

Competition to become European Capital of Culture in 2030

After Mons (2015), Bruges (2002), Brussels (2000), and Antwerp (1993), it is Belgium's turn again in 2030 to nominate a European Capital of Culture. Currently, six Belgian cities are competing for the title: Bruges, Brussels/Molenbeek, Ghent, Kortrijk, Leuven, and Namur. A jury will decide at the end of October which of these cities will advance to the final selection round in 2025.

Ghent2030

Ghent is one of the candidates for European Capital of Culture. This title was once perhaps a crown in a beauty contest, today the focus is on broad societal impact with culture as a lever. Ghent is a genuine cultural city with kilometers of art and heritage and a broad cultural offering, built at the confluence of the Leie and Schelde rivers. Ghent is also a rebellious and social city; a city of stubborn go-getters where we chart our own course but also look out for each other and truly collaborate. Our rich history of participatory art practices and participation in general is proof of this.

In short: Ghent is a city to be proud of, but... there are also signs that the unique character of Ghent is under pressure. Artists can no longer find space to develop their work, and cultural workers are overburdened. New (cultural) initiatives feel constrained by regulations. Many Ghentian residents do not identify with the artistic offerings and the language of institutions and governments. It sometimes seems as though systems have taken over imagination: more rules, more specializations, more bubbles, more bureaucracy... And there is a wide gap between the world of institutions and organizations and the world that people live in. This is accompanied by a creeping sense of unease, polarisation, and disconnection between people.

We want to change that tide; the title of European Capital of Culture 2030 creates the momentum for Ghent to rediscover its true energy. In Ghent, we are therefore aiming for a cultural system switch: a path of 'tuupetegoare'—beautiful Ghent dialect for 'together'—back to the power of people, instead of the power of systems. We want to create a resilient city together, with physical and mental space for people where they feel they belong and contribute to active and cultural citizenship—both locally, regionally, and in Europe.

'Resistillience', as we call it, is resilience with extra resistance against any form of exclusion. Simply put: it's about energy. It's about the human energy that comes from being allowed to be yourself, from being part of something bigger. The energy that makes you want to contribute something that makes a difference. The energy to face the world together, even when it challenges us or presents complex problems. The real Ghent that we want to reinvent must not only reform and make our own system resilient for the future, but also be an example for other European cities.

Working Together in 'Toopen'

To put this into practice and tackle our challenges, we work in 'toopen'. Toopen is a new word, composed of the Greek word *Topos* (place) and the Ghent word *tuupetegoare* (all together). Toopen are artistic working groups that make Ghent one large learning

environment to co-create the Ghent2030 program together, closely connected with other doers and thinkers in Europe. These are places where we work together on the needs and dreams of citizens, makers, organizations,... It's a participatory way of programming between the arts and culture sector and other players, creating more connectedness and new skills.

In toopen, people work together according to three learning principles:

1. Sharing ownership: We share responsibility, build trust, safety, and openness so that all participants can share their ideas and perspectives.
2. Surprising connections: We bring people and organisations together that previously did not collaborate. We encourage local, regional, and international connections, both online and offline.
3. radical learning: We believe in the strength of doing and experimenting together, adjusting, and trying again... What we learn, we share with others in Ghent and in Europe.

Based on what is alive in the toopen, we work towards the programming of Ghent2030: from an expo or (neighbourhood) festival to living room concerts and (online) events,...

Artistic Themes of Ghent2030

After the why and how comes the what: At the heart of Ghent 2030 are three artistic metaphors representing the three artistic lines of our programme. they capture typical characteristics of Ghent: social, rebellious, and city of water. They inspire, connect, and energize to work together:

1. Wasteland as a wellspring: uncultivated land as a metaphor for physical and mental space, for quiet, space for learning, growing, and creativity without too many rules. Ghent as a rebellious city.
2. Water as a weaver: water as a metaphor for (surprising) connections between people, communities, and regions. Ghent as a city of water.
3. Margin as a measure: the edge as a metaphor for playing with boundaries, both spatially and mentally, for reversing relationships between center and edge, and amplifying unheard and lesser-known voices. Ghent as a social city.

Timing

Between 2025 and 2029, many toopen will gradually be launched per program line to set the city in motion (toopen can be curated, through open calls, through initiatives of organizations or citizens themselves,...).

From the fall of 2024, a support group will be assembled whose members, with their expertise and network, will inspire and enrich the launch of these toopen.