

Bridging the Gap

Connecting Systems for a Scalable Short Food Chain



Basel Van Rillaer

Bram Swimberghe

Rose-Anne Marie Derveaux

Rune Van Hove

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1. Transformative Change Towards a Fairer Food System

1.1. Ghent and Its Leading Role

With the ambitious food strategy 'Gent en Garde,' Ghent positions itself as a true pioneer in the transition to a fairer food system. Over the past decades, this strategy has given rise to numerous initiatives aimed at addressing the shortcomings of the current food system. Central to these initiatives is the fight against unequal and irregular access to fresh, healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for a growing population (Chiara Tornaghi, 2023). These initiatives take various forms, ranging from food banks and soup kitchens to social supermarkets and community kitchens.

Many of these initiatives make use of food surpluses because they are abundant, easily accessible, and extremely cheap (Chiara Tornaghi, 2023). In line with its food strategy, the city has set up the logistical platform Food Savers. This platform collects surpluses from the hospitality industry and large kitchens and then distributes them to vulnerable groups.

This socially motivated initiative contributes to the sustainability of redistribution and consumption within the current food system. However, from a broader agro-ecological perspective, such actions bring about little structural change. The purchase of surpluses allows the powerful retail sector to sell excess food, thus maintaining the system of overproduction and overconsumption. This reinforces power inequalities in the food system and normalizes unsustainable agricultural practices.

A fairer food system for everyone requires more than symptom management within the current system. The entire system needs to be rethought and reformed. This requires ambitious and structural policies.

1.2. Two Systems within Ghent's Food Landscape

Within Ghent's food landscape, we identify two key systems: Vanier, a cooperative platform of local farmers, and Public Catering, which encompasses the kitchens of (semi-)public services and institutions. Both systems offer potential for systemic change but also face obstacles related to the complex food issue.

Vanier

Vanier is an organization striving for a fairer food system. Through a logistical platform, it delivers fresh products from local farmers in the region to Ghent's hospitality businesses and retailers. This cooperative organization was co-founded by the city of Ghent but is now fully managed by the participating farmers themselves.

The organization currently faces two major obstacles hindering its operation and growth:

- Limited Competitiveness: Vanier focuses on fresh products such as vegetables, fruits, and dairy. This assortment is more limited compared to large players like Horecatotal, which offer a wide range of products, including processed foods, meat, and fish. The economies of scale of these large players result in lower prices, putting Vanier in a vulnerable competitive position.
- Distribution and Marketing Burden: The farmers of Vanier currently bear full responsibility for distribution and marketing. This is currently experienced as a significant burden. These obstacles lead to a limited market for the products of local farmers, making it challenging to ensure a stable and profitable market.

Public Catering

Public catering encompasses more than just the kitchens of schools, care institutions, and government services. It involves food provision in all its public facets, from student restaurants to socially recognized restaurants.

Unlike the commercial sector, where profit maximization is often the driving force, public caterers have a broader responsibility. They have a duty to make choices aimed at the public good. By focusing on these societal goals, public caterers can play a crucial role in transforming the system into one that is healthier, more sustainable, and fairer for everyone. Moreover, public catering offers a significant market, which is an interesting aspect for scaling up.

1.3. The Third System: The Infrastructure of the Middle

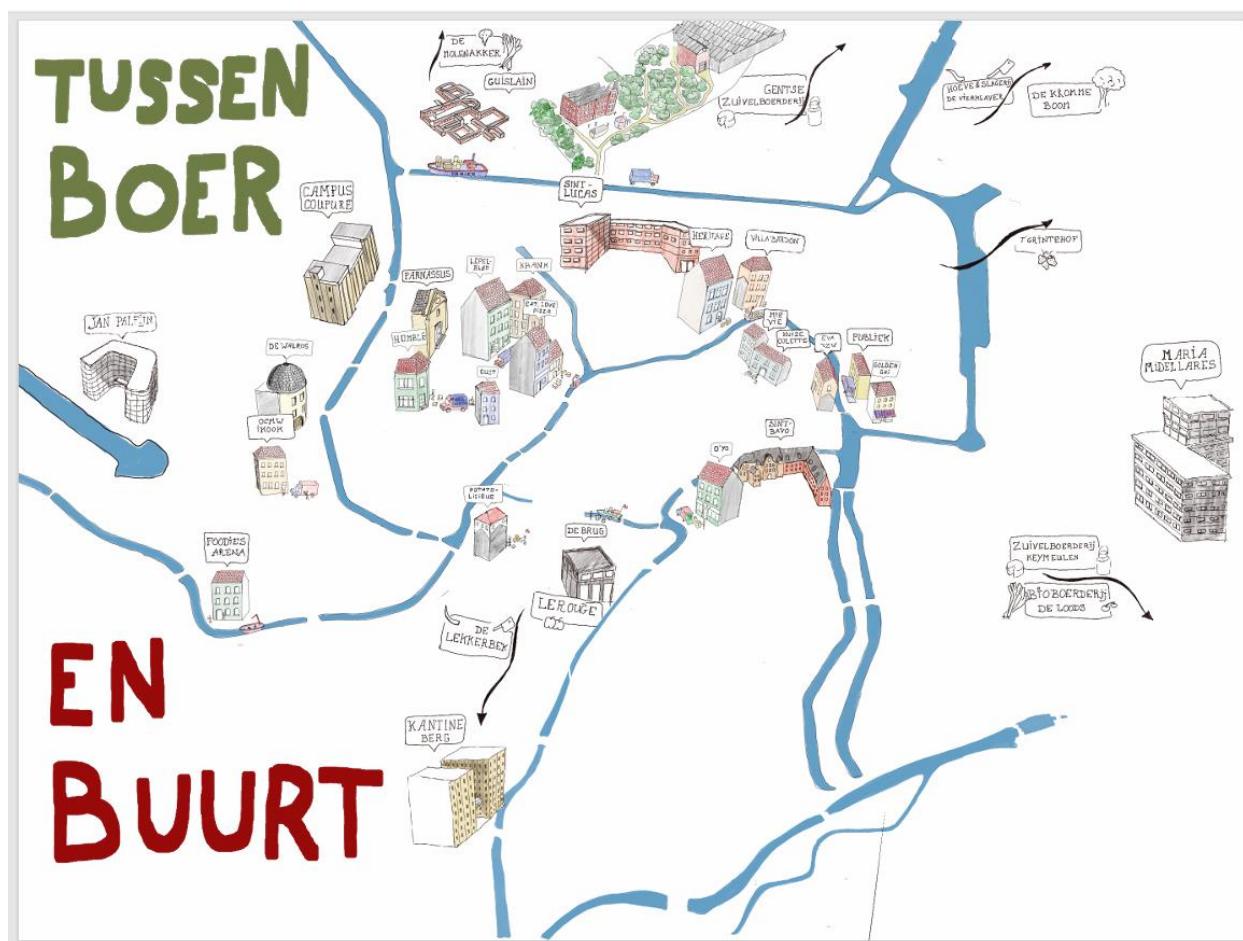
Ghent thus faces a unique opportunity to transform its food system. We have two systems, each with its own strengths:

- Vanier: This innovative project aims for systemic change by producing local, fresh food through a short supply chain.
- Public Catering: This system has the potential to become a significant market for Vanier and other local farmers, making healthy, local food accessible to everyone. By fostering innovative collaboration between these two systems, we can take a significant step towards a more sustainable and fairer food system.

To realize the integration of these two systems, an essential connector is required: 'the infrastructure of the middle'. This central hub will facilitate the processing, preservation, and distribution of locally produced products.

This processing and distribution pool offers numerous advantages for those involved:

- **Alleviation of Burden:** Farmers are relieved from the complex and time-consuming tasks of distribution and finding market channels. This allows them to focus entirely on what they do best: growing high-quality products.
- **Scaling and Diversification:** The "middle infrastructure" takes care of the processing and preservation of products. This enables farmers to expand their product range with new items. Thanks to preservation, they can also supply to large kitchens and the hospitality industry, where products with a long shelf life, such as frozen goods, are in high demand.
- **Cost Efficiency:** The centralization of processing and distribution, combined with the sale of larger volumes, leads to lower costs. This makes local products more affordable, enabling more people to choose healthy and sustainable food.



Drawing 1: Overview of Vanier's existing clientele and potential new clientele (public catering)

The Indispensable Role of Government in the Food Issue

The realization of 'the infrastructure of the middle' requires investments and decisive support from the government. Without government intervention, this project will be hard to launch. History has shown us that market mechanisms alone are insufficient to address the complex problems within the food system.

The city of Ghent has a unique opportunity to play a leading role in the transformation of our food system. By scaling innovative projects like Vanier and investing in the "middle infrastructure," Ghent can set an example for other cities and regions.

1.4. FNO as a Strategic Location

The FNO site, a former industrial site with high heritage and natural value, offers an ideal location for the 'middle infrastructure.' This site, which will be redeveloped in the coming years by the urban development company S0gent, covers approximately 2.4 hectares and provides space for a combined use including education, manufacturing economic activities, and possibly neighborhood amenities (Stad Gent, 2023).

This unique mix of functions can significantly enhance the development of the infrastructure into a vibrant food hub:

- Education: The proximity of educational institutions ensures a continuous flow of students and young professionals, potential customers for the food hub. The dynamism and innovative spirit of students can also be an inspiring source for new ideas and collaborations.

- Manufacturing Economy: The focus on manufacturing economic activities aligns perfectly with the innovative nature of the food hub and offers opportunities for collaboration.
- Neighborhood Amenities: The integration of neighborhood amenities, such as a bakery, butcher, or small supermarket, creates a lively and inclusive environment where the entire community can come together and enjoy fresh, local products.

By establishing the food hub on the FNO site, we create a dynamic hotspot for innovation, sustainability, and local food. Additionally, the FNO site is multimodally accessible, with direct connections via the Nieuwe Vaart, the city's outskirts, the R40, and bike paths to the city center.



Drawing 2: Design Proposal for "The Infrastructure of the Middle" at the FNO Site

2. What's in it for the community?

The Kingstanding Food Community emphasizes building a sense of community and has a strong educational dimension. By organizing free workshops and activities, the initiative strengthens the community and empowers people to manage healthy food independently without stigmatization (Tornaghi 2022, 89). This approach can be inspiring for the Bloemekenswijk, where the relationship with the social economy cluster, including the balenmagazijn, is of great importance.

Community kitchens offer numerous benefits by sharing skills, fostering social contacts, and reducing costs through collective food purchasing and preparation. This collective process helps overcome various social, economic, and nutrition-related barriers. Some community kitchens focus on social services, such as preparing donated food for the homeless or training the unemployed to become chefs, thus playing a crucial role in supporting and educating vulnerable groups (Communal Food and Community Kitchens, n.d.).

A key aspect of the social kitchen is the focus on education and workshops. By providing public catering services, residents can acquire skills that contribute to their personal and professional development. Moreover, such initiatives strengthen the bond between residents and local producers by raising awareness and introducing consumers to agricultural practices and the stories behind the products through storytelling.

A strategic transformation towards agro-ecological urbanism can position the community kitchen as a hub for sustainable agricultural practices and community engagement in food production. By integrating gardens and educational programs on agro-ecology into the kitchen infrastructure, residents have the opportunity to learn about and participate in sustainable farming practices. This not only promotes a healthy lifestyle but also strengthens community ties through joint activities and education.

It is essential to anchor the kitchen infrastructure in the neighborhood by creating meeting places and organizing activities that promote resident involvement. Expanding infrastructure that supports social cohesion, such as implementing a barbecue area and open green space, can serve as a gathering place and positively

impact the local community. In the contemporary urban environment, such amenities are often limited but are crucial for enhancing the sense of community.

Investment in public policy is crucial to support the transformation of kitchen infrastructure into neighborhood-oriented 'landed community' kitchens. This includes creating favorable regulations and funding mechanisms for neighborhood food infrastructure and promoting collaboration among various stakeholders, including local governments, community organizations, and private enterprises. By facilitating such collaborations, a sustainable and inclusive food infrastructure can be developed that benefits the entire community.

The integration of community kitchens and the Balenmagzijn as neighborhood infrastructure can have a significantly positive impact on the Bloemekenswijk. This transformation promotes inclusivity, education, sustainability, and social cohesion, and provides residents with the opportunity to engage with various types of food and agricultural practices. The initiative has the potential to strengthen the community and set an example for other neighborhoods. Food connects people, and The Balenmagzijn and the infrastructure of the middle are the key to a healthy and resilient community (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Envisioning Bale Magazijn's Transformation into a Vibrant Hub of Interwoven Functions

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