

Visionary, outside-the-box thinking

The 60,250 seats national stadium that is soon to arise on the Heizel grounds is unquestionably a new milestone with an iconic impact for real estate developer Ghelamco. The Ghelamco Group is not only a major real estate developer in Belgium, it has also been very active in Poland. Since 1991 they have built nearly one third of the new offices in Warsaw. An interview with Paul Gheysens, CEO and founder of the Ghelamco group, a solid family company that places great value on a positive business culture with the space to develop a close team of employees.

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After the Ghelamco Arena in Ghent, the ‘Eurostadium Brussels’ is a new prestige project for your company. What particular characteristics can we expect?

‘Eurostadium Brussels’ is a purely sports-oriented project, although we are providing for 20,000 m² of office space in the concept. It fits perfectly with the ‘Neo’ town planning development located just 550 m away, which focuses on

housing, retail, leisure, exhibitions and congress. The two projects are fully complementary. A covered ‘driveway’ will provide an indispensable and optimal link between the two. From the outset mobility was integrated into the concept, researched in detail and backed up with hard figures. The traffic to ‘Neo’ and the traffic to the stadium will flow separately and on different levels. The access capacity to the stadium parking will exceed the capacity of the public infra-structure by a factor of 2! We consulted with all parties – the municipality of Grimbergen, the city of Brussels and Brussels Expo - and strove for a consensus.

The stadium is designed to be energy-positive and will integrate many progressive technologies, on which we have collaborated closely with VITO, the University of Ghent and most likely still a number of international technology partners.

The Ghelamco Arena in Ghent was undoubtedly an ideal learning experience for succeeding with ‘Eurostadium Brussels’. What did you learn there?

It is of vital importance that the ‘sports temple’ creates a family event. Everybody has to feel at home there, and a beautiful space is an invitation for this. Visitors are seeking conviviality, and that’s what we offer them. The accommodation generates a group feeling - and this has a direct impact on the turnover. For example, sales per visitor are almost twice as high in Ghent than they are in a stadium like Genk. The stadium is also the place where supporters are cultivated; after all, you don’t become a supporter of a club overnight. The way the ambiance is experienced is extremely important for allowing this to happen. By cultivating supporters, the public





influx doubles to triples. The catering offering and the space are the binding agents. The all-around glass facade in Ghent proved to be a great success. We also learned a huge amount from all the expertise that was gained through collaboration with experts in the areas of general safety, fire protection, signage, etc.

We see a great deal of variation in the projects under development by Ghelamco, including large-scale urban developments. Why opt for variation?

Ghelamco invariably goes for a broader approach. We put the accent on creating a different life-world. That can't be done with just a single building; ideally, it has to be achieved on a location with diversified buildings and an overall vision of how to lay out the surrounding area, integrating circulation and mobility issues. The 'Oud Blekkerij' site in Kortrijk is a textbook example of that and will give birth to a new part of town, 'New Kortrijk on the Leie'.

It's becoming a strikingly high-profile project that includes two glass residential towers with 50 flats each, which enjoy a beautiful view out over the Leie river. The design is by the American architect Andrew Bromberg and the Belgian agency Jaspers & Eyers. On the site there's also space for 80 houses with garden and assisted-living residences. There will also be a spacious park, and there'll be an underground parking facility beneath it.

We're convinced that the age of small apartments that are mainly purchased by investors in order to rent them out is coming to an end. Investors must be able to buy cheaply, but renting out will be very difficult in the coming years. Rents are high and interest rates are low, so buying becomes the logical choice over renting. We've gradually reached saturation point for this type of investment project. That doesn't exclude the fact that in Kortrijk we will also offer several apartments with surface areas ranging from 70 to a maximum of 125 m².

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The projects in the pipeline also include a lot of student flats, although some people say that this market has already peaked.

A solution from the private sector had to be offered quickly for the shortage of student flats. This solution came with the positive effect that the offering of high-quality and comfortable student accommodation has now been brought up to an acceptable level. And the rents are back down to an affordable level. Universities will quickly take over the housing for their students themselves.

We were surprised not to find any projects targeting seniors amongst the new Ghelamco project developments.

We're working very intensively on a whole new concept and want to embark on this market fully independent of government subsidies.

It's turning into a visionary, high-tech concept that will be converted into a product focusing 100% on human beings. As always, we're not acting impulsively here: we study all the possibilities in detail before moving on to the design phase. Within this context we've already had contacts with Samsung, Google and other technology pioneers.

How do you view the office market?

Each year Ghelamco creates 150,000 m² of office space, at home and abroad. The Belgian office market has fallen behind over the past decade, and a new generation of office buildings is necessary. Oxygen and light are the essence for every contemporary office project. Older buildings had to neglect that, and they risk

projects like the 'Warsaw Spire' - 180 m and 48 floors - or 'Spinnaker Tower' (50,000 m²) possible. All the major players are present there, but there is fair competition based on competency. Brussels will undoubtedly try to catch up, but it needs some iconic buildings.

Amongst the many new developments, am I right in saying that Antwerp is notably absent?

In recent years we've done a lot of building in Ghent and we're definitely remaining very active here, with new projects that haven't been unveiled to the public yet. We certainly aren't ignoring Antwerp, but we're currently working hard on various preliminary studies before sharing them. We also see many opportunities in Namur and Charleroi. It's our policy to always carry out a thorough preliminary study before elaborating and presenting a concept. Basically we only communicate about new projects when the chances that they will be authorised are virtually 100%.

How important is architecture for the success of a project development?

Architecture is essential and it's worth paying something for it, because high-quality architecture pays for itself. For Ghelamco, everything starts with a vision of the life-world that we want to offer with our projects. That's why we constantly work together with the American architect Andrew Bromberg and Jaspers-Eyers Architects from here at home. A very precious relationship of trust has developed with them over the years. Andrew Bromberg flies over in person when we think it's necessary. There are

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becoming 'unusable' to worthless very quickly. We firmly believe in a market for the better product. Passive building is already outdated, new buildings have to be energy-positive. The passive buildings that are being built today aren't going to have a long life. 'Breeam excellent' is the standard that has to be used, which we also illustrate with the 'Blue Towers' in Ghent and the 'Centre Etoile' office building in Brussels.

Compared to Belgium, Warsaw is moving rapidly ahead. Everything's new there! We could start from the proverbial tabula rasa, which makes

certain other international names that we appreciate, but the enthusiasm and motivation of the two firms strengthen our collaboration so much that loyalty has become a matter of course. Ghelamco isn't just a contractor, we're also designers, we've got a strong team of in house architects who work together closely with our outside architectural partners. Moreover, we've set up a highly competent R & D team in Warsaw. We very much value well-thought out mobility solutions, because this is crucial for attracting customers / users.



The Ghelamco group has been very active in Poland since 1991. They have built nearly one third of the new offices in Warsaw. Starting there from the proverbial 'tabula rasa' makes projects like the 'Warsaw Spire' - 180 meters and 48 floors high - or 'Spinnaker Tower' possible.