



AVENUE DES
BOIS-DE-MAI

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Innovating in a Limited Territory

The Perspective of the Brussels Bouwmeester – Maître Architecte

This chapter starts from a special perspective, namely from the role of the Brussels Bouwmeester (government architect). The function has its origins in the Dutch “Rijksbouwmeester”, which has existed for more than 200 years. In Belgium, this role was only introduced at the turn of the last century, but it has since expanded to encompass a broad and diverse remit: the Bouwmeester is no longer restricted to government building assignments and now aims for a higher quality of the overall spatial environment. The first Belgian Bouwmeester began working in Flanders in 1999. Afterwards came several Bouwmeesters working at the city level: in Antwerp, Ghent, and Charleroi.

In Brussels, the position of Bouwmeester – Maître Architecte (BMA) was established in 2009 on the level of the bilingual Capital Region. The BMA is appointed for a period of five years after an open selection procedure and, together with a team of about 15 people, forms an independent institution working with all government agencies, public and private clients, and cultural and academic organisations. The BMA’s overall mission is to promote the spatial quality of urban development projects in terms of architecture, urban planning, and public space.¹ This is done mainly through the conducting of design competitions, but also through other tools which each BMA can develop according to his or her own insights. In Brussels, as a result, the BMA also uses research by design, provides official review on the quality of permit applications for buildings of above 5000 m² gross floor area and engages in agenda-setting by taking public positions on spatial issues. Themes promoted by the BMA over the past decade since 2015 include the productive city, adaptive reuse instead of demolition, and cooperative living as a new solution for affordable housing in Brussels.

The intervention of the BMA does not have a mandatory status; instead, the Bouwmeester operates entirely on the basis of substantive argument, persuasion, and partnership. So, in terms of governance, it is all about “soft power”. Independence is fundamental to the BMA and creates an exceptional position in the structure of the public administration, as the BMA is both “in” and “out” of the system: “Because we do not belong to anyone, we can work with anyone.”² The BMA’s unique position allows them to work transversally, which is of great importance in urban development in view of spatial quality. Our society is facing complex problems that we can no longer approach from a single policy domain but must focus instead on collaborative efforts to find quality and sustainable solutions.

Housing is one of our society’s “wicked problems” that cannot be addressed from an architectural perspective alone. This chapter is therefore framed within broader social dimensions that affect or influence urban housing, including the growing financialisation of housing as an investment product, demographic changes, the contraction of the office market, and reuse as a fundamental aspect of sustainability.

In the BMA’s operations, housing quality receives permanent attention, not only because it represents the largest share of the city’s total building volume but mainly because of the social importance of good quality of life for Brussels residents. Ultimately, the BMA prioritises good city life over achieving a beautiful cityscape. The quality of everyday housing programmes and basic services is far more important in a city than iconic projects, even though the latter tend to receive more attention within the architectural scene.

Reflecting on the past few years, we cannot ignore the impact of the 2020–2021 pandemic on urban living quality. Homeworking has now become a permanent fixture for many, altering the traditional relationships between living and working. But above all, urban inequality became painfully clear during the confinement period.

Clearly, those living in overcrowded neighbourhoods, where there is a severe lack of public open space or housing without any outdoor space, are entitled to a better quality of life. If these issues were known for quite some time, the COVID-19 period raised awareness and elevated them on the political agenda.³ In Brussels, a reform of the building code has been submitted to the government for approval in 2024, introducing several new rules clearly influenced by the experiences of the pandemic years, such as the requirement for private and collective outdoor spaces in all new housing developments.

Looking back more broadly at the past ten years as BMA, we see a paradigm shift at work in Brussels urban development policies. For a long time, the dominant discourse emphasised the need for city densification due to significant demographic growth, which led to a strong focus on additional housing and facilities. Yet, recent forecasts indicate that population growth is slowing down. Furthermore, another significant urgency, climate change, is emerging, which poses a potential threat to urban quality of life. Therefore, the central focus of urban planning discourse in Brussels should shift from 10,000 to 2. “10,000” is roughly the annual average number of new Brussels residents in the past decade. “2 degrees Celsius” is the expected temperature rise for the next decade. Now more than ever, it is time for a paradigm shift in the driving force behind urban development in Brussels: from demography to temperature.

Densification as a Means of Internal Growth for the City

Brussels is currently experiencing urban flight while simultaneously witnessing population growth. This paradox shows that behind the demographic evolution of the Belgian capital lies a complex reality. While residents are leaving Brussels, primarily for the suburbs, resulting in a net loss of approximately 20,000 inhabitants per year,⁴ the total population of Brussels continues to rise. After a decline in the late 1960s, Brussels’ population has started growing again since the mid-1990s, averaging nearly 10,000 new inhabitants per year over the last decades, although this trend has slowed in recent years.⁵ This growth is linked to recent immigration and the contribution to birth rates from earlier immigration waves. In addition, Brussels is Europe’s most diverse city as over 75 % of the population

was of foreign origin in 2024. This includes individuals who are of foreign nationality, those born with a foreign nationality, or those with at least one parent born with a foreign nationality.⁶

The static nature of Brussels’ territorial boundaries contrasts with this demographic dynamic. Since its establishment in 1989, the Brussels-Capital Region has been irrevocably fixed within the borders of a 161-km² territory: no more, no less. Although the socio-economic sphere of influence of the Brussels region extends beyond its administrative borders, cooperation with Flanders and Wallonia is quite challenging. As a result, the political reflex in Brussels is to address all issues within its own territory, particularly since the Region’s tax revenues are based on residency rather than place of employment. Thus, Brussels’ demographic growth does not lead to plans for expansion, new suburbs, or satellite towns, but rather to strategies for internal densification.

From House to Urban Block: The Role of Private Initiative

Densification driven by demographic pressure primarily happens at the scale of the individual house unit. Alongside adding extra storeys to these houses (Népomucène 15, pp. 306–307), other forms of densification emerge. Originally intended for single families, Brussels townhouses are increasingly being divided into several residential units. When done carelessly, this leads to a significant decline in both residents’ quality of life and privacy. Many municipalities try to counter these poorly considered divisions by implementing regulations aimed at preserving large, high-quality homes.⁷ For example, since 2009, planning permission has been required for such subdivisions,⁸ although many owners bypass this rule.

The Escher House by Atelier Tom Vanhee (2021) demonstrates that such divisions can present architectural quality; a newly added staircase complements the original one and enables the large house to be subdivided while preserving its spaciousness. While such a project may not significantly impact on densification, its systematic replication should not be underestimated. In terms of population density, it contributes to a more intensive occupation of urban space, especially considering that the existing urban fabric in Brussels is largely made up of individual

³ Comité Scientifique Logement. “Rapport des Travaux.” Brussels, Perspective.brussels, 2020. ⁴ In 2021, 23,854 persons came to live in the Brussels-Capital Region, and 44,905 persons left. Hermia, Jean-Pierre. “Baromètre démographique 2022 de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale.” *Focus*, vol. 58, May 2023. ⁵ In 2021, the population of Brussels rose to 1,222,637, which is an increase of 84,000 residents in 10 years. *Ibid.* ⁶ Statbel. “Key Figures 2023.” FPS Economy-Statistics Belgium, 2024. ⁷ Commune de Molenbeek. “Diviser une maison unifamiliale, subdiviser un immeuble de rapport, transformer un arrière-bâtiment en logement.” edited by Service de l’Urbanisme, 2006; Ville de Bruxelles. “Recommandations du 9 octobre 2008 relatives à la division d’un logement unifamilial.” 2008. ⁸ Ordinance of 14 May 2009, amending the ordinance of 13 May 2004, concerning ratification of the Code bruxellois de l’Aménagement du Territoire.



The existing staircase below (shown in light beige) serves the first dwelling; the added new staircase (highlighted in medium beige) leads directly upstairs to the second dwelling (Atelier Tom Vanhee, Escher House, 2021).

houses. This results in significant “bottom-up” densification, a typically Belgian practice of real-estate operations carried out by individual citizens.

Another aspect of this small-scale densification in Brussels is a recent shift in trend: construction is now occurring on plots of land where it previously did not take place. These are plots that, due to factors such as irregular shape, unfavourable location, or restrictive context, previously failed to attract interest for development. In Werfstraat 23, pp. 400–401, in the heart of Brussels, a very shallow plot was completely sandwiched by blind façades. While building a dwelling there was once deemed unlikely, the current pressure on the housing market has changed that perception. Architectural ingenuity has navigated the constraints of the plot, successfully stacking the complete programme of a comfortable family home across five storeys,

each about 4.5 metres deep. A family resides there, behind a façade that combines the appearance of a *maison de maître* with an industrial character. The house’s primary outdoor space is no longer the garden at the back, but rather a large rooftop terrace, accessible by both stairs and a lift.

A wide range of interventions also take place in the reworking of the closed urban blocks. In its archetypal form, the Brussels block is characterised by a row of houses along the frontage lines of the surrounding streets, with an open inner area that features gardens and small out-buildings. In reality, many blocks are more heterogeneous, as building volumes such as warehouses, multi-storey annexes, second-line buildings, and garages have emerged over time in the interior of the blocks.⁹ Today, the pressure for densification is leading to another transformation in the urban block. A common practice is

⁹ Le Fort, Barbara. “Tissus urbains hétérogènes: une ressource pour l’adaptabilité urbaine: le cas de Bruxelles”. Louvain-la-Neuve, UCLouvain, 2022.

the conversion into residential spaces of semi-industrial buildings in the inner areas. A typical approach involves preserving some buildings while removing others to allow light and air to enter. This approach creates a horizontal form of living punctuated by a series of patios, benefiting from the tranquility created by the setback from the street.

This phenomenon can extend right through the entire block as in the cases of the projects Angleterre-Hollande by Vanden Eeckhoudt-Creyf (2021), p. 374, or Picard 46 by Générale (2021). These transformations create the economies of scale of a larger number of homes, but necessitate removing existing buildings in a more drastic way to ensure sufficient open space. This open space, often a collective garden, plays a crucial role, influencing both the building volumes' arrangement and fostering community among residents. Often, the garden provides access to shared facilities, ranging from a workshop, a community room, a guest room, and bicycle storage to a garbage room. The existing architectural diversity of the various buildings – from classical townhouses along the street to industrial constructions at the back and contemporary



Existing buildings

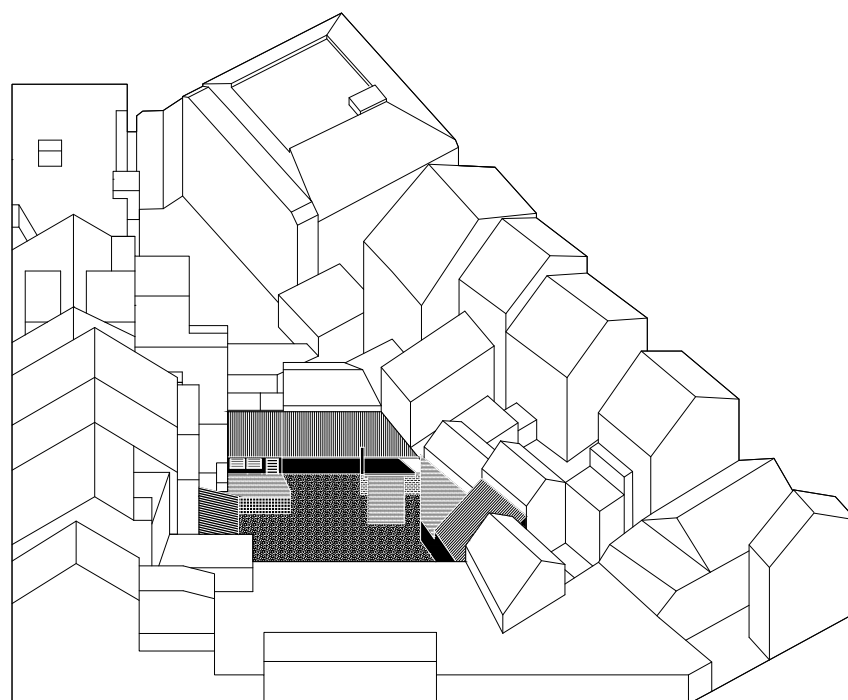


Transformation into two dwellings

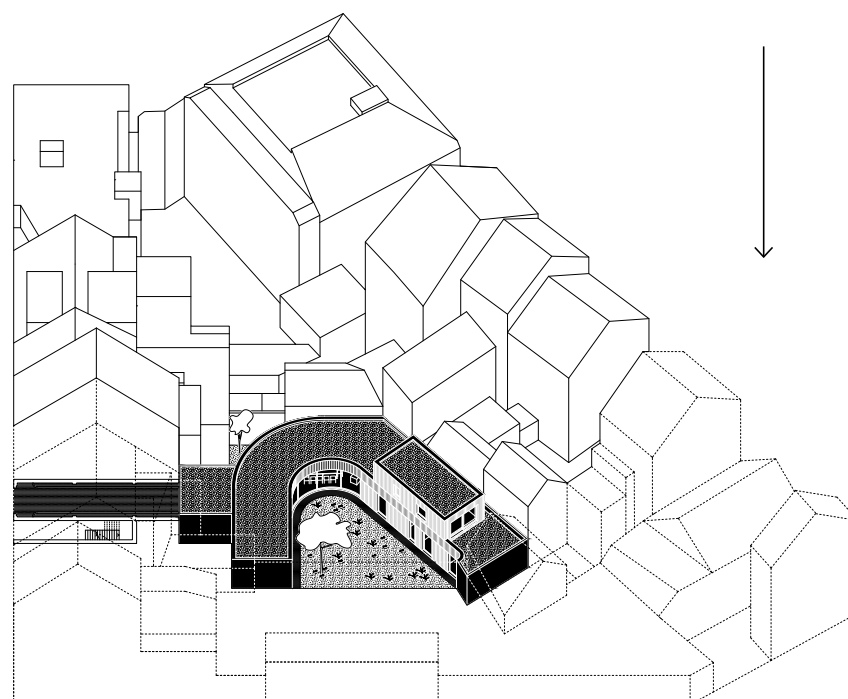
One unit is located on the upper floors of the house on the street side, while for the lower unit, the roof structure of the workshop is punctually opened. The interior and exterior rooms are arranged along the entire length of the plot (Czvek Rigby – Emilie Bechet – Corine Paquot, refurbished terrace house and former warehouse Glands 51, 2022).



A larger scale of intervention in the urban block enables the mixing of housing with other functions, such as a food supermarket on the entire ground floor with a roof garden on top for residents (Générale, co-housing apartment building Picard 46, 2021).



Before



After

The design replaces an impermeable hangar with a new family dwelling organised around a garden (a practice., house Noyer 115, 2024).

façades of the added volumes – is also unified by the garden, creating a cohesive whole (Duchesse 29, pp. 404–405; PNT², pp. 284–285).

When economies of scale reach a higher level, they typically involve professional real-estate developers. This is not only due to the larger investment budget but also to the time required to patiently negotiate the merger of different properties in order to create a project of a profitable scale. In those cases, the outdoor spaces expand in scale to incorporate amenities such as a playground or even a swimming pool (Clos

des Chartreux, pp. 392–393). Such projects often feature a mix of offices and commercial spaces alongside the residential programme, leading to a significant restructuring of the urban block.

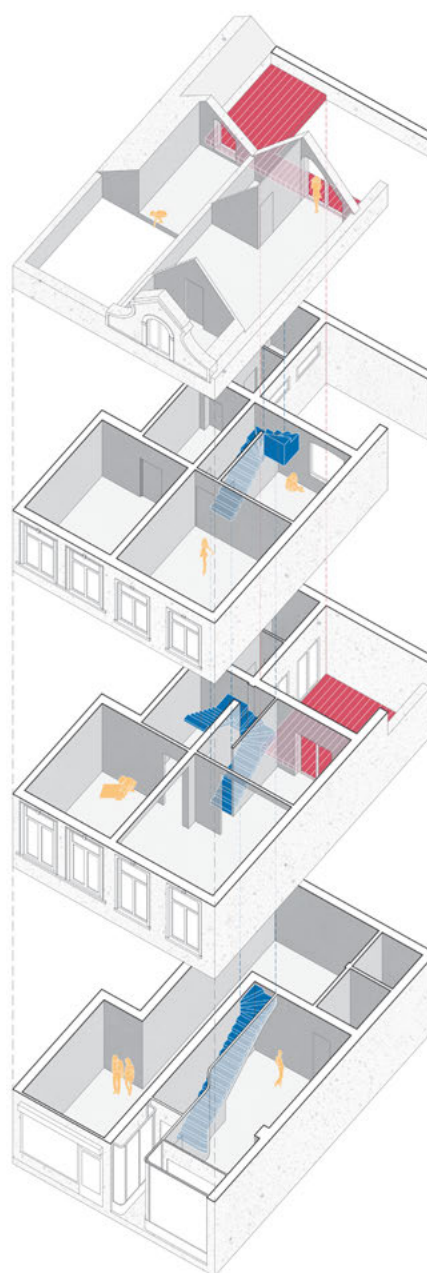
The densification of the urban fabric in Brussels is largely carried out by a diffuse but large number of private initiatives, from individual citizens to professional real-estate investors. This corresponds to what was already the case in the 19th-century expansion of Brussels. So, nothing truly new under the sun – at least to a certain extent. A noteworthy observation is that while

contemporary densification results in more inhabitants, it does not necessarily increase the physical building volumes. Indeed, many of these projects depart from a context where plots were completely built up with semi-industrial functions (Verbiest 5, pp. 396–397; the conversion of a warehouse into two dwellings at Helmet by a practice. and VLA Architecture in 2011, p.388; P.NT², pp. 284–285, etc.). Paradoxically, small-scale densification can hence be viewed as de-densification since it ensures more light and air, the initial step frequently being to remove existing building volumes to create open spaces. When the design of these open spaces incorporates unpaved, permeable surfaces and substantial greenery, this form of residential densification can create a porous network of open spaces, fostering a more resilient and sustainable living environment.

Densification as Public Policy: Rules, Projects, Vision

Besides the densification that occurs “bottom up” as a result of private initiatives, some developments can be characterised as “top down” when local authorities take the initiative by encouraging private stakeholders or by acting directly as project developer.

While shopping streets may be bustling with life during the day, they often become deserted in the evening. In most retail premises, only the ground floor is used while upper floors serve for nothing more than storage, back-office functions, staff rooms, or often remain just vacant.¹⁰ In Brussels, this vacancy is substantial, reaching 1.9 million square metres in 2018.¹¹ The central issue is accessibility. Indeed, to optimise the commercial potential of a property, the ground floor façade is fully utilised as a shop window, removing the separate entrance to the upper floors. This is particularly true in prime shopping neighbourhoods, where apartments yield far less profit compared with retail spaces. As a result, these shopping districts lack social control after opening hours. The municipality of Brussels has developed a policy to combat this trend by imposing rules to make the upper floors separately accessible from street level again.¹² For example in Plata Nueva, pp. 394–395 in the Rue Neuve, new residential spaces were built on top of the commercial spaces, around a rooftop terrace that protects inhabitants from the shopping bustle below. The project benefits the city through the social control it generates after shopping hours from having residents in the area.



Combining two houses with commercial ground floors to create access to apartments on the upper levels (LOMO studio, Midi 9–11, 2024).

In the 1920s, Belgium experienced a brief yet powerful influence from the garden city movement (see pp. 105–106). The best-known example from that era in Brussels is Le Logis-Floréal, pp. 158–161, though other neighbourhoods were developed on similar grounds until the mid-20th century. These interesting ensembles feature detached buildings integrated in green surroundings. Meanwhile, extensive renovation is required, which also provides an opportunity to densify these low-density settlements.¹³ Given that the waiting list for social housing in Brussels surpassed 50,000 households in 2023,¹⁴ it is important to increase the housing capacity in those garden cities while diversifying the offer. Garden

¹⁰ Grimmeau, Jean-Pierre and Benjamin Wayens. “Les causes de la disparition des petits commerces (1945–2015).” *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, vol. 16–17, 2016, pp. 5–114. ¹¹ Dirx, Lola et al. *Leegstond: handleiding voor gebruik van leegstaande ruimte*. Brussels, Toestand, 2018.

¹² Ville de Bruxelles. “Règlement relatif à l’octroi d’une prime communale pour la création d’accès séparés aux logements.” 2022. ¹³ Ananian, Priscilla. “La production du logement à Bruxelles : la ville de proximité à l’épreuve de la densification urbaine.” *Brussels Studies*, vol. 107, 2016.

¹⁴ Englert, Marion et al. “Baromètre du social. Rapport bruxellois sur l’état de la pauvreté et des inégalités sociales et de santé.” Brussels, Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2023.



Twenty-four new houses merge into the garden city of Val Maria, arranged so that the landscape continues into the outdoor spaces in between, encouraging a collective way of life (LOW Architecten, Val Maria, ongoing).

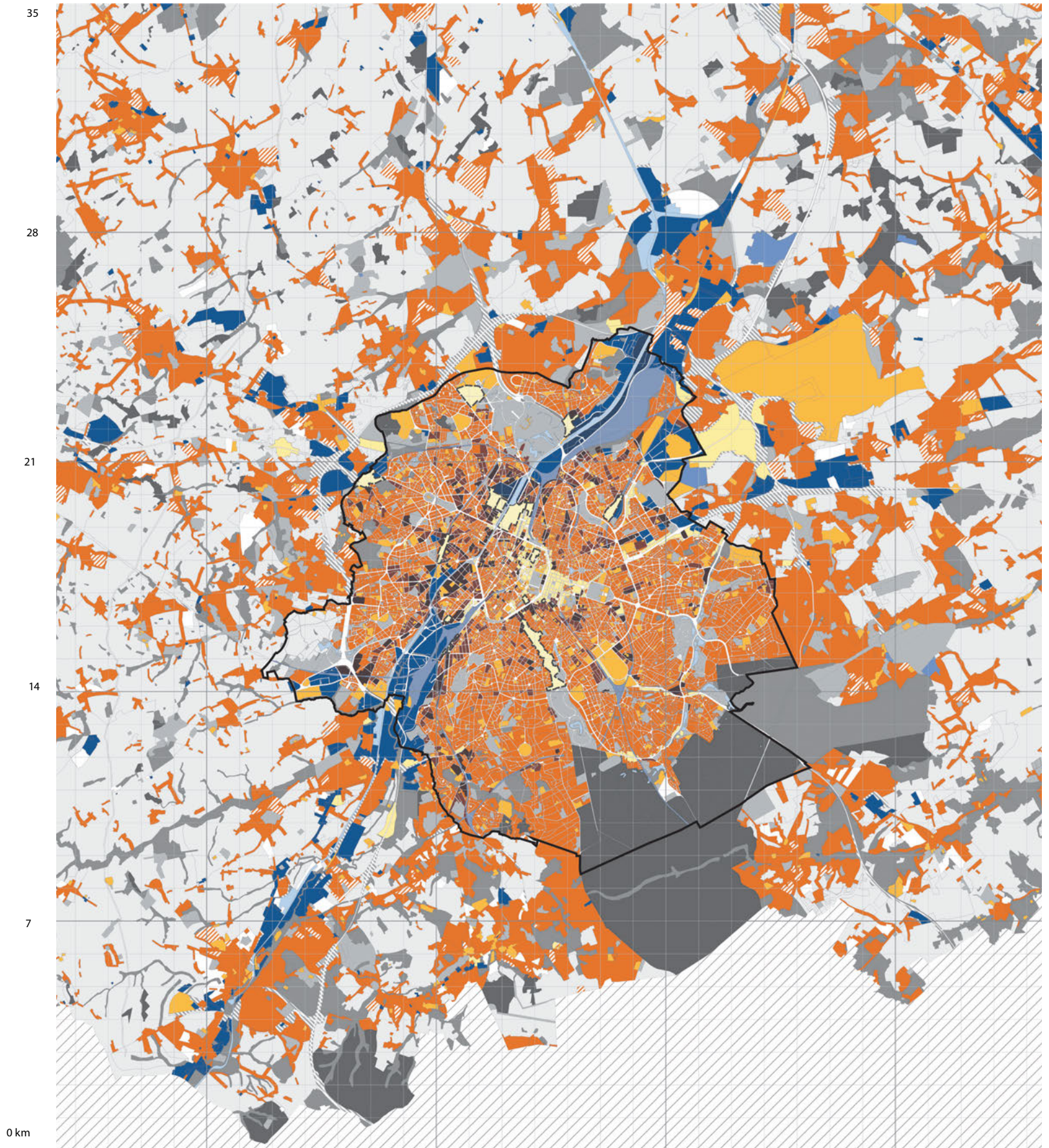
cities were typically designed with two- or three-bedroom houses for nuclear families and need now to be supplemented with units for singles, larger families, and adapted to accommodate less mobile or ageing residents. Recent projects commissioned by public authorities such as Val Maria by LOW Architecten or Homborchveld by 51N4E and Coloco succeed in revitalising these garden cities with a sense of quality by adapting existing homes or incorporating new buildings, all while preserving their original character.

In the immediate vicinity of Le Logis-Floréal, several undeveloped sites were identified to build more social housing in the early 2000s. While some were developed as the Archiducs development (8 houses and 52 apartments) by Pierre Blondel Architectes (2013), others saw the rise of new priorities, such as urban agriculture and biodiversity preservation, in direct conflict with densification plans, as exemplified by the Chant des Cailles urban farm in Watermael-Boitsfort.¹⁵ Similar conflicts arise at the Friche Josaphat in Schaerbeek and the Marais du Wiels in Forest – green spaces that the Brussels Region initially intended to develop with new housing. All these projects are currently at a standstill, reflecting a significant paradigm shift. Indeed, growing awareness of climate change and its consequences for the quality of urban life necessitates a recalibration of spatial planning, shifting the emphasis from building densification to protecting open and natural spaces. The evolution

towards a climate-resilient city will undoubtedly be the primary focus of urban development in Brussels in the coming years, probably also leading to political friction in the government.

For decades, the bulk of urban transformation in Brussels has occurred within the 19th-century fabric, manifested through incremental adaptations in urban blocks and systematic reconversion of large-scale infrastructures, including industrial brownfields, former railway yards, and deserted barracks. While this phase of urban renewal is not yet complete, another challenge is emerging. The topic of the 20th-century belt is rising on the agenda. These peripheral, almost suburban, neighbourhoods in and around Brussels were primarily developed in the second half of the 20th century and are now approaching the end of their life cycle. Houses are in need of renovation to reduce energy consumption, and generational changes alongside evolving social needs are influencing this shift as well, not to mention the necessary change in the original car-oriented mobility. All of this coincides with the pressure to urbanise areas in Brussels that still have relatively low density, such as along the ring road (e.g. the mixed-used Westside project with housing, hotel, nursing home, theatre, and artist studios) by XDGA Xavier De Geyter Architects (ongoing) but also highlights the need to utilise the remaining open space for climate-conscious liveability throughout the city. Here too, both objectives conflict, necessitating a

¹⁵ Bergers, Jolein et al. "Urban Agriculture COOP's on a Shared Landscape." *Designing Brussels Ecosystems*, Metrolab Brussels, edited by Bernard Declève et al., Brussels, Metrolab, 2020; Ledent, Gérald. "Genèse de la maison bruxelloise." *Montréal et Bruxelles en projet[s]. Les enjeux de la densification urbaine*, edited by Priscilla Ananian and Bernard Declève, Louvain-la-Neuve, PUL, 2017, pp. 127–156; Ternon, Anna. "Evolution of the housing cooperative model in Brussels." *Sustainable Dwelling*, edited by Gérald Ledent et al., Louvain-la-Neuve, PUL, 2026.



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| residential zones | agriculture zones | port and transport activity zones |
| mixed-use zones | park, leisure, burial, and sport zones | railway zones |
| highly mixed-use zones | buffer zones | military zones |
| collective facility zones | green zones | urban or residential extension zones |
| administrative zones | forest zones | water |
| urban industries, artisanal businesses zones | zones of regional interest | no data |

Land use in and around Brussels, highlighting the sharp divide created by the regional border between continuous urbanisation and the preservation of open spaces (LaboXX+I, L'urbanisation du 20^e siècle dans et autour de Bruxelles, 2021).



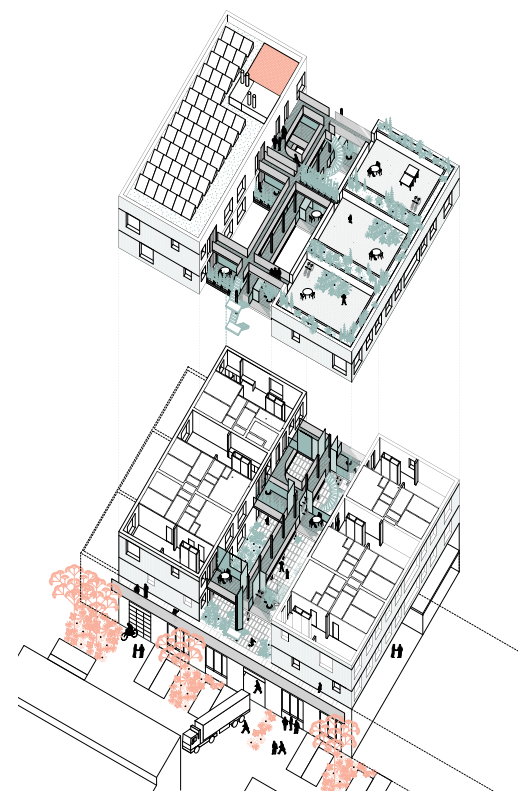
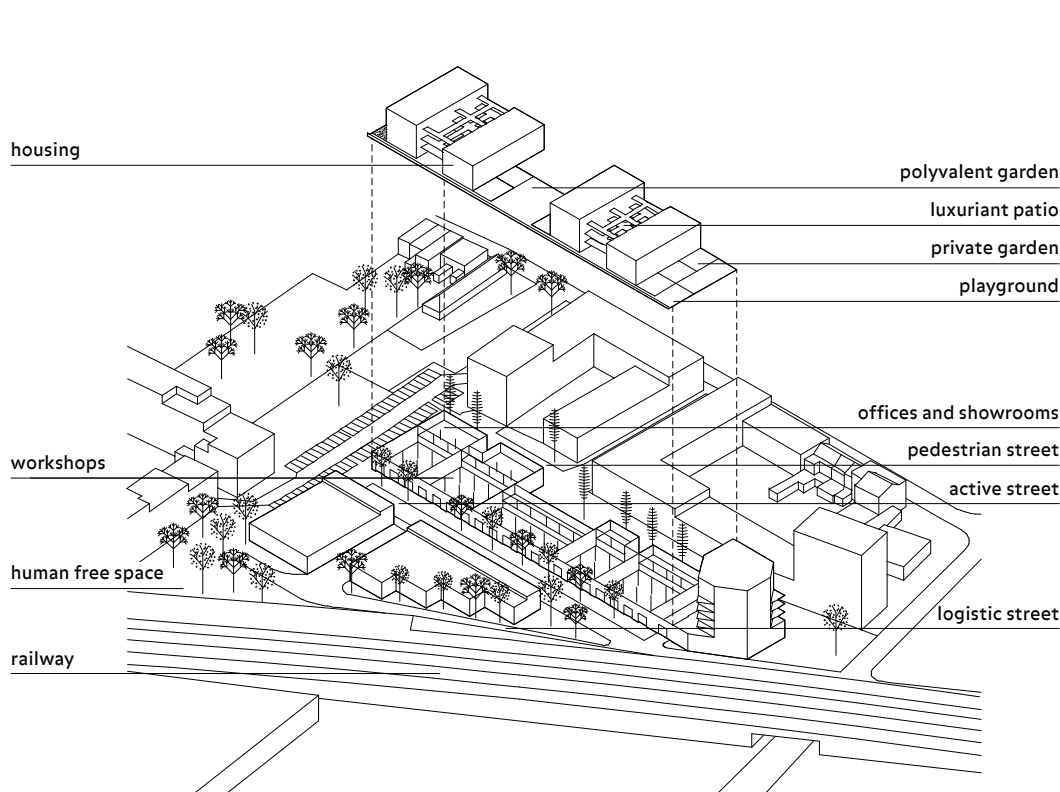
The 20th-century fabric is less consolidated and triggers proposals for exceptional densification (XDGA Xaveer De Geyter Architects, Westside project, ongoing).

comprehensive vision to find a balance. Although a wealth of expertise and experience in urban renewal exists for the 19th-century fabric, the same cannot be said for the morphology of the 20th century. Fortunately, growing attention is being given to researching how this 20th-century belt functions and how we should address the challenges it presents.¹⁶

Embracing Programmatic Complexity

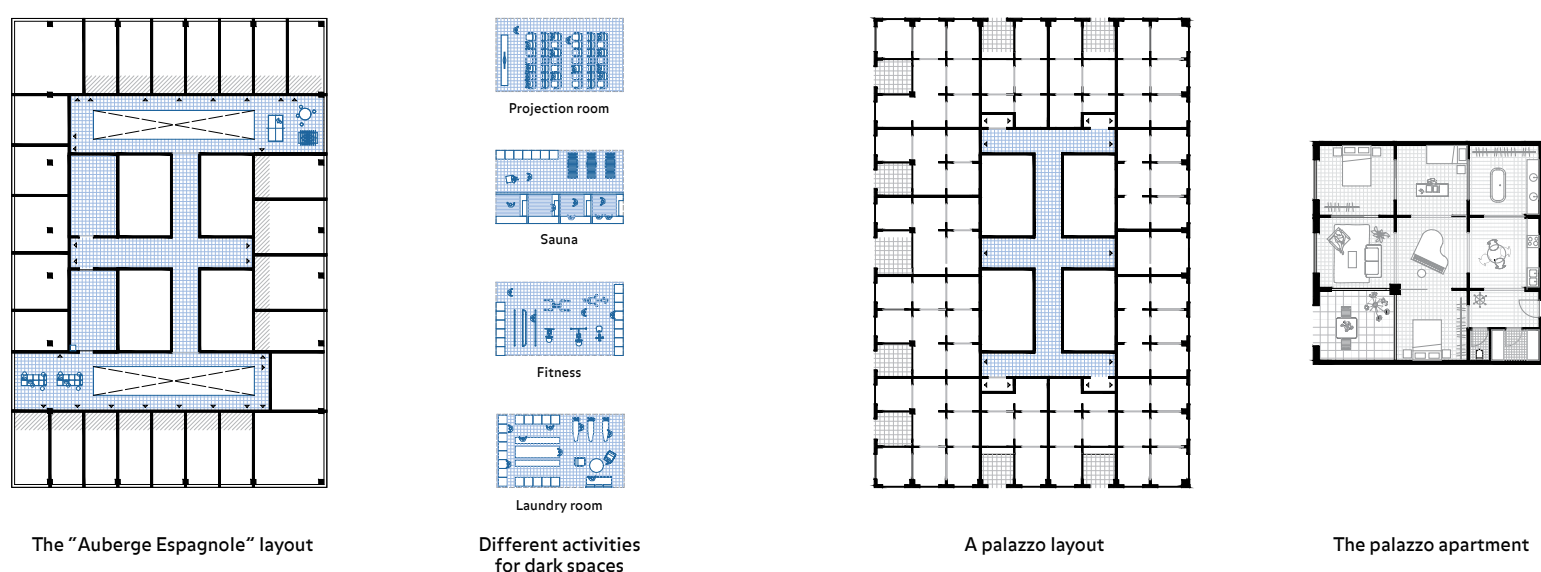
Due to its confinement to its own regional territory, Brussels is compelled to devise innovative solutions. In architecture, that leads to an abundance of combining, mixing, and assembling with what already exists. Designers working in Brussels quickly develop expertise in smart stacking, sharing space, and adopting circular thinking. The result of this expertise is evident in mixed-use projects that intertwine work and living spaces, countering the city's mono-functional zoning inherited from the 1960s. Mixity is one of the fundamental characteristics of urbanity and a value that the BMA is explicitly committed to.

In recent decades, productive activities such as small-scale manufacturing, logistics, maintenance, and repair jobs have increasingly been pushed out of European cities.¹⁷ However, these “back-end” activities belong to the city as much



This mixed-use project combines 63 housing units on top of 7600 m² of light industry, without completely separating the two worlds, thus rightly integrating productive economy into everyday city life (BOGDAN & VAN BROECK and DDS+, NovaCity I, 2023).

¹⁶ Cavalieri, Chiara; Dehaene, Michiel; Grosjean, Bénédicte; Leloutre, Géry; Colson, Alexander; et. al. *ATLAS. L'urbanisation du 20^e siècle dans et autour de Bruxelles Exploration de la zone sur base de douze questions urbaines*, 2021. ¹⁷ De Boeck, Sarah et al. “Maintenir l'espace de production de petite taille en ville: le cas des entreprises de construction bruxelloises (1965–2016).” *Brussels Studies*, vol. 147, 2020.



Research by design on innovative residential floor plans that address the large building depth and dark core when reconvertng the Proximus office towers (A2o architecten – Multiple – Koen Van Synghel, *How to live in the North neighbourhood?*, 2022).

as the front-end for which they provide services. Proximity between housing, work, and consumption not only supports sustainable mobility but also ensures a diversified and more resilient urban economy. After all, a city cannot rely solely on white-collar jobs, can it? Brussels is a pioneer in the policy endorsement and practical implementation of the concept of Productive City.¹⁸ Thanks to architectural competitions, a variety of projects have been realised in Brussels that combine working and living in vertically stacked typologies (Gryson, pp. 406–407; NovaCity I, p. 379; Making a/+Living, pp. 338–339; etc.). In doing so, the ambition is to avoid separating these two worlds while addressing potential mutual nuisances. Eventually, the goal is to celebrate the complexity of mixing these functions as a key aspect of urban identity.

Since the COVID-19 period, it has become evident that working from home will have a lasting impact, and that less office space will be needed in our cities. A major player in Brussels, the European Commission announced in 2021 its intention to reduce its office surfaces by 25 %, which is a good barometer of what lies ahead.¹⁹ However, this reduction is not an entirely new trend; it has just been intensified by the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, a substantial office vacancy existed before the pandemic due to the rise of flexible desks, remote working, and decentralisation to locations situated ahead of traffic jams.

In recent years, offices have primarily disappeared from the Brussels periphery. While losing their appeal due to the single mode of accessibility, namely by car, these buildings, mainly set in nice green environments of the 20th-century belt, are easily convertible into apartments.

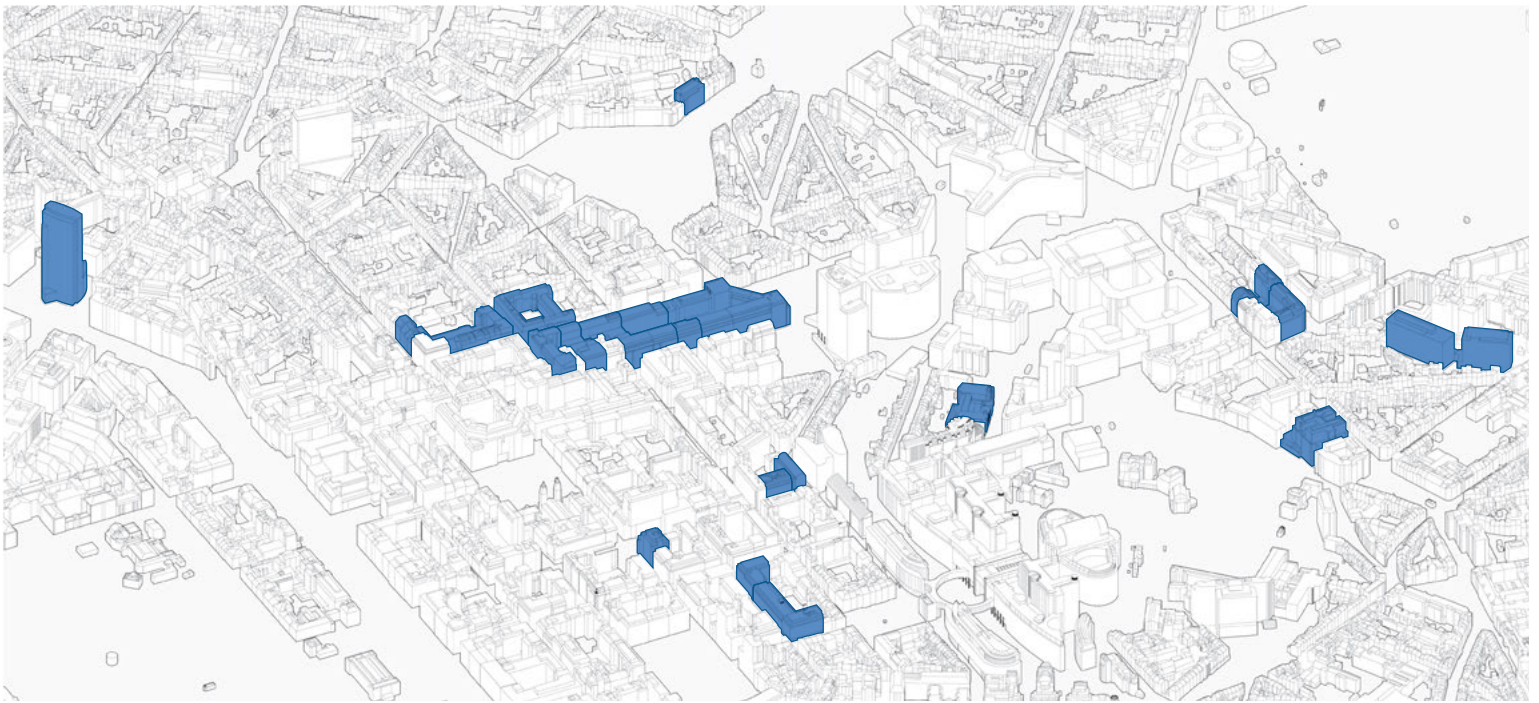
Thereby, they enrich the areas' residential offer with more compact housing types in contrast to the local abundance of detached family houses, as in the Leopold 3 project by architectes-associés, p. 380 (2018). The transformation of office buildings presents architectural quality potential, such as higher ceilings (Cosmopolitan, pp. 322–323), but also poses challenges in creating terraces, lowering window sills, or accommodating numerous pipe shafts.

The decline of offices in the periphery coincides with a re-concentration around public transport hubs in Brussels, such as the central railway stations. If this shift is positive in terms of sustainable mobility, it makes it harder to counter the monofunctionality in areas such as the North Quarter or the European Quarter. In these office districts, the authorities still need to encourage or even impose a mix of functions to ensure liveliness outside working hours. This has resulted in innovative approaches such as the project ZIN, pp. 410–413, by 5IN4E, l'AUC, and Jaspers-Eyers, which alternates office floors with residential or hotel floors in two interconnected towers. The façades' animation evolves according to these programmes, varying between daytime and evening, as well as weekdays and weekends, ensuring it never becomes completely inactive. Another example in the North Quarter is the transformation of the headquarters of the Belgian telecoms company Proximus, where one of the two existing 102-metre-high tower buildings will be converted into apartments. However, the very deep office floors do not allow a layout with standard flats, so a study investigated alternative residential floor plans for the tower. The architectural practices A2o architecten, Multiple, and Koen Van Synghel

¹⁸ Ryckewaert, Michael et al. "Variable Arrangements Between Residential and Productive Activities: Conceiving Mixed-Use for Urban Development in Brussels." *Urban Planning*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2021, pp. 334–349; Borret, Kristiaan. "Building Better Brussels: Production Urbanism as a Policy." *Architectural Design*, vol. 91, no. 5, 2021, pp. 120–127; Bouwmeester – maître architecte. "Brussels Productive City." Brussels, perspective.brussels, 2019. ¹⁹ Von der Burchard, Hans. "European Commission to close half of its buildings as telework is 'new norm'." 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-to-close-half-of-its-buildings-as-teleworking-becomes-the-new-norm/>



Office buildings from the late 20th century that will all be converted to housing due to increasing vacancy.



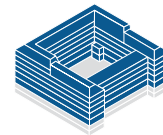
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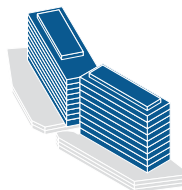
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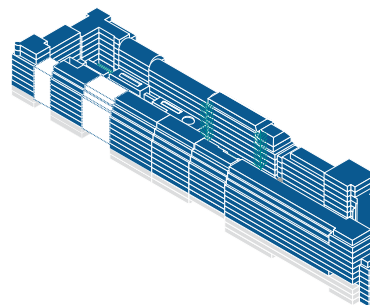
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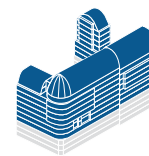
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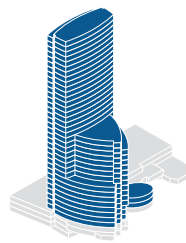
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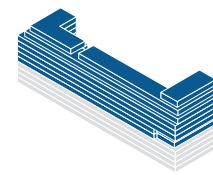
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CLUSTER LUX – MON

Twelve sites with in total 23 office buildings to be renovated in the European Quarter will, depending on the building type and location, also contain a proportion of housing and facilities in the future, bringing new life to this monofunctional office district (Cityforward – plusoffice architects – RE-ST, 2024).

(2022) proposed extra spacious terraces, bicycle storage, and larger-than-usual storage rooms on the same floor as the flats instead of in the basement. These elements have been incorporated into the actual plans for the Proximus towers redevelopment project by Neutelings-Riedijk and Jaspers-Eyers (ongoing). They provide an enhanced quality of life that would not have been achievable in a newly constructed building.

In the European Quarter, the monoculture of offices is particularly entrenched, as it is one of the few areas in Brussels where demand remains strong.²⁰ Housing projects in this district are often marginal, like additions to existing office buildings such as in Loi 42 by Synergy International (2018) or small flats that serve as *pieds-à-terre* for short-term occupancy. The City-forward project could be a game changer. It encompasses over 300,000 m² of office space sold by the European Commission in 2024, which will be redeveloped by a public-private consortium. A key requirement set by the Brussels government is that at least 30 % of this space will be dedicated to housing and collective facilities. This critical mass of the operation could finally mitigate the monofunctionality of the European Quarter in the coming decade.

With a touch of drama, one might describe Brussels as entering a post-tertiary era in urban development, following its post-industrial evolution. The significance of office vacancy has increased to become a key driver for the current housing production. For instance, in 2021–2022, 40 % of all housing permit applications exceeding 5000 square metres were for repurposed office spaces.²¹ Half of these projects involved demolition followed by new construction, while the other half focused on reusing at least the existing building structure. This fits well with the need to reduce the high environmental impact of the construction sector in terms of CO₂ emissions. Demolition conveniently overlooks the CO₂ emissions already embedded in the existing building, apart from the emissions related to the sourcing and production of new building materials. Since emissions accumulate over time, it is vital to focus on immediate solutions rather than relying solely on new buildings, which may only yield returns after several decades. Therefore, the primary challenge in our cities lies in the reuse of entire buildings rather than merely focusing on the reuse of materials. To achieve systemic change, the adaptive reuse of buildings in Brussels must transition from being a pioneering effort to a mainstream practice.

Commodification of Living: It's the Finance, Stupid!

Like many large cities, Brussels has seen a dramatic rise in housing costs over the past decades. At first glance, this can be attributed to the city's growing attractiveness. While urban renewal has achieved significant success, it also poses a serious risk of gentrification. Brussels could become unaffordable for many of its current residents,²² affecting not only those on the lowest incomes but also the middle class.

Housing shortage and rising construction costs contribute to this housing unaffordability, but the primary factor is the transformation of residential real estate into a financial product, attracting various investment mechanisms and speculation. In cities like London, Berlin, or Amsterdam, the influence of international investment funds on the local markets is significant. In Brussels, however, this presence remains limited for now, due to Belgium's fragmented property market where up to 65 % of Belgians own the property they live in.²³ Equally important, the historical plot division into numerous small parcels, each owned by different individuals, makes the acquisition of individual plots to develop large projects difficult. As a result, supra-local property investment groups have found Brussels to be an uninspiring market, as they typically seek larger-scale opportunities.

Nevertheless, the commodification of housing in Brussels is intensifying. As early as the 19th century, the Brussels bourgeoisie participated in land speculation by constructing housing intended for lower-income groups. This resulted in the emergence of basement flats, housing in *impasses* (Impasse Vanhoeter, pp. 68–69), or *maisons de rapport* (tenement houses) that emulated the architectural style of the *maison de maître* while accommodating multiple households within a single structure (Discailles 9, pp. 82–83). After 1945, developers like Etrimo and Amelinckx began marketing flats that were purchased by the middle class to be rented out. Amelinckx even used the slogan “an Amelinckx for old age” to advertise their flats as investment products, claiming that “37 % of their customers owned three or more Amelinckx flats”.²⁴ The early 21st century saw a rise in companies listed on the stock exchange in the housing market, leading to an increased grip of the capital on urban land.²⁵ Local property developers have begun selling

20 Ledent, Gérald; De Visscher, Jean-Philippe. “The European Quarter of Brussels: From District to Neighbourhood, the difference between Study and Research by Design.” In: *Architectural Research Addressing Societal Challenges: Proceedings of the EAAE ARCC 10th International Conference*, CRC Press, 2017. 21 Raynaud, Frédéric et al. “La conversion des bureaux à l'appui du projet régional.” *About Brussels : Perspectives pour l'aménagement du territoire Bruxellois*, no. 8, 2024. 22 Van Crielingen, Mathieu. *Contre la gentrification: convoitises et résistances dans les quartiers populaires*. Paris, La Dispute, 2021. 23 “71 % van de woningen uit de jaren 80 wordt bewoond door hun eigenaar.” 2024. <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/census/woningen/type-eigendom#:~:text=Op%20gewestelijk%20niveau%2C%20was%20er,%2C0%25%20in%20.> 24 Heindryckx, Laurence. “Practices of Commodification: The Private Mass Housing Development of Etrimo and Amelinckx (1924–1985).” Ph D thesis, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Gent, UGent, 2023, pp. 328–329. 25 Aalbers, Manuel. *The Financialization of Housing: A political economy approach*. London, Taylor & Francis, 2016; Dessouroux, Christian and Alice Romainville. “La production de logements en Belgique et à Bruxelles – Acteurs, dynamiques, géographie.” *EchoGéo*, no. 15, 2011; Romainville, Alice. “La production capitaliste des logements à Bruxelles: promotion immobilière et division sociale de l'espace.” *Faculté des Sciences – Géographie, Bruxelles*, Brussels, ULB, 2015.



Student housing as a typology makes it possible to develop plots that are less attractive for conventional housing (Olivier Richard, Slachthuislaan 17, 2023).

entire residential projects as rental products to institutional investors from abroad (ZIN, pp. 410–413),²⁶ accelerating the process of turning housing into an investment product rather than a place to live.²⁷ International finance has not yet taken control of the Brussels housing market, but the first steps are there and things could change very quickly.

The architecture linked to these real-estate mechanisms is often of poor quality – partly because the sector is quite conservative and tends to replicate what sold well yesterday. In terms of housing typology, there is little variation or innovation, and there is no experimentation in architectural expression either. This systemic inertia in the real-estate sector has long been met in Brussels by architects with uninspired compliance. Brussels was regarded as a closed community where the same developers repeatedly employed the same architects to construct mediocre buildings.

In 2015, the BMA launched a strategy to improve architectural quality in private development by breaking the monopoly in the Brussels architectural landscape through design competitions. As a result, not only were talented architects who had previously been overlooked in Brussels finally given an opportunity, but a breath of fresh air was also introduced into the design quality of private housing production. One of the

first competitions was Extensa's plan for some 900 homes in the Tour & Taxis district, a former railway site of high industrial heritage value (Mansion Block, pp. 330–331; Dayton, pp. 328–329). There, the architects devised an urban plan with several "mansion blocks" that formed a coherent ensemble around public courtyards and gardens. The neat brickwork not only complemented the monumental heritage architecture but also set it apart from the worn aesthetic of private property development, where white plaster adorned with a few wooden or concrete accents had become the norm. However, it is regrettable that the floor plans proposed during the competition were not kept. These resembled a collection of interlocking rooms of similar size, with functions that were not strictly defined, allowing for flexible use.

The stakes in the private competitions overseen by the BMA were both formal quality, exemplified by a fresh architectural language (Havenlaan 12, pp. 336–337), and quality of life, primarily through improved floor plans (Dockside, pp. 340–341). The same dual ambition is evident at the Biestebroek brownfield site along the canal in Anderlecht, where a new neighbourhood for over 10,000 residents is being developed. The façade of the most recent residential block (City-Dox 7, pp. 408–409) is a subtle play of white glazed brick with terracotta-coloured joints, steel and concrete, establishing a clear hierarchy between the front and rear façades. In terms of floor plan, the slab accommodates conventional but predominantly through apartments, stairwells with natural light and a wide terrace for each dwelling. All this sets it apart from more common practice that provides dark flats under the guise of affordability, featuring building depths of over 20 metres and minimal outdoor spaces.²⁸

In addition to standard flats for the average market, the real-estate sector also targets a variety of specific housing types, including student accommodation, apartment-hotels for expats, and various forms of co-living. These all have in common that they are short-term rentals of small units that drive up financial returns and are well-suited as new investment products.

Student Housing

For about a decade now, Brussels' appeal as a university town,²⁹ coupled with the pressure on the housing market, has led to a shortage of student accommodation. The real-estate industry has capitalised on this gap to develop large projects. Student housing often involves smaller units, which generally achieve higher rental yields compared with standard flats. As a result, it has emerged as a financially attractive option for

²⁶ <https://www.tijd.be/ondernemen/vastgoed/berlijnse-colivingreus-habyt-landt-in-brusselse-noordwijk/10544159.html>; <https://www.befimmo.be/nl/news/befimmo-verwelkomt-hbyt-zin> ²⁷ Wijburg, Gertjan et al. "The Financialisation of Rental Housing 2.0: Releasing Housing into the Privatised Mainstream of Capital Accumulation." *Antipode*, vol. 50, 2018. ²⁸ Dirickx, Ben et al. "Gebouwdieptes in woongebouwen. Een evolutie die vraagt om debat." Brussels, BMA, 2021. ²⁹ Albea, Rodrigo et al. "Panorama de la vie étudiante : pratiques urbaines et rapport à la ville." Brussels, perspective.brussels, 2020.

real-estate investment.³⁰ This trend is reflected in the marketing efforts that often target small middle-class investors rather than focusing on students or their parents.

The integration of student housing within the city is diverse. Some projects follow the alignment of a city block, as in Slachthuislaan 17 by Olivier Richard (2023), while others develop in the block interior as in the case of the Printemps project, p. 384, by Roose Peeters Architects +U (2019). Larger complexes appear often on campus premises as free-standing buildings such as VUB Student Housing by CONIX RDBM Architects (2019), p. 385. Student housing is increasingly being incorporated into complex real-estate projects, because the small units are easier to develop on challenging plots than traditional apartments. It also allows interesting combinations with other programmes such as a semi-industrial activity on the ground floor (Demets 47, pp. 416–417; Gryson, pp. 406–407). Student housing can undoubtedly add diversity and vitality to neighbourhoods, provided it does not dominate or disrupt the social balance of the area.

Co-Living

Just as students have become a target, the same applies to young professionals, or “starters”. In particular, university-educated singles with a good income, cultural capital, or those working as expats in Brussels are a sought-after demographic group for the emerging trend of “co-living”. Co-living represents the commodification of the home-sharing concept, which initially appeared as a resident-led initiative focused on affordable, community-oriented living. The private sector has diverted the concept by producing and managing themselves short- to medium-term leases for rooms in communal houses, where residents also have access to shared meeting and workspaces, as well as additional services.³¹ Since 2016, this represents more than 3000 rooms whose rent is 50 to 200 % higher than in traditional home-sharing.³² If co-living in Brussels was initially driven by small, local companies, the sector has since attracted foreign capital, viewing it as a strategic way to access the fragmented Brussels building stock.³³

The phenomenon started with great success by converting magnificent *maisons de maître* into trendy co-living residences, featuring 5 to 20 rooms and shared amenities, from billiard corners to mini-cinemas.³⁴ Since planning permission was not always required for these conversions,

the government watched with concern as the commercial success of co-living further drove up the price of family homes. In response, authorities decided to intervene by introducing stricter regulations on co-living developments³⁵ so that they no longer pose a competitive threat to ordinary housing, as is the case with the subdivision of townhouses. Since then, co-living has partly been directed towards atypical buildings where designing family dwellings would be challenging. Hence, co-living could become a win-win for both the public and private sectors when heritage buildings that are unsuitable for conventional housing, such as the Aegidium in Saint-Gilles or the Passage du Nord, pp. 414–415, can be revitalised with such programmes.

Essentially, housing commodification is nothing new in Brussels. As early as the 19th century, wealthy citizens constructed rental housing with the intention of generating income. What makes a fundamental difference today is that their place has been taken over by professional developers and listed companies. That has led to an unprecedented rise in housing prices. Getting out of the housing crisis will ultimately come down to daring to intervene in the financial system that drives the housing market. All well-intentioned design ingenuity notwithstanding, architecture alone will not solve the housing crisis.

The City Belongs to Everyone: Exploring Alternative Modes of Living

If housing commodification is in full swing, this does not mean that alternatives capable of resisting the aggressive push of mainstream housing production do not exist. In Brussels, numerous initiatives aim at target groups that receive little attention from developers. These initiatives include housing for lower-income and precarious individuals, as well as for specific groups who share a common sense of identity. Sometimes, the public authorities establish or subsidise these housing projects, but increasingly, civil society organisations such as citizens’ initiatives, NGOs, and activist associations are taking the lead. This evolution is characteristic of the decline of the welfare state in the Western world over the past decades, with cuts in social services.³⁶

For example, the waiting list for social housing in Brussels is expected to exceed 10 % of its population in 2024.³⁷ To address this issue, the

30 Aernouts, Nele et al. “Where are the student rooms? Reinvesting in student housing.” *BSI*, no. 7, 2024. 31 Bergan, Tegan L. et al. “Coliving housing: home cultures of precarity for the new creative class.” *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 22, no. 9, 2021, pp. 1204–1222; Uytendbrouck, Constance et al. “Shared housing for students and young professionals: evolution of a market in need of regulation.” *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, vol. 35, 2020. 32 Casier, Charlotte. “Experience the future of living. L’émergence du logement flexible et financiarisé en ville.” Brussels, ULB, 2023. 33 Casier, Charlotte. “The coliving market as an emergent financialized niche real estate sector: a view from Brussels.” *Housing Studies*, 2023, pp. 1–22. 34 Casier, Charlotte. “Coliving, or the financialisation of houses in Brussels.” *Brussels Studies*, 2023. 35 Ville de Bruxelles. “Recommandations du 17 juin 2021 relatives au coliving.” 2021. 36 Milner, Helen. “Globalisation, Populism and the Decline of the Welfare State.” *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2019, pp. 91–96; Moran, Michael. “Crises of the Welfare State.” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1988, pp. 397–414. 37 Englert, Marion et al. “Baromètre du social. Rapport bruxellois sur l’état de la pauvreté et des inégalités sociales et de santé.” Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2023.

production of new, affordable housing must be accelerated and better distributed across Brussels' 19 municipalities. To achieve this, authorities could mandate that a ratio of social housing be included in all building projects above a certain size. This approach follows the example of Vienna and Amsterdam, but also the recent plan for the Heyvaert neighbourhood in Anderlecht, where every permit application for more than 20 dwellings must include 25 % social housing. Simultaneously, the existing building stock, and in particular that from the second half of the 20th century, urgently requires comprehensive renovation – especially many of the slabs of modernist inspiration, which are in significant disrepair and whose house residents experience poor living conditions (Tilleuls, pp.342–343; Peterbos 9, pp.344–345). Social housing companies thus face a Catch-22 challenge: at the same time building additional housing units and renovating the existing housing stock.

Cooperatives and Co-Housing

With the authorities no longer able to ensure decent housing for all, numerous grassroots initiatives are emerging to develop alternative solutions. An important one is the renewed interest in cooperatives as a financial housing model, coupled with taking land value out of market speculation. Cooperative housing should become a third pillar for housing production in Brussels, between public and private, as new initiatives by Fairground and Cobha raise expectations. Within all these initiatives, the principles of co-housing are almost always central as they reduce living costs through sharing spaces or services³⁸ and create a sense of community in the absence of family or government support. The middle class may not face the housing distress experienced by those with the lowest incomes, but it does have its own concerns about affordability. At the same time, it has the capacity to organise itself into projects that embrace co-housing as a model (CôtéKanal, pp.274–275; La Tréfilerie, pp.286–287; Brutopia, pp.302–303; L'Echappée by Stekke + Fraas (2017); Habitat groupé Tivoli, pp.326–327; Casa Nova by Accarain-Bouillot (2015), etc.).³⁹

Other projects go a step further and focus on living together with residents in need of support. Residential groups of elderly people share space but also daily care in growing old together in projects such as Abbeyfield Le Martin-Pêcheur in Watermael-Boitsfort (2009). With the same goal, lToit2Ages connects seniors who have a room too many in their existing house with students looking for accommodation to create an inter-generational project where one benefits from



Housing can act as a safe space for vulnerable communities, as in the two cluster apartments for the LGBTQIA+ community in the Grands Carmes project (Manger Nielsen – Architectures Parallèles – L'architecture qui dégenre, Grands Carmes, ongoing).

companionship and the other from low-cost housing.⁴⁰ The co-housing model also applies to people with disabilities that require specialised infrastructure and communal services in their homes. In this case, architecture can provide both homely support to the residents and services to the neighbourhood (Villa Pilifs, pp.304–305; De Lork by 51N4E (2016), etc.). Housing can also provide a safe place, to protect from aggression or to turn to like-minded people. Such projects are developed in Brussels with the Grands Carmes, p. 386, and Le Bras for LGBTQIA+ persons, Sister's House for migrant women, Circé for homeless women or Communa's Casa Vesta where single mothers can live temporarily. There are also

³⁸ Ledent, G  rald and Chlo   Salembier. "Co-Housing to Ease and Share Household Chores? Spatial Visibility and Collective Deliberation as Levers for Gender Equality." *Buildings*, vol. 11, no. 189, 2021, pp. 1–23. ³⁹ Lenel, Emmanuelle et al. "Les exp  riences contemporaines de co-habitat en R  gion de Bruxelles-Capitale." *Brussels Studies*, vol. 142, 2020. ⁴⁰ Masson, Olivier et al. "Habitat et vieillissement. Inventaire des formes de logements qui supportent l'interd  pendance et l'autonomie des seniors." Louvain-la-Neuve, UCLouvain, 2015.

housing solutions that help people in precarious circumstances to regain a place in society through housing, as in the Transit project, p. 387, for drug addicts. More than just places to live, these are places that empower residents. In the most precarious situations, even a temporary solution is welcome, such as transit housing by ZED Architects and Atelier Gigogne (2010), Woonbox's, pp. 398–399, modular and relocatable housing units, or Pierre Blondel Architectes' design of emergency housing for Ukrainian migrants. These last two projects are located in vacant office buildings, illustrating the duality between acute housing shortage on the one hand, and long-term vacancy of corporate real estate on the other.

Ethics before Authorship

The single-family house has significantly influenced the Belgian landscape.⁴¹ This influence is not only quantitative, as the most common housing typology, but also qualitative. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, the single-family house evolved into an object that had to

express individual taste, made possible by a huge increase in building systems and materials. This applied to the mass of Belgian builders but also to architects, who viewed the home as an opportunity for experimentation. To conclude this chapter, some recent single-family houses in Brussels will be explored. They reflect new attitudes among architects, where personal style and signature are yielding to an ethical approach to material use that considers the impact of climate change.

In Brussels, the collective Rotor, founded in 2006, has been a pioneer of building-material reuse. Through exhibitions, interior design, and research, this non-profit organisation has promoted the beauty of material wear and tear while raising ecological awareness about carbon reduction through reuse. Alongside the collective, Rotor DC, a cooperative, specialises in dismantling, processing, and reselling building materials. Another local key player is BC architects, which focuses on achieving the lowest possible CO₂ emissions. While reusing building elements or structures remains a priority, BC architects have also introduced a range of new construction products that are environmentally friendly.



The dismantling of construction elements and their reuse in new projects has once again become a common practice (Rotor DC showroom, 2024).

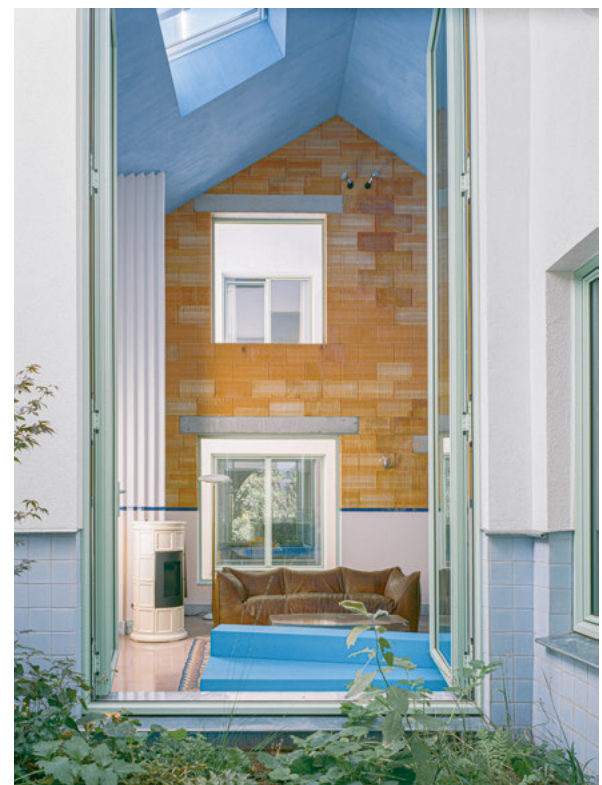
41 Cuyvers, Wim. "The Demise of the Belgian House." *Text on text*, The Hague, Stroom, 2005.



Conversion of an industrial building into a home, with a contrasting balance between hefty interventions and careful preservation (hylé, residences Étangs Noirs, 2020).



Within the typology of the individual terraced house, there have always been experiments with programme, plan organisation or expression. Here, new sustainable materials take the lead role (Karbon', House Vignette, 2018).



This house, stretching 22 m in length, integrates with elegant virtuosity reused materials from the dismantling of the warehouse that stood on the plot (Mamout, Dailly Courtyard house, 2023).

These include rammed earth bricks, plaster, and paint made entirely from locally quarried soil.

The row house Vignette by Karbon' (2018) combines bio-based, local, and recycled materials, showcasing the potential for innovation that single-family houses can achieve. Their smaller scale allows for unconventional choices that operate independently from industrial material flows.

For his own home, Jupiter 172, pp. 402–403, the architect from V+ chose simplicity by eliminating any high-tech elements, opting instead for solid walls, simple ventilation grilles, lime plaster, and a thermal-mass stove. The materials were applied as ethically as possible. This approach contrasts with what is often seen as the heroic posture of the architect – the creative talent who stands out through a distinctive personal style. In the residences Étangs Noirs by hylé (2020) and Dailly Courtyard house by Mamout (2023), the materials, either present on site or reused from elsewhere, also take the lead in architectural expression, albeit even becoming almost a mannerism.

A much more radical shift in the architect's authorship is apparent in Verbiest 5, pp. 396–397, which discards conventional notions of aesthetics, energy measures, and structural norms to develop the most climate-conscious concept possible. It eliminates concrete and fossil-based insulation materials, opting instead for a renovation of

the existing structure that enables spacious living in the summer while compacting into a heated volume that is 50 % smaller in winter. Here, the urban dwelling explores a new typological form, the architecture adopts a circular approach, and the inhabitants embrace an adapted way of life. The era of climate change demands a paradigm shift. If not now, then when?