

Colloque *Militantisme décolonial : enjeux et perspectives* à l'Université de Liège (20-21 mai 2026)

Decolonising public spaces in Brussels (2020–2025). When the authorities get themselves into a mess [/get involved]

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[Décoloniser l'espace public à Bruxelles (2020-2025). Quand les autorités s'emmèlent]

Theoretical framework

Decolonial : A set of strategies, discourses and struggles that challenge the political, economic, social and epistemological structures constituting the coloniality of a given society.

Coloniality : Colonial characteristics that stem directly or indirectly from the ideological, legal, political and economic power structures that shaped the colonial regimes of a given society.

Decolonial economy : A system of exchange within which visibility, legitimacy, access to resources, institutional recognition and control over the terms of decolonial critique are negotiated.

The centrality of public space in belgian memory activism



September 2008 : Théophile de Giraud covers the bust of the Place du Trône's equestrian statue of Leopold II with red paint, symbolizing the blood shed for the exploitation of the Congo.



2004 : Symbolical sawing off of the hand of a congolese figure part of the Leopold equestrian statue on Ostend's seafront.

Since ~2010: A fake plaque has been installed Place de l'Athénée in Ixelles to call for the creation of a square dedicated to Patrice Lumumba.



Since 2010 : Afro-descendant collectives take over public space and its material coloniality to organize decolonial guided tours.

Since 2008 : Afrodescendants collectives gather in front of the Monument to the African Campaigns in Schaerbeek to commemorate the soldiers of the Congo Force Publique every November 11th.



2020-2024: Public space on the decolonial agenda

2020

- **Anderlecht & Ixelles:** Implementation of policies (including inventories) targeting streets with names linked to colonial history
- Etterbeek: Creation of the Mixed Participatory Commission on colonial traces in the public space of the municipality of Etterbeek.
- **Schaerbeek:** establishment of a working group dedicated to remembrance (including that of colonisation)
- **Brussels-Capital Region :** project launch "Vers la décolonisation de l'espace public en Région Bruxelles Capitale" (report published in 2022).

2021

- **Forest:** Adoption of a motion on (de)colonial memory and the fight against discrimination

2022

- **Brussels-Capital Region:** Brussels Heritage Days focused on the traces of colonisation in the public space
- **Ixelles:** removal of the bust of General Émile Storms from Meeûs Square

2023

- **Schaerbeek :** The bust of Mayor Roger Nols has been symbolically turned upside down in the town hall
- **Brussels-Capital Region:** Launch of a 14-point action plan for the decolonisation of public spaces

2024

- **Brussels-Capital Region:** Unveiling of an art installation in dialogue with the monument to Belgian pioneers in the Congo at the Cinquanteenaire Park

Scheduled :

- **City of Brussels:** Unveiling of a monument honouring Patrice Lumumba in the square already named after him (Matonge)

"Encommissionnement" Governing the Colonial Question through Commissions

Belgian public authorities have historically managed colonial and postcolonial issues through commissions:

1904 - 1905: Commission of Inquiry into the Atrocities Committed in the Congo Free State;

2000 - 2001 : Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the assassination of Patrice Lumumba

2020 - 2022 : Special parliamentary committee tasked with examining the Independent State of the Congo (1885–1908), Belgium's colonial past in the Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962), as well as the consequences thereof and the measures to be taken in response.

1. Framing the issue

- Which issues are taken into account?
- What implicit limits are set?

3. Regulating discourse

- What can be said?
- Which proposals are considered legitimate?

2. Selecting expertise

- Who is seen as legitimate?
- Academic / activist / institutional forms of knowledge?

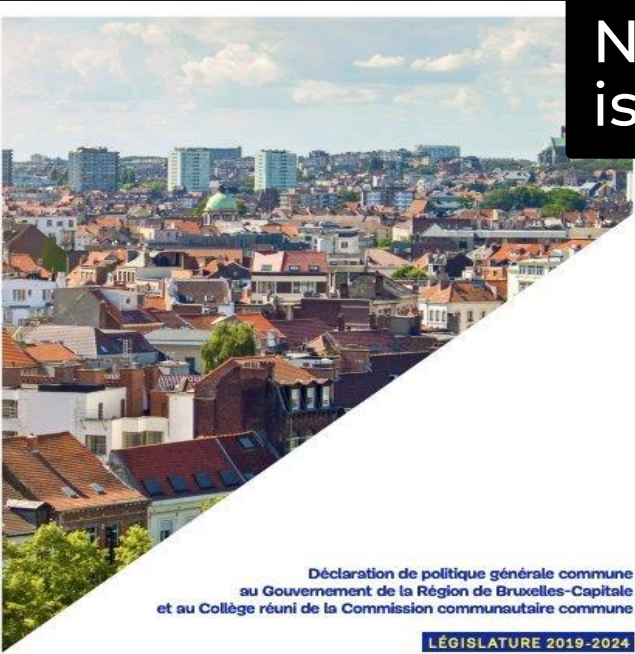
4. Disseminating or containing the debate

- Publicization
- Effects on public opinion and public policy

Negotiating the inclusion of (de)colonial issues on the political agenda

‘The Government will launch a reflection, in collaboration with academics and relevant civil society organisations, on symbols in public spaces associated with colonisation.’

Déclaration de politique générale commune au Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale et au Collège réuni de la Commission communautaire commune. Législature 2019-2024, Bruxelles, 2019, p. 47.



Déclaration de politique générale commune
au Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale
et au Collège réuni de la Commission communautaire commune

LÉGISLATURE 2019-2024

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Toward the decolonisation : “a project of radical equality”

DECOLONISING PUBLIC SPACES IN THE BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION: A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



REPORT OF THE
WORKING GROUP
FEBRUARY 2022

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‘We very quickly agreed that the decolonisation of public space was part of a much broader programme, because you cannot simply decolonise public space and continue to live in a society that has not been decolonised. These initial sessions also revealed that there was a core group, representing the majority, who rallied behind the same definition [of the decolonisation of public space]. (...) That is why we were able to be so radical.’

Interview with a member of the Working Group, 2 July 2025

The decolonization of public space must be part of a broader policy that recognizes the impact and consequences of colonization for people of Sub-Saharan African descent. This is why it is essential to develop corresponding policies in other areas (...) such as healthcare, housing, research, urban planning, and employment.

Vers la Décolonisation de l'Espace Public en Région Bruxelles Capitale, p. 211

DECOLONISING
PUBLIC
SPACES IN THE
BRUSSELS-CAPITAL
REGION:
A FRAMEWORK
FOR REFLECTION
AND RECOM

Resizing the decolonial : From the Report to the Action plan

“The report’s militant tone was toned down so that the Region, as a public and political institution, could take ownership of the issue and so that the government as a whole would support the project.”

Urban.Brussels Cultural Heritage
Department.

TOWARDS THE DECOLONISATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN THE BRUSSELS- CAPITAL REGION

“organize commemorative days”

“create a national monument”

“create a documentation center”

“dump/dumpsite
for colonial symbols”

Operational monitoring commission

Conditionalization of the
recommendations

Lexical softening / reduction
of the “militant tone”

Change in the nature and
function of the bodies

“continue the reflection”

“analyze the feasibility of a memorial”

“feasibility study for an interpretation center”

“Storage facility”

Advisory committee

Creation of the position of decolonization coordinator

“That’s not really in the spirit of our report.”

Interview with a member of the Working Group, 2 July 2025

action plan
may 2023

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Coordination: a central role within the dispositif

A structural issue

- Limited (de)colonial expertise within institutions
- Strong reliance on external expertise
- precarious and peripheral status of external expertise

→ asymmetry between institutional knowledge and critical knowledge of the colonized

The “decolonization coordinator” position

- Created through the action plan
- Two-year mandate
- Responsible for supervising and coordinating the actions

A role of legitimation

- Central importance of the coordinator’s relational capital
“If Romain had not been involved, personally, I would have refused.”

Black Lives Matter (Brussels 07/06/2020) : 'this city belongs to us too'



- = the result of a long and multifaceted campaign against the **indifference** of the authorities
- Raising democratic issues of inclusion (or exclusion) and diversity (homogeneity) :
 - Who does the public space belong to? Does the public space reflect today's society?
 - Whose story is being told? What is being said about history?
 - Who determines what constitutes heritage and to whom does it belong?
 - Why do we commemorate certain historical events, places and people in public spaces, and not others?
 - Whose perspective do these colonial traces represent?
 - In doing so, which perspectives and which members of society are we silencing?
- Keeping the spotlight on contemporary racial discrimination

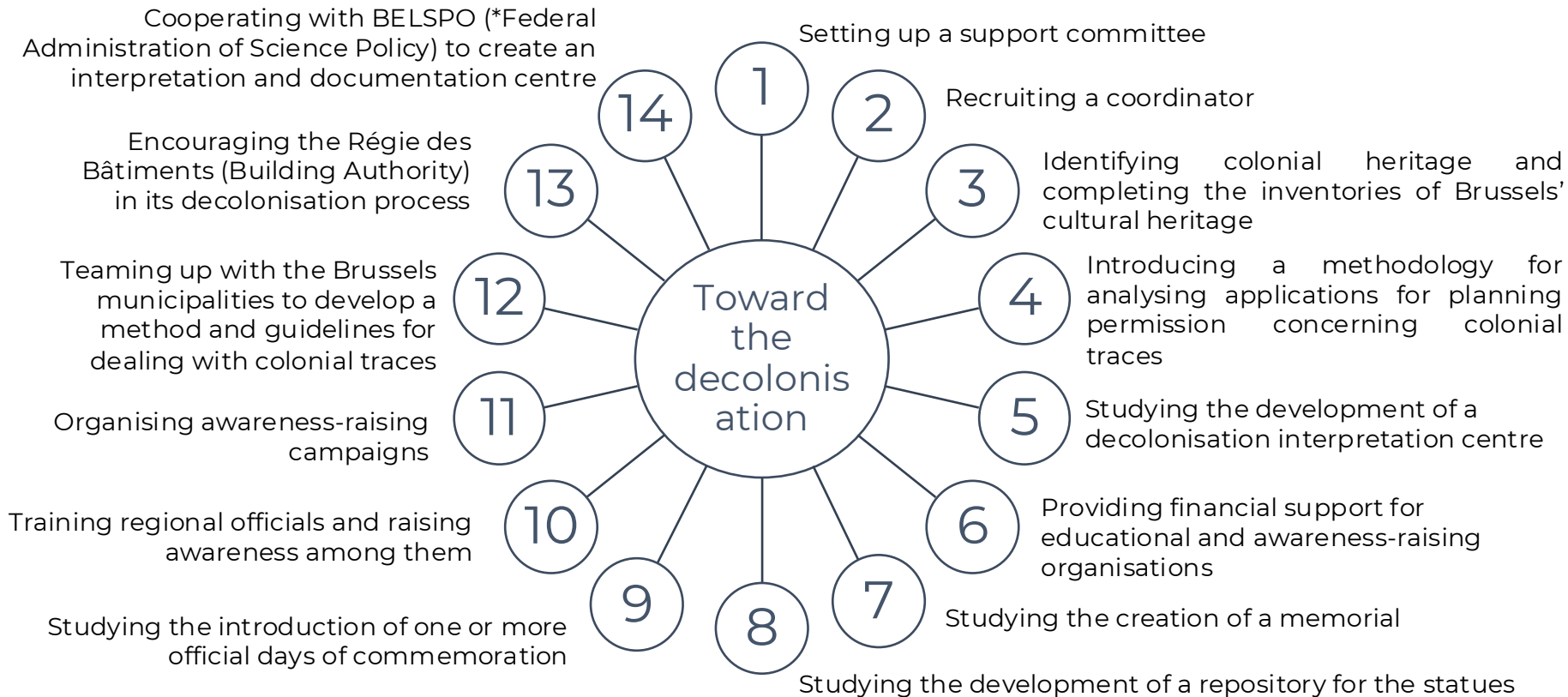
Towards the decolonisation of public space in the Brussels Capital Region



Mural of George Floyd by NovaDead, Laken (Brussel). Street Art trail © Éric Danhier (June 2020)

<https://urban.brussels/en/decolonisation>

The Action Plan (2023-2025)



Colonial denial, white innocence and the rejection of scientific knowledge



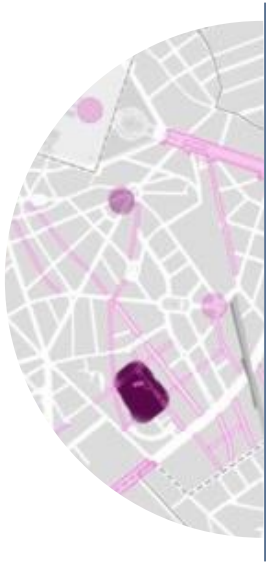
- A ‘taboo’, ‘sensitive’, ‘controversial’ or even ‘woke’ topic
- ‘erasing history’
- ‘considering both the positive and negative aspects of colonisation’ (a balanced approach)

Action 1: a support committee (or a power relations workshop)



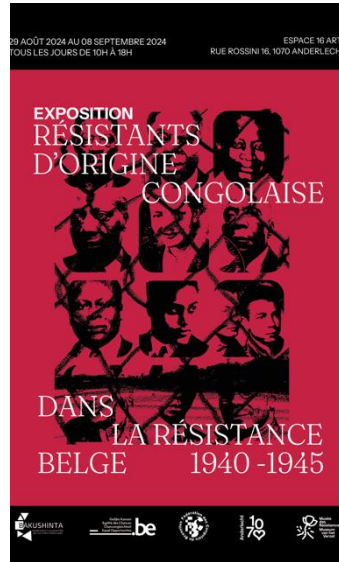
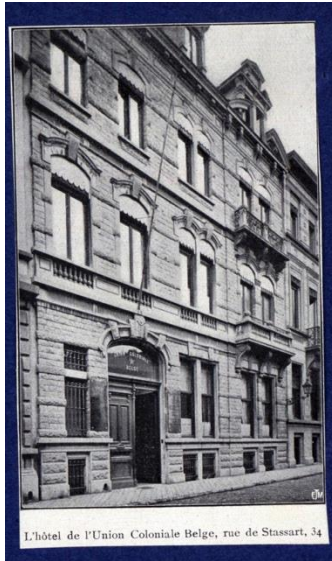
- A unique forum for dialogue between public authorities (14 representatives), civil society (5 representatives) and academics (2 full members + observers)
- “Everyone teaches and everyone learns”
- Funding for expert advice
- Burnout among decolonial activists
- Who makes the (final) decisions?
- Lacking a legal basis...

Action 3: Identify, document and map colonial traces



- Observation: there is a widespread lack of knowledge among Belgians regarding (Belgian) colonisation and postcolonial and decolonial studies
 - During the support committee meetings, activists and academics make a significant contribution to the understanding of the traces
- Between 160 and 180 traces within the BRC area: monuments, statues, buildings, plaques, street names, etc.
- 116 traces listed in Brussels' cultural heritage inventories and geolocated using Brugis
- Changing selection criteria
- A popular guide is currently being written...

Countering colonial propaganda and highlighting the resistance of the colonised (in Africa and in Brussels)



See the awareness-raising section of the Action Plan :

- Action 6: Provide financial support to education and awareness-raising organisations **(no budget allocated)**
- Action 10: Train regional civil servants
- Action 11: Organise awareness-raising activities

Decolonising heritage, architecture, and the landscape?

The example of the return of the van Eetvelde office in Brussels (7 July 2025)



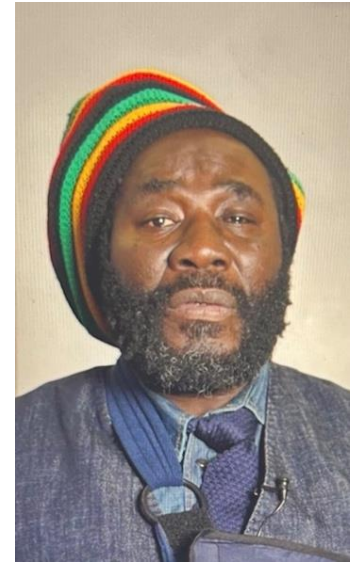
- The unease caused by the highlighting of the links between artistic movements (Art Nouveau & Art Deco) and Belgian colonisation
- 'the ineffability of colonial violence [...] within (and beyond) the discipline of architecture' [IGER & TASSI 2025]
 - Temporary art projects created by 'artists' of African descent
- protection of a major source of tourism revenue

Toma M. Luntumbue (2023): 'Whatever their artistic and technical merits, the commercial exploitation of colonial buildings that ignores who the original patrons, builders and beneficiaries were amounts to legitimising colonial ideology'

Accounting for the genealogies and records of coloniality



'The development [FR : « la mise en valeur »] of the Congo's natural resources raises, above all, the issue of transport links between the metropolis and the colony. The sea route will, of course, remain the preferred option for heavy goods. But the transport of people [...] cannot continue to rely on such a slow mode of transport when air travel is available.'



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