

# Genk's ongoing transition

Even 30 years after the last coal mine closed in Genk, the Limburg region is still undergoing an economic transition process; this process is being shaped by its increasing use of old industrial heritage and infrastructure as assets for future development.

## DESCRIPTION

**Location:** Genk, Limburg, Belgium

**Type of action:** Urban transition, repurposing of infrastructure

**Actors:** Private sector, municipality, regional government

**Financing conditions:** EU fund, state aid, municipal budget

**Type of coal:** Hard coal

**GDP:** Equal to national average

**Unemployment rate:** Below national average

**Population:** Growing, ageing population



## KEY POINTS



### APPROACH

- Heritage preservation linked to diversification of the regional economy, combining both bottom-up and top down-approaches.



### ENABLING CONDITIONS

- Previously identified actions for sustainable development; enabling initial regional conditions; government investment and tax incentives.



### CHALLENGES

- Persuading stakeholders of the potential benefits of heritage preservation and reuse of mining infrastructure and sites.
- Governing long-term change in a multi-stakeholder setting with diverse interests.



### ACHIEVEMENTS

- Supporting transition by giving each former coal mining site a theme for future economic activity, which thereby prompted the development of ideas and innovation; and rehabilitation of mining heritage and former sites as unique landmarks that respect the area's coal mining history.



**AN ONGOING TRANSITION**

When Genk was forced to permanently cease mining activities, city leaders looked for an alternative approach to generate revenues and create opportunities. Transition from heavy, industrial activities in Genk has been a long process that has had multiple steps and is ongoing to this day.

**Introduction**

Over the last 100 years, the main industrial activity in Genk, which had shaped the city's image and culture, was coal mining. However, when the city was forced to permanently cease mining activities, city leaders looked for an alternative approach to generate revenues and create opportunities. Transition from heavy, industrial activities in Genk has been a long process that has had multiple steps and is ongoing to this day.

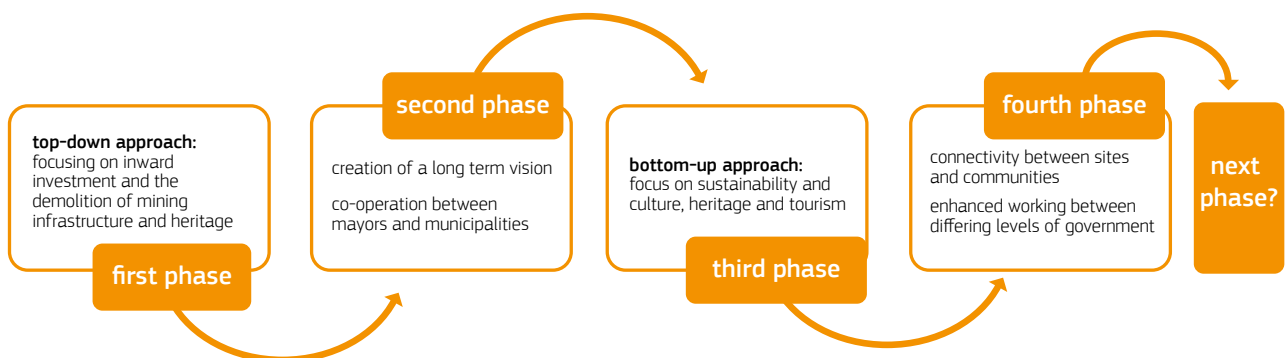
The first major transition happened in the 1960s when a large Ford Motor Company plant was established in Genk after the closure of the first coal mine. During 1980s, the city started to attract further industrial companies – mostly those related to car manufacturing connected to Ford, but also logistics companies – and made these the core of its new economy.

In 2014, after the car manufacturer decided to shut down its Genk facility, the city was forced to take on yet another major transition. This time, they decided to diversify the economy, rather than continue with a monocultural industry approach.

At the same time, discussion about a new potential use of the region's coal heritage and infrastructure came on to the agenda.

The sites had been left abandoned and in decay for many years. For example, the Waterschei coal mine stopped operating in 1987, but the site was not bought by the city until 2006.

Despite only entering the discussion decades after the mines closed, the protection of coal mining heritage and infrastructure became one of the main guiding philosophies of the current and ongoing phase of transition, taking advantage of opportunities already present in the local area.



**TRANSITION AND GOVERNANCE PHASES IN THE LIMBURG REGION OVER TIME**

Considerable effort has been spent on finding new ways to re-use the mining sites themselves. Among the initiatives in recent years, three projects, all related to the conversion of decommissioned coal mines, have been of particular focus in Genk.

One of the revived places is **Thor Park**, situated in the former Waterschei coal mine. It is a symbol of transition from coal mining to green energy: once a mine employing 7,000 people, it is now a hotspot for technology, clean energy and innovation (see graphic). The state-of-the-art, 93-hectare technology park hosts companies in the fields of research & development, innovation, business, talent development and urbanisation.

The mostly-demolished **Zwartberg mine** has been converted into a business park that hosts primarily SMEs and local entrepreneurs. It also now houses a public garden, an art studio and a research park on biodiversity (known as La Biomista).

Last, but not least, is the so-called **C-Mine**, in the former Winterslag coal mine. Nowadays, it functions as a creative hub and cultural centre, where the focus is on education, creative economy, recreation, and art. It hosts a cinema, a

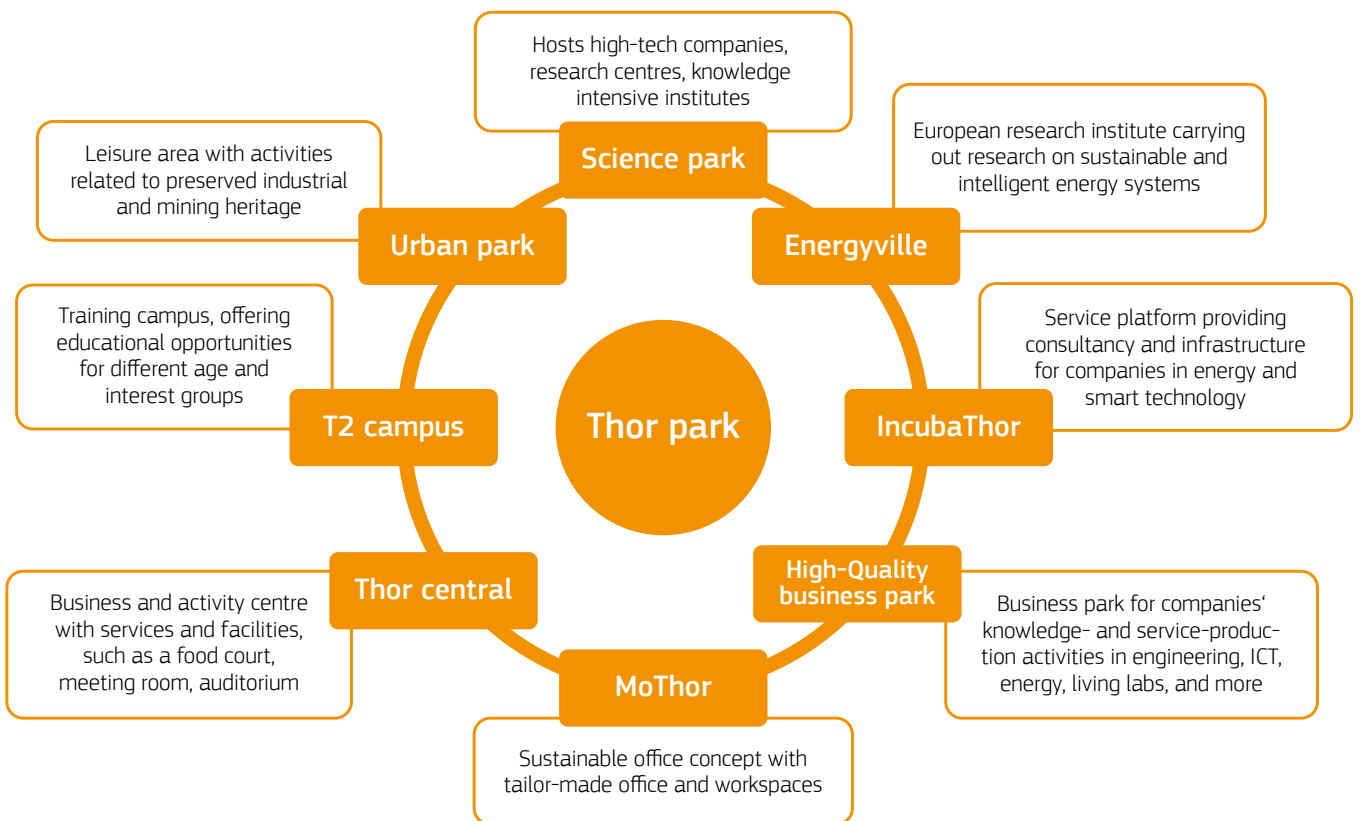
theatre, and a faculty of the Luna School of Arts, as well as space for events, and it is considered an incubator centre for start-ups. It also attracts tourists with its unique virtual tour of the former mining site.

Genk has become a dynamic entrepreneurial city that devotes much attention to sustainable jobs and welfare creation. In order to secure and to strengthen the future economic competitiveness, in this phase of transition, Genk is focusing on the transition from a manufacturing industry to an innovative manufacturing and knowledge economy.

**Key challenges**

As the local authorities at various levels all had different thoughts about how transformation could be implemented, it was challenging to agree on a common plan for regional re-development. This was especially true since many were sceptical of the proposed changes and of new directions, considering the industrial heritage and slate of potential new opportunities.

One of the greatest challenges was to save the former mining facilities from being demolished. It was difficult to





### REHABILITATED WINTERSLAG MINE

The rehabilitated Winterslag mine, renamed “C-Mine,” which now hosts 42 companies and 330 jobs in the creative industry.

get decision-makers to see the old coal mining infrastructure as an asset instead of something that needed to disappear. Some infrastructure was taken down, including a railway line, which was later seen to be a mistake, as the municipalities and regional stakeholders eventually wanted to re-establish it.

The Limburg region is rather peri-urban – Genk is the biggest city with only about 66,000 inhabitants. Attracting large companies in this landscape is rather uncommon, as they generally prefer more urbanised centres. The current transition pathway addresses this concern, and aims to develop a more diverse economy with a mix of new technology firms, clean energy companies, and an array of options for the service industry.

Despite progress made, the region still faces the challenge of re-employment for those whose skillsets have been made redundant due to the closure of the automotive industry and the coal phase-out.

Lastly, most transition initiatives continue to be vulnerable, since the majority of them are financed by external sources, making them quite sensitive to changes in policy frameworks and related funding.

### Enabling conditions

Overall, Genk is situated in the economic and logistic hotspot of Europe and has tri-modal transport accessibility by rail, water, and several highways. Furthermore, the city has a strong knowledge-base due to being close to multiple cities with leading universities. These initial conditions enabled the region to be optimistic about their future development.

City leaders recognised that, in order to increase transformative innovation, bottom-up approaches

were needed as much as larger-scale, often top-down, development projects. The city council thus pursues a binary strategy to govern transitional activities: they favour both small-scale initiatives started by citizens and NGOs, while they also follow a more traditional, top-down approach for larger investments.

Transition views and strategies have changed over time; today's approach is based on experiences with structural change over the last decades.

Each mining site that took part in the process of aligned regional development, including other mining sites in Limburg not in the Genk area, agreed to have a designated leading theme (clean technology, cultural and leisure space, energy related activities, etc.). This has helped with diversifying the future purposes of the assets and avoiding counterproductive competition. Most importantly, this has reduced complexity in the early stages of the transformation process, and helped to guide participants and decision-makers in certain directions to initiate ideas and foster innovations.

The redevelopment of Genk's former mining sites was subsidised, inter alia, by a €217 million grant pledged by the Flemish government in 2014, which made it possible to work out an extensive investment plan. The government also provides tax incentives and subsidies for companies and academic institutions to work in the area. To finance these subsidies, the city developed an Integrated Territorial Instrument (ITI), which made it possible to also use multiple EU Funds (ESF, ERDF and the Cohesion Fund).

In order to strengthen transformative capabilities, the government spent 8.5% of the city budget in 2015 to invest in knowledge building, setting up a cross-departmental transition team, and increasing their efforts in citizen empowerment.

In 2008, the whole Limburg region had already declared that it aims to reach carbon neutrality, and the City of Genk got involved in the Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability (ARTS) project that identified 90 actions to be developed to support sustainability in the city. These initiatives became a huge driver for sustainability and also deepened the cooperation between policy-makers and stakeholders outside the project's development consortium.

## Achievements

Today, Genk has successfully shifted from a mining to manufacturing and knowledge economy, and is – together with the surrounding region – an example of redevelopment of industrial and mining infrastructure. Instead of demolishing the already existing mining facilities, Thor Central and C-Mine (pictured) demonstrate a great example of how to create a unique landmark that respects heritage as an important part of regional history, while at the same time transforming heritage spaces into modern workplaces.

## Further reading

Articles and features on how Genk uses its industrial heritage for future development:

- 🔗 <http://www.just-transition.info/coal-will-always-be-part-of-the-story>
- 🔗 <http://acceleratingtransitions.eu/transition-regions/transition-region-flanders/>
- 🔗 <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/business/coal-digital-waterschei-mine-becomes-new-business-park>
- 🔗 <https://oppla.eu/genk-nbs-bridging-green-and-industrial-heritage>
- 🔗 <https://www.tol.org/client/article/28636-belgium-slovakia-coal-mining-solutions-journalism.html>

Information about the reconverted coal mines, described in this case study:

- 🔗 [http://www.thorpark.be/en/Infrastructure/Urban\\_Park](http://www.thorpark.be/en/Infrastructure/Urban_Park)
- 🔗 [http://www.c-mine.be/Contact\\_Info/Over\\_C\\_mine?lang=en](http://www.c-mine.be/Contact_Info/Over_C_mine?lang=en)
- 🔗 <https://www.labiomista.be/homepage>



### THOR PARK

THOR PARK, the former house to mining directors and engineers, which is 10,000m<sup>2</sup> large in total, serves today as a modern meeting centre.

## IMPORTANT LEARNING POINTS

- Repurposing and utilising already existing infrastructure and heritage can be beneficial for reshaping a city's historical and future narrative, if it combines mining legacies with innovation, modernisation, and national and international opportunities for diversification
- Giving a mining site (or multiple sites) a theme or a vision helps to reduce complexity and competition amongst municipalities and locations, and accelerates ideas and public engagement in the implementation process
- Co-operation and co-ordination across municipalities – who often have individual and conflicting interests – can provide better development opportunities for the region as a whole
- Transition can be a long-term process that goes through differing phases of policy and action, combining both bottom-up and top down-approaches

# Platform for Coal Regions in Transition

The Platform for Coal Regions in Transition is an initiative by the European Commission.

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P2, P4: Photo by Pieter Kers

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