



Research Through Design and the Politics of Scale: A Case Study in Brussels Metropolitan Centre, Belgium

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Through an ex-post analysis of the successes and failures of the Brussels Studies Institute-Brussels Centre Observatory (BSI-BCO)—a multidisciplinary, multi-university research platform dedicated to transforming downtown Brussels—this article aims to contribute to the debate on the dilemmas between the risks and benefits of collaborations between urban commoners and local governments (Feinberg et al., 2021; Bianchi et al., 2024; Heidelberg, 2024; Polko, 2024). In particular, it explores how Research through Design—a methodology that emerged in recent decades at the intersection of design thinking, urban design & planning, transition management, participatory governance, and transdisciplinary research, yet has received little attention in commons literature—can serve as a valuable tool for navigating the tensions between seeking institutional support for urban commons and resisting political cooptation when addressing scales that involves multiple levels of stakeholders and governance.

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INTRODUCTION

SCALE OF URBAN COMMONS AND THE DILEMMA BETWEEN THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF SUPPORTS FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Urban commons have become a growing area of research (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Dellenbaugh-Losse et al., 2015; Eidelman & Safransky, 2021). Studying how spaces like streets, parks, public spaces, neighborhoods, and various local services and facilities are or can be shared within the city has become a promising way to explore alternatives to the injustice and unsustainability of state-market systems (Foster, 2011; Foster & Iaione, 2015). Furthermore, studying the processes involved in producing and maintaining new urban commons – *commoning* – has prompted significant reconceptualizations of the commons (Linebaugh, 2009; Parker & Johansson, 2011, 2012; Fournier, 2013; Dardot & Laval, 2015; Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021; Bollier, 2024). One key issue is defining what constitutes a resource, determining its value, and identifying for whom it holds significance. Urban commons are highly diverse in nature (Hess, 2008) and they necessitate the collaboration of a diverse array of stakeholders to co-produce shared goods and services across various scales (Foster & Iaione, 2018). Secondly, defining the community, its size, and the openness or closure of the commons is challenging in dense, fragmented high-mobility contexts (Foster & Iaione, 2018). A sufficient number of actors are needed for effective stewardship of the commons, but expanding and opening the group requires overcoming socio-cultural challenges, communication challenges, and risks of bureaucratization (Feinberg et al., 2021). Thirdly, nesting a commons into pre-existing governance frameworks is highly complex. Cities are highly regulated, so introducing commons requires navigating urban laws and politics. Establishing urban commons often means modifying, adapting, or even hacking property regulations and working with local government to support collaborative resource management (Foster & Iaione, 2018; Polko, 2024).

Among these numerous challenges, the relationship between urban commoning practices and local governments stands out as particularly complex (Feinberg et al., 2021; Bianchi et al., 2024; Heidelberg, 2024; Meerkkerk, 2024; Vesco & Busso, 2024; Polko, 2024). Recent reviews on the commons have attempted to map the diverse perspectives on this issue (Feinberg et al., 2021; Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021; Bollier, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). At the two ends of this nuanced field lie two orientations: a *reformist* perspective, which expands Ostrom's focus on innovative governance models to address the specificities of urban commons, and a *critical* approach, grounded in social movements, neo-Marxism, eco-feminism, and post-colonialism, which emphasizes

the fundamental and irreducible differences between the commons and the state (Wang et al., 2024).

Reformist approaches have highlighted the pivotal role of institutional support in consolidating and disseminating urban commoning practices, particularly within liberal democratic contexts such as those found in most European cities (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; De Schutter & Dedeurwaerdere, 2020). Research and experiments on “co-cities” governance frameworks—especially those led by Foster and Iaione's LabGov—has emphasized how urban policies that position state institutions as enabling platforms for resource pooling and multi-stakeholder sharing of power can be crucial in fostering the development of new urban commons (Foster & Iaione, 2022). However, most experiences of commons-public partnerships testify recurrent difficulties with institutional rigidity, political co-optation, and excessive institutional control (Feinberg et al., 2021).

On the other hand, critical approaches have emphasized the fundamental divergence between the centralized power inherent in public management and the shared power dynamics that define the commons (Quilligan, 2013; Heidelberg, 2024). As documented in Bollier and Helfrich's reviews of commoning practices, commoning fosters a radically relational understanding of the world, demanding a profound ontological shift that extends far beyond superficial transactions and momentary convergences between commoners and governments (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Bollier, 2024). Feminist perspective on the commons have shed light the continuous reproductive work necessitated to maintain a commons and on the importance of the embodied knowledge and emotions of those who carry out this work. Conversely, they have drawn attention on the risk of cooptation by disembodied institutions that have marginalized those embodied experience (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001; Fournier, 2013; Federici, 2015, 2019; Geagea & De Tullio, 2024). As summarized by Heidelberg, “The commons succeeds in bringing order by and through the particular interactions of agents in a time and space; on the contrary, the idea of the public removes the particulars of agents in time and space and replaces it with standards, measurement, legibility and like features that sustain the state.” (Heidelberg, 2024).

This article aims to explore ways to navigate the dilemma between support and resistance—not by underestimating its significance, but by developing methods to engage with it more effectively. To this end, we emphasize the spatiality of urban commons, not as a mere backdrop or pre-existing asset (Moss, 2014), but as a medium through which the institutions of commoning are formed and take shape (Stavrides, 2016). Additionally, we highlight the crucial role of scale in urban commons and its impact on state-commoner relations (Cox, 1998; Smith & Kurtz, 2003; Berkes, 2009;

Harvey, 2011; Smith et al., 2020; Heidelberg, 2024). As the scale of commons expands, so does the need for institutional support. However, this growth simultaneously makes it more challenging to maintain strong connections to the specific people, places, and practices that continuously (re) produce urban commons. In this context, we hypothesize that urban Research through Design can serve as a valuable tool for bridging the scales where embodied experience prevails and those where state planning dominates, creating opportunities to continuously navigate and balance tensions between the state and commoners.

CONTENT

The article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework introduces three key principles that underpin the work of the BSI-BCO and its analysis: recognizing the interconnections between the spatiality of commons, partnerships, and governance; using Research through Design (RtD) to reshape these interconnections at various scales; and assessing the social learning that occurs during RtD-facilitated processes through the lens of the co-cities design principles (Foster & Iaione, 2022). Second, the social learning outcomes from the various research phases conducted by the BSI-BCO are mapped. Fourth, a discussion compares successes and failures in using RtD to foster more commons-oriented state planning. The conclusion emphasizes the impossibility of achieving success in *reformist* attempts to foster more commons-oriented state planning practices without maintaining a strong connection to *critical*, place-based and embodied experiences of commoning. It also highlights why and how multiscale RtD conducted by research platforms acting as mediators between local governments and civil society, can help navigate the balance between seeking support and resisting cooptation.

METHODOLOGY

AN EX-POST ANALYSIS MAPPING COMMONS-ORIENTED SHIFTS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS DISCOURSES AND DECISION-MAKING

This ex-post analysis by two BSI-BCO members with backgrounds in architecture, urban design, and planning seeks to extract methodological and theoretical insights beyond some significant, though limited impact on Brussels' planning. Though not explicitly stated, the concept of the commons implicitly shaped the research. This article aims to deepen those intuitions.

Although the project lacked a structured assessment framework, the research process was documented extensively through various formats: research reports, online articles,¹ exhibitions, an academic book (Vermeulen

et al., 2020) and a wide-audience publication (Mezoued et al., 2020) featuring contributions from scholars, activists, and public partners. These materials serve as the data from which evidence of commons-oriented shifts has been extracted. However, no structured series of personal interviews or focus groups is available to assess changes that occurred at individual and collective levels. Consequently, the analysis will focus on changes that occurred at the institutional level by examining formal decisions, participation levels, and stances on intermediate research outcomes.

The aim of this ex-post analysis is to evaluate the relevance and limits of the place-based and design-based methods adopted by the BSI-BCO by mapping out the clues of commons-oriented social learnings that have occurred throughout the research process (Figure 1).

THE BSI-BCO AS AN ATTEMPT OF RE-COMMON FOLLOWING COOPTATION

The BSI-BCO emerged from a controversy reflecting the disillusionment of citizen movements advocating for urban open spaces as commons, which, despite local government support, ultimately led to the commodification of public space. In 2012, Picnic the Streets mobilized thousands of citizens to demand the transformation of Brussels' central boulevard into a public space. In response, the municipality decided in 2014 to pedestrianize the boulevards (Vanhellemont & Vermeulen, 2016). However, by 2015, when design plans and temporary changes were introduced, resistance grew among residents and civic associations. Objections not only focused on reduced car access but also on concerns about negative impacts, such as harm to independent businesses, intensified commodification, gentrification, overtourism, and a lack of communication and community participation (Genard et al., 2016). According to Quilligan's distinction between common and public goods, the citizens' original demand envisioned the boulevard as "a shared resource managed through negotiated rules, traditions, norms, and practices", while the municipality's approach reimaged the boulevard as a public good, managed by a "central governing authority to whom we have surrendered the control of these resources, which then meets our demand through conventional private markets." (Quilligan, 2013). Amid this controversy, the municipality of Brussels agreed to support the creation of the BSI-BCO research platform as a means of introducing objectivity into the debate and restoring trust.

These events unfolded within the broader context of Brussels, a city that encapsulates many challenges of urban commoning: a high socio-cultural diversity (Vloeberghs & Corijn, 2013), a fragmented governance system and a heterogeneous urban landscape shaped by contrasting historical dynamics (De Visscher, 2013). Yet, Brussels has a

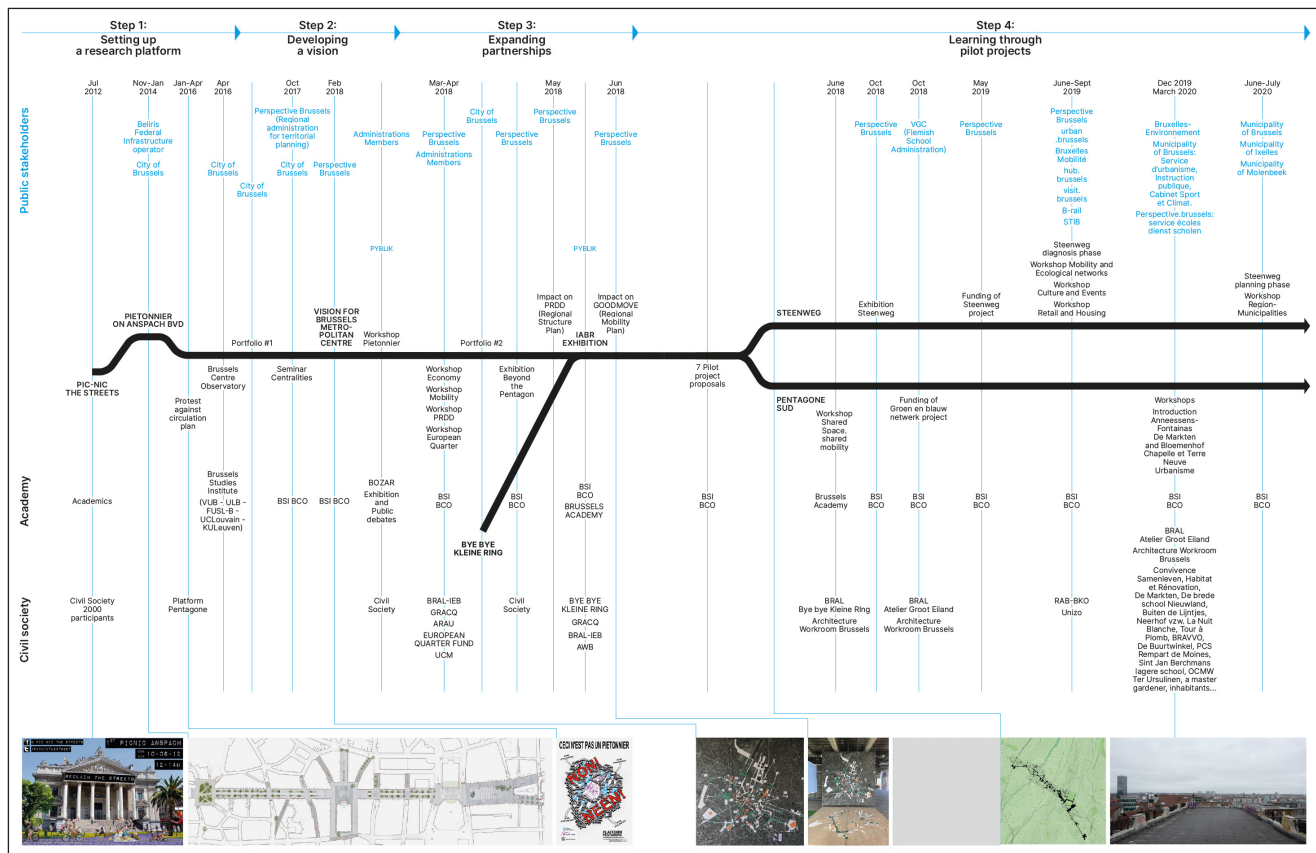


Figure 1 Timeline of the research phases and the involved public, academic, and civil society partners.

Excerpt from Mezoued, A., Vermeulen, S., & De Visscher, J.-P. (Eds.). (2020). *Au-delà du Pentagone. Le centre-ville métropolitain de Bruxelles*. EUB and VUBPRESS.

vibrant tradition of socio-cultural activism and participatory initiatives, some explicitly focused on the commons (Aula Magna, 2019; Community Land Trust Brussels et al., 2023).

Within this context, the BSI-BCO aimed to promote innovative multi-stakeholder participation, acting as a mediator between federal, regional, and municipal authorities, civil society organizations, and inhabitants from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. While the municipality's initial plan was to fund two doctoral research projects, the initiators of the BSI-BCO successfully persuaded them to support the creation of a research platform functioning as a knowledge commons, built on the voluntary exchange of expertise, skills, research infrastructure, and time by nearly fifty scholars from five Brussels-based universities.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ASSESSED METHODOLOGIES

The key feature of the BSI-BCO methodology is the experimentation with multiscalar and place-based Research through Design (RtD) as a means to foster new forms of resource pooling, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and shared governance.

RtD is a type of research where the act of designing is the driver of knowledge production (Till, 2008), as opposed

to within the field of design research *research on design* (a posteriori analysis of design processes) and *research for design* (scientific research as a base for design) (Lenzholzer et al., 2013, 2016). RtD operates as a transdisciplinary and collaborative process based on design thinking (Cross, 1982; Dorst, 2011). In this abductive method, design patterns, successfully tested in analogous contexts, are used to simultaneously reframe ill-defined wicked problems and identify actionable solutions. These solutions are then iteratively tested and refined (Schurz, 2008; Duchhart, 2011; Dorst, 2019).

Over the past decade, Belgium—like the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy (Grosjean, 2023)—has seen numerous RtD-centered urban initiatives led alternately by universities (Loeckx et al., 2009; Nijhuis, 2017; Viganò, 2016), public administrations, cultural organizations,² and activists.³ Following Sandra Lenzholzer's taxonomy (Lenzholzer et al., 2013, 2016), most of those urban RtD programs, like BSI-BCO, adopted *pragmatic* approaches merging *positivist* solution-oriented RtD, with *constructivist* RtD aiming at reframing urban issues and *advocacy participatory* RtD focusing on empowering communities (Lenzholzer et al., 2013, 2016). In those RtD programs, initially solution-oriented, design proposals

often remained unimplemented but acted as catalysts for public dialogue through exhibitions, talks, and debates, empowered communities and fostered collaboration.

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Establishing an effective assessment framework meeting clear academic standards remains a significant challenge in the field of RtD ([Cortese & Lenzholzer, 2022](#); [Prochner & Godin, 2022](#)).

This assessment challenge is actually not unique to pragmatic RtD; a similar debate has emerged in the broader field of transdisciplinary research, though there it is approached with greater rigor and clarity. Transdisciplinary research is defined as “research that tackles real-life problems, addresses their complexity by involving a variety of actors from both science and practice, considers the diversity of their perspectives, and creates knowledge that is solution-oriented, socially robust, and transferable to both scientific and societal practice” ([Hoffmann et al., 2017](#)). It is a type of research wherein *Design thinking* has proven to be a core methodology ([Brown & Wyatt, 2009](#); [Mulgan, 2014](#); [Pearce, 2020](#)), a specialized branch of which is urban RtD. Within this field, *social learnings* have been acknowledged as key outcomes ([Pahl-Wostl, 2006](#); [Reed et al., 2010](#); [Popa et al., 2014](#); [Herrero et al., 2019](#)). Following Reed et al. (2010), *social learning* occurs when individuals experience a change in understanding, when this change extends beyond individuals, becoming embedded in broader social groups and communities of practice and when the learning emerges through the exchange of ideas, arguments, and information within these social networks.

Ideally, participants should define these values at the start of the process, as clarifying normative perspectives significantly increases the potential for social learning ([Herrero et al., 2019](#)). However, this can be difficult in complex urban settings where the number, roles, and nature of research partners often shift over time ([Michel et al., 2013](#)). This was the case for the BSI-BCO, whose focus on local and short-term impacts in ongoing controversies and urban projects overshadowed the need for clear and shared normative perspectives.

Retroactively, the BSI-BCO’s use of pragmatic RtD to bring municipalities closer to civil society through the co-design of shared visions and experimentations aligns closely with Foster and Iaione’s definition of constructing a commons as a “collaborative process of bringing together a wide spectrum of actors that work together to co-design and co-produce shared, common goods and services at different scales” ([Foster & Iaione, 2017](#)). More specifically, it aligns with their *co-city design principles* of collaborative governance, enabling state, pooling economies, and urban experimentalism, let alone the Tech-justice principle ([Foster & Iaione, 2018, 2022](#)).

We therefore propose using these principles as a framework to assess whether commons-oriented social learning occurred among institutional partners throughout the process and, in turn, how RtD contributed to driving these changes. The following analysis of the research process will look for signs of change in:

- Pooling: indications of a commitment to resource pooling and a resistance to exclusionary practices ([Iaione & de Nictolis, 2017](#));
- Collaborative governance: signs of new partnerships across existing social barriers, including public, private, civil society, academia, and social innovation groups ([Foster & Iaione, 2022](#));
- Enabling state: indications of a commitment of public stakeholders to act as facilitators rather than managers, and to share power and responsibilities with other community members ([De Schutter & Dedeurwaerdere, 2020](#); [Foster & Iaione, 2022](#)).

CASE-STUDY

PHASE I: UNFOLDING A COMMONS CONTROVERSIES

By the end of 2016, the BSI-BCO published a first research portfolio ([Corijn, Hubert, Vermeulen, et al., 2016](#)) dedicated to a deeper understanding of the controversies raised by the pedestrianization of the boulevard. Based on a study of the project’s production process ([Vanhellemont & Vermeulen, 2016](#)), most studies highlight the project’s oversimplification relative to the complexity of the challenge, as it fails to account for its varied impact on different practices and stakeholders in a European historical city center. ([Vanderstraeten & Corijn, 2016](#)). For instance, no measures are taken to address the impact of pedestrianization on rents and accessibility and their consequences for inhabitants and shopkeepers ([Boussauw et al., 2016](#)). The new urban furniture promotes pacified practices by the dominant middle class but excludes more complex practices in a city centre, such as homelessness or protests ([Corijn, Hubert, & Neuwels, 2016](#)). More generally, the project has been planned as an isolated fragment, disconnected from clear planning on a wider scale.

As a consequence, the project is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, one could see it as the first step towards a slow city where public spaces would have been freed from cars ([A. M. Mezoued et al., 2018](#)). But on the other hand, one could see the project of the municipality as a new open-air shopping mall, fostering mass consumption for a middle class with highly suburban imaginaries ([Corijn, Hubert, & Neuwels, 2016](#)). Evidence of this trend is currently happening. Since the construction phase started, several independent shopkeepers closed their doors, while

big brands such as McDonald's are opening new shops (Wayens et al., 2020).

Several public debates organized with Brussels Academy, a citizen university focused on urban issues, supported this interpretation of the problem. Following this diagnosis, the BSI-BCO proposed several recommendations to improve the project for the municipality. However, the city council failed to implement concrete measures. Although they were not originally framed as commons-related issues, the initial portfolio of research articles published at that time highlighted several key problems:

- Pooling: The pedestrianization project focused solely on refurbishing public spaces, lacking a comprehensive strategy for adjacent buildings, for the socio-economic implications or social marginalizations stemming from commodification (Rosa et al., 2020).
- Collaborative governance: The municipality failed to account for the diverse and often conflicting goals, practices, and imaginaries of different groups, such as participants from *Picnic the Streets*, shopkeepers, central neighborhood residents, homeless people, peri-urban middle-class citizens, and tourists (Berger & Genard, 2020).
- Enabling state: Efforts at public communication do not equate to genuine participation. Similarly, employing social workers to mitigate commodification's effects do not foster true inclusion (Rosa et al., 2020).

Across these three dimensions, public stakeholders, despite their intentions, appeared overwhelmed by the

multifaceted nature of the situation. Their rejection of most BSI-BCO recommendations—or their inability to implement them in the short term—underscores their distance with a commons-oriented planning culture.

PHASE 2: DEVELOPING A SHARED VISION THROUGH A RTD PROCESS

Consequently, in 2018, the BSI-BCO revised its strategy, exploring whether a broader, more prospective, and collaborative study of the city center could help resist ongoing commodification (Vermeulen et al., 2018). In the 1960s, planning divided the city into specialized zones separated by urban highways. Since the 1990s, renewal efforts had prioritized small-scale transformations. However, no attempts had been made since to reconceptualize the city center within a polycentric metropolitan framework. (De Visscher et al., 2016).

Three main characteristics of such a city centre were put forward: a high diversity of practices and users with no dominant specialization, a high density of buildings along walkable public spaces, and high connectivity (mainly through public transport) with the surrounding neighbourhoods, local centres, the metropolitan area, and other cities (Vanderstraeten & Corijn, 2018). This definition called for a renewed reading of the spatial structure of the city centre. First, the historical figure of the pentagon should be widened to include the main structuring infrastructures (the train stations, the canal, and the metro loop) (Figure 2). This extended perimeter should also include a high diversity of users (among which is the district of Molenbeek, usually



Figure 2 Analysis of Brussels' metropolitan center's main public transport infrastructure and street network, used as the starting point for the Masterclass "Zoom In, Zoom Out."

Image credits: BSI-BCO, 2018.

considered a marginal immigrant neighbourhood) and activities (among which are the European institutions and the business areas). Secondly, the mesh of small streets inside this figure should be reconsidered as the main structuring public spaces fostering walkability and interactions between the users (De Visscher et al., 2018; Vanin et al., 2020) (Figure 2).

In January 2018, in partnership with perspective. brussels, the Brussels regional administration for territorial development, a one-week design masterclass named “zoom in-zoom out” was dedicated to the exploration of the challenges and potentialities opened by this new spatial pattern, resulting in the production of a model of the metropolitan centre at a scale of 1:2000 (Figure 3), completed with series of zooms at scale 1:200.

After the masterclass, the BSI-BCO launched seminars, workshops, exhibitions, and public debates using the model as a discussion tool (Figure 4). The first event, held at BOZAR (Center for Fine Arts), featured an exhibition and

debate with experts and officials from Brussels municipality and region. Over the next three months, the model was exhibited at perspective brussels and used in thematic workshops on economy and mobility with academics, public servants, professionals, and citizen groups. Parallel initiatives included lectures and debates with inhabitants and citizens associations via Brussels Academy and a public space design workshop in partnership with Pyblik, a platform providing training in public space design for both professionals and public stakeholders. From June to November 2018, alongside a complementary model by Byebye Petite Ceinture⁴ activists, the Metropolitan Centre model was exhibited at the Brussels branch of the International Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam.

This process contributed to a continuous improvement, implementation, modification of the model through a cumulative co-design process that takes into consideration the desires of the actors, their remarks, and the existing initiatives - notably those coming from civil society. But



Figure 3 Model of the vision for Brussels’ metropolitan center developed during the Masterclass “Zoom In, Zoom Out.”

Image credits: BSI-BCO, 2018.



From pedestrian area to urban project
Exhibition and public debate, BOZAR, February 2018



Beyond the Pentagon
Exhibition and workshops, perspective.brussels, April-May 2018



Shared mobility, shared spaces
Exhibition and workshops, «You are Here», International Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam, June-November 2018



Southern Pentagon
Workshops, «You are Here», International Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam, September-November 2018

Figure 4 Exhibitions, workshops, and debates on BSI-BCO's vision for Brussels' metropolitan center, held at BOZAR, perspective.brussels, and You Are Here-IABR.

Image credits: Aniss Mezoued, 2018.

beyond the design of the model itself, other types of more commons-oriented shifts happened throughout the process:

- Pooling: In 2018, the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development adopted the extension of the perimeter of the city centre to include the metro loop, the canal, and the historical centre of Molenbeek (Figure 5). The new regional mobility plan also institutionalized the connection between the South Station, the pedestrianized boulevard, and the North Station as a main walkable axis suppress (axis 04), along with the

historical axis connecting Molenbeek with the upper town (Figure 6) suppress “(axis 02)”.

- Collaborative governance: Partnerships with public stakeholders (perspective.brussels, bMa) and civil society initiatives (Pyblik, IABR, Bye bye kleine ring) have been reinforced.
- Enabling state: This living lab experience was one of the first held in the newly built lab space of perspective.brussels. Bringing together public, academic, associative, and private actors to debate urban issues around design research is now organized on a regular basis.

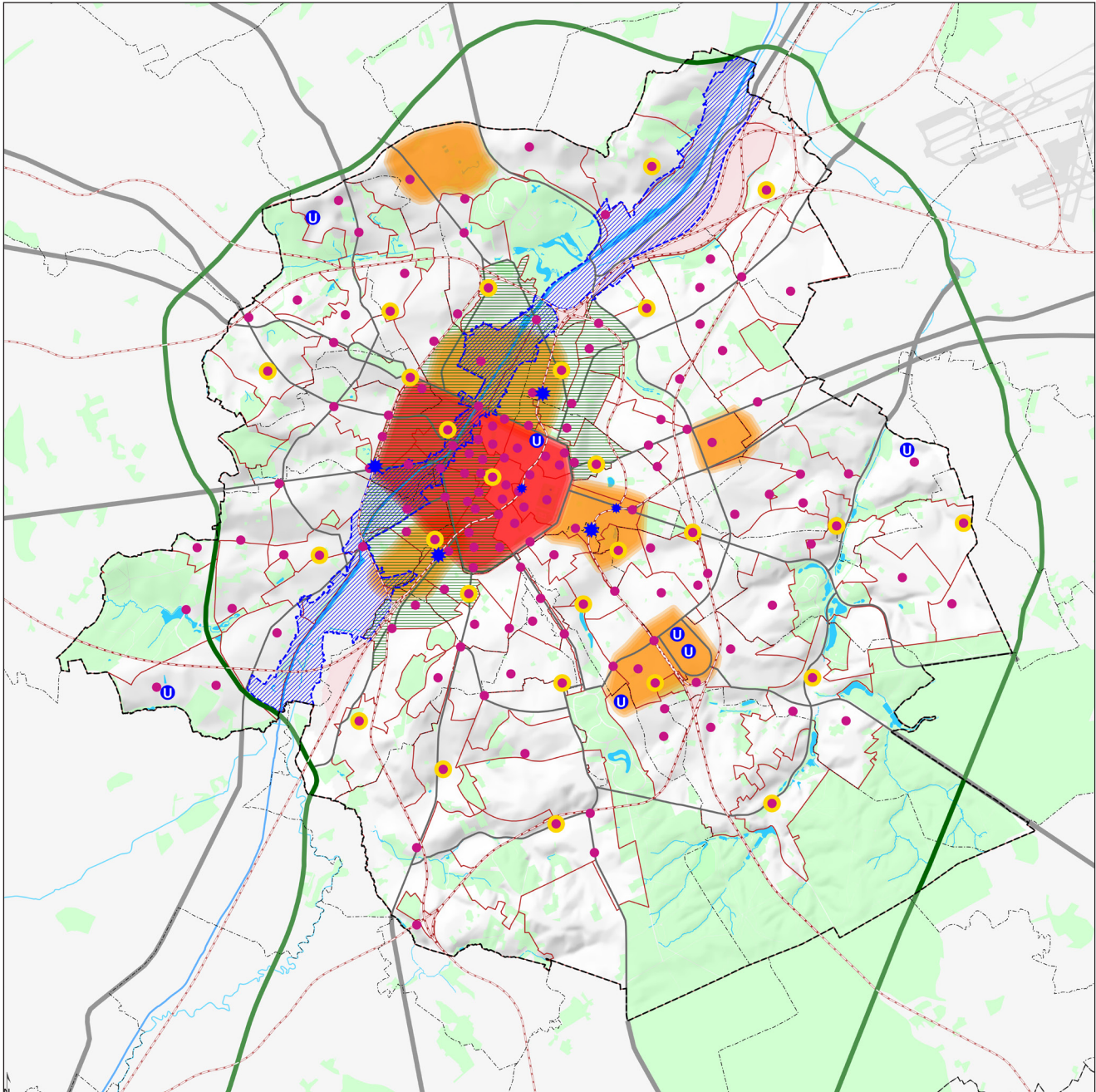


Figure 5 Map of the spatial framework and vision for Brussels. Excerpt from the Plan Régional de Développement Durable, Carte 01 (Région de Bruxelles Capitale, 2019).

PHASE 3: EXPERIMENTING COMMONS-ORIENTED PLANNING FOLLOWING RTD OUTCOMES

The process of communication and collective discussions around the model allowed for an impact on public planning decisions and the initiation of two experiments: “Southern Pentagon” and “Steenweg.”

In 2019, following the design workshops held during the International Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam, a cluster consisting of the BSI-BCO, Architecture Workroom

Brussels (the organizers of the biennale in Brussels), BRAL (a Dutch-speaking citizens’ association), and Atelier Groot-Eiland (a non-profit organization helping marginalized people get jobs) received funding from the Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie (the administration in charge of Dutch-speaking education) to build a series of vegetable gardens for schools located in the south of Brussels city centre. Rather than constructing the gardens within school grounds, the cluster aims to create them in public spaces and prototype a safe, green network of school paths

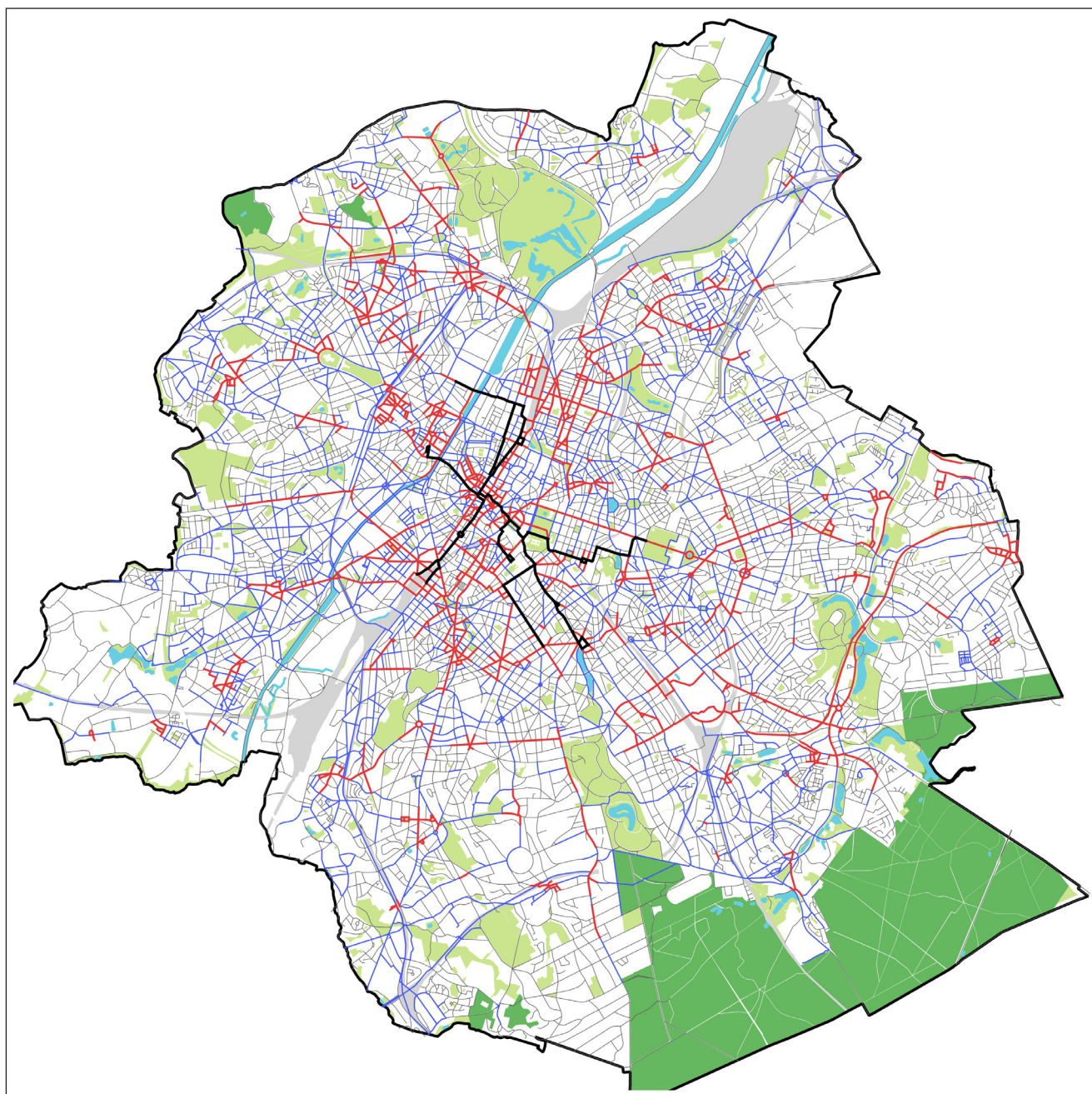


Figure 6 Map of the pedestrian network. Excerpt from GoodMove Plan Régional de Mobilité 2020–2030, Carte de spécialisation modale des voiries – piétons (Région de Bruxelles Capitale, 2020).

connecting the various schools in the area, spanning both French- and Dutch-speaking institutions, from nursery to college (Dudal et al., 2020).

During a workshop in November 2019, representatives from Brussels' urbanism and green spaces departments supported the proposals and showed signs of shifting towards commons-public partnerships. The head of the green spaces department noted that allowing schools and neighborhood associations to steward the gardens would expand the vegetation choices, which are usually limited due to the municipality's management capacity.

In 2021, nine micro-projects of urban orchards in school courtyards or leftover public spaces were launched under the label GroenblauwBxl, funded by the Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie. A website⁶ maps out all new initiatives, provides information, and supports the development of new ones.

Looking back at this experience, one can notice the following outcomes:

- Pooling: Even limited, the shared vision for the neighborhood fostered the development of local

initiatives and has provided a framework allowing for more pooling of spatial, financial, and human resources.

- Collaborative governance: The design research has fostered new collaboration between neighbors, parents' associations, schools, administration, civil society experts, and academia. However, the project is funded by the Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie only. Neither the Municipality of Brussels nor the French-speaking schools have become official partners.
- Enabling state: The design research has led to the development of user-managed projects in public/semi-public spaces. Schools and their referring administration have developed actions beyond their usual scope, intersecting with municipal urban projects.

The second major experiment also started in 2019, when perspective.brussels commissioned the BSI-BCO for scientific support in the redevelopment of the main historical axis (called the Steenweg) as a pedestrian axis connecting the bottom of the valley with the top of the hill ([De Visscher, 2020](#)). From June to September, a diagnosis was carried out through a process mixing exhibition, public walks, and a series of thematic workshops involving different public administrations, economic representatives, citizens' associations, and scholars. The outcomes of the discussions highlighted that the Steenweg can become much more than a pedestrian axis. The Steenweg is an important environmental axis connecting the top of the hills with the bottom of the valley. It is also a social axis connecting the western poorer neighborhoods with the eastern richer ones ([Figure 7](#)). In addition, it is an



Figure 7 Map and chart of average income per capita along the Steenweg, Brussels. Image credits: Cap, P., Hertoghe, M., UCLouvain, 2021.

economic axis connecting the areas where industrial, retailing, cultural, and office activities are located. At last, it is a cultural axis connecting the major heritage sites and museums of the city center.

In 2020, a small research grant enabled an urban designer, a sociologist, and an anthropologist to explore the socio-cultural potential of the Steenweg. Their goal was to explore whether improving access to the Steenweg's social and material fabric for diverse—and often marginalized—groups could enhance urban inclusion. (Fenton et al., 2022).

Building on Jean Remy's idea that opportunities for citizens to engage with others occurs in spaces with varying degrees of openness and enclosure (Remy et al., 2020),

qualitative observations were made in semi-open spaces along the Steenweg, such as galleries, arcades, patios, and public buildings. Inspired by Nolli's 1748 map of Rome—a spatial representation of all publicly accessible spaces in the 17th century, including churches and patios—the research team also surveyed and mapped interstitial spaces of encounter beyond traditional public space boundaries (Figure 8).

In 2022, the Nolli map of the Steenweg and the outcomes of the social surveys were presented at the first Summer Assembly of Brussels2030, an organization gathering Brussels socio-cultural stakeholders with the aim of preparing Brussels' application as the European

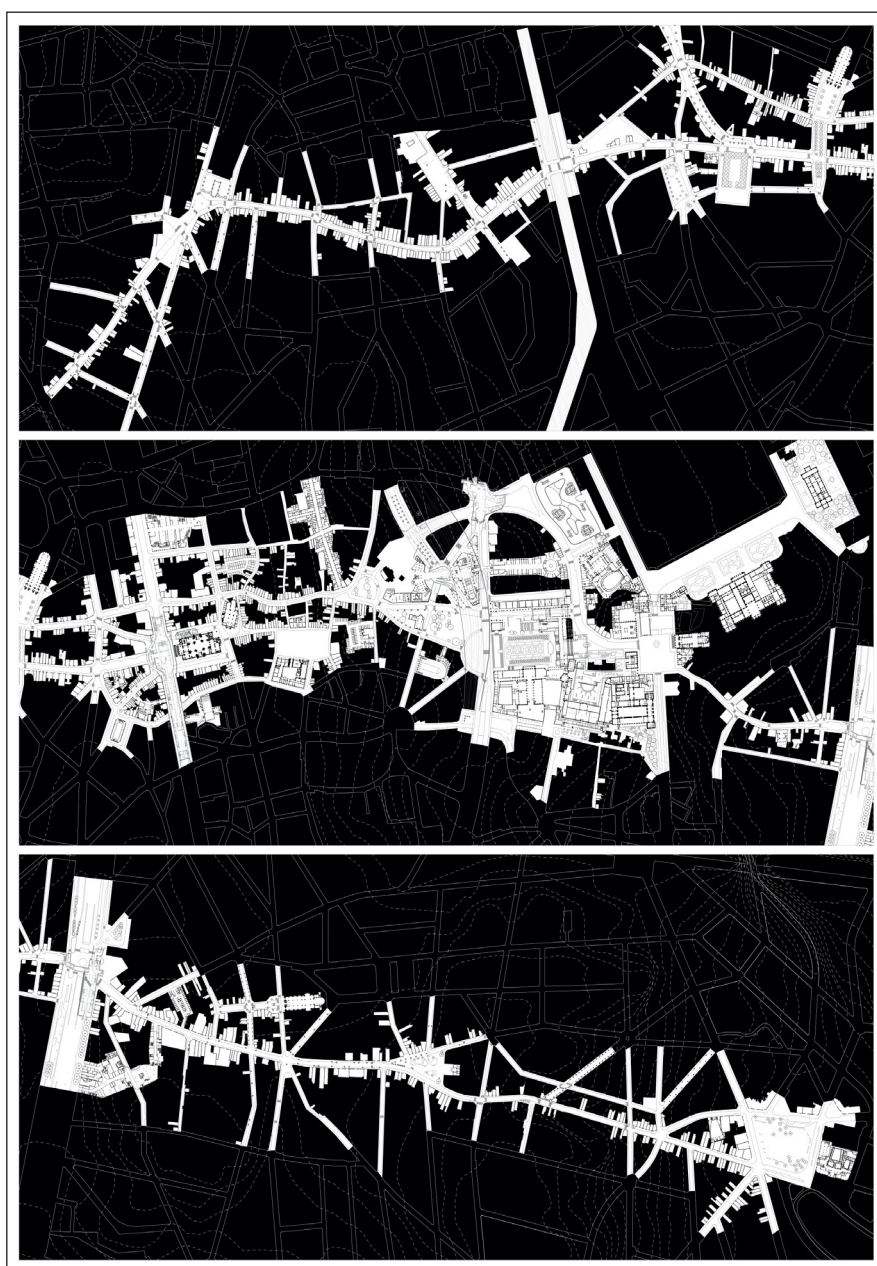


Figure 8 Nolli-map of the publicly accessible space along the Steenweg, Brussels. Image credits: De Visscher, J.-P., Fenton, G., Michel, H., Cap, P., Hertoghe M., UCLouvain, 2020.

Cultural Capital in 2030. Through talks, walks, and design workshops, attention has been drawn to the importance of the Steenweg as a structuring axis for socio-cultural urban development and as a laboratory to experiment with the challenges and opportunities of Brussels' highly diverse metropolitan culture (Moriau et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, perspective.brussels and Prof. Jean-Philippe De Visscher drafted a political note summarizing key ideas from previous phases. This content was discussed with representatives from Brussels Mobility (regional administration in charge of mobility) and the three municipalities along the future pedestrian axis (City of Brussels, Molenbeek, Ixelles). After positive discussions, a structure plan was commissioned to urban designers, aiming for government approval in 2025. The next steps include forming a task force with representatives from the three municipalities, mobility and territorial development administrations, walk.brussels (a civil society platform promoting walkability), and academic experts; launching further mobility studies and public space projects; and implementing temporary initiatives with socio-cultural stakeholders.

Looking back at this experience, one can notice the following outcomes:

- Pooling: The RtD helped convince Brussels Mobility and three municipalities to pool their resources and highlighted that public spaces should meet not only pedestrian mobility needs but also socio-cultural, economic, and environmental ones. While the Nolli-plan aimed to demonstrate the need to pool more than just public spaces, it ultimately proved challenging to achieve at this stage.
- Collaborative governance: The RtD helped overcome administrative and political barriers by bringing together two regional administrations, three municipalities, and an academic expert. While partnerships with civil society associations (Walk, Brussels2030) were discussed, they were not formalized. Unfortunately, apart from public walks and talks, direct participation from residents has not yet taken place.
- Enabling state: Discussions have been sparked about innovative planning tools such as “contrat d’axe” (an adaptation of Brussels participatory neighborhood renewal programs to urban axes crossing several neighborhoods), “Beeld Kwaliteit Plan” (a guide plan for public spaces refurbishment), and tactical urbanism (running and cultural events). However, all these planning tools are still very top-down.

DISCUSSION

Alongside some advances in fostering commons-oriented shifts in resource sharing, actor networks, and governance, the BSI-BCO also encountered significant difficulties and failures. In terms of pooling, the research process has opened the door to new resource pooling between municipalities (extension of the perimeter of the metropolitan centre to Molenbeek, into the regional structure plan pedestrian axis crossing three municipalities), or different schools from the Dutch-speaking community (Groenblauw network). But attempts to bring together public owners, private owners, and inhabitants of the pedestrian zone to develop an inclusive vision for the ground floors and housing failed. In terms of collaborative governance, several public talks, walks, exhibitions, publications, workshops have been made, but mainly reaching an expert, professional, or activist audience. The difficulty of bringing inhabitants into open and speculative reflections on large-scale and long-term urban projects has been underestimated. In terms of enabling state, by the end of the 4-year funding by the municipality of Brussels, neither the municipality nor the regional government accepted our demand to fund an academic urban observatory in the long run.

Taking a critical perspective on the BSI-BCO's reformist approach reveals that a common thread among all these failures is an excessive *disembodiment* of the process (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001; Federici, 2019; Geagea & De Tullio, 2024). Referring to Boltanski's distinction between institutions as a set of disembodied rules and institutions as embodied in actual spokespersons (Boltanski, 2013), the BSI-BCO experience illustrates that institutional support can be reached when institutional spokespersons—typically mid and upper-level public servants with a long-term perspective on their field of responsibility—are personally engaged in design charrettes, workshops, walks, or discussions where complex, place-based issues are debated with diverse stakeholders. In contrast, institutional support granted by more distant leaders—such as heads of administrations or elected officials—has proven to be either opportunistic and fragile or entirely unattainable. For instance, it became clear with time that proposals for an extended metropolitan center or a new pedestrian axis were endorsed by the regional government and municipalities primarily for opportunistic reasons—namely, the need for expert backing to secure plan approval. This endorsement, however, was by no means a guarantee of a commons-oriented commitment.

It is also important to note the recurring failure of attempts to change urban design, collaborative networks, or governance frameworks in isolation. For example, among the many urban design proposals presented in the metropolitan center model, only those backed by civil organizations—such as pedestrian associations or school parent associations—were further developed. Similarly, the demand to secure long-term funding for an academic urban observatory was discussed with municipal and regional authorities separately from the urban visions that would necessitate such a collaborative platform, and without the presence of citizen associations advocating for those visions. It ended up unsuccessful. Here again, a certain disembodiment—understood as a disconnection between places, people, and rules—appears to weaken the process.

These recurring failures confirm the impossibility of reforming urban governance toward more commons-oriented goals without anchoring them in relational and embodied commoning practices (Bollier, 2024; Geagea & De Tullio, 2024). Even when governments endorse commons-oriented plans, losing these connections risks paving the way for co-optation or abandonment. However, our analysis of RtD suggests a way to escape this dilemma between support and cooptation. In the BSI-BCO experience, while RtD has not directly led to the formation of public-commons partnerships, it has played a crucial role in sustaining a dynamic space for dialogue between local governments and citizen associations. In this process, the ability to shift scales of investigation has been particularly significant—the act of zooming in and out, as reflected in the title of BSI-BCO's first design workshop. Shifting the research focus from the scale of the central boulevards to that of the metropolitan center helped move beyond the controversies surrounding the pedestrianization project and reestablish a constructive and open dialogue with municipal and regional authorities. By supporting them in developing strategic plans that were under study at the time, the BSI-BCO facilitated the endorsement of innovative ideas. In turn, refining urban visions from the metropolitan scale down to specific segments of public space created opportunities to bring citizens back into the discussion, as seen in the Pentagon South project, where activists, citizen associations, schools and parents' associations became re-involved. Similarly, once the plan for the Steenweg is officially adopted, the Nolli-style map of the publicly accessible interior spaces may prove instrumental in reopening future debates on the actor networks and governance models needed to activate those spaces and foster urban inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The introduction first highlighted the dilemmas surrounding the risks and benefits of collaboration between urban commoners and local governments, focusing on its connection to issues of space and scale. To this end, the BSI-BCO experience has been analyzed as a post-cooptation initiative seeking to advance commons-oriented planning through a reformist approach following the co-cities design principles (Foster & Iaione, 2022). Analysis has shown that Research through Design within the BSI-BCO has facilitated notable shifts toward more commons-oriented planning practices, though without guarantees that these orientations will be sustained over time. Moreover, failures have emerged whenever the connection between place-based issues, actual communities, or embodied experiences has been lost. Institutional commitment has also proven fragile when engagement is restricted to high-level decision-makers rather than institutional spokespersons actively involved in the process.

Besides those critical aspects, the most promising outcome is that Research through Design can be useful when used as a tool to question and drive debates on existing and potential relationships between place-based issues, actor networks, and governance frameworks across multiple scales. Zooming out on urban design issues at wider scale helped reshape trust with authorities, while zooming in facilitated the reintegration of civil society into the discussion. From this perspective, adopting a spatial approach and varying the scales of investigation to consider the mutual interests of commoners and authorities may offer a promising way to navigate the balance between institutional support and the risks of cooptation and marginalization.

However, it is important to note that these methodological insights emerged from an ex-post analysis of archives from a research process initially focused on local impact. They were not part of the original design, monitoring, or assessment of the research process. This underscores the need for future research to explicitly integrate and monitor how RtD, conducted by research platforms, can influence the relationships between commoners and institutions.

NOTES

- 1 <https://bsi-bco.brussels/>.
- 2 IABR Atelier Brussels.
- 3 Bye Bye Petite Ceinture.
- 4 <https://groenblauw.brussels/>.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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