

Density

From temporary densification to transitory urbanism

Anna Ternon

The background of this article is the ecosystem of players, places and processes of Brussels' urban densification. It examines a specific aspect of this ecosystem: the temporary occupation of sites or buildings involved in 'urban projects'.

The article highlights the variety of practices that fall under this category, in terms of the spatial objects they produce as well as of the related systems of actors and social visions. It looks into how taking into account the temporal aspect can yield fresh insight into the debate in the city's qualitative densification.

Regarding the spatio-environmental aspect, we will examine the nature and conditions of the relationship between the places created by temporary occupations and the 'sustainable' densification of the city. We are basing our approach on a dual assumption: first, that the temporary occupation of sites and buildings is a concrete form of the city's densification process; secondly, that temporary spatial and social arrangements may, under certain conditions, prefigure a new life cycle of space and original forms of sustainability. This dual assumption is at odds with a dominating view according to which temporary occupation is defined as a momentary initiative taken in order to seize a niche opportunity with no durable constraints on the spatial form and its social organisation.

These two views have in common that they acknowledge temporary occupation as an opportunity to liberate unused potentials for urban intensification (useful square footage per unit of time) found in vacant spaces. However, one stops at opportunistic exploitation without challenging the 'business as usual' approach, in which real estate is an economic asset. The other approach sees opportunities for temporary occupation as resources that can attempt to respond — on a small scale and outside of the market — to societal and environmental challenges related to the ecological transition.

The question of transitory occupation is examined as part of the Metrolab MasterClass, in order to reflect on the ecosystems involved in this practice as well as on their impacts on the long-term processes of urban densification.

The question of density in Brussels — territorial background

The question of density in Brussels has a number of specificities, due to its status as both a city and a region; this means territorial development is subject to the evolution of the political and institutional situation. With its status as capital of five different entities, Brussels' leadership is not uncontested. The local authorities do not control the development of the loose metropolitan network in which the city exists, unlike in the Industrial Era when the young Belgian state had adopted policies on land use planning and railways that intentionally spread out the population across the entire territory rather than only in cities (Grosjean, Gilot and Tsiomis, 2007).

However, the importance of regional borders now forces Brussels' authorities to deny this history. Their project for the city's future is dense and compact, and increasingly limited by available land. Yet the reality of Brussels' metropolisation is very different: it results both in an intensification/concentration of motor functions inside the city itself (the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region) and in a movement of extension/diffusion of the urban fabric over a metropolitan region whose definition challenges historical territorial borders. The spatial organisation of this living area is closer to the concept of a dispersed city and that of a 'small horizontal metropolis' presented by B. Secchi and P. Vigano during the 'Brussels 2040' campaign launched in 2010 by the Region's government in order to provide a background to the reflection on the Region's new sustainable development plan (Declève and Declève, 2017).

If we are to adopt an ecosystemic perspective, this question of the geographical and institutional context for densification should remain open. Are the bio-region (see de Lestrangé, p.17) and the Brussels metropolitan community not the only viable avenues for the development of the true city? And yet, most reject this ecosystemic common sense, since it is — now more than ever — a political utopia. If the Brussels-Capital Region is to take

on a realistic approach, it must take into account its entire 162 km² (63 sq. mi.) area for its territorial development. The territorial view inherited from history is dismissed as a utopia, even as imagination can provide the best answers to the reality of metropolisation and the challenges of ecological transition.

This tendency is reinforced by the fact that demographic pressure in Brussels' 19 municipalities has once again become positive in the first decade of the XXith century, after thirty years of population decline and of middle and upper classes leaving the city to live in surrounding provinces. In order to respond to what the Regional Plan for Sustainable Development (PRDD)¹ calls the 'demographic challenge', public territory policies are centred on the idea that the city must be densified: the authorities must respond to the increase in the number of residents and distribute it across the entire city-region while also ensuring that enough amenities and services are available for education, mobility, social cohesion and quality of life.

In quantitative terms, according to the statistics published by the Federal Planning Bureau and Statistics Belgium, the Region's population will increase by 10,000 inhabitants each year until 2025, then by 9,000 each year between 2025 and 2040. The target defined by the PRDD in order to respond to the demographic challenge is for all players involved to create 6,000 new homes each year, up from the current rate of around 4,000 homes each year. Among these 6,000 new homes, 1,200 (20%) should be public housing, 60% of which should be destined to welfare recipients and 40% to middle income households. This is an ambitious target, considering that for the past fifteen years 400 public housing units have been built each year, with 41,000 households on the waiting list.

In order to tackle this challenge, the Brussels-Capital Region is calling upon a number of tools for action²:

- PRDD, roadmaps, Plan Canal and PAD
- (Sustainable) Neighbourhood Contracts and Urban Renovation contracts

1 See the 2018 PRDD https://perspective.brussels/sites/default/files/documents/prdd_2018_fr.pdf

2 See the map of regional planning perimeters (p.68).

- Development of housing covered by citydev.brussels
- Incentives for households
- Funding for social housing from the Brussels-Capital Region

We know that from a quantitative point of view, much of the challenge lies in the reuse of vacant or underutilised land and buildings. And these are precisely the types of spaces on which temporary appropriation practices have been increasing in recent years.

Density and temporary occupation³

'Temporary use has become a magical term: on the one hand, for those many creative minds who, in a world ruled by the profit maxim, are trying nevertheless to create spaces that reflect and nurture an alternative vision of the transition to the future; and, on the other, for urban planners to whom it represents a chance for urban development.' (Oswalt, 2013)

The background of this article is the relationship between the temporary occupation phenomenon and the ecosystem of players, places and processes of Brussels' urban densification. In the context we have described, this ecosystem's transition is strategically designed around 'mobilising potentials and real estate resources', in order to ensure a 'controlled densification of the territory', as well as around the development of social housing. There is nothing ecological about this view of transition: in particular, it does not take into account the risks of soil sealing and, more importantly, of rapid exhaustion of the rare resource that is unbuilt land; in addition, it remains confined to a perspective that prioritises large-scale urban projects and the production of new homes, while Brussels has many underutilised real estate resources whose activation could enable a response to the demographic challenge that could better contribute to ecological balance.

At the interface between both positions, transitory urban planning provides the leverage necessary to contribute to qualitative densification of the city. The temporary activation of these sites

encourages innovation and creativity, and often promotes a diversity of uses; these are key requirements for an open and collaboratively designed city that meets the needs of its active inhabitants (residents, workers, students, etc.). Temporary urban planning often manages to create social value in little time, whereas traditional urban projects only consider social value in the longer term, with no true guarantee of success. The concept of urban planning includes the prefiguration aspects of future projects for transitory urban planning (Diguët, 2018).

Evolution of the system of players and of the conditions for temporary occupation⁴

There is insufficient data to produce a comprehensive history of temporary occupations in Brussels. Here we will simply present a few milestones that show the phenomenon's evolution and demonstrate the increasing diversity of spatial objects, player interactions, forms of appropriation and value systems that underlie this type of urban planning.

The squat movement

Starting in the 1970s, Brussels was affected by urban exodus, mainly from middle-class households who found easier access to housing in the city's outskirts. The increase in urban poverty and in the number of vacant buildings in municipalities at the centre of the city resulted in illegal occupations driven by a highly active movement in favour of housing rights and the right to the city. The îlot Soleil, located Rue des Chevaliers, and the squat at Rue des Drapiers are high-profile examples of this type of occupation.

Temporary occupation agreements

Some of these occupations organised into associations. One of them is 321 logements, a non-profit that organised the occupation of the former Tagawa hotel on Avenue Louise, which had been vacant for many years. After many expulsions, the association occupied a former administrative building located at 123 Rue Royale. This occupation marked the

3 The map p. 67 shows the relationship between these two variables in Brussels

4 (RBDH, 2013)

first instance of a new form of agreement between occupants and owners: the temporary occupation agreement. Following this, the association also signed an agreement with Infrabel, for houses located Rue du Progrès near the Brussels-North railway station.

Gradually, public authorities as well as private owners came to realise the benefits of promoting these practices and giving them a proper framework. This lets them avoid vacancy taxes, ensure their buildings are maintained, prevent vandalism and make neighbourhoods more active. The temporary occupation agreement is not a leasing agreement, but rather an agreement that allows the legal occupation of a space and possibly — depending on specific terms negotiated with the owner — provides for a period of notice before the occupants are required to vacate the premises. Among other achievements, this tool enabled FeBul, a housing rights association, to sign agreements with SISPs ('sociétés immobilières de service public', which are in charge of social housing in the Brussels-Capital Region) on the occupation of buildings awaiting renovation.

Brussels also promoted temporary occupations by socio-cultural projects, by facilitating agreements between associations and owners. For instance, the PRECARE programme, launched by City Mine(d), enabling the activation of a dozen spaces between 2000 and 2010 in Brussels' central neighbourhoods. The programme's purpose was to allow emerging initiatives to occupy working spaces in temporarily vacant buildings, thus encouraging the city's function as a laboratory. These temporary occupations are mostly in vacant buildings, but other forms of occupation emerge on unused urban land such as the Josaphat site in Schaerbeek — occupied by non-profit Commons Josaphat — and the Chant des Cailles in Watermael-Boitsfort. There are also occupations of the public space, which involve events such as the Picnic the Streets event on Boulevard Anspach.

Subsidies

Temporary occupation agreements and the creation of associations have led to a form of institutionalisation of temporary occupations. Public authorities are increasingly aware of the social value of temporary occupations and their role in activating neighbourhoods. As a result, they are granting more and more subsidies to the associations that launch these types of initiatives. This is how Recyclart — the association that temporarily occupied the Chapelle station under the city's main railway connection with a project dedicated to social economy, urban reflection and artistic creation and diffusion — has received funding under the EU's ERDF programme. Another source of funding is the Neighbourhood Contract, which has a specific fund dedicated to socio-cultural projects.

Calls for projects

The support from the public sector also takes on the form of calls for projects. This is how Bruxelles Environnement supports the Parckdesign festival and has made the occupation of the 'Allée du Kaai' possible.

Other public administrations have recently launched calls for interest regarding the management of temporary occupations on sites awaiting development. This is the case with the See U project, which involves the temporary occupation of the Ixelles barracks at the initiative of the Urban Development Corporation and the Université libre de Bruxelles; another example is Studio CityGate in the Biestebroek neighbourhood, at the initiative of citydev. brussels. The latest call for projects is related to the occupation of the former mail sorting centre building: after a grassroots petition gathered nearly 7,000 signatures, the SNCB and the municipality of Saint-Gilles launched a call for projects for temporary occupation before work begins on the new SNCB headquarters in 2023.

A challenging aspect of these calls for projects is their administrative complexity. Applicants require a structured organisation that has the human resources and experience necessary for this type of process. It should also be noted that these calls for projects are not intended as tools to meet the demand for housing; in fact, so far

they have excluded all projects that involve housing vulnerable citizens.

Still, these new tools have given considerable momentum to the movement, and resulted in the emergence of organisations specialised in managing temporary occupations. On the one hand, there are activist associations like the non-profits Communa and Toestand, whose support of temporary occupation is part of a wider project in favour of a more democratic society and for more inclusion of vulnerable groups in cities. On the other hand, there are companies in the private market sector, such as Entrakt, who have identified the market opportunity created by vacant spaces in Brussels: they charge owners a service fee to manage their buildings and rent them out on a temporary basis, for a much lower price than on the rental market.

From a market point of view, the question of temporary occupation soon collides with that of neighbourhood gentrification. We can mention the recent example of non-profit association Up4North, created in 2016 by eight real estate companies (AG Real Estate, Allianz, AXA, Banimmo, Befimmo, Belfius Insurance, Immoel and Triuva) to 'breathe new life into Brussels' Northern Quarter' (Up4North, 2017). This neighbourhood of high-rises in the city centre has three types of occupants: civil servants and office workers isolated in office buildings; residents of social housing towers; and refugees occupying the Parc Maximilien. These groups seldom encounter one another, and as a result the neighbourhood is not very lively (10 to 15% of building space is vacant).

In November of 2017, Up4North launched a call for temporary occupation projects, receiving 67 proposals. This has enabled some thirty organisations to set up in the World Trade Center 1 and North Plaza buildings (Up4North, 2017). The criteria guiding project selection are open, but they prioritise start-up companies and innovative cultural projects. An art school, for instance, has installed a satellite campus in one of these vacant spaces. The explicit goal of the temporary occupation organised

by Up4North is to widen the range of habitation practices in the neighbourhood. It attracts younger users, whose habits and temporalities are different from those that exist in the area. The term 'integrative gentrification' (Lemaier, 2018) eloquently conveys the paradox of this movement.

Anti-squatting law

Acting as a counterpoint to the public initiatives mentioned above in favour of temporary occupation, the legislative framework has been made stricter in November of 2017 with the entry into force of a new anti-squatting law, which now includes a criminal section that was absent from the previous law.⁵ The occupation of vacant spaces now requires the owner's prior formal consent. In practice, however, the occupation itself is what creates a power dynamic that triggers negotiations with the owner. The new provisions of the law only widen the often blatant gap between the legality of an occupation and its legitimacy, and could also result in longer proceedings.

Urban planning regulations

Another difficulty related to temporary occupations is that there exists no regulatory framework on urban planning or safety that governs them specifically. This means they must be in line with applicable standards on urban planning. Such a requirement makes temporary occupation much less attractive, as it loses its main benefits: affordability, flexibility, and expediency. This legal vacuum is also a boon to large owners or managers of real estate, who can more easily exploit loopholes in the system to their own benefit.

Saint-Vide Leegbeek

In response to the market sector's new interest in temporary occupations, and fearing that this movement could be exploited as a tool for gentrification and urban marketing, several socially oriented temporary occupation platforms have recently created the '20th Municipality of Brussels'. A symbolic territory, it includes all vacant spaces in the Brussels-Capital region. 'After long remaining unnoticed

⁵ Law of 18 October 2017 on the illegal entry into, occupation of or residence in another's property (Loi relative à la pénétration, à l'occupation ou au séjour illégitimes dans le bien d'autrui) (Belgian official journal, 6 November 2017).

— because they are spread out across the entire city —, 6.5 km² (2.5 sq. mi.) of vacant space are now revealed to citizens. Office complexes, town houses, residential buildings, former industrial sites: real estate vacancy in Brussels involves buildings of all types.⁶ There are an estimated 30,000 vacant housing units among privately owned buildings, while 10% of public housing is vacant (for reasons of unsuitability) as well as 1.55 km² (0.6 sq. mi.) of office space. By creating this 20th Municipality, the associations involved intend first and foremost to highlight the ecosystem's potential to promote an ecological, social, political and cultural transition through initiatives that benefit the entire urban collective. The goal of the 20th Municipality is to defend this resource by recommending measures on real estate taxation, public tenders, legislation on urban issues or structural financial support.

Temporary occupation as a form of citizen participation

Temporary occupations emerge as a new form of citizen engagement, in a context of questioning and co-producing urban phenomena.

As we have seen above, these illegal occupations — now referred to as 'temporary occupations' — are often institutionalised in order to be in a position to receive public subsidies. In this new context, temporary occupation is about more than access to housing: it is an opportunity to teach about the meaning of citizenship and experiment with new ways of living together. The challenge of these new participatory processes lies in synchronising the pace of the association with that of the site or building transformation project around which they are built. According to the vision of urban project operators, their operational programme does not include the temporary occupation programme and the social experiment is intended to end as soon as the project's construction phase begins. The occupants, on the other hand, often see their occupation as the prefiguration of a sustainable housing programme for the site or building in question. In this perspective,

the projects encourage individuals to emancipate themselves by playing an active part in urban transformation.

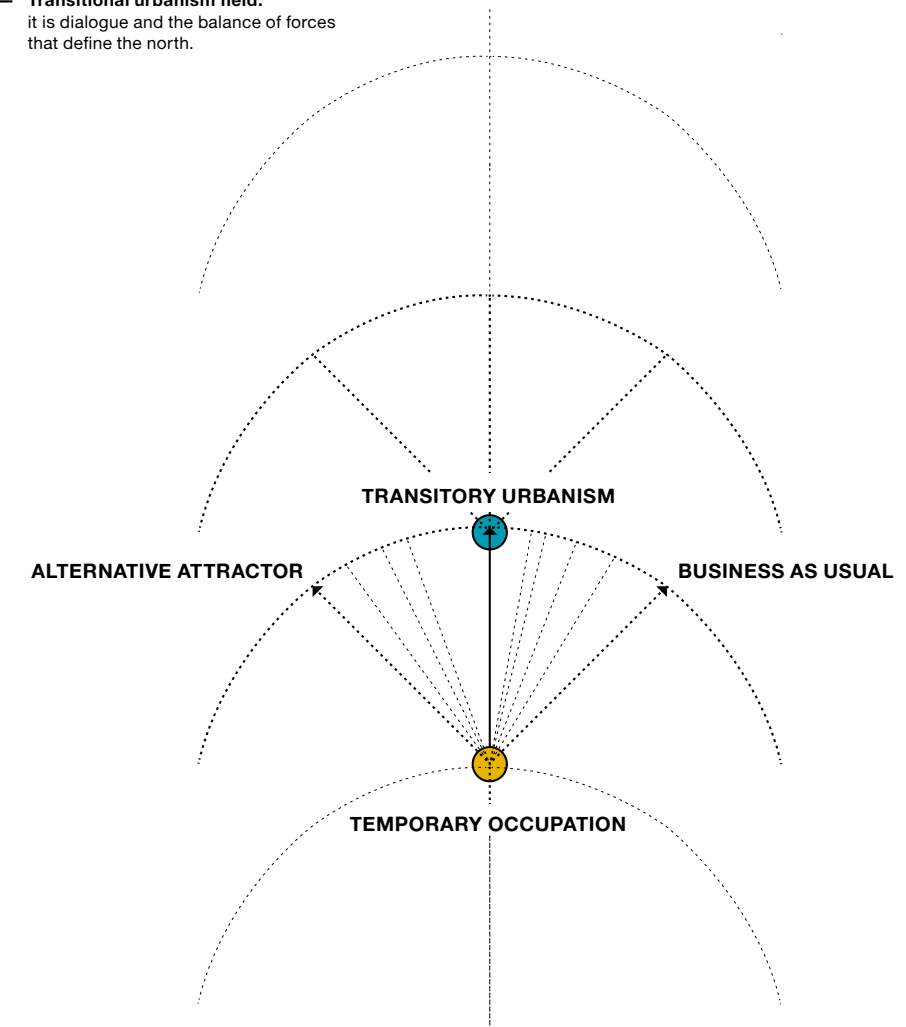
Urban temporalities and democracy

If the question of temporary occupation is viewed from the perspective of ecological transition, three narratives can be distinguished:

- The first considers the challenges of transition to be part of 'business as usual', prioritising the market value of space. It gives these challenges an interpretation that is essentially technological in nature, falling under the remit of architecture and landscape planning and used as a tool for urban marketing.
- The second narrative considers ecological constraints to be part of environmental management and, as such, under the responsibility of experts. In this context, population growth is a social constraint that must be managed through an appropriate city densification policy. The question of the relationship between built and unbuilt land is essentially resolved through regulation, by enacting rules on urban development or landscape design.
- The third narrative focuses on democracy as a mediator for society as a whole (Gorz, 2008). This perspective is based on 'dividing power against itself' and on creating many spaces dedicated to 'structured free debates', according to P. Ricoeur as quoted by Declève and Mabardi (1994). The challenges related to the ecological transition are interpreted in the context of the fight for housing rights and for the right to the city in a quality environment. Population growth, through the irreplaceable nature of individuals seeking freedom, is seen as a resource rather than a constraint of urban densification. Building on the idea that 'conquering time is the first challenge of freedom', (Fleury, 2018) this narrative approach sees temporary occupations as places that offer the time necessary for freedom.

The compass of temporary occupations in a perspective of ecological transition:

- **Transition to an alternative attractor (North):** from temporary occupation to alternative non-market programming
- **Business as usual:** transition from temporary occupation to the profitable programming initially defined
- **Transitional urbanism field:** it is dialogue and the balance of forces that define the north.



Methodology and case studies used in the MasterClass

The task submitted to participants of the Designing Brussels Ecosystems MasterClass was to analyse the interplay between these three narratives in the Canal area, which was drastically affected by deindustrialisation and plays a major strategic part in the territory's redevelopment policy, as the PRDD has labelled it its main regional intervention area (ZIR). The transition from an 'economic activity area' to an 'enterprise area in an urban environment' (ZEMU) has legally paved the way for building housing, which

— considering the high number of plots and buildings left vacant by deindustrialisation — makes the area an ideal environment for real estate development.

Participants to the MasterClass were presented with two case studies: Studio CityGate and the Pop Up Canal projects. The first is part of the broader project for urban transformation in the Biestebroek neighbourhood, a former single-purpose industrial site in the south of Brussels, while the second is part of the revitalisation project for the Heyvaert neighbourhood, which is one of the city's most dense and

underprivileged areas; located in the centre of Brussels, it has become an international hub for the second-hand vehicle market over the past few decades.

Studio CityGate

citydev.brussels, the Brussels-Capital Region's development corporation in charge of promoting economic expansion (by creating spaces dedicated to businesses) and urban renovation (by building subsidised housing), has acquired the former Vesdre Continental plant in order to develop a multi-purpose project: CityGate II. At the same time, the Brussels-Capital Region's social housing institution (SLRB) has bought the adjoining plot, the former site of AMP. citydev.brussels and the SLRB collaborate on this project, and have decided to launch a joint procurement as part of the redevelopment programme for the Biestebroek neighbourhood, in Brussels' southern municipality of Anderlecht. A high-priority area in the Region's development strategy for the Canal territory, it is also part of the Biestebroek local land use plan (PPAS). Construction work for CityGate II should start in early 2022 and is expected to end in 2025. Considering the time it takes to identify a site, acquire it and make the project operational, sites often remain vacant for several years. This is why citydev.brussels has launched a call for expressions of interest for the management and coordination of the site's temporary occupation for a period covering the four years before work begins (2018-2022). This temporary occupation is called Studio CityGate. The company selected at the conclusion of the call was Entrakt, a private company whose main activity consists in managing vacant buildings by temporarily reallocating them. These buildings can belong to either public or private owners. The company currently manages some forty projects across Belgium.

Both the former plant and the adjacent outside space are occupied. The building is 20,000 m² (215,000 sq. ft.), divided into two wings, and houses artist studios, a cultural, social and economic centre, shared facilities, a climbing gym and an indoor skate park. Outside spaces host project Wonderlecht, whose purpose is to gather residents around topics such as organic

food production, biodiversity and climate protection. Entrakt has recently started organising events on the site. The building is currently occupied to 80% of its capacity. Occupants are organisations of one to ten people, and space is rented from 1 to 10 euros per square metre (~11 sq. ft). Most organisations are craftspeople or artists from various places in the Brussels-Capital Region and its outskirts.

'At the end of the day, we remain a business; our first goal is not public well-being. As the project manager, I have a stake in achieving this result, but it's not the end goal' explains Gerd de Wilde, former Studio City Gate manager for Entrakt.

The social relationship with the neighbourhood is limited, as some of the events programmed are restricted to economic activities that are not open to the public. Income-generating activities open to the public every day are the climbing gym and the indoor skate park. Still, certain activities create true interactions with the neighbourhood or with a broader audience. This is the case of project Wonderlecht and of various one-time cultural events. Entrakt also leases certain spaces to neighbourhood associations (e.g. for homework assistance). Lastly, workshops are offered to youths in the neighbourhood, introducing them to manual labour.

Pop Up Canal

Every year, the Brussels-Capital Region issues a call to the municipalities located within the urban renovation area (ZRU) for the conclusion of neighbourhood contracts, which allow them to receive subsidies by defining a perimeter and a programme for urban renovation. Neighbourhood contracts do not fund only urban transformations, but also socio-cultural projects.

As part of the Petite Senne Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract, a total subsidy of 100,000 euros (30,000 euros/year in 2016-2017 and 40,000 euros in 2018) is distributed to neighbourhood residents and associations by the Molenbeek-Saint-Jean municipality's executive body for the implementation of project Pop Up Canal from 2015 to 2018.

The project's goal is to activate vacant or untapped sites (public spaces, buildings, warehouses, etc.) and, at the same time, to activate the Petite Senne neighbourhood's

social fabric and network of relationships. Pop Up Canal is a call for projects, accepting applications from all organisations seeking space for their activities.

In practical terms, it aims to support temporary occupation projects in vacant buildings or public spaces, developing a social dynamic in the neighbourhood.

One of the municipality's ambitions is that if the chosen site is eventually selected for a future project of rehabilitation (through the Petite Senne Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract or any other public or private organisation), the momentum of the temporary occupation will contribute to shaping the site's new purposes.

Three projects currently receive funding as part of this call for projects. Subsidies are put towards making the buildings functional and ensure they meet safety standards. As a public authority, the municipality requires that all standards be complied with, which is not necessarily the case with private players. The three projects are located in the same city block as the project for the rehabilitation of Halle Libelco as a public space, as part of the Petite Senne Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract. The Halle Libelco project also receives funding from the European Union (ERDF).

— uZinne

Since the summer of 2017, non-profit DAK-Domus Art Kunst has been coordinating project uZinne, a temporary socio-cultural centre installed in an abandoned industrial warehouse. uZinne gathers six associations that collaborate and share resources and space. If a space is made available to an artist, they must do something for the space in return. uZinne works in collaboration with the Citizens' Platform for Refugee Support, offering refugees shower facilities.

— Liverpool 24

This massive building of around 2600 m² (28,000 sq. ft.) will be fully remodelled in the context of the Petite Senne Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract.

As part of the Pop Up Canal project, the site's occupation is managed by Entrakt, who has signed a temporary

occupation agreement with the municipality. The main occupier is Decoratelier, a project by the artist Josef Wouters. Decoratelier is a studio open to artists, with room for scenographers and audience members as well as for interdisciplinary collaborations and social experiments. It has also developed a creation space for vulnerable people and refugees.

— Wood in Molenbeek (WIM)

WIM is an Action Co-create (Innoviris) research project that gathers multiple partners. As such, it receives additional funding from the Brussels-Capital Region. The project's objective is to develop a creative and productive living lab, in partnership with the neighbourhood's residents, dedicated to recovering and reusing wood. It offers training courses for local residents. The building that houses the project is a former used vehicle business. The municipality plans to develop a housing project (in its place), through a public-private partnership. Once construction work begins, the WIM project will be permanently relocated into another building in the same city block.

Towards other urban temporalities

Temporary occupations are a growing phenomenon, in Brussels as well as in many European cities. The practice consists in occupying vacant buildings or spaces while they are not used by their owners.

The Metrolab MasterClass examines the ecosystems linked to the practice of temporary occupations. What are the spatial and social forms of temporary occupation? How do they contribute to an ecological, political, social and cultural transition? The current debate on temporary occupation and the densification of Brussels is proof of the tension that exists between the temporalities created by market approaches and the temporalities that enable the creation and reinvention of a variety of usages. The hypothesis explored here is that this variety can occur in the spatial and temporal gaps within territories. In particular, the MasterClass looks into the concept of 'transitory urban planning' as a lever

for the qualitative densification of the city. Questioning Brussels' temporary occupation ecosystems also means examining the coexistence of various approaches, as well as the mediation tools that make this coexistence possible in the longer time frames involved in densification processes. Through these two case studies — involving ongoing transformation processes in two different morphological contexts that generate interactions between players promoting different values —, the MasterClass attempts to lay the groundwork for reflections that could help ensure this coexistence in the long run.

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