

# GENK C-mine Cultural Square

**Hanneke Keijne** takes us through the transformation of a coal mining site into a cultural space

## AN ACCOUNT OF THE PREVIOUS STATE OF THE SITE

The C-mine Square is situated on the grounds of the former coaling mine complex, Winterslag, in Genk. A city of about 65,000 inhabitants, Genk is one of the main cities in the province of Limburg in Belgium. The city used to rely heavily on coal mining, which started around 1917 and ended with the closing of the last mine in 1988. There were three coal-mining complexes in Genk, Winterslag being the main one. In 2001, the city of Genk became the owner of Winterslag.

The transformation of Winterslag into C-mine was an ambitious project to develop the city of Genk. The plan was to transform the Winterslag complex into a new centre with cultural, recreational, creative economy and creative education functions. It was a public-private collaboration with investments from the city, the province, Belgium and the European Union.

The former mine buildings around the square have been renovated and stand transformed into buildings with a cultural programme: a large theatre, a cinema and restaurants. On the west side of the square a new building was added: the Media, Arts & Design Faculty. The two grand shaft towers on the square form landmarks and show insight

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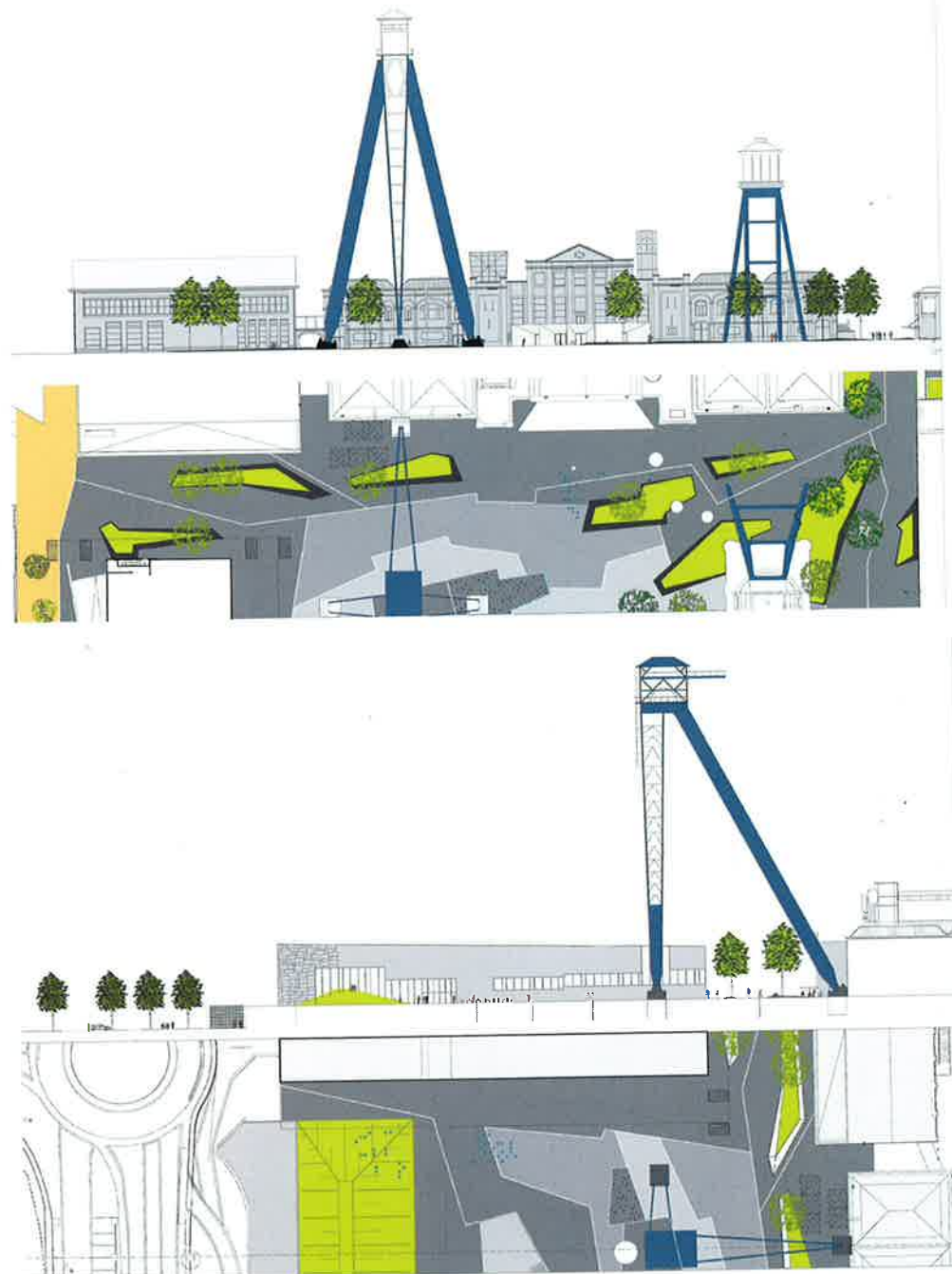
into the functioning of the site as a coal mine, as do the ruins of the former mining reception building. The C-mine square is the central open area of the new cultural heart of Genk.

**THE AIM OF THE INTERVENTION**

The city wanted the square to be the vibrant cultural heart of Genk, with possibilities for all sorts of events and activities. During the activities with a large number of visitors, the square will turn into a lively and marvelous space. However, the aim was to maintain the

dynamic and lively character even when there weren't any events happening.

HOSPER (a landscape architecture and urban design firm) was asked to design the square and its surroundings, taking the new functions and the strong identity of the site as a former coal mining complex into account. HOSPER designed the C-mine square as a 'space for the spectacular'. To accommodate all possible events, the square was designed as a one level surface, as is usual in a theatre; as an obstacle-free surface with removable seating. At the same



Plan and Sections



Top: Belgian beach slate, glass islands, new and old trees and scattered steel and red furniture

time the square was designed to be interesting and spectacular without an enormous crowd on it, by using all the design tools of the public realm for this purpose.

The C-mine expedition was planned by the city: an attractive route that follows the former mining corridors under the square and ends with a fantastic view from the top of the tallest shaft tower. Elements of this C-mine expedition were to be placed on the square, as well as certain safety measures for the exhibition route.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION**

The strong identity of the site was of course taken as the basis for design. The square is paved with Belgian black slate as a reference to the 'black gold' of the former mine. It is the same stone type as the waste material that ended up on the terrils (cairns) of Genk during the reclamation of the mines. The slate is used in large flagstones and much smaller chips of



Panoramic view from the tallest shaft tower



Laser show on opening night



slate. The floor gets a lively character due to the integration of a water surface, mist fountains, removable seating and lighting elements. The chairs and stools, made of folded stainless steel, shine like glittering diamonds on the dark square floor.

As is the case in a theatre, much attention was given to the lighting of the square. The buildings around the square are illuminated with great respect for its historical character. The two shaft towers are illuminated with LED lamps, thus providing a lighted beacon from a great distance. The lighting on the square, with light lines in the paving and illumination of the mist fountains and the seating, gives the square a spectacular appearance at night. The basic colour of all the lighting is warm white, but special colour effects during events are possible. The fountains and a large part of the lighting are included in a controlled programme.

#### A FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

During the opening of the square it became obvious that the main aim of the design was met. The square was definitely made for

spectacle! The square opened on April 29, 2012 with a big party and lots of performances, laser shows and fireworks. Not long after the opening, the square was used for the Manifesta of 2012, the European biennial for contemporary art. The square was also immediately used for important gatherings of the inhabitants of Genk, for instance during the protest against the closure of the Ford factory in Genk.

For HOSPER, as also for the city of Genk, it was very important that the former mine workers were pleased with the result. They are very proud of the transformation of their previous working place. For the opening of the square, a video clip was made by Dominique Deruddere, in which the former mine workers participated, as did a lot of other Genk organisations, groups and politicians. In total, 1000 people from Genk participated in this Lipdub 'mijn Genk'. This video clip has had more than 45,000 views on YouTube. The C-mine square was nominated for the Belgian Public Space Award in 2013. ●

#### FACT SHEET

First Prize invited competition. Nomination Belgian Public Space Award 2013

**Project:** Design cultural square C-Mine

**Location:** Genk, Belgium

**Designers:** Hanneke Kijne, Petrouschka Thumann, Remco Rolvink, Ronald Bron, Hilke Floris, Han Korings

**Partners:** ARA Atelier Ruimtelijk Advies, Carmela Bogman industrial design, Painting with Light, NU architectuuratelier

**Client:** City of Genk

**Area:** 5.000 m<sup>2</sup>

**Year of design:** 2006-2012