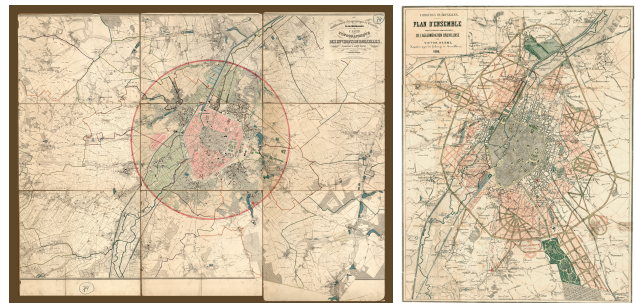


Brussels in its pre-urbanistic days

Paper and pavement

There are many benefits at looking at the pre-urbanistic days of Brussels, i.e. the time when urbanism was not yet coined nor practiced as a profession, while the rapid urbanisation process was already taking place. In *Agglomérer*, set in the 19th Century, three benefits are present. They all relate to the way in which we, local researchers in urban studies, usually conceive - or should I say misconceive ? - 19th Century planning practice. First of all, the fragmented nature of Brussels is often traced back to the failure of 1854, when National Parliament decided to maintain municipal autonomy in the Brussels surroundings. The city-center would not be reunited into one bigger urban entity. Still today, the 19 municipalities are held responsible for a lot of the city's misfortunes. Instead, the book shows that the surroundings have been unified, consolidated, that the failure of 1854 was overcome, and that the territorial unity had nothing to do with municipal borders, but proceeded from the ways in which houses and streets were moulded in an overall coherent manner. There's a difference between municipal unity and agglomerated of pre-urbanistic unity ¹

Secondly, it is often said that the first general maps of Brussels, those of the road inspectors Charles Vanderstraeten and Victor Besme, are the forerunners of urbanism or city planning. Even more, at the turn of the 20th Century, this view was held by some of the early urbanists themselves! But, and the book shows this, such a teleological view fails to acknowledge that there's a huge gap between working with road alignments only - i.e. the main tool available to inspectors then - and working with full-fledged town development tools, with sectorial hierarchies, programmatic attributions and enforced residential zones. In French, in Dutch, the difference is quite clear: 19th Century inspectors made maps of *alignment*, of *alignement* or *rooilijnen*, whereas 20th Century urbanists made maps of town development, of *aménagement* or *ruimtelijke ordening*. So, instead of staring itself blind on the visual global coherence and overall beauty of those maps, the book relates those maps back to the planning practice, to the correspondence and to the strategic intentions which led to draw those maps in the first place. *Agglomérer* reintegrates both maps in their technical and political milieu, their own complex environment.



Thirdly, and lastly, the birth of urbanism is often told in a progressive way, from relative small State power to great or at least greater State power, from an emphasis laid on private interests to one laid or at least intentionally claimed on public interest. Here, the misconception turns into error. The Belgian State has been very present from the start, in matters of opening roads and

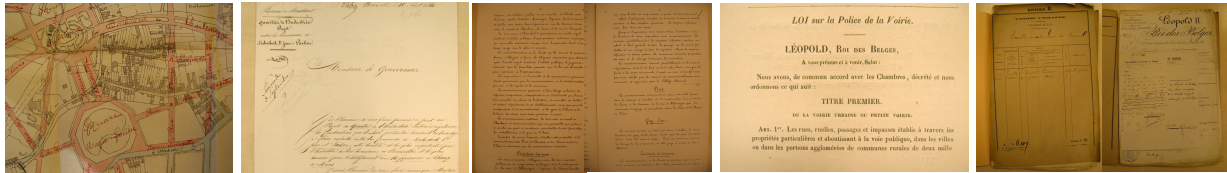
neighbourhoods, in guaranteeing an overall coherence and looking after the lay-out of the city's extensions. The State was planning, but the question is - taking the queue from Jessica Van de Ven's invitation mail - *how* was it doing this? *Hoe gebeurde stadsplanning toen?* How did urban planning happen then? *Agglomérer* shows that during the 19th Century, the State was planning ahead, regulating the extensions, that it was doing so for the sake and in the name of public good. The book shows that the shift which occurred at the turn of the 20th Century, when urbanism was coined and invented, is not a shift going from less to more State, from private to public interests, but one that moves away from the Ministry of Interior, its inspectors and land surveyors, its local negotiating and diplomatic practices, to embrace the Ministry of Public Works, its engineers and its architects, its zoning and science-based rulings. Gradual and prospective planning was replaced by immediate and total planning, and this cannot be reduced to a matter of right turning into left, of private investors losing ground. On the contrary.

So, the general maps of alignments are no forerunners of urbanistic thinking, the city's unity is not a matter of municipal borders only, the State was very present from the start. These are three benefits gained from looking back at the 19th Century. In other words, our current situation, urbanism, city planning and the revolution they brought upon us, is not exactly what it seems to be... But let me get into the story now. Let me give you a sense of these so-called benefits. It is the story of the extension of Brussels. It is the story of a paper-pavement performance. It is the story of a territorial machine.

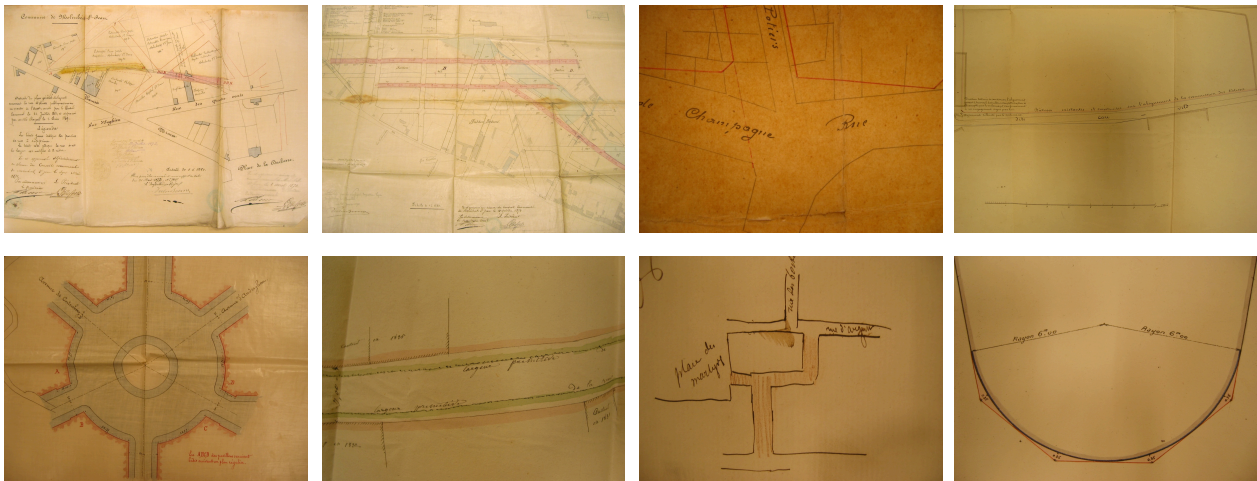
The machine is a word that does *not* abound in my book - naming the "urbanisation machine" was only useful when analysing the triggering effects for construction which municipalities tried to accomplish on the ground (*Agglomérer*, pp. 177-178) - but I take it up again after reading Céline Tellier's work². When describing the genealogy of the Brussels' subway system, Tellier refers to the machine as comprising the ministries, professional trades, technical construction methods and public budget allowances which, all together, propel the subway into the city's destiny. And that is where the metaphor of the machine gets interesting. The machine propels; it has momentum; it gets going and, when it does, it is hard to stop. Not only does it have a body and cogwheels - i.e. State's offices, municipal councils, civil servants, engineers and others - but it's also made of simultaneous movement, of entangled holds and grips, of concatenated pressure points and supporting surfaces which allow the machine to hold. Just like in a dancers loop, it's the momentum of the whirling and circling which fuels the performance. Rather than mapping its elements or connexions, the machine's rendering must therefore account for its workings, its fuel, its forces. Thus the descriptive locus - i.e. the position or coordinates that allow the researcher to trace the territorial machine and its workings - is aimed at mapping the connexions and also, furthermore, at unveiling collective propensity. Now, what is this propensity and how can it be traced?

The starting point is often a paper trail. As Delphine Gardey³ has shown, paper transactions are characteristic of contemporary society; they exist as soon as collective or institutional actions are undertaken, be it on the private or on the public side; and they are especially abundant when legal procedures are involved, as was the case in my own fieldwork. In *Agglomérer*, letters,

proceedings, decrees, laws, maps and technical requirements run back and forth between ministers, civil servants, inspectors, mayors and landowners, so as to allow road improvement and to grant permits in the city's immediate surroundings and by doing this, they create a territory, i.e. Brussels extended. Let me show you some of these documents: [a map; a letter to the Governor; technical requirements on road-building, gas and water piping; a law on road-building; a file cover from "Department B" and a Royal Decree]



The documents all belong to the Governor's archives, more precisely to Department B, afterwards called Department 12, created in 1828 and disbanded in 1972. The Department looked after roads; it checked the tracing and opening of new roads, the adjustment and transformation of old ones, the replacement of unfitted ones and the suppression of dead-end streets, the construction of squares, and so on. The Department had its likes in the other provinces and, together, they were in charge of a relatively small portion of the country's land, i.e. the urban municipalities and the zones of exception such as Brussels' surroundings, the areas of reconstruction such as the Ypres area after the First World war, etc. So, Department 12 is an incredible locus of description: it is narrow, focused, procedural thus compulsory, and - this is the most important point - it is set at the heart of the urbanisation process. Let me show you some of the drawings which caught my attention in the first place. [streets adjusted or inaugurated in an old and a new neighbourhood; softer corners and widening of street; change the street outline by a few dozen centimeters; a square; the sizing-up of side walks; sketch; adjustment of a corner]



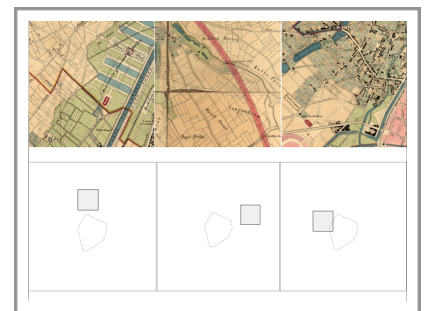
As you can see, following the paper trail unfolds the urban transformation *in concreto*. During the 19th Century, these documents physically shaped the streets of Brussels because they carried negotiation and decision-making onto the ground. A paper-pavement performative machine was at work. It was a territorial machine and it was a blind one; it was oblivious to most contemporaneous political and social events; and its blindness will not disappear by merely adding historical context to it. Rather, the blind spots point to an altogether different picture, an endogenous pic-

ture, to the machine's own logics, its own stakes, its soul so to speak. In my case, this soul quest, or what I've called the search for propensity, led to two results and empirical discoveries which, retrospectively, change the perception of pre-urbanistic planning practices during the 19th Century. Here, from this point onwards, we dig deeper into the empirical material and we close in on the machine's propensity.

Closing in on propensity

The first discovery bears on the State's role in formatting the surroundings of Brussels. Now, let's remember that at the start, the State was not the topic of my research and that it was only a side-effect of wanting to follow an empirical trail, by wanting to talk in concreto of the city in the making, of pavement and brick walls. But when I realized how blind this territorial machine was, I asked myself: what is at stake in the territorial making *from the endogenous point of view, seen from the insides of the paper trail*? What is the overall impact of the gradual transformations *at the level of the pavement cut, the curbs of side-walks and other details that gather in the archives*? Digging deeper into the empirical material, trying to connect all files, I realised - for it wasn't written anywhere - that there had been State surveillance. *Agglomérer* not only shows that the State was present during the 19th Century, it also shows that the State controlled and shaped the surroundings of its capital. Furthermore, I discovered that this control or this surveillance had been established by *one* single operator. This operator was no other than the Department itself! By taking care of road files and assuring their follow-up until final approval by royal decree, the Department operated as a compulsory point of transition for the entire procedural trail. It detected any physical change that was intended on the ground. This, then, is how the story goes:

- All files came from municipalities who, because they were city-centers or set in exceptional zones, could not apply directly for a royal decree and had to pass through the Governor's office before reaching other levels of executive power. Establishing that single difference, between passing or not passing through the office, allowed the State - i.e. the Ministry of interior, the Governor and his collaborators, the road inspector and the county commissioner - to turn the construction sites to their advantage. That is a fact. It does not say anything about the intentions. It is rather the machine's strength, part of its propensity. Department 12 worked as a grip.
- On the legal side, the State gripped the urbanisation process by squeezing into a procedure from which it had first been excluded. Constitutionally, landowners and municipalities were in charge of construction. So, as long as the Ministry of interior stayed merely at the end of the line, where construction initiatives were either approved or refused by royal decree, there wasn't much room for adjustment. But as soon as the two appointees - the Governor and the inspector - entered the game, right in the middle of it, the paper trail could run back to the municipalities, back and forth, carrying suggestions until the State's desires were met.



► On the intentional side, for the State, gripping the urbanisation process meant: guaranteeing traffic fluidity and opening possibilities for further investment - two aims which define the “public good” and which are revealed by the records of Department 12. To enhance fluidity, for traffic sake, a lot of digging and filling went on around Brussels; tons of ramble were imported to streamline the hills; hard porphyry pavement was imported into the industrial area. To enhance investment, all was done to leave the future open - again, it happens in the details: sewers were re-designed so as to become open-ended; reversible stairs were added to doorsteps; first floors were elevated so as not to obstruct further changes;...

In other words, the grip operated by Governor’s office touched up the entire outskirts, from the levelling of hills to the calculation of pavement cuts. All this became clear to me when looking for the archive’s or machine’s *own* logic.

Furthermore, and that’s where the second discovery comes in, disclosing the machine’s strength, tracking its active patterns, unleashes also its technical, its empowering and more poetic - or should I say more *active* political - dimensions. I discovered that the extension of Brussels was, at heart, a creative undertaking and that we fail to see this because we do not *want* to see it. We ignore the poetic engrain of a technical sketch or an administrative letter, out of scientific seriousness perhaps or for the sake of political criticality most probably - especially when State surveillance is concerned! But it’s a mistake. For agency doesn’t spring from boredom; the machine’s fuel cannot be mere water; actors don’t move because they are told to. They move because they strategise, hatch up schemes and aspire. Such wheeling and dealing, such desire, cannot be understood if the positive, interesting and even transcending empirical moments are systematically set aside. In other words, we need to think *with* the machine, *with* the collective undertakings, as anthropologists have done. The seemingly banal must be granted Godlike grandeur, the archive’s detail must be treated as the augurs of an oracle, for only then are we able to discover the more powerful and *potentially more empowering sides* of the State-led grip. The Belgian, 19th Century, pre-urbanistic State-led grip is not only a grip. If we accept to see the poetic, active-political and philosophical engrain of empirical details, then it becomes something quite different, i.e. a territory in the making. That’s the second discovery: these people knew how to make territories.

The story, then, goes on like this:

► The Minister, Governor, road inspector, county commissioner experimented with concrete as well as abstract considerations - doorsteps and elevated floors were already mentioned and there’s more. They claimed the rule of ubiquity, i.e. the idea that development can leap from any place within the surveyed zone and that urban growth evolves along scattered impulses rather than in a concentric manner (two different ways of being with the investors, of enhancing investment). Road inspection therefore required the enactment of many possible futures in every single point of the territory, i.e. the enactment of the many developments which would be triggered from God knows where, and to God knows what effect - but to which every single point had to be able to reply, had to be prepared. And all this without impeding on the overall coherence! As one road inspector had it: the initiative of one obliged him to

trace the impact for all (*Agglomérer*, p. 140). Which, of course, was an impossible task and led to some shrewdness on the State's part.

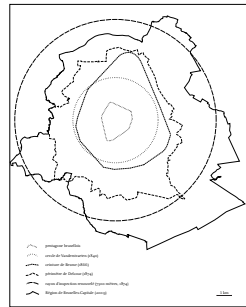
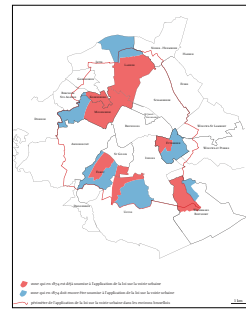
► Along the meanders of collective invention, road alignment - a major tool of road inspection - was slowly diverted from its usual role in order to establish overall coordination. It became the dotted line - named (by me) after a visual trait on a map. See the images: here's the map; here's the zone of exception and inspection; here's the circular canvas of ubiquity where the dotted lines were implemented. These lines were virtual, latent, dormant, not to be constructed entities which simply gave directions when construction was undertaken, allowing for it to happen as long as the main connexions of the city were upheld. As such, they offered a sense of orientation in the overall scheme of things: "if you constructs, you will construct in the eyes of the entire circle". A virtual gridlock rested underneath the surface where it operated a future constraint.



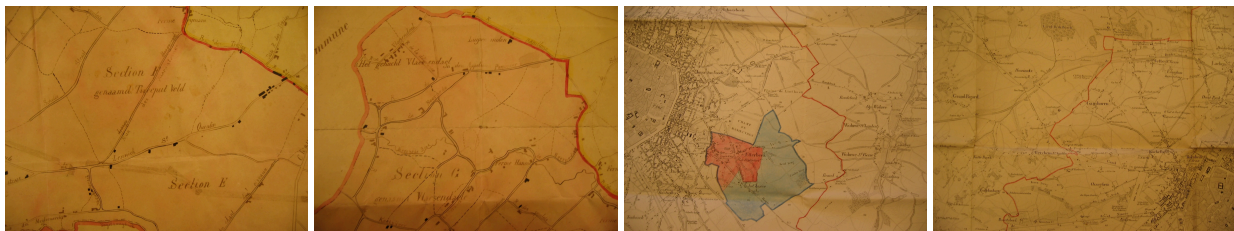
► Civil servants, then, learned the acrobatic art of future-making. They learned to distinguish between a future that is self-fulfilling and required each landlord of a street or a neighbourhood to act according to a given aim, on the one hand, and a future that is imposed by the passage of time and required to come ahead of times, i.e. to be able to prospect, on the other hand. They also learned to distinguish between houses which turned their back on the future, were uncooperative, isolated and distanced from the road, and those that were just as isolated but geared towards the future, adjacent to the roads, with party or "waiting" walls, reinforced foundations, and other material details that allowed future investors to build alongside them.

► To agglomerate, then, became a technical construction or planning term. For landlords and inspectors alike, it meant enabling each point of the circle to trigger new extensions and it meant the seriality of construction by means of material detail. In the meantime, it had also become a legal term which - if applied on a territorial part, by mere labelling - gave the rural municipality the same demolishing rights as cities. In absence of any clear definition of what was or wasn't, legally at least, agglomerated, all rural municipalities around Brussels applied for this particular status. It didn't take long for the State to seize this opportunity and to grant teleological powers to the agglomerated: the agglomerated was the city-in-the-making, the city-to-be, and vice versa. This is how the city's first general perimeter - the perimeter of the agglomerated - was constructed.

► The image is a reconstruction based on seven partial maps. To my knowledge, it's the first time that this perimeter is represented and talked of. A historical discovery thus. And a theoretical one: these people knew how to make territories; they made one which we've forgotten about. In this perimeter, there wasn't only a State-led grip or control (see the big circle), there also was an enforcement of how the city should evolve, how alignments had to operate virtually at first, how buildings and pavement had to be prepared for further investment, how and to what extent spontaneous construction could be demolished, how courts of law could decide upon construction and demolishing rights. This is the perimeter, drawn in the State's offices in 1875, never publicly declared, but from then onwards used and enforced, which made the unity of the Brussels' Agglomeration, long before any bilingual or 19 municipalities were acknowledged as such. It is the unity of the territorial machine of urbanization.



► And when you look closely, you can only acknowledge the cleverness of this perimeter.



[last series of slides: red “agglomerated” zones without any buildings; blue agglomerated zone at some distance from the city center and the urbanised parts of the city; red perimeter of the agglomerated zone at a big distance from the city itself; all without much agglomeration going on] Here's an enigmatic research moment which should be cherished. Rather than saying cynically that the State is Machiavellian, that it lies and presumptuously qualifies a state of things which isn't even there on the ground, rather than presuming that we know, that we haven't got anything to learn, we can look at these documents and acknowledge that there's a mystery here, something we simply do not understand: they say it's agglomerated and to us it looks like it isn't... Only then, bit by bit, can we discover how the technical term of the agglomerated crossed over with the legal disposition and helped qualifying a new territory, a new territorial way, a new way of urban transformation.

So, to conclude, *Agglomérer* is the tale of a gripping territorial machine that ran on technocratic inventiveness. Circle of ubiquity, virtual dormant lines, self-fulfilling futures, prospecting the passage of time, uncooperative houses, waiting walls, seriality and the city-to-be, these are the elements that propel the machine forward. We, urban sociologists and researchers, are mapping the cogwheels, uncovering the stakes and stating the overall effects and we are looking for something more indeterminate than the collective result, something more impersonal than signed creativity, something which I've called here the territorial machine's propensity, its patterns, its momentum,

but which in my book I've rather called the territorial ways, *la façon d'évoluer du territoire, la manière territoriale*, the way in which a territory is consolidated and serves the issue of construction and demolition (*Agglomérer*, p. 65, 76, 160, 172, 192 and all throughout the book). Looking at the pre-urbanistic days allows us to learn again how, technically, legally, experimentally, tentatively, doorstep by doorstep, street by street, a territory can be transformed. It is one thing to acknowledge that the State-led grip did a lot of harm, that it was blind and unforgiven, it's another to therefore cross out the mere possibility of technocratic inventiveness, to ignore the powers and possibilities of procedural treatment and to start from scratch as if no other territorial makings could be learned from.

Thank you for your attention.

- ¹ "L'exemple bruxellois: agglomérer plutôt qu'annexer", *Les 150 ans des limites actuelles de Paris*, colloque international organisé par le CHS - Centre d'Histoire Sociale, CNRS, Université de Paris 1, Paris, du 13 au 15 octobre 2010. Can be downloaded on following page: <http://ulb.academia.edu/BenedikteZitouni>
- ² Céline Tellier, *Une sociologie des profondeurs. Conception et organisation de la mobilité souterraine à Bruxelles (1950-2010)*, PhD in final writing phase, dir. Pierre Lannoy, Université Libre de Bruxelles.
- ³ Delphine Gardey, *Ecrire, calculer, classer. Comment une révolution papier a transformé les siècles contemporains (1800-1940)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.