

RIGHT(S) TO BRUSSELS'S CITY CENTRE AND THE URBAN PROJECT: WHAT POSSIBILITIES EXIST FOR FUTURE TRANSFORMATIONS?



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> Abstract

In this text, the right to the city is used as a prism to analyse the transformations of Brussels's city centre, notably in relation to the pedestrianization of the central boulevards. Drawing on four case studies that analyse this development plan from different perspectives—the participatory process, the experience of homeless people, the representations and practices on the edges of the gay district, the interactions between public spaces and residential spaces—the aim is to cross-reference their respective contributions with the concept of the right to the city and its specific articulations in this context.

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By taking all of these analyses together, it is possible to show the complex interactions in the city centre of Brussels between centrality and marginality, and the coexistence of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, attractiveness and eviction. What emerges above all is that the composition of these dynamics is not set in stone, but (still) remains fluid. This is the challenge-opportunity that must be addressed by decision makers: making the right to the city a fundamental lever for future transformations.

1 > INTRODUCTION

In this text, the right to the city is used as a prism to analyse the transformations of Brussels's city centre, notably in relation to the pedestrianization of the central boulevards. Drawing on four case studies⁵ that analyse this development plan from different aspects – the participatory process, the experience of homeless people, the representations and practices on the edges of the gay district, and the interactions between public spaces and residential areas – the aim is to cross-reference their respective contributions with the concept of the right to the city and its specific articulations in this context.

Since the development of the theory and the publication of the work dedicated to it (Lefebvre, 1968), the notion of 'the right to the city' has continued to nourish research and scientific debates around the 'urban question' (Castel, 1995), the various forms of socio-spatial inequalities and the process of marginalization and segmentation that characterize contemporary cities, along with movements and practices of resistance (Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009). At the crossroads of sociology, geography, urbanism, architecture and political science, this vast scientific debate accounts for the contemporaneity of the subject, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, essential for studying urban existence in its complexity.

Lefebvre does not propose a unique and unequivocal definition of the *right to the city*. The notion remains relatively vague in his writing. Nevertheless, three aspects appear to be particularly important with regard to the context of this article. First of all, the right to the city 'signifies the right of citizens and city dwellers,⁶ and of the groups they [...] constitute, to appear on all the networks and circuits of communication, information and exchange' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 194-5). Secondly, it 'manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habit and to inhabit' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]:

5 These four case studies have been developed within the framework of research projects independent from one another.

6 Lefebvre uses the combination citizen-city-dweller to indicate someone who is not only a member of the national community and enjoys the rights that come from that membership (citizen), but who is also fully participating in urban life, with all the benefits that brings. According to Lefebvre, the true essence of contemporary citizenship is not so much to be a citizen through formal citizenship guaranteed at a national level, but to be a city-dweller and to participate in a life that is fully urban.

174). Lastly, the search for the right to the city legitimizes opposition to exclusion from urban life and segregation: Lefebvre strongly expresses the need ‘for a re-appropriation of the urban space by citizens as a starting point for the democratic transformation of society’ (Costes, 2010:181, our translation).

From a spatial point of view, *centrality* is, for Lefebvre, an essential characteristic of the urban: the city brings together and attracts a ‘whole’ that is born elsewhere. In doing so, the city creates a situation that allows different things (people, ideas) to come into contact with each other, while maintaining their differences. Alongside centrality, which manifests itself in space and through space, Lefebvre introduces a temporal dimension that would be a characteristic of urbanity, the idea of *simultaneity*: the city is cumulative in space and time, it is the special place and time for meetings, convergence, encounters and differences (Lefebvre, 1968). These conditions are, however, challenged by the economic logic, which makes urban space a tradable good to be exploited, to the detriment of the usage value related to the daily practices and experiences of inhabitants. The result is a discriminative and segregating urban organization that reduces differences by marginalizing practices and people who do not correspond to these economic logics. To this end, it is important to mention the criticism made by Lefebvre about the functionalist planning approach, reduced to technocratic functions subservient to economic powers: space is instrumentalized and acquires a strategic role which allows – indeed produces, as a result of planning – a generalized segregation of places, practices and people. In light of these dynamics, the right to the city is primarily a right to meet and gather, targeting needs that are often misunderstood; ‘the need for social life and a centre, the need and the function of play, the symbolic function of space [...] above classified functions and needs, which cannot be objectified as such [...]’ (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 195).

This brief overview of Lefebvre’s thinking allows us to introduce the concept that guides our approach, which is twofold. On the one hand, we will examine the pedestrianization project as a specific feature of Brussels’s urban project and its capacity to affect the reality that it transforms, by, among other things, drawing attention to the process of exclusion or even marginalization of spaces, people and practices that it produces. On the other, we will explore the different kinds and practices of spatial appropriation, the contestations and resistances to marginalization, and how and whether they can be interpreted as an expression of a claim for a more inhabitable city. To do this, our approach is inspired by pragmatism and focuses on the ‘doing with space’ of individuals (Lussault and Stock, 2010): how they live in the city, how they embed themselves into it, how they act in – as well as on – space, how they assign meaning and appropriate it. Consequently, analysing *spatial agency* (Awan et al., 2002) becomes a central issue, and leads to two hypotheses. Firstly, the transformations produced by the urban project are to be understood not as determining of society, nor as entirely determined by society, but rather as having been created *within* society. This means understanding the urban project as an ongoing process, rather than a completed achievement, an

‘already there’, whilst also taking into consideration the socio-spatial and temporal context in which it develops in order to understand its effects. Secondly, the urban space is also a social space, meaning it is shaped by the practices and representations of a multitude of actors looking for inhabitable spaces, who re-signify space and are constantly re-appropriating it. What is important is not only to analyse the transformations – both material and symbolic – produced by the urban project, but also to understand how it is affected, updated and modified by the practices and representations of individuals.

Against this background, and in order to examine the transformations currently underway in Brussels’s city centre, we will draw on our respective research projects. The first of these focuses on the different ways in which a multitude of actors participate in shaping the future of the city centre, both practically and politically. The results of this analysis show the need for a critical evaluation of the participatory processes put in place by various actors, and warn against the desirability and effectiveness of urban marketing and the developments it engenders. The second research analyses the living habits of homeless people in the public spaces of the city centre, and how they interact with the transformations created by the pedestrianization. In doing this, it highlights the importance for this project of taking into consideration the claim of these people to inhabitable places and recognizing them as inhabitants of the city. The third piece of research looks at Place Fontainas as a border, and examines it through the lens of intersectionality, between practices, discourses and representations. It reveals the entanglement of cohabitation and encounters, and exclusion and invisibility, which appear in opposition but nevertheless coexist. The fourth piece of research analyses the pedestrianization project through the study of the relationship between public spaces and collective housing. It highlights new possibilities for urban projects open to innovation in terms of governance, typology, property status, and of inclusion of the most vulnerable people. Bringing together the findings of the four pieces of research allows us to further explore the right to the city and the specific shapes it takes in the context of Brussels’s city centre, to shed new light on the current transformation process, and to suggest new perspectives for future developments.

2 > PARTICIPATION(S) AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Henri Lefebvre makes participation (or more precisely a certain form of ‘participatory activity’: *l’oeuvre*, the work) one of the central pillars of his conception of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). He thus criticizes the *ideological* participation organized by institutions that seek to ‘have the acquiescence of interested and concerned people at a small price’ (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]: 144-145). Instead, he advocates for participation in the strong and material sense of the term, where citizens, in particular the working classes, are the main *creators* of the city, through their ‘appropriations’, their inventions, and the way they take over the space (*ibid.*). To him, this is a key condition for making the city and the urban reality

a collective *work* rather than a *product*. A work open to differences and enriched by them, defined by its ‘use value’ rather than its ‘exchange value’ (*ibid.*).

The tension between, on the one hand, low-intensity participation, limited to institutional information and consultation procedures, and known to have limited beneficial effects for citizens, and, on the other, stronger forms of participation, where creative citizen self-management leaves its mark on the atmosphere and the very materiality of the city, is still lively in contemporary debates surrounding urban participation (Blondiaux 2007; Bacqué and Gauthier, 2011; IEB, 2012). It is even more relevant today, as participation is increasingly being considered a necessity, not only by more radical movements but also within public policies, including the most neoliberal ones (Charles, 2016).

The project to turn Brussels’s central boulevards into a pedestrian area is a particularly interesting case by which to explore this tension. This section looks at the history of the pedestrianization process, and, more specifically, at the various forms of participation: those on the basis of which it was built and those it gave rise to. The idea of participation is considered here in its broadest sense and refers to a variety of situations. The corpus⁷ used for the research shows both attempts by the authorities to encourage participation or to include citizens in the pedestrianization project, and attempts by citizens, inhabitants, users or shop owners to participate spontaneously (Houlstan-Hasaerts, 2019). Moreover, these situations reflect certain modes of action that arise not only from public debates or critical/oppositional claims but also from forms of appropriation, occupation and use of the pedestrian area, insofar as we consider the latter as ‘contributions’ to public space, understood as a material form of public sphere (Laki, 2018; 2019). The City of Brussels had been tackling the project of pedestrianizing the central boulevards since the end of the 1990s. Despite several feasibility studies and many discussions within municipal bodies, no consensus was achieved (Vanhellemont and Vermeulen, 2016). In 2012, a series of citizen-led mobilizations and initiatives revived the idea of limiting traffic on these boulevards as a possible and desirable project. At the time, the philosopher Philippe Van Parijs published an open invitation for citizens to picnic in the street as an act of civil disobedience. This invitation was widely reported in the press and on social media.⁸ On Sunday, 10 June 2012, more than 2,000 people occupied Boulevard Anspach, without authorization, sitting on blankets on the tarmac and sharing their picnics. These events were repeated over the following months and even years, condoned by the authorities. Both professionals

7 This corpus has been gathered through a study of archives, a review of media sources, interviews and in situ observations, including participatory observations carried out with the action-research collective Urban Species, as part of the research project “p-lab. Identifying and amplifying new forms of urban participation. The pedestrianized city centre as a laboratory”, funded by Innoviris in the framework of the 2018-2021 Anticipate program.

8 Philippe Van Parijs, “Picnic the streets!”, *Le Soir*, 24 May 2012, pp. 14-15 ; <https://www.facebook.com/PicnicTheStreet/>

and amateurs responded to the call for ideas 'Parc Ansapach Park'⁹ launched by the urban citizens' movement Bral.¹⁰ Around 15 proposals were put forward, with most focusing on non-motorized usage and the greening of the areas.

In 2013 Yvan Mayeur (PS) became Mayor of the City of Brussels. With the support of parts of civil society, he made the pedestrianization of the central boulevards the flagship project of his mandate and worked to obtain the approval of the council. He succeeded only through compromise (Vermeulen and Hardy, 2016): the central boulevards were to be pedestrianized provided that the city centre remained accessible to motorized transport. Despite these ambiguities, the new mayor wanted to move fast. Too fast, according to several stakeholders we interviewed: residents, citizens' associations such as Arau or Bral, and even civil servants from the City of Brussels. Once approved, the pedestrianization project was sharply criticized, mostly for the absence of – or at least a deficiency in terms of – citizen participation. Although a series of public meetings and participative workshops had been organized during the pre-project preparation,¹¹ they were judged insufficient in terms of content, number and duration, as well as in terms of the representativeness of the attendees. It is important to note that these criticisms were also made by people who were in favour of the pedestrianization project.¹² Moreover, some of the critiques addressed the way the project was presented and debated during the legally-required information and discussion process,¹³ especially the impossibility of addressing the design questions together with the mobility plan.

These deficits were nevertheless followed by an increase in participation, in the broadest sense of the term, including what is commonly understood as *citizens' mobilizations*. For instance, it gave rise to the *Platform Pentagone*¹⁴, which brought together a vast range of stakeholders with differing concerns in a fairly unusual alliance (between residents and shopkeepers, for example). Using various media and a series of actions, this platform highlighted the troubles and the risks the project entailed for daily activities (noise pollution, slower sales, reduced accessibility, etc.), as well as its deep contradictions and wider implications. Under the slogan 'No Mini-Ring, No Parking, No Bling-Bling', the environmental virtues of the project were questioned, as were the dynamics of 'festivalization' and the use of the public space for performances to enhance the commercial value of the area (IEB, 2015). The pedestrianization project was the subject of much debate, including on social media. A debate that included comments and issues of all sorts, made by a

⁹ www.parcanspach.be

¹⁰ Bral (Brusselse raad voor het leefmilieu) is an urban citizens' movement active in the Brussels Region.

¹¹ Interview with Constantin Lazarou, Bruxelles-Participation, 15 March 2019.

¹² Pierre Vassart, "Le projet de piétonnier au centre-ville sous la loupe critique d'une association", *Le Soir*, 5 May 2014; Nicolas De Decker, "Le piétonnier à Bruxelles : le "oui, mais non" de 1500 riverains", *RTBF*, 7 June 2015.

¹³ According to the opinion of citizens expressed during the Public Discussion on 28 April 2017, which we attended.

¹⁴ <http://www.plattformpentagone.be/>

very diverse range of city-centre users, with different language registers (Berger et al., 2016; Houlstan-Hasaerts, 2015).

In terms of institutional participation, once the works began, the local and regional authorities tried to engage citizens in the project and its challenges through a series of initiatives that we also consider to be within the wider definition of participation. Among these, we can mention the creation of a permanent point of contact through a fictional and personalized alias of the city (julien.mille@brucity.be). Julien is the first name of the Manneken Pis, Mille stands for the post code (1000). This alias was created in order to answer to questions and concerns of inhabitants and users of the pedestrian area. The purpose of the Julien Mille figure was to centralize all questions relating to the central boulevards and redirect them to the appropriate department. Besides, a team of local stewards, the Bruciteam, was created to inform and guide users of the pedestrianized area and prevent conflicts or report any problems. More broadly, the City of Brussels and its department for participation worked to enhance the relationships between the city and its citizens. In the years that followed the beginning of the construction works, and even more so with the election of a new municipal council, a series of existing tools were improved, reworked and/or made more visible, while new ones were put in place under the *FaireBXL*Samen slogan.¹⁵ These measures were not limited to public debates, but also allowed for other forms of expression and imagination: social innovation labs, workshops and participative budgets were added to the traditional neighbourhood councils.

The measures taken by the authorities to improve citizens' support for the project were also visible in the street. The City tried to limit the damage, and temper the disruption, caused by the redevelopment. The omnipresence of construction barriers, for example, was the focus of much criticism on social media.¹⁶ From the summer of 2018, these structures were thus progressively covered with tarpaulin hoardings featuring renders of the future refurbished urban landscape. These also spread the contact details (of 'Julien Mille') for further information, and occasionally provided more specific information: some were used to explain a technical challenge of the construction works, to show the latest archaeological findings, or to raise awareness about women's rights.

These vast canvasses also proved to be the ideal site for other voices seeking to make themselves heard, upon what we suggest should be understood as a physical and material public sphere, where passers-by contribute through the objects and traces that they place or abandon on it (Laki, 2018; 2019). Graffiti and critical messages appeared on the clean and smooth surfaces, sometimes reacting on the original message that they displayed (Figure 1). More generally, the urban transformations initiated by the City, as well as the works themselves, became the occasion for

¹⁵ <https://www.fairebruxelles.be/>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10213975147351288&set=a.1166513841528&type=3&theater>

informal or marginal practices to settle in the heart of the city centre, primarily as a result of access and control difficulties.¹⁷ For example, fake street signs renamed boulevard Anspach as 'Rue Semira Adamu', Place de la Monnaie was temporarily renamed as 'Place des droits de l'homme' [human rights square] by Amnesty International, and cracks in the walls of *la Bourse* were framed and given a title, creating an open-air museum highlighting details of daily life (Figure 2).

In the wake of Lefebvre, we are interested in these multiple appropriations and uses as the intrinsic components of participatory activities that contribute to making the city a collective work. The car-free streets are not only shaped by shopping facilities and *flâneurs*, but also by the presence and activities of homeless people, beggars, street artists and their audiences, street vendors, charity fundraisers and bicycle couriers waiting for their next delivery. When the weather is good, the pedestrian area is lively and filled with portable loudspeakers, sport mats and a variety of other objects.

However, some of these material contributions and appropriations are only tolerated for a limited or temporary period, or are extremely regulated: street musicians have to undergo an audition with the deputy mayor (*echevin*) in charge of culture in order to obtain their permit;¹⁸ homeless people are woken in the morning by district officers and told to move on (see also Part 2); not only waste but also posters and stickers are removed as quickly as possible, particularly in the areas where the works have been completed.¹⁹ The finished parts are considered 'demonstration zones', meant to testify to the future of a clean and beautiful city. A city project less open to the rough edges and margins that this urban area used to host and that the construction works had allowed to settle. Thus the irregularities and imperfections of public space were smoothed; uses and behaviours deemed to be inconvenient were channelled or punished (Breviglieri, 2013; 2015). Furthermore, these observations from the field correspond to phenomena identified in many other cities, where the authorities attempt to guarantee the urban qualities that are believed to make cities attractive (*Ibid.*), such as safety, cleanliness and beauty. But we need to know to whom this power of attraction is addressed and for what purpose. In Brussels, as elsewhere (Harvey, 1989), one of the aims of urban revitalization is to 'bring consumers to the city',²⁰ to breathe new life into a service economy claimed to be in decline.

We could multiply the to and fro between these very different ways of (making) people participate in the future of the city. For the time being, let us note some areas for reflection. It would appear that we can nuance the opposition established by

17 Hennuy Jean-Claude, "Piétonnier bruxellois : saleté et insécurité ? La question divise", *RTBF*, 8 July 2015.

18 <https://www.bruxelles.be/audition-des-artistes-de-rue>

19 Observation during participation of the Bruciteam tours on 13 September and 10 December 2018.

20 Lowyck Nicolas et Vancampenhout Marine, "Piétonnier de Bruxelles : un premier état des lieux, avant le lockdown", *La Libre Belgique*, 5 May 2016.

- Figure 1. Tarpaulin covering construction site barriers in Brussels city centre promoting the new urban project of the city. On the tarpaulin, graffiti reads 'let's hack Brussels'



Source: Unknown author, Urban Species, 13 September 2018

- Figure 2. Frame put around a crack in a wall of Brussels's Bourse building with the title 'Humpback Whale'



Source: Urban Species, 16 August 2018

Lefebvre between forms of participation mainly driven by economic and political authorities, which would only give shape to their desired model of the city, and more radical versions that would allow citizens, including the most marginalized, to make the city a collective work through their appropriations, occupations and uses. Between ideological or cosmetic participation, on the one hand, and self-management on the other, there is a diversity of modes, which weave complex relations between citizens' initiatives and institutional dynamics (Houlstan-Hasaerts and Pattaroni, 2020). In reality, by looking at the material and spatial conditions of the various ways of (forcing) participation, their implementation and their concrete and practical organization, as Lefebvre himself recommends, one can go beyond a binary vision, and demonstrate the infinite nuances and hybrid formats, however ambiguous they may be. Given the multiple forms of participation that it brings about, allows or catalyses, the pedestrian zone (still) seems to be deeply urban. It is indeed a *centrality* that *simultaneously* welcomes a whole range of difference. The distinction established by Lefebvre between two opposing forms of participatory activity nevertheless allows us to warn against the desirability and also the effectiveness of the politics of attractiveness and its attempts to implement a smoothed and peaceful centrality.

3 > INHABITING THE CITY CENTRE WHEN HOMELESS²¹

Placing the focus on homeless people and questioning how they inhabit the city makes it possible to further develop reflections on the effects of transforming public spaces in terms of pushing the most vulnerable to the margins, or even excluding them. It is notably the right to inhabit which is the crux of the matter here, which we are going to examine from the starting point of the practices homeless people develop in order to make a place for themselves in the city.

According to the *European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*, the 'homeless' are those who live in public spaces and spend the night there, or who sleep in emergency shelters, because they do not have a dwelling 'that can be defined as a living place' (FEANTSA, 2007). This definition refers to an interpretation of homelessness that can be found in common representations – broadcast media, in print, political discourse: homeless people are *the* marginal, those that do not inhabit (Breviglieri, 2002). An unsurpassable otherness that disturbs and scares, they embody a threat to the urban order, which justifies their non-acceptability and their eviction from (central) public spaces, in accordance with neoliberal objectives of attractiveness and commodification of the urban space (De Vertueil et al., 2009). The transformations of public space that meet these same objectives also contribute to these dynamics. The ideal of an urban area that is ever smoother, cleaner

²¹ The research leading to this paragraph has been conducted within the framework of the research program "BRUMARG-Brussels through its margins", financed by INNOVIRIS-Brussels Capital Region, ATTRACT/Brains for Brussels program (2017-2022).

and safer, an invitation to stroll and to shop, which is privatized to allow terraces and other commercial presences, ... becomes part of the urban project and makes cleanliness and safety a political gesture able to guarantee acceptable behaviours and metropolitan ways of life (Guitard and Millot, 2015; Breviglieri, 2013). And yet, the more smooth, clean and transparent a space is, the more anything that is 'out of place' disturbs, as a result of its increased visibility, and becomes unacceptable, which then leads to subsequent acts of purification (Wright, 1997). That is how homeless people find themselves excluded from the *key* areas of the city.

But is it always like this, everywhere? Our hypothesis is that the ways in which planning policies and projects affect homeless people dwelling within the city depend on the socio-spatial and temporal contexts in which these policies materialize, as well as negotiation and resistance tactics that homeless people develop against marginalization processes. Therefore, it is necessary to see how, and if, the practices of these people in public spaces allow them to *live with* the transformation of these areas and (continue to) inhabit them.

Brussels city centre is a particularly suitable place for studying these dynamics for two main reasons: Firstly, in the city centre there are numerous services for homeless people, which partly explains the considerable presence of people living on the streets (Mondelaers, 2017). Secondly, the census of homeless people performed by La Strada²² suggests that there is a progressive dispersion of these people towards the edges of the *Pentagone* (the heart of the city centre) (*ibid.*). We therefore felt it was relevant to see if and how a major urban transformation such as the pedestrianization of a central boulevard affected the inhabitability of public spaces and the urban practices of homeless people, and to analyse the consequences in terms of geographies of appropriations and ways of inhabiting the city. More particularly, our aim was to explore how the daily life of homeless people is assembled within the city centre and to look at how public spaces are used and become/are inhabitable, in relation to the transformations produced by spatial planning.

The analysis used an ethnographic approach, with extensive and repeated observations in the areas of the city centre inhabited by homeless people. Non-directive interviews were also carried out, notably with three women, a man and two families living on the streets, who we met and followed on a number of occasions between July 2017 and March 2019. We started the fieldwork on Boulevard Anspach, then enlarged the perimeter following the movements of these people and the changing geographies of the places in which they spend the night. This ethnographic immersion revealed a variety of forms of occupation of spaces along a spectrum of more to less visible and temporary, with a multiplicity of areas inhabited as well as a wide range of people (families, men, young couples, single women). What clearly emerges is the materialization, via the pedestrianization project, of a desire to remove certain practices through *spatial* transformations: the installation of benches limited to certain parts of the boulevard reduces the

22 La Strada – Support centre for organizations in Brussels working to assist homeless people.

possibility of sitting and resting; the elimination of awnings diminishes the areas that protect from the rain; the removal of the (few remaining) public urinals further increases the exclusion of those (male and female) who are unable to access a café. Thus, Place De Brouckère became a huge esplanade with (just) six benches around its perimeter; the front of the Brico DIY store was cleaned, meaning V. and her companion who lived in front of the entrance protected by a large awning, had to leave. Similarly, the urinals on Place Fontainas were removed, which made life harder for G. (female, in her sixties), who used them every day despite their not being designed for women.

Other practices are, however, encouraged by this *smoothing* of the space: strolling, moving about, showcasing oneself, shopping. Possibilities for encounter—a significant encounter with the other—remain limited to areas of consumption: the terraces of cafés, shopping centres, multiplex cinemas. And yet, if we look more closely at both spaces and practices, we realize that this binary reading of the intentions and effects of the project (removal of the marginalized vs. commodification of space) must be nuanced.

┌ July 2018. I meet J.-M. [Male, in his forties] on a bench on Boulevard
Anspach, in front of a closed casino; he has been sleeping here under the
arches since the street was pedestrianized. He tells me, 'It's nicer now, no
cars, less noise, lots of people ... security guards? They're OK, I just have to
respect the timing, I come here after 10 pm and I leave before the sun rises.
(Taken from the author's field notes)

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As J.-M. explains, the smoother and cleaner pedestrianized area is more inhabitable *for him* than before, thanks to the absence of cars, noise and exhaust fumes, the relative invisibility afforded by the presence of large crowds, the reassuring lighting (Figure 3). The security guards allow him to remain overnight, and the benches, although few in number, allow him to lie down thanks to their material (wood) and their length. In the eyes of J.-M., all of this contributes to making the boulevard more liveable than before. At the same time, his description provides us with information about the limits imposed on his presence and his visibility: he can stay overnight but he must *disappear* as soon as the day breaks.

> Figure 3. J.-M's place



Source: Elisabetta Rosa, 22 August 2018

Similar dynamics occur with a Romanian family, a dozen or so people who set up camp each evening at the entrance to a shopping centre in a pedestrianized street just off the main boulevard. They wait with their suitcases until the shops close and the crowds disperse, then start the process of creating their shelter, a wall made from piled-up cardboard boxes. This is packaging thrown out by shopkeepers and residents that members of the family have gathered throughout the day. The wall is assembled taking advantage of the awning that protects the entrance to the shopping centre and leaning against the columns that support it. The process can take more or less time²³ according to how much effort the various members put in. The newly built shelter must be dismantled the next morning: they have to '*dégager dégager*' ('go away, go away')²⁴ before day breaks, as the street-cleaning trucks start to circulate, their revolving orange lights and beeping noises acting as an alarm. This process of setting up and dismantling is repeated every evening and every morning, thus inscribing the way of living of the homeless people in the daily routine of the city. Although this street does not belong to the strict perimeter of the current pedestrianization project, it is littered with small building works, the barriers of

which can be used for protection, to strengthen the cardboard structure, and to dry bedding and clothing when the rain is not too heavy.

The arcades where J.-M slept were demolished during summer 2019, and the closed casino was replaced by a Burger King. These changes were what convinced J.-M to move:

┌ *October 2018. I saw J.-M again, in front of the entrance to a shop in the street leading to the railway station. 'I was sick of the boulevard,' he told me, 'the bad smells, the urine, the partygoers ... I have moved ... it's cleaner here, people live here. (Extract from the author's field notebook)* ┐

However, J.-M often returns to that part of the boulevard to spend the day, sit on the benches and see his friends.

The Romanian family also had to find another place to spend the night, as the awning that protected them was renovated, and the scaffolding and the alarm system took the family's place.

These stories, examples selected from among others, are used here to underline the importance of a pragmatist approach, which focuses on the micro-practices these people develop on a daily basis, and show how they succeed in making the space inhabitable, transforming it and inhabiting it. Thus, the routines and the movements of homeless people in the city do not only depend on the geographies of the services they are offered, or the effects of distancing produced by the urban developments, but also on a practical and tactical knowledge of the micro-architecture of the city, its rhythms and its temporalities. Drawing attention to these practices highlights both the search for inhabitable spaces and the 'ability to inhabit' of these people, which partially contradicts the idea of 'an absence of inhabiting' (Breviglieri, 2002), that is often associated with homeless people. Following this interpretation, it becomes possible to recognize homeless people as citizens, due to their knowledge of the urban space, their involvement in the dynamics of transformation, and their anchorage. The question that is raised – and further research on this is urgently needed – is one of how to understand the way these developments and projects (in Brussels and elsewhere) could take into consideration not only the presence of these people in the public spaces of the city, but also, more pressingly, their claim and ability to inhabit.

4 > PLACE FONTAINAS: A BORDER SPACE ON THE EDGE OF THE 'GAY' DISTRICT

Place Fontainas lies a stone's throw from the Bourse, at the crossroads between Boulevard Anspach and Boulevard Maurice Lemonnier. The first (or last, depending on the point of view) section of the pedestrianization plan for the city

centre boulevards, this square is located between two emblematic districts, or at least two neighbourhoods that echo in the imagination of Brussels's residents. On the one side, lying on the edge of the touristic city centre, the Rue du Marché au Charbon is the starting point for the 'gay' district, where associations, bars, clubs, saunas and other businesses targeting the LGBTI population, and particularly homosexual males, are located. On the other side, after crossing Place Fontainas, Boulevard Maurice Lemonnier marks the end of the pedestrianization plan and the start of the Anneessens District, a poorer neighbourhood often described as 'working class', and a significant hub for immigration, where incomes are among the lowest in the Region of Brussels.²⁵ Often maligned both by the media and in social discourse, Place Fontainas has frequently been described as 'dangerous', 'violent' and 'homophobic'.²⁶ In addition, as the neighbourhood surrounding it is widely associated in the collective imagination with Muslim populations, these categorizations help to reinforce associations – discursive, of thinking – between a specific area, a specific population and certain devalued social characteristics, such as homophobia. As a result, the square has often formed a backdrop for the opposing discourses of the groups and the spaces that it neighbours. However, although it is often seen as an interruption – topographic, social, functional – between the neighbourhoods in the heart of Brussels's city centre and those bordering the *Pentagone*, the square has recently been the focus of renewed public interest, notably seeking to link the neighbourhoods that it separates and encourage encounters between populations judged to be different. To this end, there has been substantial work undertaken on the square,²⁷ combined with certain political interventions seeking, at least in their rhetoric, to reduce the (homophobic) violence that occurs there. This is the case with the most recent 'Interfederal action plan against discrimination and violence towards LGBTI people' [*Plan d'action interfédéral contre la discrimination et la violence à l'égard des personnes LGBTI*] drawn up by the former Federal Secretary of State for equal opportunities (Zuhair Demir, N-VA). However, rather than gathering, bringing together and aligning the various 'differences' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]), this plan seems to be constructed around nationalist logics of stigmatization and binary confrontation. It notably states that 'Muslim people have a more negative attitude towards homosexual people than Christian people'²⁸ even though a number of studies demonstrate the socially broad and protean character of homophobia (Borrillo, 2001; Tin, 2003). Identifying the latter as a

²⁵ Taken from 'Monitoring des quartiers de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale', 2015.

²⁶ Examples include the RTBF website headline on 24 March 2015: "Agression place Fontainas: le parquet reconnaît le caractère homophobe". (attack in Place Fontainas: the prosecutor recognises the homophobic nature) More recently, the headline on the BX1 website on 21 May 2018: "Un groupe de jeunes victimes dimanche soir d'une agression homophobe près de la place Fontainas". (A group of young people were victims on Sunday night of a homophobic attack at Place Fontainas)

²⁷ In addition to the pedestrianization work, the square and its surroundings are also undergoing work relating to the building of housing, sports facilities and green spaces.

²⁸ Extract taken from "Plan d'action Interfédéral contre la discrimination et la violence à l'égard des personnes LGBTI", p. 10.

religious characteristic (often assimilated with a characterization of race and even of class), this plan seeks to reaffirm certain supposed oppositions (notably between the 'Arab World' and LGBTI people). It thus suggests a security-based approach to the management of public space and expresses an egalitarian political rhetoric for the – binary – categorization of vulnerable people and dangerous populations; safe spaces and risky spaces. In light of these dichotomous representations, it would seem, in contrast, that these worlds that we tend to oppose are fluid, heterogeneous, hierarchical and interlinked, in the same way that the gay district and the Anneessens neighbourhood are littered with overlapping 'hierarchizations' and internal boundaries. Via a study carried out between September 2017 and June 2018, we felt it was pertinent to observe if, and to what extent, these categorizations emerged – in practices, populations, use of the space – and circulated in discourses and representations. More precisely, starting from repeated observations made in and around Place Fontainas and semi-structured interviews with residents and users of the gay businesses in the neighbourhood, the aim was to understand how spaces are built through the usages, practices, discourses and representations of a variety of actors who invest time and money in these spaces. In order to nuance the above-mentioned categorizations, we propose here to examine Place Fontainas through the notion of *border* and approach this area from an *intersectional* analysis which will make it possible to understand the experiences of oppression and domination specific to the people situated at the crossroads of multiple power relationships (Crenshaw, 1989). The notion of border and the intersectional prism allow a breaking away from the binary analysis of socio-spatial relations and greater understanding of, in a finer and more nuanced way, the manner in which occupations play out (socially, spatially and discursively) and conjugate with the dynamics of limitation and the invisibilization of certain categories of a population. Over this section of the chapter, the analysis of four axes of differentiation will be developed: sexuality, social class, ethnicity and gender.

An area of sociability and socialization that is often a constituent feature of the urban experience of its users, the gay district is a community area, a spatial reference that is often essential for the construction of identity, notably for the 'coming out'. Strengthened by the presence of gay monuments, associations and institutions, the community area of the district allows for a more free expression of certain practices and certain behaviours (such as visible homosexual seduction) which is normally forbidden in public spaces (or seen as risky). Its central and visible character means that the district offers a certain right to the city to certain segments of the homosexual populations (Leroy, 2009). However, it would be inadequate to state that the gay district is a homosexual area: it is a multifunctional space that is not only dedicated to homosexual sociabilities, there is a large minority of lesbians, it is a very masculinized area (and is frequented by a certain type of man, as we will see later), self-identified heterosexual people visit its socializing spaces, and some of them have homosexual relationships there. In addition, this right to the city, which occurs in a trusted space, is geographically situated and is consistent with the representation of other areas seen as dangerous. This extract

from an interview from May 2018 with Aurélien,²⁹ a user of the gay businesses in the neighbourhood, is particularly illustrative:

┌ Aurélien: 'With some mates, we sometimes come dressed in drag or we wear rather provocative clothes, but when we come here [Rue du Marché au Charbon] we always go via the Grand-Place or we take a taxi.'

Author: 'You never go via Anspach, Fontainas or Lemonnier?'

Aurélien: 'You are crazy, not dressed like that anyway [laughs].'

The representation of a non-heteronormative³⁰ trusted space is thus intimately linked to the representation of other heteronormative spaces. On the edges of the gay district and its representations, the Anneessens neighbourhood, often associated with an area where homosexual exposure is seen to be risky, acts as a parapet for practices, behaviours and self-representations that are not heteronormative. To this end, Place Fontainas is seen as one of the boundaries of the gay district.

But sexuality is not the only element that contributes to the construction of this boundary; other axes of differentiation seem to be involved. Mainly occupied by a white, well-off population, the Rue du Marché au Charbon falls within commercial and residential gentrification dynamics (Van Crieelingen and Fleury, 2006), which contrast with Boulevard Maurice Lemonnier, where the built environment is more run-down and inhabited by a population that is poorer (in terms of income) (and with a North African or sub-Saharan immigration background (or represented as such). Frequently seen as the potential perpetrators of homophobic acts, these populations living alongside the gay district are partially excluded from it, feeding the construction of a border based on aspects of class and race. Far from being hermetic, borders do not divide areas that are socially closed, but rather they leave room for the relatively fluid circulation of people, symbols and practices. But the borders are primarily discourses, representations nourished by the perceived contrasts which can stoke certain forms of tension.

┌ It's really a cut-throat area, I avoid it as much as possible. You got scum and dealers everywhere [...] There are a lot of attacks on gays. For gays it is very dangerous.
(Mathias, 2018)

┌ That part of it [Place Fontainas] is much poorer, more working class, and it's quite ambivalent really because it is a district that is both gay and also potentially very Arab. For me it really is the border between the two and I think there is a lot of violence there. Between Muslims, on the one hand, and Gays on the other, I think things must be quite tense.
(Émilie, 2018)

The interviews reveal that the supposed characteristics of class and race are essential elements for maintaining a feeling of insecurity and the construction and designation of dangerous areas. For this reason, the recurrent figures of *poor* (notably homeless), *young* and *foreigner* often maintain this representation of danger. In addition, both the interviews and the above-mentioned media and political discourses illustrate the tendency for certain figures to be largely omitted from collective representations, such as the gay Arab, the lesbian Arab, the black lesbian, etc. Under-represented within the visible and central gay district, these populations are the subject of specific intersectional oppression (notably by these forms of discursive invisibility) and are often partially excluded, spatially invisible. And although it is understood that homosexuality does not have a class, race or gender, and that racialized homosexuals exist and frequent the gay district, they are generally reduced to being an object of desire or curiosity (Huysentruyt et al., 2017) or relegated to less visible areas, such as the sauna or the Stamm bar. Often considered outside of its social environment and the power relations that cross through it, the gay district is the subject of its own appropriations, is crossed by boundaries and internal hierarchies, such as those between class and ethnicity, and tends to be predominantly peopled by white, middle-class males.

Despite the different spatial occupations, the Rue du Marché du Charbon, Place Fontainas and Boulevard Maurice Lemonnier are continually dominated by the masculine occupation of space, rendering women invisible in each of the areas. Invisibility is not synonymous with totally absent, and women are indeed present in each of these spaces, but their access to them is limited and requires strategies and forms of negotiation. In the Rue du Marché de Charbon, this invisibility relates to a feeling of illegitimacy caused by the homosexualized image of a space associated with masculine gay sociability.

┌ *I am not gay; I don't know what I would do there.*
(Émilie, 2018)

For Lesbians, there is 'Mothers and Daughters' or occasional events, but they are generally outside of the gay district.
(Sophie, 2018)

└

In addition, certain businesses explicitly forbid access to women, such as a gay sauna or a cruising club.³¹ In Boulevard Lemonnier, the invisibility of women relates to a feeling of insecurity often associated with the district, generating certain strategies of adaptation and spatial avoidance: taking certain routes or forms of transport rather than others, being accompanied, avoiding wearing certain clothes, etc.

┌ *I avoid Anneessens at night, I go round it or I take a taxi [...] It's true that, in the evening, I try to be the least visible possible. But it has become so much a part of my normal life that I hardly notice it anymore.*
(Amandine, 2018) ┐

These various strategies are constitutive of the invisibilization of women in these spaces and reveal the asymmetric relationships between genders which seem to take shape both outside of and through these spaces.

Here as elsewhere, we observe that public space is marked by unequal access and by the domination of certain behaviours, practices and specific populations. Often presented as a melting pot (Devleeshouwer et al., 2015), Brussels (and its city centre in particular) is a combination of socially varied areas, resulting in cohabitation and encounters, but also forms of tension, exclusion and invisibility. When seen as a city that is being transformed, the quest for a right to the city and the understanding of the aforementioned problems with cohabitation have become central in the reflections on the urban developments (Costes, 2010) as well as on egalitarian public policies. To this end, certain measures aim to reduce violence and forms of exclusion, bringing people together and having them coexist in their differences. At the junction between the gay district and the district of Anneessens, Place Fontainas, a spatial area with contrasting perceptions, is sometimes judged to be too dangerous or too homophobic, and is a prime example of this type of reflection. However, dissident logics often combine with these measures – this may be the commodification of urban areas (see Part 2) or, as here, nationalistic logics of confrontation and stigmatization. And yet, as the study shows, the groups and spaces cannot be understood in a binary mode, pitting categories of vulnerable populations against categories of dangerous populations; safe areas and risky areas. In contrast, and even if the notion of dangerousness (of spaces, populations, practices) is still present in the representations, they are interspersed with boundaries and internal hierarchies that regulate access to spaces. Essentially occupied by a masculine population that is often white and well-off, the gay district is in fact governed by a number of limits to access and generates dynamics that invisibilize people located at the crossroads of numerous power relationships, such as lesbians or racialized (homosexual) people. Like other spaces, the gay district is a social area marked by power relationships and produced by populations, practices and discourses that forge the appropriations. Although rarely conceived as such, it is the focus of measures which, as well as opposing and stigmatizing, cultivate categories of ‘undesirable’ users (Belina, 2003) and fail to take into account other socio-urban problems hindering the right to the city, notably those relating to the free movement of women in the public space.

5 > PEDESTRIANIZATION BETWEEN PUBLIC SPACES AND RESIDENTIAL SPACES, WHAT PROJECTS FOR AN INHABITED CITY CENTRE?

5.1 The right to housing as an insufficient but primary condition of the right to the city?

In 1968, when Lefebvre wrote *The Right To The City*, this work appeared as a manifesto criticizing mass production housing and the way in which the urban fabric is too often reserved for specialized technicians, a state bureaucracy and real estate promoters who care little about the aspirations of inhabitants and who reduce dwellings to a product defined by its 'exchange value' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). Between the lines, the author promoted the creation of spaces that respond to the aspirations of residents, areas of difference and not of repetition, and a permanent intervention of dwellers in the shaping of the spaces they inhabit (Busquet, 2012). The right to housing occupies a key position in these demands and this urban project.

In Belgium, from a legal perspective, the right to the city does not exist. The right to housing does, however, appear in the texts of numerous laws. At an international level, since 1948, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers to the 'right to housing for all' (art. 25). At the national level, Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution guarantees the right of all to live a life in accordance with human dignity. This right notably includes 'the right to decent housing'. At the regional level, the Brussels Housing Code (*Code du logement bruxellois*) is the instrument used to implement Article 23 of the Constitution. Herein, Article 3 sets out the right to decent housing. The authorities must be able to create the necessary conditions for achieving this basic right. This article refers more to the technical and material aspects of housing, without taking into account the aspirations as developed by Lefebvre through the notion of a right to the city. In addition, the Brussels-Capital Region has difficulties in guaranteeing the right to housing and has been experiencing a housing crisis for the last twenty years, as a result of various elements, such as the demographic increase, the ageing built environment, the rising price of housing, etc.³² Some authors also criticize the lack of public regulation in the housing sector, which has been totally surrendered to market forces (Bernard, 2008). In 2018, according to the SLRB (the Brussels-Capital regional housing company – *Société du Logement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*), 45,478 households were on waiting lists for social housing, whereas SLRB built just 150 homes per year in the period from 2003 to 2011 (Romainville, 2015).

³² Brussels demonstration for the right to housing "La crise du logement à Bruxelles" – see: <http://www.rbdh-bbrow.be/spip.php?article1957>.

The pedestrianized area studied in this work represents a regional exception in terms of the proportion of public housing it includes (housing belonging to the city housing authority – *Régie foncière* – and the CPAS). This unusual situation offers substantial potential in terms of property and could become a lever for imagining new forms of governance, conceiving new forms of housing in line with the transformation of our societies and encouraging new forms of urban living. Furthermore, the 2018–2024 municipal plan, which governs this area, announced ‘an ambitious housing policy in accordance with Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution which spells out the right to housing. Above all, decent housing allows universal needs to be met, such as sleeping, forming a family, having an active life, studying or working.’³³

The following historical analysis and field study³⁴ will reveal how this regional exception and the ambition of the City of Brussels could be combined so that the pedestrianization of the boulevards is accompanied by a genuine project of housing for all.

5.2 Observations. The central Grand Boulevards: a project in between collective dwellings and public spaces

Between 1867 and 1871, work to clean up the centre of Brussels by modifying the flow of the Senne River led to the creation of the Grands Boulevards. This was an ambitious urban project led by the City and designed by the architect Léon Suys (1823–1867). This project included ‘the development along the amended riverbed of a monumental boulevard interspersed by two squares, and with facilities designed to embellish the public area: a Commemorative Fountain, a Bourse and the Central Market Halls’ (Brauman et al, 1982:7, our translation). It was the first time in Brussels that a project to build collective dwellings was carried out on such a large scale in these areas. This transformation was the response to centralization of the economic, administrative and cultural functions in the lower city, in line with the aspirations of the new liberal bourgeoisie of the time. Nevertheless, in contrast to other cities such as Paris (the Haussmann plan) and Barcelona (the Cerda plan), where the blocks were completely rebuilt, in Brussels the new was grafted onto the old, as only a part of the old urban tissue was expropriated to build the new-built facade of the Boulevards. The expropriation and the construction of new buildings only concerned the built facade of the boulevard.

Initially, a private British financial company, the Belgian Public Works Company, signed a contract with the city to carry out certain works over the course of three

³³ https://www.bruxelles.be/sites/default/files/bxl/Accord_de_majorite_Ville_de_Bruxelles_2018-2024.pdf.

³⁴ Data gathering is mainly based on in situ research to identify housing in the pedestrianized area in order to calculate the percentage of public housing in this area, and on semi-directive interviews with representatives of municipal authorities in the City of Brussels.

years in exchange for the transfer of the land bordering the Boulevard. But the British company went bankrupt and the land was bought in 1871 by the City and given to a French building firm, Mosnier. During this second stage, Mosnier built 62 investment properties. At the end of the work, only seven buildings had found a buyer. Due to a lack of enthusiasts and following the bankruptcy of the company,³⁵ the City bought the entire portfolio of unsold properties. To date, the city of Brussels, via its housing management department (*Régie foncière*), is still the owner of some of the buildings that form the inhabited façade of the new pedestrianized district.

Given the limited area acquired through the expropriation, the buildings were constructed along a narrow strip on the rich side of the Boulevards, with limited outdoor areas (courtyards, patios) and small apartments (in the eyes of the bourgeoisie, who were used to larger homes). The buildings along the Boulevard are therefore characterized by courtyards that merely catch light, the lack of a passage between the courtyard and the street, virtually no areas offering contact between neighbouring houses, and the contact between public areas and dwellings consisting only of a door opening onto the street. As a result of the construction of the Boulevards, the buildings of the older residential areas also lost certain qualities of habitability (scale disruptions, loss of brightness, reduction of the interior of the blocks, etc.).

In 2014, the project to pedestrianize the central Boulevards highlighted the City's desire to drastically change its centre by creating a new public pedestrianized area. In contrast with Léon Suys' project, where housing was integrated into the design of the boulevards, the pedestrianization project exclusively focused on the creation of public spaces. At this scale, new challenges appeared in terms of mobility, commercial possibilities, urban co-presence, events organization, attractiveness for tourists, etc. But consideration of housing along the pedestrianized area remained secondary. Yet, this issue encapsulates a series of spatial and social challenges such as the balance between tourist accommodation (and the transformation of homes into Airbnb rentals³⁶), residential housing, gentrification, the threshold between the various functions³⁷ and accessibility to housing for the poorest (Bernard,

³⁵ At the time, the bourgeois classes did not wish to live in the city centre, preferring their town houses in the outer layer of the city.

³⁶ The 2018-2024 majority agreement plans to put in place measures to avoid entire houses and apartment blocks being rented out via Airbnb. These coercive measures would be a way of avoiding it becoming impossible to rent a residential property other than via these platforms in certain neighbourhoods. (Majority agreement, p. 92)

³⁷ With regard to the importance of linkages between public and private spaces, Salignon's research shows that: "Any articulation has value only if it allows to maintain the unity of the whole where it has meaning or from where it draws meaning. [...] The fact that we are increasingly seeing a breakdown in functions, content, living habits, clearly shows the loss of meaning that this unity should maintain. This maintenance does not suggest an idea of enclosure, on the contrary with what is implied in this question of articulation: something that opens possibilities." (Salignon, 1992)

2008), amongst others. This topic is even more strategic because, as a result of the City purchasing the unsold buildings in the 19th century operation, 317 of the 1493 dwellings (some 21%) listed in this zone belong to the City's housing department³⁸ (Figure 4).

Furthermore, according to the Monitoring des Quartiers (2020) report, the west of the Boulevards has a higher population density, lower average incomes, smaller dwellings and, above all, a lower mobility of inhabitants towards the rest of the Region (Figure 5). Consequently, this pedestrianized zone simultaneously exists as a central area for the Region and as a border area between two different socio-economic parts. This area contains a whole series of spatial and social challenges that make it possible to imagine a reconciliation between the right to the city and the right to housing.

5.3 Levers for a project combining residential spaces with public spaces

The City of Brussels municipal plan for 2018–2024 is not short on ambition for enabling the multi-functionality and the liveability of the city centre. Section 3 of this document presents housing as the second most important concern after unemployment for this legislative period, to be addressed via a programme focused on the following points:

- 'accelerating the renovation of social housing via the establishment of incentive mechanisms, partnerships and financing schemes, encouraging temporary occupation, integrating green technologies, etc.;
- developing the public and private housing offer via innovative financial packages, combatting the issue of unoccupied properties, developing public housing reserve funds, transforming the upper floors of commercial premises into housing, etc.;
- fighting for the dignity of all by making emergency housing available, through "housing first" projects, etc.;
- giving priority to good governance and collaboration via transparency in the allocation of social housing, the creation of a one-stop shop, strengthening social care, supporting citizens' initiatives, etc.'

(City of Brussels, 2018; our translation).

The City of Brussels has control over a series of levers influencing the definition of housing on the edge of the pedestrianized area, either due to the fact that it is the direct owner of the properties (via the Régie Foncière or the CPAS) or because its urban planning decisions influence them.

➤ **Figure 4.** Buildings along the boulevard (UrbAdm 2019), Buildings with housing units (survey 2019), Buildings with housing units belonging to City's real estate department (data from the City real estate department)



Source: Gérald Ledent, Chloé Salembier

From the point of view of the housing management department firstly, Olivier Verstraete, director of the cabinet for Khalid Zian, deputy mayor in charge of housing and public heritage for the City of Brussels, explicitly states that ‘the housing management department considers this exceptional situation as a true lever to avoid the so-called “gentrification” in this area. Rents have not risen (following the pedestrianization) and this has helped to stabilize populations and avoid a situation where the majority of citizens are inhabitants with high incomes.’³⁹

From an urbanism perspective, Ans Persons,⁴⁰ deputy mayor in charge of urbanism, intends to influence the transformation of the city centre and take into account a form of egalitarianism between the richest and the poorest using two fundamental levers. One is urbanism permits, in order to ensure a functional and typological mix in future residential projects. The other involves using a controlling unit to limit the development of Airbnb rentals in the area and regulate urban development breaches that are not in line with the project of a city centre accessible to everybody as a public space and to its inhabitants as a living space.

The central position of the City, as the owner and manager of the public spaces and of certain residential spaces of the pedestrianized area, could make it possible to coordinate both an urban space and good quality domestic spaces in a single project.

In parallel, the City could partially and innovatively respond to the housing crisis that the Brussels Region has experienced for two decades. For example, in terms of governance, co-housing projects⁴¹ could develop in these areas as a result of citizens’ initiatives supported by the authorities. In terms of housing status, the creation of Trusts via foundations and housing cooperatives⁴² could also be considered,

³⁹ Interview with Olivier Verstraeten, director of the cabinet for Khalid Zian, deputy mayor for housing and public heritage for the City of Brussels since 1 January 2019, with the authors on 25 November 2019.

⁴⁰ Interview with Ans Persons, deputy mayor for urbanism for the City of Brussels since 1 January 2019, by the authors on 17 December 2019.

⁴¹ Co-housing, sometimes termed ‘collective housing’ corresponds to innovative forms of housing where future residents are stakeholders throughout the process of designing and managing the future living spaces. The resident is no longer considered to be a simple consumer of these living spaces, but an active participant in their habitat (Lenel, Demonty & Schaut, 2020).

⁴² The housing cooperative is a cooperative that buys and manages a property operating along the premise that an individual has one voice in the decision-making process, regardless of the size of their holding in the company. This legal structure implies the collective ownership of a property, as well as its shared management to ensure its longevity.

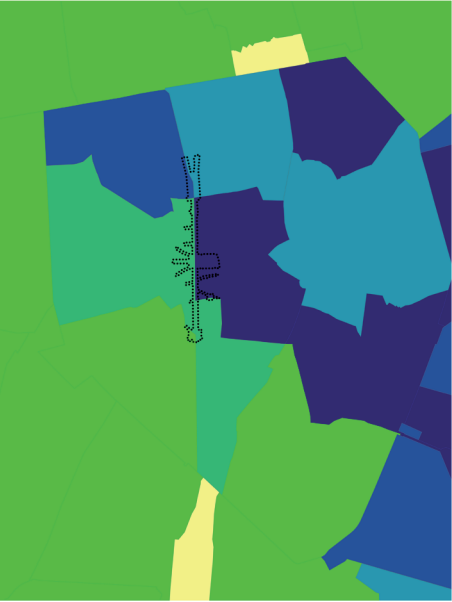
> **Figure 5.** Population density, Average income per declaration, Average housing size per inhabitant, Mobility rate of residents towards the rest of the Region



Population density
(StatBel2019)



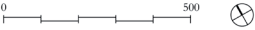
Average income per declaration
(StatBel2017)



Average housing size per inhabitant
(Census2001)



Mobility rate of residents towards the rest of the region
(StatBel2006)



Source: Statbel, 2019; Statbel, 2017; Census, 2001; Statbel, 2006

notably the Community Land Trust.⁴³ In terms of typology, apartments could be transformed to offer multipurpose spaces and encourage the pooling of certain services (laundry, cooking, party halls, guest rooms, etc.) as is already the case in certain innovative housing programmes in Belgium and elsewhere. Lastly, in terms of inclusion, residential spaces on the edges of the pedestrianized area could offer forms of solidarity housing,⁴⁴ with drop-in and emergency centres to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people.

By doing this, the project would meet the recommendations set out by Lefebvre for achieving the right to the city by including the right to housing. Indeed, Lefebvre believes three fundamental levers make it possible to transform capitalist society through the transformation of its spaces: the collective ownership and management of spaces; the permanent intervention of inhabitants in the production of living spaces; and the creation of spaces of difference and interchangeability. Redefining the Grand Boulevards as a public pedestrianized area represents an opportunity unprecedented since the plans of Léon Suys in the 19th century to rethink the residential and urban project in an integrated manner. The City of Brussels now has control over a series of levers to achieve this.

6 > PUTTING THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE. ENSURING THAT THE RIGHT(S) TO THE CITY IS/ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN FUTURE TRANSFORMATIONS

In this text, the right to the city is used as a prism to examine the transformations of Brussels's city centre caused by the pedestrianization of the central boulevards. The four pieces of research which form the basis of this analysis allow us to demonstrate the complex relationship, in the given context, between the multiple dimensions that make up the right to the city – participating, inhabiting, appropriating and using the public spaces and housing.

In particular, our analysis of the multiple forms of participation that accompanied the pedestrianization project and its implementation has shown that, while

⁴³ "A Community Land Trust is a 'non-profit-making organization [...] tasked with purchasing and managing built or non-built property in the Brussels-Capital Region, with the aim of creating housing accessible to socially disadvantaged households as well as facilities for collective usage. [...] The community land trust remains the owner of the land, but transfers ownership of the buildings to the households via rights in rem with the attributes of ownership separated. It determines the resale conditions for the buildings which must allow them to remain accessible to low-income families". (RBC, 2013; our translation).

⁴⁴ The Brussels Housing Code (2013) defines solidarity housing in these terms: a dwelling that is underpinned by a solidarity project, which may or may not be initiated by an institution but which is organized in a written document and where at least one inhabitant is experiencing financial and social difficulties. Each resident has one or more private spaces for their exclusive use, and there is at least one communal living space.

(inciting) participation in the future of the city remains an essential condition for exercising the right to the city, special attention should be paid to *who* participates and *how*. This would seem to be an imperative if the city centre is to (continue to) remain a space able to welcome and enable the cohabitation of a multitude of differences. Paying attention to the homeless people living in the public spaces of the city centre allows these considerations to be developed further. The practices adopted by these people in inhabiting these spaces can be seen as much as a quest for inhabitable spaces as a capacity to inhabit. The right to the city can be seen here as the right to inhabit, and not only for the most disadvantaged. Indeed, the manner in which the presence of homeless people in public spaces is managed, including via physical transformations, becomes a prism through which to question the public nature of these spaces, the acceptability of uses and differences, the possibilities of encounters. It also represents an opportunity for rethinking the urban project and the desire for coexistence that it embodies. These interrogations are an echo of those developed in the third part of the text. Here, the analysis carried out highlights the fact that the power relationships inherent to the space are the product of practices, discourses and representations of a variety of actors *all* of whom contribute to the production of powerful mechanisms of exclusion, hierarchization and stigmatization. A detailed exploration of these dynamics highlights issues that were either unknown or underestimated in the context of Brussels's city centre, notably the use and accessibility of the public space for women.

The last part of the text adopts a broader point of view in order to address the tension between the right to the city and the right to housing. This issue is examined through the study of the relationship between the residential space project and the public spaces project. To achieve this, the analysis concentrated on the historical, typo-morphological, political and legal dimensions of the urban mutations that have transformed the city centre and central boulevards. This approach expands the considerations developed throughout the text, and highlights a series of levers that the pedestrianization project could seize upon in order to render the city centre more liveable, including for the most vulnerable.

The question which is raised, therefore, is if – and how – future transformations will be able to produce a city '*for the many, not for the few*' (Amin et al., 2000). Any intervention affecting space, whether in the form of material or strategic operations, has a social impact that cannot be neglected. Although the pedestrianization work on the central boulevards will soon be at an end, other transformations, concerning both material aspects (use of spaces that are currently empty, notably the public housing stock) and immaterial aspects (organization of events, recreational activities, combining uses and practices according to differing temporalities, etc.), are still ongoing. There is potential for the pedestrianization project – and all those in charge of decisions relating to it – to address these questions by taking seriously the challenges raised by the right to the city in its multiple dimensions.

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