

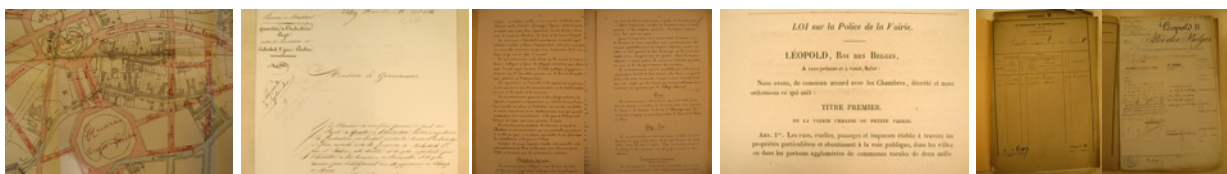
Brussels agglomerated: looking closely at territorial ways

Mapping isn't enough

[I'll be talking about my PhD, turned into a book. The title says all there is to now at this point: *To agglomerate, the extension of Brussels (1828-1915)*¹]

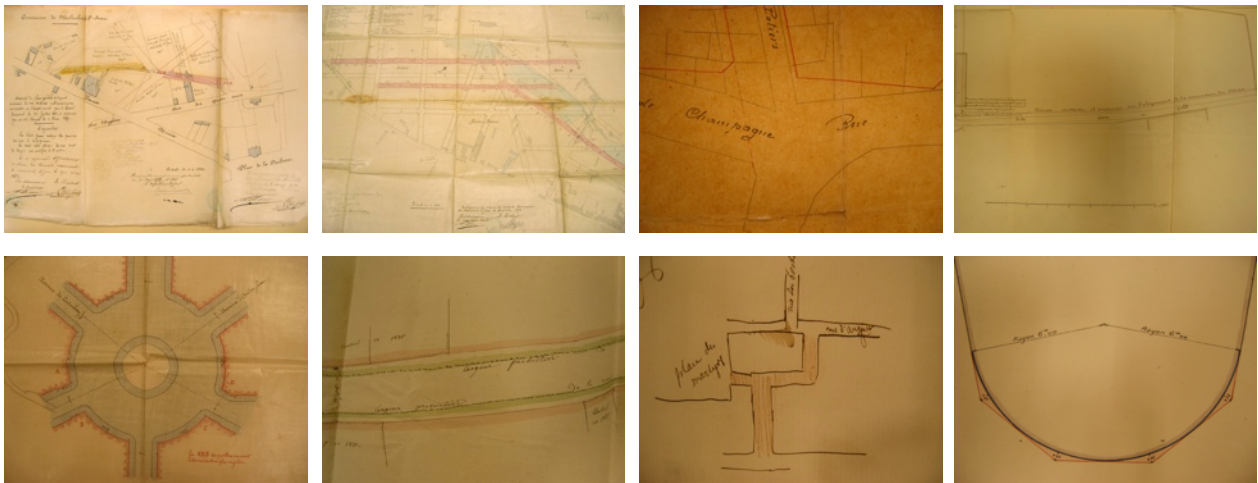
Cities become traceable when one takes a close look at its territorial “machines”. That exact word doesn't abound in my book (*Agglomérer*, pp. 177-178) but I take it up again after reading Celine Tellier's work². When describing the genealogy of the Brussels' subway system, Tellier refers to the machine as comprising the ministries, professional trades, technical construction methods and public budget allowances which, all together, propel the subway into the city's destiny. And that is the point. Other than a network, the machine propels; it has momentum; it gets going and, when it does, it is hard to stop. Not only does it have a body and cogwheels - i.e. State's offices, municipal councils, civil servants, engineers and others - but it's also made of simultaneous movement, of entangled holds and grips, of concatenated pressure points and supporting surfaces which allow the machine to hold. Just like in a dancers loop - the image is from Isabelle Stengers³ - it's the momentum of the whirling and circling which fuels the performance. Rather than mapping its elements or connexions, the machine's rendering must therefore account for its workings, its fuel, its forces. Thus the descriptive locus - i.e. the position or coordinates that allow one to trace the territorial machine and its workings - is no longer aimed at cartography but also at unveiling collective propensity. What is this propensity and how can we trace it?

The starting point is often a paper trail. As Delphine Gardey⁴ has shown, paper transactions are characteristic of contemporary society; they exist as soon as collective or institutional actions are undertaken, be it on the private or on the public side; and they are especially abundant when legal procedures are involved, as was the case in my own fieldwork. In *Agglomérer*, set in the 19th Century, letters, proceedings, decrees, laws, maps and technical requirements run back and forth between ministers, civil servants, inspectors, mayors and landowners, so as to allow road improvement and to grant permits in the city's immediate surroundings and by doing this, they create a territory, i.e. Brussels extended. Let me show you some of these documents: [a map; a letter to the Governor; technical requirements on road-building, gas and water piping; a law on road-building; a file cover from “Department B” and a Royal Decree]



The documents all belong to the Governor's archives, more precisely to Department B, afterwards called Department 12, created in 1828 and disbanded in 1972. The Department looked

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



As you can see, following the paper trail unfolds the urban transformation *in concreto*. These documents physically shape the streets because they carry negotiation and decision-making onto the ground. One could say that a paper-pavement performative machine is at work but what's more important is this: the machine is a blind one; it is oblivious to most contemporaneous political and social events; and its blindness will not disappear by merely adding historical context to it. Rather, the blind spots point to an altogether different picture, an endogenous picture, to the machine's own logics, its own stakes, its soul so to speak. In my case, this soul quest, or what I've called the search for propensity, led to two results or discoveries which, retrospectively, could guide the tracing of other territorial undertakings, of *their* propensity, *their* active patterns - that is why I present them here and why I'll take the rest of my time to do so. Here, from this point onwards, we start digging deeper into the empirical material.

Closing in on propensity

The first guideline bears on the territorial stakes and impact. What is at stake in the territorial making, from the endogenous point of view this is, from the insides of the paper trail? What is the overall impact of the gradual transformations at the level of the pavement cut, the curbs of side-walks and other details that gather in the archives? Digging deeper into the empirical material, trying to connect all files, I realised - for it wasn't written anywhere - that there had been State surveil-

lance and, furthermore, that it had been established by a single operator. This operator was no other than the Department itself. By taking care of road files and assuring their follow-up until final approval by royal decree, the Department operated as a compulsory point of transition for the entire procedural trail. It detected any physical change that was intended on the ground. This is how the story goes:

- ▶ All files came from municipalities who, because they were city-centers or set in exceptional zones, could not apply directly for a royal decree and had to pass through the Governor's office before reaching other levels of executive power. Establishing that single difference, between passing or not passing through the office, allowed the State - i.e. the Ministry of interior, the Governor and his collaborators, the road inspector and the county commissioner - to turn the construction sites to their advantage. That is a fact. It does not say anything about the intentions. It is rather the machine's strength, part of its propensity. Department 12 worked as a grip.
- ▶ On the legal side, the State gripped the urbanisation process by squeezing into a procedure from which it had first been excluded. Constitutionally, landowners and municipalities were in charge of construction. So, as long as the Ministry of interior stayed merely at the end of the line, where construction initiatives were either approved or refused by royal decree, there wasn't much room for adjustment. But as soon as the two appointees - the Governor and the inspector - entered the game, right in the middle of it, the paper trail could run back to the municipalities, back and forth, carrying suggestions until the State's desires were met.
- ▶ On the intentional side, for the State, gripping the urbanisation process meant: guaranteeing traffic fluidity and opening possibilities for further investment - two aims revealed by the records of Department 12. To enhance fluidity, a lot of digging and filling went on around Brussels; tons of ramble were imported to streamline the hills; for traffic sake, hard porphyry pavement was imported into the industrial zone. To enhance investment, all was done to leave the future open - again, it happens in the details: sewers were re-designed so as to become open-ended; reversible stairs were added to doorsteps; first floors were elevated so as not to obstruct further changes;... In other words, the grip operated by Governor's office touched up the entire outskirts, from the levelling of hills to the calculation of pavement cuts.

All this became clear to me when looking for the archive's or machine's *own* logic. Furthermore, and that's where the second guideline comes in, disclosing the machine's strength, tracking its active patterns, unleashes its poetic dimensions. I discovered that the extension of Brussels was, at heart, a creative undertaking and that we fail to see this because we do not *want* to see it. We ignore the poetic engrain of a technical sketch or an administrative letter, out of scientific seriousness perhaps or for the sake of political criticality most probably - especially when State surveillance is concerned! But it's a mistake. For agency doesn't spring from boredom; the machine's fuel cannot be mere water; actors don't move because they are told to. They move because they strategise, hatch up schemes and aspire. Such wheeling and dealing, such desire, cannot be understood if the positive, interesting and even transcending empirical moments are systematically set aside. In

other words, we need to think *with* the machine - the preposition is Isabelle Stengers'⁵ - as anthropologists have done. The seemingly banal must be granted Godlike grandeur, the archive's detail must be treated as the augurs of an oracle, for only then are we able to discover the more powerful and potentially more empowering sides of the State-led grip which then becomes something quite different: a territory in the making.

The story, then, goes on like this:

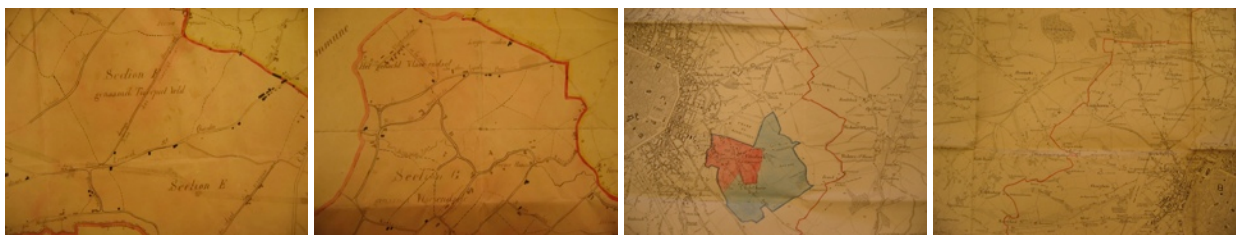
- ▶ The Minister, Governor, road inspector, county commissioner experimented with concrete as well as abstract considerations - doorsteps and elevated floors were already mentioned but there's more. They claimed the rule of ubiquity, i.e. the idea that development can leap from any place within the surveyed zone and that urban growth evolves along scattered impulses rather than in a concentric manner. Road inspection therefore required the enactment of many possible futures in every single point of the territory, i.e. the enactment of the many developments which would be triggered from God knows where, and to God knows what effect - but to which every single point had to reply, to be prepared. All this without impeding on the overall coherence. As one road inspector had it: the initiative of one obliged him to trace the impact for all (*Agglomérer*, p. 140). Which, of course, was an impossible task and led to some shrewdness on the State's part.
- ▶ Along the meanders of collective invention, road alignment - i.e. one of the tools of road inspection - was slowly diverted from its usual role in order to establish overall coordination. It became the dotted line - named (by me) after a visual trait on a map. See the images: here's the map; here's the zone of exception and inspection; here's the circular canvas of ubiquity where the dotted lines were implemented. These lines were virtual, latent, dormant, not to be constructed entities which simply gave directions when construction was undertaken, allowing for it to happen as long as the main connexions of the city were upheld. As such, they offered a sense of orientation in the overall scheme of things: "if you constructs, you will construct in the eyes of the entire circle". A virtual gridlock rested underneath the surface where it operated a future constraint.



- ▶ Civil servants, then, learned the acrobatic art of future-making. They learned to distinguish between a future that is self-fulfilling and required each landlord of a street or a neighbourhood to act according to a given aim, on the one hand, and a future that is imposed by the passage of time and required to come ahead of times, i.e. to be able to prospect, on the other hand. They learned to distinguish between houses which turned their back on the fu-

ture, were uncooperative, isolated and distanced from the road, and those that were just as isolated but geared towards the future, adjacent to roads, with party or “waiting” walls, reinforced foundations, and other material details that allowed investors to build alongside them.

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



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

To conclude, *Agglomérer* is the tale of a gripping territorial machine that ran on technocratic inventiveness. Circle of ubiquity, virtual dormant lines, self-fulfilling futures, prospecting the passage of time, uncooperative houses, waiting walls, seriality and the city-to-be, these are the elements that propel the machine forward. Mapping the cogwheels, uncovering the stakes and stating the overall effect is necessary but not enough. We, tracers, are looking for something more indeterminate than the collective result, something more impersonal than signed creativity, something which I've called the territorial machine's propensity, its patterns, its momentum, but which in my book I've rather called territorial ways (*Agglomérer*, p. 65, 76, 160, 172, 192 and all throughout the book). For we need to learn again how, technically, legally, experimentally, tentatively, doorstep by doorstep, street by street, a territory can be transformed. It is one thing to acknowledge that the State-led grip did a lot of harm, it's another to therefore cross out the mere possibility of techno-

cratic inventiveness, to ignore the powers and possibilities of procedural treatment and to start from scratch as if no other territorial makings could be learned from.

Thank you for your attention.

- ¹ Benedikte Zitouni, *Agglomérer. Une anatomie de l'extension bruxelloise (1828-1915)*., Bruxelles, Academic and Scientific Press & VUBPress, 2010.
- ² Celine Tellier, *Une sociologie des profondeurs. Conception et organisation de la mobilité souterraine à Bruxelles (1950-2010)*, PhD in final writing phase, dir. Pierre Lannoy, Université Libre de Bruxelles.
- ³ Isabelle Stengers, *Penser avec Whitehead - Une libre et sauvage création de concepts*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.
- ⁴ Delphine Gardey, *Ecrire, calculer, classer. Comment uen révolution papier a transformé les siècles contemporains (1800-1940)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.
- ⁵ Isabelle Stengers, *Penser avec Whitehead - Une libre et sauvage création de concepts*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.