developers to undertake upgrade projects. ”



Greet Geypen, Alderman for Spatial Planning, Housing, Urban Regeneration, Real Estate Policy & Monument Preservation.

An alternative between Brussels and Antwerp

With an estimated office stock of some 450.000 m², Mechelen has become a market in its own right. It comprises 3 zones (north and south industrial zones and the centre). These areas benefit from very good access to the motorway E19 (Amsterdam - Paris) and from the central railway station giving a good access to Brussels (Diabolo line) and Antwerp.



Patrizia Tortolani,
Economist - MRICS
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Mechelen is a relatively young market with office buildings initially only present in the city centre. Over the past 20 years more specific office buildings have begun to be located alongside the industrial zones. These can be seen as an alternative to the mobility problems found in Brussels or Antwerp. This city has expanded greatly over the last decade and this is continuing.

Take-up increasing

Take-up was particularly good in 2012 with 29,000 m², nearly double that of the previous year, and far above the ten year annual average of around 15,000 m². Most of the lettings occurred in the **Mechelen Campus**, or in the **Intercity Business Park**, both located in the north of the city. But this good performance is mainly accounted for by the pre-letting by Sanoma of 12,000 m² in the Zuidpoort development.

Mechelen is proving to be very attractive for large corporate users. During the last three years, firms such as Sanoma, Alken-Maes, and Kraft Foods have chosen this location to house their activities. They were probably attracted by its advantageous position on the economic Antwerp - Brussels axis, while avoiding their mobility issues. Mechelen also offers a young workforce and relatively low rents in comparison with other Flemish cities. Prime rent remains stable at €135 /m²/year, while average rents vary between 80 and €120 /m²/year.

All these factors contribute to the success of this market.

New developments for the immediate future are limited, since only two developments are currently expected:

- **Zuidpoort** (Stationstraat)

The site is opposite Mechelen central station and is 3 km from the E19. The development consists of four buildings totaling 22,000 m² of offices of high standing, with underground car parks. The offices are part of a renewed and reviving city area with apartments, shops, and restaurant facilities set around a central green area. Two phases of this project have already been delivered. Where the remainder is concerned, Sanoma has already pre-let 12,000 m², which are under construction and are scheduled to be delivered this year.

Around 1,500 m² high-quality offices are still available to be rented in units from 500 m² and a new construction consisting of 6,700 m² of offices and café/restaurant units is still available.

- **York Tower** (Blarenberglaan, along the E19)

An 8-storey building is to be built by real estate developer Uplace. This building will have a total surface area of 6,395 m² of which 5,400 m² of offices. Construction will begin once a contract with an occupant has been signed, and is set to last 18 months.

Patrizia TORTOLANI
Economist - MRICS ■

The York Tower real estate project to be built on the Blarenberglaan, along the E19 by real estate developer Uplace



Image Uplace - Jaspers-Eyers Architects