

**THE
ROLE
OF
THE PEOPLE
IN
(RE-)APPROPRIATING
BRUSSELS'
BUILT
HERITAGE**

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Introduction.

As final year architecture student born, raised and currently residing in the city of Brussels, it felt almost like an obligation for me to grasp this paper-writing opportunity to describe and denounce the many failures, but also the nascent positive progress in the way urban planning was and is conducted in our capital city. The growing, utterly decisive role of the people in the urban planning and (re-) appropriation of Brussels is described in the second half of the paper and illustrated by a telling case-study. I hope that my engagement in this discourse will inspire a certain amount of readers to turn into a conscious and enabled member of society and push the urban revolution that is growing continuously in Brussels to a next level.

Urban planning in Brussels, A history of expropriation.

To understand fully the notoriously difficult history of urban planning in Brussels and the resulting heritage we deal with today, I will first provide a brief historical introduction on this topic, using several written historical overviews of urban development in Brussels throughout the years.

King Leopold II

From a historical city-planning point of view, the city of Brussels has always been – and probably always will be - a controversial topic. Looking back on the history of this capital city, it seems that making rash and unconsidered city-planning decisions has become a trademark. Urban mismanagement already surfaced in the second half of the 19th century, only thirty years after the Belgian independence. At that time Belgium was ruled by Leopold II: king of the Belgians, private owner of Congo and self-declared city-planner. (Vanhamme, 1968)

In *Brussel: van landelijke nederzetting tot wereldstad*, Marcel Vanhamme (1968) devotes two chapters on Leopold II as urban planner and consequently describes how Leopold fiercely aspired Brussels to become a worthy capital city with an unmistakable *grandeur* and charisma, able to compete with cities like Paris and London. This – slightly – megalomaniac idea, backed with the huge amount of money he was *mining* in his Congo, got the king executing his visionary and rather bombastic interventions in the Brussels urban area. Leopold II unconsciously started more than a century of urban violations of the Brussels landscape.

Louis Verniers (1934), in *Les transformations de Bruxelles et l'urbanisation de sa banlieue depuis 1795*, descriptively writes on the closing up of the Zenne (between 1867 and 1871) as one of the most radical interventions under the reign of Leopold II. The Zenne was the main river that functioned as an artery for Brussels, once giving birth to the city. On top of the covered river, the majestic boulevards Anspach, Adolphe Max, Emile Jacqmain and South were installed and completed with a luxurious Paris-like Haussmann architecture. Of course the project also implied that many thousands of unconsulted families were to be expropriated from their homes; for the greater cause.

These excessive housing confiscations were also the issue in many of his other urban interventions in Brussels like the construction of the big central Boulevard Leopold II, the bombastic Palace of Justice by the Brussels architect Joseph Poelaert and even after his death in 1909: the North-South Connection (Verniers, 1934).

Leopold II wanted the city of Brussels to be a representative city of the wealthy Monarchy of Belgium. In realizing this vision, he neglected every human participation and acted by the Machiavellian phrase: *'the end justifies the means.'* The city was to become a showcase for the wealth and grandeur of the nation and in extend the king, himself. A series of bombastic and mostly out of context buildings were scattered all over Brussels territory to emphasize this vision. The poor(er) layer of Brussels inhabitants were of minor interest and were obliged to adapt to the city-planning decisions, most often highly to their disadvantage (Vanhamme, 1968).

Modern Times

In 1911 work started on building a train connection between the North and the South railway station, two of the largest railway stations in Brussels. This rather ambitious project, named *'the North - South Connection'*, would be the last city-planning profusion by king Leopold II, who, preceding his death in 1909, co-conceived and approved this project. When World War I commenced in 1914, funds for this gigantic project dried up very quickly and the already fully initiated building site stayed untouched for forty-five years, laying there in the Brussels urban landscape like a massive gaping urban wound until its completion in 1953, after lots of intensive (re-)planning. The *North – South Connection* turned out to be an unbelievable catastrophe for the Brussels inhabitants: thousands of people were directly expropriated by the government and due to the new railroad, entire neighborhoods were cut off from the rest of the city causing thousands of additional people to move out of the city as well. (De Bock, 2012).

Unfortunately, this new connection between the South and the North station instigated the latest real big city-planning fiasco in Brussels involving large-scale expropriations to this date. The so called '*Manhattan project*' was, according to Professor Albert Martens' (in Brussel Deze Week, 2011), planned to transform the flourishing, folkloristic neighborhood around the North station into a big business district with eight office skyscrapers and two adapted highways. This financial district was implemented in Brussels after the example of the capitalistic American city planning of that time. Ultimately - probably as a result of the oil crisis in 1978 - funds ran dry causing only eight of the planned seventy-eight towers to be developed and only 65% of the planned 1.6 million square meters being built.

The planned project never even came close to completion and what did get built looks oddly out of place. The tall, glass office buildings in the business district cause an odd contrast with the small streets of the neighborhood around the Brabant Street a little further.

The (re-)appropriation of the built heritage by the people.

Brussels' heritage.

Keeping the facts in town-planning as described above in mind, one could resolutely say Brussels has a long history of severe urban mismanagement, leaving us not only with a peculiar and questionable built heritage, containing many controversial buildings, squares and even entire neighborhoods; but also with a collective and innate skepticism towards urban planning conducted by our government. These are continuous relics from a (still ongoing?) period in Brussels' history defined by making drastic urban decisions without any real consideration of the local quality of city-life. The term 'Brussels heritage' not only contains the self-evident built monuments one thinks about when speaking about heritage but also covers the invisible collective memory of the people concerning urban spaces and the numerous town planning failures in the history of Brussels of whom the traces have also become part of Brussels' built heritage.

Our capital city was planned and modified after classic examples like Paris and London, rather to serve as a tool for national branding than to provide an optimal living-area for the inhabitants. This is strongly noticeable when walking through main boulevards like Anspach and Adolphe Max, where the Haussmannian architecture (fiercely implemented in Paris) defines the urban scenery.

Later on in history, the pecking order of model cities shifted: due to the spread of western capitalism in the mid-20th century, modern high-rise and economy-driven cities like New York became the standard objective in urban planning. Of course, Brussels couldn't limp behind and deemed the time being right to rudely implement modern and rational high-rise buildings into its medieval, organic city structure.

The Brussels' built heritage we deal with today can be described as the direct result of urban decisions made in these historical periods of inconsiderate and almost compulsive urban mismanagement, an urban paradigm that we today have to declare radically outdated. Currently, most of these megalomaniac projects, once presented as progressive and visionary, suffer the greatest difficulties in evolving along with the needs and standards of a modern city and are thus potentially becoming obsolete and irrelevant. Almost like persistent scars, these ambiguous projects still determine the current Brussels' urban landscape, posing a great deal of difficult discussions about what to do with them now. The fact that these projects became a part of our heritage and even define the identity of Brussels and its inhabitants, makes finding durable and pleasing solutions significantly harder. All parties to this heritage have to be taken into consideration for not chasing rash decisions in function of modernity. The last twenty years, this growing awareness of the value of our built heritage is causing a more durable approach to city-development. The discarded, slightly forgotten buildings are now more often preserved and given a new fulfilling purpose because they are widely considered a valuable part of Brussels' heritage.

When taking decisions on urban planning, the feeling and meaning of the heritage for the community has to be taken into severe consideration. One should not forget that many buildings have become part of the collective memory of Brussels and so the people have a rightful claim to a free and accessible use of these urban sites.

In the past, these kind of decisions considering reuse and revaluating buildings were – just like the decision to build them all these years before – seemingly made without any significant participation or consultation of regular civilians. Needless to say decisions were again mostly taken in advantage of the city authorities, acting with financially lucrative motives.

A sad example of this absolutistic, profit seeking approach towards the built heritage was the notorious demolition of 'Het Volkshuis' by architect Victor Horta.

'Het Volkshuis', literally meaning 'House of the People', was a brilliant piece of Art Nouveau architecture in Brussels, torn down in 1965 under loud objection of thousands of civilians. Even though severe protest arose from civilians, supported by the Belgian Guild of Architects, the authorities persisted in demolishing

the building and even granted the establishing of an enormous office tower called the 'Tower of Blaton' to replace 'Het Volkshuis'. ("Het Drama van het Volkshuis" 2005). The protest can be seen as a premature, exploring attempt of claiming their participation in the urban planning of Brussels.



Fig.1: A pencil rendering of 'Het Volkshuis'
In its original state, before 1965.



Fig.2: 'The Tower of Blaton', replacing
'Het Volkshuis' since 1965.

A shift of focus: increasing protest and participation by the people.

Throughout the history of Brussels, public protest was mostly very local and poorly organized, making it virtually impossible to cause real impact on decisions pending by the government. Especially in times when civilians weren't as enabled so strikingly obvious as they are today and politics still had a distinct elitist character. Decisions were made above the heads of the - mostly - unaware civilians and the number of stakeholders was strongly kept to an absolute minimum.

However, in the last decade, a significant change of mentality towards participation of the civilians is noticeable. People have become increasingly aware of their valuable position in the city and refuse to stay silent witnesses of a further deformation of their living environment.

Even now, the citizens are becoming more articulate and are loudly demanding or even claiming the right of participation in the planning and development of their city. Very often this protest is conducted through an extensive use of the online community. It is an indisputable and widely noticeable fact that the rise of the internet had (and still has) a vast innovative impact on the way of planning and the overall success of public protest by giving the public an opinion and a collective voice in the world. In pre-digital times, assembling an action group, setting up a protest rally and collecting petitions were slow and cumbersome tasks, often even subject to the same bureaucratic rules they protested against.

The use of a – initially - digitalized protest makes it possible for protesters to go past these elaborate processes and provides them with a dynamic and swift platform for like-minded people to group, discuss and organize '*real life*' protest with the internet as a home base. Like guerilla warriors, online protesters can now quickly and widely disperse their protest through the internet, making it accessible, supportable and shareable for the whole online community and by extension the world. Online protest easily spreads and easily gathers followers, therefore the regular media picks it up and reports it. This extensive exposure and wide support makes it possible for the protesters to bluntly claim participation in the debate or decisions. The internet not only provides us, the people with vast logistic advantages in protesting, it also gives us a strong and undeniable position to negotiate in modern society.

Personally, I find it enormously interesting to witness the growing role of the popular social network community Facebook. Almost weekly, invitations appear to join some sort of protest action group and thus supporting their cause. Just like the traditional petition (but a lot faster), my 'click of support' appears to be adequate to make a difference; the more supporting members on the Facebook page, the more impact and effect the protest is able to cause. A striking example, fresh in the collective memory of every Belgian is the recent gigantic protest against the imminent discarding of 'Zwarte Piet' from the annual tradition of celebrating Saint-Nicolas. Within a few days, the official protest page in Facebook had gathered two million supporting members and thus became an important and undeniable factor in any further debate. The uniting of congenial people worked and showed a glimpse of its tremendous opportunities for society.

In these engaged times where the public opinion can no longer be systematically ignored by the decision-makers and participation by the people is tolerated and more often even highly desired, it is now more than ever clear that the true success and quality of a city is deeply rooted in its inhabitants and not so

much in obnoxious, out-of-place landmarks. The city government is becoming increasingly aware of the fact that valuable input can be obtained from outside their offices and private studies.

Neighborhood meetings, public competitions and urban activist groups are strongly standing up and taking action to optimize the urban city space by attempting to tilt the scale of urban development once again in favor of the citizens. By participation, the common urban space is claimed back and (re-)appropriated by us, the people, as a vital element for the optimal living environment we want our capital city to be.

(Re-)Claiming the city by (re-)appropriation of Brussels' 'waiting spaces'.

Obviously, a metropolitan city like Brussels is a continuously evolving and adapting entity, following the ever-changing needs of a city in modern society. These lingering processes of never-ending evolution take up a significant amount of time and are incessantly causing a certain amount of urban sites (built or unbuilt, big or small) being 'under transition' and out of use for an undisclosed period of time; almost completely purposelessly waiting for a new function, owner or even for demolition. Traditionally, this means a temporary (in Brussels more often long lasting) uselessness of the site in question and an inevitable degradation of the surroundings. (De Smet, 2013). However, an important nuance in this phenomenon has to be defined: these so called 'waiting spaces' have often merely been declared temporarily obsolete as a result of bureaucratic dilatory processes like reallocation, a change of owner or pending permits and not so much as a result of a sudden incapability of further serving a proper role of urban significance. It goes without saying that these urban voids are a thorn in the side of the Brussels' inhabitants who - whilst living in rather small apartments with limited (outside and green) space – see these qualitative spatial opportunities being squandered.

As further described elaborately in *'Dealing with urban waiting space: the possible role of professionals'*, the prospective PhD dissertation by Aurélie De Smet (2013), these temporary urban surpluses don't necessarily have to be written off as being obsolete so quickly anymore. Through a dedicated social engagement the people can (re-)claim these urban spaces and - temporarily - make use of them as a valuable tool in the process of (re)appropriating their city. Instead of the traditional city planning where a general plan - often acting like a rigid corsage for its environment - is implemented on a site, the temporary using of waiting spaces is being approached as if they were 'urban laboratories' for the public well-being. Initiated and strongly influenced by the community. In a dynamic way diverse innovative

urban strategies are being implemented, tested and evaluated on the waiting spaces, eventually resulting in an urban intervention customized and shaped for the people, who have an explicit decisive role in this process. Lessons for future urban planning can be learned and applied.

The temporary special intervention can evidently (and hopefully) turn out to be such a big success for the neighborhood that it influences or even replaces the further final use of the waiting spaces on which it was implemented. By this temporary and useful use of waiting spaces, conducted, executed and benefited by the people the city, is a step closer of being completely (re-)appropriated and claimed by the Brussels' inhabitants as optimal living environment on behalf of themselves.

Case-study: Parking 58, a lost view on the city.

Although the temporary useful occupation of waiting spaces (discussed above) is a very effective, explicit and safe tool for the people in their lingering battle of (re)appropriating the city, it is certainly not the only one. More drastic, sometimes even slightly illegal practices are being used to get the job done when claiming public participation is difficult but needed. Protest occupations, fictitious action groups and manifestations are as old as the phenomenon of protest itself, but are still heavily used today, also for the (re)claiming of Brussels' urban space. These actions are showing a great dedication by the militants involved.

The following case-study on 'Parking 58' exposes an undeniable and decisive involvement of the people in an attempt to (re-)appropriate their city. The fierce ambition of real participation in urban planning is inspiring for all of us.

An iconic building.

Parking 58 is a multi-story parking lot in the center of Brussels, according to the website 'Interparking' (<http://www.interparking.be/nl/find-parking/Parking%2058/>) currently containing 589 parking spaces and a street-level supermarket. Although, it looks like a rather dull building specimen it grew out to become an iconic building.

It hasn't always been like this, says Roel Jacobs in 'Een geschiedenis van Brussel' (2002); even before the actual construction commenced, the building of this parking space, the first of its kind in Brussels, was a controversial decision accompanied with the traditional large amount of ignored public protest. As usual in Brussels history of compulsive modernization, the new building was conceived at the great expense of

an authentic and beloved building of that time. The grand, majestic Central Halls of Brussels had to make place for Parking 58, in essence conceived as nothing more than a concrete parking lot for a – back then - gigantic amount of cars in a time where cars were still a curiosum.

This urban tragedy precedes the similar demolition and substitution of 'Het Volkshuis' several years later and marks a sad trend in the Brussels' urban development of the 20th century. Since its completion in 1958, the parking lot still determines the direct neighborhood in which it is embedded and was –in my opinion, correctly - stigmatized by the public opinion as an out of place and bluntly modernistic monstrosity.

Throughout the years, when the trauma of demolishing the Central Halls faded away and parking space became unbelievably scarce indeed, people started accepting Parking 58 and maintained a love/hate relationship with it.

The Dansaert district, the direct surrounding of Parking 58, is nowadays a Flemish oriented flourishing part of Brussels heavily visited by a young and trendy public as well as tourists from all around the world. This noticeable revaluation of the Dansaert district of the last two decades also had substantial positive consequences for Parking 58. Not only is it the obvious well-used parking space in the city center it was initially meant to be, the top floor of the building revealed itself to be a huge elevated open-air platform with a unique and spectacular 360° view over Brussels. Local inhabitants adopted this query parking space to become a place for encounter, quiet relaxation and sometimes even modest events. Initially a seemingly hidden, 'locals-only' spot, it slowly grew out to be a great popular asset for the neighborhood and the city, even currently making an appearance in travel guides like '*Spotted by the locals*' and '*Use-it*' as an absolute 'must-do' when in Brussels. Traditionally, when fireworks are upon Brussels, one can be sure the roof top of Parking 58 will be packed with spectators, drawn there for the best view of the spectacle.

The once very controversial parking lot evolved into an iconic meeting/gathering point with true landmark characteristics and by its improvised, hybrid character even became a representation of our collective Brussels identity. The panoramic view has virtually become public property and is freely used by the people as an obvious addition of their Brussels' living experience. Gigantic panoramic, open-air platforms that are also free to access can be considered a curiosum in Brussels.



Fig.3 & 4: Les Jardins Suspendus in Brussels. A popular weekly event on the public roof top during the summer of 2013.

The claim of participation.

In 2012, AG Real Estate, the owner of Parking 58, filed an application to the city of Brussels for a new building project, on the site where Parking 58 is currently situated. The building will predominantly contain highly profitable office spaces and only a small amount of apartments spread over a mere two floors, notwithstanding there is a continuous need of (social) housing in Brussels.

Even though these facts alone already sufficiently reflect the private building organizations' objectives of money, maximal exploitation and lack of social empathy, they thereafter announced the iconic public roof top will not be re-installed. Needless to say this announcement induced a tsunami of negative comments and spontaneous protest by the people coming from all - expected and unexpected layers of (Brussels) society, again proving that Parking 58 roof top is an important acquisition for our optimal city life experience. As I am a fervent visitor of the panoramic rooftop myself, I followed (and still follow) the evolutions from up close and with great interest.

An anonymous protest action group started a notable campaign against the plans of AG Real Estate. They started up their protest by the establishment of a Facebook group called *Project 58*, primarily gathering all like-minded (non-)Brussels people and thus getting their demand of participation in the planning of the new Parking 58 wide spread and supported.

To enforce their fierce demand of participation, the group designed and widely dispensed posters (analogue and digital) advertising a fictitious self-designed ideal project for the Parking 58 site. This *Project 58* poster was intended as a pamphlet to inform the community of the great projects, really beneficent for the city of Brussels that could be implemented on a rich site like Parking 58, instead of the inferior plans of AG Real Estate. This guerilla-like action got picked up fast and is what got the group

known with the general public. Anonymous appearances (AG Real Estate threatened the group with legal procedures for using their logo on the *Project 58* posters) by the group and their ideas in Brussels newspaper *Brussel Deze Week* and television channel *TV Brussel* generated *Project 58* the needed attention of the people and support of Brussels Politician Brigitte De Pauw who publically outed (through television interviews and her own website: <http://www.cdenv.be/actua/parking-58-overlegcommissie-pleit-voor-meer-woningen>) her discontent with the plans of AG Real Estate and pleaded for a participatory attitude.

AG Real Estate is obviously a private enterprise, this enables them to completely ignore the public opinion and possible protest on their plans for Parking 58. This is exactly what they did and are still doing today: no allowance of participation whatsoever. The original plans currently stay unchanged and the public investigation where civilians (and thus Project58) could file legal objection is closed since the 7th of June 2013. Since the hearing of all parties on the 18th of June 2013, no results have been communicated.

Even though the result of this protest will always be minimal and insufficient, the action of protesting itself is still absolutely useful. An undisputed statement is made: Brussels' inhabitants have a deeply rooted love for their city and are always willing and able to passionately protest malicious urban planning and reclaim the rights of participation in our city. Project58 made society aware that other ways of thinking are indeed possible and worth defending and striving for; ways that are appropriate for a more qualitative city life.

PG REAL ESTATE

PROJECT 58

OMDAT BRUSSEL ONS NAUW AAN HET HART LIGT! PARCE QUE BRUXELLES NOUS TIENT PARTICULIÈREMENT À COEUR!

354
LOGEMENTS SOCIAUX
SOCIALE WONINGEN

1420 m²
BUURTWINKELS
COMMERCES LOCAUX

5000 m²
PARK OP HET DAK
PARC SUR LE TOIT

GÄRDERIE - KLEUTEROPVANG | SALLE POLYVALENTE - POLYVALENTE RUimte
 CONSOMMATION ÉCOLOGIQUE - ECOLOGISCH VERBRUIK | MAISON DE JEUNES - JEUGDHUIS
 ADAPTÉES AUX PERSONNES INVALIDES AANGEPAST VOOR MENSEN MET BEPERKINGEN
 MAISON DE QUARTIER - BUURTHUIS | STATIONNEMENT POUR LES VÉLOS - FIETSENSTALLING

WWW.PG-REALSTATE.BE

Fig.5: The Project58 poster, as originally distributed by the protesters.

Conclusion

The city of Brussels has gone through a notoriously dragging and painful history of misconducted and outrageous urban planning. A striking story with in the leading role: King Leopold II, not only King of Belgium but also an aspiring urbanist who, backed up with huge piles of dubious '*Congo-money*' and an uncanny hunger for grandeur and recognition, conducted a series of inconsiderate, megalomaniac urban interventions to serve himself and the city image, but not so much the inhabitants and their needs. These obnoxious projects consistently caused massive expropriation and condemned the citizens to live on a construction site for an indefinite period of time. Also after King Leopold's reign of urban mismanagement, the town-planning failures kept piling up, with the demolition of 'Het Volkshuis' and the implementation of 'The Manhattan Project' in the 'Quartier Nord' in the nineteen sixties as a sad climax.

The peculiar Brussels built heritage we deal with today (tangible buildings and space but also the urban collective memory of Brussels civilians) is the direct result of this long-lasting period of vigorous urban mismanagement, where our capital city was rather used as a tool for national branding and needless modernization than providing a qualitative living environment for its inhabitants. These drastic town-planning decisions were resolutely and inconsiderately made without any participation of the unaware civilians.

However, since then things have been changing profoundly. The people have become more aware of their powerful, decisive position in modern society. With undeniable credits to the internet, the civilians are still increasingly turning into informed, enabled and concerned members of modern society. The government can no longer deny the immanent role of the citizens and allows, even deeply appreciates the participation of the civilians. The real greatness and quality of the city is deeply grounded in the implicated participation of the people in city life.

It is time for us now to continue the pursuit of (re-)appropriating and frankly claiming our common city space. The temporary use of urban '*waiting spaces*' is potentially a vital tool in this process. By locally reactivating and appropriating the wide-spread sleeping patches of unused, but ever valuable city membrane, we will reconquer the city, piece by piece. The fierce involvement of people in '*Project58*' for the preservation of the iconic Parking 58 roof terrace can be set as a representative example to inspire more and more people to defend their rights to a livable and pleasant city.

Endnotes

This Paper was written as a contribution to the courses of ELBG1 '*Studium Generale*' (professor Nel Janssens), which is part of the theoretical aspect of the studies master of Architecture at the KU Leuven, Department of Architecture LUCA Brussels.

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Images

- Fig. 1: ‘Het Volkshuis’. [aprox. 1895]. A Pencil rendering of ‘Het Volkshuis’. Last visited on 10/01 using: http://www.autrique.be/images/origines/big/maison_du_peuple.jpg
- Fig. 2: Tour Blaton. [aprox. 1970]. *The tower of Blaton*. Last visited on 10/01 using: http://i54.photobucket.com/albums/g92/Benonie/Brussel/marollen%20en%20omgeving/118_0609.jpg

Fig. 3 & 4: Jardins suspendus. (2013). *View of the rooftop party during Les Jardins suspendus, summer 2013.* Last visited on 13/01: using:
<http://www.lacapitale.be/779336/article/regions/bruxelles/actualite/2013-08-04/aperitif-sur-le-toit-du-parking-58-ca-y-est-c-est-parti>

Fig.5: Project58. (2013). *The original Poster,* Last visited on 11/01 using:
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