

FROM HARD TO SOFT

Gentrification and
the Transformation of the Northern
Quarter in Brussels

Julie-Anna Barès



2024, Julie-Anna Barès

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*Gentrifiction and the Transformation of the Northern
Quarter in Brussels.*

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Candidate: Julie-Anna Barès

Professor Theoretical Statement: Pier Vittorio Aureli

Pedagogical director: Jo Tailieu

Supervisor: Mattia Pretolani

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INTRODUCTION

Making the city is a process based on movements through time and space. The city can be understood as a system of elements perpetually in mutation through their creation, restoration, or destruction. Therefore, the city's multidimensional aspects are embedded in the notion of transformation, which implicates the change of a form, an organization, or an idea beyond its initial state. This phenomenon can be either linear or cyclical in its evolution and can appear as a punctual act or a process.

Urban transformations are thus intrinsically related to city-making and can be embodied in various specificities. The process of gentrification is a type of urban transformation within the (post)industrialized city. Gentrification implies a dual movement based on the appropriation and the dispossession of space, involving a transformation of the land value which impacts social classes through their displacement. Gentrification is not only a phenomenon but also a political project.

The transformation process has an ambiguous character as it can operate either in the real or the ideal world, and be the link between them, making them interdependent. Therefore, a transformation in one or the other dimension can impact the other, and vice versa, or both at the same time. In this manner, the manifestation of the gentrification process implicates a series of tools and mechanisms based on this dichotomy. Thus, rhetorical discourses can be used to transform a whole district, and the renovation of an old Victorian house can trigger the modification of a neighborhood. Ideas, semantics, and images are simultaneously aims and means for urban transformation through gentrification.

In the Post-Fordist era, the urban transformations are understood through social, economic, and political foundations, which reveal the Metropolization of Capitalism. This can later be understood as the spatial agglomeration of the dominant economic agent's headquarters, which are part of the present neoliberal configuration of capitalism, such as multinational firms, financial offices, and public and private institutions. Symbolic of this phenomenon are the Central Business Districts, where the inherent power structures of the city and its globalized network are located. Within these areas, a network of public and private stakeholders is formed.

This research seeks to understand how the process of gentrification manifests itself in contemporary metropolises governed by persisting power structures, focusing on the city of Brussels as an anchor. To do so, the first part of this work will explore the definitions, movements, and figures that have been involved in understanding this phenomenon since its inception. Then it will look at the role of culture as an important aspect of this process. To verify the hypothesis that a contemporary form of gentrification is emerging in the city of Brussels, we will analyze the development of its Northern Quarter from its establishment to the present day through its different phases of transformation, their causes, and consequences.

The Process of Gentrification

The insights revealed in this section stem from research focusing on the Global North, particularly emphasizing theories from North America and the United Kingdom, which were the most dominant within the international debates across Western countries.

Gentrification is a process encompassing the displacement of social classes and its consequential transformation of the urban landscape. More precisely, it involves “the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class”¹, characterized by “both the exploitation of the economic value of real estate and the treatment of residents as objects rather than the subjects of upgrading.”² The core elements of the process include the reinvestment of capital, the social upgrading of locals by the arrival of high-income groups, alterations of the urban landscape, and finally, the direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups.³

As gentrification is a peculiar type of urban transformation that can morph through time and space, its definition and conceptualization have considerably evolved since its creation, leading to various analytical approaches and schools of thought. This evolution, embodied by diverse scholars and thinkers, reflects the intricate relationship between the term and a certain complexity that should be considered. Due to its complexity and elasticity, this notion has been neglected for a long time. It has recently been used as a portmanteau word, washed of its brutal implications and fatally banalized. Careful examination of this phenomenon as a student or architectural professional is necessary, especially when (new) urban theories and all associated actions are inextricably linked to it. Despite its extensive scope and keeping in mind the imperative that the term has to remain elastic enough to encapsulate new gentrification processes, identifying some key elements through the diverse waves, movements, and prominent figures that theorized it would enable a carefully crafted definition of the term.

The term “gentrification” was first coined by the British and Marxist sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, referring to the emergence of a new “urban gentry” leading to the unique and distinct process of urban changes in inner London.⁴ “Gentry-fication” referred to a gentry’s replacement of an existing population, a concept deeply rooted in the traditional English rural class structure. Therefore, Gentrification was first identified as a complex urban process that included the rehabilitation of old housing stock, the tenorial transition from renting to owning, increased property prices, and the displacement of the working-class inhabitants by the incoming middle classes. She describes the social status inversion of such a process and its larger-scale extension.⁵

However, gentrification could be observed before the invention of the term, as exemplified by the Haussmanisation of Paris outlined by Neil Smith.⁶ Nevertheless, the proper emergence of gentrification occurred in postwar capitalist cities, especially during the 1950s in large metropolises like London or New York City.⁷ Indeed, the brutal destruction of old neighborhoods replaced by modern housing and highways symbolized the postwar context in the US and UK. Reactionary middle-class protests emerged, defending turning themselves to the reconditioning of

1 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification*, 5.

2 Kaminer et al., *Houses in Transformation*.

3 Davidson and Lees, “New-Build ‘Gentrification’ and London’s Riverside Renaissance,” 1165–90.

4 Glass, “Introduction: Aspects of Change,” 141.

5 Ibid., 18–19.

6 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, 34–38.

7 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification*, 5; Clark, “The Order and Simplicity of Gentrification.”

8 Laska and Spain, *Back to the City*.

9 Smith, "Gentrification and Uneven Development."

10 Clay, "The Mature Revitalized Neighborhood: Emerging Issues in Gentrification."

11 Lees, *The Gentrification Reader*, 33–34.

12 Bourne, "The Demise of Gentrification? A Commentary and Prospective View"; Berry, "Islands of Renewal in Seas of Decay."

13 Berry, "Islands of Renewal in Seas of Decay."

14 Hackworth and Smith, "The Changing State of Gentrification," 2001.

15 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 81; Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification*, 29.

old houses in the "bad" neighborhoods. Consequently, the "Back to the City"⁸ movement appeared, disturbing the so-far-established urban theories based on suburbanization. Glass's definition became what we now know as the "classical gentrification" process, where pioneer gentrifiers upgrade disinvested inner-city neighborhoods, residents are displaced, and working-class housing becomes middle-class housing.⁹ Fifteen years later, the term gentrification was first introduced in academic research as a series of distinct yet related stages, proposing a specific framework to drive generalizations from intuitive ideas, observations, and experiences. Four phases outline the process of neighborhood transformation through the pioneer gentrifiers' arrival, the promotor's development of the area, the displacement of original lower-income inhabitants by the middle class, and finally, the economic power of the business and managerial class upon them.¹⁰

Over the years, the stage models evolved, were criticized, and revised by different scholars, adapting them to emphasize unique circumstances.¹¹ The four-stage model became seen as too rigid and unable to account for the particularities of each neighborhood, therefore basing their amendments on the context, the partiality, and the revision of the concept itself. Despite their opposition between abstracting generalizations or localized and specific cases, consensual analyses focused on the role of metropolises and historical contexts. Gentrification was therefore put in relation to the regional housing market, the national and global system, and the slow and powerful forces of demography.¹² In the context of the increasing post-war suburbanization, a cascade of "vacancy chains" led to an abandonment of the inner city, therefore theorized by Brian Berry as a "seas of decay."¹³ As a result, gentrification appeared as a solution by creating "islands of renewal," made of attractive housing stock in the city's downtown core that increased office spaces for the emerging corporate headquarters and their white-collar workers. This is an argument that many scholars of the time rejected, as gentrification was not seen as a "solution" but rather an issue. However, a decade later, gentrification was redefined through the stages of political economy that shaped the context for gentrifiers, investors, developers, and poor and working classes as a coherent state strategy to reshape urban spaces that benefit wealthy residents, investors, and tourists.¹⁴ Therefore, the stage models knew three major reviews, concluding that gentrification is a process without a final state and will always be incomplete, leading to questions related to the current state of what is observed as a new or different state or kind of gentrification and, therefore, its related consequences. This critical way of analyzing and questioning the current state of the gentrification process in a given place is a crucial starting point for our research, which focuses on Brussels and its northern district.

In the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, gentrification emerged as a significant point by challenging previously held predictions and sparking debate for the first time.¹⁵ The middle and wealthy classes, used to favor newly built suburbs, were now choosing the inner city. The evidence and factors of this move were contested, and the role of consumer preference as a cause of gentrification was questioned. On the one hand, the Consumption-side theorized a shift in consumer preferences induced by the "Back to the City" movement, challenging the long-established

foundations of urban theory and policy, qualifying gentrification as a consequence of changes in advanced capitalist cities' industrial and occupational structure. On the other hand, the Production-side, influenced by Neil Smith's analysis based on the concept of Rent Gap and "consumer sovereignty," reframed the decisive role of the state in a capitalist economy that shaped the fate of urban neighborhoods.¹⁶ Thus, gentrification became a primary consequence, at the neighborhood scale, of a new form of policy-driven consumer sovereignty. Later on, the transformation of Western cities from manufacturing centers to business services and creative and cultural industries was exposed as a cause of gentrification, implicating changes that affected the occupational and income structure, producing an expanding middle class that replaced the working class in desirable central city areas.¹⁷ During this period, a consensus formed around the class as the central focus of gentrification studies. Research then shifted towards the growth and the behavior of the middle classes and their interests in locating into disinvested neighborhoods.¹⁸

16 Smith, "Of Rent Gaps and Radical Idealism: A Reply to Steven Bourassa"; Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People."

17 Hamnett, "Gentrification and the Middle-Class Remaking of Inner London, 1961–2001," 2424.

18 Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*; Ley, "Gentrification and the Politics of the New Middle Class."

Contemporary Gentrification and Urban Policy

19 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 447–51.

20 Ibid., 191–93.

21 Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism,” June 1, 2002; Hackworth and Smith, “The Changing State of Gentrification,” November 2001; Smith and Williams, *Gentrification of the City*.

22 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *The Gentrification Reader*, 445.

23 Florida, “Cities and the Creative Class”; Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, *Who’s Your City?*

24 Imrie and Raco, *Urban Renaissance?*; Lees, “Visions of ‘Urban Renaissance’”; Lees, Shin, and López-Morales, *Global Gentrifications*.

25 Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism.”

26 Such as the Olympic Games, Worlds Expositions, global-scale sports events, festivals, as well as cultural labels, such as the European Capital of Culture. Lees, *The Gentrification Reader*, 446.

27 Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism,” June 1, 2002; Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*.

Since the 1990s, gentrification has been on the verge of a significant acceleration, and rising waves of anti-gentrification have emerged in different cities as a reaction.¹⁹ Despite critical researchers’ theoretical evolution of this complex process, a new wave of economic analysts exposed generalized neoclassical explanations of gentrification. They created consistent and convincing rhetoric that slowly reached the policymakers by satisfying their expectations by promoting downtown redevelopments, creative-class subsidies, public and social housing destruction, and other pro-gentrification policies.²⁰ Therefore, this period was marked by significant transformations that led to the use of increasingly powerful public policy instruments, including gentrification.²¹ After policymakers failed to promote the process in the US in the 1970s, the 1990s marked a new wave of policy interests.²² The use of language, promotion, and marketing means were more developed to achieve the ambition of an inner-city space addressed to middle-class and wealthy residents, investors, and tourists.²³ In the UK, a new policy movement emerged to promote an “urban renaissance,” also called “regeneration” or “revitalization,” of the city centers.²⁴

From that period through the following decades, a series of conditions were (and still are) creating a new dynamic between (urban) policies and gentrification. Large metropolises continue centralizing population and economic activities while trade, migration, and investments reinforce transnational networks. A wider mismatch between economic and social policies is growing. Indeed, the policies related to taxes and trade are more centralized in national governments, letting the financial decisions on free-trade agreements shift to global institutions. Therefore, the provinces, regions, and cities are left with the main responsibility for social welfare, thus forcing them to become more competitive and entrepreneurial.²⁵ The middle-class and wealthy voters are more reluctant to the social welfare expenses that benefit primarily the poor, leading them to promote tax cuts and subsidies dedicated to wealthy households, investors, and corporations. The competition between the regions and the cities, on a national and international level, to get the “right” to host “mega-events” spectacles is accelerating.²⁶ These factors unfold differently regarding their contexts. However, a general trend can be observed: public policies encourage a type of investment, subsidies, and planning processes that are understood as means to reinforce gentrification pressures.²⁷ Therefore, the severe activist and resistant movements constraining pro-gentrification policies some years ago seem to bend under too much burden.

The Role of Culture

A large variety of explanations of gentrification, symptomatic of the postmodern era, marked the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The emergence of a new trajectory out of the dichotomic theoretical battleground of the Production and Consumption discourses has revealed the full complexity of gentrification. Therefore, critical studies could move beyond the important stalemate between economics and cultural explanations.

Sharon Zukin, with her 1982 book *Loft Living: Capital and Culture in the Urban Core*, was the first to consider the different explanations of gentrification. Her studies marked a turning point in the definition of the process of gentrification. By recognizing the absence of culture in the Marxist political-economic theories – where culture was a synonym of ideology, thus reflecting substructure without any autonomy of its own – Zukin argues that gentrification was “a close connection, in late industrial capitalism, between accumulation and culture consumptions.”²⁸ Her later essay, *Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core*, consolidated this culture and consumption path. Hence, gentrification emerged as a cultural practice embodying different dimensions as a means for accumulation and social reproduction for the high middle class through a form of homeownership, as a mode of high-status cultural consumption, and as a mode of colonization by economic institutions associated with the service sector.²⁹ Finally, analyzing gentrification through a cultural and economic aspect implicates to consider deindustrialization in metropolitan areas, long-term plans focus on downtown by local financial, political and social elites and the transformation of the city’s social interest through the change of urban areas’ morphology. Therefore, the attention to economic institutions and the analysis of space and time can reveal how “the post-industrial city, as gentrification, refers to existing patterns of social, spatial, and economic restructuring of the central city.”³⁰

After Zukin’s contributions, understanding the expansion of the new middle-class professionals in urban cities was coupled with analyses of the aesthetic strategies employed by gentrifiers (and those who produced space for them) to distinguish themselves from other social class groups, leading to the concept of “gentrification aesthetic.”³¹ For instance, Caroline Mills was interpreting the “postmodern” gentrification aesthetic in Fairview Slopes, Vancouver, Canada.³² She seeks to understand how developers, architects and marketing agents were responsible for creating a new landscape of gentrification that could capture middle-class tastes and values. She analyzed the “textual landscape”³³ of gentrification in the site and looked at the marketing of a gentrification lifestyle. Therefore, she offered a cultural twist on the Marxist economic concept of the use-value: “For an investment to be a good one, the commodity must sell; for it to sell, it must have use-value; and that use-value must be “imaginable” – it must have cultural meaning.”³⁴

28 Zukin, *Loft Living*, 177.

29 Zukin, “Gentrification,” 144

30 Ibid., 145; Zukin and Di-Maggio, *Structures of Capital*; Giddens, “Time, Space and Regionalisation.”

31 Ley, “Gentrification and the Politics of the New Middle Class”; Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*; Jager, “Class Definition and the Esthetics of Gentrification: Victoriana in Melbourne.”

32 Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification*, 141–44.

33 Mills drew on the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz to analyze gentrification. Original In Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*.

34 Mills, “Life on the Upslope,” 180.

35 Harvey, "The Art of Rent: Globalization and the Commodification of Culture."

36 Bell and Burckhardt, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20; Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

Another important contribution to the analysis of gentrification through a cultural perspective is the one of David Harvey and its *Art of Rent* in 2001.³⁵ Here, the commodification of culture is exposed as a sort of contradictory phenomenon that implicates the special character of cultural products and events and the commodities as something ordinary. Harvey is then asking how the commodity status of so many of these phenomena can be reconciled with their special character. His definition of the creative core, in relation to Daniel Bell's "cultural mass" and Bourdieu's collective symbolic capital,³⁶ was based on the analysis, through class and labor conditions, of the increasing number of workers engaged in cultural activities and production.



Figure 1: The Northern Quarter (red) positioned in Brussels Capital Region.
By Jan Denoo, 2019.

Figure 2: Zoom on the Northern Quarter (light red) and the Manhattan area (dark red) as presented in the Manhattan Plan of 1966. By Jan Denoo, 2019

1948 to 1973: The Manhattan Plan, a Brutal Fairy Tale

Over time, Brussels has undergone a series of urban transformations, even leading to the identification of the phenomenon known as Brusselization. Numerous scholars have delved into the intricate dynamics of its urban transformations throughout history. A notable contemporary figure is Mathieu Van Criekingen, a critical geographer who has extensively written about gentrification within the Brussels context, especially in his book *Contre la Gentrification*, published in 2021.³⁷ To better understand the reasons and impacts of such transformations in the post-Fordist era, the Northern Quarter emerges as a constantly evolving and transformed site. By examining the issues, influential figures, and mechanisms that shaped its evolution, the hypothesis labeling this Northern Quarter as a product of gentrification can be questioned through its different historical phases of transformation.

After the catastrophic damages of the Second World War, Brussels recovered through Fordist economic growth and political regulations that implied urban changes and political decisions. During the 1950s, the city was sprawling with the benefit of the triggering Marshal Plan and the prolific Loi de Traeye that favored access to individual property to the middle class.³⁸ To connect the suburbs to the city center, the national government enabled a network of highways to flourish and a road with tunnels to emerge from the transformed Petite Ceinture. During that time, a "New Optimism" vision was broadening the horizons and securing the beliefs in car industries, technologies, and atomic powers. New ambitions were symbolically embodied by the Exposition Universelle in 1958, which proved to be a turning point for Brussels to achieve its international status and portrayed as an essential place of power, services, and international exchanges.³⁹ To assume its new post-Fordist identity, Brussels had to carry out brutal urban transformations to develop three new types of districts.⁴⁰ The heart of the city was turned into an administrative area after having been disemboweled by the massive infrastructure of the Jonction Nord-Midi some years before.⁴¹ Progressively settling themselves in the capital until the late 1960s, the European Institutions, with their destructive office quarters, strutted proudly on the old aristocratic city's plateau of the Leopold neighborhood, newly called European Quarter.⁴² Finally, pushed by the city ring back into the arms of the canal axis and the Gare du Nord railways, this enclosed area seemed to be the ideal location for a new much-needed Central Business District called Northern Quarter.

The continuous growth that breathed the Golden Sixties was rooted in the modernist idiosyncrasy incarnated by the CIAM 4 principles: dwelling, working, recreation, and circulation.⁴³ This period was cultivating new ambitious visions for the future through large-scale interventions, thus resurrecting the old Victor Bourgeois' plans for the Nouveau Bruxelles of 1920.⁴⁴ Coupled with a superficial interpretation of Le Corbusier's project *Ville Contemporaine de 3 Millions d'Habitants*, the first version of the Manhattan Plan was proposed in 1962, which perimeter is shared between three municipalities which are Brussels, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse-Ten-Node. The plan was then adapted with two major infrastructures from a new motorway plan of the same year. As a result of this

37 Van Criekingen, *Contre la gentrification*.

38 Vanderमotten, *Bruxelles, Une Lecture de La Ville, De l'Europe Des Marchands à La Capitale de l'Europe*, 164–74. Laconte, "History and Perspectives on a Capital City."

39 Hubert, "L'Expo 58 et Le « tout à l'automobile »"; Demey, *Bruxelles, chronique d'une capitale en chantier*.

40 Romańczyk, "Transforming Brussels into an International City – Reflections on 'Brusselization'"; Doucet, "Fuel to the Urban Debate or, at Last, an End to the Brussels Trauma?"; Ledent, "From Ideal Proposals to Serial Developments."

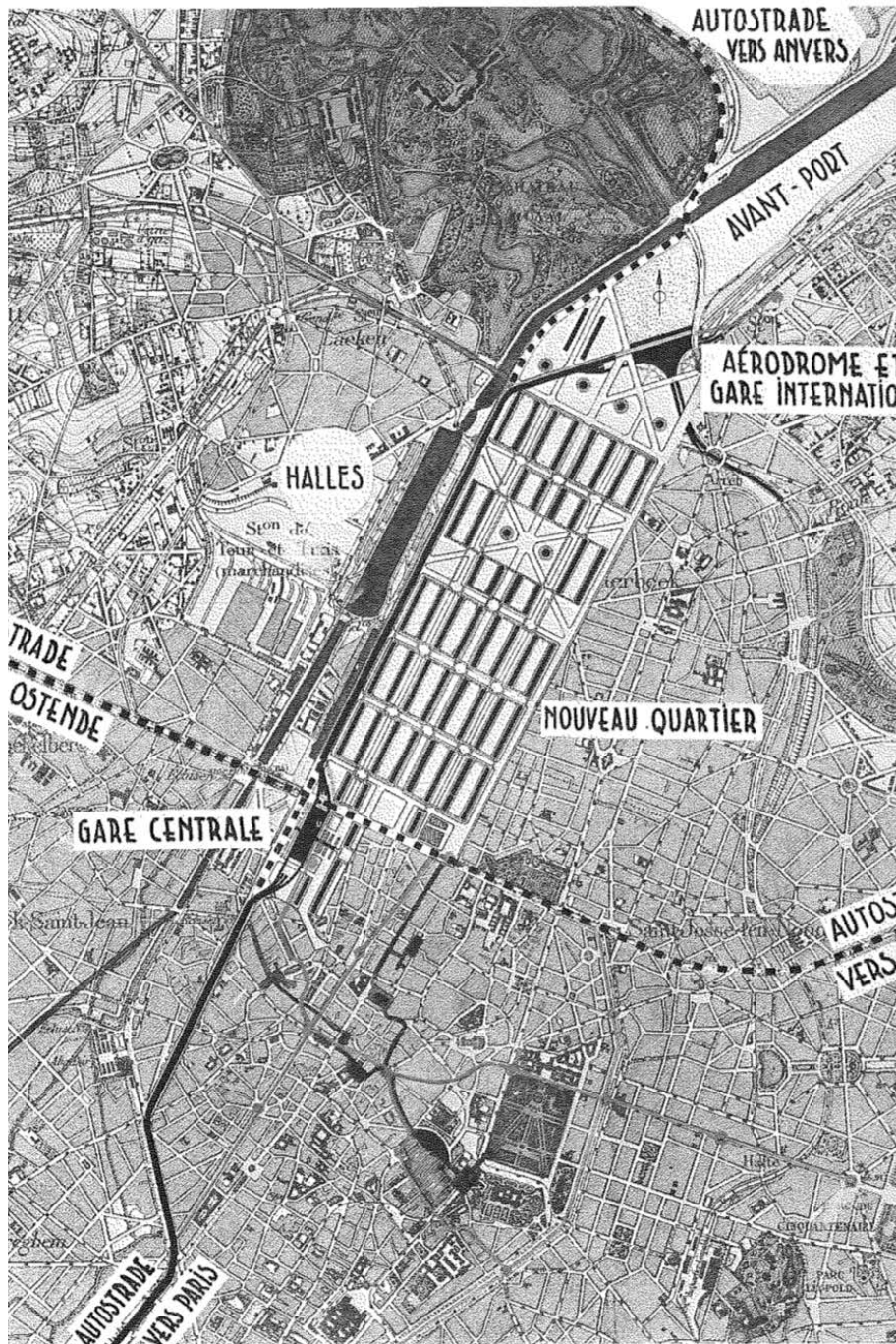
41 Debroux et al., "La Production d'ensembles Résidentiels Élitaires (Bruxelles XVIIIe-XXe Siècles)"; Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)."

42 Witte, "Belgian Federalism: Towards Complexity and Asymmetry"; Romańczyk, "Transforming Brussels into an International City – Reflections on 'Brusselization,'" 129; Goldmann, "Internationalisation and the Nation-State: Four Issues and Three Non-Issues"; Savitch, "What Makes a Great City Great?"; van der Wusten, "The Distribution of Political Centrality in the European State System."

43 Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*.

44 Ledent, "From Ideal Proposals to Serial Developments."

VICTOR BOURGEOIS



Projet pour le Nouveau Bruxelles, 1930.
Encre de Chine et encres de couleur sur tirage. 630 x 480.

Figure 3: 'Project pour le Nouveau Bruxelles' by Victor Bourgeois.
Chinese and coloured ink on paper. 630 x 480.
Reprinted from Culot, Van Loo, & Martiny, 1986. Culot,

45 Demeulemeester, "MANHATTAN, NEW YORK – MANHATTAN, BRUSSELS"; Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*, 34.

46 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism."

47 Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 47; Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*.

48 Deligne, *Bruxelles sortie des eaux*; Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 45.

49 De Beule, *Bruxelles, histoire de planifier*.

50 Electoral Tract of P.S.C.-C.V.P., 1970. In Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*, 3.

51 City of Brussels, "Bulletin Communal de Bruxelles," 1910. In Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 46–47.

52 De Beule, *Bruxelles, histoire de planifier*; Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*.

53 Interview of Albert Martens by Jan Denoo. In Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 47.

54 Moniteur Belge; Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)," 3.

New Optimism, the plan is seen as the "largest urban renewal operation," which was believed to create "the most modern part of Brussels, if not of Western Europe."⁴⁵ Since the city needed to expand economically, the storage areas around the canal became vacant plots that were the ideal placeholders for a new service economy. Nevertheless, such a massive transformation project hid a fear of the future, related to uncertainty based on interurban and international competitions – symptoms of a fear of growing globalization.⁴⁶

A rhetorical discourse had to be built to justify the project's unseen scale and controversial character. Therefore, the developer and the public authority suggested two urban diseases as the main incentives to initiate this plan.⁴⁷ First, the river Senne was seen as a hygienic risk. In the 1870s, the Mayor of Brussels, Jules Anspach, undertook the first wave of covering the river between 1863 and 1879 because of the various floods it was causing. The steams were believed to spread cholera. During the 20th century, the diseases were distributed through the tap water rather than the fumes, leading to a second wave covering the river between 1931 and 1955 that ran partly through the Northern Quarter.⁴⁸ Back then, criticized as the Anspach's hidden agenda, this transformation could offer commercial activities to the lower city by developing plots and boulevards. Nevertheless, this new land was considered in the Motorway plan that propelled the development of the Northern District as an office area for a growing car-dependent private sector.⁴⁹

Second, the neighborhood was labeled a "slum," Prime Minister Vanden Boeynants' commercial intentions to dedicate this area to business people were not hidden from public spheres.⁵⁰ However, the central argument in his discourse was to replace what was labeled as unsanitary housing, justifying the lease of 2,1 hectares of public land at 2% of its value for constructing the World Trade Center.⁵¹ In fact, the real decay of the neighborhood was caused by the impossibility of landlords to maintain their property and the bricking up of vacant housing. But people there were told that a law could let the government pay for their relocation, installation, and rent allowance if they moved away. However, a contradiction appears: none of the housing stock could be identified as unsanitary by regular visits from the National Institute for Housing inspectors.⁵² But, the press was systematically called to help construct the false narrative of the neighborhood as a "slum." Indeed, each time they came to look at the plans, they were redirected to the Telefoonstraat and Telegraafstraat, where there were actual slums.⁵³ A fiction was built on a law that couldn't be applied to these local inhabitants. This fiction became a reality through the media's public framing of the controversial Manhattan Plan. Therefore, labeling the whole area as an urban disease that needed urgent transformation allowed the three municipalities to obtain the royal decrees on the 17th of February in 1967 to expropriate owners more quickly.⁵⁴ Additionally, gathering the subsidies to redevelop the "slums" lowered the expropriation cost.

To legitimize this discourse, the public authorities answered to these two urban "diseases" on two levels. The federal government firmly promoted the Manhattan Plan, but its realization had to be done by the three municipalities implicated in the project. The plan was so massive for the limited capacities that they had to outsource a company with essential

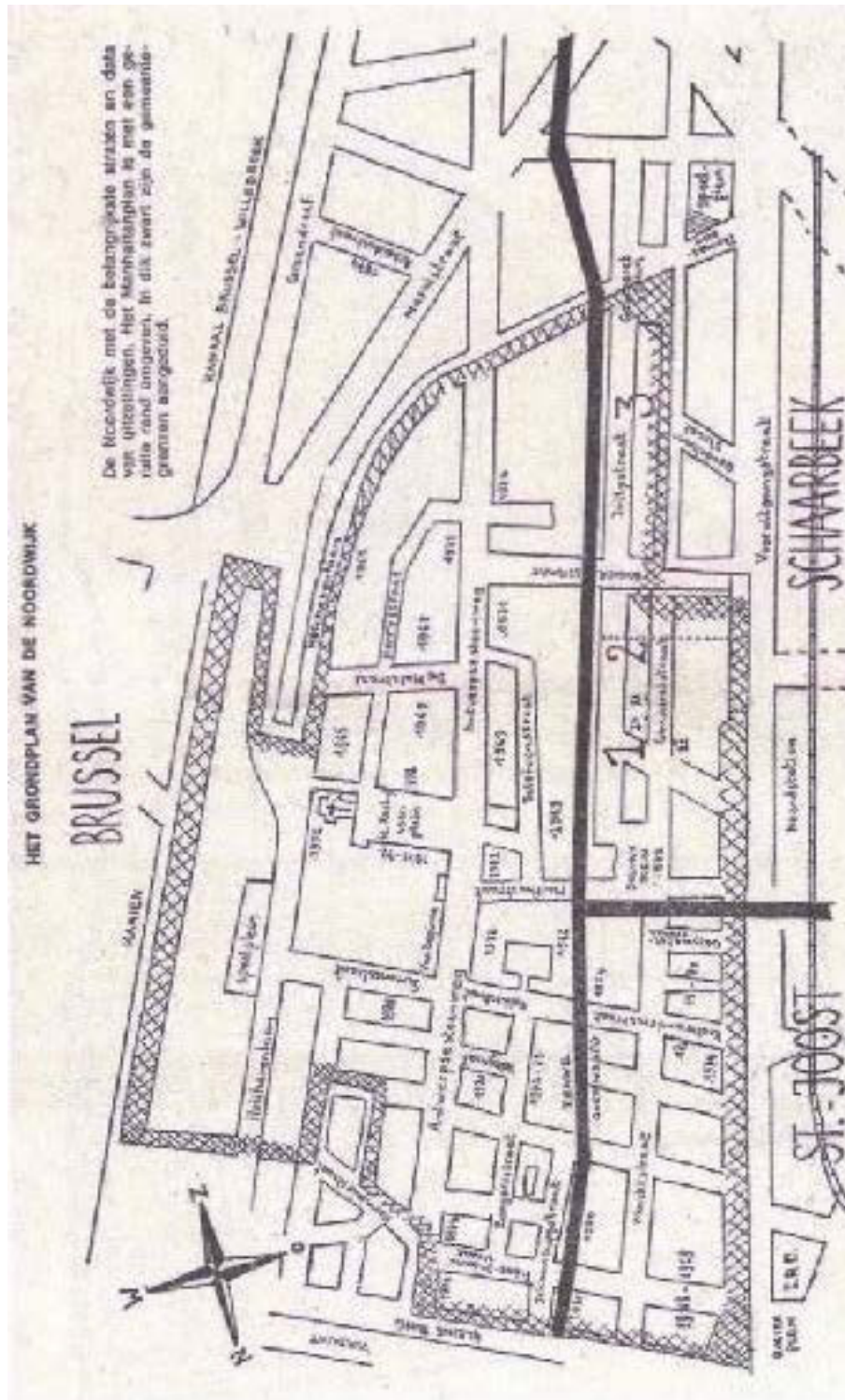


Figure 4: Map with the years of expropriation per block.
Archive Albert Martens, 1974.

55 Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 48.

56 Manhattan Center' presentation brochure published by the promoters and printed by J-E Goossens, Brussels, see Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*, 25; Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)," 5.

57 Jan Denoo adapts these numbers based on the one Albert Martens gathered, such as the numbers related to the *Promised square meters per function and the Manhattan Plan: goals and results*. Second Source Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 48, 52. Original Source Martens, "Vier Decennia Later : De Balans van Een Megaproject (1967-2010). Stand van Zaken 44 Jaar Na de Afkondiging van de Drie Bijzondere Plannen van Aanleg (BPA's) van Het Manhattanplan. Een Schoolvoorbeeld Ter Illustratie van de Stellingen van Bent Flyvbjerg En Michael Burawoy."

loans to collaborate with the design team of Groupe Structure. The choice of SOBEMAP (Société Belge d'Économie et Mathématique Appliquée)⁵⁵ was influenced by a French trend that sought to resolve uncertainties through the use of mathematics applied to economics. This technical and ideological strategy reflects the will to condition space as something "absolute" and to overestimate the benefits of progress – a Fordist ideology per se. Therefore, the calculation of square meters per function combined with a new mode of envisioning the future served to convince the public and civic entities. The stigmatization of the neighborhood through its uncertain future led to the glorification of a modernist tabula rasa.

The public authorities finally accepted the Manhattan Plan in 1967, which triggered a wave of brutal transformations. Three waves of expropriations happened in 1967, 1969, and 1972, displacing 11'000 inhabitants,⁵⁶ chaotically, without any guarantee that companies would come to replace them. Demolitions were going on intensely in each municipality as they were blinded by their strong convictions about the future. Before the materialization of the Manhattan Plan, 44 blocks were supposed to be demolished, 80 towers constructed, 1'613'000 square meters of office space released (including commercial spaces, parking garages, and storage places), 14'000 inhabitants welcomed, and 60'000 to 70'000 jobs intended. In terms of functions, the total square meters promised by the three municipalities together were 684'000 for offices and hotels, 554'000 for parking, 405'000 for housing, and 375'000 for commercial activities, which resulted in a total of 2'018'000 square meters.⁵⁷ But in 1973, when the most significant part of the demolitions was done, the oil crisis suddenly interrupted everything; construction sites were stopped, and the motorway project was dispatched. Regarding the promises of the Plan, 90% of the blocks were demolished, 22% of the towers were constructed, 65% of the office spaces were released, 43% of inhabitants were welcomed, and 28-35% of jobs were intended. Less impressive results than the one announced demonstrate the failure of a discourse that couldn't fulfill its proper delusions.

This turning point marked the end of the Golden Sixties when economic growth and absolutist visions of spatiality collapsed. All the ambitions for the future inspired by this former New Optimism vanished, leaving behind the ruins of a pending project. The rhetoric crafted around economic and political aspirations for a "new" future, rooted in an uncertain post-Fordist reality, resulted in the formulation of promises that could only be fulfilled by brutal urban transformations. This whole process sheds light on the underlying dynamics of gentrification, as manifested through the strategic use of displacement to reshape the class composition and the structural and occupational functions that characterized the neighborhood. As a result, the public authorities had to rent out the 1st and 3rd WTC towers to save the private developers from bankruptcy. Forced to kneel in front of the private sector, the act of the government revealed the strong connivance they shared, thus marking an end to the city's urban development and the beginning of a new type of planning.

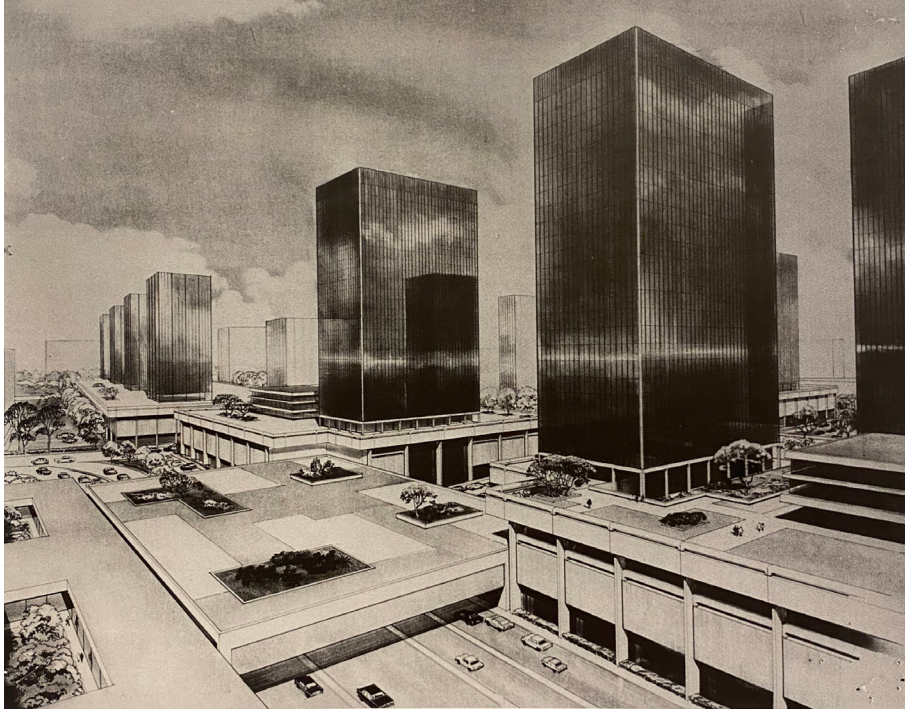


Figure 5: Drawings of the pedestrian walkways, on the plinths and in between of the WTC Towers, that frees up the traffic below. De Beule, 2017: 357.

Figure 6: Model's impression of the Manhattan Plan with a focus on the WTC. Together with the other impressions they serve as important elements to legitimate the big project. ABV/DD. 1960s: 531

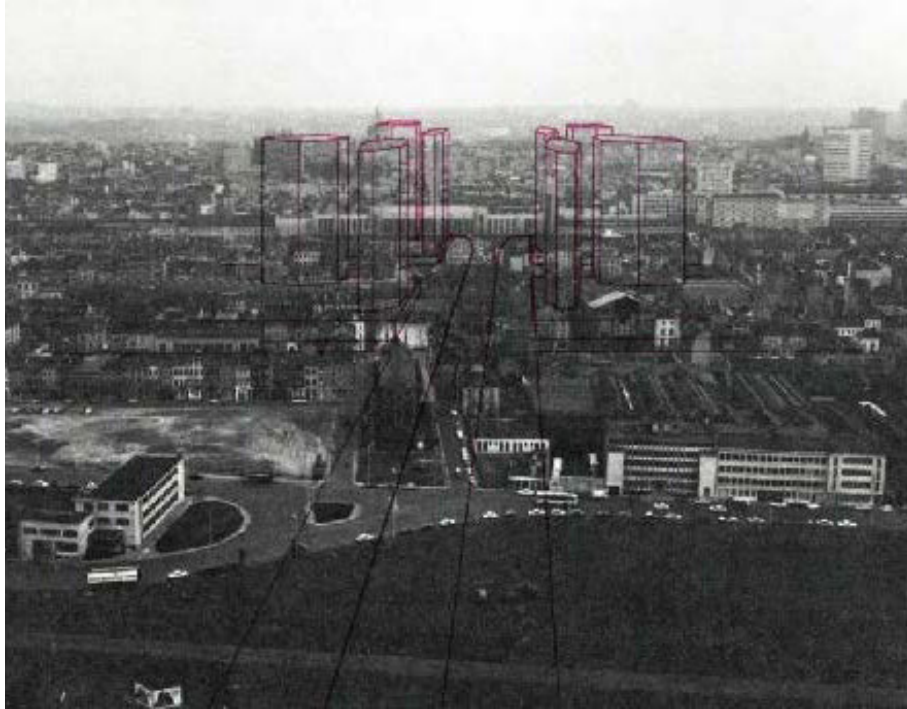


Figure 7: View on the Manhattan Area with the World Trade Center drawn in pink.
Brochure World Trade Center Brussels. 1960s: 11.

Figure 8: Aerial picture of the Northern Quarter. Including the Boulevard Albert II, the World Trade Center and the TBR-tower, 1980. IrisMonument.

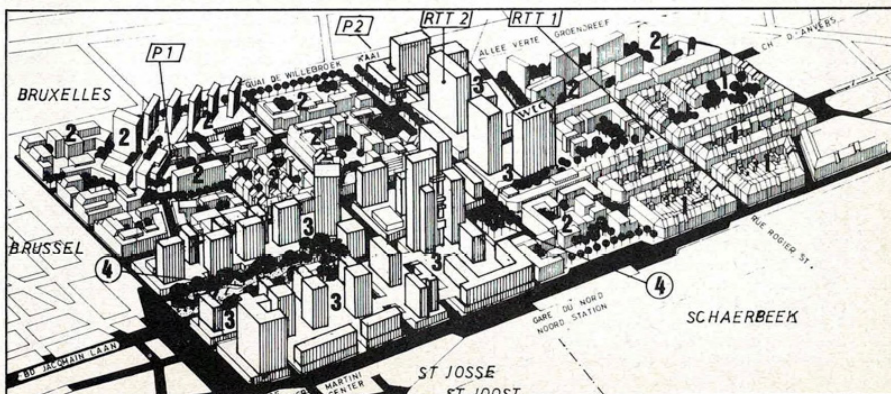
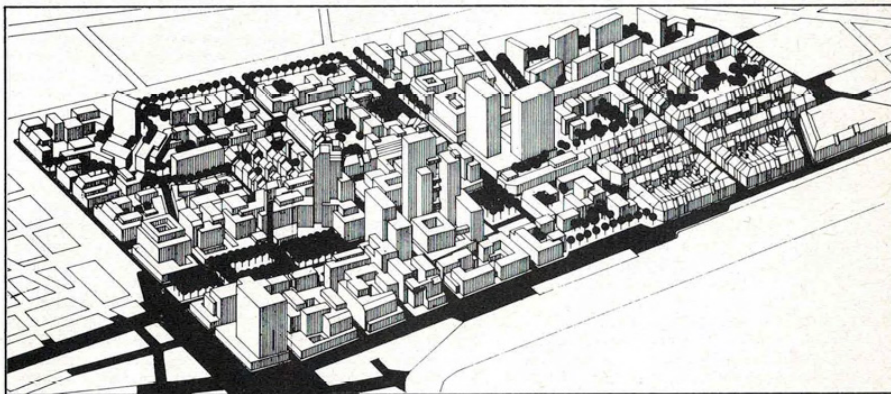


Figure 9: Residents' opposition to the project on the Chaussée d'Anvers.

Archives Belga

Figure 10: Maurice Culot and ARAU: diagrams used for clarifying particular steps in the argument. It shows ARAU's flexible method in extended negotiations.

Maxwell, Tafuri/Culot/Krier, A.A., 1977

1973 to 2000: Postmodern Discourse for a Resilient Restructuration

58 ARAU is an association set up in 1969 by several prominent figures, including the architect and planner Maurice Culot, the theologian and parish priest of Les Marolles, Jacques Van der Biest, the sociologist René Schoonbrodt and the lawyer Philippe de Keyser. It aims to ensure that the public authorities deal with urban issues in Brussels transparently and comprehensively.

59 The Comité d'Action Local (CAL Quartier Nord) that made the opposition more visible by organizing demonstrations and radical actions, the Comité des fêtes de la chaussée d'Anvers (owners and retailers) that organize the annual neighborhood parties, the Comité d'Action Local, and the Service Social Logement (SSL). Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)," 7.

60 Ibid., 9.

61 Schoonbrodt et al., *Vouloir et dire la ville*, 378.

62 Martens, *Le plan Manhattan, ou, que crèvent les expulsés*.

After the oil crisis and the Nixon shock, the Sixties lost their golden tone and left the northern building sites as emptied battlefields. The modernist urban planning mode has been defeated, leaving behind a gridlocked Northern Quarter with a high vacancy rate and a less profitable office market. The risk of a new "real estate cycle" was looming on the developers who couldn't return their investments. It set up a contemporary discourse to put pressure on this gridlock, qualifying it as a new "crisis." This traumatic landscape, left abandoned with urban wastelands and increasing social problems, had scars that were still bleeding for the inhabitants of Brussels.

At the end of the 1960s, consecutive eviscerations of the city and its metropolization left the urban context of Brussels brutalized. The boiling revolt of the citizens then burst into diverse reactionary movements, protests, and organizations, hence known as *lutttes urbaines*.

During the 1968 cultural strikes, a young group of professors and students from La Cambre and Sint Lukas gathered to support the emergent *Comités de Quartier* throughout the city. With organizations like L'Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaine (ARAU), a new discourse was emerging and defended the return to the city, the use of streets as a life space, and the use of historicist and contextual architecture through the tool of Counterprojects.⁵⁸ Later, in 1974, they would gather around the organization Inter-Environnement, equaled at the same period by the creation of its Flemish sister, the Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu (BRAL).

In the Northern Quarter, different movements were divided into groups that organized demonstrations and actions.⁵⁹ In 1972, the creation of the *Groupe d'Action du Quartier Nord*, which held protests in the neighborhood and managed the occupation of vacant houses, radicalized ongoing fights.⁶⁰ The same year, the ARAU got engaged in the opposition even though the area had already suffered demolitions. An urban critique of the Manhattan Plan was produced, followed by the proposal of urban planning through the *Conseil Urban Nord*. Composed of other local actors, the *Conseil* presented formal modifications that prevailed in the project's future phases.⁶¹ ARAU's activists aimed to confront the developers and the public authorities on their conception of the city and the type of urbanism they imposed. In their view, it would be an illusion to reverse the existing balance of power and improve the situation of residents if the criticism of the fundamentals of the plan is not prioritized. Critical visions of the Manhattan Plan are rising, embodied by the symbolic and significant essential publication of Albert Martens, *Le Plan Manhattan ou que crèvent les expulsés!*⁶²

At the same time, tertiary employment in the center marked the metropolization of the city, and housing spread throughout the region. Therefore, the demolitions of the working-class neighborhoods within the inner-city awakened union protests, and the historical and landscape heritage threatened by the office building constructions in the residential areas prompted the reaction of associations such as the *Ligue Esthétique Belge*.



Figure 10: A view on the the WTC III, II and I.
Ten years after the start of the Manhattan Plan. Archive Joris Sleebus. 1988.

63 An issue that the Marolles district could escape (since it was the only commune implicated in the urban transformation projects), confirming the success of his fight. In Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)," 2.

64 De Beule, *Bruxelles, histoire de planifier*; Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 67–74; Leloutre, "La transformation moderne de Bruxelles"; Leloutre, "La Bruxellisation," 79.

65 Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 69, 74.

66 De Beule, *Bruxelles, histoire de planifier*.

67 Leloutre, "La Bruxellisation," 81.

In reaction to the luttres urbaines and the Bruxellisation, a policy shift took place on both the regional and municipal levels to address the city's temporal and spatial restructuring. One crucial issue that strikes the areas touched by the Bruxellisation is the competition between municipalities.⁶³ A consensus was built around stronger regional regulations to defend the existing city better. Therefore, a new law was established at a regional level in 1979, the Sectorial Plans, which imposed the public publication of construction permits and the institution of concertation committees. It also aimed to prioritize housing and battle against office buildings. This shifting mode of planning would later lead to the definition of the Région de Bruxelles-Capitale in 1989 and, afterward, the creation of the Regional Development Plan in 1995.⁶⁴

The planning adjustments part of the 1979 law allowed the municipalities to implement the regional policy. Still, their lack of control, the real estate pressure, and the inter-municipal competition resulted in unaddressed loopholes. Between 1971 and 2000, 27 planning adjustments modified the Northern Quarter situation, but this scarring was mainly embodied by real estate and uncontrolled office developments, which drastically increased during the 1990s. These loopholes were tolerated until 1998, revealing a new "lax urbanism" with a "compromising role of the state." Indeed, 45% of the 10'000 square meters of offices were located outside the "administrative zones" strategically dedicated to office development by the regional plan. A vast amount of land was sacrificed to supply-led real estate production, which increased to 38% (28% between 1970 and 1980, 66% between 1980 and 1997).⁶⁵ Under the "common good" requirements, the upscaling of the governance primarily benefited the supply-led economy by allowing the developers to satisfy further developments.

During the 1980s, the rough Bruxellisation, the industry's decay, and the urban flight of 40'000 people also scarred the neighborhood level.⁶⁶ Therefore, the Brussels Region pushed profound planning reforms and governing instruments further. An important policy of participatory urban renovation at the neighborhood scale was undertaken through the Contrats de Quartiers in 1993.⁶⁷ These contracts have three aims: to reconstruct and renovate housing, to redevelop infrastructures, to re-evaluate public spaces, and to act upon social cohesion to improve it. On the one hand, the public administration's grip on urban developments seemed strengthened by limiting the institutional complexities. On the other hand, the smaller scale of these plans appeared more manageable for the future and less traumatic than the past large-scale significant projects.

A significant shift happened through the "urban charges," a law enacted in 1962 and later updated in 1991. This legislation mandated a public "charge" compensation when developers obtained permits from public amenities and their surplus values. Until 1995, the calculation of the charges remained transparent and different per plan, allowing some reconstruction projects to be funded by "urban charges." However, frictions and debates surrounding these charges compromised the city's development. On the one hand, these "urban charges" were seen as a compromise between public and private actors, becoming a critical turning point in the neighborhood's development. On the other hand, various urban developments utilized these compensations to "transform the meaning of the

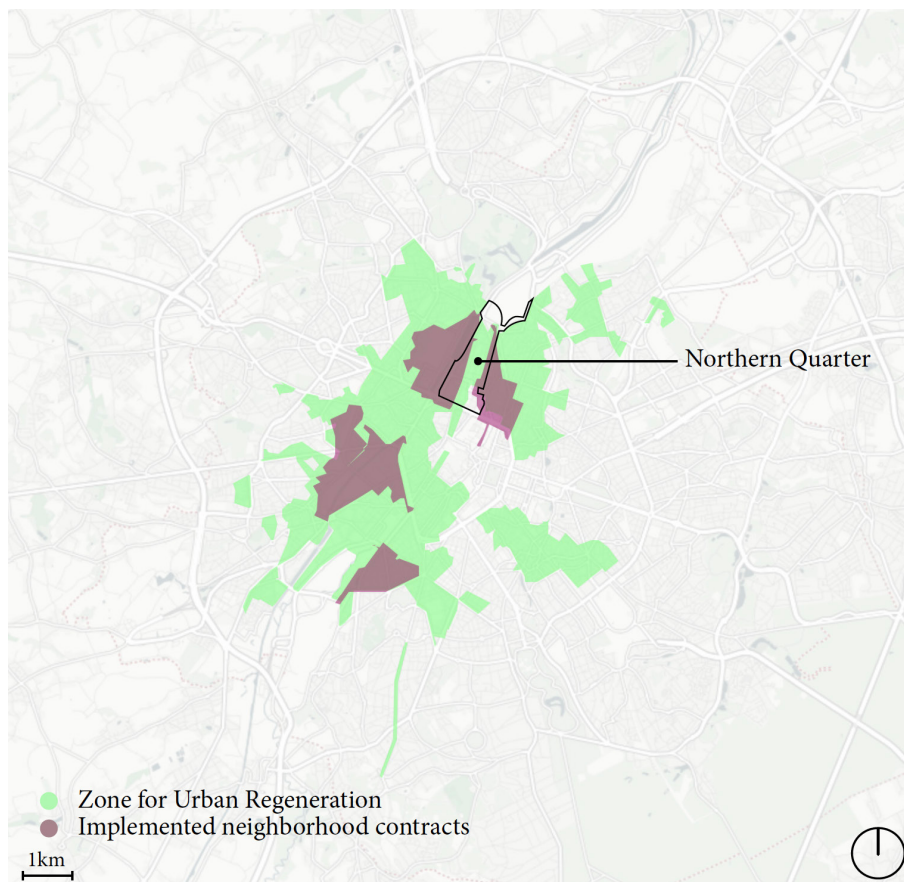


Figure 11: Map of the 'Zone for Urban Regeneration' over the areas where '(sustainable)district contracts' have been implemented.
Reprinted from Perspective.Brussels, 2019 from Denoo, 2019: 72
<http://perspective.brussels/nl/stadsprojecten/interventieperimeters/zone-voor-stedelijkeherwaardering-zsh>.

68 Smets and Harvard GSD, "Insights I Gained from Manuel," 19.

69 Doucet, Gosseye, and Kockelkorn, "From Le Droit à La Ville to 'Rechte Räume'; Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*; Doucet, "Counter-Projects and the Postmodern User."

70 Krier and Culot, *Contreprojets*; Culot, Schoonbrodt, and Krier, *La Reconstruction de Bruxelles*.

71 Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 73.

72 Martens, "Dix Ans d'expropriations et d'expulsions Au Quartier Nord à Bruxelles (1965-1975)."

73 Interview by Jan Denoo with Joris Sleebus. In Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 73.

city as a whole while remaining recognizable as an addition of its own."⁶⁸ Reconstructing history became a focal point to deal with the process, supported by influential figures such as Rossi, Krier, Lynch, Venturi, and Scott-Brow.⁶⁹ This period created a new ideology that advocated for the conservation of the city or its reconstruction. Within the same movement, Maurice Culot and Leon Krier proposed counterprojects.⁷⁰

These new modes of planning that focused on redeveloping emptied areas neglected the large numbers of newcomers without voting rights. These new policies marginalized the Northern Quarter: the overlapping of its perimeter and the ones of the Contrat de Quartiers left one middle strip completely unaddressed. Dramatically, the neighborhood suffering from the most brutal urban transformation was excluded from the very same policy aiming to cure its wounds. This absurd situation is explained by the fact that the perimeters of these plans are based on statistics, especially the number of inhabitants. Indeed, the Manhattan area was next to areas with higher unemployment, lower median income, and higher population density than the regional averages.⁷¹ The municipal and regional inaction resulted in a crucial limited number of voters in the area, reflecting an uncertain political power. Expropriated and demolished area of the Manhattan Plan was left untouched. The 1990s witnessed a surge in office developments, spurred by updates to the law on urban charges in 1991. The Koning Albert II-Laan and the central reservation of King Albert II-Laan quickly developed due to such changes. Post-Bruxellisation curing policies and "regulated deregulation" allowed for increased real estate production, paving the way for a new version of Bruxellisation in the Northern Quarter under urban governance. However, the vague regulations of the law allowed public interests to be overshadowed by private ones. The Manhattan area saw 27 planning adjustments, contributing 26% (366'000 square meters) of the total office spaces of the Northern Quarter outside its original perimeter before 2011.⁷² Despite expectations, developers in the mid-1990s could not manage to attract new investments, leaving the lands vacant and challenging the anticipated results of these urban development efforts.⁷³



Figure 12: View from the Boulevard Baudouin towards Koekelberg.
Photographed by Celeste Tellarini, 2024

Planning without Plans

After analyzing the more traditional forms of gentrification and its corollary of planning policies, we will now try to understand the type of planning paradigm that has recently emerged in Brussels and the Northern Quarter.

At the dawn of the new century, aggressive urban transformations and analogous planning policies left some unsolved issues in the post-Fordist neighborhood. On the one hand, the monofunctional identity of the district didn't evolve but intensified the high vacancy rates resulting from the hard expropriations a few decades ago, reaching up to 20% in 2018.⁷⁴ The precarious situation of the inhabitants and newcomers was left secondary, leading to a socially unintegrated population. During the last couple of decades, waves of immigration across Europe have intensified and were concentrated on several strategic territorial nodes, including Brussels. Thus, the northern station became the main gate used by immigrants moving to the UK and stopping in the north quarter. On the other hand, the district was still facing urban segregation. Despite the evolution of its administrative perimeter through the years, a solid territorial enclosure was defined by three main axes: the railways on the eastern side, the Boulevard Baudouin on the southern side, and the canal on the western. With their radical nature, these critical mobility infrastructures isolated the district's heart from the rest of the city, turning it into a sort of island in an urban archipelago. Recursively at its inner scale, oversized solid and empty volumes are scattered apart, thus forming a network of floating objects. Finally, the private corporations that have invested in the area for decades were facing the tumbling of their profits and an increasing rarefaction of tenants. The neighborhood's future was threatened, and the 2008 economic crisis intensified the uncertainties about its likely downfall. Despite their emerging coalition with the public authorities and the resulting softer urban management of the neighborhood, it was at the end of the 20th century that private developers didn't have security about the future of their land investments.

During the 2000s, a crucial moment happened regarding the governance of urban policies by shifting the regulatory planning to more program-led regional planning. To avoid brutal urban transformation, large plans have to turn into regional planning, and a proactive attitude is installed to put more importance on the participation of the inhabitants. In 2002, the second regional development plan measured housing, and the top of the office's sprawl and 12 leverage zones were defined to be urbanized and reorganized. Since 2004, masterplans have been developed to prioritize activities and to tighten control of public-private developments through guiding comity. It is a renewed regional ambition to expand (temporal and spatial scales) and to face environmental uncertainties, but the leverage zones are often too big to be governed, leaving neglected areas such as the Northern Quarter. The Northern Quarter was part of the 2002 leverage zones but left unaddressed and was also left out of the priority poles until 2018, when the last version of the RPSD embodies four ambitions, labeled through twelve "priority poles." The government didn't see it as a strategic zone and also had uncertainties. Consequently, the area was pushed to the margins and off-stage because the public authorities

74 Secondary Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 33. Quoted in Original Bogdan, Van Broeck, and IDEA Consult, "Ferraris. Studie over de Toekomst van de Ferraris Site Gekaderd in Een Langetermijnvisie Op de Administratieve Gebouwen van de Vlaamse Overheid."



Figure 13: View from the Boulevard Baudouin towards the Northern Station.
Photographed by Celeste Tellarini, 2024



Figure 14: View from the canal towards the Northern District..
Photographed by Celeste Tellarini, 2024



Figure 15: View on non-stopping construction sites within the Northern Quarter.
Photographed by Celeste Tellarini, 2024

didn't intervene there. In addition, these regional ambitions are uncoupled with the public budgets, which makes these regional plans uncertain in the future.

Nevertheless, the regional authorities didn't assume the responsibilities of their predecessors' policies that implicated the supply of millions of euros of taxes in the construction of monofunctional office buildings. Instead, they consigned the neighborhood's dramatic state to the fearful investors' responsibility, as Rudi Vervoort, Minister-President of the Brussels-Capital Region, called it "the developers' problem," saying: "I remember a colloquium in which the promoters were accusing the region; 'we have a problem, we have a lot of vacancy in the Northern Quarter, and you as a government give building permits for offices on Tour and Taxis' for example. 'You should prohibit that so that the Northern Quarter has no competition.' And then Vervoort replied; 'we don't do that. What are you asking now, huh? That we, as the government, intervene in the market, dear private parties?' [...] 'We have not created the problem!' So, I think that's a striking anecdote."⁷⁵

To counter this tragic image, to react to the disembodied responsibility of the regional powers, and to reply to the vacancy rates, the private sector took the initiative to relieve its anguish for the future. Therefore, a new type of discourse is emerging, implicating different tools and mechanisms regarding the past and developing a new type of planning paradigm.

In 2016, the eight biggest owners of the Northern Quarter – AG Real Estate, Allianz, AXA, Banimmo, Befimmo, Belfius Insurance, Immobel, and Triuva – came together under a non-profit organization called Up4North.⁷⁶ Lab North was created to materialize their ambitions to gather designers and other actors in the projects through a Temporary Occupancy Platform and sociocultural programming called the Agenda North. The "Laboratory" is the result of a partnership between Up4North, the architectural practice 51N4E, think-and-do-tank Architecture Workroom, and the design agency Vraiment Vraiment. To justify such an initiative and allow citizens to identify with it, they developed a rhetorical discourse built on the modernist trauma and the construction of a "common good" crisis rooted in the neighborhood's context. The Northern Quarter is presented as facing the "end of its life cycle," which offers "the start of a new one" yet allows to "transform it and reintroduce life and inhabitants."⁷⁷ The public authorities are portrayed as the main supporters, as the "project is only possible if all the players look together in the same direction. The public interest here certainly outweighs private interests". Up4North aims "to invest sustainably in the city of Brussels," reflecting the undeniable union between the real estate power structures and the public authorities since "the Brussels Region is ready to support this project."⁷⁸

Hence, a new constellation of stakeholders is formed by public institutions, private developers, civic organizations, and different types of "experts" through a wide partnership, mainly embodied by three figures: perspective.brussels (the regional planners), Lab North, and the Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA). Their visions are exposed through participatory public discussions and publications such as the North District: Next Step? that explains how the "ideal connection to mobility networks and an abundance of open space make it an ideal place for a dense

75 Interview of Kristiaan Borret by Jan Denoo. In Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 96.

76 Hanscutter, "Service Volontaire International"; "Up4North."

77 Debate organized by Jan Denoo. Denoo, "The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning," 98.

78 "Les grands propriétaires privés du Quartier Nord serrent les rangs."



Figure 16: Transformation process of the WTC I and II towers. 51N4E, 2022: 49

79 Bouwmeester Maître Architecte BMA, Lab North, and perspective.brussels, “Brussels North District, Next Steps?,” 7.

and diversified district” by listing “the challenges and potentialities of the district, and questions them through a collection of visuals.”⁷⁹ To transform the tainted image of the old neighborhood, these stakeholders are developing a new discourse based on a series of key themes underlying the ambition to turn the district into an attractive area. The unseen mechanisms of such rhetoric, its materializations, and its effects can be analyzed through three main axes: the cover, the inner, and the surround. Due to their archetypal character, key cases are selected to support these axes: ZIN, the Victoria Tower, KANAAL Centre-Pompidou, and the Maximilien Park.

The public planning policies at stake during the 2000s revealed the importance given to the notion of sustainability. A focus is put on the renovation of existing building structures, implicating the contemporary and necessary topic of re-use and local materials. Therefore, the specificities of iconic buildings would be preserved while subscribing to the ecological “common good” care. In 2017, the architects 51N4E and urban planners l’AUC were selected through the competition that Befimmo organized with the help of the Brussels Bouwmeester (BMA). The design team joined Jaspers-Eyersn Architects, hegemonic in the architectural development of the district, to transform the WTC I and II towers into the ZIN project. In 2019, the Flemish Government selected the project to host their future offices for 3900 employees in 2023, next to the Brussels-North station. The ambition of the investors was to answer to the high sustainability of Flemish public buildings through the ecological and sustainable evaluation grid called “GRO: Towards Future-Oriented Building Projects.”⁸⁰ The project’s construction started in 2020 after being validated by urban.brussels, from the regional authorities.

80 Vlaanderen.be, “GRO”; Belgian Building Research Institute - BBRI and ROTOR, “Reuse in Green Building Frameworks.”

81 51N4E, *How to Not Demolish a Building*, 57.

82 Ibid., 42.

83 Ibid., 58.

The ZIN project vigorously defends the aspect of circularity through the reuse and the choice of materials. A crucial argument focuses on reusing the existing structure to transform the buildings. However, only the core and the foundations were kept, representing “more than 60% of the original mass of the WTC I and II buildings.”⁸¹ Because of structural uncertainties, the steel skeleton, the façades, and the floor slabs were replaced. To change the urban image of the iconic WTC towers, a new construction called the Volume Capable was added to merge the two buildings into a single object, “offering a whole new scale for the neighborhood,” which is “radically different from what is available today, introducing new possibilities.”⁸² A hybrid strategy was then developed through partial demolition and the construction of a new plinth, new towers around the cores, and the Volume Capable. Yet, a contradiction is underlying this seductive strategy revealed by the structural engineers’ investigation: these “slabs could not be kept, mostly because they were structurally unable to transfer the loads coming from the new Volume Capable.”⁸³ The architectural decision to build a new element that would benefit the common good of the neighborhood is threatening the essential argument that justifies the transformation: the reuse of the original structure. While reusing and recycling in-situ construction elements is highlighted by the partnership with ROTOR, a coffered ceiling system made of plasterboard is added to cover the existing steel skeleton inside the WTC towers. The unopenable windows and the façade’s structure had to be changed, leading to the design of a new façade that is one meter

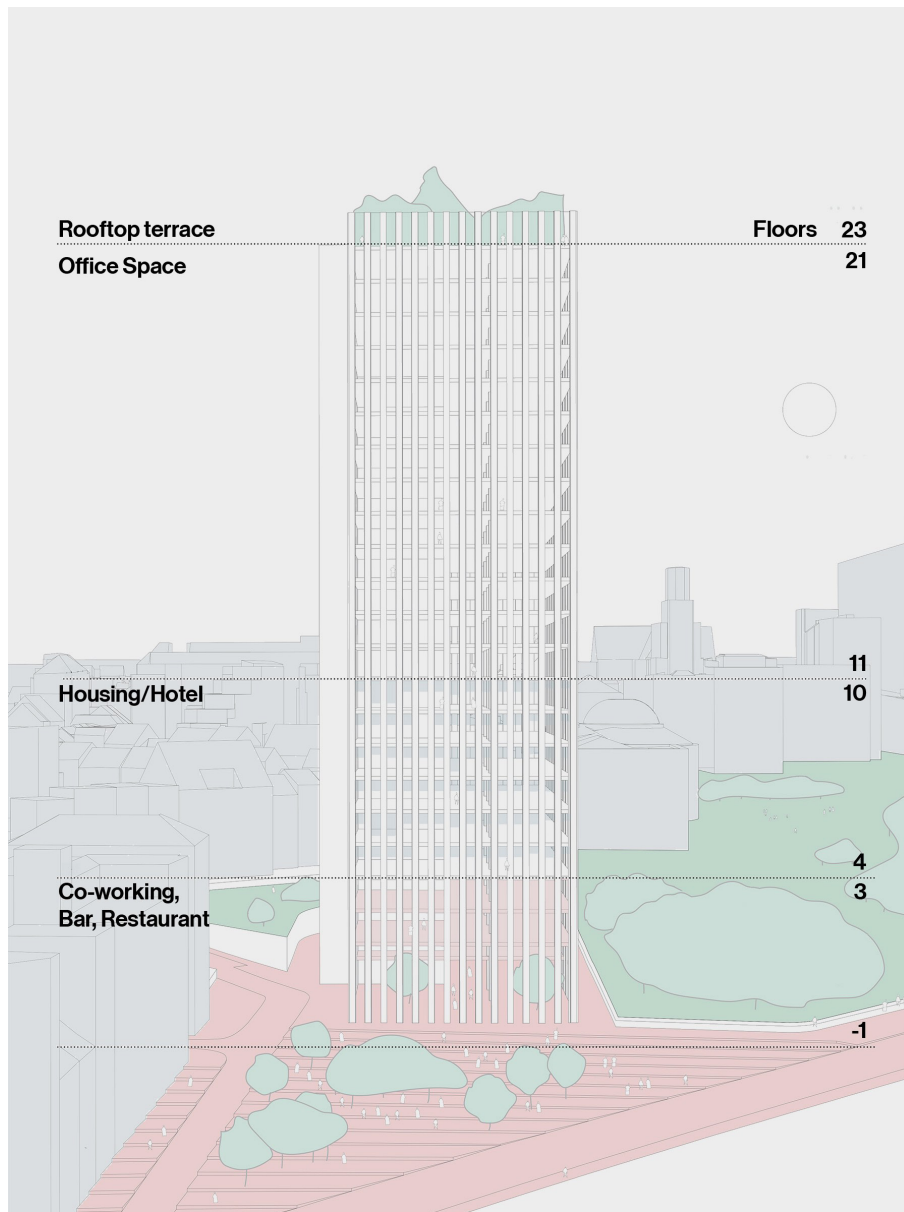


Figure 17: Programs within the Victoria Tower. 51N4E

offset to integrate vertical ventilation shafts. Although this architectural change was an opportunity to modify the “cover” of the building, the architects defended the “unexpressive” identity of the façade, justifying a programmatic abstraction. Therefore, the façade aims to (un)express the flexibility and adaptability of the inside programs, a language seemingly discordant, or at least ambiguous, with the aim to change the tertiary identity of the neighborhood.

The Northern Quarter’s historical trauma has been inherent to its own identity since its creation: a monofunctional district based on a globalized tertiary economy, administrations, and power structures institutions. Therefore, hybrid and mixed-use programs embody an essential solution for the unified private-public institutions to stimulate “a more diversified use of space” where “different activities and users” can turn the district into a “place to work, live, and reside.”⁸⁴ The transformation of single-use buildings into structures with flexible programs through time embodies the sacralized notion of sustainability.

Built in 1978, the archetypal IBM Tower was used to host the Belgian headquarters of the American multinational company of the same name and was acquired by Downtown Real Estate and Baltisse in 2019. To carry out the renovation, the new owners commissioned architectural firm 51N4E. They formulated four main ambitions for the new Victoria Tower: keeping the iconic identity of the building, working with adaptive reuse, introducing mixed-use programs, and investing in neighborhood-making. The two first ambitions were processed through similar operating modes to those in the ZIN project. The notion of circularity was carefully highlighted by the collaboration of the sustainability experts of SuReal, who developed the reuse plan of the entire structure, the concept of fossil-free energy, the qualitative comfort and experience, and the circular economy principles.⁸⁵ Yet, the last two ambitions tried to be as seductive as the first two. However, by adapting the term “sustainability” to social aspects related to the common good of the neighborhood, the programmatic and architectural choices seem unfavorable to the real inhabitants’ needs, therefore becoming questionable. A compilation of hybrid programs dedicated to the residents’ living conditions is promoted as a solution to reactivate the neighborhood intensity. The inner composition of the tower is justified through the key aspects of social diversity, accessibility to many, and engagement with the area, by Pascal Smet, from the Brussels Secretary of State for Town Planning, and Emir Kir, the mayor of Saint-Josse-Ten-Node.⁸⁶ However, the base hosts co-working spaces, a bar, and three entrance lobbies, while the tower’s crown is turned into a rooftop bar. The 16-floor core of the 22-story-high building is dedicated to the new headquarters of the WPP media group and the first Belgian branch of The Hoxton Hotel. The advantages of the typical office floor plan and its eccentric distributing cores allow this superimposition of programs in a seemingly reversible way. As for the ground floor, the piano nobile is opened up to be turned as an interface between public users and the private workers of the building, therefore permitting a so-called social diversity to happen. In the same manner, the head of the tower becomes an attractive lighthouse from which the city can be observed from a safe distance, a privilege given only to specific consumers.

84 Bouwmeester Maître Architecte BMA, Lab North, and perspective.brussels, “Brussels North District, Next Steps?,” 7.

85 SuReal was responsible for sustainability guidance, the optimization of the energy concept and comfort, implementation of measures regarding circular economy and sustainable development. “Victoria Tower | Sureal.”

86 Times, “Brussels to Rebrand the Northern Quarter with a New Name”; “Opening of Victoria Tower Marks Start of Northern Quarter’s Transformation.”



Figure 18: Victoria Tower, an iconic development by Baltisse & DWNTWN.
Inventaire du patrimoine architectural

87 “The Hoxton, Brussels, Brussels, Belgium.”

88 “Ancien tour IBM – Inventaire du patrimoine architectural.”

89 Debroux et al., “La Production d’ensembles Résidentiels Élitaires (Bruxelles XVIIIe-XXe Siècles).”

90 Secondary Ibid., 85. In Original Archives de la Commune de Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, “Bulletin Communal de Saint-Josse, Séance Du 15 Mai 1957.”

91 Secondary Debroux et al., “La Production d’ensembles Résidentiels Élitaires (Bruxelles XVIIIe-XXe Siècles),” 85.18e s. ; quartiers Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges et Berkendael, fin 19e s. ; Centre International Rogier, mi 20e s. In Original Novgorodsky, “Le Centre International Rogier à Bruxelles,” 199.

92 Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism”; Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*.

93 Van Criekingen, *Contre la gentrification*, 127.

94 Harvey, “The Art of Rent: Globalization and the Commodification of Culture.”

95 Van Criekingen, *Contre la gentrification*, 129.

However, the programmatic ambitions to address social mixity are clearly countered by the four-star hotel and its 200€ rooms per night⁸⁷ and the glaring absence of any housing. This appears as completely detached from the neighborhood’s reality. Indeed, dangerously high vacancy rates have been looming over the district for decades, and the nearby residential area of the commune holds one of Brussels’s highest poverty and unemployment rates. Relatively, the co-working spaces that are privately managed have uncertain futures and seem doomed to perish due to the increasing land prices which would result in high rents of the area, inevitably impeding on the “social mix” for the future.

While the building is transformed from 2021 to 2023, its recognizable strip façade was adorned with a huge banner indicating: “Victoria. brussels an iconic development by Baltisse & DWNTWN”.⁸⁸ The materialization of such a marketing discourse based on hybrid uses (and sustainability) is even more striking when the Centre International Rogier, or Martini Tower, of 1958 was known to stand 500 meters away. The multifunctional tower was composed of offices, a commercial gallery, several large showrooms, generous parking areas, and 155 apartments. In addition, the commune of Saint-Josse-Ten-Node was directly financing the construction of a bus station and halls to house the National Theatre’s activities, which were entirely financed by the State.⁸⁹ Back then, public authorities were defending its “expenditures, even if they are non-refundable or partially non-refundable as long as there is an indirect benefit in terms of upgrading a neighborhood and giving its residents and shopkeepers the chance to see their businesses prosper”⁹⁰, despite the “high standard” apartments and its social rupture with the surrounding low-income neighborhood.⁹¹ In 2001, the building is demolished and to be replaced by a monofunctional office tower realized by the architects Philippe Samyn and the well-known Michel Jaspers. An umpteenth real estate development that dramatically reflects the contemporary condition of the city making of that time and space.

Underlying the hybrid and mixed-use program discourse are the public authorities and private sector’s ambitions to transform the district into an attractive area raised on the international European stage. Not only is the land development done through lucrative property based on the accumulation of rent capital, but culture is also used as a fundamental tool to address the city as a competitive international business, turning its governance model into an entrepreneurial one.⁹² Public authorities play a decisive role in land value production since they control the construction permits, zoning plans, and financing of public facilities. Three main levers can transform land values: modifying land use rights (regulatory levers), increasing situational advantages (equipment levers), and influencing the image of a location (symbolic levers).⁹³ This very notion of land value production through symbolic levers rests on a plethora of distinctive spatial features, defined as a collective symbolic capital by David Harvey in 2001.⁹⁴ For almost a decade, the Canal Territory policies embodied these three levers. Modifying land use rights to promote housing results in a significant increase in land value.⁹⁵ Moreover, public amenities emerge along the canal by transforming its banks into parks, walkways, bridges, and summer beaches. Therefore, landmarked

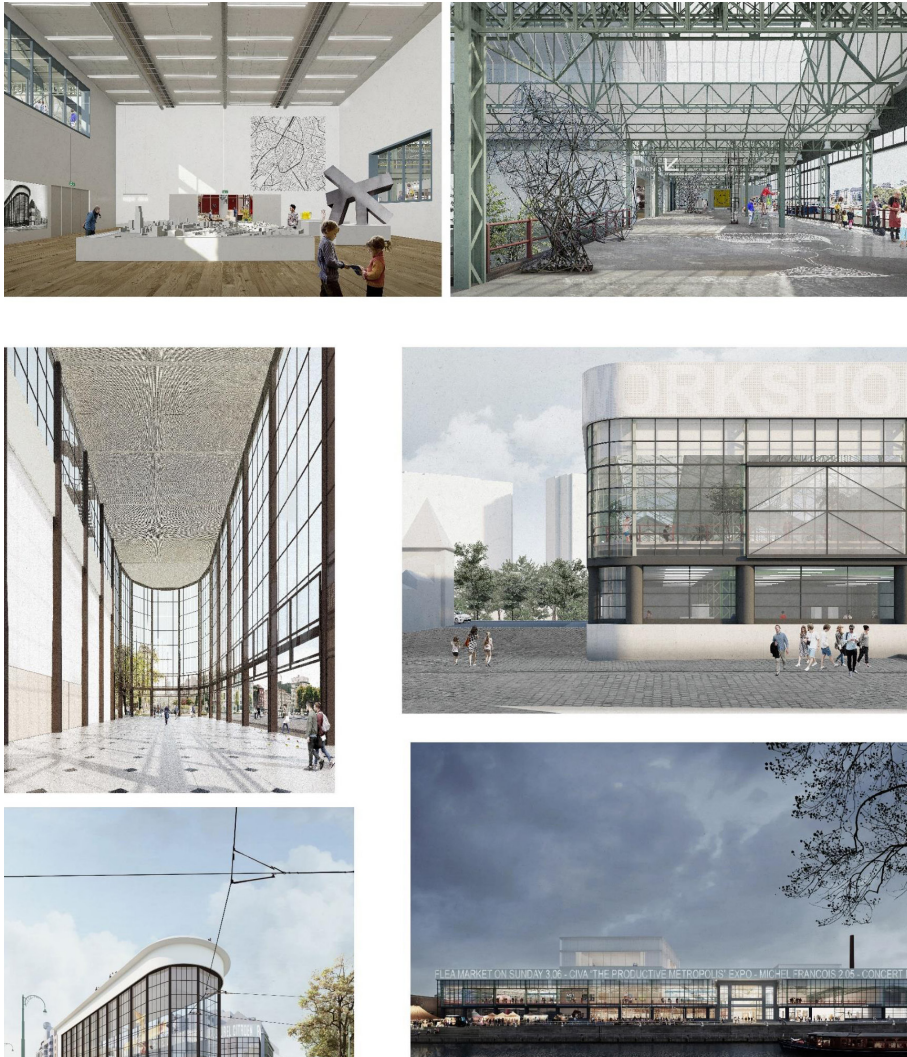


Figure 19: Images of the future KANAAL Centre Pompidou
© noAarchitecten, EM2N, Sergison Bates architects

96 Secondary Ibid., 128. In Original Torisu, "Policies to Enhance City Attractiveness: Achievements and New Challenges."

buildings and strategic public spaces are becoming the placeholders of diverse programs based on mass consumption, entertainment, (social) organizations, and art. With convincing labeling and trendy aesthetics, described by the 2006 OECD report on Competitive Cities in the Global Economy,⁹⁶ these places dedicated to culture mirror a "common good" notion of shared knowledge, alternative practices, and creative pleasures.

Already part of the Plan Canal in 2015, the KANAAL Centre Pompidou is the archetype of such a marketing strategy within the Northern Quarter, making it distinctive to the common Central Business District's urban structures. In 2017, the Regional Government concluded a convention with the Centre Georges-Pompidou for 10 years. The 1930 Citroën showrooms were turned into the city's new flagship museum. As for the building on the corner of the canal and the boulevard junction, it has a dual typological identity that produces two different façades along the main axes. Turned into showcases, these two sides are oriented towards two different contexts, therefore adapted for closer pedestrians and further inhabitants across the canal.

The international competition for the KANAAL cultural center put in concurrence 92 architecture offices, a record for Brussels, from which seven then proposed a project. The winning project was called "A Stage for Brussels" and led by the international partnership of noAarchitecten from Brussels, EM2N from Zürich, and Sergison Bates Architects from England, who founded the Atelier Kanal to work on site. The white exterior border was extended with an illuminated information strip, englobing the whole building. A transversal street runs through the 35'000 square meters site to access the three "boxes in the box." The cultural center presents itself as urban, modernist, and inclusive, a sort of "cultural city within the city".

The typical floor plans of the frontal building, previously used for the showcasing of cars, are demolished to produce a huge empty volume, thus becoming the main entrance hall. This radical gesture creates a space that is a faded reminiscence of a Gothic cathedral, where the extraordinary lay in the intimate union between architectural prowess and the very symbol of worship: light. "This new space will symbolize the Kanal project, the desire to create a 'new scene' that is open, visible, and welcoming to the people of Brussels and to Brussels itself," as explained by Yves Golstein, Administrator, Jean-François Leconte, Secretary General and Baptiste Delhauteur, Administrative and Financial Manager of the Kanal Foundation.⁹⁷ But here, the imposing space is artificially lit, and the breathtaking effect of emptiness lasts long enough to justify the purchase of a ticket that opens the doors to a culture covering economic profits based on attractiveness and international competition. This discourse was based on a gesture of massive emancipation for local inhabitants, whereas the project is expensive and risky for public finances. Indeed, it exposes all the bourgeois codes that encourage land speculation, with developers looking for clients with high cultural and financial rates. The explicit discourse being: the museum as the signal of "dynamism" of space "in mutation." Despite the temporal and spatial delays, the KANAAL seems to be reenact in Brussels, the opening of the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1977.⁹⁸

97 Goransson, "Les enjeux institutionnels et administratifs de la fondation Kanal," 5.

98 Clerval, *Paris sans le peuple. La gentrification de la capitale*, 45–46.



Figure 20: A photomontage of the temporary uses within the neighborhood coupled with the ZIN project. Pascalsmet.brussels

99 Smith, “Gentrification and Uneven Development”; Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People”; Smith, “Gentrification Generalized.”

100 As the Silver Tower, The Mobius Towers, or Quatuor attest.

101 Persyn et al., *How to Not Demolish a Building*.

103 Denoo, “The Quest for Uncertainty. Decolonizing the Future in Urban Planning,” 101.

102 The sixth argument entitled “Start Now!” is fully quoted here: “We cannot afford to wait and see. Already today, test-sites are being implemented that transform the district. Meanwhile recent activities start to show the possibilities for mixed and hybrid use, local initiatives strive for more green and local food production or provide legal assistance for newcomers, administrations co-constructing public space initiatives, property owners exploring new tenant models, etc. While being fragile, these initiatives can be the foundation for a different future for the district, a future that starts now.” Bouwmeester Maître Architecte BMA, Lab North, and perspective.brussels, “Brussels North District, Next Steps?,” 7.

104 Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*.

105 Belga, “Le projet ‘BXNord’ veut transformer le quartier Nord de la capitale en un lieu inclusif où il fait bon vivre”; “BXNord.be.”

The necessity to transform the Northern Quarter, defended by the private sector organizations and the public authorities, intensifies the gap between the actual and potential land values for speculative capital accumulations.⁹⁹ A built rhetoric based on time and space transforms the district’s image, therefore increasing and legitimizing new real estate developments through destruction and reconstruction.¹⁰⁰ This new kind of planning paradigm developed recently can be seen as a shift in urban transformation methods. Indeed, the very notion of planning distinguishes this new operating mode from the previous phases of the district’s development. Modernist planning ignored its context to project the future of a new city; postmodernist planning swore by its context which was to rise from its ashes and repair the city of the past by adapting it to the present. In the Northern Quarter and Brussels, planning nowadays seems to deny the very principle of planning because of the gap between the plans and their realizations, representing a time that can’t be wasted anymore. This temporal rupture results in the focus on the “here and now.”¹⁰¹

Therefore, softer interventions are replacing the hard urban transformation of the 20th century. Presented as a solution to avoid repeating the same mistakes as in the past, tests and experiments are coupled with temporary projects and ephemeral uses. These urban experiments are justified as opportunities to share knowledge and ideas to develop new futures in a so-called participatory manner.¹⁰² Lab North launched several temporary projects in the WTC I tower before transforming into ZIN: workshops, urban gardens, discussions with the area’s inhabitants, and other cultural programs were taking place there. These experiments are justified to serve a long-term vision,¹⁰³ turning the district into an urban laboratory of experiments. However, the crucial argument in this contemporary discourse relies on a new way of conceiving the present and the future. The process of this new planning phase is mainly based on urban experiments aiming to answer a “common good” crisis. To avoid repeating the same mistakes as in the past, softer interventions replace the hard urban transformation of the 20th century with tests and experiments. Hence, analyzing the translation and the transmission of knowledge gained through these experiments reveals the masking of a process of lowering uncertainty to enable a new boom in the real estate cycle in the Northern Quarter. Marketing campaigns are used as a tool for legitimate planning in times of speculative accumulations as a “common good” while reproducing power structures through the production of space.¹⁰⁴ The experimentation for urban transformation is a risk of accentuating business-as-usual outside the experimental bubble and getting closer to a broken system. The Northern Quarter is specific because the urban experiments allow us to experience uncertainty by being the link between the known and the unknown, the link between two contradictory elements.

Recently, Up4North launched 2023 the BXNord campaign in collaboration with the Brussels Region and the Secretary of State for Town Planning, Ans Persoons. The aim is to “showcase Brussels’ Espace Nord”, as “the place to be” in Europe’s capital within a decade.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the dark old picture of the district is progressively covered under a multitude of “experiences,” creating a new hymn for the transformation of the Northern Quarter: “Make Work extra-ordinary,” “Make Share extra-ordinary,” and

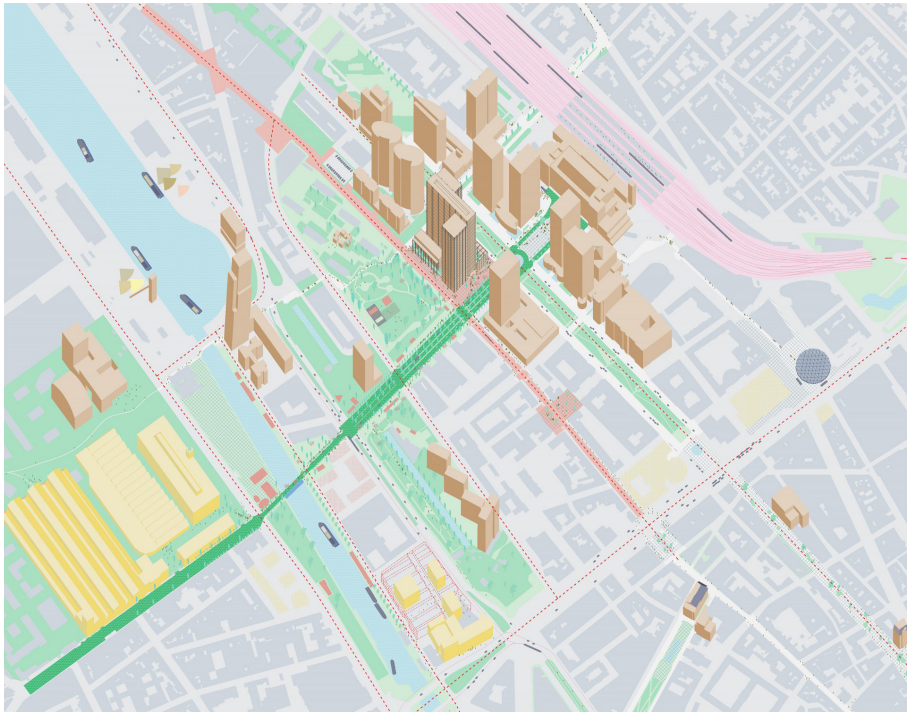


Figure 21: The Zin project is represented surrounded by other urban objects within the Northern Quarter. The east-west green axis is linking the Northern Station to Tour&Taxis. Both maps are playing with abstraction. 51N4E, ZIN
 Figure 22: “There’s a new downtown in town”, mapping of the “must-see” places in the Northern Quarter: Brussels Nord Station, ZIN, Kanal Centre-Pompidou, Sea Port, Tour&Taxis. BXNord, <https://bxnord.be>

106 “BXNord.be.”

“Make Life extra-ordinary.” “There’s a new downtown in town,” as stated on the flash-colored website, that is addressed “to the young, bold and innovative people we want to bring here from all over Europe” who can find an area that “hosts an intense alternative, cultural and artistic life. Day & night.”¹⁰⁶ Next to this slogan, a map shows the “must-see places” with its sights set on Kanal-Centre Pompidou, Tour&Taxis, and the Ferme Maximilien, as well as the Sea Port along the canal, ZIN, and the Nord Station. Pined on this abstract map, there’s no other information than the addresses of these places and their recognizable portrayals, making sure to focus everyone’s attention on them. The district is pictured as a blank stage on which each spectator of the audience is incited to play their role. Waiting on the stage are some actors, the carefully selected buildings, who are telling their lines eloquently and are wrapped in convincing costumes. Directly interacting with the audience, they offer space and time for the new players to orientate themselves towards their preferences while proposing some alternatives. This website is used as cybernetics vitrines for transformations: the experiences happening within the neighborhood are also taking place in this digital space through different types of information and news on “the progress of the various worksites”. Therefore, this part of the city is becoming a playground of experiences, which are taking place in a (web)site made of multiple locations, between a digital and a real world in the making. The “here and now” is embodied by temporally unframed events that are spreading across borders: “Let’s transform business quarters and towers into unseen multifunctional experiences for living, shopping, or visiting. Let’s overcome boundaries so we make it happen together. Because in the end, we all aim at something or somewhere for us to feel at home. Something perfectly imperfect to be yourself. Somewhere to dare to be yourself.”¹⁰⁷ A rhetoric that dissolves the present into a distant past and constructs the future into the here and now – an ideal transformation of the real. Fictions to attract, actions to value, and projects to secure: all this process is happening as an event detached from any other planning than securing this urban space as being part of the real estate market race, without falling again.

107 Ibid.

Some decades ago, the Bilbao Effect triggered a wild chase for impressive but ephemeral sensations in front of iconic buildings. This non-unique moment would have been crystalized through photographs and selfies and spread to be seen by all. For the sake of great pictures, this architecture of great means is frontal and doesn’t necessarily need to be experienced from the inside since its real value lies in appearances, thus taking place in an international competition between cities, feeding the municipalities’ economies by boosting tourist rates. Nowadays, in Brussels and its Northern Quarter, the trend seems to have changed into a more “caring” image regarding buildings’ direct environments (in terms of context and issues to face, such as renovation, sustainability, flexibility, etc.). Buildings are not especially new but involve transformations to allow diverse uses. The attraction is not about impressive images from the outside but rather extraordinary experiences on the inside. Both have an ephemeral character, either by an effect that fades over time or by a use that is replaced. However, these ephemeral characters are hiding power structures that replicate themselves through time.

By overcoming boundaries, the ideal and real transformation of the

neighborhood is expanding in parallel to the city center, thus aiming to form another “downtown in town.” The Northern Quarter’s enclosure is being transformed by its increasing perimeter, which attempts to overcome the radical fractures of the urban landscape. With this, strategic points are being developed, forming a network of single objects whose linking axes are centrifugal forces pushing space and time beyond the borders. These points are glittering elements, serving as landmarks among unscaled solids and voids, forming a chaotic whole. Transforming one of these points implicates the transformation of the others, either as a means or an end. The act of transformation is scaled up: the changing state of the object is at the same time (but not with the same value of time) changing the state of the network to which it belongs, and vice versa. An urban echo can be observed, sprawling over time and space.

The act of transformation can also be retroactive between the ideal and the real, which can be understood as fiction and reality. Transforming the reality of our environment could also be done by transforming the idea of this environment. To do so, fiction is used and, therefore, its tools such as narration, discourse, rhetoric, language, representation, and image. When fiction is projected on reality, the act of transformation is operating, either on one or the other, or both.¹⁰⁸ In an urban context such as the Northern Quarter of Brussels, discourses were built throughout history to transform the real state of the place (at a certain time, in a certain space) because its future was uncertain. However, these fictions were implemented with real tools of transformation, such as urban planning tools or expropriation acts, which further blurred the definition of each constitutive element of the whole system. The process of gentrification is a type of urban transformation. Despite its variations through time and space, gentrification seems to have become the most common way Western post-Fordist cities are transformed. The relation between gentrification and the real estate hegemony, with its deflagrating consequences on (public) planning, can softly intrude on reality, thus hiding the power structures that are present and persistent behind it.

108 Tafuri and Tafuri, *Progetto e utopia*; Žižek, *Event*.

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This paper is part of a research project on *Domesticity* within the TPOD laboratory consisting of the following Theoretical Statements:

Beyond the Closet, Klea Ott

Staging Movement, Ada Massarente

Destination Home, Vanesa Santillan Messina

First Struggle Then Housing, Antoine Ricard-Gauthier

Pretending to Take the Country's Side, Karl-August Valfells

Housewifization, Meryl Louise Barthe

Round Table, Jian Lin Wong

Persistent Community, Melchior Dechancé

Room for Women, Camyl Vigneault

From Hard to Soft, Julie-Anna Barès

Factory of Lives, Serena Mazzetti

