

## 1. Lissewege, Flanders, Belgium



### The Flemish polders

The village of Lissewege is situated in the polder region between the historic city of Brugge and the industrial port of Zeebrugge. During the Middle Ages, the construction of embankments (or “polders”) transformed this former coastal plain into a fertile, cultivated landscape, interwoven with a dense network of waterways and paths. Since the early 20th century, large-scale infrastructures such as the railway and the Boudewijn Canal, connecting Brugge with its new harbor in Zeebrugge, have disrupted the agricultural landscape and its intricate microtopography, significantly altering the village's relationship with its surroundings.

Historically, the village was located centered around the imposing brick tower of the church and the Lissewege waterway, connecting the village with its productive landscape. Traditional whitewashed brick houses clustered along the waterway and form today a main tourist attraction in the village. In the late 20th century, Lissewege expanded westward of the railway tracks, adopting a neo-vernacular architectural style and serving as a suburb for the tourism and harbour industry of Brugge and Zeebrugge.

The proposed intervention site lies at the feet of the church tower, within a housing block in the historic village, known locally as the “parish playground.” This public land, spanning approximately 9,000m<sup>2</sup>, is bordered to the east by the Lissewege waterway and surrounded on its other three sides by houses and small facilities built after the 1990s. The site currently hosts a tennis club (TC Lissewege, established in 1987), a youth organization (KSA Lissewege), and a sports club (Avanti Lissewege). Additionally, there is a playground accessible from the adjacent primary school, Ter Poorten. Modest sheds on the site house restrooms and a bar for the sports clubs.

## Brief history

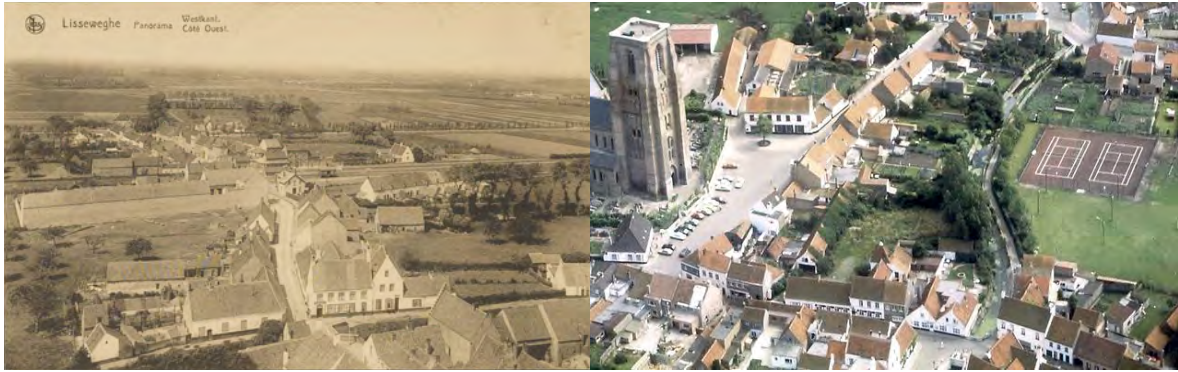
Lissewege's earliest written record dates back to 1027, likely referencing a *terp* (an artificial mound) or a sandy elevation topped with a castle and its ancillary dependencies, located in the middle of a sparsely inhabited coastal plain protected by high dune barriers. From the 13th century onward, the construction of the Cistercian abbey of **Ter Doest** to the south of the village brought prosperity and population growth, driven primarily by the abbey's role in developing the Polders—land often reclaimed from the sea.

By the early 14th century, a significant sea defense was constructed collaboratively by landlords and abbeys, roughly tracing today's Flemish coastline. Although some breakthroughs occurred, this dike successfully withstood the great storm tides of the late Middle Ages. It reduced seawater inflow to the salt marshes, facilitating land reclamation. In the older polders, plots were irregular, with remnants of tidal channels often serving as boundaries. Land use was dictated by soil type and moisture: while old clay and peat grounds remained as pasture, sandy creek ridges formed by tidal channels breaching the dunes were cultivated as farmland.



Ter Doest Abbey in a May Day celebration in the 50s and today.

The **Map of the Brugse Vrije**, drawn by Pieter Pourbus between 1561 and 1571, accurately illustrates the Zwin region after the medieval embankments. It depicts a transformed coastal plain, now a cultivated landscape connected by a dense network of waterways and paths. During the Middle Ages, Lissewege thrived on the prosperity generated by Bruges' cloth trade. It was during this period that the three-aisled, cross-shaped **Church of Our Lady of the Visitation**, a quintessential example of early Flemish Gothic architecture, was built. Its imposing brick tower served as a beacon in the polder landscape, justified by the village's role as a stop for pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela. However, economic decline set in during the 16th century, as trading activities diminished and the abbey's fortunes waned.



To the left of the Station street, limited by the brick wall of the school on the top and by the waterway on the south, the site was used as an orchard before its occupation from the late 80s on. Opposite to it, the site at the turn of the century, with the tennis courts and the waterway running next to them.

Little changed in Lissewege and its surroundings until the late 19th century, despite recurring armed conflicts, plagues, and climatic disruptions, such as the Little Ice Age of the 17th century. However, the early 20th century brought radical changes with the construction of new infrastructure, leading to the loss of land and centuries-old farms. In 1902, the first coal shipment arrived via the newly constructed Boudewijn Canal, destined for a coke factory at the newly completed Zeebrugge seaport. The arrival of the railway in 1905–1906 further accelerated industrial transformation. Despite these changes, the village center largely retained its authentic character, with traditional houses built from locally baked bricks and whitewashed walls, making it an important tourist attraction. The original settlement remains concentrated around the market square (**Onder de Toren**) and along Lissewege's waterway, which historically connected Bruges, Ter Doest, and the village.

Today, agriculture continues to play a significant role in the western half of Lissewege, contrasting sharply with the eastern part, now entirely occupied by the Zeebrugge back harbor. The old cultural landscape remains particularly evident south of the village center and near the **Ter Doest abbey site**, characterized by groups of trees, ponds, reed fields, elevated dog's-tail meadows, and lower-lying marshy areas interwoven with ditches and drainage channels. Remnants of salt meadows, a legacy of the coastal plain, are still visible within the dyke and are preserved within the nature reserve **De Monnikenmoere**.



Lissewege's waterway that longs the site.





Different views inside the site.

### Program requirements

The proposed project aims to integrate new housing for seasonal workers employed in the tourism sector, as well as transitional housing for asylum seekers and homeless families, while preserving the site's open and public character. The housing will also be accompanied by a small-scale workshop for drying and grounding the madder plant (*Rubia tinctorum*). Historically grown in the region to produce natural red dye, used as a pigment in canvas paintings, this plant remains a symbol of local heritage, reflected in the red frames and shades of vernacular architecture. The heat needed for the workshop, its generation and potential recirculation, can be thought of in combination with the new housing.

Existing sports and community facilities could be consolidated into a new structure, with some relocated northward near the existing football field. Structures left behind could be repurposed within the new project. The currently enclosed waterway should be reimagined as a vital connection within the site, restoring its historical role as a link between the village and its surrounding landscape. The site should remain accessible and public, preserving the passage through Vincent Doens Street and extending to nearby fields where the madder plant could be cultivated for the workshop.

Minimum program requirements:

- Workshop for madder plant (with greenhouse)
- Temporary housing
- Indoor and outdoor sports facilities
- Storage space
- Reuse of enclosed waterway
- Collective kitchen
- Community room