

That Leuven feeling

Polis Project Officer **Abigail Martin** spoke to Leuven's deputy mayor, **Mohamed Ridouani**





Photograph: Debby Termonia

With nearly 100,000 inhabitants, a major university and hospital, the presence of spin-off's and large companies such as multinational brewery AB Inbev, the proximity of Brussels and some major urban development, the city of Leuven has developed into a very dynamic, bustling city over the past few decades

A well-thought-through and decisive land use policy has enabled the city and the economy to undergo a process of rapid development in recent years. In addition to the science parks and an expansion of the hospital, the city also boasts a series of new growth areas located in what used to be industrial areas, and large-scale urban development projects that are conducive for enhancing the many attractive historical buildings and squares. The beautiful medieval city centre is a regional attraction point for shopping, cultural and business activities and the integration of many university buildings and student areas creates a unique atmosphere in Leuven.

The high growth in numbers of inhabitants, students and employment brings along an increase in traffic, which is one of the biggest challenges the city has to cope with. Mohamed Ridouani, alderman of Leuven, explains how Leuven is in pole position to face those challenges, along with the ambitious plan to make the city climate neutral by 2030.

Thinking Cities (TC): What exactly are the challenges Leuven has to deal with?

Mohamed Ridouani (MR): We are heading towards a lot of challenges in a time where cities will play an ever-increasing role in our society. More people than ever will live in urban areas. This means we have to provide and enable more public and private services. Housing, child care, education, ageing, migration, mobility and so on are domains that will have extra needs. Having said this, it is my belief

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we can combine the conservation of open space, a sustainable mobility and energy supply, a safe and social environment for every citizen with the ambition of a city that wants to grow and excel.

TC: How do you unite the need for housing, offices and services with the need for more open space?

MR: Within the city we're creating smaller, local hubs, so people have everything they need nearby, like supermarkets, grocery stores, schools and day care centres. Those principles of core consolidation will be the outlines for our spatial structure plan. In the last decades there were a lot of big city developments projects. We redeveloped the area around the railway station, making it a new hub for living, working and business. As it is near the railway station, we withheld any plans generating more car traffic and parking lots. Instead, we have the space for a large public park. The largest development area in our city is the former harbour. That used to be the kind of place where industry died out and nothing came in its place. Now it's a lively neighborhood, with thousands of people and room for green space, arts and creativity.

It is a difficult balance. We do need more bricks and concrete to meet the needs of our population. But we also may not suffocate the city, erasing all open green space. More urban development, housing, offices, economic growth means more traffic in our city. As our city isn't the largest in square meters, we chose to limit the space we give to cars and parking. In our new traffic circulation plan, we combine the livability for citizens with accessibility for visitors. Cars will have limited access to certain areas in the city, a larger car-free city center and will be guided to underground parking lots, escorted by a smart parking management system that will direct cars to the nearest available place. It is my dream in the long term: no more parking for cars in public space above the ground in the city centre. That way we reclaim streets and squares for pedestrians and cyclists and we will have more space for trees and plants, sitting areas and social encounters. Regarding city logistics there are different

market players who prepare a business case on a city distribution centre for Leuven.

TC: People are attached to their car, though. Won't they still prefer to ride to Leuven?

MR: Not only within the borders of our city we try to engage people to use different means of transportation. Over the past 20 years we've seen a five-fold increase of public transport users. At this moment Leuven is rethinking its public transport network with a focus on a high level regional public transport network which forms the basis for future urban developments in the whole region. This project, called RegioNet Leuven, has the ambition to make the whole region of Leuven easily accessible with high-end public transport and increase the use of public transportation even more. At the same time we invest in a high-end cycle network, with cycle highways and a fine-grained local network, bicycle parking facilities and bicycle parking management. At the moment there is a high share of cycle use with 17-20 per cent of the modal share. We don't want to make it impossible to come to Leuven by car, but we want to make the other options more preferable for everyone. The car is still an option, but we need to look at it differently. Not the ownership of the car should be the standard, but availability of a car. Car-sharing is perfect for our city. We already are the number one car-sharing city in Belgium, but the potential is even bigger.

Our ambitions regarding a sustainable urban transport system are framed within the project of Leuven Climate Neutral 2030 (LKN2030). The goal of LKN2030 is to realize a mobility shift to 30-30-30 for car, public transport and cycling. In the LKN2030 project we have a cooperation of more than 300 local partners such as the biggest companies in Leuven, the University and citizens. Public participation in the project is one of the keystones for its success. 🌱

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