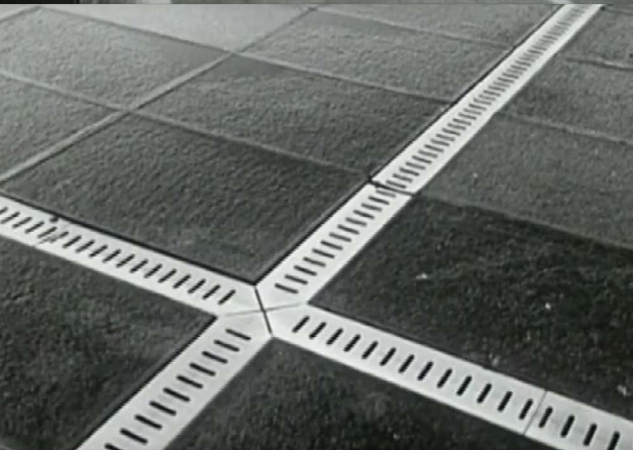




The Political Imperative of Public Space

Public sphere and space in the
Brussels Capital Region

Gommaar Van Reybrouck Van Gelder

Fig. 0.1: stills from the film “Occupied” by Peter Downsbrough, depicting the State Administrative Centre in Brussels (Pachecolaan), 2000. (© Peter Downsbrough)



The Political Imperative of Public Space

Public sphere and space in the Brussels Capital Region

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Abstract

This thesis explores the political imperative of public space in the Brussels Capital Region. The city-region, marked by administrative complexity and political stratification, is today also subject to a disconnect between citizens and representative democratic instances. This disaffection is exacerbated by broader political polarisation and hyper-politicization within Belgian society. Furthermore, despite discussions about a reappropriation of public space, true progress remains relative and often coincides with creeping processes of depoliticization.

Public space, however, plays a crucial role within the public sphere, which has been influentially theorised by Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. Habermas's historical analysis of the bourgeois public sphere highlights principles of accessibility, rational deliberation, and reasoned opinion-formation. This has been critiqued by Nancy Fraser for its exclusion of subaltern groups, leading to her concept of multiple counter-public spheres. Arendt in a different stance emphasises plurality as fundamental to politics, with the public sphere then being the site for action and speech.

The public sphere, although non-dismissible for forming critical public opinion and active citizenship in contemporary democracy, is today challenged by delocalisation and disembodiment. Therefore, in response to challenges to both sphere and space, the political imperative of public space proves essential to (re)consider. Public space must in this regard be seen as a relational entity with socio-physical and spatio-temporal dimensions. Characteristics such as accessibility, inclusivity, and potential for transgression are key, yet public spaces are more often dominated by patterns of e.g. securitization, privatization, and commodification.

The conceptualization of political public space in this thesis considers it as either a playground or a theatre, focusing on democratic performance of both citizens and architecture in itself. The general framework is subsequently applied to the case of the Brussels Capital Region. An analysis of XDGA's non-realised design for the Schuman Square, a significant political and symbolic site, illustrates the potential and limitations of formal public spaces for embedding political action. In contrast, but refraining from hierarchisation, Filter Café Filtré Atelier's OpenStreets project demonstrates the potential of informal public spaces to foster political engagement and activism around themes of common interest. The Decoratelier case study ultimately emphasizes the importance of genuine political engagement in public space, warning against superficial participation.

Addressing the political imperative of public space proves crucial for enabling citizen engagement within societal transformation. While public space alone cannot resolve polarisation, it can contribute by making abstract disagreements tangible and fostering continuous negotiation and debate. The thesis identifies key socio-physical and architectural considerations for evaluating the political imperative of public spaces, such as representation, control, and multi-publicity. The goal is to create a framework for spaces that represent both diverse publics and society, while enabling collective action and participation. After all, architects have a significant role in designing these spaces through re-engaging politics and aesthetics by treating space as an active participant in societal and political dynamics.

Preface

On 9 June 2024, a quadruple election awaits the inhabitants of the Brussels Capital Region. Both the European, federal, communal and regional elections will take place on the same day, making it a crucial moment for Brussels' and Belgian democracy. However, if the opinion polls of the last months are to be believed, the result will be further polarisation and discord between the country's constituent parts. Moreover, the public debate ahead of the elections rarely testified of nuance and wilfulness to understand the other's perspective, but was rather dominated by the vocal cultivation of personal public mythology and populist, often non-factual claims.

Particularly disillusioning is the constatation that my own generation does not necessarily form an exception to these patterns. This worries me, and it motivated me to conclude my architectural studies with a research on the role that space plays in perceptions about societal challenges and problems. Starting from an assigned topic which evolved around collective imaginations, I gradually narrowed down this broad ambition towards a more specific goal. Combining interests in architectural theory, politics and philosophy, the idea arose to inquire what it fundamentally means to consider specific spaces as "public". After all, such publicness to some extent implies that everyone can form its own expectation and imagination about this space – thereby, theoretically, making it an incomparable space of confrontation.

Especially the recurring ideal of public space as a (metaphorical) arena of both political deliberation and antagonism triggered my fascination. With the contemporary dominance of media and online communication, this ideal appeared somewhat outdated. Nonetheless, in contrast to writings from thirty years ago announcing (while simultaneously being regretful and curious) the irreversible substitution of places by intangible flows, I believe that a different tendency shows today. Post-Covid lockdown, people have massively re-entered physical public space. Furthermore, the emergence of outspoken and spatial protest in my environment, particularly in support of Palestine these last months, proves that there remains hope and potential for politics in public space.

Therefore, this thesis became an exercise of thought on how the ideals of the public sphere can find a physical dimension in public space. It inquires the potential of architecture beyond depoliticized aesthetics and attempts at defining a political imperative for public space. After all, in order to collectively engage society in some of the urgent transformations that our time faces, I believe that the possibility for profound and inclusive debate and confrontation in public space is non-negotiable.

Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, 5 June 2024

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Introduction

Problem statement and research outlines

“This *falsely pacified public space* constitutes the unsurpassable horizon of the market democracy that imposes its law. But this vision becomes less and less seductive, and its functionalist market logic continues to generate an atomisation of social links.

Rather than calling public spaces again into question, we prefer to put the spotlight on the collateral damages in the physical urban spaces: fragmentation, separatism, withdrawal into oneself (or into the inner circle), and the many signals of disintegration of “social cohesion” and links.

Expecting public space to act as tools of pacification, which means that they defuse social tensions, is a neglect and masking of the fact that the city is a space of struggles and confrontation of ideas, classes, genders, etc. Meanwhile, expecting public spaces to “recreate social links”, means burdening the area with the weight of the dysfunctionalities of an increasingly stratified and polarised society.

While allowing the citizens to confront each other beyond the boundaries of the home and neighbourhood, public spaces can and must *re-become intermediaries of public debate*.¹

Since the late 1980s, discourse about (urban) *public space* has largely been characterised by a “narrative of loss”.² Allegedly, public space has diluted into either “dead space” or “festive consumption space”, and is increasingly shaped following a logic of “Disneyfication”.³ This has resulted in recurring announcements of “the end of public space” and complaints about the “destruction of any truly democratic urban space”.⁴ The Brussels Capital Region has formed no exception to these patterns. Most notoriously in the wave of post-war *Brusselization*, the urban landscape has been subject to far-reaching mutations, and numerous Brussels’ public spaces have over time become strong arguments to any deemed loss of public space.⁵

However, an important question arises when hearing and reading such radical claims: which most elementary characteristic to public space has been lost in order for these spaces to, at least supposedly, lose all meaning and value? And why is this feature so non-dismissible?

An important part of the answer hereto lies in the theoretical observation that public space inherently bears an imaginary ideal of giving place to unmediated public and political debate.⁶

¹ Benzaouia and Sadow, “Quel espace public?”, 3. My translation. Emphasis added. Introduction to *Bruxelles En Mouvements* 287.

² See Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm”, 4.

³ See Mitchell, “The End of Public Space?”, 119, and see also Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park*, 227.

⁴ See Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm”, 4.

⁵ See e.g. the public space of the RAC on the cover page of this thesis.

⁶ See Mitchell, “The End of Public Space?”, 121.

This ideal finds its roots in the impactful theories of 20th-century philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt on the *public sphere*. Although these are rarely explicitly addressed in political theory, there are both inherent and non-neglectable physical and spatial dimensions to any conception of the public sphere. It is, therefore, exactly the felt disappearance of such possibility for free political expression in public space that is often lamented, and the alleged loss mostly comes forth from a continuous *depoliticization* of urban space.

Today, in the post-Covid era, mention is regularly made of a “reappropriation of public space” in the Brussels Capital Region, which is visibly subject to large public space projects and mobility transformations.⁷ However, besides objecting that any discourse of a true reappropriation is a bit blunt, one can more fundamentally remark that public space is herein often ambitioned as either a *community* space or a *commercial* space. These approaches in fact represent two sides of the same coin and idealise a common ideal of public space as peaceful, convivial and aimed at feelings of contentment – and thus, quite a-political and without debate or conflict.⁸

This constataion, in turn, raises new questions. How could public space then fulfil its “political” ideal? And are there practices or spaces in the Brussels Capital Region that, at least to some extent, live up to this imaginary? After all, the idea of the public sphere as an “arena of political deliberation and participation” has a long history and remains fundamental to democracy today, while public space has the potential to function as at least the “physical setting for the nonphysical public sphere”.⁹ From an architectural viewpoint, it is then interesting to research what the role and importance of contemporary public space can still be today in regard to citizen engagement in politics, despite the rise of various other (online) “spaces” for political expression.

The Brussels Capital Region is furthermore specifically characterised by an almost ungraspable administrative complexity and political stratification. Combined with a climate of increasing societal polarisation and political extremization, and an era of *hyperpolitics*, this makes for a dangerous cocktail in regard to democratic affiliation of citizens.¹⁰ Indeed, recent research has shown that, although they are generally positive about their city, only a quarter of Brussels’ inhabitants expresses trust in the democratic representants within the city-region.¹¹ Therefore, it is an urging question how to ensure political interaction both between representants and represented, and how to consolidate democracy in society beyond formal procedures. In counterweight to e.g. anonymous online fora, public space has a tangible role to play herein by making abstract matters and disagreements visible.

So, the combined challenges of *depoliticization* of space and *hyperpoliticization* of society are imperative not only for political theorists, but also for urban designers and architects. In this light, a profound consideration on the linkage between public sphere and public space imposes itself. As David Harvey argues, “while it may well prove impossible to sort out the relationship between the physicality of urban public space and the politics of the public sphere with any exactitude”, there are “some potent points of linkage between them”.¹² If one is then “to think more cogently

⁷ See Breës and Van Crieckingen, “Réappropriation des espaces publics: pour mieux dominer?”.

⁸ See Verschaffel, “De mythe van de straat”, 108-109.

⁹ See Harvey, “The Political Economy of Public Space”, 17, and see also Miller, *Designs on the Public*, 1.

¹⁰ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 14.

¹¹ See Huyghebaert, “Brusselaars vernietigend over hun politici”.

¹² See Harvey, “The Political Economy of Public Space”, 17.

about how urban design in general, and the shaping of urban public space in particular, might influence politics in the public sphere”, there is “an intriguing mix of sociogeographical perceptions, expectations, and material conditions at work that need to be unpacked”.¹³

In order to do so, the **first chapter** of this thesis inquires the major public sphere theories. The public sphere has most importantly been theorised by Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, while the first has impactfully been critiqued by, among others, Nancy Fraser. Following on this theoretical underpinning, the unceasing importance of a well-conceived public sphere today is pointed out and the most essential contemporary challenges are identified.

Among those challenges is the oft-cited *disembodiment* and *delocalisation* of the public sphere, which is further addressed in the **second chapter**. After a discussion of which spaces to include under the wide denominator of public space, I’ll argue in line with Margaret Crawford that any supposed loss of public space is “primarily perceptual, derived from extremely narrow and normative definitions of both public and space”.¹⁴ Indeed, instead of calling public space again into question, I will rather assess how it can relate to what I will call the *political imperative of public space*, and thereby serve as “political public space”. This is done through first conceptually approaching both architecture, public space and democracy. Subsequently, a number of elementary socio-physical and architectural points of consideration for political public space will be laid down.

In the **third chapter**, this theoretical framework is applied to the Brussels Capital Region. Following an analysis of both Brussels’ political complexity and intricate architectural culture, especially in regard to public space, a few distinctive practices are identified. These practices, at least in discourse, engage with the political imperative and reflect upon the earlier formulated points of consideration. On the more formal and iconic level, a nearly-realised design by XDGA for the Schuman Square will prove remarkable and interesting to scrutinise in detail. By contrast, on the informal and small-scale level, the OpenStreets actions by Filter Café Filtré Atelier and the Decoratelier in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek will serve as objects of focus. While mutually very different, both prove interesting in converting theoretical considerations to practice, be it to various extents of success. Ultimately, the most essential reflections will be summarised in the **conclusion**.

¹³ See Ibid., 18.

¹⁴ See Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm”, 4.

Research questions

How is the real and physical public space related to the imaginary and conceptual idea of the public sphere?

Under which socio-physical and architectural conditions does public space today allow, enable, or contribute to political expression of citizens?

To what extent does public space in the Brussels Capital Region relate to the political imperative of public space?

Methodology

This thesis develops through three main foci: public sphere, public space and Brussels Capital Region. Its approach is to gradually narrow down the scope of the research, which results in the presented threefold build-up. The research itself is the result of a year-long process that involved both theoretical investigations, interviews and field work. These different elements are incorporated throughout the thesis.

The first chapter constitutes of the broadest part of the theoretical framework, the public sphere, and is based on extensive readings which started in the summer of 2023. While the public sphere has been addressed by several key thinkers of both 20th- and 21st-century, I found that the most influential and political accounts to this day were those of Jurgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. Since their theories also found some repercussion in other domains such as geography and anthropology (especially Habermas), or architectural theory (especially Arendt), this choice consolidated itself when attempting to connect their political philosophy to spatial analysis. One might object that some aspects of Habermas's and Arendt's thinking are outdated. However, much is still to be learnt from these canonical writings and I have attempted to illustrate this throughout the thesis. An additional source of inspiration for this part was a lecture about populism and democracy by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer in Leuven on 17 April 2024. Around the same time, a Dutch translation of Anton Jäger's compelling book *Hyperpolitiek* was also published, which further sharpened my final analysis of the public sphere.

The second part addresses public space and formulates a 'spatial grounding' of the framework about the public sphere, which was built within the first chapter. The idea for bridging the notions of sphere and space originated after reading the introductory text by Setha Low and Neil Smith to their compilation book *The Politics of Public Space*. Herein, they argue that combining both theoretical stances bears the potential to overcome the individual flaws of each component, and that "an understanding of public space is an *imperative* for understanding the public sphere".¹⁵ The second part of the thesis is equally based on both profound and intensive readings and reflections from my part. Of special interest for this chapter have been several essays by Bart Verschaffel, mostly found within his collection book *Van Hermes en Hestia*, and the journal article

¹⁵ See Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 6. Emphasis added.

“Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage” by Hilde Heynen, explaining the value of a relational perspective on space within architectural theory. This theoretical basis has been combined with insights from the interview that I conducted with architect and guest professor at the University of Ghent Joachim Declerck on 8 May 2024. It also makes reference to a debate in Recyclart on 13 March 2024, which was entitled “creating public space for womxn & gender minorities” and was combined with the inauguration of the Salon Duchesse pagoda on the Brabant Square in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek.

The third part tackles the Brussels Capital Region. This city-region forms the overarching case study in relation to the theoretical framework that is built throughout the first two chapters. While this research has emerged out of both an interest for, and empirical knowledge of, the Brussels Capital Region and its (public) spaces, and while the city-region has continuously remained a major focus throughout the year, it is however a deliberate choice to present this thesis with its threefold structure. Departing from a combined observation of the spatial and political struggle within the city-region, this thesis (implicitly) inquires the broader relationship between (political and architectural) theory and (architectural-spatial) practice. Therefore, the most fit format is an initial conceptual development, followed by an elaborate case study testing and translating the proposed framework and suggestions.

My initial entrance point to the Brussels Capital Region was my own perception, since I have grown up in the city (while living in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek) and therefore experienced it in various stages of my personal development. This background knowledge, which was gathered over time, was subsequently profoundly fact-checked and enriched with in-depth readings and further discovery of the city’s multi-layeredness. Isabelle Doucet’s book *The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968* proved particularly influential to me, both in its distinctive approach to criticality within architecture and its depth on the intertwinement between architectural culture and activism in the city. The interview with Joachim Declerck proved very valuable in this regard too, as well as several (implicit) acts of field work such as e.g. getting to know multiple activist struggles and collectives in Brussels during a “carrefour des luttes” (crossroads of struggles) in le Dk (in Saint-Gilles) in October 2023, but also for instance attending a political debate bringing together several prominent Brussels’ politicians about “space, nature, living and working in the Brussels Capital Region” in Muntpunt (Brussels) in March 2024.

Three projects or practices have been investigated in detail, since they appeared particularly remarkable in regard to the political imperative of public space within the Brussels Capital Region. These have been selected out of a long list that I drew up in February-March 2024 and mutually address the different considerations, thereby together forming a rather profound insight into my framework on the political imperative of public space. These cases consciously and explicitly connect to different scale levels as well as degrees of formality. All have been researched based on a combination of in-depth reading, documentation, city walks, site visits and interviews. Not all site visits took place this year: e.g. for the OpenStreets project, which takes place during the summers, I had witnessed its presence during the previous summers since I live nearby, and I had been to several parties in Decoratelier already. Other sites, such as the Schuman Square, were visited on multiple occasions during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Within the scope of the nearly-realised XDGA design for the Schuman Square, which caught my attention due to its overt physical engagement with the political imperative and its (formal)

symbolism, I interviewed architects Xaveer De Geyter and Jonathan Maj on 18 April 2024. For the analysis of Filter Café Filtré Atelier and OpenStreets, I interviewed architect and initiator Annekatrien Verdickt on 6 May 2024. The zoom-in on Filter Café Filtré Atelier proved particularly relevant because they emerged out of a citizen mobilisation within public space a few years ago, and continue today within a trend of, what Isabelle Doucet labels, architectural activism from-within.

Ultimately, the analysis of the Decoratelier raised awareness about the potential ambivalences of conceptualising democracy and architecture as performance, while simultaneously highlighting the difficulty of the position of the “maker” in regard to political public space. For this case, I e-mailed scenographer and founder Jozef Wouters for an interview, but due to the ongoing relocation of the Decoratelier and lack of time, this could unfortunately not take place. Instead, he kindly recommended me his book *Moments Before the Wind*, and I received an additional text which had been presented during a recent theatre festival.

In addition, I interviewed film maker Robbrecht Desmet, who made the film *Het open oog* around the *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* performance in Decoratelier (within the scope of his PhD in the Arts from 2023), on 15 April 2024. *Het open oog* also proved very interesting for my research, and my multiple viewings of the film led to a more profound insight into the behind-the-scenes working of *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*. I also had a mail conversation with film maker and art historian Joeri Verbesselt, who has equally researched the Decoratelier but currently resides outside of Belgium, between April and May 2024. Lastly, I have been to the Decoratelier on several occasions. Most importantly within the scope of this thesis: a performance marathon by *Ne Mosquito Pas* during the *Making Time* summer festival (in early September 2023), a unique re-performance of *The Soft Layer* on 7 April 2024 and the Saturday event by Toestand vzw on 27 April 2024 during the *It For Now* closing festival (before moving-out of the Manchester Street, as I’ll explain in a later part of this thesis). Herewith, the methodological framework for the thesis is set out.



Fig. 1.1: billboard on the Rue du Midi attempting to promote life in Brussels with the slogan “close to your work – close to your hobbies – come live in Brussels”, in an attempt to stop the city flight of Brussels at the time, 1981. (© Michel Huhardeaux)

1. Public sphere

1.1 Dimensions of the *public*

1.1.1 Sphere, realm, space, domain

In order to understand the political nature of public space and its potential for political action, we first need to disentangle the various facets of the *public*. Political theory about the public often decouples itself from the physical dimension of space and rather discusses immaterial concepts such as the public sphere. This abstract framework will nonetheless prove essential for a later political understanding of public space.

When searching a way through the numerous publications about the public, the first element that stands out are the different dimensions associated. The notions of 'public sphere', 'public realm', 'public domain' and 'public space' are sometimes seemingly used interchangeably. There exist however important conceptual distinctions.

It is, at least for now, hard to formulate clear and unique definitions. The idea of the public sphere, for instance, has several strongly varying theoretical groundings and interpretations. It is for this reason more useful to point out the relative differences between the concepts. The public sphere can be interpreted as the broadest concept.¹⁶ Fundamentally, it is a set of political and cultural practices.¹⁷ It is mostly a metaphorical concept encompassing all the media, institutions, ideas, interactions and more that lead to the formation of a public opinion through debate and is seldomly spatialized.¹⁸ Herein lies the difference with public space, which is inherently spatial and material. Public space has numerous different interpretations, some of which I will evolve on later, but can generally be conceived as the physical environment associated to public functions and thus as the physical component of the public realm.¹⁹ While the public sphere is mostly theorised by philosophers and political thinkers, the public realm is often the term used by sociologists and communication researchers.²⁰ To some extent interchangeable, Mitrasinovic and Mehta explain that the "public realm fits at the intersection of public sphere and public space and is conceptually where real political action takes place".²¹ It is therefore most commonly used to describe the public uses and activities in specific public spaces. Lastly, the public domain relates to those specific places where exchange between different societal groups is allowed to take place.²² Those are the spaces under possession and management of a public government. The public domain is thus a broader term indicating a set of public spaces, but still less wide in scope than the public sphere which refers to a set of practices.²³

¹⁶ See Mitrasinovic and Mehta, *Public Space Reader*, 15.

¹⁷ See Boomkens, "The temporalities of the public sphere", 13-14.

¹⁸ See Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 4-5.

¹⁹ See Mitrasinovic and Mehta, *Public Space Reader*, 15.

²⁰ See Ibid., 15.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² See Hajer and Reijndorp, *Op zoek naar nieuw publiek domein*, 11.

²³ See Avermaete et al., *Architectural Positions*, 25-26.

Clearly, those concepts are inseparably linked and are sometimes a bit of a juggling act with terms. For instance, while Habermas' notion of *Öffentlichkeit* is translated to public sphere in English, in Dutch it is frequently translated to public domain. In this thesis, the main concepts will however be the public sphere and the public space. Low and Smith rightfully argue in my opinion that "public space and the public sphere represent conjoined arenas of social and political contest and struggle".²⁴ Nonetheless, theorisation on the public sphere often remains ungrounded, while at the same time thoughts on the public space seldomly refer to reflections on the public sphere.²⁵ It is true, as Ali Madanipour argues, that public space is now defined in a much wider sense in both physical and institutional forms than the "idealized image of an integrated society with public spaces at its heart, such as the agora in the polis".²⁶ Thus, although the concept of the public sphere is somehow rooted in this ancient imaginary ideal (as I will explain further), the linkage between public sphere and public space should not be read as nostalgia towards ancient images of public space. This bridging of theories is rather to be understood as a reflection on the possibilities still present in contemporary public space to contribute to the solidification of democracy *today*. In this regard, much is to be learnt from canonical conceptions of the public sphere despite the shortcomings. It is for this purpose that I will look at the relationship between public sphere and public space, while focussing on an urban context. Through this, I will then unravel the inherent *political imperative of public space* and explain the constant relevance to this day of public space enabling political expression.

1.1.2 Public sphere theories

"The value of a public sphere rooted in civil society rests on three core claims: first, that there are matters of concern important to all citizens and to the organization of their lives together; second, that through dialog, debate and cultural creativity citizens might identify good approaches to these matters of public concern; and third, that states and other powerful organizations might be organized to serve the collective interests of ordinary people – the public – rather than state power as such, purely traditional values, or the personal interests of rulers and elites."²⁷

The public sphere, of which a first attempt at definition is given above by Craig Calhoun, has been a long-debated topic in (Western) political and philosophical theory. Hence, inspiration is often symbolically found in the democracy of ancient Athens and in the thought of its illustrious philosophers. The concept of the public sphere, however, transformed profoundly throughout the 18th century and the Enlightenment when the idea of a civil society distinct from the state originated.²⁸ This made it possible to conceive public deliberations separated from state control but based on voluntary citizen debate. A democratic public sphere could then in its turn form the link between civil society and state, which would potentially lead to a rethought state design serving all citizens.²⁹ Themes such as the common good; self-conscious decision-making of

²⁴ Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 12.

²⁵ See Ibid., 5.

²⁶ Madanipour, "Rethinking public space", 39.

²⁷ Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere", 311.

²⁸ See Ibid., 312.

²⁹ See Ibid., 312.

citizens; inclusive forms of communication; and the creation of social unity through free will became important.³⁰ The idea of a public sphere became a vital theoretical part of public life: it identified an abstract social space, freely accessible to all citizens, where the matters of general interest could be discussed free from state coercion.³¹ Although spatially as well as legally remaining vague, large conceptual steps towards political participation and citizen representation were being made.

This new line of thought, led by the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and especially Immanuel Kant, coincided with an era of societal change.³² Multiple revolutions and the subsequent creation of (semi-)representative institutions around the turn towards the nineteenth century led to new normative ideals of democracy and citizenship. The corresponding theory mainly grew in liberal thought and was based on the imaginary ideal of public opinion.³³ In contrast to absolutist repression, this opinion was based on open citizen debate and approval in public discourse.³⁴

The twentieth century saw a major revival of the public opinion research and public sphere theorisation. Today, Jürgen Habermas is often the first name linked to the concept of the public sphere. His writing, linked to the deliberative democracy theory he proposes, has often been cited as well as criticised. Next to him, Hannah Arendt delivered a major theoretical contribution on the importance of a public sphere. Through these canonical diagnoses, the public sphere became again a dominant concern in various fields of research as for instance also architecture and urban planning. The writings of Habermas and Arendt will form the starting point for my research.

³⁰ See Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere: History of the Concept", 702.

³¹ See Adut, "A Theory of the Public Sphere", 239.

³² See Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere: History of the Concept", 702.

³³ See Ibid., 702.

³⁴ See Ibid., 702.

1.2 The public sphere of Jürgen Habermas

“Designating a central institution of modern society, one that previously lacked a name, Habermas’s concept of the public sphere enjoys a status akin to that of a scientific discovery.”³⁵

1.2.1 A structural transformation of the public sphere

The public sphere constituted the major topic of Jürgen Habermas’ early and also some of his later work. His 1962 book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (later translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) formed a first attempt to formulate a theory of the public sphere as an essential part of democracy.

Habermas primarily draws inspiration from the bourgeois society of the late 17th and 18th centuries. Nevertheless, he first posits that the origins of the private-public distinction lie in ancient Greece. He names the sphere of the *polis* or the city-state as the opposite of the *oikos* or the family-house, separating the public life from the individual life. Although Habermas situates public life or *bios politikos* in a space, namely the marketplace or *agora*, this doesn’t mean it is bound to this space: the idea of a public sphere is rather indicating the conversation (*lexis*) and collective action (*praxis*) taking place.³⁶ This marks the de-spatialized character of Habermas’ account of the public sphere, wherein the ideal public sphere he describes is universal and thereby spatially as well as physically undifferentiated.³⁷

Habermas’ vision of the public sphere is based on two analytic lines: a historical analysis and a critical-normative one.³⁸ Essential for Habermas is the fundamental separation between state and society, as developed during the Enlightenment.³⁹ The then new mercantilist and capitalist economic system transformed the political and societal order. This introduced a new class of economically powerful – the *bourgeoisie*. This shift came together with the invention of the press and the rise of new vocal types of intellectuals. The emergence of a bourgeois public sphere was the result. The new type of public sphere contained a fundamental difference with the previous Greek public sphere model. Whereas in Ancient Greece the private sphere, related to the household, was clearly subordinate to the public sphere, where politics were decided, a new balance now arose. Public interest matters (for instance related to economics) entered the private sphere of the bourgeois society and were no longer a sole matter of the state.⁴⁰ The public now became a whole of individual persons joining in public debate on both state-related issues and common interests.⁴¹

³⁵ Fraser, “The Theory of the Public Sphere”, 245.

³⁶ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 3.

³⁷ See Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 5.

³⁸ See Fraser, “The Theory of the Public Sphere”, 246.

³⁹ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30-31.

⁴⁰ See Ibid., 23.

⁴¹ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 7.

Habermas sees it crucial to identify the new bourgeois distinction between private and public. The state and politics (and also the court) were considered “public” while civil society, market economy and family were “private”. The new public sphere emerged out of the private sphere: it was a public sphere of private individuals, who by means of public opinion connected the state with the needs of civil society.⁴² It was thus based on the domain of civil society that the real public sphere, guided by private autonomy, expressed itself.⁴³

Following on this historical analysis of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas subsequently gives what we might see as his definition of the public sphere:

“The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason.”⁴⁴

Type examples for Habermas are the *salons* and coffee houses, especially in Britain. However, it is again not the spatiality that matters to Habermas. As Craig Calhoun points out, the importance of the public sphere for Habermas lies in its potential as a mode of societal integration.⁴⁵ For Habermas, public discourse has the ability to organise society just like state power or market economy can. Contrary to the latter two, public discourse however has an emancipatory character and offers the possibility to have reason as the guiding principle instead of domination.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, Habermas gives importance to the symbolism of the *salon*. He describes this as a space not at the service of the house(hold) but of society. The *salon* pulls societal debate and public reasoning out of the private sphere and draws a new boundary between the private and public sphere right through the house itself.⁴⁷ It thus becomes a scene of psychological emancipation, in correspondence to the political-economic emancipation of civil society.⁴⁸ The coffee houses fulfilled a similar function.

A few characteristics to the public sphere are exemplary for Habermas. He remarks a disregard of status through the focus on the common interests of the participants.⁴⁹ For the debates, only rational and reasoned arguments have value and topics that had before never been discussed now come into light, such as state and church authority.⁵⁰ Above all, Habermas considers accessibility for all the constitutive element of the public sphere: if certain groups are excluded, then it is by definition not a public sphere.⁵¹ Through these conditions, the bourgeois public sphere following

⁴² See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30-31.

⁴³ See Ibid., 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 6.

⁴⁶ See Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 45.

⁴⁸ See Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 13.

⁵⁰ See Ibid., 13.

⁵¹ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 85.

Habermas led to the institutionalisation of an open political discussion led by rational-critical discourse.

Institutionalisation is an important dimension of the rise of the public sphere for Habermas. He explains that the political public sphere had been influenced by the literary public sphere, which already featured public institutions and discussion platforms before.⁵² The development of the public sphere encompassed indeed more than we might expect: it involved the growth of a whole series of institutions (such as independent publishers and political parties), practices (debates, cultural meetings, ...) and especially media (manifests, journals, ...).⁵³ All of this guaranteed the safeguarding of the central value of the political sphere: political and personal freedom. Through its multiple facets, the public sphere based on the communication of a reasoned public opinion truly became the organizing principle of state and judicial procedures.⁵⁴ It aimed to transform arbitrary authority into rational authority subject to citizen influence in the social domain.⁵⁵ The concept of the public sphere holds high symbolical value: it marks the rise of citizens to participation, or at least influence, on those matters of common concern. Following Habermas, a complex manifestation of societal preconditions enabled the public sphere to flourish and become the backbone of democracy, but this was only temporary.⁵⁶

Insofar, I discussed the historical and conceptual emergence of a pivotal public sphere based on normative ideals. Habermas' work also contains a major critical part about the degeneration and even loss of this type of public sphere in later times. He argues that the full potential of the bourgeois public sphere was never realised in practice. Habermas discusses critical theories of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx who had been sceptic about the potential of public opinion as a rational authority. The main reason he sees however for this loss in strength of the public sphere is a re-feudalisation of society.⁵⁷

Over the course of the 19th century, new actors such as private corporations and political parties began to increasingly influence the public power of the state.⁵⁸ At the same time, the state penetrated the private sphere through for instance interventionist economic policies. Private interests were no longer separated from the public sphere because the privatization of interests (in a neo-mercantilist economy) became a concern of public interest.⁵⁹ Habermas calls this dialectic "a progressive *societalization* of the state simultaneously with an increasing *stateification* of society."⁶⁰ This dynamic destroyed the base of the bourgeois public sphere, namely the separation between civil society and state. At the same time, non-bourgeois classes gained access to the public sphere and society became polarized by class struggle and competing interest groups.⁶¹ Together with the rise of mass media (which brought manipulation and power struggles over access and influence into the public sphere) and consumption culture, all the foregoing for

⁵² See Ibid., 51.

⁵³ See Boomkens, "The temporalities of the public sphere", 12-13.

⁵⁴ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 83.

⁵⁵ See Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures", 290.

⁵⁶ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 88.

⁵⁷ See Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere", 21.

⁵⁸ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 142.

⁵⁹ See Ibid., 145-46.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 142. Original emphasis.

⁶¹ See Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", 59.

Habermas culminated in a literal disintegration where the members of the public sphere lost their common interests.

As Calhoun describes, the result was “to replace the shared, critical activity of public discourse by a more passive culture consumption on the one hand and an apolitical sociability on the other.”⁶² Habermas posits this as the evolution of a public that reasons about culture towards a public that consumes culture.⁶³ Essential to the literary-political sphere of the salons was that they were not submitted to consumption and production logics: this made political emancipation possible. The entrance of the market logic into the public sphere dismantles the barrier between the political domain and the consumption domain, which makes the first become apolitical too through the dominance of the latter. Engagement in societal debate is replaced with non-binding group activities.⁶⁴ The public sphere becomes an arena for advertising and negotiation instead of rational-critical debate.⁶⁵ The conclusion is severe: “the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only.”⁶⁶

Is the public sphere then a lost cause? At least the idealised bourgeois public sphere is, following Habermas. But this doesn’t mean there is no place left at all for a public sphere. Quite the contrary: the public sphere remains as important as ever before. Habermas esteems that the essential struggle of his time is to find new democratic public discourses that can bring critical reason in times of fuzzy boundaries between state and society.⁶⁷ His solution for this challenge remains however a bit vague. He proposes a possible way-out through the idea of internal democratisation and subjection to critical publicity of the institutions, even those who were before not connected to the public sphere.⁶⁸ A transformation of these institutions into internally democratic entities would respond to “the struggle to make publicity a source of reasoned, progressive consensus formulation rather than an occasion for the manipulation of popular opinion.”⁶⁹ This would give the public sphere a lifeline as a critical authority for politics rather than becoming merely the playground of the state.

A further development on this institutional reform would lead too far off topic. Essential here is that the concept of the public sphere, which clearly plays a central role in Habermas’ account of democracy, has had high importance ever since for several fields of research. Habermas conceptually highlights the importance of citizen deliberation on the matters of common interest. He clearly points out the dual working between on the one hand the possibility of citizen criticism on the state and on the other hand the obligation of state justification to the citizens. This twofold working is considered essential but under constant peril. The emphasis lies, as e.g. his later work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) would prove even more, on the communication between citizens in order to reach common agreements. Habermas’ theories subsequently also had strong influence in the world of urban planning, through e.g. the Communicative Planning Theory.

⁶² Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 23.

⁶³ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 159-160.

⁶⁴ See Ibid., 163.

⁶⁵ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 26.

⁶⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 171.

⁶⁷ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 28.

⁶⁸ See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 208-209.

⁶⁹ Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 28.

1.2.2 Critical voices

As goes for most influential works, Habermas' theory also received a fair amount of criticism. The goal of this thesis is not to give a full (historical) account on the reception of Habermas' public sphere theory. Nevertheless, I will touch upon the most important criticisms since they identify a few major flaws in Habermas' public sphere concept.

Nancy Fraser divides the theoretical development of the Habermasian public sphere into five key moments, starting with the original publication of Habermas.⁷⁰ After Habermas' first formulation of a public sphere theory in 1962, a first important reflection upon it was published in 1972 by fellow Frankfurt sociologists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. This influential response marks the second phase for Fraser. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge reject Habermas' exclusive focus on the bourgeois public sphere and develop upon so-called proletarian and other counter-public spheres. In this perspective, the public sphere is (besides the institutions associated to press, public opinion, public space, ...) also "a general social horizon of experience in which everything that is actually or ostensibly relevant for all members of society is integrated."⁷¹

Seen in this way, the public sphere is more than only rational debate but rather the come-together of social experiences of different classes. Negt and Kluge open up the perspective towards a more pluralistic and inclusive public sphere. A public sphere that only performs the task of collective mediation of reason would for them imply a society made up of only scholars.⁷² Instead, the public sphere should not be seen as a homogenous whole of individuals but as "an aggregate of phenomena that have completely diverse characteristics and origins."⁷³ The focus lies more on the different "classes" of society with different public spheres: therefore, the emancipatory ideal behind the public sphere can be recovered through a "culturally radical and aesthetically transformative class struggle."⁷⁴ Next to public opinion, public opposition is for them also a valuable aspect of the public sphere.

Nancy Fraser formulated similar criticism herself in the early 1990s, which is the era of the third key moment she describes. Importantly, Fraser grants high potential to Habermas' idea of the public sphere as being conceptually distinct from the state and the official-economy.⁷⁵ For her, this public sphere "designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk [...] an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction [...] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state."⁷⁶ This leads her to presuppose the public sphere as a premise to understand the limits of late capitalist democracy. Nonetheless, she argues that the Habermasian form does not fulfil the expectations.

First of all, Fraser esteems Habermas' account of the liberal public sphere an idealisation.⁷⁷ In reality, many groups were excluded from this public sphere. Thus, a paradox lies in the fact that

⁷⁰ See Fraser, "The Theory of the Public Sphere", 245-246.

⁷¹ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 2.

⁷² See Ibid., 9.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Fraser, "The Theory of the Public Sphere", 246.

⁷⁵ See Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", 57.

⁷⁶ See Ibid., 57.

⁷⁷ See Ibid., 59.

the bourgeois public sphere had in reality not been a public sphere following Habermas' own claim that inclusivity is a constitutive parameter. A main pole of exclusion was gender: the public sphere was based on masculine reason and the republican public sphere led to the formal exclusion of women and other genders from political life. Striking in this sense, and utterly problematic, is the fact that "*public woman*" was an euphemism to designate a prostitute while *public man* was presented as a societal goal. The bourgeois public sphere was also very class elitist: the civil society thus was anything but accessible to everyone.⁷⁸ Especially minority groups and racialized ethnicities were most of the time excluded.⁷⁹

Furthermore, Habermas also failed following Fraser to identify other, non-bourgeois or non-official public spheres. For instance, nineteenth-century women had various routes to forms of public political life through, among others, woman-only voluntary associations, street parades or even supporting roles in male-dominated working class protest activities.⁸⁰ Thus the bourgeois public was not the true and unique public it claimed to be, but was rather balanced by multiple counter-publics. Seen from this perspective, the bourgeois public sphere was also a vehicle of repression and domination instead of a rejection of those values. Similarly, it is striking that Habermas does not point out the relationship between (historical) social movements and their influence on the public sphere.⁸¹ These movements, for instance radical working class movements, were however often crucially influencing and structuring public discourse.⁸²

Fraser develops four criteria she esteems essential to a well-working and inclusive public sphere and lacking in the non-convincing Habermasian re-conception of a post-bourgeois public sphere.⁸³ First, political democracy based on participatory parity requires substantive social equality between individuals, both socio-economically and socio-sexually. These inequalities are exacerbated when there is only a single public sphere, because then the subordinated groups often tend to be dominated in discourse. Indeed, the members of dominant groups often set the rules for public speech. Therefore, the second aspect is the need for *subaltern counter-publics* as parallel discursive arenas, that are nevertheless equal in status and importance. The resulting plurality of publics could then more closely approximate participatory parity than a single, enforced public.

A third difficulty lies in the idea of common interest or common good. This has no prescribed boundaries: therefore it is important that "what will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation."⁸⁴ The topics of deliberation should not be framed from the standpoint of an all-encompassing "we" but rather be subject of deliberation too. A last important remark lies in the distinction between *weak publics* and *strong publics*. Wherein the bourgeois public sphere is based on weak publics in civil society, which are exclusively concerned to opinion-making and not to decision-making (which is left to a distinct state apparatus), the rise of parliamentary sovereignty changed this balance. It created institutionalised strong publics in the state, whose discourse includes opinion-making and

⁷⁸ See Ibid., 60.

⁷⁹ See Ibid., 63.

⁸⁰ See Ibid., 61.

⁸¹ See Postone, "Political Theory and Historical Analysis", 170.

⁸² See Ibid., 170.

⁸³ See Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", 62-77.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 71.

decision-making. This blurred the line between state and society. These strong publics are however supposed to be accountable to the weak publics in civil society. The difficult question then lies in the issue of accountability between strong and weak publics, and how to best ensure this institutionally. Herein lies the essential fundamental challenge for the public sphere in our time, following Fraser.

Let me return to the word *subaltern*, since herein lies a crucial problem of Habermas' early idealisation of the public sphere while overseeing the patterns of exclusion. Nancy Fraser does not use this notion unconsciously. The concept was first coined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (ca. 1930s).⁸⁵ Subaltern groups indicate historically marginalized and socially subordinate groups such as workers and peasants, but also religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat (and even the bourgeoisie before the Enlightenment).⁸⁶ They constitute important subjects in his analysis of state power and (cultural) hegemony. Marcus Green even argues that "the transformation of the subaltern's subordinate social position was Gramsci's ultimate goal and, through his analyses, he formulated a political strategy for such a transformation."⁸⁷

The notion of subalternity later became very influential in post-colonial studies, especially through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can The Subaltern Speak?* in 1988 wherein she focusses on subaltern women. Spivak argues that the everyday notion of the subaltern as the oppressed is incomplete. She esteems it is too generalising: a major part of the identity of the subaltern is their internal difference and heterogeneity.⁸⁸ Representation is hard or even impossible, because the itinerary of subaltern groups has never been traced outside of the dominant (colonial) discourses and documents.⁸⁹ Thus, the vocalization of the subaltern is complicated by imperialist (historically mostly Western) projects involving processes of epistemic violence.⁹⁰ Since they have no own represented history and consciousness, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak and cannot be heard.⁹¹

These analyses of unheard groups prove of particular difficulty but also importance when considering the potential of a public sphere, or multiple (counter-)public spheres. A major question however remains: what makes different publics counter-publics? Acknowledging that a single public sphere denies social complexity, Robert Asen cautions for reductionism by identifying counter-publics as relying on particular persons, places or topics. This would push counter-publics into isolation, through e.g. enforcing group identities and eliminating the emancipatory character of a public sphere.⁹² Instead, one should focus on discursive norms and practices that participants in the public sphere recognize as exclusions.⁹³ Seen this way, counter-public "signifies the collectives that emerge in the recognition of various exclusions from wider

⁸⁵ Gramsci formulated a very influential analysis of the state and its relation to civil society, political society, intellectuality, domination, (cultural) hegemony and history. It would be interesting to confront this theory with the Habermasian perspective, however, this falls out of the scope of this thesis.

⁸⁶ See Green, "Gramsci cannot speak", 2-3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁸ See Spivak, "Can The Subaltern Speak?", 285.

⁸⁹ See *Ibid.*, 285.

⁹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 283.

⁹¹ See *Ibid.*, 308.

⁹² See Asen, "Seeking the "Counter" in Counterpublics", 432.

⁹³ See *Ibid.*, 437.

publics of potential participants, discourse topics, and speaking styles and the resolve that builds to overcome these exclusions.”⁹⁴ Counter-public spheres thus become the social spheres that emerge in response to the acknowledgement of exclusions and in an attempt to overcome and resolve these exclusions. In this effort, they act in a dialectical movement with the public sphere.⁹⁵

Similarly, Catherine Squires argues that a differentiation between a “dominant” public sphere and “counter-publics” based only on group identity would obscure other important issues such as inter-group interactions.⁹⁶ Therefore, she proposes another typology of the public sphere in multicultural societies based on how different public spheres respond on political, social and material constraints. Squires identifies three types of response:

“A public can enclave itself, hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning. It is also possible to create a counterpublic which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and perhaps utilize traditional social movement tactics (boycotts, civil disobedience). Finally, a public that seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time acts as a satellite public sphere. These responses—*enclave*, *counterpublic*, and *satellite*—emerge not only in reaction to oppression from the state or dominant public spheres, but also in relation to the internal politics of that particular public sphere and its material and cultural resources.”⁹⁷

Be that as it may, whether one conceives one public sphere or a plurality of (counter-)public spheres, the overall characteristics of the concept remain analogous: participatory parity, inclusivity (be it more or less successful), rational debate, citizen engagement and political deliberation.

Other voices also point out Habermas’ alleged overestimation of the degeneration of the public sphere. As Craig Calhoun shows, Habermas does not treat the bourgeois public sphere and the post-bourgeois sphere equally.⁹⁸ While he judges the first by Immanuel Kant, he judges the twentieth century by the “typical suburban television viewer” and not by comparable intellectual traditions.⁹⁹ Furthermore, one could also argue that the consequences of mass media are not as negative as Habermas suggests. For instance in the creation of counter-public spheres, these mass media can be very useful in spreading information and granting access to public debate.

One can also question the production of public opinion. Instead of assuming it as a technique of sociology, Theodor Adorno (to whom Habermas served as an assistant) warns that public opinion should rather be an object of research itself.¹⁰⁰ This follows his concern that public opinion can easily become subject to manipulation and ideology. The mass media plays a crucial role in this,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 438.

⁹⁵ See Ibid., 441.

⁹⁶ See Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere”, 447.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 448. Emphasis added.

⁹⁸ See Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere”, 33.

⁹⁹ See Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁰ See Adorno, “Opinion Research and Publicness”, 122.

since it serves at the same time as a forum for opinion but also as an “organ” seemingly conformed to the public opinion but at the same time undermining its independence.¹⁰¹

1.2.3 Habermas’ later development of the public sphere

With the foregoing, important elements of Fraser’s third phase have been identified. This phase in fact corresponds to the publication of Calhoun’s influential compilation book *Habermas and the Public Sphere* in 1992 and other similar criticisms from the 1990s. As mentioned before, I far from tackled all of the reviews and additions on Habermas’ public sphere. I rather evolved only on some important reflections in my evolution towards the political dimensions of public space.

Fraser’s fifth phase refers to the ongoing debate, which I’ll turn to in a later part. Consequently, we can briefly handle her fourth phase as a conclusion on Jürgen Habermas’ public sphere. This phase refers to the adjustments Habermas formulated on his own theory in the 1990s, in response to Calhoun’s book.

Thirty years after the first publication of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas acknowledges that counter-movements, challenging the patterns of repression and exclusion, cannot be neutralised.¹⁰² Herewith, he validates the criticism from feminist literature that there may be multiple communicating public spheres and also from writers such as Negt and Kluge pointing out the simultaneous plebeian public sphere of the “people” during the heights of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas likewise recognises that through class society patterns the bourgeois public sphere indeed “contradicted essential premises of its self-understanding” in reality.¹⁰³ He also states that his diagnosis of the public development from a politically active public into one withdrawn from it and only concerned with consumption was too simplistic and pessimistic.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, he attempts to step away from the conceptual comparison between a “glorified past” of the early political bourgeois public sphere and a distorted present.¹⁰⁵

This does not mean the public sphere reduces in importance in his theory, but rather that his previous theoretical framework needs some modifications. Since there is no longer an ideal-historical model, Habermas focusses on the normative concept of the public sphere in his later work.¹⁰⁶ The process of communication then becomes even more the focus of his theorisation on the public sphere. Habermas re-emphasises that democratic legitimacy is to be found in the formation process of citizen’s will and opinion through deliberation in the public sphere.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, the closest to an englobing public sphere is what he names the political public sphere, which is explicitly focused on the political system. It should not be understood anymore as a single and unified public sphere, but rather as a tied-together communicative network of decentralised public spheres.¹⁰⁸ It is in this pluralistic “open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural

¹⁰¹ See Ibid., 123.

¹⁰² See Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere”, 427.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 428.

¹⁰⁴ See Ibid., 438.

¹⁰⁵ See Ibid., 430.

¹⁰⁶ See Belina, “Evicting the undesirables”, 50.

¹⁰⁷ See Habermas, “Further reflections on the public sphere”, 446.

¹⁰⁸ See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 298-299.

publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries” that opinion-formation takes place through unrestricted communication flows between different publics and guided by the mass media.¹⁰⁹ The networked sphere can for Habermas be “the fundamental concept of a theory of democracy whose intent is normative”.¹¹⁰ In this networked public sphere, justification of political terms and resolution of moral-practical problems can happen through public argument and reasoning between equal citizens.¹¹¹ Therefore, citizens should engage as participants in rational debate and these practices of debate should be institutionalized and protected.¹¹² Clearly, the general idea behind the public sphere does not change much, but the normative form does slightly with respect to the criticism.

To produce a discursive formation of opinion, one must find ways to overcome the gap between self-interest and common good, because the preconditions of rational communication are impartiality and the participant’s will to question their initial preferences.¹¹³ This implies the institutionalisation of legal procedures to ensure these preconditions for a free debate.¹¹⁴ The public sphere is then conceived in the following way:

“Such opinion formation must be facilitated by the constitution, but it cannot be formally organized in its entirety. Instead, the expectation deriving from a discourse-centered theoretical approach, that rational results will obtain, is based on the interplay between a constitutionally instituted formation of the political will and the spontaneous flow of communication unsubverted by power, within a public sphere that is not geared toward decision making but toward discovery and problem resolution and that in this sense is *nonorganized*.”¹¹⁵

Essential for legitimating the political decisions becomes the interaction between “formal” (the elected politicians, judges, courts, ...) and “informal” segments of society (the unregulated flows of communication outside the formal segments, which for instance means between the citizens) in the political public sphere.¹¹⁶ Thus, the abstract public sphere remains a key concept for Jürgen Habermas’ thought for connecting citizens with democratic politics. Notwithstanding this, it is still hard to find any reference to a concrete spatialisation, let alone physical dimension, of the public sphere in Habermas’ (later) work.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 307-308.

¹¹⁰ Habermas, “Further reflections on the public sphere”, 446.

¹¹¹ See Ibid., 447.

¹¹² See Ibid., 447-448.

¹¹³ See Ibid., 449.

¹¹⁴ See Ibid., 449.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 451. Original emphasis.

¹¹⁶ See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Jürgen Habermas”.

1.3 The public sphere of Hannah Arendt

1.3.1 Deliberation or agonism

Until now, I discussed the public sphere in *discursive* or *deliberative* terms. In this framework, the emphasis lies on participation and rational dialogue (as shown in the previous part). Various theorists, of whom distinctively Seyla Benhabib, also discern other (strongly) different models. The most important of those is the *agonistic* perspective. Herein, the public sphere is rather seen as a sphere of competition and strive for individual recognition.¹¹⁷

Discussing these alternative approaches of the public sphere needs reference to broader democratic research. While Habermas is often associated with deliberative democracy, the common name to be associated with agonistic pluralism is Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe (sometimes together with her long-term collaborator Ernesto Laclau). Although both stances posit a similar starting analysis, namely that western societies are witnessing a growing disaffection with democratic institutions, the proposed solutions differ thoroughly.¹¹⁸

For deliberative democracy thinkers, the main challenge for democracy today is to reunite rationality with legitimacy through a public sphere where public processes of deliberation take place.¹¹⁹ Through equal and impartial debate, where private interest is put aside, Habermas believes in the creation of “a rational formation of the will from which the general interest will emerge”.¹²⁰ Although agonistic thinkers find this a commendable ideal, the main problem for them lies in the idea of a neutral or rational dialogue in a unitary public sphere. They believe for instance that at the end of reason always follows persuasion of the other.¹²¹ Next to this, the ideal of impartial and equal speech is impossible, since discourse in its fundamental structure is authoritarian.¹²² No discourse is free of power and antagonism, so it is an illusion to become free of power through rational discourse.¹²³ Therefore, agonistic thinkers plead to leave the dream of rational harmony and total emancipation behind.¹²⁴ The new central challenge becomes to constitute forms of power that are compatible with the democratic values of a radically plural society.¹²⁵ Or, in other words, the goal of politics becomes to create unity in an inevitable context of passions, conflict and diversity.¹²⁶ To acknowledge and protect pluralism in society, Mouffe concludes:

“Modern democracy’s specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body – which is characteristic of the holistic mode

¹¹⁷ See Benhabib, “Models of Public Space”, 78.

¹¹⁸ See Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”, 745.

¹¹⁹ See Ibid., 746-747.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 748.

¹²¹ See Ibid., 750.

¹²² See Ibid., 751.

¹²³ For instance Michel Foucault explained a similar thesis in his famous lecture about *The Order of Discourse* (*L'Ordre du Discours*). Chantal Mouffe refers to Wittgenstein, Lacan and Žižek.

¹²⁴ See Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”, 752.

¹²⁵ See Ibid., 753.

¹²⁶ See Ibid., 755.

of social organization – a democratic society makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values.”¹²⁷

Hannah Arendt’s account of the public sphere is usually considered agonistic.¹²⁸ This however is sometimes also contested, since some also read her view in a deliberative perspective.¹²⁹ I won’t focus any further on this split, since it’s not quintessential to this thesis. It is nonetheless beyond discussion that Arendt delivered a major contribution on the concept of the public sphere, which has important differences with the Habermasian concept and is therefore fundamental to any understanding of a public sphere.

1.3.2 A public sphere for action and speech

Although Arendt already touched upon the public sphere as the “in-between” sphere where freedom is situated in earlier work, her main contribution to public sphere theories lies in her particularly influential 1958 book *The Human Condition*.¹³⁰ Herein Arendt bases her analysis of human life on earth on the idea of *vita activa* or active life. This term englobes three distinct fundamental human activities: labour, work and action.¹³¹

For Arendt, labour corresponds to “the biological process of the human body”, which means it refers to activities done to individually survive making it “the human condition of life”.¹³² Work for its part is unnatural and indicates the production of “artificial” and permanent things in the world that are meant to outlast human beings. Therefore, the human condition of work is worldliness.¹³³ Lastly, action is the only activity solely involving men without an intermediary of things. Action is always coupled to speech. This is important, since “speech is what makes man a political being” and enables man to experience meaningfulness.¹³⁴ Through action and speech, men reveal their identity as distinct from each other: it is the human condition of plurality. This is a key concept for Arendt:

“While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the condition* – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life. [...] Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 756.

¹²⁸ See Benhabib, “Models of Public Space”, 73.

¹²⁹ See Lederman, “Agonism and Deliberation in Arendt”, 327-328.

¹³⁰ See Teerds, “The space between”, 762. Where Habermas uses *sphere*, Arendt uses both *realm* and *sphere*. This is in line with the distinctions I made earlier, since the realm is the place of action and Arendt’s notion of the public sphere centralises action. I’ll opt for *sphere* for the sake of clarity.

¹³¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

¹³² Ibid., 7.

¹³³ See Ibid., 7.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3-4. Hannah Arendt uses ‘man’ in reference to ‘mankind’ and not more neutral terms as for instance ‘human’. It is therefore that I will use this here too when discussing Arendt, but it is important to note that I am aware of the inherently problematic dual significance of the word ‘man’. Unconscious usage of the word ‘man’ in our time without acknowledging structural (historical) patterns of inequality would be inappropriate. In other parts of this thesis, these patterns are identified and the word ‘man’ is not used in Arendt’s sense.

same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”¹³⁵

Arendt argues that all dimensions of active life are rooted in a world of men and man-made things: no human life is possible without a world that testifies the presence of other human beings.¹³⁶ The activity of action is however unique compared to the two others, since this activity cannot even be imagined outside the society of men and is thus entirely dependent on the presence of others.¹³⁷ Arendt describes action as the “disclosure of the agent” because one appears to others and through this affirms to live a human life, which means one lives among other men.¹³⁸ This is fundamentally impossible alone – “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act”.¹³⁹ The fact that men cannot live without the company of other men forms a fundamental human characteristic for Arendt. Therefore, the activity of action is the highest realisation of the *vita activa*.¹⁴⁰ Through acting and speaking, humans show who they really are and reveal their unique personalities.¹⁴¹ Action and speech are the essential human deed of becoming political and engaging in political deliberations.

Similarly to Habermas, Arendt finds inspiration for her emphasis on shared (political) action in the Ancient Greek *polis*. This Greek polis is a rightful source of inspiration for Arendt, since she believes that in modern times private and public issues had become confused and that this distinction was more clear in ancient times.¹⁴² The polis for Arendt refers not to the city-state in its physical form, but the “organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together or this purpose, no matter where they happen to be”.¹⁴³ The political deed was, as for Habermas, constituted by two necessary activities: action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*). These activities are for Arendt coequal and necessarily require each other. The rise of the polis, which thus symbolises the rise of a stage for human (political) action, served a twofold function: on the one hand it multiplied the occasions to distinguish oneself and on the other it secured the narrated remembrance of actions deserving fame through generations.¹⁴⁴

Arendt further highlights a strong dichotomy between a sphere of politics and public life as opposed to a distinct private sphere. She reads the rise of the city-state as the upcoming of a second life for man, namely the *bios politikos*. This is sharply contrasted to the life of the *oikos* – every citizen now belonged to two orders of existence.¹⁴⁵ The driving force of the household sphere was life itself since every activity therein happened out of necessity and this sphere was

¹³⁵ Ibid., 7-8. Original emphasis.

¹³⁶ See Ibid., 22.

¹³⁷ See Ibid., 22-23.

¹³⁸ See Ibid., 175-176.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 188.

¹⁴⁰ See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Hannah Arendt”.

¹⁴¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

¹⁴² See Canovan, “Politics as Culture”, 621. Hannah Arendt also gives a historical framework to explain the necessity of a public sphere as well as its rise and decline. Although foundational to her theory, I will not go into this in detail in this thesis, because it contains similarities with Habermas’ historical analysis and is less necessary to understand Arendt’s perspective on the public sphere than it was for Habermas.

¹⁴³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

¹⁴⁴ See Ibid., 196-197.

¹⁴⁵ See Ibid., 24.

marked by inequality (for instance between man and woman).¹⁴⁶ By contrast, the realm of the polis was the sphere of freedom since here rule nor being ruled existed.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, she esteems the private sphere a constituting condition for a public sphere, because it enables the public sphere to be free of necessities.¹⁴⁸

Arendt subsequently explains a specific view on the public sphere based on a twofold understanding of the term public. She distinguishes two “closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena”: in brief, we can speak of the *space of appearance* and the *world*.¹⁴⁹ The first refers to the fact that “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity”.¹⁵⁰ Thus, appearance forms existence since whatever is not brought into the public sphere remains in private, shadowed uncertainty and invisibility. What is not in the public sphere will never appear to others – which means it will never become reality to humanity.¹⁵¹

For its second meaning, the term public refers to the world itself. The world is not the same as the earth or nature, which denote the “limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life”.¹⁵² It is rather to be understood as a ‘world of things’: it indicates the human-made material artefacts or institutions and the way they come together to form a common in-between for its inhabitants.¹⁵³ While for animals and primitive men the earth-bound nature forms the entire environment, civilization is distinguished by an unbound human world.¹⁵⁴ The common world is the locus, and the stage, of public life and is inherently shared with others in space and time. This latter refers to a fundamental human challenge, namely the possibility to achieve something more permanent than life itself:

“Only the existence of a public realm and the world’s subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men. Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible.”¹⁵⁵

The public sphere now holds particular importance for Arendt because it is there where action and speech occur – and human plurality is expressed. The revelatory quality of those activities only appears when people are confronted with others:

¹⁴⁶ See Ibid., 30.

¹⁴⁷ See Ibid., 33.

¹⁴⁸ See Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵¹ See Teerds, “Publiek domein, publieke ruimte”, 26.

¹⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

¹⁵³ See Teerds, “The space between”, 767.

¹⁵⁴ See Canovan, “Politics as Culture”, 619.

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55.

“Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”¹⁵⁶

Action and speech create a conceptual space between the participants. This is a space of appearance in the widest sense, namely a space where one appears to others as others appear to oneself.¹⁵⁷ For Arendt, a public sphere as space of appearance already comes into being before its formalisation or institutionalisation: the being-together of men through speech and action is enough.¹⁵⁸ The word space must not be misread: it does not refer to locatable spaces, but rather to the political use of a non-defined space. In Arendt’s thought, the public sphere can find its “proper location almost any time and anywhere” and disappears when the constituting activities end.¹⁵⁹ The public sphere is characterised by potentiality: wherever people gather, it can appear but this does not happen necessarily nor forever.¹⁶⁰

In line with agonistic theory, Hannah Arendt believes that power has an indispensable role to keep the public sphere, which is thus a “potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men”, in existence and meaningful.¹⁶¹ Power is in this regard contrasted to strength: the first is the realised potential of men when they act together while the latter is the natural quality of an individual in isolation.¹⁶² Power is for Arendt for instance a citizen revolt through speech and action (think of large-scale manifestations) against materially *strong* rulers: the acting-together of people may engender an almost irresistible power.¹⁶³ Power thus has no physical limitations in human nature or bodily existence, but only the existence of other people counter-acting can restrain power.¹⁶⁴ Nonetheless, this limitation is not accidental for Arendt: power originates from action, and action corresponds to the human condition of plurality.¹⁶⁵ That is why power can also be divided without decreasing it as long as the interplay (or inter-action) between actors is alive.¹⁶⁶ If not, power is destroyed by force and violence which for instance leads to tyranny. Following Arendt, this however condemns the rulers as well as the ruled to impotence and futility through the inability of its subjects to speak and act together and its contradiction to the essential human condition of plurality.¹⁶⁷ The foregoing leads Arendt to conclude:

“Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d’être*. Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵⁷ See Ibid., 198-199.

¹⁵⁸ See Ibid., 199.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 198-199.

¹⁶⁰ See Ibid., 199-200.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁶² See Ibid., 200.

¹⁶³ See Ibid., 200.

¹⁶⁴ See Ibid., 201.

¹⁶⁵ See Ibid., 201.

¹⁶⁶ See Ibid., 201.

¹⁶⁷ See Ibid., 202.

world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object [...]"¹⁶⁸

The potentiality in itself of a public sphere for action and speech thus becomes non-dismissible for meaningful and impactful human existence. A loss of the public sphere would impose a restraint on plurality. This means that the freedom of humans to shape their identity would be taken away, which would obstruct an essential part of the human condition.¹⁶⁹

Particularly interesting, for this thesis, in Arendt's account of the public sphere is its connection to the man-made world and the references to space. Although Arendt does not discuss a concrete physical form or specific location of the public sphere, the step to do so departing from her thought is no longer unbridgeable. Since the public sphere is *embodied* in the human world and acts as a stage for appearance, there is an inherent spatiality in Arendt's idea. Margaret Canovan points out that:

"For real politics to be going on, it is not enough to have scattered private individuals voting separately and anonymously according to their own lights. The people need to be able to see and talk to one another in public: to meet in a public space so that public concerns will become visible to them. This means that her [Hannah Arendt's] conception of the public realm is as different as possible from the common view according to which 'the public' are a mass of unassignable individuals who do not know one another and do not form a group. Instead, to form a public in her sense, people need to be united around an arena in which common affairs can appear and be debated."¹⁷⁰

Such a space would also prevent public opinion of being relegated into mindless unanimity of mass society following Arendt.¹⁷¹ Public opinion should be formed between people rather than individually inside each one: therefore an in-between space must exist. When originating in "an appropriate public space", opinions can result in a sophisticated political discourse instead of remaining dispersed or being misused.¹⁷²

It is from here possible to think of spaces that physically shape the Arendtian public sphere. A few architectural theorists have made reference to Arendt's thought. The most notable are Kenneth Frampton and George Baird. I will discuss their work later in this thesis, when making the step from sphere to space.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 204. Original emphasis.

¹⁶⁹ See Teerds, "Publiek domein, publieke ruimte", 26.

¹⁷⁰ Canovan, "Politics as Culture", 634.

¹⁷¹ See Ibid., 634.

¹⁷² See Ibid., 635.

1.4 Conclusions on the public sphere

1.4.1 Importance of a public sphere

Clearly, both Habermas and Arendt grant high potential and importance to a sphere for political deliberation or action. Although their perspectives are inherently different, there are some elementary “common grounds” that describe the basic characteristics of any public sphere. As shown, it is more adequate to consider multiple (counter-)spheres than a unique and englobing sphere – nonetheless, these all fulfil the same fundamental values. First, a public sphere appears out of a sense that the “matters of common interest” should be subject to immediate citizen deliberation. Active involvement would lead to more meaningful lives. This marks in a way the potential emancipatory dimension of a, or several, public sphere(s) for citizens. A public sphere is therefore a “domain of activity” where society can be approached critically and at the same time be (re)thought constructively and more equally.

A public sphere is furthermore an “in-between” in many different ways: it serves as an intermediary between state and society, between citizens and “politics”, between people themselves, ... It is a regulated “free-zone”: the difficulty then lies in which rules should be applied. Can reason serve as a determining principle? How can free accessibility to all be assured? How can deliberation or debate be organised? How to ensure that different voices are heard? When attempting to spatialise public spheres, these questions become even more prominent and complex.

Generally seen, a public sphere refers to all the practices through which citizenship is actively lived and performed. It is there where the deed (or action) of *being political* can emerge. This takes on multiple facets: one could pursue influence in decision-making; or can seek a heated debate; but it can also be a sphere for information and knowledge sharing. In all possible accounts, the importance of a public sphere lies in its potential to make political action a part of citizen’s lives and concerns.

Reflection on the public sphere, and on the relationship between public opinion and democratic systems, must not be read as an expression of fundamental doubts on the legitimacy of democracy. It is on the other hand a reflection on how democracy can be safeguarded today. Public opinion cannot be understood as a ruling principle, fit to determine state governance. Otherwise, democracy might slowly evolve into its negative pendant of “ochlocracy”, identifying systems of mob rule or dictatorships of the (supposed) masses.¹⁷³ These systems are however fundamentally undemocratic, bypassing fundamentals as the separation of powers and being characterised by an extreme fluctuation prohibiting long-term vision. After all, public opinion is inherently changeable and continuously evolving:

“A politics that enslaves itself to public opinion is [...] a politics that avoids problems and postpones difficult choices. While *symbol politics* is practised to keep up the appearance of decisiveness, for instance by taking ever more ruthless action against asylum seekers, politics loses its ability to solve problems. And when democracy has become such a parody

¹⁷³ This idea of the “negative pendant” was explained by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer during a lecture in Leuven on 17 April 2024.

of itself that it no longer offers solutions, it loses trust, after which the call for the strong man will irrevocably get louder and louder. The populists will not stop this development because it is not unwelcome to them. They too want to *dismantle democracy in the name of democracy*.”¹⁷⁴

The belief that public spheres are essential for democracy is rather rooted in a fundamental conviction that democracy is more than formal procedures. A core challenge for a democratic society is the permanent interaction and mutual accountability between representants and represented. Putting the emphasis today on a “healthy” public sphere is in fact an attempt to reflect on how people can become, or remain, connected to democracy. With popular sovereignty arguably being the primordial cornerstone of any democracy, it remains a continuous topic of debate in political theory on how direct or not this should happen (varying from indirect involvement through representative democracy to direct forms of democratic participation).¹⁷⁵

The laid stress on citizen participation comes not without dilemma’s and difficulties. Although direct citizen participation is today no longer only a normative ideal but truly the object of real experimentation, it is far from the goal of this thesis to discuss the institutionalisation of participation processes.¹⁷⁶ The fundamental idea of a public sphere that I developed until now does not imply specific prescriptions on *how* (in)direct citizens should be involved in policy and decision-making processes of governments. It rather focusses on the more conceptual need to give forum or platform to opinion-making of citizens in relation to the state institutions and on the connection between civil society and a representative state. This is in line with the potential that Habermas truly grants to the public sphere, as described in 2022:

“[...] those two requirements of the democratic process – namely, deliberation and the inclusion of all citizens – can only be realised, even approximately, at the level of the institutions of the state, and especially in the representative bodies of parliamentary law-making. This explains *the essential but limited contribution* that *political communication in the public sphere* can make to the democratic process. Its contribution is *essential* because it represents the sole locus where public opinion and political will are formed in a manner that in principle includes *in corpore* all adult citizens who are eligible to vote. And this can, in turn, motivate the decisions that citizens make collectively, but as individuals and in the isolation of the voting booth – that is, ‘of their own free will’. These electoral decisions lead to an outcome that is binding on all citizens insofar as they determine the political composition of parliament and, directly or indirectly, of the government. On the other hand, the contribution of the public sphere to the formation of public opinion and political will in a democracy is *limited* because, as a general rule, no collectively binding individual decisions are taken there [...]”¹⁷⁷

Diversity and pluralism being essential realities of democracy and society today, it is indispensable to (re)consider how and where differences and conflicts can be expressed in constructive ways. Beyond elections and parliamentary voting rounds, the specificity of democracy lies in the recognition of the legitimacy of conflicting views and interests – and thus in

¹⁷⁴ Pfeijffer, “Dit is populisme”. My translation. Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁵ See Callahan, “Citizen Participation: Models and Methods”, 1179.

¹⁷⁶ See Ibid., 1181.

¹⁷⁷ Habermas, “Reflections and Hypotheses”, 150-151. Original emphasis.

the rejection of the authoritarian repression of those.¹⁷⁸ Societies are only truly democratic when they give room to the expression of antagonism. When no possibility is found within democratic society for emancipation and expression, other forms of political identification that are hardly compatible with democracy (think of right-extremism or religious fundamentalism) lure around the corner.¹⁷⁹ Nonetheless, this antagonism is only valid as long as the public sphere is based on principles of tolerance, non-violence and inclusion. Maintaining the democracy-serving, or anti-authoritarian, character of the public sphere is a constitutional imperative of the sphere in itself.

Coming from this framework, the feeling arises that conceptual reflections on the importance of a public sphere require to be narrowed down to tangible insights on its possible spatialisation and physical form. That is why the public sphere theorisation is also important for research fields as architecture and urbanism. The emphasis is often put on a vital public sphere by various disciplines such as communication science, political theory and social-anthropologist research. As mentioned earlier, based on Low and Smith and on my own analysis of the public sphere, there is however an inherent spatial dimension connected to any abstract public sphere. Theorisation on a public sphere highlights the need for citizen affiliation with democracy and the urge to interconnect political processes with the citizens. This can take place in different forms, through different (digital) modalities of “public spheres”. I’ll argue in the following chapter that the physical public space should nonetheless play an important role in safeguarding and vitalising democratic society today.

1.4.2 Contemporary challenges to (a) public sphere(s)

To conclude on the public sphere, I think it is useful to briefly outline a few contemporary challenges. Those are important for analysing public spheres today and often find repercussions in architectural and urbanistic discussions about public life and space.

In the before-cited 2022 article, Jürgen Habermas added further reflections to his account of the structural transformation of the public sphere. His central concern now became the influence of the digitally transformed media structure on the political process: initially this ameliorated the accessibility of the public sphere but gradually this led to fragmentation and an unbounded public sphere.¹⁸⁰ Through new (social) media, anyone can assume the role of author, which leads to a “mode of semi-public, fragmented and self-enclosed communication [...] distorting their *perception of the political public sphere*”.¹⁸¹ This distortion goes hand in hand with the blurring of the perception of the boundary between the private and public spheres of life.¹⁸² Through these semi-private/semi-public spaces of communication, the inclusive character of the public sphere and the intimate character of the private sphere disappear for Habermas.¹⁸³ As a result, the constitutive threshold of the public sphere, determining which matters are private and which issues are of shared interest, becomes compromised.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁸ See De Vos, “Het Politieke denken van Chantal Mouffe”, 8.

¹⁷⁹ See Ibid., 8.

¹⁸⁰ See Habermas, “Reflections and Hypotheses”, 146-160.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 146. Original emphasis.

¹⁸² See Ibid., 153.

¹⁸³ See Ibid., 153.

¹⁸⁴ See Ibid., 165.

Habermas also points out the infiltration of the public sphere by fake news and the growing distrust in the media. This development towards a “post-truth democracy” is a tremendous danger in his eyes, since it leads steadily growing minorities into “echo chambers of like-minded” and removes widespread belief in critical and reasoned opinion.¹⁸⁵ The consequential unrestrained communication circuits can take shape around any subject or individual and dogmatically seal themselves off from each other.¹⁸⁶ These “bubbles” (Habermas gives the example of nonreasoned anti-Corona virus demonstrations and corresponding conspiracy thoughts) are characterised by their rejection of dissonant voices and are opposites to a true public sphere: although staged in a libertarian spirit, they are in fact driven by authoritarian motives.¹⁸⁷

The changed media systems and the resulting diversification of public spheres are major topics in research about the public sphere. This communication transformation takes on various forms: the rise of online and social media, the subsequent crisis of legacy media, the upcoming (social) alternative media, dark platforms, etc.¹⁸⁸ Another important contemporary concern, somehow related to the potential of global and delocalised communication patterns through digitalisation, lies in the de-alignment of public spheres with states. In a way, this is positive and logic: some “common issues”, think e.g. of global warming, immigration or women’s rights, are not bound to specific states.¹⁸⁹ Nonetheless, a dual challenge appears from this situation. One potential danger lies in a deficit of democratic (normative) legitimacy: this arises when there is no appropriate public sphere holding administrative and legislative powers accountable (for Habermas, this is an issue in the EU).¹⁹⁰ The opposite can also happen: when transnational or global public spheres are not matched by comparable public powers, this leads to a deficit of political efficacy.¹⁹¹

Classical conceptions of public spheres, such as the Habermasian, could be read as essentially rooted in a correlation with what Benedict Anderson describes as the imagined communities of the nation.¹⁹² They carried an explicit project: the democratization process of the modern nation-states. This was bound to the national media, the possibility of public communication in the national language, equal membership of nation-defined public communities, empowerment of national citizenry, etc.¹⁹³ As pointed out above, current mobilisations of public opinion seldom stop at the borders of territorial states.¹⁹⁴ Regardless of whether one conceives this as a recent phenomenon related to late 20th century globalisation or as a historical failure in public sphere theory, this tendency forces to rethink the critical potential of the public sphere.¹⁹⁵ Different (supranational) levels of state sovereignty, presence of non-citizens in public deliberation, transnational economies, de-nationalisation of communicative (media) infrastructure,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 162.

¹⁸⁶ See Ibid., 160.

¹⁸⁷ See Ibid., 166.

¹⁸⁸ See Eisenegger and Schäfer, “Reconceptualizing public sphere(s)”, 61.

¹⁸⁹ See Fraser, “The Theory of the Public Sphere”, 251.

¹⁹⁰ See Ibid., 251.

¹⁹¹ See Ibid., 251.

¹⁹² See Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere”, 10.

¹⁹³ See Ibid., 9-11.

¹⁹⁴ See Ibid., 14.

¹⁹⁵ See Ibid., 15.

multilingualism and (global) multiculturalism all complicate both the *legitimacy* and *efficacy* of public opinion.¹⁹⁶

In order to still ensure those constitutional elements, following Fraser, of a critical public sphere, there is a need to rethink them. First, legitimacy, which is based on inclusiveness (*who*) and participatory parity (*how*), must be considered following those two pillars.¹⁹⁷ Whereas the latter has been a prominent question ever since Habermas' first description of the public sphere, the first can now no longer be brought back to the boundaries of citizenship.¹⁹⁸ The guiding principle that "all-affected" should be included, difficultly requires to consider communicative deliberation processes in which all potentially affected can now participate regardless of their (political) citizenship.¹⁹⁹ Second, the question of efficacy is very complicated to afford:

"A critical conception can no longer restrict its attention to the direction of communicative flows in established polities, where publicity should constrain an already known and constituted addressee. In addition, it must consider the need to construct new addressees for public opinion, in the sense of new, transnational public powers that possess the administrative capacity to solve transnational problems. The challenge, accordingly, is twofold: on the one, hand, to create new, transnational public powers; on the other, to make them accountable to new, transnational public spheres."²⁰⁰

The foregoing considerations are explicitly present through the phenomenon of migration.²⁰¹ This of course challenges classical ideas of membership both *in* and *to* a state, political expression and citizen rights.²⁰² But there are also more indirect dimensions: combined with other (economic and cultural) insecurities, and through a generated sense of 'crisis', it gives place to a sphere determined by polarisation, convulsiveness and fear. This only proves the constant need for rethought and well-working public spheres for "all-affected" to avoid misinformation and intolerance.

A crucial feat that one must remain aware of is the danger of populism inherent in public opinion when any of the core prerequisites (inclusivity, information, tolerance, ...) is abandoned. Cas Mudde's and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser's definition of populism is as follows:

"[...] a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."²⁰³

Clearly, this emphasises the danger of misusing concepts such as public opinion/will and the needed awareness for "fake" public spheres, which only consist of like-minded and refuse reasoned debate but instead flee in dichotomic world visions. Furthermore, the current success of populist movements highlights the difficulty of realising and safeguarding a truly pluralistic

¹⁹⁶ See Ibid., 15-19.

¹⁹⁷ See Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁹⁸ See Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁹ See Ibid., 21-22.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 23.

²⁰¹ See Boomkens, "The temporalities of the public sphere", 17.

²⁰² See Brubaker, "Migration, Membership, and the Modern Nation-State", 77.

²⁰³ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6. Original emphasis.

public sphere. We could indeed consider populism and pluralism as opposites since pluralism is focussed on public opinion coming from compromise between different individuals and groups.

Following a two-century period of mass politics until 1989, wherein society was strongly politicized, deep-anchored ideologies were clearly separable and political engagement was mostly institutionalised, an era of alleged post-politics broke out.²⁰⁴ In response to Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history', the post-political situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall was marked by a supposed conclusion of the long historical struggle of ideologies.²⁰⁵ This led to a retreat of the citizens into their private spheres determined by consumption hand in hand with a thorough marginalisation of the public sphere.²⁰⁶ More generally, the post-political condition indicates:

"[...] a situation in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – is increasingly colonised by politics – understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. 'The people' – as a potentially disruptive political collective – is replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation."²⁰⁷

Large numbers of researchers have ever since attempted to formulate responses in order to escape this situation of post-political insignificance. Several elder theories addressed in this thesis (indirectly) are rooted in this feeling of disconnection and therefore attempt to find new ways of associating citizens to democracy. Our current time is however, as Anton Jäger convincingly argues, no longer marked by this situation of post-politics, nor by the anti-political era resulting from the post-crisis chaos around 2008, but rather by the phenomenon of *hyperpolitics*.²⁰⁸

Again, a new but much more diffuse balance arose between the public and the private, now based on dynamism and polarisation.²⁰⁹ Public opinion becomes hard to distinguish from private/personal opinion and political position statements become more and more identitarian and individual.²¹⁰ Politics have become present everywhere and everything has become politic, ranging from macro-economics to short social media reels. However, this paradoxically does not result in persistent collective engagement, but in short-lived and non-cohesive moments of outrage (e.g. through social media platforms).²¹¹ Quantitatively, there have never been so much protests before, while at the same time the unions, political parties and churches have never been more empty.²¹² Jäger therefore posits that the contemporary political public sphere is characterised by short cycles of "uncontrollable convulsions" (think of (unfortunately) short-

²⁰⁴ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 15.

²⁰⁵ See Swyngedouw and Wilson, *The Post-Political and Its Discontents*, 7.

²⁰⁶ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 24.

²⁰⁷ Swyngedouw and Wilson, *The Post-Political and Its Discontents*, 7.

²⁰⁸ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 14.

²⁰⁹ See *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹⁰ See Jäger, interview.

²¹¹ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 18-19.

²¹² See Jäger, interview.

fetched and rather unorganised protests such as the student climate strikes in Brussels) never “crystalising into permanent infrastructure”.²¹³

The condition of *hyperpolitics*, leading to omnipresent politization and polarisation, can be seen as an essential challenge of democratic society today. I won’t evolve further on the previous challenges, but I nevertheless believe these are crucial considerations for any valid conception of a public sphere today.

A last contemporary challenge is however particularly important in the scope of this thesis. As mentioned before, although the public sphere is rarely if ever materialised or given physical dimensions, there is often a conception of its *locus*, be it in very abstract spatial terms. The imagery of the Athenian *agora* continuously serves as an imaginary ideal in this regard. One could argue that, because of forementioned challenges such as digitalisation and denationalisation, the public sphere also became subject to *delocalisation*.²¹⁴ As René Boomkens highlights, even if the public sphere rather refers to a set of practices and media and not to a localised space, an essential dimension remains the *embodiment* of those practices:

“[...] as practices of freedom, confrontation, experiment and identity construction, public practices are essentially embodied practices, they presuppose bodily presence, or the experience of physical differences, a simultaneous presence of all our senses. Embodiment makes the difference.”²¹⁵

It would be wrong to dogmatically insinuate that *the* solution to any alleged disappearance of the public sphere lies in re-seeking this embodiment of the public sphere. Nonetheless, spatial considerations on the public sphere might prove crucial when thinking political-public life in today’s context marked by the forementioned challenges. In response to those questions, it is my belief that an important question lies in how to continuously connect public sphere theory to public space design and analysis. The following chapter will attempt to give an insight to this alliance.

²¹³ See Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek*, 20-21. My translations.

²¹⁴ See Boomkens, “The temporalities of the public sphere”, 16-17.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

2. Public space

“The idea of the “public sphere” as an arena of political deliberation and participation, and therefore fundamental to democratic governance, has a long and distinguished history. [...] As a result some kind of association or even identity has been forged between the proper shaping of urban public space and the proper functioning of democratic governance. [...] While it may well prove impossible to sort out the relationship between the physicality of urban public space and the politics of the public sphere with any exactitude, there are, I think, some potent points of linkage between them.”²¹⁶

2.1 What space is public?

2.1.1 Relational approach to space

The previous chapter gave an introduction to the important public sphere theories and identified possible openings towards spatial readings of this sphere. By contrast, I have not yet clarified which range of spaces are essentially included in the wide denominator of public space. Thus, before addressing the spatial grounding of the public sphere, I will first discuss a general notion of *public space*.

To do so, it is necessary to briefly develop on the broader framework following which I will research (public) space. Acknowledging the dialectical interactions between spatial forms and social processes, making it impossible to address any epistemology of space through the frames of reference from a single discipline, researchers from various fields have pleaded to rather apply an interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional perspective on the analysis of space.²¹⁷ In line with this proposal, I will adopt such a *relational* perspective of space.

This approach differs from the common a-relational perspective through its view on space as an integral part of social processes. Space is then not considered a “container within which the world proceeds”, but rather a veritable “co-product of those proceedings”.²¹⁸ A relational viewpoint implies “an understanding of space as a social, cultural, economic, political and ecological construction”.²¹⁹ Since spaces are simultaneously material and social, any spatial analysis must necessarily include these different facets too. Furthermore, within the relational approach to space, the “co-production of time and space” becomes an important element for consideration in research.²²⁰ A relational perspective acknowledges the ever-changing meaning of space, as well as its contested uses and social conflicts, both at a certain moment in time and over history.²²¹

²¹⁶ Harvey, “The Political Economy of Public Space”, 17.

²¹⁷ See Khan, Moulaert and Schreurs, “Epistemology of Space”, 288-289.

²¹⁸ See Thrift, “Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography”, 96.

²¹⁹ Van den Broeck et al., “On Analysing Space”, 324.

²²⁰ See Madanipour, “Researching Space”, 375.

²²¹ See Knierbein and Tornaghi, *Public Space and Relational Perspectives*, 4-5.

The relational perspective strongly impacts architectural theory and practice. Hilde Heynen proposes three major architectural-theoretical models that focus on the relationship between spaces and social processes.²²² The first model considers space as a mere *receptor* and echoes the a-relational view of space as a container, or simply a background for social activities.²²³ This view can be considered as social determinism. Contrary to this is the paradigm of physical determinism. Following this viewpoint, space can be used as “an instrument to instigate social changes”. This perspective grants space an organising, structuring or even disciplining influence on social patterns through its alleged capacity for imposing desired behaviours on subjects.²²⁴ However, the third model is the most adequate, since it in fact encompasses the other two and proposes a more nuanced stance:

“In conceiving of spatial arrangements as the *stage* on which social life unfolds, the impact of social forces on architectural and urban patterns is recognized (because the stage is seen as the result of social forces) while at the same time spatial patterns are seen as modifying and structuring social phenomena. The difference with the first model — space as receptor — is that the agency of spatial parameters in producing and reproducing social reality is more fully recognized. The difference with the second model — space as instrument — is that the theatrical metaphor is far from deterministic, and that this thought model thus allows for a better understanding of the interplay between forces of domination and forces of resistance.”²²⁵

A theatrical metaphor of space thus serves to describe the relational perspective. On the one hand, spatial constellations constantly condition human behaviour and action, but on the other hand, there is always room for people to re-interpret and re-appropriate (built) spaces in non-conventional ways.²²⁶ A model which conceives space as a stage is therefore most fit to approximate the relation between people and space.²²⁷ Such a metaphor proves especially interesting seen against the background of the public sphere: space then becomes a stage of public deliberation, which in its turn is equally a “continual enactment of democracy” following Arendt.²²⁸ This two-step connection gives a preliminary indication of how public space potentially serves the public sphere: through materialising physical configurations serving as stages fit for people to engage in political discussion or reflection. Acknowledging space as a relational phenomenon, and thus as a continuous interplay between design and human usage, is crucial in order to understand political dynamics in, and of, space.

The relational framework is particularly relevant when (architecturally) thinking about public space. A main challenge here lies in conceiving both the meaning people give to spaces and the actual uses or practices taking place in spaces.²²⁹ When framing space simultaneously through its built and social qualities, it becomes possible to reveal the possibility inherent to spatial practices

²²² See Heynen, “Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage”, 343.

²²³ See Ibid., 344.

²²⁴ See Ibid., 346.

²²⁵ Ibid., 349. Original emphasis.

²²⁶ See Ibid., 350-351.

²²⁷ See Ibid., 354.

²²⁸ See Frampton, *Labour, Work and Architecture*, 7.

²²⁹ See Knierbein and Tornaghi, *Public Space and Relational Perspectives*, 6.

for “sustaining social change in spatial terms”.²³⁰ For instance, considerations on political dynamics in space require to go beyond a narrow vision of space as absolute and abstract entities. It is in this regard necessary to also consider *placemaking* processes. Such spatial commissioning involves the participation of people and their respective communities in creating meaningful places. Placemaking processes thus refer to the socio-spatially innovative efforts that are made to make spaces into meaningful places.²³¹

Lastly, a relational perspective strongly determines any assessment of spatial quality. Since spatial quality is now seen as the result of collective place-shaping efforts between various human and non-human actants in multiple space-time frames, it must equally be assessed relationally and multi-dimensionally.²³² Incorporating a relational-pragmatic epistemology of space and a transdisciplinary perspective leads to the concept of ‘integrative spatial quality’.²³³ This implies to understand spatial quality as an “experiential valuation and dialectics of spatial form and social processes”.²³⁴ Practically, Khan et al. in this regard formulate an inclusive meta-framework to address spatial quality based on seven dimensions.²³⁵ Most importantly, this framework prescribes an assessment that is based on ethical reflections on spatial justice, analysis of power relations, multi-scalar perspectives and a thorough questioning of the spatial contribution to sustainable development.²³⁶ Such an evaluation demands the identification of actors and actants of spatial quality within their socio-spatial embedding as well as an identification of spatial features relevant to those actors and actants. Finally, this equally prescribes a reflexive analysis on the role of the researchers, designers, ... themselves when they are involved in spatial quality analysis.²³⁷

2.1.2 Definitions of public space

Before engaging in theoretical debate on public space, it is useful to start with a general, more practical working concept. I’ll refer in this regard to the definition used by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (Un-Habitat). This definition is based on the Charter of Public Space that was drawn up during the second Biennial of Public Space (Rome, 2013). Herein, public spaces are “all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive”.²³⁸ Remarkably, public spaces are not necessarily publicly owned, although this is preferable since such spaces “offer more stable guarantees of access and enjoyment over time because they are less subject to those legitimate changes of use typical of private ownership.”²³⁹ Instead of considering *who* owns public space, it is thus more relevant to wonder *how* public space is owned and in which ways the space relates to its public following this

²³⁰ See Ibid., 6.

²³¹ See Van den Broeck et al., *Handboek Ruimtelijke Kwaliteit*, 22-23.

²³² See Khan et al., “Integrative Spatial Quality”, 396-397.

²³³ See Ibid., 396.

²³⁴ Ibid., 397.

²³⁵ See Ibid., 401-402.

²³⁶ See Ibid., 401-402.

²³⁷ See Ibid., 402.

²³⁸ UN Habitat, *Global Public Space Toolkit*, 127.

²³⁹ Ibid., 128.

suggestion. However, since it is very difficult to eventually enforce the resulting policy prescriptions on privately owned public spaces, the *who* question still has value too.

Four typologies of public spaces are subsequently distinguished: streets, open public spaces (indicating pieces of undeveloped or unbuilt land accessible to the public, think of e.g. squares and parks), public facilities and markets.²⁴⁰ The following suggestion in the charter is furthermore particularly intriguing, but at the same time begging for more in-depth exploration:

“Public space is the gymnasium of democracy, an opportunity for creating and maintaining over time the sentiment of citizenship and the awareness of the roles that each of us had and can have with regard to one’s daily lifestyle and to one’s living environment.”²⁴¹

Of course, public space is not a new subject. In fact, it has probably never been a new subject, since the political as well as economic and cultural significance of public space has been known at least since ancient times (as testimonies the long-lasting influence of the Athenian agora-model).²⁴² Numerous different accounts of public space have been formulated and implemented over history, with some being more influential or successful than others.

Notoriously impactful has for example been the modernist vision. This account of public space has been pungently synthesised in the Athens Charter (1933, but only published in 1943 by Le Corbusier). Although progressive and egalitarian at its base, Mehaffy and Low explain that this vision was marred by a naïve understanding of the nature of social relations.²⁴³ The functional zoning principles and a-historicism of the CIAM-doctrine (*Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne*) notably lacked a clear conception of the dynamic co-production processes of urban spaces that involve various kinds of actors and actants.²⁴⁴ Nonetheless, multiple urban areas throughout the twentieth century were shaped following modernist principles (be it often only from the post-war, second half of the century on and regularly following corrupted mock-up principles). Brussels can in this regard serve as an illustrious example: e.g. the infamous public space of the State Administrative Centre (RAC) exemplifies the flaws in the late-modernist paradigm through its grey gloom and continual emptiness (figures 2.1 and 2.2).

To avoid likewise misconceptions on the constitutional elements of public space, Ali Madanipour argues that public spaces should be considered as “*accessible places*, developed through *inclusive processes*”.²⁴⁵ A place is herein considered as a non-abstract space with an attached meaning and value.²⁴⁶ Madanipour’s view on the degree of publicness, as being entirely dependent on accessibility and the activities taking place, is also highly relevant. The key feature of public space is for him indeed accessibility, simply because a public space can otherwise not be public.²⁴⁷ Following this logic, the role of urban designers is to articulate the boundaries between public and non-public spaces and conceive their rigidity. In order to understand the place-value for the

²⁴⁰ See Ibid., 128.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 128.

²⁴² See Madanipour, “Rethinking public space”, 38.

²⁴³ See Mehaffy and Low, “The resurgence of public space”, 5.

²⁴⁴ See Ibid., 9.

²⁴⁵ Madanipour, *Whose Public Space*, 1. Original emphasis.

²⁴⁶ See Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁷ See Ibid., 7-8.

various groups influenced by the outcome of these (public) spaces, any thinking of such boundaries should be based on inclusive processes.²⁴⁸

It is against the foregoing background that Madanipour then argues the following, which soundly begins to resonate key elements of Arendt's thought:

"Public space is the institutional and material common world, the in-between space that facilitates co-presence and regulates interpersonal relationships. By being present in the same place with others, shared experience of the world becomes possible and a link is made with previous generations who experienced (or future generations who might experience) the same physical reality. This connecting role that bridges time endows public space with permanence."²⁴⁹

A very elaborate relational perspective on the publicness of space is given by Chiara Tornaghi. Besides the common working concept of public space explained earlier, she pleads for an additional understanding of publicness as a relational and subjective quality rather than solely as an attached label.²⁵⁰ The question then becomes which spaces are *experienced* as public and which not – and how come so that they are (not). Tornaghi identifies five main "building blocks" for a relational approach to the publicness of space: spatial scale; degree of normativity (based on e.g. regulation and accessibility); modes of social encounters; sound-visual, tactile and olfactory scapes; and, finally, degree of biodiversity.²⁵¹ The interplay of these categories is fluid and defines the (experiential) publicness of a space. This means that the publicness of a space is, for Tornaghi, a context specific variable. Publicness is never a fixed quality but rather a constantly evolving characteristic, influenced by placemaking processes over time.

What is then the task for architects and (urban) designers when shaping public spaces? To avoid deterministic perspectives, it becomes essential to consider the public space in relation to societal concepts such as the public sphere. In parallel to the importance of a public sphere for democratic society lies the relevance of public space for the embodiment of democracy in this society. Although the public sphere clearly does not resolve issues such as societal inequality (think of e.g. economic divides in society), it at least provides opportunities for open expression, opinion testing and collective action. The same accounts for public space: societal problems will not be removed through the provision of public space, but at least this creates a shared *stage* for encounter, socialization and free usage or appropriation. It is in the phase of *stage-shaping* that architects have a major role to play. Perhaps, a rightly conceived, and received, public stage can then even become a place wherein one's private beliefs are confronted with public reality.

This design challenge for public space has been influentially addressed by Manuel de Solà-Morales. De Solà-Morales argues that the categories of private and public are nowadays hard to separate since they are often mixed: for instance market halls (he uses the example of the Boqueria in Barcelona) can be in public ownership but filled with private initiatives and activities.²⁵² Hence, spaces such as shopping malls and soccer stadiums are strictly spoken also

²⁴⁸ See Ibid., 11-12.

²⁴⁹ Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, 206.

²⁵⁰ See Knierbein and Tornaghi, *Public Space and Relational Perspectives*, 24-25.

²⁵¹ See Ibid., 26.

²⁵² See de Solà-Morales, "Public spaces/collective spaces", 187.

private, but they nevertheless serve as modern (public) community spaces.²⁵³ Therefore, de Solà-Morales argues that the essential difficulty, which contemporary designers must necessarily face, lies in the following:

“[...] creating these intermediate locations, neither public nor private but exactly the opposite, spaces that are not sterile, that are not just abandoned to advertising and profit but stimulating parts of the multiform urban fabric. [...] Thus taking ‘public spaces’ too seriously, considering them sufficient in themselves, as places in which to build works of architecture without volume or as objects of design, may turn out to be a grave theoretical error.”²⁵⁴

In conclusion, a radically alternative account of public space is given by Belgian architect Wim Cuyvers, who argues that public space is not an unambiguous concept but a personal conception. Therefore, Cuyvers allows himself to define his own understanding of public space based on 37 bullet points.²⁵⁵ I’ll cite a few of the most striking suggestions:

“1. Public space is the opposite of private space, is the opposite of privatised space; 3. Those who privatise space have power; 7. Public space is the space of powerlessness; 9. The perfect public space would be that space where anyone could do anything at any time; 10. Public space is thus a platonic concept; one hundred percent public space seems unthinkable; 13. Leisure kills public space; 19. The moment of societal violation is the moment of contact with oneself and with the world; 21. Public space is the space of violation of societal norm(s); 25. Public space is the space of need (the compulsion to have to violate the social norm); 28. Those in distress leave their marks in public space (waste of waste), like their bodily fluids: tears, urine, blood, semen. There is no one to sweep it up, the space belongs to no one, no one feels responsible for it, no one has appropriated the space; 29. People of different ages, races or cultures, people with very different needs appear to seek out the same public space; 31. We all need offence, space for offence, public space, we are all needy and vulnerable; 34. Through space, non-lingual – or is it pre-lingual – speech is possible”²⁵⁶

In the moment of trespassing the separation between private and public, and thus in the contamination of the one by the other, lies for Cuyvers the true quality of public space.²⁵⁷ When a homeless person temporarily appropriates a space in order to sleep there, then on the one hand, the space is no longer strictly public, but on the other hand, it is precisely public because of this person’s possibility to temporarily appropriate this space.²⁵⁸ Following Cuyvers, public spaces are the spaces where *transgression*, in all different forms and of all kinds of different norms, takes place. Although his argument might be polemic, he herewith convincingly emphasises an important yet often threatened dimension of public space.

²⁵³ See Ibid., 188.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 188-190.

²⁵⁵ See Cuyvers, “Musea voor actuele kunst”, 9.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 9. My translation.

²⁵⁷ See Van den Brande, “Ondergaan van ruimte”.

²⁵⁸ See Ibid.

2.1.3 Narratives on the loss of public space

“The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure – all those artfully hoodwinking forms – as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. In the “public” spaces of the theme park or the shopping mall, speech itself is restricted: *there are no demonstrations in Disneyland*. The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself.”²⁵⁹

Most literature addressing public space over the last 50 years has been characterised by narratives on the endangered status, and even loss, of public space.²⁶⁰ Exemplary in this regard is Michael Sorkin’s depiction of a placeless, a-geographical city characterised by gentrified neighbourhoods, anonymous skyscrapers, omnipresent car infrastructure and non-localisable shopping malls.²⁶¹ This type of city is determined by three salient features: a loosening of ties to any specific space resulting in meaningless places (which is a *contradictio in terminis*); an obsession with security and surveillance; and as a result of the previous two a “city of simulations, television city, the city as a theme park”.²⁶² Public space is for Sorkin illustrative of this decay. By the early 1990s, it had devaluated to nothing more than a phony ersatz that lost any symbolic value in favour of a semiotic genericism – thereby becoming nothing more than an apolitical theme park, a simulation without end.²⁶³

It is not my ambition to give another all-encompassing overview of these theoretical concerns on public space, since this has already been subject of abundant writing and debate. I’ll rather refer to the overarching conclusions from this large body of research that have been formulated by Matthew Carmona.²⁶⁴ Carmona organises the canonical accounts on the decline of public space into different categories. By doing this, he equally gives insight into actual challenges for public space. Although this approach is interesting for the purpose of structure, it is essential to note that these categories should not be read as strictly distinct. On the contrary, they should rather be understood as inter-connected phenomena. Also, some criticised types of spaces do not necessarily lead to negative results: sometimes ‘lost spaces’ can for instance prove their worth in giving subaltern publics a distinct space fit for appropriation. Nonetheless, most of the identified categories are near to always problematic when aspiring for inclusive and egalitarian public space.

First, there is neglected space that results from a shortage of care or an unmet need for redesign.²⁶⁵ Secondly, there is invaded space, which is “the most universal derision” of public space since this impoverishes and sacrifices public space for cars, traffic, roads, parking lots and other related infrastructures.²⁶⁶ Then there is the category of exclusionary space, which essentially points out spaces whose design and management are marked by physical barriers (e.g.

²⁵⁹ Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park*, xv. Emphasis added.

²⁶⁰ See Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm”, 4.

²⁶¹ See Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park*, xi.

²⁶² See Ibid., xiii-xiv.

²⁶³ See Ibid., xiv-xv.

²⁶⁴ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space: Critique and Classification”, both Part One (Critique) and Part Two (Classification).

²⁶⁵ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space, Part One”, 124-125.

²⁶⁶ See Ibid., 127-128.

for persons with disabilities) or psychological barriers (e.g. a fear of “the other”).²⁶⁷ By way of illustration, one of the seminal works that addresses concerns related to the second and third category is Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Somewhat connected to the previous category is the fourth distinction: segregated space. This refers to space wherein specific groups are separated, or are willingly separating themselves, from others (by the means of e.g. gates).²⁶⁸ Fifthly, there is also insular space characterised by a retreat from public space into individual and non-related experiences.²⁶⁹

Carmona pleads that the previous five categories are the result from an under-management of public space, although he acknowledges this is a simplification for the sake of clarity. By contrast, there are also critiques linked to forms of over-management. One can in this regard think of privatised space. This privatisation of public space happens mostly for corporate or commercial interests. Such spaces are marked by patterns of control, securitisation and regular social exclusion.²⁷⁰ Thus, an essential issue with privately owned public spaces (POPS) is that the rights of the citizens using them are often severely constrained and people therefore refrain from communal activity and engagement.²⁷¹ POPS can hardly become places for collective action, not in the least because “when space is controlled, and especially when the public is unclear about what the legal or acceptable boundaries of activity are, we tend to police ourselves, to monitor our behaviour and to limit our interactions, especially after embarrassing confrontations with security.”²⁷²

Under the denominator of over-management, and in line with Sorkin’s argument, falls also public space uniquely intended for consumption and commodification.²⁷³ These spaces of consumption are equally determined by explicit exclusion, although based on financial means.²⁷⁴ Closely related to the last two categories, one can furthermore identify invented space which condones “the spread of a placeless, formula-driven entertainment space” and arguably leads to universal genericism.²⁷⁵ This concern on public space has been influentially addressed by Sharon Zukin in *The Cultures of Cities*, wherein she discusses ‘public space’ in both theme parks and historic city centres. A last common critique on public space lies in the notion of scary space. Such spaces are based on exclusionary policing that is supposedly legitimate because of a fear of crime.²⁷⁶ This last category is in reference to e.g. Mike Davis’s books *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*.

Clearly, those categories are relational phenomena and can sometimes occur simultaneously. A recurring aspect in most of the categories is exclusion: not surprisingly, this is an essential restraint on the publicness of space. Interesting is also the vicious relationship between under-managed and over-managed spaces:

²⁶⁷ See Carmona, “Re-theorising contemporary public space”, 374.

²⁶⁸ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space, Part One”, 130-131.

²⁶⁹ See Ibid., 131-132.

²⁷⁰ See Ibid., 134-135.

²⁷¹ See Garrett, “The privatisation of cities’ public spaces”.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space, Part One”, 137.

²⁷⁴ See Ibid., 138.

²⁷⁵ See Carmona, “Re-theorising contemporary public space”, 375.

²⁷⁶ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space, Part One”, 141.

“[...] in fact these critiques represent two sides of the same coin. Thus the poor quality of under-managed publicly owned space is contributing to the flight to privately managed space, whilst the spread of overmanaged privately owned pseudo-public space is further undermining truly public space, and leading in some localities to critiques of over-management by the public sector in an attempt to fight back.”²⁷⁷

Overall, the consequence of these phenomena is seen to be a *homogenisation* of public space resulting from dominant neoliberal policy in cities. An increasing push for ‘perfection’, efficiency and control in cities, and their public spaces, around the world (not in the least Brussels, as I will show later) has led René Boer to coin the *smooth city*.²⁷⁸ I believe this is a powerful concept to understand the dominant tendency of city development today.

The subtitle to Boer’s book powerfully summarises the plea he makes: “against urban perfection, towards collective alternatives”. While the rebranding of urban spaces into clean, aesthetic and peaceful environments might seem harmless at first, this process of normative ‘smoothing’ is problematic since it leaves no place for “everything that is out of tune with its sterile objectives” and “reduces the depth of urban existence at the cost of diversity, encounters across difference, and the potential of becoming”.²⁷⁹ Or as Boer more broadly puts it:

“The city has, over time, become one of the most important habitats of humankind, not only in terms of scale but in particular because it has often provided space for exchanging ideas, bridging cultures, providing shelter, transforming lives, testing new forms of togetherness, and pushing the boundaries of the imaginable. The smooth city puts all these and other important functions under serious pressure, while gradually eroding their vitality, if not their existence.”²⁸⁰

The smooth city rarely provides for everyone, as e.g. the often-striking contrast between ‘showcase’ public spaces and secondary, ‘marginal’ public spaces in cities shows.²⁸¹ What is more, reconfiguration and alleged improvement of public spaces might all too often lead to explicit processes of gentrification. The phenomenon of gentrification incorporates the “sum of various developments whereby working-class areas are (re-)appropriated by groups that are socio-economically more advantaged than their prior residents or users”.²⁸² This is something research on the Brussels Capital Region amply underlines. For instance, the active contemporary city dynamic that sees numerous historical, so-called popular neighbourhoods (think of e.g. the Maritime neighbourhood in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek) increasingly become object of “real estate, residential and urbanistic lusts” fits into these patterns of gentrification.²⁸³

Preventing public space to become, or remain, undifferentiated is therefore a major challenge of urban design today. A counter-challenge, however, lies in avoiding overly romanticised visions of public spaces as entirely free and open for political action. Indeed, such an utopian state realistically has no potential to exist and is arguably as undifferentiated as the neoliberal model.

²⁷⁷ See Carmona, “Contemporary Public Space, Part Two”, 157.

²⁷⁸ See Boer, *Smooth City*, 9-10.

²⁷⁹ See Ibid., 8-15.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

²⁸¹ See Ibid., 11, and see also Madanipour, “Marginal Public Spaces”, 284.

²⁸² Van Criekingen, “What is happening to Brussels’ inner-city neighbourhoods?”, 4.

²⁸³ See Van Criekingen, *Contre la gentrification*, 30. My translation.

It is rather the middle ground that can be sought for. This implies attempts to find (alternative) ways of plural expression and political reflection on society while at the same time fully engaging with the existing conditions. Such an argument corresponds to Boer's advocacy for *queering* the city's new smoothness. Queering is in this context understood as "being the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent, and create, and find a place to speak, and to thrive, and to live."²⁸⁴ This is also in line with the different narrative, focussing on diversity of spaces, that Carmona advances in order to leave behind both laments about loss and quests for an idealised blueprint of the perfect public space.²⁸⁵

2.1.4 Further threats to public space

There are a few remaining challenges to public space that, even though Carmona omits to explicitly mention them, I find important to highlight. Fundamentally, the combination of an often-growing spatial fragmentation of cities with the consolidation of digital modes of communication puts public space at risk. Manuel Castells describes this conflict conceptually through the opposition between the *space of places* and the *space of flows*.

In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells describes how society shapes itself in an "internationalized information economy".²⁸⁶ This leads society to become constructed around flows: flows of information, flows of capital, flows of technology, ...²⁸⁷ The system of flows is an expression of the processes that dominate our political, economic and symbolic life. It entails a transformation of the spatial constraint – a transformation that Castells defines as the formation of the space of flows.²⁸⁸ Those spaces are not entirely placeless, although he argues that their constituting logic is, but come together in "nodes and hubs".²⁸⁹

Another important building stone for the spaces of flows is "the implicit assumption that societies are asymmetrically organized around the dominant interests specific to each social structure".²⁹⁰ The spatial manifestation of the informational elite, which contains the twin mechanism of elite articulation on the one hand and segmentation and disorganization of the masses on the other, is a fundamental dimension of the spaces of flows. A major trend in this process of cultural distinction is "to design spatial forms aimed at unifying the symbolic environment of the elite around the world, thus superseding the historical specificity of each locale".²⁹¹ Cultural connectedness between the different nodes grows, while different nodes lose connection to their local *place*.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of people live in places and perceive their space as place-based.²⁹² These spaces of places fundamentally differ from the spaces of flows through their

²⁸⁴ Boer, *Smooth City*, 164. Boer bases this definition on a reading by bell hooks which he attended in New York.

²⁸⁵ See Carmona, "Re-theorising contemporary public space", 398.

²⁸⁶ See Castells, "The Informational City: a new framework for social change", 8.

²⁸⁷ See Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 442.

²⁸⁸ See Castells, "The Informational City: a new framework for social change", 14.

²⁸⁹ See Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 443.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 445.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 447.

²⁹² See Ibid., 453.

connectedness with human history, culture and matter.²⁹³ However, “because function and power in our societies are organized in the space of flows, the structural domination of its logic essentially alters the meaning and dynamic of places”.²⁹⁴ Following Castells in 1996, this leads space to evolve towards a horizontal, ahistorical and networked space of flows, which leaves behind segmented and scattered places that are increasingly unconnected and unable to share culture.

Digital communication indeed makes it, to some extent, unimportant *where* one is, since everybody has access to resources and services from any location at any time.²⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the last twenty years and especially the recent post-Covid period have proven that the need for public space has not disappeared, which makes Castells’ analysis perhaps too radical. Still today, people take advantage of city spaces to gather and thereby (in)directly testimony that, notwithstanding the tremendous growth of online public spheres, face-to-face communication and physical co-presence are still essential for human well-being and interpersonal interaction.²⁹⁶ The academic as well as popular interest in public space has in this light unceasingly remained present – as this thesis, among others, witnesses.

Another substantive challenge to the publicness of public space lies in homeless (or other) appropriations of those spaces. Although one could argue that the possibility of this appropriation marks the constitutional element of public space (as Wim Cuyvers does), a public space serving as shelter potentially restrains others from using those spaces. This obstructs another essential element of public space, namely accessibility. So, the difficulty becomes a two-way experience: on the one hand, homeless people in public space are often harassed for doing things they have in fact a right to (sitting, eating, gathering, ... or even rough sleeping), while on the other hand, other users of public space might feel at unease and start avoiding those public spaces.²⁹⁷ Clearly, the answer to this question lies not only in the hands of public space designers (but largely in the hands of policy makers (not) providing shelter), but they can nevertheless think about ways of dealing with co-existence in public space.

Furthermore, it is quintessential in the context of public space to reflect on the relationship between spatial experience and gender. Already in the 1980s, feminist architectural theorists (then united in the MATRIX co-operative) put the emphasis on how *man-made* and determined by stereotypical and heteronormative idealisations public spaces are.²⁹⁸ Their analysis showed, inter alia, how non-adapted public spaces are for the less mobile (wheelchairs, pushchairs, ...), how deeply embedded the normative ideas of ‘woman’s places’ in a ‘man’s world’ are in planning norms and to what extent public spaces are either entirely exposed to man’s gazes, or not exposed at all (leading to a feeling of insecurity).²⁹⁹

Forty years later, gender-issues remain omnipresent in public space and related discourse. As feminist geographer Leslie Kern states about public space:

²⁹³ See Castells, “The Informational City: a new framework for social change”, 14.

²⁹⁴ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 458.

²⁹⁵ See Madanipour, “Rethinking public space”, 42.

²⁹⁶ See Ibid., 42-43.

²⁹⁷ See Jankowsky, Kim and Loew, “Homelessness in the Public Realm”.

²⁹⁸ See Boys, “Women and public space”, 54.

²⁹⁹ See Ibid., 40-53.

“It’s the space where my experiences lead me to ask, “Why doesn’t my stroller fit on the streetcar?” “Why do I have to walk an extra half mile home because the shortcut is too dangerous?” “Who will pick up my kid from camp if I get arrested at a G20 protest?” These aren’t just personal questions. They start to get to the heart of why and how cities keep women “in their place.””³⁰⁰

Clearly, spatial gender issues are nowadays considered much more intersectional than the passed-by bifurcation of man and woman. Such urban problematics equally relate to all other genders and sexual orientations, and are often also linked with other experiences related to ethnicity, class, age, ...³⁰¹ Since gender inequality and sexual discrimination persist within everyday urban situations, it remains crucial to raise awareness about the often-limited recognition of minorities in public space.³⁰² Fear of violence and abuse in public space are still of particular concern for especially women and LGBTQIA+ communities and addressing this topic within the context of everyday public spaces therefore remains an important task for urban designers.³⁰³

Acknowledging the symbolic value of public spaces as inclusive and open to all also requires to critically think about formal and aesthetical elements that (don’t) bear this symbolism. Based on this conviction, multiple voices have been raised recently to *decolonise* public space and remove references to inglorious histories of inequality and trauma. Removing structures that represent racism, segregation, patriarchy, ... might lead to new possibilities for collectively imagining a different city and a different public space. Such a process of decolonising public space can be interpreted as a very thorough reflection on urban public space for Françoise Vergès:

“Decolonizing public space also means putting a stop to racial profiling, to the fabrication of bodies that can be killed, to hikes in public transport costs, to architecture that is hostile to disabled people, to the sexual, racial, cultural, and social segregation of public space, to the invisibilization and thus exclusion of key workers – cleaning staff, cashiers, garbage collectors – but also of sex workers, refugees, migrants, homeless people, old people, women. It means *humanizing the city*.”³⁰⁴

Lastly, it is also essential today to consider public space from an ecological and environmental standpoint. More and more, urban public spaces prove essential in formulating a response to climate change and creating liveable cities.

So, as I have shown, there are clearly profound challenges to contemporary public space that require to be addressed. Notwithstanding these, I agree with Margaret Crawford’s argument from 1995 that any supposed loss of public space is “primarily perceptual, derived from extremely narrow and normative definitions of both public and space”.³⁰⁵ Framing those challenges and urging urban designers to address them, must not be understood as abandoning public space and withdrawing into scepticism, as some critics have done and continue to do. While it is essential to critically reflect on e.g. discussions about the ownership of public space, it is equally crucial to restrain from utopian idealisations and search for alternative ways of political expression in

³⁰⁰ Kern, *Feminist City*, 8.

³⁰¹ See Beebejaun, “Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life”, 323.

³⁰² See Ibid., 330.

³⁰³ See Ibid., 328-329.

³⁰⁴ Vergès, “Decolonize the city”. Original emphasis.

³⁰⁵ Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm”, 4.

existing reality. This implies a contemporary reflection on the linkage between public space and public sphere, taking all contemporary challenges (for both sphere and space) into consideration, as well as a further discovery of how public space can *still* serve democratic goals.

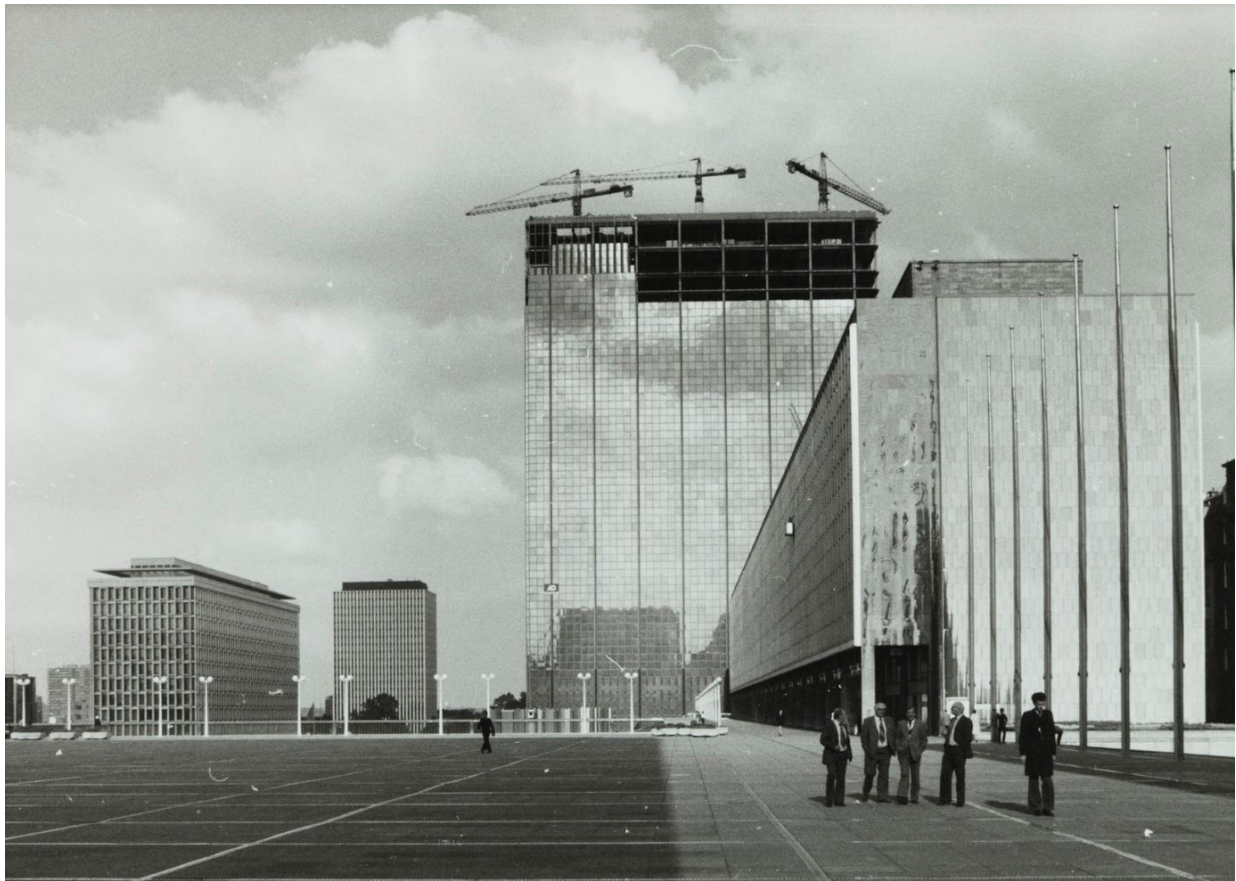


Fig. 2.1: central panorama square of the State Administrative Centre alongside the Pachecolaan in Brussels, 1980. (© Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest – Inventaris van het Bouwkundig Erfgoed)



Fig. 2.2: view of the desolate pedestrian walkways along the State Administrative Centre in Brussels, 1980. (© Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest – Inventaris van het Bouwkundig Erfgoed)

2.2 The spatial grounding of the public sphere

2.2.1 Architectural interpretations of Arendt's thought

As pointed out in the chapter about the public sphere, and in contrast to Habermas' non-spatialisation, Hannah Arendt mentions the *embodiment* of any public sphere in the world-of-things and its conjoint working as a space of appearance. This open door has been interpreted by some authors and designers, giving Arendt's philosophy regular resonance in architectural discourse. As a bridge between political and architectural theory, I will briefly address two major readings giving a sense of what Arendt's theory can mean for architectural fields of research.

Some architectural designers, as for instance the artists of the Irish *Free Market* project during the Venice Biennale of 2018, regard Arendt's thought as a goal to be unceasingly pursued when thinking public space (figure 2.3). Therefore, it is for them necessary to structurally apply a theoretical framework to design wherein "the most important function of a marketplace – and of the public realm in general – is its ability to gather people, histories, stories and a plurality of perspectives."³⁰⁶ Others, such as Jozef Wouters of the Brussels-based *Decoratelier*, consider that contemporary public space has already been shaped by Arendt's thought on public appearance. Wouters argues one should perhaps not always want to fulfil this all-inclusive ideal in one space. In his opinion, the plural expression of different groups might be better protected and enabled in mutually distinct spaces of freedom.³⁰⁷ I'll return to this latter stance in the next chapter of this thesis within the case study of the Brussels Capital Region.

An influential reading of Arendt in "architectural terms" has been made by Kenneth Frampton from the 1960s on. Frampton, likely one of the most influential architectural theorists of the 20th century, even went so far as to claim that all his writings from the mid-60s on have been at least indirectly influenced by Hannah Arendt.³⁰⁸ Consequently, he proposes the *creation of the public realm*, thereby providing the fundamental human possibility to enter into *action*, as the primary charge of architecture.³⁰⁹ This claim in its turn rather nourishes than simplifies one of this thesis' core questions: what is now essentially meant by *creating* the public realm?³¹⁰

In his essay *The Status of Man and the Status of his Objects*, Frampton makes several substantive connections between Arendt's work and the theory and practice of architecture. He, for instance, disentangles the for him "fundamental ambiguity of the term architecture" through combining the process of building with the condition of labour; and the "art or science of construction edifices for human use" with the condition of work.³¹¹ Of particular interest for my research is however the postscript to this essay wherein Frampton connects Hannah Arendt's thought to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, thereby including Jürgen Habermas.

³⁰⁶ Bolhuis and Kennedy, "On Marketplaces and an Architecture of the Common", 77.

³⁰⁷ See Wouters and Agha, interview.

³⁰⁸ See Frampton, *Labour, Work and Architecture*, 7.

³⁰⁹ See *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹⁰ As mentioned in an earlier footnote, Arendt uses both realm and sphere – thus, this question is in this case equal to: ... *creating* the public sphere?

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

Although acknowledging Arendt's scepticism towards the (Marxist) criticism of the Frankfurt theorists, Frampton argues that both parties were in essence "equally obsessed with the interaction of structure and superstructure in advanced industrial society", herewith indicating the dialectic interaction between productive forces and socio-cultural institutions, "even if such terms were entirely foreign to her thought".³¹² Building on this remark, he suggests that Habermas put an aspect into light that Arendt's analysis underexposed. Following Frampton, Habermas denoted a problematic opportunity inherent to the reality-formative character of the space of appearance: namely its ability to mediate the autonomous rationality of science and technique.³¹³ This issue showcases for Frampton not so much a flaw in Arendt's thought but the need, in fact urged by both Habermas and Arendt, to adopt an existentially political perspective, since this is the only valid perspective "for the rational determination of human ends".³¹⁴ He argues (public) space must be no exception to such a perspective: after all, political power depends on elements such as its derivation from people living next to each other and on the physical manifestation of public being in built form.³¹⁵ Architectural designs always create in-betweens with political and societal influence. Thus, Frampton concludes that:

"For architecture at least, the relevance of *The Human Condition* resides in this – in its formation of that political reciprocity that must of necessity obtain, for good or ill, between the status of men and the status of their objects."³¹⁶

Whilst formulating it a bit cryptically, he hereby grants high value to architecture. Hand in hand with the opportunity to enable, or *create*, any setting of public-political life also comes the possibility to destroy or prohibit such form of life. Frampton testifies a fond belief in the importance of architecture for everyday life and it therefore proves crucial to see how intertwined political engagement and spatial design can, or arguably must, be. Furthermore, a critical approach to space design simmers through in this fragment: architecture should not only consider the physical shape of a location, but also create a relation between that location and its users thereby giving a possibility for, among others, political participation and appearance.

In his later famous essay *Towards a Critical Regionalism – Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, Frampton equally builds on Arendt. In this essay, he suggests that the bounded place-forms, referring to the critical regionalist urge for specific built forms in their appropriate locations, are essential to democratic political life.³¹⁷ In contrast to an ever-spreading "modern motopia", characterised by the absence of any true public sphere or by the equally problematic presence of pseudo-public spheres, Frampton emphasises the importance of those bounded place-forms for enabling resistance to the "endless processual flux of the megalopolis".³¹⁸ Without them, all that remains would be "an urbanized populace which has paradoxically lost the object of its urbanization".³¹⁹ Frampton thus equates the presence of a vital public sphere (in Arendt's sense)

³¹² Ibid., 39.

³¹³ See Ibid., 39.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

³¹⁵ See Ibid., 42.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

³¹⁷ See Ibid., 85.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 84-86.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 86.

with the existence of physical places of resistance and overtly opens the public sphere theory towards spatialisation.

Another vocal architectural theorist that has been thoroughly influenced by Hannah Arendt was George Baird. In contrast to Frampton, as Baird pleaded himself, the latter focusses (amongst many other topics) more extensively on the third human condition of action and its potential affiliation to architecture.³²⁰ In *The Space of Appearance*, Baird addresses the relationship between politics, the public realm and (post)modern architecture based on his reading of Arendt. Throughout the book, Baird covers a wide scope of 20th century architecture projects and tendencies while evaluating their relationship to ideals such as the plural public sphere.

Baird for instance argues that architecture has a direct (at least symbolic) relationship to action. After all, Arendt's worldly reality can only truly be formed through the equal appearance of things to a variety of people in the common world.³²¹ However, based on for example analyses of Herman Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer building in Apeldoorn and Leon Krier's entry for the Royal Mint Square in London, Baird esteems that in the second half of the 20th century the symbolic representation of the action-correlated condition of plurality evolved into mere individualism (Hertzberger) or pure iconography (Krier).³²² This downturn restrained or even repressed the emergence of collective action patterns (figures 2.4 and 2.5).

The foregoing twofold problematisation is for him symbolic for the "crisis of the public" that this time encounters. To oppose this decay, Baird argues for a new conception of the public and its relation to space. This should be a "yet undefined hybrid of the citizen as characterized by Arendt and the *flaneur* so familiar from Benjamin", thereby combining the "active" characterisation of the public and the "contemplative" conception of "disengaged alienation".³²³ Baird suggests this combination should be possible, since both models are in essence committed to related key social phenomena such as heterogeneity and (urban) anonymity.³²⁴ Interesting in this regard is the direct link he proposes between political and social notions of e.g. the public and models of public life, and their respective influence on architectural discourse.

Baird and Frampton prove the profound influence Hannah Arendt's political theory can have on architectural theory and practice. In line with Frampton, Baird also openly promotes such a reciprocal link:

"Admitted, there certainly is not a linear relationship between reading Arendt and developing specific architectural intentions. Nevertheless, to me it is clear that Arendt challenged me, particularly on aspects of the urban built environment – it's continuity, it's permanence and its publicness – that still are relevant today. Moreover, Arendt does offer her perspectives in an open, undogmatic way. This has been crucial for me both in my writings and in my practice, from my first reflections on the double face of utilitarian

³²⁰ See Baird, *The Space of Appearance*, 356-358.

³²¹ See Ibid., 23-24.

³²² See Ibid., 335-340.

³²³ Ibid., 307-345. Original emphasis. This also resonates to the dissection made by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, based on Aristotle, between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

³²⁴ See Ibid., 307.

perspectives in architecture all those years ago, up until today, in my current reflections on public space.”³²⁵

2.2.2 From sphere to space: the political imperative of public space

Having discussed the notions of public sphere and public space individually, the focus can now be put on the *political imperative of public space* by clarifying the relationship between public sphere and public space.³²⁶ In parallel with the belief that democracy involves more than formal procedures, a linkage between sphere and space conveys the idea that public spaces are not only physical locations in which to congregate, but also spaces in which argued political stances can be formulated and countered.

Notwithstanding that space is not a primary concern in public sphere theories, there is an inherent spatial dimension to the conceptual public sphere. While Habermas’ ambition is to formulate a universal model of the public sphere, the fundament of his theory lies in a historical analysis of socio-spatial patterns in the ancient agora and Enlightenment salons. Fraser explains her understanding of the (counter-)public sphere by references to spatial constellations such as theatres and arenas. Likewise, Arendt emphatically bases her public sphere theory on spatial concepts such as the world-of-things and the space of appearance, as explained before in more detail. In fact, any description of a public sphere is (in)directly stooled on spatial phenomena. Even when considering theories that I did not explicitly address in this thesis, think of for instance Charles Taylor’s writings about the public sphere as a “locus in which rational views are elaborated” and his distinction between topical and “metatopical” spaces, spatial references are consistently present.³²⁷ Clearly, even though the highlight is often put on normative descriptions, the public sphere is fundamentally embedded in historical and political practices and spaces.³²⁸

Any attempt, following the observation of the public’s sphere inherent spatiality, to combine public space and public sphere theories bears the potential to overcome the individual flaws of both components:

“Where the weakness of the public space literature perhaps lies in the practical means of translation from theories of political and cultural economy to the materiality of public space, the public sphere literature offers an historically embedded discussion of the continual making and remaking of the public vis-a-vis the state and related institutions, and ideologies and modes of communication and power. By corollary, the weakness of the public sphere literature may lie in the distance that it maintains from the places and spaces of publicness, whereas it is precisely the insight of the public space literature that produced public spaces naturalize the very assumptions interrogated by public sphere theorists and provide an extraordinary palimpsest for detailed scrutiny. If the public sphere can be described as “the sphere of private people coming together as a public”, its

³²⁵ Baird, “World-building: Arendt’s Writings as Challenge”, 71.

³²⁶ The term “imperative” is issued from Setha Low and Neil Smith’s introductory chapter to the book *The Politics of Public Space*.

³²⁷ See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 86-89.

³²⁸ See Low, “Public Space and the Public Sphere”, 156.

emergence clearly has a history, as we have seen, *but it has an equally clear geography*. [...] An understanding of public space is an *imperative* for understanding the public sphere.”³²⁹

The last sentence of this quote from Setha Low and Neil Smith essentially clarifies the relationship between sphere and space. While the public sphere broadly refers to a wide range of practices, people, activities, but also places, public space has the potential to function as the “physical setting for the nonphysical public sphere”.³³⁰ Public space is an essential constituent of a vital public sphere and provides it with, *inter alia*, material characteristics and geography.³³¹ It is, after all, also in physical public space that citizenship comes to meaning and is acted out.³³² As Low and Smith argue, it is therefore crucial to overcome any feeling of “lost geography of the public sphere”.³³³ Such a sentiment results from forementioned challenges to the public sphere as digitalisation, trans-nationalisation and disembodiment. Through an investigation of how public space is made and remade, socially as well as physically, “space provides a unique window on the politics of the public sphere, suggesting an even more powerful imperative to the focus on public space”.³³⁴

For instance, large social movements and political uprisings regularly show how public space and public sphere are intertwined through their usage of space for political expression.³³⁵ Public space can thus on the one hand serve as site of political collective action but must on the other hand equally be subject of democratic processes itself.³³⁶ After all, *who* is able to speak or act in public space is also determined through spatial design, rhetoric, policy or regulation.³³⁷ Clearly, a dangerous constraint to the spatial grounding of the public sphere lies in overly (neoliberal) policing of public spaces under aliases such as security.

As explained earlier, public spaces are relational in the sense that, besides physical and built locations, they are also *places* with personal and communal meanings. These attachments for instance show through ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork.³³⁸ Such bonds between people and spaces inevitably make public spaces into “democratic forums for public dissent” or “arenas for civic contestation and public involvement”, simply because they are the symbolic as well as practical places that people use to express themselves and gain visibility on an everyday basis.³³⁹

Numerous writers have, mostly since the 1990s, formulated concerns on a supposedly rising issue of placelessness. One can in this regard think of Manuel Castells’s theory that I explained earlier, but also e.g. about Rem Koolhaas’s famous essay on the *Generic City* or Marc Augé’s description of the *non-lieux* (non-places). While such analyses certainly contain valid concerns and arguments, I feel that they are perhaps too much characterised by a sense of physical determinism or even

³²⁹ Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 6. Emphasis added.

³³⁰ Miller, *Designs on the Public*, 1.

³³¹ See Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 3.

³³² See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 175.

³³³ See Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 7.

³³⁴ See *Ibid.*, 7.

³³⁵ See Low, “Public Space and the Public Sphere”, 156.

³³⁶ See Miller, *Designs on the Public*, xvii.

³³⁷ See *Ibid.*, xix.

³³⁸ See (e.g.) Low, *On the Plaza*, 238.

³³⁹ See *Ibid.*, 239-244.

cynicism. Despite the rise of non-spatial experiences and the increasing presence of impersonal spaces such as shopping malls, contemporary urban space has not definitively lost its value nor potential for (political) significance.

Notwithstanding the contemporary omnipresence of digital possibilities for individual expression, it is still hard to overcome that we remain embedded in a material world.³⁴⁰ Therefore, it is better to avoid overly binary distinctions but rather embrace the simultaneity of “public squares and public screens”.³⁴¹ An analysis of the Occupy movement (which originally appeared in New York’s Zuccotti Park in 2011 and quickly gained international following) shows the value of such an intertwining. Although Occupy rose to worldwide prominence through online spheres, the essential feat of the movement remained the occupation of physical spaces wherein ideas were discussed, and demonstrations were held.³⁴² Any sense of (international) community was first created on the square, through the use of public space and the mutual interdependence of this space.³⁴³ More recently, at the end of April 2024, student protests in support of Palestine at Columbia University in New York prove a similar pattern wherein occupation of space, as a way of visually manifesting standpoints and in order to oblige a public debate, plays a central role in the act of political expression.

Most online or media debates indeed still require those physical actions in order to engage the discussion.³⁴⁴ The previous actions are not unique cases: more often than not are online discussions related to events or phenomena in the material world. While uses of spaces change, and although the relationship between online representation and real acts in public space becomes increasingly important, physical public space remains a crucial element of political action and engagement.

The relationship between online and material space also contains another aspect. While it is easy to believe things that are read or seen in one’s online “echo chamber of like-minded”, as Habermas calls it, physical public space has the potential to challenge private beliefs and open up one-sided perspectives. Through entering public space, people engage in a constant negotiation with both other users and with the space itself – making the usage of public space an inherently political experience. It is a place where abstract matters and concerns become real and sometimes even tangible. For instance, the often-heated debate about people on the move, which is mostly dominated by an unreasoned fear and results in irrational streams of online reproaches and demonisations, would benefit from an inclusive public interaction in public space wherein all voices are heard.

After all, physical public space significantly proves its worth as a place for face-to-face interaction. Interpersonal communication in physical space (still) holds value since communication is also dependent on non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions and body gestures).³⁴⁵ In addition, real-

³⁴⁰ See Ibid., 247.

³⁴¹ See Murray, “The Sphere, the Screen, and the Square”, 451.

³⁴² See Ibid., 461.

³⁴³ See Ibid., 461-462.

³⁴⁴ See Parkinson, “Does Democracy Require Physical Public Space?”, 102.

³⁴⁵ See Ibid., 108.

life deliberation can in general be assumed more civil than online debate, since it is easier to demonise someone without actually knowing or seeing them.³⁴⁶

The embeddedness of everyday experience in a material world and urban reality thus directly influences our acts and political stance. Nevertheless, it is not enough to assume that encounters in the public space are sufficient in themselves to represent the idea of a public sphere. Or, in other words, it is necessary to critically approach “the assumption that the sociology of public gathering can be read as a politics of the public realm”.³⁴⁷ The stakes are indeed higher: truly grounding the public sphere requires explicit visions on how to grant the possibility to everyone for expressing themselves about any topic they feel urgent.

Architecture has a non-neglectable role to play herein. The predominant neoliberal evolution of cities forces architects to develop alternative visions to public space. When considered as more than a mere cumulation of buildings but rather as a possible dispositive for empowerment of citizenship, architecture can however play an active role in the politicisation of our cities, both through its formal materiality and its potential to shape future places.³⁴⁸

Architecture as a contribution to place-shaping requires practical proposals for material settings wherein even counter-hegemonic or subaltern democratic politics can find place.³⁴⁹ Public space designs with the ambition to relate to the public sphere must therefore essentially bear the potential to be permanent urban “battlegrounds”:

“In the battleground of public space, fights endorse multiple forms, from different tactics of sit-ins to open clashes. It is less the conflictual degree of all these kinds of manifestations that matter than their sustained and continuous *presence* [...] which is crucial for those without power and deprived of other visibility, but also for assessing the primacy of the cities as strategic sites empowered by new political actors. [...] By demonstrating physical presence through free assemblies or forms of occupation, the act of presentness itself becomes a political statement, it exposes the political commitment to transforming public space through more inclusive, democratic and collaborative situations.”³⁵⁰

Within its wide variety of possible fillings, the public space then also holds the capacity of a political place.³⁵¹ Beyond a collection of objects and volumes, space becomes a relational “actor that participates actively in governance dynamics”.³⁵²

Addressing politics in public space is indeed crucial in light of societal change. In public space, practices of people are embedded – and in those practices are embedded the thoughts and manners of people that are the object of politics. Thus, in order to collectively engage all citizens in necessary societal transitions (e.g. in the light of climate change), it is essential to conceive the *political imperative* of public space through embedding its potential for political formation,

³⁴⁶ See Ibid., 108.

³⁴⁷ Amin, “Collective culture and urban public space”, 7.

³⁴⁸ See Hohlfeldt and Popescu, *Living Politics in the City*, 9-10.

³⁴⁹ See Ibid., 13.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 12-14. Emphasis added.

³⁵¹ See Ibid., 11.

³⁵² See Ibid., 11.

expression, debate and even conflict. In order to go beyond polarisation, but rather towards acknowledging the complexity of politics and societal transitions, I believe that political (inter)action in public space is indispensable.

It is nonetheless important to rightly understand the potential of public space: in line with my previously formulated conclusion on the public sphere and based on Habermas's later work, the contribution of public space to democracy is *essential but limited*. It is however precisely this essential possibility of political action or presence, and the formation of political opinion, in (urban) public space that deserves care and safeguarding, since it cannot be taken for granted in contemporary cities.

In what follows, I will develop an account of how public space can relate to its political imperative, and thereby serve as what I'll call for the sake of convenience *political public space*. Therefore, I will first describe a conceptual approach to such political public space and confront this with common models for public space. As a theoretical conclusion, I will then describe a number of essential *points of consideration* for public space design and policy in order to allow, enable or even contribute to politics in (everyday) public space.

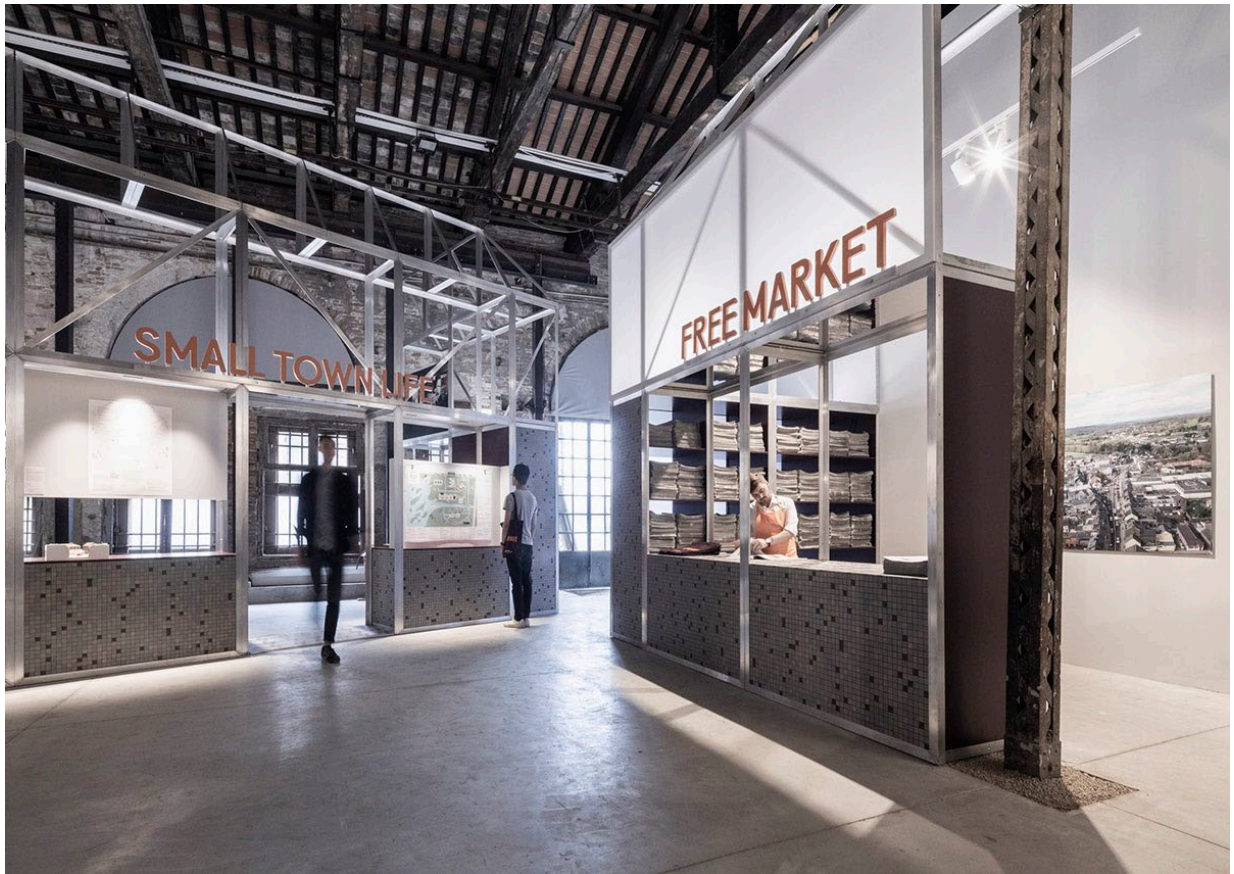


Fig. 2.3: view of the Irish Free Market Project at the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2018. (© Free Market)



Fig 2.4: indoor view of the Centraal Beheer building by Herman Hertzberger, showing the characteristic small balconies that enable individualism in a shared open space. (© Herman Hertzberger)

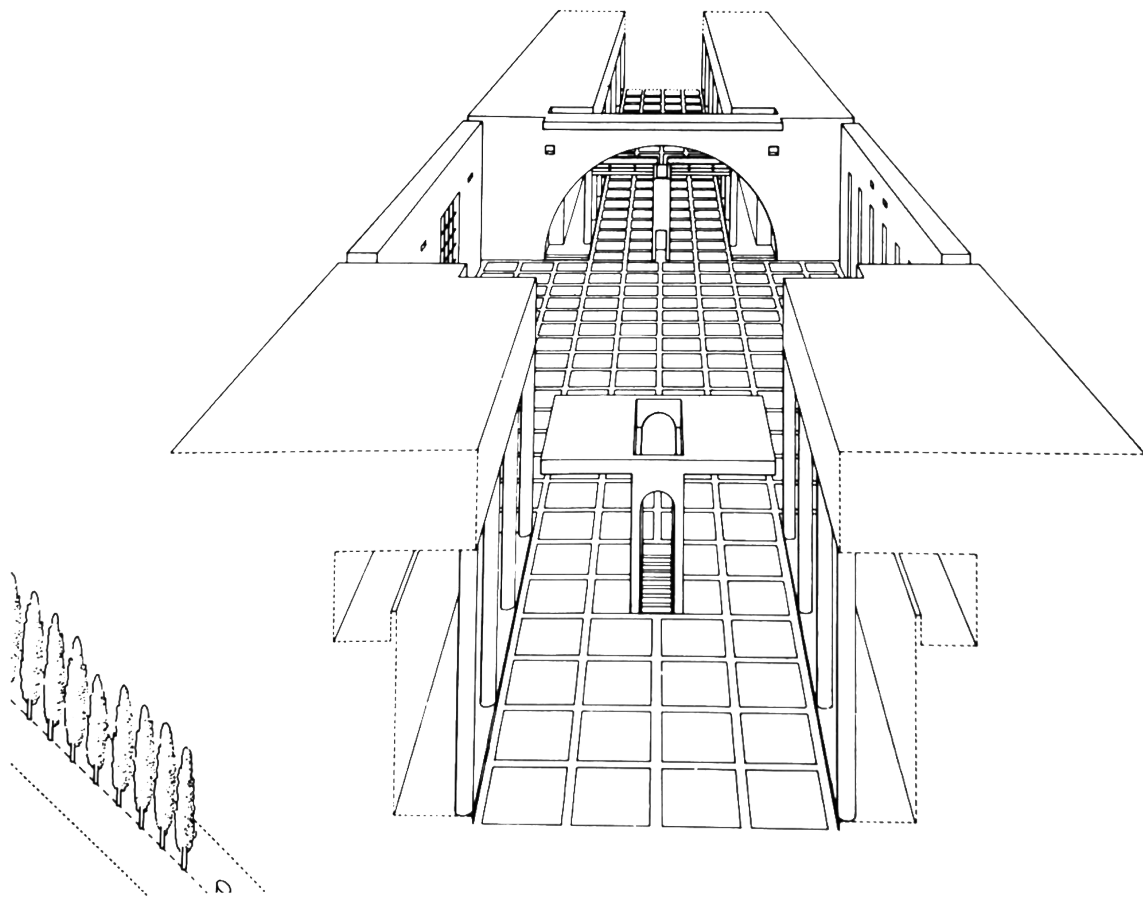


Fig 2.5: drawing of the public spine in Leon Krier's design for the Royal Mint Square competition resounding recognisable classical iconographic references. (© Leon Krier)

2.3 Public space for democracy and politics

2.3.1 Spatial metaphors for public space as a political space

Opposed to Arendt's *conditio per quam* for politics, plurality, an essential threat to political expression in public space lies in the recurrent processes of homogenisation and alleged perfecting of public space. This is a phenomenon of all times: David Harvey for instance shows how the 19th-century Haussmanian reform of Paris incorporated an attempt to generate class homogeneity within the public space of the boulevard.³⁵³ As a result, Harvey argues that the fundamental ambition was a far-going depoliticization of public space through the introduction of omnipresent *commercial space* and an accompanying reshape of the distinction between private and public “under the aegis of commodification and spectacle”.³⁵⁴

Considering public space as the spatial-physical element of a public sphere rather implies that the public character of public space must be safeguarded, and that public space continues to hold potential for deliberation, confrontation or even conflict. This in turn means that public space cannot be seen as a *community space* or place of commonality neither – since this would equally restrict the potential for political activity.³⁵⁵ In fact, both previous approaches to public space represent two sides of the same coin and idealise the common yet apolitical ideal of peaceful and convivial public space.

How should one then, from an architectural viewpoint, conceptually think of “political public space”? And how can the political imperative of public space be incorporated in the space itself, through e.g. its form? Two spatial metaphors prove especially relevant in this regard.

Bart Verschaffel has regularly addressed the spatiality of “political public space” throughout his essays. By way of contrast, he first identifies an often-used approach to understand the spectrum between private and public:

“A traditional model for thinking about the relationship between the spheres of the private and the public is that of *mutually enclosing circles*. Around a 'point' that represents the individual, we draw 'intimate circles' that delimit the sphere of the private and the familial; these small circles are situated within wider, social, communal spaces, which in turn are included in even larger-scale contexts, even larger 'circles'. In each case, the more encompassing spaces are inhabited by an even larger 'we' that incorporates the smaller social contexts: I/we live in our house, a group of small we lives in 'our' street or our neighbourhood and our city, and these groups form the communities that live in our region, our country, our Europe and our world...”³⁵⁶

Such a circular logic is based on the idea that “the common is the base of the social” as well as on the consideration that even strangers in public space are somehow connected to oneself, since after all one shares at least the same city.³⁵⁷ Verschaffel furthermore argues that the categorical

³⁵³ See Harvey, “The Politics of Public Space”, 22.

³⁵⁴ See Ibid., 27.

³⁵⁵ See Verschaffel, “Over de publieke ruimte als politieke ruimte”, 22.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 22. My translation. Emphasis added.

³⁵⁷ See Ibid., 22.

spatial distinction between private and public, or between private dwelling and public-political space of the agora or street, is essentially meant for harmonising the complex entanglement of different *freedoms* in society.³⁵⁸ Private space, therefore, is the space of personal freedom: it is for instance there that one can speak and think without others listening. Public space, on the contrary, locates other freedoms such as free gathering, free encounter and free discovery. Freedom is thus what is fundamentally at stake in, both private and public, space and sphere.

Exactly because of its public character, public space should however not be conceived as a circle inhabited by an overarching 'we'.³⁵⁹ Public space in a political sense is rather a space wherein people are explicitly democratic *citizens*. Since democracy is based on "dialectics or the play of contradictory conversation", political public space must by result be conceived as a *playground* where such a dialectical play is prone to take place.³⁶⁰ When thought of in this way, public space can serve as a physical "space of conversation, of protest and consensus, of argumentation and decision".³⁶¹

Furthermore, since ordinary encounters are not a sufficient constituent for public life, it is equally dangerous to connect political public space to the "myth of the street".³⁶² Streets are often associated with a twofold expectation. On the one hand, they are conceived as small-scale meeting places and melting pots of (co-)citizens, while on the other hand, they are seen as a *pars pro toto* for metropolitan life entailing anonymity, coincidence and heterogeneity.³⁶³ In the latter viewpoint, the street "represents then not the gathering with neighbours and fellow residents, but the un-awaited, surprising encounter with a stranger".³⁶⁴

Nevertheless, it is important to see how such a metropolitan perspective is essentially based on the same principle as the small-scale ideal:

"This classical-modern urbanity, although it breaks with the premodern commonality of the square and with the social as a circle, is nevertheless the latter's objective ally in opposition to the rationality and functionalism of modernist urbanism. After all, both define the city as a meeting space, and both see the informal encounter or spontaneous gathering as the (utopian) basic form of the social."³⁶⁵

Until here, nothing is wrong: the idea of the street as a meeting place is rather precious. Nevertheless, it is essential to regard this vision of the street as an ideal of *social* significance.³⁶⁶ It is a place of convivial social life where relations are based on vicinity and continuously searches for a balance between safety and freedom: the aimed-for objective of the street is a feeling of *contentment*.³⁶⁷ Therefore, the street cannot be equated to *political* space: streets are indeed not determined by a logic of discussion, nor by a logic of need and necessity, but rather by a (non-

³⁵⁸ See Verschaffel, "Publiek/privaat", 124.

³⁵⁹ See Verschaffel, "Over de publieke ruimte als politieke ruimte", 22.

³⁶⁰ See Ibid., 22.

³⁶¹ See Verschaffel, "Publiek/privaat", 133.

³⁶² See Verschaffel, "De mythe van de straat", 101.

³⁶³ See Ibid., 101-102.

³⁶⁴ See Ibid., 102.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 102-103. My translation.

³⁶⁶ See Ibid., 107.

³⁶⁷ See Ibid., 108-109.

literal) logic of consumption.³⁶⁸ To obtain a feeling of contentment implies an atmosphere where people can stumble upon their desire or an object of their desire, without being accountable for this desire.³⁶⁹

For Verschaffel, this logic of consumption obstructs the street from being a conceptual model for political public space:

“Those who start from the principle that the street is a political space and that the true *homo politicus* is the man of the street, and therefore takes to the streets to solicit the opinion of ‘the people’, *de facto* lets the consumer speak. [...] Why should one make a difference between the way one chooses politicians and the way one chooses a car? The result is that reasons no longer play a role in voting behaviour and that the best sellers and the most attractive idols win. [...] *the myth of the street is the ideology of populism.*”³⁷⁰

For public space to be political, it is elementary to go beyond desire in favour of (reasoned) debate. Verschaffel’s (quite Habermasian) argument in this way places a lucid reflection on the need to critically approach politics in public space. This is not to say that the physical street is not highly valuable public space, often even for achieving political influence, but rather that one should not easily take “everyday street usages” as a fit conceptual model for political public space – the political imperative of public space is about more than this.

Besides the first metaphor of the playground, the *theatre* metaphor is also commonly used to describe how political public space should function. In essence, this metaphor holds a similar belief as the playground metaphor, namely that political deliberation is somehow a *play* (wherein the dual meaning of the word is fully embraced). In order to engage in politics, both in Habermas’ formal and informal sphere, one must ‘play the game’. Designing a public space is defining the boundaries of the playground or theatre, which are thus the two spaces possibly associated to the meanings of the term “play”. The purpose is thereby to clearly emphasise the constituting logic of critical play irrespective of personal desires in those spaces as opposed to e.g. private spaces.³⁷¹

The element of performance is inherent to architecture:

“Architecture is performative as built structures and structured physical objects, as embodying and embodied acts. [...] Architecture situates performances and makes the representation of the execution of acts possible. Built spaces configure fields of activities: they can identify, alleviate and make comprehensible activities which take place in them; they can incorporate labour, appropriate it or exhibit it publicly. They organise movements, perceptions and emphasize particular zones of attention. Also, they form points of unification and confrontation.”³⁷²

Importantly, performance must not be wrongly understood here: it does not imply disguise, but rather indicates that one must be willing to engage in a context that is potentially unknown and unfamiliar and thereby uncover, or show, oneself to others. In parallel with this, public space must

³⁶⁸ See Ibid., 109.

³⁶⁹ See Ibid., 110.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 110-111. My translation. Both original and added emphasis.

³⁷¹ See Ibid., 114. Although Verschaffel subsequently emphasises the importance of institutions (often seen as semi-public spaces), his argument is also applicable to other types of public space.

³⁷² Schwarte, “Performative Architecture”.

also not be understood as a literal scenography (as e.g. post-modernists sometimes tended to do). Both metaphors of *playground* and *theatre* essentially indicate conceptual models that one can hold in mind when addressing the political imperative of public space.

Building further upon the theatre metaphor, architecture is not a mere structural parameter but rather “that which lets an action appear”.³⁷³ (Political) action requires a *stage*, which resounds the relational perspective I developed earlier. A similar performative perspective is also useful (and common) to describe democratic processes:

“While discursive threads may appear to have an existence independent of the people who pick them up and use them, they depend on being ‘grounded’ in activity, performance and physicality. Democracy is not merely the interplay of arguments and reasons in some abstract public sphere, but is performed, by people, with aims and motives, who require stages on which to perform and audiences to perform to.”³⁷⁴

So, when combining the performative character of architecture and democracy, it becomes possible to crystallise the need for a physical stage for democratic politics. John Parkinson in this regard distinguishes three main political actions that require a physical component to gain visibility and develop a collective voice: making public claims; making collective decisions; and scrutinising the powerful.³⁷⁵

While people often (with right and reason) distrust what others say about themselves, actions that can be seen or experienced with one’s own eyes create belief in public claims.³⁷⁶ Therefore, making such claims requires physical space in order to convince others of their legitimacy (since it remains, after all, an essential feature of democracy to gather majority support). As for collective decision-making (although opinion-making is perhaps a more rightful ambition), it follows the same logic that rhetoric, persuasion and voting require physical gatherings in order to be effective.³⁷⁷ Lastly, in regard to the action of scrutinising the powerful:

“Considering the *scrutiny role* in democratic performance, then, it is a significant advantage to have a single, readily-identifiable and prominent stage on which the powerful must perform. It puts the powerful under the ‘spotlight’ and keeps them there. This, I suspect, is one reason why people find the existence of ‘off-stage’ political actors so troubling. It is not just that these people are unelected or hard to hold accountable for their actions, but that they cannot be clearly seen on the stage, that they cannot be *located* in a physical sense and thus have the light of publicity shone on their words and actions.”³⁷⁸

Summarising the performative importance of physical space for democracy, Parkinson highlights four key assets.³⁷⁹ First, its potential for interpersonal communication. Secondly, because “the

³⁷³ See Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Parkinson, “Does Democracy Require Physical Public Space?”, 103.

³⁷⁵ See Ibid., 108.

³⁷⁶ See Ibid., 110.

³⁷⁷ See Ibid., 110.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 110-111. Original emphasis.

³⁷⁹ See Ibid., 111-112.

making of *ethos* claims is easier”.³⁸⁰ Thirdly, collective physical performance can have an impressive effect and, inversely, physical performance obliges the powerful to act publicly and not hidden in the shadows. Lastly, physical stages also provide material that the media can subsequently use to transmit the made claims and give them platform through the virtual public spheres.

Clearly, any asset of physical public space is not sufficient for democracy. However, this refers again to the *limited but essential* contribution of both public sphere and space to democracy. Although not sufficient, they are nonetheless necessary for vital democracies to which citizens feel connected and by which they feel heard and represented. So, it is necessary to respect this political imperative of public space and constantly evaluate its presence.

The metaphors of the *playground* and the *theatre* are very useful to represent how public space must be thought of, or imagined, in order to (potentially) serve as a place of political dissent, collective voice development,... While they underline the political imperative of public space, it is necessary to combine such physical conceptualisations with socio-spatial patterns and usages. I will therefore finish the second chapter by formulating a somewhat more applied approach towards political public space. However, before doing so, it is interesting to first lay down some dominant views on the purpose and value of public space in contemporary cities. Within those, it is then possible to identify the models wherein the possibility for political expression receives attention and perhaps becomes somewhat embedded. When subsequently combining valuable models of public space with metaphorical conceptions of political space, it will be possible to formulate points of consideration on the crucial features to political public space.

2.3.2 (Non-)models for (political) public space

In his influential article *The End of Public Space?* from 1995 (republished as chapter four in his equally impactful book *The Right to the City* in 2003), Don Mitchell argues that there are “two opposed, and perhaps irreconcilable, ideological visions of the nature and purpose of public space”.³⁸¹ Guided by a case study on the struggles over People’s Park in Berkeley in the early 1990s, Mitchell opposes the activist view on public space to the view of the university representatives. As for the first, they promote a public space marked by free interaction and absence of coercion by power, thereby accepting the possible risk for disorder.³⁸² While a total absence of power relations might be a too idealistic wish, this viewpoint justifiably highlights public space as an equitable “space within which political movements can organise an expand into wider arenas”.³⁸³

Opposed to this is a perspective on public space as a platform for recreation and entertainment. Such a public space is fundamentally unjust because of its normative view on what (and who) the public must be so that public space can become an “orderly retreat where a properly behaved

³⁸⁰ The concept of *ethos* dates back to Aristotle and refers to the rhetorical elements that convince an audience of the credibility and legitimacy of a speaker. Together with *logos* (based on argumentation) and *pathos* (based on emotions), this triptych forms the basis of rhetorical persuasion.

³⁸¹ See Mitchell, “The End of Public Space?”, 115.

³⁸² See Ibid., 115.

³⁸³ See Ibid., 115.

public might experience the spectacle of the city”.³⁸⁴ This second view on public space can be furthermore problematised in multiple ways. Not only does it misunderstand the performative character of architecture, it also sees public space as a place of (restricted) community aiming at comfort and contentment. Clearly, similar accounts of public space must be countered since they continuously restrict the political imperative of public space.

Mitchell’s bifurcation roughly corresponds to Henri Lefebvre’s distinction between *representational* space and *representations of* space (which are part of a conceptual triad for Lefebvre together with spatial practices).³⁸⁵ The first indicates the lived space-in-use: it is the space of inhabitants and users and acknowledges the relational character of space.³⁸⁶ The latter by contrast refers to space that is planned and ordered by scientists, technocrats and engineers.³⁸⁷ Moreover, while the first is related to “the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art”, the latter is merely tied to relations of production.³⁸⁸ Unfortunately, Lefebvre argues, the dominant spaces in contemporary society are representations of space because it are those that deal with the conception of the production of space.³⁸⁹

Building further on Lefebvre, Mitchell interestingly adds a third variant, which he deems even more essential in view of political expression: spaces *for representation*.³⁹⁰ Herewith, he describes how public space is also explicitly the place wherein a political movement or a social group can claim to be seen as a part of “the public”.³⁹¹ This continuous negotiation of *who* constitutes the public, takes place in public space – and it is this, among other things, that makes public space crucial for democracy as representing the will and feeling of the people. Beyond utilitarian thinking, it is therefore important to conceive public space as a representation of society – which means public space design must necessarily address the difficult question of *how society wants to be represented in and through space*.

Another very useful categorisation of ideological models for public space is given by Kurt Iveson. Iveson derives four major models, all with their own respective ideal images, which he suggests normally receive special attention when discussing public space. First, there is the *ceremonial* model of public space. This model considers grand urban open spaces, where important events can be celebrated and where the triumph of the public over the market is represented, as the only genuine public space.³⁹² Such ceremonial spaces, mostly large squares in state ownership, are indeed potent sites for protest as well as celebration because of their representative status and scale.³⁹³ Nonetheless, despite their public status, these spaces are not always welcoming all kinds of political action since states may be unwilling to give platform to certain protests.³⁹⁴ So, while

³⁸⁴ See Ibid., 115.

³⁸⁵ See Ibid., 115.

³⁸⁶ See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

³⁸⁷ See Ibid., 38.

³⁸⁸ See Ibid., 33.

³⁸⁹ See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 75.

³⁹⁰ See Mitchell, “The End of Public Space?”, 115.

³⁹¹ See Ibid., 115.

³⁹² See Iveson, “Putting the public back into public space”, 22.

³⁹³ See Ibid., 23.

³⁹⁴ See Ibid., 23.

they inherently bear high potential for political action, the spatial regulations of those squares must be explicitly taken into account when evaluating their value as political space.

Next, there is the *community* model of public space. In its own way, this model however tends to be rather homogenising (because of its often picturesque imagery) and exclusionary in regard to the wanted community feeling (e.g. towards the homeless).³⁹⁵ Furthermore, as I explained earlier, political public space must fundamentally not be conceived as community space. Third, there is also the *liberal* model of public space. In this perspective, the emphasis is put on accessibility and potential multi-usage of public spaces (which is in line with the emphasis on maximal liberty and individual choice in overarching liberal thought).³⁹⁶ Nonetheless, although noble at its base, the liberal thought on public space regularly fails to live up to its own ideals and is often, through its ignorance of social difference, rather exclusionary in practice too.³⁹⁷ Thereby, this model logically resounds the criticism on Habermas's theory of the public sphere which is also often classified as liberal. In addition, both the community and liberal model tend to be physical determinist in their considerations on public space.³⁹⁸

So, in line with Nancy Fraser's argument on counter-publics and the resulting diversity of publics, a fourth model is the *multi-public* model of public space.³⁹⁹ This model highlights four contemporary "city life virtues" for public space: social differentiation without exclusion, a variety of groups and uses, encounters with an unfamiliar subjectivity (because of the proposed diversity) and supra-community publicness.⁴⁰⁰ While this model is certainly most promising, two issues nonetheless require special attention.

First, while stimulating diversity and thereby the confirmation of multiple publics such as the homeless in public space is commendable, it is essential to remain aware that "while reducing the intolerance of homeless people, it runs the risk of tolerating homelessness as a part of city life". What I mean by this is that, while recognising homeless as part of the public in public space is positive, this clearly should not mean that an adequate response to the issue of homelessness in cities is no longer needed. This problem for instance occurs in the Brussels Capital Region. Acknowledging the inevitable presence of homeless and drug users in underground station 'Merode', a designated zone has been defined for this part of the public.⁴⁰¹ In a positive framing, this could be seen as a confirmation of diversity. However, in practice it is rather a desperate attempt to hide the policy failure and reduce the grim 'underworld'-feeling in the station. Adequate and effective political responses are still rarely formulated towards the underlying issue: paralysed by the numerous organs and different levels of public governance, the buck is rather passed from one politician to another.⁴⁰²

Secondly, it is essential not to make the determinist theoretical error of assuming social groups to be formed prior to their usage of public space, but rather relationally through their usage of

³⁹⁵ See Ibid., 25.

³⁹⁶ See Ibid., 26.

³⁹⁷ See Ibid., 26.

³⁹⁸ See Ibid., 26.

³⁹⁹ Iveson departs from Marion Young's book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) for this multi-public model.

⁴⁰⁰ See Ibid., 27-28.

⁴⁰¹ See X., "Afgebakende zones voor daklozen en drugsverslaafden in Brussels metrostation Merode".

⁴⁰² See Van Maele, "Drugsgeweld escaleert, toch moet Brussel wachten op politieke actie".

space.⁴⁰³ Public space serves as a medium for group formation, and the membership of various publics is fluid and overlapping.⁴⁰⁴ Notwithstanding those possible errors, a multi-public model of public space proves particularly interesting towards a conception of political public space.

2.3.3 Socio-physical and architectural considerations on political public space

“There is, therefore, an intriguing mix of sociogeographical perceptions, expectations, and material conditions at work that need to be unpacked if we are to think more cogently about how urban design in general, and the shaping of urban public space in particular, might influence politics in the public sphere.”⁴⁰⁵

As a conclusion before addressing the Brussels Capital Region as a case study, I will crystallise a few essential features that are indispensable for potentially connecting public space to its political imperative. Needless to say, no listing can be exhaustive. Besides this, one must equally remain aware not to fall into the restrictive trap of normative prescriptions. Therefore, I choose not to construct a set of allegedly binding criteria which a public space should fulfil in order to be a “political public space”. After all, strict definitions for this are impossible to formulate since public space, and the extent to which it fulfils its political imperative, are highly context-bound.⁴⁰⁶

I will rather lay down some elementary points of consideration when evaluating to which extent, and in which ways, specific public spaces are allowing, enabling or even contributing to political action and political expression of citizens. As extensively argued throughout the previous (sub-)chapters, political public space requires a relational approach. Any political public space will therefore be determined by both social and physical elements.

A first important factor to political public space is the degree of **accessibility**. This is in line with, inter alia, Habermas’ account of the public sphere and Madanipour’s definition of public space. Both indeed argue that accessibility in disregard of one’s status, class, origin, ... is a constitutional factor for politics in public space. The experience of accessibility is related to several factors and elements in public space. One can in this regard for instance think about the extent to which a public space is decolonised (in the broad sense that I explained earlier). Public space can only serve democratic goals when it is democratic and representative for all in its own nature and appearance. Both direct and indirect restrictions to the usage of specific spaces, through mental and physical obstacles reducing the democratic accessibility of a space, clearly endanger the politics of public space.

Nonetheless, questions can be asked about *how* maximal accessibility to public space is ensured. Is a public space where anyone can enter at any time, and with any different intention, always the most accessible space for everyone? Formulated differently, does the accessibility of a public space for all reduce the true accessibility, in practice, for some? This is an urgent and very complex question which public space design and accompanying policy must necessarily address. It is my belief that the final ambition must always remain spaces that are accessible to all at any time.

⁴⁰³ See Iveson, “Putting the public back into public space”, 29.

⁴⁰⁴ See Ibid., 30.

⁴⁰⁵ Harvey, “The Political Economy of Public Space”, 18.

⁴⁰⁶ This impossibility of a strict list of criteria, or an absolute definition, was also emphasised on multiple occasions and by several different persons during the interviews that I conducted.

Nonetheless, achieving such social openness of space requires a mentality change wherein everybody respects the total freedom of others at all time. It can be argued that this ideal can perhaps only be acquired through a gradual evolution towards the ideal of co-existence, while slowly normalising such behaviour in society.

Somewhat related to the foregoing is the level of **control** in public space. As explained earlier, overly policed public spaces restrain personal (political) expressions in public space in various ways. However, entirely unregulated spaces (wherein regulation is not necessarily understood as a state matter, but can also be e.g. social control implemented by a community of people that take care of this space) are only rarely meaningful places. Clearly, a balance must be found between both extremes while avoiding the fundamental threat to (political) public space of excessive securitisation.

Thirdly, the **multi-dimensionality** of public space is essential. By this I am referring in particular to features of multi-publicity and multi-functionality. A variety of uses and groups (both socio-economically, socio-sexually, ...) in public space is essential for complex political (inter)action to take place. Or, in the words of Richard Sennett, who also famously drew on the modern decline of public sphere and public life in the 1970s from a sociological viewpoint in his book *The Fall of Public Man*:

“[...] an essential component of public space: the overlay of function in a single territory, which creates complexities of experience on that turf.”⁴⁰⁷

It is indeed only through complexity, versatility and pluralism that public space can serve as **space for representation**. This has two reasons. First, it is from both individual and group claims in (multi-)public spaces, demanding to be conceived as a part of the public, that both political deliberation and agonism subsequently originate. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, public space design and usage essentially comes down to addressing the question of how society wants to represent itself. So, public space is also a physical space that represents collective imaginations about society. Since society is becoming increasingly more diverse and plural, public space should logically follow this trend in order to be representative.

The previous considerations furthermore imply political public space to contain, or at least allow, possibilities for **alternative/non-predestined usage, claim-making, gathering, transgression and even temporary appropriation or occupation**. This is an increasingly restrained feature in homogenised, smoothened and gentrified urban environments where undefined elements in space are rigorously eliminated. Nonetheless, political public space requires vocal, spatial as well as bodily acts of scrutinising and even criticising the state in public space. Spatial possibilities for this purpose can originate rather unexpected and subsequently be exploited by bottom-up initiatives but can as well be inherently embedded in a public space design. As for the first, Jeffrey Hou explains this type of political action through his notion of insurgent public spaces:

“[...] instances of self-made urban spaces, reclaimed and appropriated sites, temporary events, and flash mobs, as well as informal gathering places created by predominantly

⁴⁰⁷ Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 297. Although impactful, I did not explicitly address Richard Sennett's account of the public sphere earlier in this thesis due to lack of space and because his analysis shows some resemblances with Habermas. Elements of his writing have nonetheless been (indirectly) important to my account of the public sphere.

marginalized communities, have provided new expressions of the collective realms in the contemporary city. No longer confined to the archetypal categories of neighborhood parks, public plaza, and civic architecture, these *insurgent public spaces* challenge the conventional, codified notion of public and the making of space.”⁴⁰⁸

In essence, insurgent public spaces can appear anywhere, as long as they are not subject to repression. Especially interesting from an architectural viewpoint are however the spatial designs which consider such possibilities already while in the project phase. An oft-cited and particularly illustrative example in this regard is Bernard Tschumi’s Parc de La Villette in Paris, which was conceived in the early 1980s (figures 2.6 and 2.7). As Teresa Hoskyns states about Tschumi and the park:

“[...] shows how the design of form can be used to produce political and democratic space. In this case, the challenge of design is to design form that is as indeterminate as possible, to remove function from form in order to allow for appropriations, chance and events; or if form does follow function then the function is multiple. For Bernard Tschumi, architecture poses the possibility of constructing the conditions that make it possible for non-hierarchical non-traditional society to exist within the relationships between spaces and events. [...] Tschumi argues that to define space architecturally is to determine spatial boundaries.”⁴⁰⁹

Architecture is for Tschumi an inherently social and public matter, foremost aimed at creating potential places for public activities.⁴¹⁰ Architecture is in this perspective seen as an event itself while continuously creating a “dynamic, unstable place which allows architectural narratives to unfold through events”.⁴¹¹ The iconic red follies throughout the park, which have the scale of small buildings but are often rather empty structures supposed to evolve into points of activities and events, showcase this vision.⁴¹²

Tschumi explains his felt need to approach architectural spaces as spaces that must explicitly embed transgressing use and citizen appropriation through an “anthropomorphic perspective”. Herein, architecture is regarded as the materialisation of social norms, which means architecture must always explicitly consider which values it wants to represent.⁴¹³ Following Tschumi, the most appropriate public space is therefore an “empty form”: while impossible to become permanently dominated (which is also a dangerous constraint to the political character of a public space), it is continuously open for appropriation, negotiation of diverse publics and unexpected political events.⁴¹⁴

I will not analyse whether the specific case of the Parc de la Villette is a success today, but Tschumi’s design approach to public space is particularly interesting. His global perspective on architecture, as being the creation of conditions for encounters and activities within a dynamic public sphere, sounds familiar and leads to a sixth important point of consideration.⁴¹⁵ In line with

⁴⁰⁸ Hou, “(Not) your everyday public space”, 2. Original emphasis.

⁴⁰⁹ Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 78.

⁴¹⁰ See Avermaete and Havik, “Accommodating the public sphere”, 45.

⁴¹¹ See Ibid., 54.

⁴¹² See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 78.

⁴¹³ See Avermaete and Havik, “Accommodating the public sphere”, 49-53.

⁴¹⁴ See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 78.

⁴¹⁵ See Avermaete and Havik, “Accommodating the public sphere”, 55.

the conceptual metaphors of theatre and playground, political public space serves as a **stage** for (performative) action. This imagery essentially connects to the need for a public space design that creates, or at least enables, **visibility and audibility** of its users. Visibility is important in this regard as a driver for interactions in public space and as a way of claiming *recognition* as part of the public by e.g. subaltern groups.⁴¹⁶ As De Backer argues, “many small acts are micropolitical, in the sense that they may be covert, tacit, innocuous, or unintentional, but they still are an expression of a political stance and a practice of protest”.⁴¹⁷ So, visibility is a tool for gaining political action which must be embedded in space and spatial practices. After all, it are ordinary objects such as public furniture, benches, etc. that create an atmosphere which triggers either an emotion of belonging or a feeling of being non-welcome.⁴¹⁸

An interesting architectural archetype in this regard is the *platform*. While referring to a rather broad spatial artefact, namely a raise in the surface level, it is striking that even the slightest elevation of surface already bears the symbolism of a stage on which to perform.⁴¹⁹ Platforms are distinctive in their potential to define a space without strictly enclosing it but through subtle manipulations of the ground, resulting in an ambivalent formal type “that both enables and restricts what happens upon it”.⁴²⁰ As Brussels-based architecture practice Dogma beautifully shows in their book *Platforms*, the historical importance and long-standing presence of the platform as an archetype for architecture (ranging from e.g. the ancient Greek “theatrical circle” in the Sanctuary of the Gods in Samothrace, which embeds associations to gathering, ritual and performance, to “Mies’s subtle use of steps in the Seagram Building’s plinth” which monumentalises the *empty space* in front of the tower) showcases a widespread understanding of its inherent theatricality and meaning as a formal gesture which puts public emphasis on the actions that take place on it (figures 2.8 and 2.9).⁴²¹

A comparable architectonic thinking of space as stage has historically been theorised by e.g. situationists and Team X members, among whom emblematically Aldo Van Eyck. Van Eyck was an early advocate for the importance of place-making processes in spaces. Summarising the core of his thought in the well-known Otterlo circles, he clarifies the stage relationship between architecture and human life through the polarity of a *by us* (wherein *us* refers to architects) and *for us* circle (figure 2.10). For Van Eyck, architects can indeed shape spatial-formal reality, but cannot intervene in the relational reality of human coexistence. So, a contemporary architectural form should in essence be a space for imagination, in which imaginaries can play a game with concrete forms.⁴²²

This thinking is, for instance, very visible in the playgrounds designed by Van Eyck in post-war Amsterdam. While remaining abstract and rather undefined, they provide at the same a series of physical elements which trigger participation and active imagination.⁴²³ The playgrounds therefore implicitly question “the relationship between inside and outside, figure and ground, top

⁴¹⁶ See De Backer, “Regimes of Visibility”, 308-309.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 310.

⁴¹⁸ See Ibid., 313.

⁴¹⁹ See Dogma, *Platforms*, 4.

⁴²⁰ See Ibid., 4.

⁴²¹ See Ibid., 5-6.

⁴²² See Terlouw, “Le musée imaginaire”, 16.

⁴²³ See Dogma, *Platforms*, 7.

and bottom, projecting an understanding of the platform as a defined an yet simultaneously unlimited space of interaction” (figure 2.11).⁴²⁴

Van Eyck’s thought is characteristically marked by the use of such dualities (think for instance also about bifurcations between mind-space, ...). To bridge those duo-phenomena, extensive detail and care is given in his designs to the ‘in-between’ or, in physical form, the *threshold* between different spaces. Such thresholds must be regarded as essential features to define a space:

“She is not a ‘line without thickness’, but an area. Overall, she is an interruption in a continuous movement that makes ‘two and more’ worlds simultaneously tangibly present. [...] The notion of threshold thus fairly accurately indicates the place of the imaginary: it lies between the artefact and the real modes of order as established in the legal, in programmes and other predetermined binding practices.”⁴²⁵

As I explained earlier, a social (public) space is not the same as a political space. However, *within* social spaces such as the street, it is relevant that distinct political spaces are formed, or can at least potentially be formed. After all, societal transformations must take place in everyday (public) spaces – so, it is important that those transitions are addressed in these spaces too (making it constituents of informal public spheres).

In line with the foregoing, carefulness to the **articulation of boundaries** is thus necessary when evaluating political public spaces. Verschaffel in this regard explains that it is important to somehow demark the boundaries of a political space through architectural gestures or (implicit) thresholds, in order to make people aware of entering the playground.⁴²⁶ Or, as Harvey similarly argues about the necessity of both boundaries and interconnectedness:

“The character of public space counts for little or nothing politically unless it connects symbiotically with the organization of institutional (in this case, commercial, although in other cases it may be religious or educational institutions) and private spaces. It is the relational connectivity among public, quasipublic, and private spaces that counts when it comes to politics in the public sphere.”⁴²⁷

Nevertheless, a boundary must not become exclusionary nor segregating: everybody should in practice be able to easily cross into the political arena. It is rather an act of clearly defining space (physically as well as socially) and thereby giving it a characteristic nature. Such thinking also resounds Madanipour’s forementioned argument that the essential task for urban designers is indeed the articulation of boundaries. This articulation can be done in various material ways. For instance, the surface articulation (resounding the archetypal platform) and pavement of public spaces can explicitly formulate relations between distinct spheres and thereby even “facilitate the connections between the parts of the built environment and the person inhabiting it, between the private sense of being and the public sense of place – or more extraordinarily, vice-versa”.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁴²⁵ Terlouw, “Le musée imaginaire”, 16. My translation.

⁴²⁶ See Verschaffel, “De mythe van de straat”, 114.

⁴²⁷ Harvey, “The Political Economy of Public Space”, 31.

⁴²⁸ Luz, “On pavements and other public groundscapes”, 99.

Another important point of consideration is related to **scale**. The political imperative associated to a specific public space, and thereby both the nature of its political use and its potential for action, is indeed strongly depending on the scale of the public space in question. This difference shows when comparing the type of politics on a large “ceremonial” public square, think of for instance Tiananmen Square and the famous 1989 protests, or on a small-scale “everyday” square consisting of only a few benches, with people silently discussing daily matters. Those different natures and associated political imperatives do not imply a hierarchisation. It is, on the contrary, the consideration of politics on all different scale levels, through both hearing and addressing individual or shared concerns, which constitutes an antidote to polarisation.⁴²⁹

To understand the emergence of politics in public space, it is equally crucial to look into the **relationship between that space and the media, institutions, ...** After all, political public space is a constituent of a larger public sphere which involves multiple practices of actively living citizenship. This means that, in order for space to truly achieve political value, it must necessarily relate to other dimensions of the public sphere. Besides the physical usage of the space, an essential feature of political public space is also attached to its imagery in the media and towards the decision-making institutions. The perception that public spaces and their usages generate, are political and form a trigger to public debate in themselves. This is somewhat in line with the visibility element, although on a different level.

Moreover, since the maintenance of a public sphere requires citizens to step up and speak out, the political imperative of public space can only be fulfilled through a sense of **collective action** “activating” the space. This feature in essence relates back to the relational perspective on space, showing further how space and social patterns must be considered as a mutually supporting whole in order to grasp the true meanings of spaces. Besides design, the collective usage of space by a public, and the imagery thereby created and diffused to other publics, is at least as important to make public space political.

Collective action has multiple forms and scale-levels. The first thing that comes to mind when considering collective action patterns is, of course, the aspect of occasional large-scale uprisings. Nonetheless, I also intend to indicate the everyday **co-creation** of spaces, the **co-management** of its spatial quality and, at best, the **participatory processes** starting from the design phase of a public space under this denominator. Such continuous involvement of citizen users in the creation of space is “necessary for a spatialisation of democratic practice, the construction of political identity and for a politicisation of public space”.⁴³⁰ Direct engagement generates a place-value to a public space, which in its turn makes a space likely to become a locus of political expression for the involved citizens. Furthermore, in order to reflect on the practices embedded in public space, it is quintessential to first acknowledge those practices that require reflection.

As Hoskyns points out, and in line with remarks I made while formulating a conclusion on the public sphere, it is nonetheless “important not to think that participation can replace representative democracy”.⁴³¹ Instead, it is the following relationship that is rightful:

⁴²⁹ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁴³⁰ See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 177.

⁴³¹ See Ibid., 177.

“[...] in order for democracy to be spatial and for power not to become ‘concretised’ or embedded, democracy requires a coexistence of different democratic forms, both representative and participatory. Participation is central to politicisation of public space, as it is through active citizenship that public space becomes democratic, but representation is necessary to prevent power becoming embedded or concretised and to maintain the image of the empty place.”⁴³²

Herein, an empty place for Hoskyns refers to the ideal image of a space free of domination, permanent occupation and power, but rather a democratic space simultaneously created by multiple subjects and serving as a “space for the political, conflict and passion, for politics and association and for public discourse”.⁴³³ More than a fixed entity, political public space is indeed a permanent process of engagement, struggle and (re)politicisation.

Therefore, it is indispensable to regard political public space as a matter of **time-space**. After all, publicness of a space is a multidimensional process and a permanent “creation of practices rather than a preestablished frame”.⁴³⁴ Similarly, political public space is rather a constantly evolving practice than a stable entity. Space receives its specific value and meaning through *placemaking* processes of its users. It is a product of continuous formation and distortion and is therefore never-finished: both its conception and use unceasingly evolve in a dialectical interaction with each other.⁴³⁵

One final remark can then be made. Notwithstanding the both spatio-temporal and relational character of political public space, I believe that architects can still play a major role in, at least, initially embedding the political imperative in the design of a public space. Or, as formulated by Dogma:

“It is only the utopian reinterpretation of the platform [...] – as defined and yet-unbound space – that opens up radically alternative ways of using the ground beyond possession and control. Opening up the design of the ground to new forms of imagination is particularly urgent today, when access and use of differently-abled users demands a radical rethinking of the architecture of the ground towards inclusive solutions. It is precisely the right to freely access and use the ground as exemplified by Van Eyck’s playgrounds that should inspire alternative ways of conceiving the open spaces of our cities. Of course spatial justice is something that goes far beyond what architectural form can do on its own, but architecture can and should be mobilized to offer at least *glimpses of unforeseen possibilities*.”⁴³⁶

⁴³² Ibid., 177.

⁴³³ See Ibid., 176.

⁴³⁴ See De Backer, “Regimes of Visibility”, 308-309.

⁴³⁵ See Hoskyns, *The Empty Place*, 179.

⁴³⁶ See Dogma, *Platforms*, 7. Original emphasis.

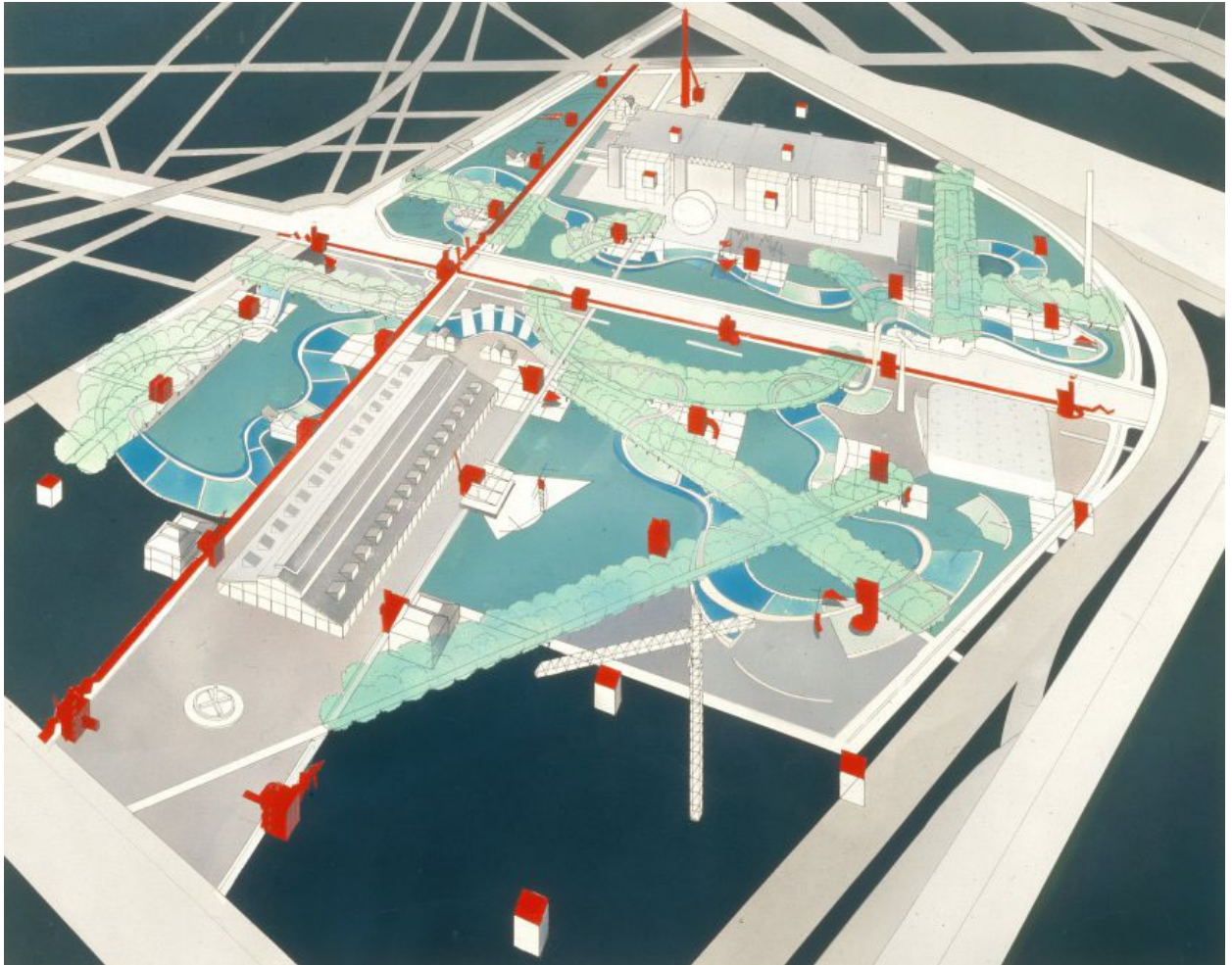


Fig. 2.6: conceptual drawing of the Parc de la Villette showing the red follies arranged on a grid throughout the park. (© Bernard Tschumi Architects)



Fig. 2.7: view on two of the red follies in the Parc de la Villette. (© Bernard Tschumi Architects)



Fig. 2.8: steps of the ancient Greek Theatral Complex at the Sanctuary of the Gods in Samothrace, 600-400 BC. (© Dogma)



Fig. 2.9: empty space with plinth and stairs in front of the Seagram Building in New York by Mies van der Rohe, 1958. (© Dogma)

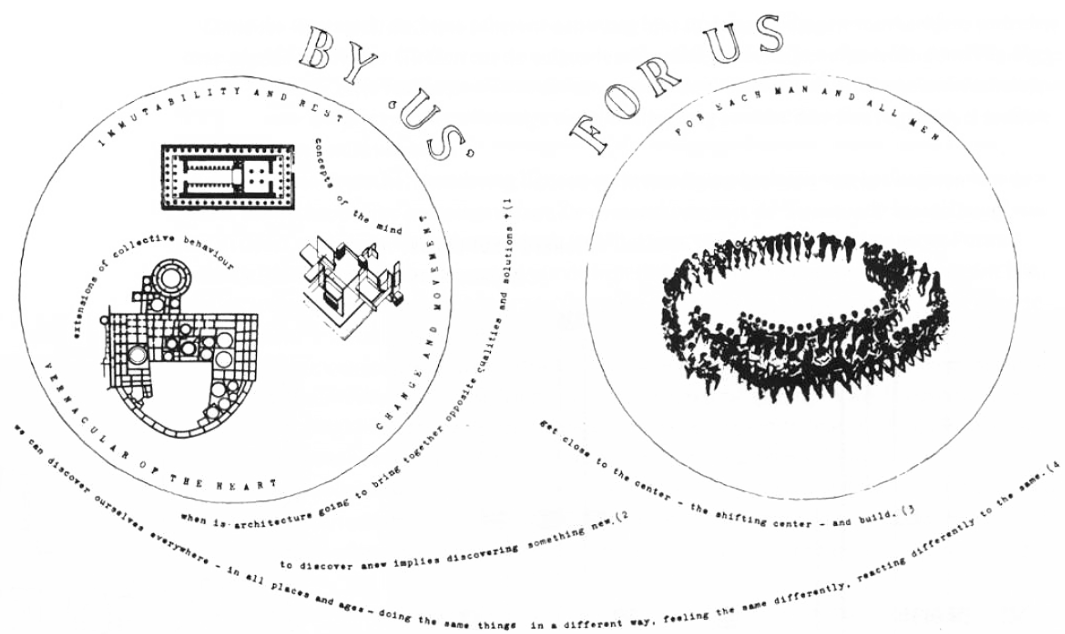


Fig. 2.10: Otterlo circles by Aldo Van Eyck, 2nd version of 1967. (© Aldo Van Eyck)

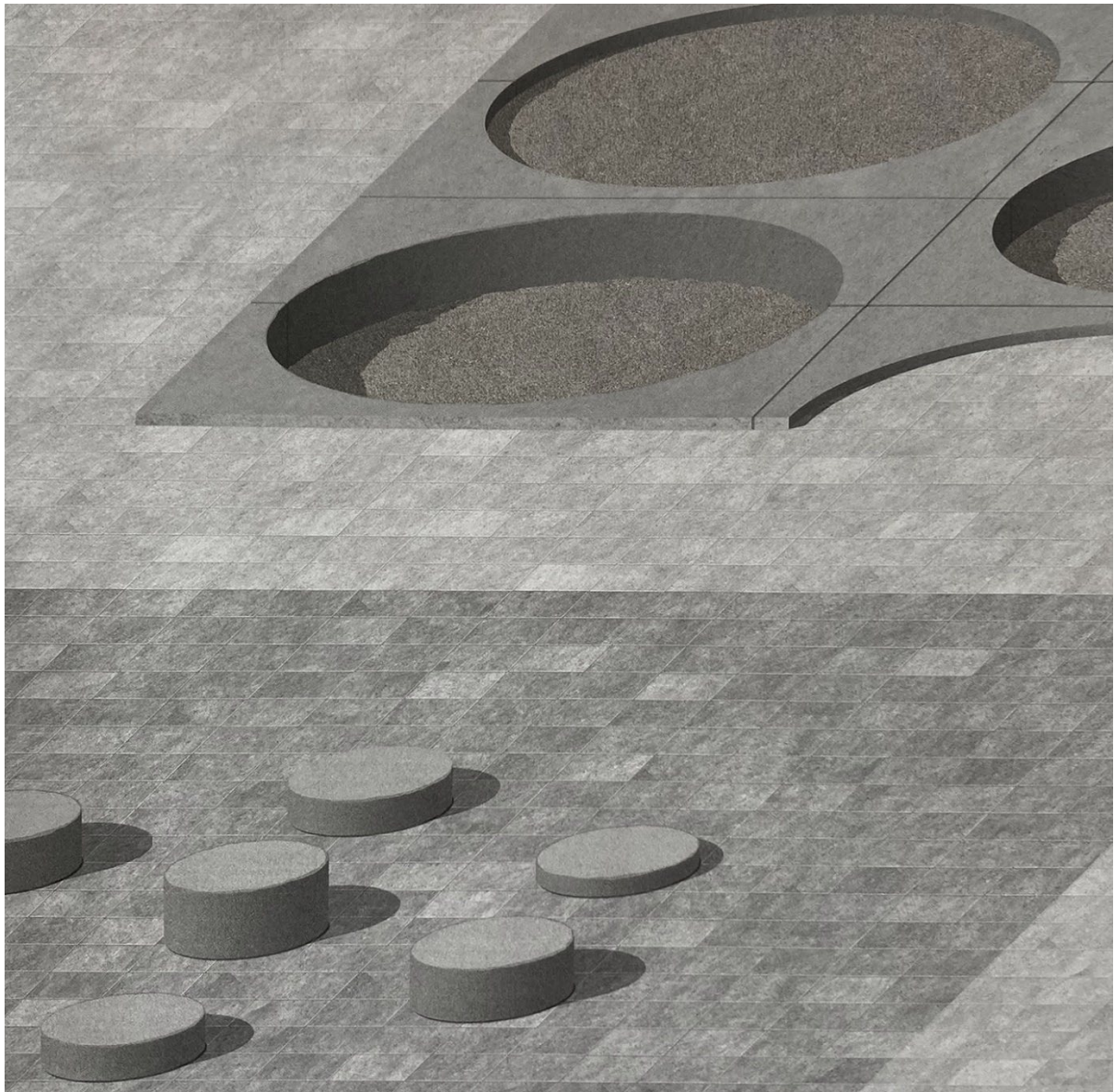


Fig. 2.11: play tables and sandpit at the Sumatraplantsoen playground in Amsterdam by Aldo Van Eyck, 1950-60. (© Dogma)

3. Brussels Capital Region

3.1 Public space in the Brussels Capital Region

3.1.1 Very brief introduction to the complexity of a city-region

“ [...] how to gain access to Brussels and its architectural culture? How to find a point of entry to this complex city? I soon discovered that the simple question as to ‘where to start’ was not to be taken lightly. [...] It is multi-layered, multi-lingual, administratively complex, geographically contested, and, as a capital city, it is home to prestigious institutions as well as numerous minorities. Moreover, it became soon apparent that Brussels has a love-hate relationship with architecture, and architecture struggles to love it back.”⁴³⁷

Having formulated the general framework for consideration and evaluation of political public space, I'll now turn towards Brussels and its public spaces. As I will show, Brussels, a “small world city”, is characterised by a particular specificity, which makes it both an extremely relevant and interesting case study for investigating the (non-)presence of political public spaces.⁴³⁸

In fact, the previous sentence already takes a leap with the complexity of the city. After all, the overarching political level of the Brussels metropolitan area, and its more than 1.2 million inhabitants, is since 1989 the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). In parallel with the two other Belgian Regions, Wallonia and Flanders, the BCR has its own government and administrative apparatus (making it one of the few urban areas in the world with its own ministers and cabinets). The regional level decides over matters such as spatial planning and mobility.

Within the region, the city of Brussels is in strict sense only one of the 19 constituting municipalities (figure 3.1). Those municipalities all have their own major, aldermen and city council. The city of Brussels is the official capital of Belgium. However, notwithstanding the difference between city and region, the name ‘Brussels’ is in practice often used in reference to the whole region (since, in essence, the region englobes the true extent of the urban area). I'll use it in this sense as well in this thesis.

If the previous jumble was not yet complex enough, Brussels is also part of both the Dutch- and French-speaking institutionalised language communities. The communities, which are not entirely matching the geographical boundaries of the regions, handle the more “personal matters” such as education, health and culture.⁴³⁹ This complex entanglement of political levels in Brussels symbolises the difficulty of the Belgian state structure, which results from historical political and linguistic struggles. It is therefore not without a reason that Eric Corijn calls Brussels an “institutional monstrosity, choked by Belgian tribal strives”.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, xix.

⁴³⁸ The reference to Brussels as a “small world city” is an expression commonly used by Brussels expert and urban geographer Eric Corijn.

⁴³⁹ See Schuermans and De Maesschalck, “Fear of crime as a political weapon”, 248.

⁴⁴⁰ See Corijn, “In Brussel kiezen we pas echt in 2019”.

On top the foregoing, Brussels is also broadly framed as the capital of Europe. Although this is legally not entirely rightful, it refers to the fact that several major European institutions, as well as the NATO headquarters, are situated in Brussels.⁴⁴¹ Clearly, any understanding of the city-region requires an insight into the inherently politicised character of Brussels in all its facets and dimensions.

Since the late 1990s, Brussels has been confronted with a significant demographic increase, especially in comparison to Wallonia and Flanders (figure 3.2). Today, the BCR has never been so densely populated before.⁴⁴² This is mainly due to both a positive natural increase in inhabitants (related to births and deaths) and a significantly positive international migration balance, which counter the negative internal migration balance (from the BCR towards the other two regions, with city flight being an important phenomenon in Brussels).⁴⁴³ In 2023, 36.9 percent of Brussels' population (ca. 450 000 persons) did not have the Belgian nationality and around 60-65 percent had other, or more, origins than Belgian.⁴⁴⁴ Within this first group with different nationality, the most represented are by far the French (70 000), then followed by Romanians, Italians and Moroccans (ranging from 33-47 000).⁴⁴⁵ Brussels is thus thoroughly multicultural: an oft-heard boutade is that Brussels is, behind Dubai, the second most diverse and cosmopolitan city in the world. Another interesting element in the demography of the BCR is its relatively younger population than other parts of Belgium, with an average age of 37.8 years.⁴⁴⁶

Within the scope of my research, trying to understand the possibility for political (inter)action in public space, it is interesting to confront these demographical trends with insights on the linguistic evolution of Brussels. As mentioned, Brussels is officially bilingual (French-Dutch). However, in reality, it is more truthful to understand Brussels as "one territory on which two unilingual states operate independently, often without much consultation".⁴⁴⁷ Recent research shows that the true *lingua franca* in Brussels is French: around 81 percent has a good command of this language.⁴⁴⁸ Largely tailing behind are English (ca. 47%), Dutch (ca. 22%), Spanish (ca. 15%) and Arabic (ca. 11%).⁴⁴⁹ Only around 6 percent of the inhabitants of the BCR indicated Dutch as their native language in 2018, compared to slightly over 50 percent mentioning French.⁴⁵⁰ Although geographically entirely located in Flanders and historically a Flemish city, Brussels is nowadays clearly dominantly Francophone.⁴⁵¹ Furthermore striking is that an increasing amount of people in Brussels knows neither Dutch, French or English: around 10.5 percent.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴¹ See Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*, 39.

⁴⁴² See Hermia, "Demografische barometer 2023", 2.

⁴⁴³ See Ibid., 2-3.

⁴⁴⁴ See Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴⁵ See Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴⁶ See Ibid., 4.

⁴⁴⁷ See Corijn, "In Brussel kiezen we pas echt in 2019".

⁴⁴⁸ See Van Garsse, "Nieuwe taalbarometer: stijgend aantal Brusselaars ken Frans, Nederlands noch Engels".

⁴⁴⁹ See Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ See BRIO, "Taalbarometer 4".

⁴⁵¹ See Bousetta, Favell and Martiniello, "Governing multicultural Brussels", 2072-2073.

⁴⁵² See Van Garsse, "Nieuwe taalbarometer: stijgend aantal Brusselaars ken Frans, Nederlands noch Engels".

Brussels is furthermore characterised by a rather ambiguous socio-economic situation. On the political level, the BCR faces a tremendous projected debt of 17 billion euro in 2028.⁴⁵³ This is, inter alia, caused by the both financially and structurally disastrous new subway project. At the same time, the BCR is one of the wealthiest regions in Europe in terms of output production.⁴⁵⁴ It is the economical motor of Belgium, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the gross national product.⁴⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the wealth is far from equally divided as almost a third of the population lives underneath the poverty risk threshold (without even including the estimated 50 000 people without documents in the BCR).⁴⁵⁶ Social inequality is thus particularly outspoken in Brussels.⁴⁵⁷

These patterns of inequality are tightly linked to the geography of the region. Macro-scale poverty is widespread in Brussels but generally based on a strong geographical polarisation of the city.⁴⁵⁸ Broadly speaking, there is a major and continuously lasting difference between the northwestern and southeastern parts of the city, wherein the latter are considerably more wealthy, encounter less demographic pressure and are less subject of both incoming and outgoing migration.⁴⁵⁹ Within this context, mention is often made of a 'poor sickle' of formerly industrial neighbourhoods around the canal (figure 3.3).⁴⁶⁰ This area lies within the first crown of the city (meaning close to the centre) and crawls around the pentagon, marking Brussels' anomaly in comparison with several other European capital cities since wealth is mostly situated in the suburbs and poverty in the central neighbourhoods.⁴⁶¹ In addition, this urban rupture is not only visible in economic terms but is also confirmed through different social, such as for instance life expectancy and incoming foreign migration, and physical indicators, such as the unequal distribution of green spaces.⁴⁶²

The result is a city characterised by considerable levels of large-scale socio-economic and ethnic segregation, especially in comparison with other major European cities.⁴⁶³ However, renewed interest from real-estate investors, wealthy private clientele and public authorities in the centrally-located neighbourhoods has slowly appeared throughout the last 15 to 20 years.⁴⁶⁴ This leads to quick processes of gentrification in previously deprived neighbourhoods – more about this in the next part.

Let us return to the politics of the city-region with one more example of its difficulty. While the job market is overall not doing bad in the BCR, a major part of the jobs is also taken by commuters from the periphery towards the city.⁴⁶⁵ This leads to a form of 'democratic deficit': besides its responsibilities towards the 19 municipalities and its inhabitants, resulting from the intricate

⁴⁵³ See Vander Taelen, "De Brusselse begroting is een bodemloze put".

⁴⁵⁴ See Bousetta, Favell and Martiniello, "Governing multicultural Brussels", 2073.

⁴⁵⁵ See Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*, 53.

⁴⁵⁶ See Vivalis, "Armoede en ongelijkheid in Brussel".

⁴⁵⁷ See Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ See Haandrikman et al., "Socio-economic segregation in European cities", 28-29.

⁴⁵⁹ See Van Hamme, Grippa and Van Criekingen, "Migratory movements and dynamics of neighbourhoods in Brussels", 10-12.

⁴⁶⁰ See Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*, 94.

⁴⁶¹ See Van Hamme, Grippa and Van Criekingen, "Migratory movements and dynamics of neighbourhoods in Brussels", 3.

⁴⁶² See Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*, 94-96.

⁴⁶³ See Haandrikman et al., "Socio-economic segregation in European cities", 28-29.

⁴⁶⁴ See Van Criekingen, "What is happening to Brussels' inner-city neighbourhoods?", 3.

⁴⁶⁵ See Corijn, "In Brussel kiezen we pas echt in 2019".

Belgian state structure, the BCR must also serve tens of thousands city users that work in the city and use its services, but don't contribute in taxes nor vote within the region.⁴⁶⁶

All of the foregoing leads to regular long-lasting stalemates and political lethargy. Large urban challenges and crises, think of e.g. the continuously increasing housing crisis in the BCR or the much-needed reform of the six different police zones, often remain too little or even unaddressed. This happens both willingly or due to conflicts of jurisdiction.⁴⁶⁷ Of course, the blame for this does not lie solely within the region, but also often results from the failing interaction between the different formal levels. More often than not, the BCR government appears as a "team of impotence".⁴⁶⁸ For instance, the regularly appearing tent camps in Brussels' urban spaces are to be written on the account of the failing federal policy and the scandalous yet deliberate "politics of non-welcoming", even if they seem to be an urban problematic.⁴⁶⁹

The political outcome of this institutional tangle is at the same time unique, interesting, troublesome and impossible. At least two major phenomena nowadays particularly underline the need to profoundly consider citizen engagement and connection to democracy in the BCR (and, therefore, the political imperative of public space). First, Brussels has, in a way, outgrown Belgium, Flanders and Wallonia: it has become a place with a different reality of diverse blending and internationalisation. Therefore:

"What we illustrate here is *the state of affairs in an, admittedly small, metropolis*. A city connected not only to an immediate hinterland, but also to the rest of the world. And in the case of Brussels, that hinterland has a rather hostile suburban attitude, based on a combination of suburban mentality and nationalistic chauvinism. *One looks away*. Media and public administrations can apparently live with the fact that a third of the population lives at or below the poverty line. As long as the tunnels are maintained, the approach roads remain wide enough and the Maximiliaan Park and Molenbeek are regularly 'cleaned up'. We see in Brussels what we see in very many countries: an increasing tension between urbanity and nationality, between the city and the rest of the country. And in Belgium this is even more pronounced when two small neighbouring countries under construction want to govern that city together."⁴⁷⁰

Although Belgium is regularly dubbed "the world's most successful failed state", an urging sense of disaffection and unease has been rising throughout the country.⁴⁷¹ Traditional democratic parties encounter difficulties through sharp declines in voter amounts, while both xenophobe far-right and populist far-left parties quickly gather popularity.⁴⁷² This generates a climate of increasing polarisation, disinformation, lack of nuance and sometimes even violence. Although a generalisation, the political differences between Belgium's different constituent parts become extrapolated within this dynamic: Flanders shifts to the right, Wallonia to the left, and Brussels is left dragging behind as a liability.

⁴⁶⁶ See Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ See Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ See Arnoudt, "Het lijkt wel een ploeg van de onmacht".

⁴⁶⁹ This is a term coined by Ciré asbl, who work with people on the move and newcomers in Belgium.

⁴⁷⁰ Corijn, "In Brussel kiezen we pas echt in 2019". My translation. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷¹ See Jäger, "Belgian Sorrows".

⁴⁷² See Ibid.

Although Belgium is relatively wealthy and secure, it is also characterised by a feeling of non-identity and the absence of any collective spirit. Or, as Jäger states with the needed sense of sarcasm, “a motley collage of Brussels mussels, Jean-Claude Van Damme, René Magritte and the Red Devils football team is often the best marketing teams can come up with” when attempting to convey a Belgian identity.⁴⁷³ Even the self-proclaimed biggest advocate of Belgium, the Francophone liberal party president Georges-Louis Bouchez, is not able to address both parts of the country due to his inexistent knowledge of Dutch.

These differences are particularly simmering through in the difficult relationship that most Belgians have with their capital city(-region), as Corijn emphasises in the citation above. Persistent images exist of Brussels as an unsafe and “strange city”.⁴⁷⁴ A significant number of people outside of Brussels don’t bother to ever test the truthfulness of these imageries – after all, it is easier to believe preconceived and non-nuanced opinions. At the same time, a sense of local city-patriotism and group feeling has arisen in Brussels.⁴⁷⁵ Taking pride of their urbanity and intercultural interaction, Brussels’ inhabitants attempt to create a different image of their city through e.g. initiatives such as the two-yearly Zinnekeparade.⁴⁷⁶ Within the chaos, somehow a *modus vivendi* is found. While strongly critical towards everything that goes wrong, Brussels’ inhabitants acknowledge that, at the same time, there is a certain quality of life in the city.⁴⁷⁷ After all, in 2018 Brussels ranked 27th in the world rankings for quality of life (scoring particularly low, however, in regard to traffic congestion, air quality, internal stability and public cleanliness – this last issue is well formulated in an analysis of public space within the activist journal *Bruxelles En Mouvements*: “pourquoi tout est toujours déglingué?” [“why is everything always ramshackle?”]).⁴⁷⁸

The multidimensionality of this polemical relationship between Belgium and its capital city conveys a first argument for considering the political imperative of public space within the BCR. The importance hereof lies indeed in the dual working of a creation of alternative practices and places that gather political impact for Brussels’ citizens, while at the same time providing alternative images of city life, opening up the often narrow perspective of non-inhabitants. Besides this, there is equally a waning connection between Brussels’ citizens and its democratic representatives. Since e.g. non-Belgians cannot vote in the regional elections, but are only represented on the local level, a third of Brussels’ inhabitants is essentially not heard in the overarching BCR. Research from 2018 has furthermore shown that, although they are generally positive about their city and neighbourhood, no more than a quarter of the inhabitants trusts politicians and politics in the city-region.⁴⁷⁹ Quality of life in Brussels is often provided by other associations, local dynamics and personal initiatives who “save what can be saved”.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷³ See Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ See Schuermans and De Maesschalck, “Fear of crime as a political weapon”, 255-256.

⁴⁷⁵ See Corijn, “In Brussel kiezen we pas echt in 2019”.

⁴⁷⁶ See Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ This ambivalent feeling of local pride and criticism is something of which I, having grown up in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, can only testify (and which perhaps simmers through in this thesis).

⁴⁷⁸ See X., “Brussels ranked 27th in city world rankings for quality of life”, and see also Wouters, “Pourquoi tout est toujours déglingué”, 6.

⁴⁷⁹ See Huyghebaert, “Brusselaars vernietigend over hun politici”.

⁴⁸⁰ See Ibid.

Although Brussels is the place to be for all types of Belgian manifestations, this does not result in a continuous embedding of politics in public space. A strikingly visible example of the disconnection between inhabitants and politics is the total isolation of the European institutions within the city. While being the “capital of Europe”, most citizens in Brussels never enter into direct contact with any aspect of the “European project” nor with European politics, be it for the unavoidable confrontation with reflecting and untransparent office facades. Europe received its own neighbourhood in the city, where one does not really come when not invited to do so, thereby respecting the historical patterns of urban segregation. Urban activist Gwenaël Breës, one of the founders of the alternative and non-commercial Cinema Nova, poignantly describes this European neighbourhood by three words:

“*Façadisme*’ (facadism): architectural practice of integrating an old facade into a modern building. *Choucroute*’ (sauerkraut): architectural term for a heritage preserve that has become anachronistic in the course of urbanistic fermentation. *Façadisme démocratique*’ (democratic facadism): the political practice of integrating a democratic apparatus into a non-democratic whole...”⁴⁸¹

Some attempts are, however, made to (re)create a bond between inhabitants and politics. A laudable initiative in this regard was the citizen initiative and political party Agora, which had one elected representative in the parliament of the BCR in 2019. Working with a drawn-out citizen panel, which had to give green light for every decision of the representative, Agora was an interesting experiment for more direct democracy. Although they obtained the permanent implementation of deliberative committees on various dossiers of the BCR, Agora’s representative regularly encountered difficulty to take a stand in parliamentary discussions, due to the party’s own internal requirements of citizen approval.⁴⁸² Therefore, the initiative has unfortunately not appeared sustainable since Agora will not present a list in the upcoming elections in June 2024.

Furthermore, the BCR has a minister for Participatory Democracy (at this moment Alain Maron from the Francophone Green party Ecolo). In 2021, a Regional Participation Service was installed and a new online platform has been launched in April 2024 to encourage participatory projects in Brussels.⁴⁸³ Such forms of participatory democracy are particularly interesting for foreign inhabitants to weigh on decisions in their local community. Hard to say, however, if these measures are more than drops in the ocean because of their recentness.

Clearly, Brussels requires public space that reflects the plurality and diversity of the city-region. Following the foregoing tendencies, I will look at some practices as well as places that encourage forms of political expression, or serve as claims in themselves. Interesting attempts in this regard are made on different levels and in different ways. However, before addressing those, I will scrutinise the general tendencies of public space and architectural culture in the Brussels Capital Region.

⁴⁸¹ Subscript to the short film *Façadisme, choucroute et démocratie* (Facadism, sauerkraut and democracy) by Gwenaël Breës, 2002. My translation. Can be consulted online, for free and explicitly without copyright, on: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xwd9vm>

⁴⁸² See Van Garsse, “Burgerpartij Agora komt niet op bij de verkiezingen”.

⁴⁸³ See O’Regan, “New platform launched to help Brussels residents have their say in local projects”.

3.1.2 Contemporary “reappropriation of public space”?

Brussels, a city originally built in the alluvial flood plains of the river Zenne, has an equally contested relation with (public) space. I will not go too far back in time, since other research exists for this purpose and it does not fall within the scope of this thesis.⁴⁸⁴ Nevertheless, if today mention is made of a “reappropriation of public space” in both public and academic circles, then this is in opposition to the intricate past, to say the least, of the city-region.⁴⁸⁵ Therefore, before evaluating the true extent of this alleged reappropriation, it is essential to showcase how various (architectural) troubles in Brussels today are strongly rooted in those mistakes from the past.

Especially the ruthless modernisation of the city, which started in the second half of the nineteenth century, has long-lasting impact on (public) space until today. This process started symbolically with the hygienist covering up of the Zenne, which was underhandedly combined with the instauration of the central boulevards. Quickly thereafter, the construction as well as destruction works for the megalomaniac Palace of Justice above the popular Marolles neighbourhood followed. Several other large-scale city projects were subsequently carried out in the twentieth century: the cross-sectional North-South railway connection, the city-wide construction works in the light of the World Fair of 1958,...

The most emblematic example in this array is the infamous Manhattan Plan of the late 1960s (figure 3.4).⁴⁸⁶ Blinded by hubris in the aftermath of the arrival of the European institutions and NATO headquarters, an enormous new office district, which would replace the existing North Quarter, was planned. This new neighbourhood would consist of 80 high-rises, of which eleven more than a hundred meters, and would host 475 000 persons per day. It was designed following post-war corruptions of the CIAM-principles, such as a total separation of cars and pedestrians, functional zoning and a sleek formal language. Particularly interesting, within this research, are the ‘ideas’ that the project developers held about public space. Drawings of the pedestrian decks (which were planned up to heights of 13 meters) show how these could never have become more than obligatory void fillings or dystopian, large-scale shopping malls solely destined for consumption (figure 3.5). Nonetheless, the deck was purposed to become a “vivid and carefree ‘public space’ equipped with shops, restaurants, public gardens, etc.”.⁴⁸⁷

To realise an ambition of this scale, which was beyond the capacity of public instances, the project relied entirely on private investors, speculation and untransparent ground leases. However, this economic dependency was the beginning of the end: due to, inter alia, the oil and economic crisis in the 1970s, the project never took off and only a few towers were built before the works were definitively halted by the mid-seventies. Notwithstanding the construction difficulties, the destruction works had been carried out very quickly and the entire tissue of the previous neighbourhood had already been demolished by then. Subsequently, large vacant lots were left behind for many years (figure 3.6). Over 3000 dwellings had been torn down and more than 12 000 people had been expropriated without proper reallocation.⁴⁸⁸ The North Quarter has never

⁴⁸⁴ To receive an all-encompassing overview of the history, geography and numbers behind Brussels, see e.g. Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*.

⁴⁸⁵ See Breës and Van Crielingen, “Réappropriation des espaces publics: pour mieux dominer?”.

⁴⁸⁶ The paragraphs about the Manhattan Project are based on the exam paper that I wrote in January 2024 for the course *Theory and Practice of Urbanism since 1945* (H02L4A) by Prof. Bruno De Meulder.

⁴⁸⁷ See Sterken, “A Trojan horse for the Manhattan Plan”, 235.

⁴⁸⁸ See Martens and Vanden Eede, *De Noordwijk – slopen en wonen*, 17.

recovered from this disastrous episode and has remained a non-space for Brussels' inhabitants, mostly housing governmental institutions today. Ever since, the repurposing of the North Quarter has been object of architectural and policy discussions. Meanwhile, generic buildings are still unceasingly being built and equally quickly being replaced.

Importantly, the Manhattan project illustrates the architectural culture and the approach to both public space and urban planning in Brussels during the post-war period. Urban policy was extremely top-down at that time and dominated by private real estate developers, therefore following the logic of profit.⁴⁸⁹ Tremendous demolition operations and *urbicides*, under the guise of improvement, formed no obstruction to the ambition of the (already multiple) city administrations. This urban tendency and historical period have become commonly known under the name *Brusselization*.

Coined by activists of the ARAU (*Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines*) in the 1960s in response to the sudden appearance of modernist office buildings all over the city, *Brusselization* describes the landscape transformation of Brussels due to investments lacking in aesthetics and demolition of large parts of the historic centre.⁴⁹⁰ The replacing buildings did not serve the city nor its inhabitants, but were mostly used by commuters during the day and empty at night. Herein lies the core critic of the ARAU. *Brusselization* is both an urbanistic and economic mechanism, indicating the "capitalistic destruction of a city with a compromising collaboration of the public sector".⁴⁹¹ The result was, and actually still is, a fragmented city. Brussels largely lost its internal coherence and became characterised by large-scale, unfinished infrastructure projects, unpoetic modernist mirror palaces and public spaces lacking in quality.

Nonetheless, time and mind-sets have changed, especially since the creation of the region in 1989. Although these urban traumas still influence contemporary urban debates and popular feelings towards architecture, a more optimistic outlook has slowly returned through more nuanced architectural realisations.⁴⁹² Urban renewal policy has become a regional matter and procedures were strengthened over time, with stronger focus on citizen participation. Various new tools, such as neighbourhood contracts, city renewal contracts, regional development plans,... came into use to aid urban renewal and ensure more just practices.⁴⁹³ This new dynamic consolidated itself roughly around the organisation of Brussels 2000 as European Capital of Culture through a new form of interaction between architectural culture and urban activism.⁴⁹⁴

Another important factor in this evolution was the installation of a Brussels Master Architect (Bouwmeester-Maître-Architecte or bMa) in 2009, after Flanders' example ten years earlier. Responsible for the improvement of the quality of urban development, the bMa has led to a culture shift and a revival of architectural competitions in order to increase transparency. Nonetheless, these initiatives are regularly restricted in their influence and dependant on the goodwill of project developers who, over time, acquired large shares of buildings and terrains.

⁴⁸⁹ See Vandermotten, *Bruxelles, une lecture de la ville*, 222-223.

⁴⁹⁰ See Romanczyk, "Transforming Brussels into an international city", 127.

⁴⁹¹ See Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹² See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 12.

⁴⁹³ See Ibid., 12.

⁴⁹⁴ See Ibid., 12-13.

Specifically regarding public space, Benoit Moritz regards the installation of the region as a determining moment of transition between an “old and new regime for the design of public space”.⁴⁹⁵ Whereas the old ideal was characterised by the dominance of enormous transport infrastructures and functionalist visions on public space, the new policy was based on the promotion of public space as a place of urban sociability and city improvement.⁴⁹⁶

A crucial moment in Brussels’ urbanism was, for Moritz, the redevelopment of the Flagey Square in Ixelles (figure 3.7). The redesign of this square in the 2000s is symbolically seen as the first project that attempted to include residents’ and merchant’s participation. As Moritz states:

“In the Flagey case, we witnessed the emergence of the idea that minimum rationality and the distribution of public space to the benefit of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport, were no longer enough in themselves as a project for public space, and that other stakes might exist such as, for example, large-scale public space as a tool for the revitalisation of neighbourhoods, public space as support for architectural ambition, the uses of public space, public space as a factor of social cohesion, etc.”⁴⁹⁷

Debate must be held if this redevelopment was a success, especially since the square is today already being re-addressed to make it more green, more climate-proof and less empty (although this was at the time an essential requirement of the market vendors), and since, after its opening in 2008, any form of participation about the real programming of activities on the square was avoided.⁴⁹⁸ Notwithstanding this, the initial symbolism of the project holds.

The evolution in allocation of public space to different ways of transport explicitly illustrates a change in the approach towards public space - and, at the same time, the remaining or new issues. Notable in this regard is the pedestrianisation of some of the previously car-dominated central boulevards (first Boulevard Anspach and recently also the Adolphe Max Boulevard). Citizen movements contributed to this transition, in particular through the success of the Picnic the Streets actions in 2012.⁴⁹⁹ While surely laudable at its base, the actual development of this project has not been an undivided success. It has most importantly received criticism for not being matched with further policy (e.g. an ambitious social policy regarding homelessness) and for not tackling the mobility issue of the city at its core.⁵⁰⁰ Philippe Van Parijs, who initiated the picnic actions, perfectly describes the situation today: “if you compare it with what could have been, then the result is depressing – but in comparison with the situation before the picnic, it is truly fantastic”.⁵⁰¹

The issue of urban mobility has been addressed on the regional level by the Good Move plan, which was launched in the summer of 2022. Similar criticism however accounts to this latest effort in a long history of (mostly failed) regional mobility plans. Based on “six transversal focusses”, such as “good neighbourhood”, “good service” and “good network”, the plan’s ambition towards a more safe and enjoyable city, less dominated by hard mobility, positively testimonies a

⁴⁹⁵ See Moritz, “Designing and developing public spaces in Brussels”, 1.

⁴⁹⁶ See Ibid., 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹⁸ See Breës and Van Criekingen, “Réappropriation des espaces publics: pour mieux dominer?”.

⁴⁹⁹ See Hubert et al., “From pedestrian area to urban and metropolitan project”, 9.

⁵⁰⁰ See Ibid., 13-26.

⁵⁰¹ See Van Parijs and Van den Abbeele, interview.

mentality shift.⁵⁰² Let's not forget that about 70 percent of public space in the BCR is occupied by road infrastructure, that a third of carbon dioxide emission in Brussels is generated by cars and that Brussels is one of the cities with the highest levels of both noise and air pollution in Europe – this mentality shift is thus very urgent, and Good Move is a highly valuable attempt with multiple positive proposals for change.⁵⁰³ After all, the ambition to reduce the total number of cars in the BCR with a quarter by 2030 and bring the amount of traffic deaths to zero, testimonies of courage in a city historically shaped for, and dominated by, car users.⁵⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the implementation of the circulation plans received large, regularly unjustified, amounts of backlash and resistance by groups of local inhabitants (leading to its almost immediate abolition in a few municipalities – meanwhile resounding the danger of taking public opinion as a ruling principle ...). These difficulties were mostly due to the insufficient preceding participation (too narrow, too short and in practice not addressing all publics), inadequate communication on the forehand and the sloppiness and unprofessionalism of execution.⁵⁰⁵ Furthermore, the plan unfortunately did not go sufficiently to the bone:

“More fundamentally, we must first address the reasons why we have become so dependent on the car as a mode of transportation. That raises questions about the relocation of certain activities, for example. [...] The Good Move debate is symptomatic of everything that lies ahead for us in terms of climate change and its attendant inequalities. We will not achieve ecological goals without addressing the economic system and redistribution. Otherwise, either certain social groups will be pushed further into the ground, or, as we see with Good Move, we will backslide on those ecological ambitions.”⁵⁰⁶

The issues with Good Move prove the importance of the political imperative of public space – since the city, in essence, is a main common concern of citizens. Good Move has in fact uncovered more underlying (historical) urban conflicts in Brussels. Since its implementation, city councils (especially in Schaerbeek) have become stage of totally absurd scenes wherein democratically elected politicians are scolded for the filth of the street during the citizen interpellations (with the recent scolding of the mayor of Schaerbeek for “dirty whore” as absolute rock bottom of “public opinion”).⁵⁰⁷

Moreover, the historically segregated character of the city is highlighted through the regular depiction of middle-class and Dutch-speaking inhabitants as the root cause of all evil, as shows the recent chanting of the slogan “Flemish out, back to Leuven” in the same city council of Schaerbeek (which is, of course, a municipality with a very troubled historical treatment of Dutch-speaking inhabitants during the infamous Roger Nols era in the 1970s and 1980s – while the slogan itself refers to the historical “Leuven Vlaams” (Leuven Flemish) student movement at the KU Leuven in the late 1960s, which ultimately contributed to the first state reform of Belgium into a federal state in 1970).⁵⁰⁸ True public debate is made impossible by a small yet very oppressing

⁵⁰² See Brussels Mobility, “Good Move”.

⁵⁰³ See Breës, “Anatomie d’une mécanique binaire : Good Move vs. Bad Move”.

⁵⁰⁴ See Lelong, “In Brussel gaan de verkiezingen over het verkeersplan”.

⁵⁰⁵ See Breës, interview.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid. My translation.

⁵⁰⁷ See X., “Schaarbeeks burgemeester dient klacht in na beledigingen in gemeenteraad”.

⁵⁰⁸ See Ibid.

group of screamers, and the fragile line between law enforcement and hindering democratic expression makes it difficult to intervene. Polarising politicians flourish, especially in online “public spheres”, and more nuanced voices are physically prevented by hysterical citizens from responding with reasoned arguments.⁵⁰⁹ This chaos, however, fundamentally refers to the need for reflection on the interaction between the representative democracy and its citizens in the public sphere.

One of the other neighbourhoods with the highest and most visible resistance to Good Move was Cureghem (Anderlecht), which is an important part of the ‘poor sickle’. Inherent to Good Move’s goal of reducing the number of cars in the city is the positive ambition to improve the quality of public space (falling under the “good neighbourhood” aspect). However, without proper regulation to equally safeguard the status of local inhabitants and counter the side-effects that are inherent to any improvement of the attractiveness of public spaces (such as a remarkable rise of property value), this indeed introduces social issues such as gentrification into the Good Move debate.⁵¹⁰ Especially in neighbourhoods like Cureghem, which still provide housing for low-income earners but increasingly become object of investors’ interest because of their extensive industrial heritage, bringing together proper regulation and spatial improvement proves a crucial challenge.⁵¹¹

Although “social blending” is often the proclaimed aspiration, bridging the gap between more “vulnerable groups” and the “middle class” in reality often merely leads to the implementation of the values and consumption habits of the latter in the neighbourhood and its public spaces.⁵¹² The central pentagon of Brussels, locating the historic centre, is equally a visible subject to likewise patterns. Submitting itself to consumption and tourism more than to the needs of the (few remaining) inhabitants, urban activist collectives ARAU and BRAL (*Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu*) significantly describe the pedestrian area as an “internationally sold hyper-centre” to denote the difference between promising political rhetoric and physical reality.⁵¹³ It is indeed not enough to ban cars – the resulting voids have to be filled with more than tourist attractions and occasional festivals.⁵¹⁴

Exemplary in this regard is the loud activist and architectural criticism to the conversion of the centrally-located Beurs building (the former stock market alongside the pedestrian area) into a “beer temple”. The building being in a state of decay for a significant amount of time, the stairs in front of the Beurs became an iconic place in, and for, the city, giving place to activities ranging from simply hanging out to making political statements. Lieven De Cauter even describes those stairs as “the most public space of Brussels, maybe even Belgium, a true amphitheater of political and social life in our country – the ultimate spot of democracy”.⁵¹⁵ The transformation of the building into a touristic beer museum then carries a clear message for De Cauter: “We don’t do politics here”.⁵¹⁶ Arguably, De Cauter slightly overstates the political imperative related to the stairs, and

⁵⁰⁹ See Van den Panhuyzen, “Mobiliteitsprotest doet gemeenteraden in hun voegen kraken”.

⁵¹⁰ See Breës, “Anatomie d’une mécanique binaire : Good Move vs. Bad Move”.

⁵¹¹ See Ibid.

⁵¹² See Lenel, “Sociale gemengdheid in de openbare stedelijke ontwikkeling te Brussel”, 10-11.

⁵¹³ See X., “Verslag van het debat over het hypercentrum”.

⁵¹⁴ See Boie, “Moet de Beurs een Biertempel worden?”.

⁵¹⁵ See De Cauter, “Reclaim the steps”.

⁵¹⁶ See Ibid.

its radical impediment today, perhaps for the sake of *pathos*, especially since manifestations are still taking place there (e.g. in support of Palestine, figure 3.8). Nevertheless, De Cauter's argument is valuable for raising concern about the overall creeping processes of depoliticization and neo-liberalisation of public space in (the centre of) Brussels. Or, as he argues himself:

"A political action belongs in the heart of the city. [...] The stairs of the Beurs are only one sore point (yes, it's painful for me), but it actually covers the whole downtown area. [...] The pentagon has to be a peaceful theme park for tourists and one big shopping mall. 'Winter pleasures' (that horrible christmas market that transforms Brussels into an unbearable light show and a no go zone because it's flooded by tourists for several weeks), but then the whole year through. Political protest doesn't fit in that image. [...] but no blocking off downtown! The city is ours. Reclaim the steps? Also. But more importantly: reclaim the city!"⁵¹⁷

So, the supposed "reappropriation", or even "revitalisation", of public space often entails a dynamic of depoliticization in Brussels.⁵¹⁸ Whereas Moritz mentioned a "participatory turning point" in Brussels' urbanism after the Flagey project, this hypothesis has not been confirmed in reality afterwards.⁵¹⁹ While such a radical shift would truly require a consistent policy for all projects carried out by public instances, it is rather a (very) slow evolution that is happening through the application of e.g. the neighbourhood contracts, which effectively take account of the social issues involved in the development of public spaces.⁵²⁰ Although, for instance, the pedestrianisation of the Anspach Boulevard presents itself as a change for "all of us", it remains questionable who this englobing "us" exactly refers to. Following Verschaffel, I emphasised that political public space cannot be conceived following a circle-logic with an overarching "we". In a similar vein, Breës and Van Crieckingen raise the following objections to the dominant "reappropriation" discourse:

"Who decides the 'way-to-go'? Not designating who speaks, not saying where 'we' speak from, as if 'we = all', is a first condition of de-politicization. Of course, the fact that cars occupy too much space in Brussels, both on the move and at a standstill, is an empirically well-founded observation. But these empirical facts do not describe an enchanted world where social relations have disappeared and where urban policies are not inspired by any strategy."⁵²¹

Similar concerns are formulated about the Sint-Katelijne Square, which is situated nearby the Beurs. While 54 (cinq-quatre, phonetically *saint-kat*), as it is called in Brussels, has been one of the central places of encounter for (Dutch-speaking) youth the last twenty to thirty years, it is now increasingly dominated by private restaurant and bar terraces. The benches on the square have mostly been removed for this purpose. Here, however, a more permanent action group (*Free 54*) has emerged today to fight this dynamic through regular occupations of the square.⁵²²

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ See Breës and Van Crieckingen, "Réappropriation des espaces publics: pour mieux dominer?".

⁵¹⁹ See Comhaire, "Activisme urbain et politiques architecturales à Bruxelles", 20.

⁵²⁰ See Ibid., 21.

⁵²¹ Ibid. My translation.

⁵²² See Mayda, "De pijn van het Sint-Katelijneplein".

Another striking example is the relocation of Recyclart, an art centre with an explicit social agenda. Originally located in an empty station (Kappellekerk) underneath the North-South railway connection, it was evicted by the NMBS (National Railway Company) under the guise of fire safety in 2017 and given a new location by the BCR in the Birmingham neighbourhood (Molenbeek) two years later. However, as Gideon Boie argues, this eviction is emblematic for three common symptoms in Brussels.

First, it is a “law-like pattern” that “the motor of urban renewal” becomes the victim of their own success.⁵²³ Recyclart indeed gave another face to a previously forgotten space and neighbourhood. The result was that, all of a sudden, opportunities instead of degradation were seen in this neighbourhood. Secondly, Recyclart was a symbol of the “administrative culture” in Brussels: strongly dependent on unique “political backers” (in this case, the alderman of urbanism in the city of Brussels) instead of coherent policy, and therefore constantly under “threat of the house of cards collapsing” – which ultimately happened.⁵²⁴ Lastly, and more specifically, it was the latest symbol in the “trail of destruction and degradation” that the NMBS and the North-South connection continue to leave behind in Brussels – let us also not forget both the North and South railway stations themselves in this regard.⁵²⁵

Although the working of Recyclart is, of course, still very valuable in their current location in the Manchester Street, this episode of their relocation is highly illustrative. Seen against the foregoing background, any “reappropriation” is rather relative:

“We are therefore a long way from seeing public space as a plural space, a space for experimentation, criticism and the expression of differences... The trend is not towards the emergence of free poster spaces or public benches, or even the tolerance of spontaneous gatherings. On the contrary, advertising spaces and surveillance cameras abound, while many parks are closed at nightfall and any new open-air sports area is fenced off and accessible only at specific times. [...] On the part of the authorities, those reveal an ambition to control, instrumentalise and pacify which is the antithesis of the ideals that drove the initial demand to reclaim public space for and by residents.”⁵²⁶

It would be a bit short off the mark to only blame public instances. After all, there is a “culture” of vandalism too in Brussels. This is perfectly illustrated by e.g. the new, once shiny white Suzan Daniel bridge above the canal, which was entirely tagged after a few weeks (figure 3.9). Nevertheless, it is utterly problematic how public instances seek answers hereto in patterns of repression. A combination of constructive participation and designs that fit more into both the environment and the needs of this environment (and thus, its inhabitants), and are therefore perhaps not that vulnerable to vandalism, could offer more working solutions. The bridge is a perfect anti-example in this regard. While not taking its existing environment and inhabitants into account, it rather attempted to quite obviously appeal to a new, more wealthy public that the private developments along the canal want to attract. Notwithstanding this criticism, it is important to emphasise that the foregoing argument is not a warning to reduce the architectural ambition of new interventions in Brussels (although I highly doubt that this bridge testimonies

⁵²³ See Boie, “Recyclart werd slachtoffer van eigen succes – en van de NMBS”. My translation.

⁵²⁴ See Ibid.

⁵²⁵ See Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Breës and Van Criekingen, “Réappropriation des espaces publics: pour mieux dominer?”. My translation.

ambition). Quite on the contrary, but it should nevertheless be more local-bound (than a generic, badly-designed white bridge) and inclusive.

As furthermore highlighted by the citation of Breës and Van Criecken above, such processes of *smoothing* are not the only issue for public space today in the BCR. Many other challenges to public space, that I described in the previous chapter, are in fact visible in Brussels. I will exemplify a few. Since the 2015-2016 terrorist attacks, Brussels has experienced a disruptive shift of increasing securitisation and heightened measures of control.⁵²⁷ This happened through both extremely visible measures, such as the regular presence of military in busy streets, as well as almost unremarkable actions, as for instance the replacement of non-transparent trash bins with see-through ones.⁵²⁸

Furthermore, strong patterns of both gender and ethnic inequality and unsafety linked to gender are still present in Brussels' public spaces.⁵²⁹ Striking in this regard is an anecdotal remark, which was made by a young Muslim woman from Brussels during a debate at Recyclart about the creation of public spaces for gender, and other, minorities.⁵³⁰ When asked what she deemed the most enjoyable public space in Brussels, to my surprise and incomprehension at first, she pointed out the Rue Neuve (the main shopping axis in Brussels). This was not because she enjoyed shopping so much, but rather because she felt protected through the continuous presence of large masses of people and the possibility to enter stores or public transport at any time.

Especially at night, public spaces all too often become spaces of fear and insecurity, or at least generating a feeling of fear and insecurity, for minorities. If 1 out of 2 LGBTQIA+ persons does not dare to walk hand in hand with their partner in public space because of the far-righting of society, then this is an urgent matter to address, also within those public spaces themselves.⁵³¹ Rightly so, these issues are becoming increasingly thematised through the work of organisations such as e.g. Rebelle vzw and JES, and due to a heightened attention to these themes, and to the heteronormative man-made reality of public spaces, within Brussels' city and region administrations.⁵³²

Reflection is also (finally) being made about a possible decolonisation of Brussels' public space. After waves of iconoclasm and vandalization of colonial monuments, turning "colonial monuments in Belgian public space into a theatre of high tensions", a working group of experts was commissioned by the BCR government and a report with suggestions was published in 2022.⁵³³ Among those, we find the following, witnessing a high degree of nuance:

"A decolonial public space is not a space from which all traces of the colonial past are removed. It is one that is free from material elements that promote colonialism and unequal and racialized relations between colonizers and colonized, and is simultaneously

⁵²⁷ See Pawlowski, "Suspicious cities", 317-318.

⁵²⁸ See Ibid., 318.

⁵²⁹ See De Backer, "Regimes of Visibility", 312-317.

⁵³⁰ The debate took place in March 2024.

⁵³¹ See X., "Helft lgbtq+’ers durft niet hand in hand te lopen".

⁵³² See Chiau, "Vrouwen heroveren Noordwijk", and also Ben Ayad, "Brussel wil parkjes en pleintjes vrouwvriendelijker maken".

⁵³³ See Colard, "Introduction to the Report "Decolonizing Public Spaces in the Brussels-Capital Region"".

attentive to traces in public space that refer to forgotten histories related to the colonial period and the presence of Belgians of Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian origin.”⁵³⁴

More practically, the report proposes several measures such as a region-wide masterplan, a dialogue between society and all policy levels, the erection of a new national monument commemorating the victims of colonisation, replacement of the most problematic memorials and toponyms (street names) by more inclusive art,...⁵³⁵ Nevertheless, quick tangible and impactful results following this quite resolute report have remained absent until today due to discord between Brussels’ secretary of state Ans Persoons, responsible for heritage and the action plan about decolonisation, and federal secretary of state Mathieu Michel, responsible for the ‘Regie der Gebouwen’ (public instance for the direction of its buildings and monuments) – thereby perfectly illustrating the slowness to which the city-region is unceasingly subjected.⁵³⁶

Clearly, talking about a radical reappropriation of public space, or about a fundamental shift within the city-region, is a bit blunt. As Joachim Declerck points out, the success of ambitious proposals for public space still remains strongly dependent on incidental factors such as the responsible administration employees and political representatives.⁵³⁷ The relativity of this change in architectural culture is particularly visible in the North Quarter and the redevelopment of its crown jewel, the WTC towers, into the ZIN project (figure 3.10). Sven Sterken in this regard claims a “double paradigmatic change in Brussels” away from the previous *Brusselization*.⁵³⁸ Herewith, he indicates both the growing attention and estimate for the office patrimony, and the potentially easy interventions to reconcile them with the city, and the growing consciousness from construction promoters about architectural quality, urban context and ecological sustainability.⁵³⁹ Nevertheless, those projects are still entirely relying on private partners and based on similar economic rationales as before. Furthermore, among the many other issues, it is strange for a building that borders the Maximiliaan Parc that the true issues nor users of the park these last years, namely the arriving persons on the move who are left behind by the lacking Belgian asylum system, are nowhere to be found in the discourse or imagery of the project.

While the reconciliation with the city is ambitioned through increasing multifunctionality, this must not be interpreted as an act of kindness or vision. Besides not being very multifunctional (with, for the ZIN project, 75 percent still remaining offices), this is rather inspired by the overdose of empty office space in the BCR (estimated around a million square meters today), which makes it economically uninteresting to solely provide new offices.⁵⁴⁰ Therefore, this uncritical and inconsistent form of multifunctionality in current redevelopments is, perhaps, rather to be read as a sign of non-vision than as a paradigmatic shift.⁵⁴¹

Although, (very) slowly, positive progress is being made in both architectural culture and public space, there remains a long way forward towards a more socially just or ecologically sustainable

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ See Ibid.

⁵³⁶ See X., “Dekoloniseren duikt nieuwe fase in”, and also X., “‘Woke Up Call’ aan ruitersstandbeeld Leopold II”.

⁵³⁷ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁵³⁸ See Sterken, “Voorbij de ‘Bruxellisation’”. My translation.

⁵³⁹ See Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ See X., “La nouvelle ZIN du Quartier Nord”.

⁵⁴¹ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

public space, among other things. This requires to go beyond symbolic interventions, such as the cycle path around the inner ring road, and rather work on more various scale levels, e.g. also consistently taking small neighbourhood streets into account as is for instance done with the school streets initiative. Together with this, tackling societal issues will demand to address the root causes of problems and therefore obliges to go beyond symptom management, such as a problematic one-day “cleaning up” of the South Station without giving proper alternatives to people seeking refuge in the station.⁵⁴²

Of course, there are good practices too in Brussels. For instance, the recent redevelopment of a former railway site in decay into the Pannenhuis/L28A Parc (Molenbeek-Brussels) shows an alternative urban future with valuable public spaces for neighbourhoods much in need of it (figure 3.11). Carried out in the light of a neighbourhood contract, such projects demonstrate the possible value of such frameworks. Furthermore, the MolenWest project in the shadow of the West Station, which is situated in one of the most difficult neighbourhoods of Molenbeek, shows how pieces of wasteland can be revitalised with experimental architecture (figure 3.12). Equally in the context of a neighbourhood contract, this project was developed in order to create a play area for children and young people while hosting different associations in a temporary structure.

Furthermore, Brussels has an interesting urban culture which acts at the intersection of (cultural) institutions, citizen activism, architecture and politics. This can be described as forms of “informal creativity”, living parallel to the “formal” public spaces and institutions.⁵⁴³ While formal spaces refer to the more “hegemonic practices”, the informal spaces are the rather “subjugated practices”.⁵⁴⁴ Declerck in this regard mentions a “Berlin moment” for the city.⁵⁴⁵ Herewith, he designates the multiplicity of initiatives and the high amount of urban creativity in Brussels, which is nevertheless not transmitted into a systematic change within the city-region’s administrations. I will address these dynamics in the next part of my case study.

First, however, one iconic and formal public space in the BCR deserves, in my eyes, special attention. The Schuman Square, situated at the heart of the European neighbourhood, has a polemic yet interesting and particularly exemplary history for the difficulties and slowness of the city-region. Moreover, in the early 2010s, a non-realised design by XDGA (*Xaveer De Geyter Architects*) explicitly flirted, or at least pretended to do so in discourse, with the political imperative of public space – making it highly relevant to scrutinise this symbolic public space and its design (non-)history in more detail.

3.1.3 Schuman Square: a “democracy amplifier”?

“If public space represents a totality of debates, places of passage and places of gathering open to all; then it is fundamentally a necessary condition (but not sufficient) to the existence of democracy. [...] The *absence of a European public space* on a continental scale has been widely discussed – and often deplored – by political scientists. [...] Today, it there

⁵⁴² See Van Renterghem, “Het opkuisen van buurten blijft symptoombestrijding”.

⁵⁴³ See City Mine(d), “De stad als emanciperende biotoop”, 72.

⁵⁴⁴ See Laguerre, *The Informal City*, 45.

⁵⁴⁵ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

is something like a “European public space”, it is largely limited to professionals of the European Quarter, lobbyists, journalists,...”⁵⁴⁶

“A security dispositive, that is what you will find if you succeed in localising the entrance of the European Council. Congratulations, you have outplayed the stumbling blocks, obstacles and barriers to arrive here. You have trespassed the urban highways, the eternal construction sites of the Leopold Quarter and the esplanade of the European Parliament where wind gusts will push you towards the exit. No encounter, no confrontation, no dialogue in these places. *The physical space is in itself an image of the European public space*: an obstacle course for those who seek it. The incapacity of the European citizen in getting access to the different governmental stances and to the conflicts that oppose them, prevents the development of a critical political thought on Europe.”⁵⁴⁷

The permanent settlement of the European institutions in Brussels happened rather accidentally. Originally, the presidency of the EEC (European Economic Community, the predecessor of the European Union) would be held in turn by the six original members and Belgium was simply alphabetically first in line.⁵⁴⁸ Quickly thereafter, the first employees of the EEC, who were in urgent need of office space, were provisionally installed next to the Cinquantenaire (Etterbeek) in the 1950s.⁵⁴⁹ This soon evolved to unexpected permanence, since no consensus could be found within the member states about the location of permanent headquarters.⁵⁵⁰ Furthermore, Brussels proved well accessible for all member states through its central location and abundant traffic infrastructure, making it a practical solution.⁵⁵¹ In order to consolidate this new-found status, the Belgian government decided to strengthen their application in the early 1960s through large-scale urban interventions in Brussels.

Following the classical course of events of the *Brusselization* era, a few expropriations were made in the area around the Rue de la Loi and the Berlaymont garden (in the shadow of the Cinquantenaire), a handful of private investors were attracted, high international aims were formulated and the neighbourhood was transformed into a large construction site for the Berlaymont building (only the name was retained) and the first metro line in Brussels (figure 3.13).⁵⁵² Other large-scale buildings, such as the Charlemagne building, soon followed and the neighbourhood was thoroughly transformed in only a few years. Over time, more and more monstrously-scaled buildings such as the Espace Léopold ensemble and the Justus Lipsius building consolidated this trend and most important European institutions definitively settled in Brussels. This ultimately led to the official labelling of Brussels as “capital of the European Union” in 2001.⁵⁵³ However, the architectural quality of the neighbourhood was strongly compromised to achieve this goal:

“The architecture of the quarter is reduced to the infamous Brussels *facadism*: endless glass façades, accentuated with different exotic marbles and anodic steel details,

⁵⁴⁶ Pigeon, “De l’introuvable espace public Européen”, 8-9. My translation. Emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁷ Benzaouia and Sadow, “Derrière les lieux communs”, 3. My translation. Emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁸ See Van Parijs, “Brussels’s European Quarter”.

⁵⁴⁹ See Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ See Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ See Ursprung, “Political animals”, 239.

⁵⁵² See Van Parijs, “Brussels’s European Quarter”.

⁵⁵³ See Ibid.

bordering five-lane motorways that cut through the district to provide access to the quarter and the city for thousands of daily commuters. The gradual process of transformation of the Leopold Quarter has led to a situation in which an important and vast part of Brussels remains without urban quality, both spatially and functionally, and hence simultaneously fails 'to be city' and to represent the European Project beyond a purely corporate image."⁵⁵⁴

The iconography of the European Union became based on "words, maps and diagrams", but not on accessible public spaces gathering a diverse multitude of people.⁵⁵⁵ The Schuman Square, which actually looks more like an oversized roundabout and is also used this way, is arguably the most emblematic example of this chaotic process of mass destruction and facadism. In the nineteenth century, it was a calm and suburban roundabout in a wealthy neighbourhood (figure 3.14).⁵⁵⁶ While its surroundings were bulldozed around 1960 and the quarter received an entirely new (mono-)function, leading the Leopold Quarter to only house a thousand inhabitants today, the Schuman Square was barely touched (figure 3.15).⁵⁵⁷ These environment changes also dramatically increased the volume of traffic on the square. The construction of tunnels underneath the main traffic axes of the neighbourhood did not resolve this mobility problem, ultimately making the square into a non-used and desolate concrete roundabout dominated by hard mobility (figure 3.16).

Because of its non-evolution, the Schuman Square turned into an eyesore for most involved actors. Already in 2001, then-Commission president Romano Prodi urged the BCR to address this little glamorous environment.⁵⁵⁸ Pascal Smet, long-time minister of mobility, and recently also heritage and urbanism, in the BCR, allegedly mentioned the transformation of the Schuman junction as one of the main reasons he entered politics over twenty years ago.⁵⁵⁹ Notwithstanding these political comments, the standstill was maintained for a long time. While it already originated in 1993 from an agreement between the then newly-founded region and the federal state, with an explicit agenda to reconsider the European Quarter, infrastructure agency Beliris waited until 2009 to organise a large-scale architecture competition for the Schuman Square.⁵⁶⁰

In the meantime, the square and its environment nevertheless formed object of architectural debate and utopian redesigns. One reflection proves particularly interesting within the scope of this thesis. In the 2004-2005 "Brussels Capital of Europe" project, a group of researchers from the Berlage Institute (at that time still located in Rotterdam) designed several large-scale projects that would finally "enable Brussels to represent the European political idea through the city".⁵⁶¹ Based on the conviction that "the struggle for Europe is the struggle to define its form", they proposed simple forms as artefacts "to define a common ground for its different visitors" and "to share a common political consciousness".⁵⁶² Combining analyses of both Europe's project and

⁵⁵⁴ Aureli et al., *Brussels – A Manifesto*, 106. Original emphasis.

⁵⁵⁵ See Ursprung, "Political animals", 243.

⁵⁵⁶ See Moreau, "Schuman at a crossroads".

⁵⁵⁷ See Ibid., and see also X., "Geen torens meer in de Wetstraat".

⁵⁵⁸ See Gatzios, "Schuman zkt. plein".

⁵⁵⁹ See Moreau, "Schuman at a crossroads".

⁵⁶⁰ See Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ See Aureli et al., *Brussels – A Manifesto*, 81. Among them was Joachim Declerck, whom I interviewed in the light of this thesis.

⁵⁶² See Ibid., 74-77.

history with Brussels' form and structure, 9 interventions were proposed as a "leap towards a new political utopia beyond the hegemony of world capitalism".⁵⁶³

The first of those, tackling the European Quarter, includes a radical vision for the Schuman Square. This proposal is based on the evident consideration that the neighbourhood is dominated by omnipresent politics. Nevertheless, those politics are not felt nor allowed in public space: they are situated either in bureaucratic spaces such as lobbies or in the sphere of the media.⁵⁶⁴ The public spaces, such as the Schuman Square, are rather characterised by a strange combination of smoothness, emptiness and utility. Therefore, the design foresees an alternative vision for the entire neighbourhood, going beyond individual interventions. Through equally engaging in the historical trend of large-scale restructuring, both public spaces, media, lobbies and other parts of the European seats are joined together (figure 3.17). The ambition behind this intervention is to transform those seats from "bureaucratic enclaves" into "accessible podiums for collective rituals and political action".⁵⁶⁵

Practically, this leads to a plan wherein all European Commission office space is concentrated around the Schuman Square (instead of the current dispersion throughout the entire European Quarter) and where all resulting vacant lots are occupied by new housing projects to revitalise the quarter.⁵⁶⁶ Central to the proposal is a longitudinal public space, "the Gallery", which acts as the connecting spine between the different parts of the neighbourhood (figure 3.18). This enormous gallery would be 570 meters long, 37 meters wide and is organised in five superimposed levels.⁵⁶⁷ The top-layer roof is ambitioned to "function as a *ceremonial public space*" for manifestations, events and public claim-making.⁵⁶⁸ Underneath, a second level collects all public facilities (café, kiosk, shops, ...) and connects to the underground transport stations.⁵⁶⁹ Particularly interesting is also the intermediate third level, which is intended as the lobby level and aims to reverse the "austerity and rigidity" of these office spaces into a collective and accessible "sumptuousness and indulgence" (figure 3.19).⁵⁷⁰

Of course, since it is a utopian proposal only existing on paper, the surrounding regulations, patterns of control, etc. remain unclear. The same comment, as for ceremonial public spaces in general, therefore accounts here too. While there is inherently a large potential for political action, it can difficultly be evaluated as a political space without taking into account the spatial regulations that would be applied. Nevertheless, the embedding of a possibility for public representation, its large scale, the explicit relations between public, media and institutionality, ... are all interesting elements in this design in view of political public space.

While less radical, the proposal's imagery and unboundedness are somewhat reminiscent of both Superstudio drawings and early OMA (*Office for Metropolitan Architecture*) designs, such as Koolhaas' well-known Exodus project for London. However, with the Berlage being situated in Rotterdam, this comes as no surprise. Furthermore, although clearly unrealistic, the exercise of

⁵⁶³ See Ibid., 95.

⁵⁶⁴ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁵⁶⁵ See Aureli et al., *Brussels – A Manifesto*, 69.

⁵⁶⁶ See Ibid., 106.

⁵⁶⁷ See Ibid., 106.

⁵⁶⁸ See Ibid., 106.

⁵⁶⁹ See Ibid., 106.

⁵⁷⁰ See Ibid., 107.

thought that is made in this proposal provocatively pulls classical definitions of public space and urban structure out of their often narrow framework (at least in Brussels and especially at that time). Following Joachim Declerck, the influence of the book indeed lay in its approach to urban planning, wherein the city of Brussels finally became seen as an englobing whole which creates unity between distinct *places*.⁵⁷¹ In essence, this ultimately formed a recognition within urban planning of Brussels' amalgam identity, which historically grew from the coming-together of several different villages into a city and never truly disappeared.⁵⁷²

Let us return to reality then (or, at least, to designs once intended to become reality). A competition was finally held between 2009 and 2010 for the redesign of the Schuman Square, and it is XDGA's winning proposal hereto that forms the focus of this analysis. This competition was preceded by another in 2008, which ambitioned a masterplan for the Rue de la Loi and its environment in an attempt to connect the Schuman Square to the central pentagon of Brussels. The 2008 competition was entered by several major architectural names, such as OMA and Atelier Christian de Portzamparc, with the latter coming out as winner. In line with the demand, their entry added 390 000 square meters of surface along the length of the Rue de la Loi, allegedly to counter the dullness and mono-functionality of the quarter (figure 3.20).

While it remains questionable why such a competition demand, prescribing a doubling of density in an already strongly densified neighbourhood, was once formulated in the first place, this *Dubai-isation* of Brussels was ultimately abandoned in 2022 after loud and long-lasting protest.⁵⁷³ Interesting, however, is that XDGA equally participated in the Rue de la Loi competition. Whereas Xaveer De Geyter, who started his career at OMA, deems the winning concept of de Portzamparc "inappropriate and total rubbish", XDGA's proposal fulfilled the demanded densification differently (figure 3.21).⁵⁷⁴ Instead of doubling the height of the entire Rue de la Loi, as de Portzamparc foresaw, XDGA grouped the entire program in a "concentrated square of activity".⁵⁷⁵ This high-rise quadrant was planned right on the transitory edge between the large and diffuse European institutions on the one hand, and the more grid-like parts of the quarter on the other hand (figure 3.22). Rather than seeking a uniform "new" dynamic for the neighbourhood, XDGA attempted to embed a sense of multiplicity in the quarter through explicitly opposing architectural forms. A visible metropolitan identity, which Brussels acquired through the presence of Europe, is thereby both embraced and encouraged.⁵⁷⁶

It is in a similar vein that the Schuman Square was conceived a year later (figures 3.23, 3.24 and 3.25). For XDGA, this constitutes the "most important location in Europe" when it comes to representing political power in public space.⁵⁷⁷ Therefore, they started from this political character of the neighbourhood and assumed it as a place of formal monumentality rather than a place of conviviality where children should be able to play in the streets.⁵⁷⁸ Following De Geyter, the design was subsequently inspired by the observation that "most of the time, when you go

⁵⁷¹ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁵⁷² See De Geyter, interview.

⁵⁷³ See X., "Geen torens meer in de Wetstraat".

⁵⁷⁴ See De Geyter, interview.

⁵⁷⁵ See XDGA, "Rue de la Loi".

⁵⁷⁶ See Van Gerrewey, "XDGA from A to Z", 54.

⁵⁷⁷ See XDGA, "Schuman Square".

⁵⁷⁸ See De Geyter, interview.

there, there is some form of manifestation, both small groups and large manifestations”.⁵⁷⁹ Thus, while formalising “what already happens on the square”, the design attempted to permanently embed this phenomenon by providing a piece of “big scale furniture” that can serve as an *enhancing stage*.⁵⁸⁰ De Geyter in this regard states that by “*formalising* these random forms of protest or claims for attention, this causes a *more clear debate*”.⁵⁸¹ The subtitle given to the project is significant: “democracy amplifier”.⁵⁸² The ambition is high: while Brussels does not have an iconic meeting place for political manifestations, as most capital cities do, XDGA explicitly attempted to allocate this significance to the Schuman Square.⁵⁸³

While the competition requested a formally iconic space for democratic Europe, serving as an “intermodal mobility interchange” and a “harmonious meeting place”, XDGA added an additional political layer.⁵⁸⁴ The proposal indeed audaciously shows how an architectural public space design can consider the political imperative in a quite overt and literal way. Meanwhile, it also safeguards the “rather perverse advantage” that the square held before: a potential to be spontaneously appropriated and temporarily occupied, e.g. for manifestations.⁵⁸⁵ The safeguarding of this spatial quality is rooted in a belief that “the essence of public space lies in its capacity of being useable for more or less everyone”.⁵⁸⁶ Thus, XDGA does not apply a picturesque ideal of peacefulness, often materialised with abundant benches, trees, and terraces. On the contrary: the square essentially remains a “functional vacuum where something *can* happen” but nothing must necessarily take place – making it a power-free *empty place*.⁵⁸⁷

The square is, however, not exclusively purposed for demonstrations and politics. It is also more generally conceived as a “a neutral and inclusive facility” for all types of events and public gatherings, ranging from politics over sports to journalism.⁵⁸⁸ This latter element is interesting: an important consideration in the design process was the previously saddening context for media reporters when covering the news in front of the Berlaymont building, and how this imagery could eventually change through the design.⁵⁸⁹

All the foregoing considerations are formalised by two symmetric hemispheres, creating an urban *amphitheatre* with a hydraulic stage in the middle. If a public sphere indeed “designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk [...] an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction [...] a site for the production and circulation of discourses”, as Nancy Fraser defines it (see also earlier), then this XDGA design seemingly appears as an exemplary materialisation and localisation of it.⁵⁹⁰ While commissioned by political and institutional powers, it generates a free space for potentially criticising those same powers, and thus for continuous democratic performance. The formal language of the amphitheatre explicitly

⁵⁷⁹ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁵⁸² See Van Gerrewey, “XDGA from A to Z”, 71.

⁵⁸³ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁵⁸⁴ See Van Gerrewey, “XDGA from A to Z”, 72.

⁵⁸⁵ See Ibid., 72.

⁵⁸⁶ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁵⁸⁷ See Van Gerrewey, “XDGA from A to Z”, 72.

⁵⁸⁸ See XDGA, “Schuman Square”.

⁵⁸⁹ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁵⁹⁰ See Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”, 57.

embeds the potentiality of spatial representation through visible and audible claim-making processes. Through its non-submission to commodification, the proposal also inherently safeguards a certain degree of accessibility.

The formulation of boundaries is furthermore done with a remarkable subtlety in this project. In contrast to the eclectic environment and its generic materials, the square is carried out with only dark granite plates that seamlessly connect to the environment without difference of level. After all, the political space is already demarcated by the explicit form of the amphitheatre which one must enter. In addition, the introduction of a vertical circulation scheme is quintessential to the articulation of the thresholds. The car-free amphitheatre on street level is indeed only possible because of the superimposed layers of underground stations and tunnels for both cars and other types of (public) transport (figure 3.26).

Notwithstanding that the Schuman Square proposal by XDGA bears multiple (physical) qualities in respect to the political imperative, a few reflections come to mind. Most importantly, it appears that social patterns and democratic theory are addressed a bit wilfully, and arguably quite physically determinist, in e.g. the description of the project as an “open-air parliament”.⁵⁹¹ Therefore, XDGA’s proposal simultaneously illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of architectural designs (when regarded in a classical, rather top-down, and strict framing) for the realisation of political public spaces.

While holding the ambition to shape a political space which is more than a caricature of representative democracy, the required place dynamic for such purpose is impossible to enforce with a design. As I argued earlier, political public space is rather to be considered a *time-space*, subject to moments of collective action and processes of placemaking, than an absolute invariable. Although De Geyter argues that the proposal was a formalisation of an already present dynamic on the square, this is hazy. After all, the Schuman square was not much more than an unreachable and sandy roundabout where not much happened (figure 3.27). It is true that there were occasional manifestations, but the square was not fundamentally a place of gathering, let alone a place of political debate and representation.

Therefore, I think that the Berlage analysis about the omni-presence of politics in lobbies and media, but not in public space, is more rightful, and that the XDGA analysis is indeed somewhat an example of “the fantastic rhetoric of architects”.⁵⁹² Furthermore, the proposal is stooled on a determinist belief that “by *scripting the usage* (of the square), this will provoke a political reaction”.⁵⁹³ While such perspective is not perse problematic, it is nonetheless more grounded when it is the result of an active process of participation and co-creation with the present and (envisioned) future users.

In addition, multiple examples of similar large-scale (ceremonial) public spaces, especially when so closely related (and located) to power and institutionality, prove vulnerable to government-sponsored spectacle and patterns of political control of space.⁵⁹⁴ This clearly forms a potential threat to the XDGA design too. However, when taking the previous remark for granted, it becomes

⁵⁹¹ See XDGA, “Schuman Square”.

⁵⁹² Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁵⁹³ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁵⁹⁴ See Miller, *Designs on the Public*, 2.

debatable how much societal impact and criticism architectural practice can actually attempt to embed in design. Xaveer De Geyter approaches this debate rather lucidly, as showcases his reaction to the question if his practice does not take “capitalism too much for granted” by making a study for the expansion of Monaco’s territory into the sea:

“Embracing capitalism? That's what an agency does all the time, isn't it? You are in constant dialogue with developers, financiers and governments. We are architects, we are not going to adjust capitalism. If they asked to design an art museum in Abu Dhabi with exploited Indians on site, I would think twice. But Monaco? The price of real estate there is so high that it is no longer an obstacle to adding the cost of foundations in the sea.”⁵⁹⁵

While this comment may seem too pragmatic, it is also true that architecture is most impactful through physical realisations. Moreover, especially for projects with the scale of the Schuman Square and when commissioned by public instances, it is impossible to escape reality. In this regard, the amphitheatrical design of XDGA is precious because it explicitly takes up the gauntlet and would have been a very interesting experiment for a city much in need of such spaces. While adjusting to its situation, it nonetheless provokes and attempts to challenge its environment and commissioners. At the same time, the foregoing consideration points out the fundamental need to locate both such large-scale, formal political public spaces as well as alternative, informal spatial (counter-)practices in a city – since the possibility of the one requires the existence of the other, and informality often emerges from *within* formality, as I’ll show.⁵⁹⁶ These latter operate more bottom-up, small-scale and independent from capitalist reality. Therefore, they are in a different position to formulate critical (political) perspectives and shape new urban imaginaries. The next part will address a few of those in Brussels.

One might, by now, wonder why I have been discussing a project proposal, although XDGA won the competition in 2010: simply put, because it was a public project in Brussels. Or, how reality ultimately took down ambition. The XDGA proposal quickly encountered several setbacks after its first prize.⁵⁹⁷ First, the competition organised by Beliris was for a car-free square, since the additional underground tunnels had already been planned. Nevertheless, these works would ultimately cost 16 million euro, which was money that could not be found. Furthermore, the fee for the realisation of the design was 5 percent, which is typical for a public space. However, due to the layered underground which is essentially completely built, the design proved too complex to realise for this remuneration. This quickly turned into discussion between XDGA and Beliris and delayed the further development of the project. Besides those financial issues, the few remaining inhabitants, which are nonetheless reunited in vocal committees, filed several complaints against the design. After the instauration of a new government in 2014, with Pascal Smet as minister of mobility and public works, the XDGA proposal soon died a quiet death. After it appeared that multiple other tunnels in Brussels required urgent works, the plan for a new tunnel underneath the Schuman square was definitively abandoned, dealing the final blow to the proposal.

However, the Schuman Square still remained in urgent need of redesign. A second competition was therefore issued in 2015, this time by Brussels Mobility (the regional instance for mobility).

⁵⁹⁵ De Geyter, interview.

⁵⁹⁶ See Laguerre, *The Informal City*, 43.

⁵⁹⁷ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

Nevertheless, as bMa Kristiaan Borret admits, the ambition for this second competition was much lower.⁵⁹⁸ Any politicisation of the space was left behind: the new aspiration was to make it a “real *meeting place* for Brussels residents, the public of the EU institutions and *tourists*”.⁵⁹⁹ In other words, rather than a political space, it now had to become a social landmark.

A good illustration in this regard is the second entry that XDGA submitted, although they felt that the new competition was “fake from the beginning and not possible to win anymore” (figure 3.28).⁶⁰⁰ This feeling clearly simmers through in the design. Although somewhat keeping the same formal language, the conceptual strength of the design is drastically attenuated and the amphitheatre is greenwashed and softened.⁶⁰¹ The verticality and underground connections of the project equally disappear, making it more an unconvincing landscape manipulation than a radical urban project.⁶⁰²

The second competition was eventually won by a design of Cobe and BRUT (figure 3.29). This intervention is based on a large canopy, whose importance is accentuated by concentric circles over the square’s surrounding pavement “emphasizing Place Schuman as the epicentre of modern European democracy” (figure 3.30).⁶⁰³ The canopy itself is carried out in steel which will reflect the bowl-shaped square and the people below, making it a “meeting place for nationalities, cultures, languages and genders, drawing inspiration from the ancient Greek agora, the cradle of democracy”.⁶⁰⁴ Clearly, the surrounding discourse hasn’t been downsized but has rather become annoying and misplaced, since the design appears much less convincing and provocative. Through the omnipresent street furniture, dispersed over the square, and the oppressing canopy, it will also be more difficult to host e.g. manifestations – therefore, in reality, restricting the political character of the square instead of encouraging it.

Moreover, the large-scale canopy fits into a classical and repeating pattern of failure for Brussels’ urban renewal projects:

“Thus Schuman represents a Brussels take on the ouroboros (ancient symbol depicting a dragon eating its own tail): an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation. [...] Circular canopies are the itch the city just hasn’t been able to scratch in recent history. The 2012 canopy at Carrefour de l’Europe which blocks the view of Horta’s Central Station didn’t trouble the CRMS (Royal Commission for Monuments and Landscapes) and doesn’t trouble the weather either when it wants to soak people. The same goes for the new disc sheltering place Rogier from everything but the elements. [...] In the long term, however, canopies are cheaper to remove than tunnels are to build.”⁶⁰⁵

So seen, any paradigmatic shift is quite relative. The square is this time made less traffic-intensive with a mobility plan rerouting traffic through the entire neighbourhood and relieving the Rue de la Loi. These changes in the traffic situation, introduced by the region, received much protest from

⁵⁹⁸ See Gatzios, “Schuman zkt. plein”.

⁵⁹⁹ See Walker, “What will Schuman look like”. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰⁰ De Geyter, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁶⁰¹ Maj, interview, 18 April 2024.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ See Cobe, “Place Schuman”.

⁶⁰⁴ See Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ See Moreau, “Schuman at a crossroads”.

neighbourhood inhabitants and municipal administrations who feared a counter-productive result leading to more traffic jams and car pressure.⁶⁰⁶ In addition, the canopy is causing much commotion because of its imposing scale, generic design and high cost price. Esteemed at roughly 25 million euro, a large part of this should have been financed with a subsidy from the European Commission. However, it recently appeared that this subsidy had been transformed into a loan through to budget cuts.⁶⁰⁷ Although little assuring claims are made that these financial issues will not delay the project, it yet again proves another episode in the impossible history of the Schuman Square.

These conflicting opinions have long delayed the construction works after the winner of the competition was announced in 2017. Nevertheless, even though multiple complaints are still under process at the Council of State, the construction works for the new Schuman Square started last year and are foreseen to be finished in 2026. The recently formulated conclusion to this course of events by the citizen committee of the Leopold Quarter is therefore striking: “the *Brusselization* still goes on”.⁶⁰⁸ The future usage of the Schuman Square will have to prove otherwise, but it at least looks as if the political imperative of public space is today no longer topping the list of priorities.

⁶⁰⁶ See X., “Toch beroep tegen heraanleg Schumanrotonde”.

⁶⁰⁷ See X., “Op zoek naar 17 miljoen euro”.

⁶⁰⁸ See X., “Bewoners leggen zich niet neer bij heraanleg Schumanplein”.

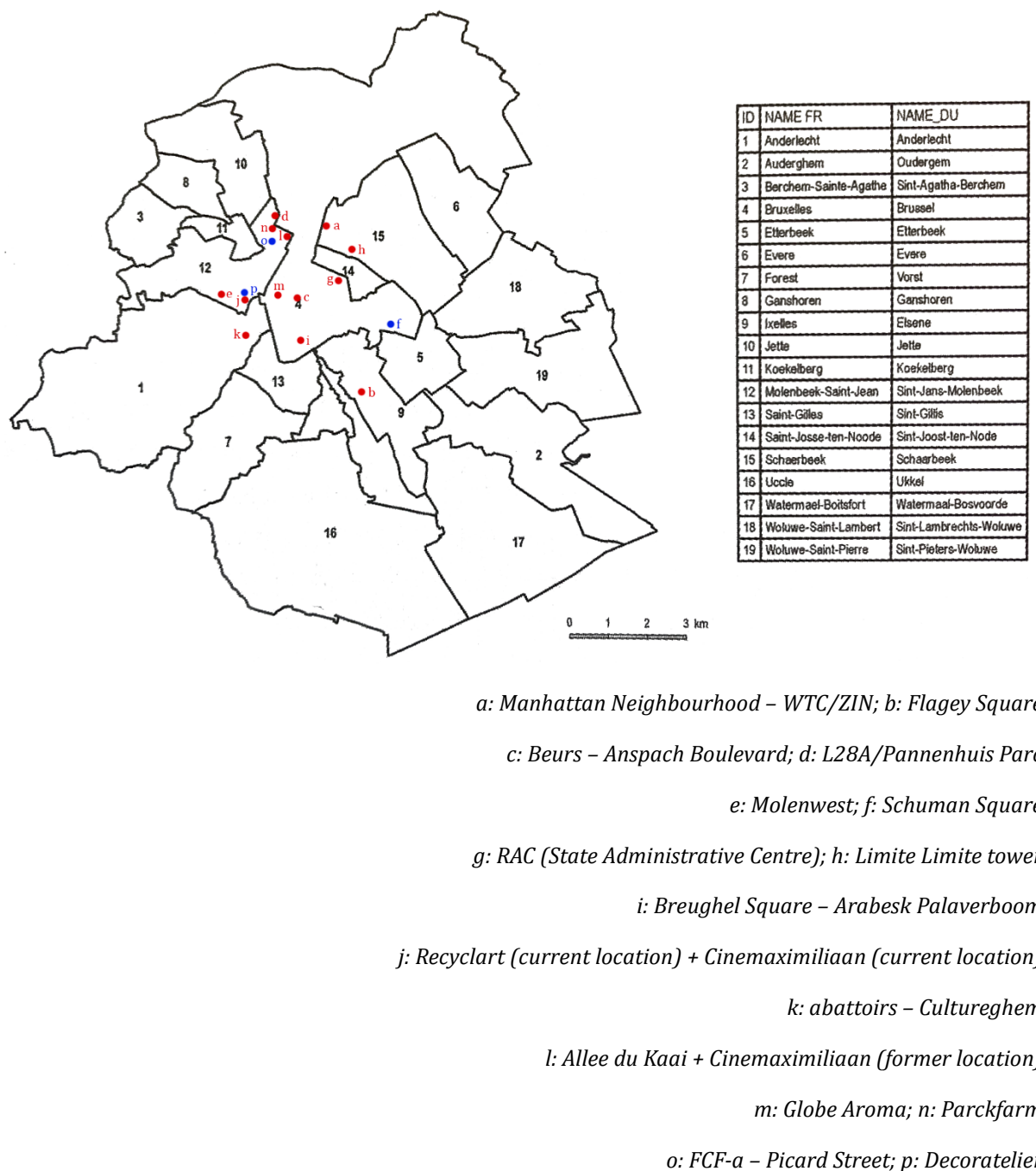


Fig. 3.1: map of the Brussels Capital Region, showing the 19 municipalities and the approximate locations of the most important projects that are touched upon in this thesis. The two small, central parts without a number respectively belong to, from West to East, Ixelles and Brussels. (© Brussels Agence de Développement Territorial – Agentschap voor Territoriale Ontwikkeling [ADT-ATO], annotations by author)

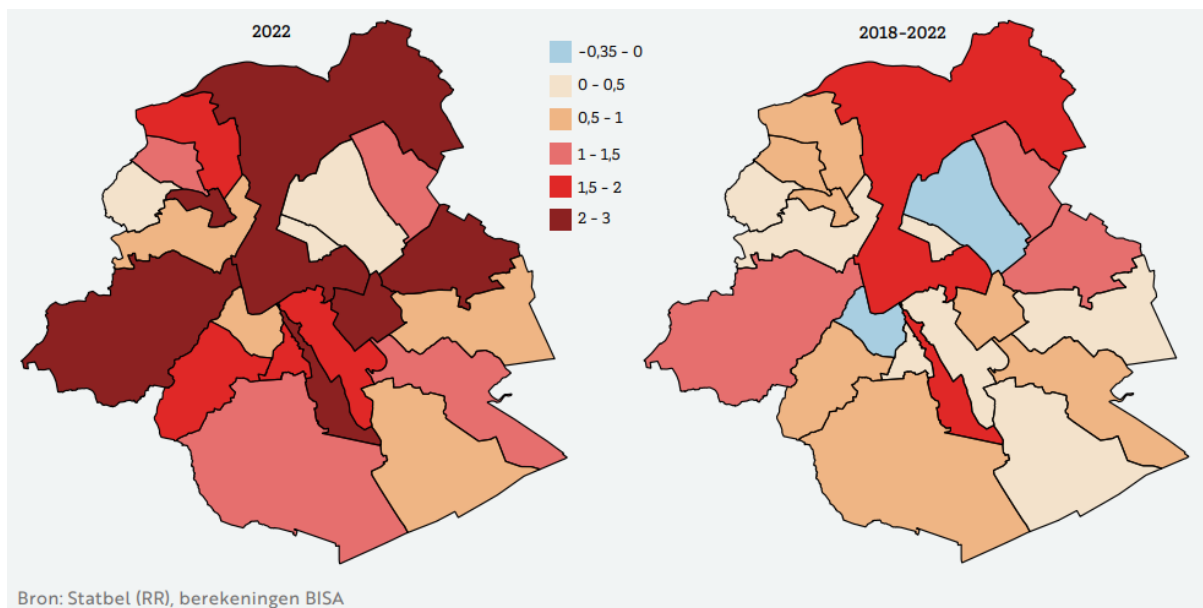


Fig. 3.2: average yearly increase (%) in inhabitants per municipality of the Brussels Capital Region, 2022. (© Statbel, BISA)

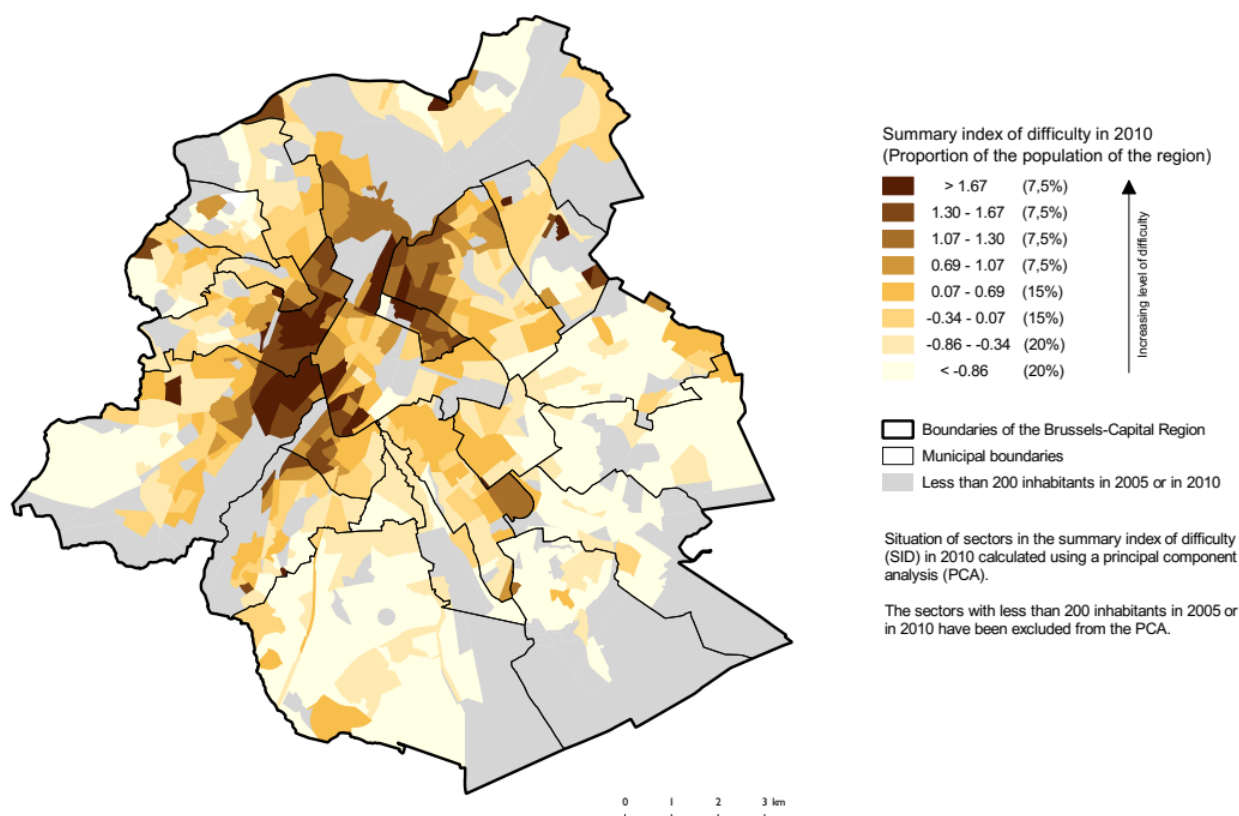


Fig. 3.3: map showing the geographic dispersion of socio-economic difficulty in the BCR, revealing a 'poor sickle' in darker colours on the west side of the central pentagon and canal, 2010. (© Van Hamme, Grippa and Van Crieckingen)

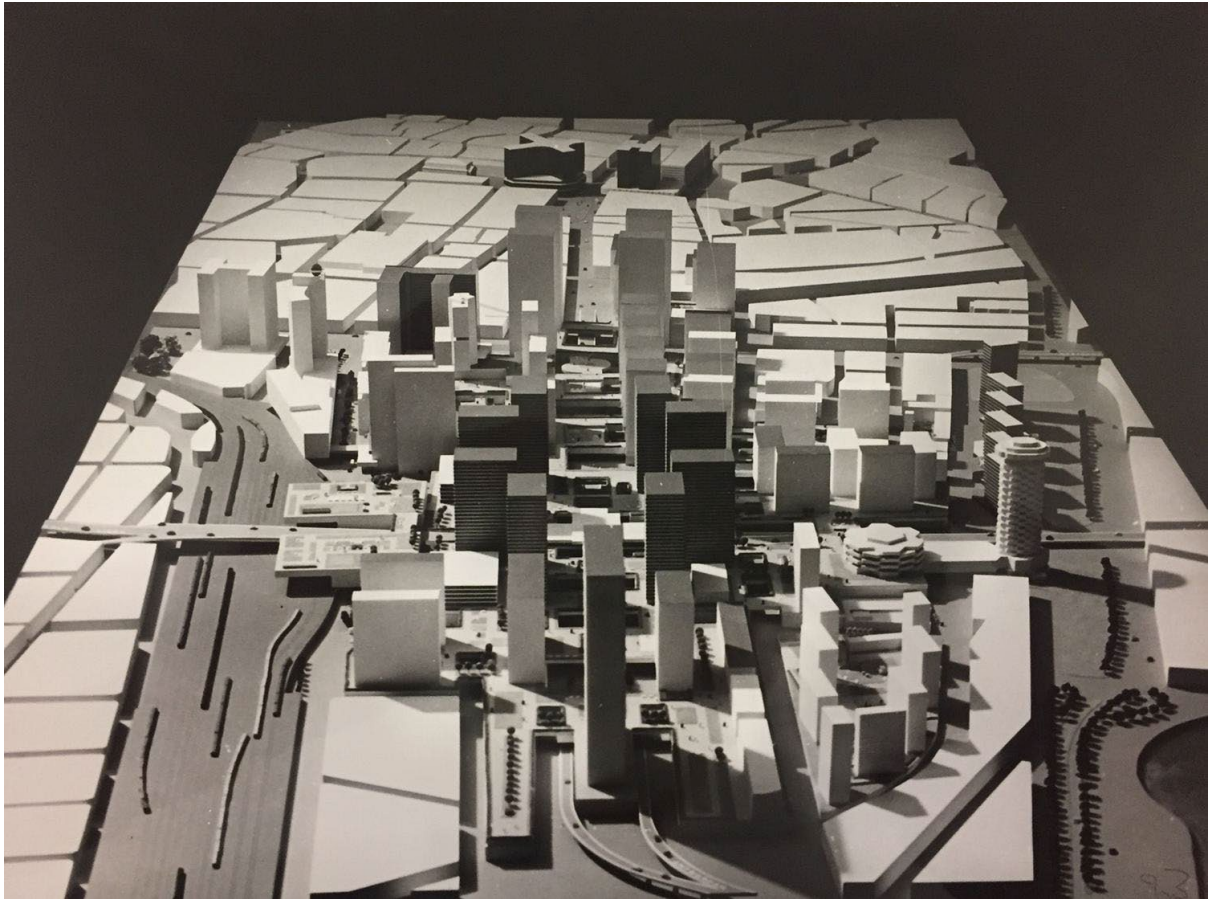


Fig. 3.4: scale model for the Manhattan Project in the North Quarter of Brussels, with the North Station on the left, the canal on the right and the centre of the city afar. Central to the plan are the 8 WTC towers on a raised pedestrian walkway, decoupling cars and pedestrians throughout the whole neighbourhood, 1967. (© Altstadt)

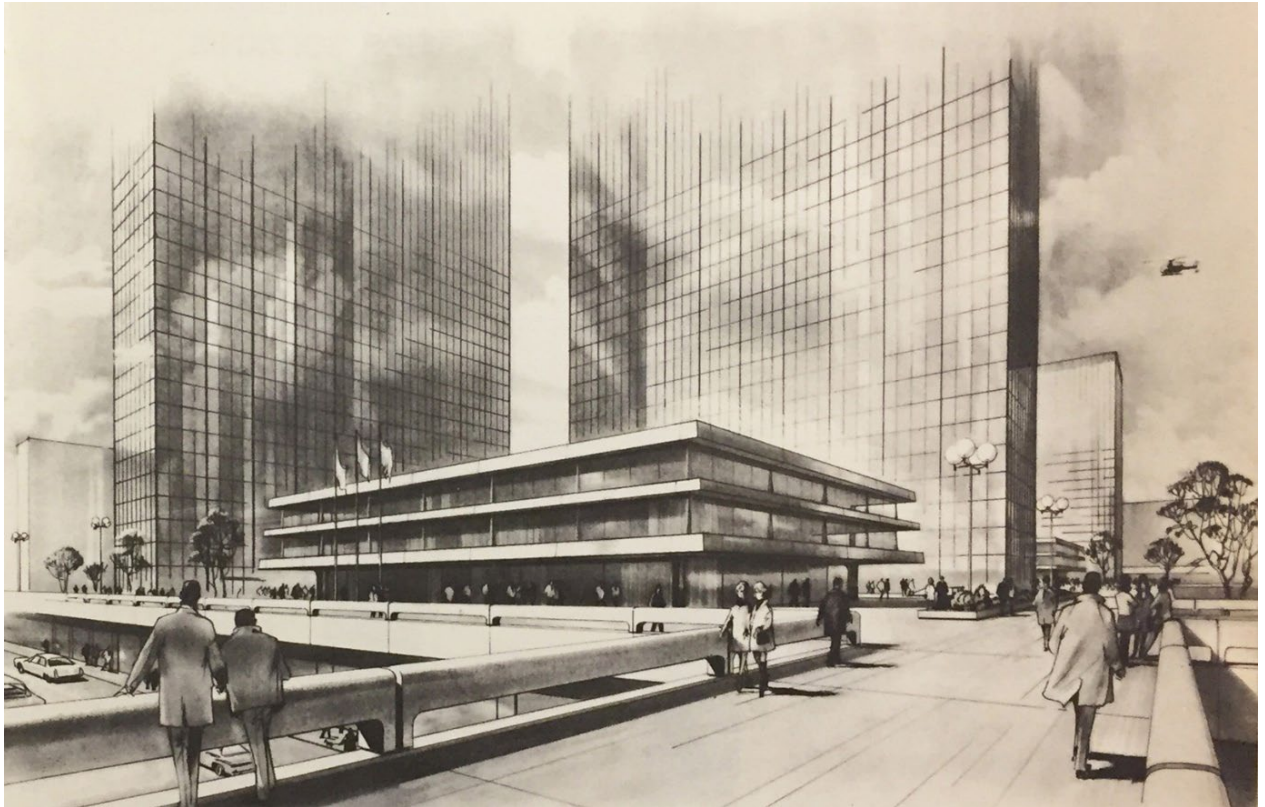


Fig. 3.5: drawing of the envisioned public space in the Manhattan Project, consisting most importantly of pedestrian decks above urban highways. (© Altstadt)



Fig. 3.6: three built WTC towers in the North Quarter amid endless vacant lots after the works were definitively halted, late 1970s - early 1980s. (© Altstadt)



Fig. 3.7: Flagey Square after its car-free and participatory redesign, ca. 2010. (© Latz + Partner)



Fig. 3.8: protest in support of Palestine on the steps in front of the Beurs, March 2024. (© author)



Fig. 3.9: vandalised Suzan Daniel bridge above the canal between Brussels and Molenbeek, showing how this design does not fit into its environment but implicitly asks for another public, 2023. (© Bruzz)



Fig. 3.10: view of the nearly finished ZIN project, redeveloping the former WTC I and II towers of the Manhattan plan, as seen from the Maximiliaan Parc, 2024. Has something truly changed? (© 51N4E)



Fig. 3.11: recent redevelopment of a former railway into the Pannenhuis/L28A Parc showing an alternative future for Brussels' public spaces and wastelands, 2023. (© Michiel De Cleene)



Fig. 3.12: MolenWest project using a desolate and seemingly lost piece of public space to create an open place for the children of a neighbourhood in lack of qualitative public space, 2021. (© Reporters, 1010 architecture urbanism)

PLAN D'AIDE EUROPÉEN



Fig. 3.13: cartoon criticising the installation of the European institutions in Brussels. (© PTTL [Plus-tôt Te laat]).



Fig. 3.14: Schuman Square (which only received its current name around the 1960s and was formerly named the roundabout of the Rue de la Loi) in the second half of the nineteenth century. (© The Brussels Times)



Fig. 3.15: Schuman Square in the 1960s, while the Berlaymont building was under construction, revealing how the square itself barely changed. (© The Brussels Times)



Fig. 3.16: Schuman Square after the Berlaymont building had been finished (left) and while the Justus Lipsius building was under construction (right), ca. 1990. (© The Brussels Times)

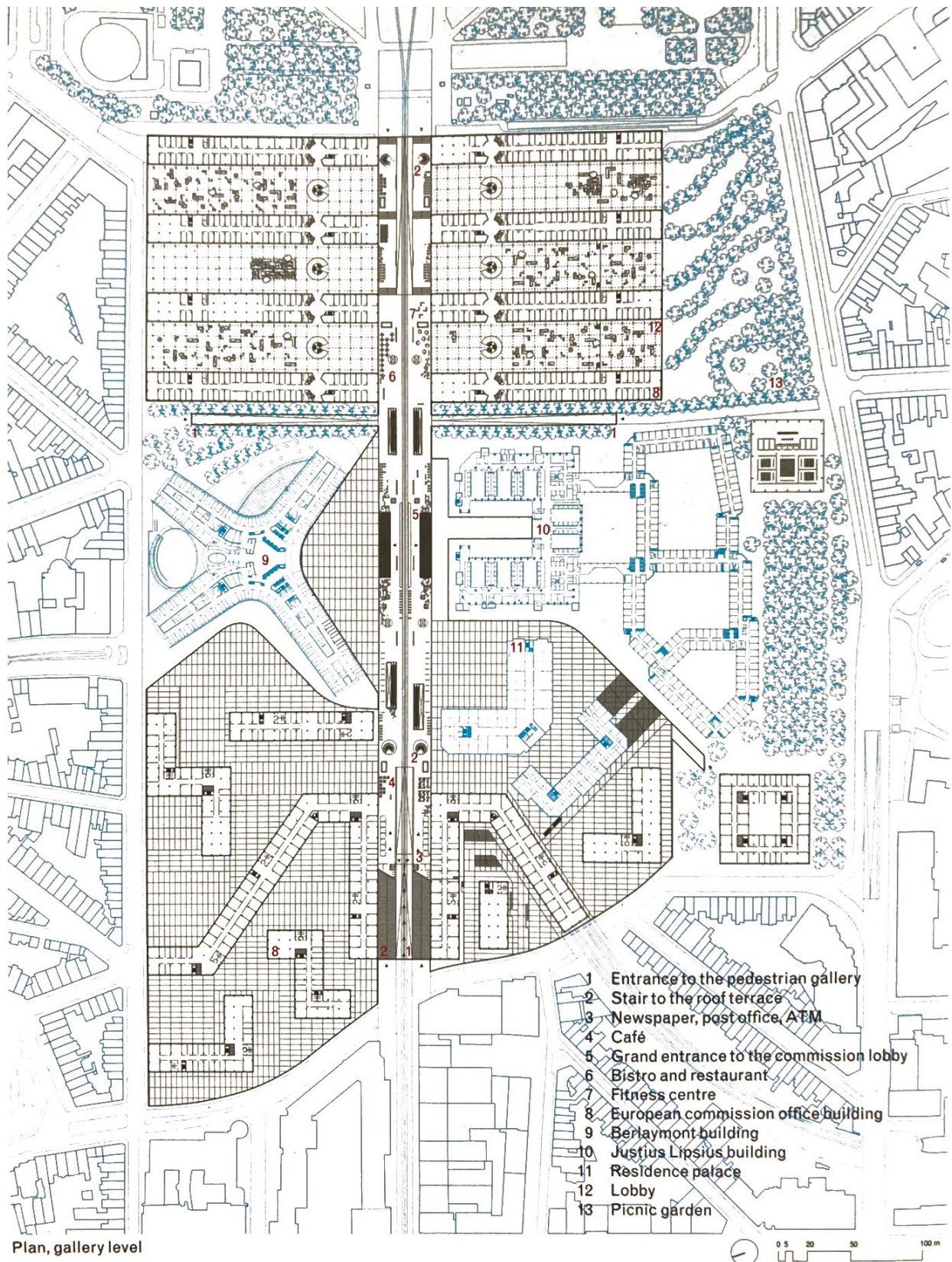


Fig 3.17: plan of the gallery level for the Berlage's utopian redesign of the European Quarter, with the disappeared Schuman Square situated centrally between numbers 5 and 6, 2005. (© Aureli et al.)



Fig. 3.18: view from the roof of the central gallery, with the centre of Brussels afar. (© Aureli et al.)

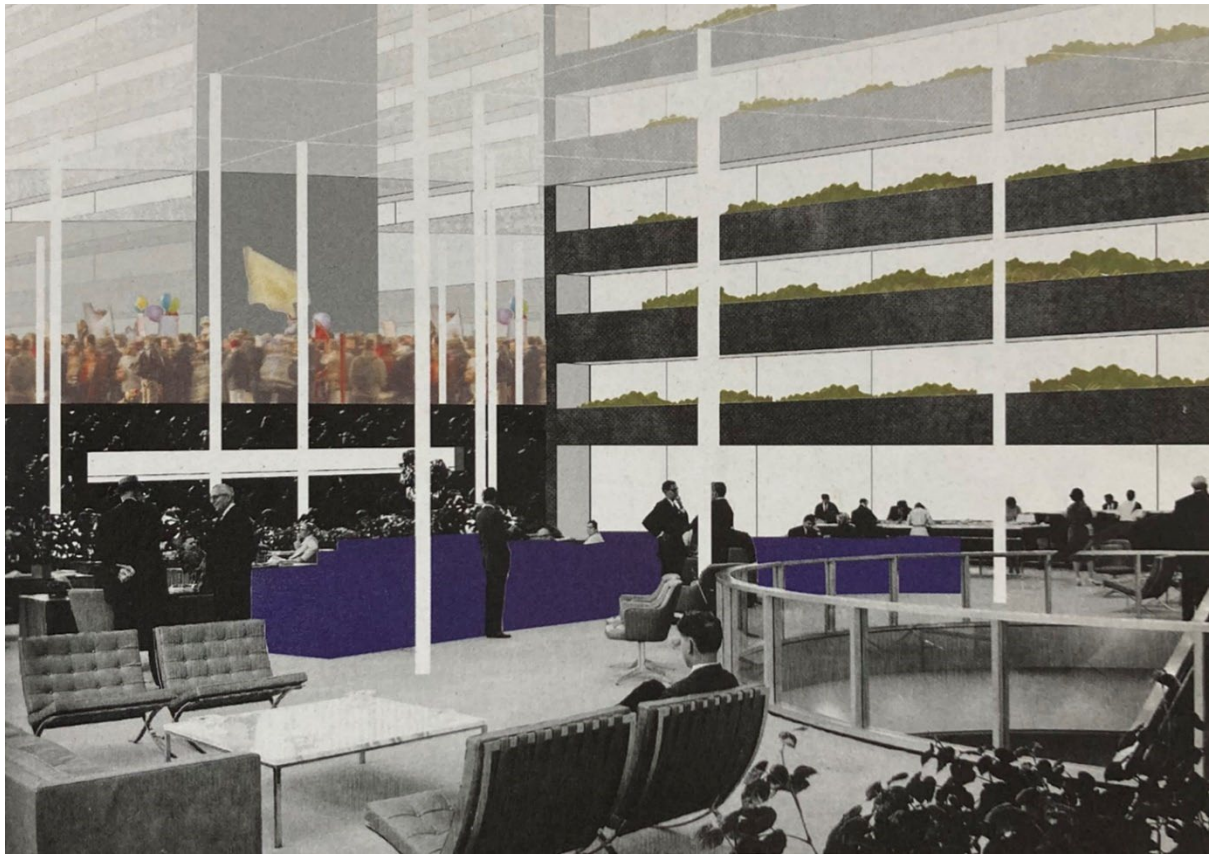


Fig. 3.19: view from the lobby space (third level of the gallery) towards the higher-level public roof of the gallery. (© Aureli et al.)



Fig. 3.20: winning design by Christian de Portzamparc for the Rue de la Loi masterplan, connecting the Cinquantaire (top right) to the centre of the city (bottom left) through the Schuman Square, 2008. (© Christian de Portzamparc)



Fig. 3.21: view for the Cinquantenaire towards the high-rise Rue de la Loi densification proposal by XDGA, wherein the circus tent is placed on the Schuman Square, 2008. (© XDGA)

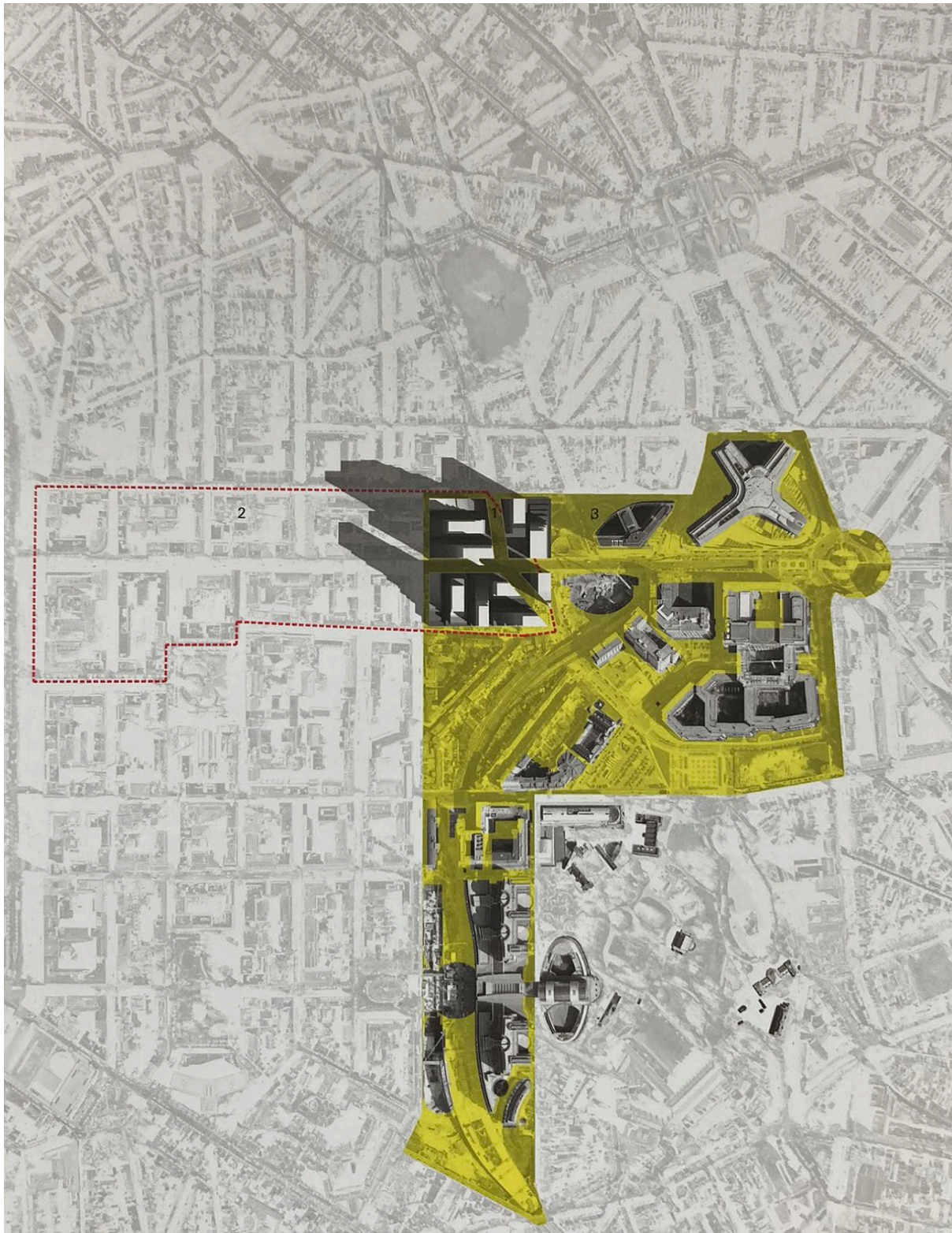


Fig. 3.22: site plan for the XDGA entry in the Rue de la Loi competition, with 1 the proposed project, 2 the competition boundary and 3 the EU institutions (with the Schuman roundabout southeast of the cross-like Berlaymont building). (© XDGA)

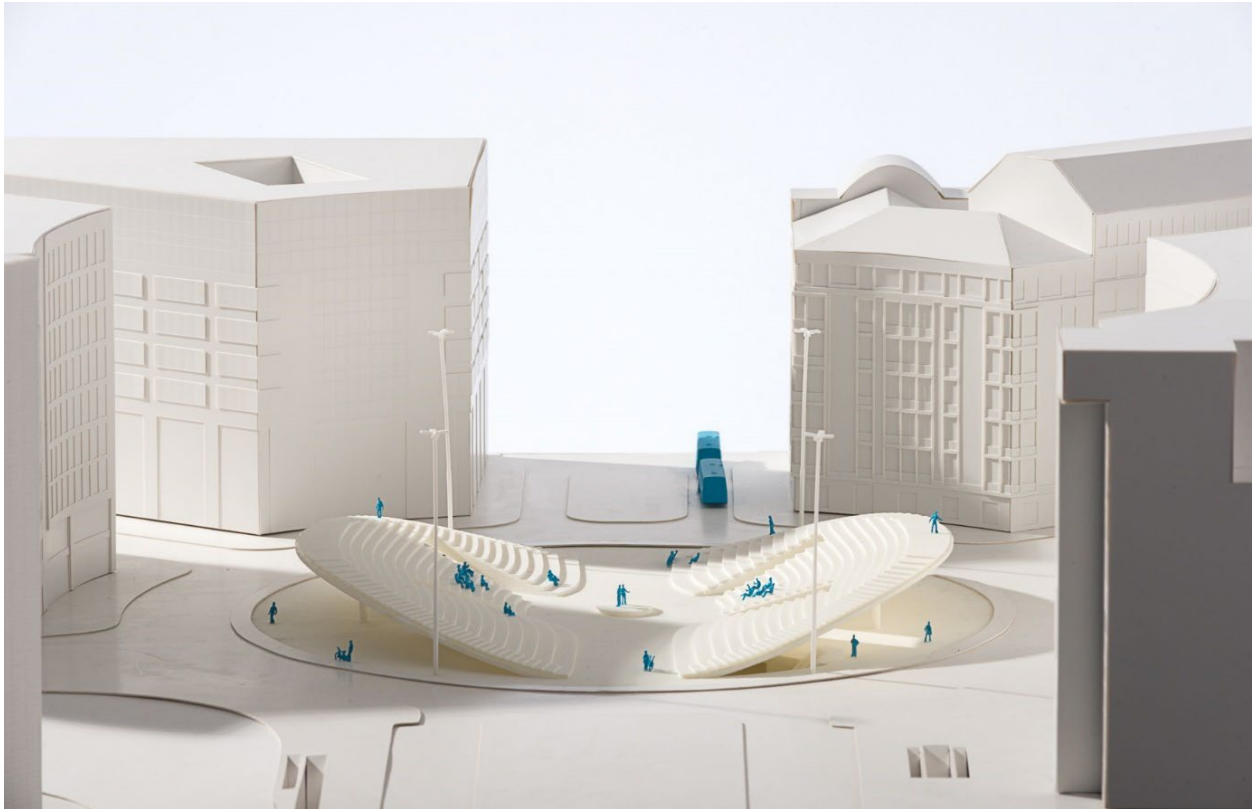


Fig. 3.23: model for the winning design by XDGA for the Schuman Square, transforming the former roundabout in an amphitheatre that serves as a “democracy amplifier”, 2009. (© XDGA)



Fig 3.24: close-up of one of the hemispheres in model, giving a feeling of the experience within the urban amphitheatre. (© XDGA)



Fig. 3.25: rendered images of the redesigned Schuman Square by XDGA, showing its traffic-free pedestrian character and its organisation as a “functional vacuum”. (© XDGA)

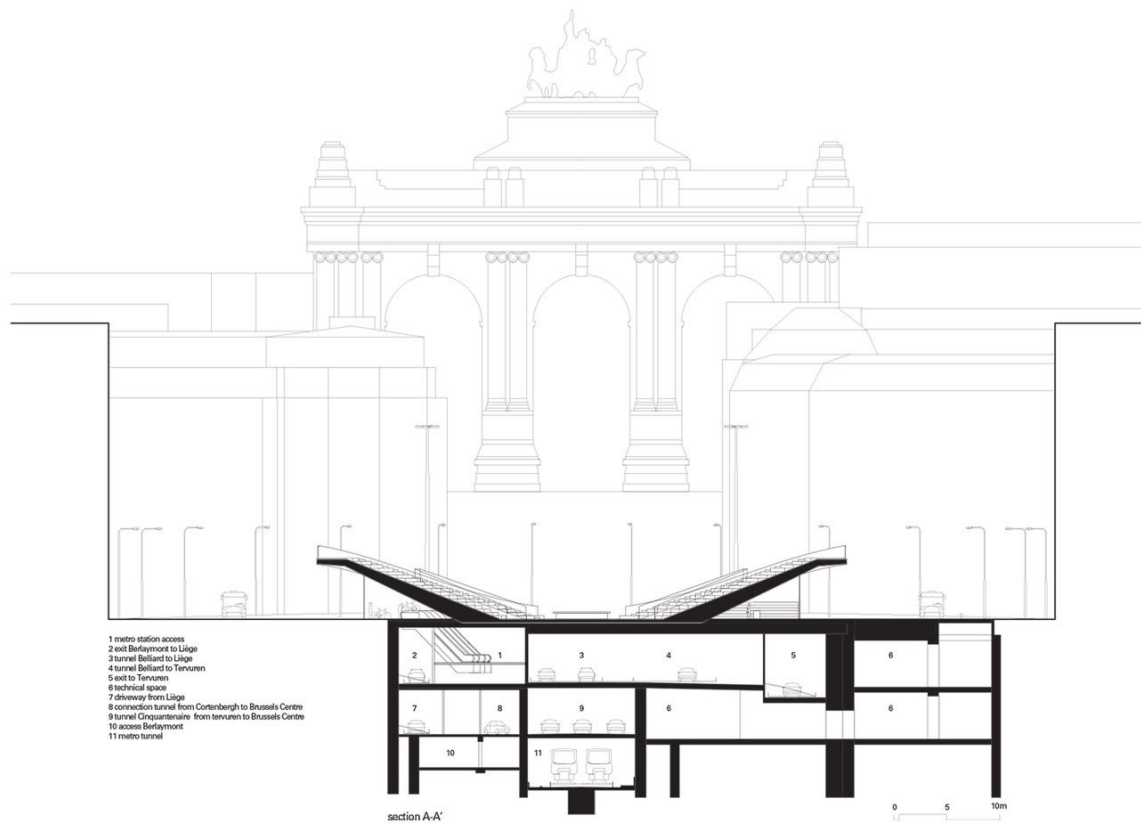


Fig. 3.26: section of the Schuman Square, showing the multiple underground levels addressing the mobility issue of the neighbourhood. (© XDGA)



Fig. 3.27: state of the Schuman Square in 2017: nothing more than a sandy roundabout. (© bMa)



Fig. 3.28: second entry by XDGA for the Schuman Square, whereby the amphitheatre is entirely greenwashed and the interesting vertical circulation is abandoned, 2017. (© XDGA)



Fig 3.29: winning design by Cobe + BRUT for the second Schuman competition, showing the reflecting steel canopy, 2017. (© Cobe)



Fig. 3.30: winning Schuman design with a bowl-shaped ground level underneath a green-covered canopy, accentuated by concentric circles in the square's pavement. (© Cobe)

3.2 Alternative practices of political public space in the Brussels Capital Region

3.2.1 “Interstitial activism”, architectural culture and urban struggle

As mentioned earlier, Brussels is also characterised by impactful practices of intertwinement between urban activism and spatial-architectural culture.⁶⁰⁹ Such co-operational dynamics have happened in different times and on different levels, ranging from unorganised and local-bound to interconnected and large-scale.⁶¹⁰ Regarding small-scale and spontaneous spatial activism, for instance, Mattias De Backer gives a beautiful example from the city-centre of Brussels:

“The football pitch near the Ieper tram stop in the Chicago neighborhood is the result of an actual political stance undertaken by local youth. Some years ago, the city council decided to transform it into a basketball field, which was received by the youngsters as a declaration of war. None of them were into basketball, and as a football field it was very popular, so why change it? The decision was interpreted as a gesture of discrimination, one that seemed to signal the city council’s aversion against Arab or Maghreb kids playing in the neighborhood. After much protest, the situation was restored. The place became literally a *space of representation* and contestation in their geographies.”⁶¹¹

More famous, large-scale examples of urban activism are e.g. the ‘Battle of the Marolles’ in the late 1960s, the temporary Hotel Central occupation in the centre of Brussels in the mid-1990s and the previously mentioned Picnic the Streets actions in the 2010s.⁶¹² In all of these, public space to some extent served as the locus for political and architectural statements. Such episodes both in and about public space, and through architectural means, hold particular relevance within the light of this research into the political imperative of public space. After all, evoking debate about urban (public) space within those same spaces, is a most elementary form of addressing this imperative.

As pointed out in my analysis of the Schuman Square, it is quintessential that a city hosts a wide and multi-scalar spectrum of different (political) public spaces.⁶¹³ Experiments, both in space and time, are crucial to politically emancipate inhabitants, to test new urban imaginaries and to initiate collectively supported transitions. In this regard, informal spaces hold specific value since they bear the inherent “double characteristic of both subversion where one gathers to resist formal power and safety valve as it allows dissidents a niche to escape from the overcontrol of formal power”.⁶¹⁴ In what follows, I will give an insight to this intertwinement between activism, politics and architecture in Brussels through a few (historical) projects and collectives. Subsequently, I will evolve on two remarkable current-day practices that are, in my eyes,

⁶⁰⁹ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 81.

⁶¹⁰ See (e.g.) De Cauter, “From Hotel Central to Picnic the Streets”.

⁶¹¹ De Backer, “Regimes of Visibility”, 314-315. Emphasis added.

⁶¹² For a rather complete overview of the history, evolution and methodology of temporary occupations in Brussels, see Nelissen, “*The Occupied City*”.

⁶¹³ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 118.

⁶¹⁴ See Laguerre, *The Informal City*, 45.

particularly interesting to confront with the theoretical framework that I have been building about the political imperative of public space.

The first influential initiatives of architectural activism originated during the *Brusselization* era. Founded around 1970 by, among others, architect Maurice Culot, the ARAU quickly became the loudest counter-voice against the then on-going waves of *urbicide*.⁶¹⁵ By contrast, they defended an urbanism with more respect for the existing urban tissue and present inhabitants through the production of several paper counter-designs. Their participatory approach gave the ARAU particular impact at that time as a form of “counter-power” to the often substantial opaqueness of political decision-making processes.⁶¹⁶ As a force of “contestation, negotiation and proposal”, the ARAU’s counter-designs were more than aesthetic-formal architectural criticism, but rather political statements out of concern with urban space and with the aim to open public debate in and about the city.⁶¹⁷

This was at least true for the early counter-projects of the ARAU, wherein political action was prioritised over stylistic considerations.⁶¹⁸ During this first instance, the core occupations of the ARAU were the urban form and the realisation of a liveable and functionally-mixed city.⁶¹⁹ Nonetheless, questionable aesthetic preferences and a sense of formalistic nostalgia became increasingly dominant throughout the years. This ultimately resulted in a consistent implementation of a neoclassical style in their proposals.⁶²⁰ Slowly, the ARAU had thereby evolved from political action and urban struggle through architectural means into the production of picturesque urban projects.⁶²¹

Consequently, the obtained results of the late ARAU were not always successful. It is in this regard sufficient to think about the disappointing redesign of the Europa Square in front of the Central Station, although much more ambitious and interesting proposals had also been formulated for this symbolic square (by, among others, Xaveer De Geyter on two occasions). Especially the depoliticised neoclassicism of Leon Krier, designer of the forementioned Royal Mint Square and closely associated to the ARAU, has been criticised as “ersatz urbanity where the recuperation of the past is purely formalistic, stripped of its political and social origins”.⁶²² Notwithstanding this unfortunate evolution, the ARAU have been very influential in the formalisation of citizen participation and in raising awareness about the need for protection of architectural heritage in Brussels.⁶²³

In the wake of the Hotel Central occupation, which is often considered a highly symbolic and impactful moment, new alliances between both urban creativity and contestation arose in architectural and urbanist circles.⁶²⁴ Remarkable in this regard is the Disturb collective, which acted rather in opposition to the ARAU and defended the discontinuous and fragmented character

⁶¹⁵ See Comhaire, “Activisme urbain et politiques architecturales à Bruxelles”, 10-11.

⁶¹⁶ See Ibid., 11-12.

⁶¹⁷ See Ibid., 12.

⁶¹⁸ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 54.

⁶¹⁹ See Ibid., 55.

⁶²⁰ See Ibid., 58-59.

⁶²¹ See Ibid., 61.

⁶²² See Ibid., 64.

⁶²³ See Ibid., 64.

⁶²⁴ See Comhaire, “Activisme urbain et politiques architecturales à Bruxelles”, 15.

of the city (resulting from the modernisation attempts) as a motor for creation.⁶²⁵ Despite this different point of departure, Disturb's criticism of the lack of architectural quality in Brussels, the political lethargy and reluctance, and the questionably close cooperation between administrations and certain architectural firms remained familiar. Meanwhile, notwithstanding the bMa's attempts at safeguarding architectural quality today, this last point of criticism remains to some extent relevant. For instance, in the North Quarter, the unceasing omnipresence of the Jaspers-Eyers consortium (who are responsible for several main architectural cancers in Brussels) makes it hard to believe that "the same actors who kept the neighbourhood in a decade-long coma are able to do better now".⁶²⁶

Disturb specifically regarded public space as a potential carrier of both multiplicity (concerning usage and users) and a metropolitan image.⁶²⁷ Following this conviction, they became closely associated to the redevelopment of the Flagey Square, which I discussed earlier. In addition, Disturb were co-organisers together with City Mine(d) to the Maprac ateliers, which marked an influential moment in the development of Brussels' architectural culture. These ateliers were an early attempt at co-creation and took place on the State Administrative Centre site in 2004.

As a participatory mapping project, Maprac reunited experts, artists, activists, and more to make a "cartography of urban needs, potentials and possible realisations, on a spot, which at the moment has lost every identity" and had become a major symbol of the rather disastrous modernisation of the city-region.⁶²⁸ The complex had, at that time, recently and under questionable circumstances been sold to private investors. The ateliers therefore focussed on how the enormous vacant public space (see also pictures in the previous chapter) could be saved from exclusive privatisation and further isolation from the city. Although this effort did not have long-lasting physical results (except for the RAC once being the location of the PleinOPENair film festival in the summer), it was an impactful early investigation of alternative futures (besides private development) based on what Isabelle Doucet labels *activism from-within*. Following Doucet, this concept describes a form of criticality that acts out of practice and attempts to formulate criticism by presenting "better accounts of the world".⁶²⁹

City Mine(d), who were thus co-organisers to the Maprac ateliers, are an outstanding example to show the potential contribution of architectural practices to those forms of activism from-within. Equally founded as a spin-off from the urban social movement surrounding the Hotel Central, it has evolved today into an organisation working in London, Barcelona and Brussels on the development of "independent urban projects in public and semi-public area's".⁶³⁰ In this notion of independency lies the fundamental strategy to their projects:

"In all projects, which have been started up by the organization, the local autonomy is pivotal: the local residents and users are urged to acquire control over their environment. This is only possible if they are involved in the decision-making of the institutions and

⁶²⁵ See Ibid., 15.

⁶²⁶ See Boie, "Welcome in Jaspers Town".

⁶²⁷ See Comhaire, "Activisme urbain et politiques architecturales à Bruxelles", 16.

⁶²⁸ See Moyersoen and Van Campenhout, "City Mine(d)", 6.

⁶²⁹ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 22-23.

⁶³⁰ See Moyersoen and Van Campenhout, "City Mine(d)", 4.

governments, because here at the urban level decisions are made about the future and the development of their own neighbourhoods.”⁶³¹

City Mine(d) thereby assumes the position of “creator of possibilities” or “power-negotiator” in the creation of these projects, offering an alternative vision on the role of architects in urban (re)development projects.⁶³² An exemplary and compelling illustration of this approach is the Limite Limite tower, which existed between 1999 and 2004 (figure 3.31). Situated in the Brabant neighbourhood of Schaerbeek, which is characterised by particularly precarious living conditions, houses in decay and window prostitution, City Mine(d) realised an ambitious architectural intervention on a site of no more than 40 m².⁶³³ Following a request for intervention from the neighbourhood inhabitants, the tower was subsequently co-created and built together. It hosted various activities and workshops for five years, before moving to Belfast.

Serving as a vibrant and bottom-up landmark in a neighbourhood with not much positive associations, the Limite Limite project proves the potential that lies in participatory architecture as a tool to mediate intense socio-spatial conflict (between different actors both on local level and regional level).⁶³⁴ Through the appropriation of a ‘structural hole’, which indicates a left-behind location where there is a power vacuum (thereby somewhat forming an *in-between*), heterogeneous socio-economic and political actors were confronted with each other in and through this space.⁶³⁵ While explicitly opposing the governmental impasse which surrounded the neighbourhood, both the construction process itself and the subsequent usage of the tower served as a catalyst to bring together the different and multi-public groups (ranging from e.g. architecture students from St. Lucas to local foreign-language shopkeepers).⁶³⁶

The goal behind this intervention was to create an emancipatory network of diverse actors, which would remain intact beyond the physical existence of the tower.⁶³⁷ Limite Limite proved a success in this regard and generated a sense of collective action by combining the physical tower with a non-profit organisation linking the various involved together. This created a long-lasting network of both formal and informal links between local residents, public administrations and stakeholders, enabling them to confront their different visions on the future development of the neighbourhood on a continuous and everyday basis.⁶³⁸

Clearly, the Limite Limite project is a convincing (historical) example of small-scale political public space. Tactically placing themselves in a third position, City Mine(d) enabled themselves to serve as mediator for political (inter)action. This position holds high potential for architects. Moreover, the successful temporary activation of this seemingly forgotten (public) space clearly illustrates the time-space value of political public space. It is in this regard also that Isabelle Doucet, based on Isabelle Stengers’s philosophy and the foregoing notion of activism from-within, more specifically defines *interstitial activism*. This refers to a form of activism simultaneously operating

⁶³¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶³² See Ibid., 6.

⁶³³ See City Mine(d), “Process Limite Limite”.

⁶³⁴ See Moyersoen and Swyngedouw, “LimiteLimite”, 141-142.

⁶³⁵ See Ibid., 142.

⁶³⁶ See Ibid., 142.

⁶³⁷ See City Mine(d), “De stad als emanciperende biotoop”, 68.

⁶³⁸ See Ibid., 69.

in support of urban regeneration and against it.⁶³⁹ Therefore, it grasps what is happening on the ‘interstice’:

“Interstices are those instances where activities that were previously illegible, and thus unnoticed, become articulated. [...] Despite their minority position, interstices are not too influenced by the majoritarian norm, which includes not defining itself as its opposite. Instead, interstices denote a *resistance from-within*; a resistance that relies on a capacity to ‘not to be too easily impressed.’”⁶⁴⁰

Fundamental to these interstitial practices is their inherently combined spatial and temporal dimensionality. This is expressed through an unceasing re-formulation of boundaries, shaping both spaces of hope and resistance where other futures become possible.⁶⁴¹ A good example of such activism is the forementioned Recyclart, because of their (former as well as actual) positioning in a spatial interstice as well as their interstitial programme which combines architectural-urban interventions (e.g. fabrication of street furniture in social workshops) with political-economic operations (contributing to new collective imaginaries in difficult neighbourhoods).⁶⁴²

Recyclart’s public space projects, notably the Arabesk Palaverboom (together with artist Jozef Legrand), prove interesting to illustrate the intersection between interstitial practice and public space design (figure 3.32). Based on a co-creation process between local citizens and the artist, the public space furniture for the Breughel Square in the Marolles was conceived as an “urban salon”.⁶⁴³ This idea is materialised by an arabesque-shaped bench, which is positioned underneath a high tree and engages with the sloped topography of the square through the embedding of different heights in the bench. The redesign of the square, which is quite literally situated underneath the foundations of the Palace of Justice, thereby explicitly opposes itself to the homogenisation of popular neighbourhoods and attempts to remain faithful to the social and cultural mix inherent to the Marolles.

So seen, both Limite Limite’s and Arabesk Palaverboom’s architectural activism is successfully aiming at a bottom-up emancipation of interstitial loci. Through small-scale but concrete interventions in the urban context, these practices “transgress the boundaries of design culture”.⁶⁴⁴ Instead of utopian criticism in the margins, they provocatively engage with the existing framework. While maintaining a disruptive and independent nature and character, these interventions do not refrain from engaging in a critical relationship with urban policy (makers) but rather propose this political interaction as an ambition. Furthermore, although operating next to the dominant and large-scale public space developments, they prove at least as valuable and often have central influence on later urban and architectural culture.⁶⁴⁵

Such interstitial initiatives often prove political in different ways: while raising concern about a topic of common interest, they also engage different layers and types of actors and create new

⁶³⁹ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 81.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 84. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴¹ See Ibid., 84.

⁶⁴² See Ibid., 86-87.

⁶⁴³ See Ibid., 87.

⁶⁴⁴ See Ibid., 92.

⁶⁴⁵ See Ibid., 101.

(collective) imaginaries through physical interventions. Today, multiple initiatives in the BCR continue this trend and create a strong and inter-connected network of practices.⁶⁴⁶ While working on different scales and through different means, these are to various extents focussing on urban society and its (political) voice in public space.

I will illustrate this dynamic with a few interesting contemporary practices. First, several initiatives that I already mentioned, have stood the test of time. After five years of absence, open air film festival PleinOPENair made a comeback last year in the Marais swamp next to Wiels, which is currently subject to urban debate on its future redevelopment. The philosophy of the project initiators, non-profit and anti-commercial Cinema Nova, remained unchanged:

“Since urbanism is a primordial concern for us, we got the idea to show films in the multiple wastelands that you found in Brussels then, even in the pentagon. [...] We broke down the fences, put up a cinema screen, organised a bar and a lot of special evenings followed. And so we drew attention to the place, its future and its potential. [...] But we never choose a place just for aesthetics or pleasure, we are concerned with the urbanist story. Urbanist interests are rarely discernible. [...] PleinOPENair is our way of highlighting what is going on here and getting people excited about urban issues.”⁶⁴⁷

Cinema Nova itself was saved last year through a large-scale fundraising campaign in order to start a cooperative which could buy the leasehold of the former Arenberg cinema, where they have been situated since 1996. Furthermore, Recyclart is still reconverting public spaces together with artists and local inhabitants, as showcases the recent inauguration of a gazebo on the Duchess of Brabant Square in the rather precarious Birmingham neighbourhood (Sint-Jans-Molenbeek).

In addition, the landscape has unceasingly continued to broaden. Out of the large unused halls of the *abattoirs* (former slaughterhouses) in Cureghem (Anderlecht), Cultureghem reclaims Brussels’ public spaces. Putting forward inclusivity as core value, they attempt to co-create alternative futures for public spaces through temporary and moving actions such as solidary kitchens (figure 3.33). Little further south along the canal, non-profit Pool is Cool advocates the need for, and reintroduction of, public outdoor swimming in Brussels. Together with scenographer Jozef Wouters and his Decoratelier, they inaugurated the first outdoor swimming pool in Brussels in 2021 within the temporary Flow structure, which is situated on a vacant space next to the canal.

At the north side of the canal, Toestand spontaneously occupied a waste land and its surrounding warehouses, making it an accessible and free hotspot for all kinds of organisations, activities (ranging from an indoor skate park to a people’s kitchen and conversation tables) and social groups in 2014 (figure 3.34). Although the Allee Du Kaai occupation had to make place for a new parc last year, the organisation continues to reactivate empty and forgotten sites in Brussels through “developing inclusive social and cultural dynamics, based on meeting, action and creation”.⁶⁴⁸ At the other side of the canal, Cinemaximiliaan originated in 2015 as an open air cinema within the tent camp of the Maximilaan Parc (which housed around a thousand people on

⁶⁴⁶ Verdict, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁴⁷ Breës and Kinet, interview. My translation.

⁶⁴⁸ See Toestand, “Toestand?”.

the move at its peak). Nowadays, they have become a major socio-cultural organisation with a permanent location in the Manchester Street in Molenbeek. From here, they focus on a variety of artistic programmatic activities, while describing themselves as a “bridge between the often socially isolated newcomers and the wider civil society, trying to provide an answer to the urgent issue of integration of newcomers in a holistic way”.⁶⁴⁹

Crossing the canal from Cinemaximiliaan’s new location in the Birmingham neighbourhood towards the centrally-located Dansaert neighbourhood, Globe Aroma also forms a “low threshold socio-cultural organisation where art serves as a medium for welcoming and connecting newcomers with opportunities and networks in the cultural scene”.⁶⁵⁰ Acknowledging that homing processes for newcomers take place at multiple scales, and must therefore also connect to urban (semi-)public spaces, Globe Aroma provides a hospitable space at a larger scale level “as the organisation’s workings are situated at the intersection of interlocking scales and at the nexus of the private and public sphere”.⁶⁵¹ In practice, Globe Aroma to a large extent forms a political (semi-)public space by bringing together, and stimulating interaction, between newcomers and citizens within a low-threshold space in the city (but still demarked with the needed boundary to generate a feeling of safeness for all of its users). Furthermore, Globe Aroma forms a strong case to show how patterns of gentrification and private speculation can be fought through intergroup coalition-building and space-sharing (both with other organisations) in order to secure a permanent safe space.⁶⁵² Through these strategies, which in essence serve as “claim-making practices” that can potentially form the basis for new types of (spatial) political action, Globe Aroma becomes a place where new civic imaginations, e.g. on “homing the city” and possibilities of urban citizenship, can arise.⁶⁵³

Crossing again to the other side of the canal, in the Tour&Taxi’s Park, Parckfarm constitutes a completely different but equally interesting public space practice (figure 3.35). Parckfarm originated in 2014 during the Parckdesign festival in order to promote the participatory governance of green public spaces and perfectly illustrates the activism from-within approach. Besides being a driver for urban agriculture and local production of sustainable food, it also has a strong social agenda by framing itself as a “social farm” stimulating connections in a fragmented neighbourhood.⁶⁵⁴

With this, I mentioned a few strong examples of this intersection between urban activism, architecture and politics. The previous listing is far from exhaustive or complete, but rather provides a summary insight, guided by a short virtual walk along the canal, into the wide array of initiatives in the BCR. All of these showcase interesting forms of collective action and processes of multi-public co-creation. The variation in scale lies at the origin of this essential difference with more formal public spaces such as the Schuman Square of XDGA, where similar dynamics remain absent or unsure. So, this emphasises the socio-physical consideration that both the nature and type of political public space are strongly dependent on the scale of that public space. This does not imply a hierarchisation: it is rather more interesting to, in line with Doucet earlier, avoid

⁶⁴⁹ See Cinemaximiliaan, “Our Story”.

⁶⁵⁰ See Nagi et al., “The homing of newcomers in Brussels”, 77.

⁶⁵¹ See Ibid., 83.

⁶⁵² See Ibid., 90.

⁶⁵³ See Ibid., 95-96.

⁶⁵⁴ See Parckfarm, “Waarden”.

normativity and polarisation but instead understand those different political imperatives as relational and co-dependent.

While all foregoing give interpretations of the political imperative, be it to various extents and in different ways, I will analyse two mutually very distinct contemporary cases into more detail. First, Filter Café Filtré forms an example to the political dynamic that a citizen movement can create about a common interest within public space. Mobilising around the bad air quality in the city-region, the citizen movement soon evolved into the Filter Café Filtré Atelier, who continue the actions until today through architectural activism from-within. Following hereupon, I will conclude my search for understanding the political imperative of public space with the case of Decoratelier. Through its ambivalent engagement with some of the considerations I drew about political public space, the Decoratelier will form a relevant and lucid meta-reflection to the framework of thought that I have been building throughout this thesis.

3.2.2 Filter Café Filtré (Atelier): the street as key space for transition

“Having the guts to block a street speaks to the *collective imagination*. [...] The open streets are laboratories for developing a healthy, social and just city. [...] It has long ceased to be just about clean air in school environments, at stake are now also road safety, social cohesion, cultural exchange, mental self-development and so much more.”⁶⁵⁵

Air quality in Brussels is not a recent issue: urban citizen movements such as BRAL have already been raising awareness about it since the 1980s. The focus was thereby often put on the unequal distribution of burdens throughout the city-region and the entangled relation between air quality and other (urban) issues such as mobility, inequality, segregation, etc. A first symbolic step was subsequently made through actions in the early 1990s around the waste incinerator of Neder-Over-Heembeek (the most northern part of the city of Brussels), which at that time had not yet a filter for its exhaust. Under the slogan “put your dustbin outside in Uccle and your problem is solved – but for Heembeek’s residents, it only starts then”, loud citizen criticism was mobilised and different mutinies were held.⁶⁵⁶ Ultimately, they proved successful: a DeNOx-filter was effectively installed and the topic of air quality in the city received its first media attention.⁶⁵⁷

In 2000, BRAL and IEB sued both the federal and the BCR government with the needed media coverage. Reason for this was the alleged neglect of the health of its inhabitants.⁶⁵⁸ Although the case was rather symbolic and quickly ruled inadmissible, the topic of air pollution was explicitly put on the agenda. This proved urgent, since Brussels continuously exceeded the European maximal values for atmospheric particulates in air. However, not much concrete political response and policy followed. While several citizen actions continued to raise awareness about the topic the following 15 years, administrations did not go much further than a symbolic car-free Sunday every year.

⁶⁵⁵ Boie, “Red de stad, open de straat!”, 61-62. My translation. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵⁶ X., “Een geschiedenis van de burgerbeweging rond luchtkwaliteit”. My translation.

⁶⁵⁷ See Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ See Ibid.

By 2015, a first full-grown citizen movement focusing on air quality originated: Clean Air BXL. This collective wrote an impactful open letter, which was supported by a much-signed petition.⁶⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the importance of the topic was again downscaled by the BCR administrations, notably with the wise words of former minister-president Charles Picqué: “in China, the situation is much worse”.⁶⁶⁰ Although a first “Air, Climate and Energy” plan was launched by the BCR, Clean Air BXL filed a second lawsuit against the government for negligence. Besides showcasing how the air quality measurements were untruthful, since they were not carried out in the most polluted spots of Brussels, they also denounced the BCR policy for not complying with the European Air Quality Directive and therefore being far from effective enough.⁶⁶¹ The vocal actions of Clean Air BXL initiated a larger wave of awareness about the topic in Brussels, both amongst citizens and (some) politicians. This resulted, inter alia, in more and more independent measurements of the situation, multiple official reports on its bad quality, a second broad citizen movement (Bruxsel’Air), “citizen lobbies” discussing the topic with parliamentarians and a few publications gathering knowledge about the topic of urban air quality – but not in strong and adequate policy.⁶⁶²

In March 2018, the issue received a new wave of nation-wide attention. A distressing Greenpeace study about air quality in schools resulted in a much-viewed *Pano* (an investigative journalism programme on Flemish television) episode about the topic. Based on NO₂ measurements in 222 schools throughout Belgium, Greenpeace concluded that the results were extremely problematic in Brussels and emphasised the influence this would have on the lungs of young children. For 61 percent of the schools, especially those in narrow and busy city streets, the air quality was “alarming to downright bad”, regularly trespassing European norms and therefore directly related to potential health issues.⁶⁶³

This disastrous report caused a shock effect among parents in Brussels.⁶⁶⁴ Shortly thereafter, a group of parents from the Dutch-speaking Maria Boodschap primary school in the central pentagon spontaneously mobilised and started closing off the school’s street every Friday morning as “a scream for attention”.⁶⁶⁵ This quickly received media attention and evolved into an action throughout 173 primary schools in both Brussels and Flanders, leading to the emergence of the citizen movement Filter Café Filtré (FCF).⁶⁶⁶

Notwithstanding this immediate success, the question soon appeared how to make this mobilisation sustainable. So, architect Annekatrien Verdickt, who co-organised the initial actions at Maria Boodschap, decided to establish non-profit Filter Café Filtré Atelier (FCF-a) in June 2018. This atelier consolidated the spontaneous citizen movement into a more permanent form of urban activism, combined with architectural practice. Through coupling the physical actions in public space with design research, FCF-a ambioned to “develop concrete solutions and spatial

⁶⁵⁹ See Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ See Ibid. My translation.

⁶⁶¹ See Ibid.

⁶⁶² See Ibid.

⁶⁶³ See Greenpeace, *Mijn Lucht, Mijn School*, 14.

⁶⁶⁴ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ See Boie, “Red de stad, open de straat!”, 61.

visions of the future where better air quality, road safety, more liveable and child-friendly cities are the objectives”.⁶⁶⁷

Central to the spatial vision-development of FCF-a is the idea that “the street is a key space for transition”.⁶⁶⁸ The reason for this is a fundamental conviction that multiple contemporary challenges (ecology, inclusivity of society, ...) come together in this specific type of urban space.⁶⁶⁹ The street is thereby not seen as a *pars pro toto* for all other public spaces, but rather as a distinct and conscious focus.⁶⁷⁰ As Verdickt argues, triggering collective imaginations about urban spaces is the core ambition of FCF-a.⁶⁷¹ Therefore, radical designs, which show the potential residing in the city’s streets as safe and sustainable spaces, are drawn up during co-creation workshops organised by FCF-a. Subsequently, the organisation attempts to launch public debate about the future evolution of those streets through widely distributing the often provocative imageries (as in, completely different from the actual situation at the moment). Similar exercises have been made both for small-scale streets and major traffic axes. Among the latter is also the Boulevard Leopold II, which I’ll use as an example since it has interestingly been subject of a public debate on the lane itself too, during the Car Free Sunday of 2022, and since it was well-documented with a newspaper distributed throughout the neighbourhood.⁶⁷²

Along with the Keizer Karel Avenue, the Boulevard Leopold II forms the entrance axis to the city-region for cars coming from the E40, the godmother of Belgian highways. Formerly determined by a notorious viaduct, it still remains a lane marked by hard traffic. Therefore, FCF-a first point out in their proposal that any change must start at the basis of the issue: a profound rethinking of mobility within the city-region based on parking lots in the periphery, a boost of public transport, a reconsideration on the tunnel entrances and exits, etc.⁶⁷³ Following such fundamental considerations on mobility, a greener boulevard is conceived with a large non-motorised space in the middle and a halving of the number of driving lanes (figure 3.36).⁶⁷⁴ Reference is made to the Rambla’s in Barcelona to emphasise the spatial dimension and impact of this urban intervention.⁶⁷⁵ Clearly, the proposed re-conception of the boulevard is, at least at this moment, quite unrealistic, but it nevertheless achieves its goal by opening an interesting and often forgotten public debate *on how we want to represent our society in public space*.

Besides the imaginary vision-development, physical actions remain the key element in the working of FCF-a. Not long after the atelier’s establishment, Covid-19 broke out and the city’s streets suddenly became deserted. In comparison to the nature-rich outskirts of the city, this loss of exterior life was particularly tough for the inhabitants of Molenbeek, where FCF-a is based, due to the often small dwellings and apartments without any outdoor space. This constatation quickly strengthened the motivation of the FCF-a initiators to start trying out alternative forms of street

⁶⁶⁷ See Filter Café Filtré Atelier, “Over Filter Café Filtré”.

⁶⁶⁸ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² This boulevard also holds personal relevance for me, since it is the street where I have been growing up since 2007.

⁶⁷³ See Verdickt et al., *Open (the) Debate – Boulevard Leopold II Laan*, 6.

⁶⁷⁴ See Ibid., 6.

⁶⁷⁵ See Ibid., 27.

life immediately post-lockdown.⁶⁷⁶ After receiving a regional subsidy, the Picard Street underneath their office was temporarily closed off for cars, and opened up to pedestrians, for a first time in summer 2020 (figure 3.37).

Originally intended to last a week, the occupation was eventually sustained for a month and proved a great success for most neighbourhood inhabitants. As Verdickt indicates, inhabitants came to the street “as if they went to the beach”.⁶⁷⁷ At the end of the street, an ancient pharmacy was converted into the summer bar ‘Barmacie’. The street itself was brightened up and became the stage for a wide array of summer activities. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood, of whom many do not go on a yearly holiday outside of the city, proved very keen on this new open space and spontaneously co-maintained the good state of the street and the furniture, proving the power of the bottom-up approach.⁶⁷⁸

The success of the action in the Picard Street led to the first full-grown OpenStreets project in 2021 (figure 3.38). While now closing off seven different streets spread throughout various municipalities of the city-region, the organisation felt the need to add a new (cultural) dimension to their actions.⁶⁷⁹ Relying on their network, FCF-a contacted dance collective Ultima Vez and asked them to perform in the summer streets. Freshly coming out of a long lockdown era, the dancers were immediately enthusiastic to find again a public.⁶⁸⁰ Encouraged by this positive response, FCF-a contacted multiple additional (cultural) institutions and organisations to collaborate. Among those was e.g. Cultureghem, who brought their mobile kitchens to the streets, which proved a great success.⁶⁸¹ This both instantaneous and spontaneous approach to the physical actions is typical for FCF-a, as Verdickt emphasises, “since our asbl truly exists from trying things and then waiting to see what happens”.⁶⁸²

The same year, a publication was made with BRAL and citizen collective Heroes for Zero under the denominator “the Other Atelier”. Arguing that “zero traffic victims (Vision Zero) is a minimum requirement for a metropole in the 21st century”, the endnote of the atelier carries the name “Beyond Vision Zero” and attempts to couple traffic safety to other challenges such as quality of life, climate adaptation and air quality, qualitative public space, inclusivity of society, ...⁶⁸³ Based on a set of city walks, three webinars presenting ideas from other cities and a concluding co-creation atelier, concrete solutions are formulated for a traffic-safe city. These include, inter alia, an emphasis on city-wide mobility plans, redistribution of public space, low emission zones, continuous consultation of citizens and also a promotion of the usage of *tactical urbanism* by small-scale experiments in public space.⁶⁸⁴

This last element was further taken to heart by FCF-a in 2022. For OpenStreets 22, FCF-a decided to focus solely on the Maritime Quarter in Molenbeek, where the original Picard Street is situated. The ambition behind this scale change was to widen the success of the individual streets to a

⁶⁷⁶ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ See Hendrickx, “Zomerstraten tonen de stad van morgen”.

⁶⁷⁹ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ See X., “Beyond Vision Zero”.

⁶⁸⁴ See Lenaerts et al. *L’Autre Atelier*, 84.

neighbourhood dynamic.⁶⁸⁵ The Maritime Quarter proved interesting in this regard: subject to strong gentrification processes around the Tour&Taxi's development site and the canal, this clashed with the long-standing inhabitants of the neighbourhood. With this background in mind, seven streets in the neighbourhood were in turn both temporarily transformed into a summer street and subjected to an imagination atelier. Most importantly, however, OpenStreets 22 also saw the tactical realisation of an experimental 'filter' for cars, called 'de knip' (meaning the snap). This suddenly made the FCF-a imagination of a low-intensity neighbourhood tangible (figure 3.39). In line with the new ambition to go beyond the seven car-free streets but truly address mobility throughout the whole quarter, this filter indeed provided an experience of near car-freedom to the whole neighbourhood.⁶⁸⁶

After all, research had shown that around 5000 cars drive through the Maritime Quarter every day to avoid the busy traffic axes, thereby congesting the streets without using the neighbourhood.⁶⁸⁷ This issue was particularly flagrant on the intersection between the Vandenboogaerden Street and the Vanderstichelen Street, which is situated near to the Picard Street. Therefore, FCF-a proposed to simply divide this crossroads in two and make cut-through traffic impossible as the surrounding streets would become one-directional loops.⁶⁸⁸ To their own surprise, this intervention received enthusiasm from the municipal administration and it was allowed a test phase of three months in view of more permanent solutions.⁶⁸⁹

However, while the summer streets had mostly been welcomed with positivity, the filter caused much more outrage. These negative reactions were strongly related to the outbursts against Good Move – which is no surprise, since the filter was essentially “totally in line with Good Move”, following Verdickt.⁶⁹⁰ Although several neighbourhood inhabitants were silently pleased with the intervention, causing higher traffic safety and quality of life, the opposition soon loudly raised its voice through e.g. (recognisable) citizen interpellations in the city council. In addition, the protest also gradually became more aggressive and ultimately went as far as demolition and vandalism of the filter.⁶⁹¹ Arguments for the opposants were the alleged “endless detours” that had to be made and the “asphyxiation of commercial activities in the neighbourhood”.⁶⁹² Following these heated reactions, the municipal council quickly pulled in their tail and the test was abandoned after only a month.

It is relevant to reflect on the reasons why this test caused so much uproar. After all, political polarisation in Brussels is strongly expressed through stances on the mobility policy.⁶⁹³ Furthermore, it appears medieval that “violence won over reason” to some extent, since the test was already deemed a failure and aborted before the agreed end.⁶⁹⁴ This case essentially proves the difficult contradiction that violence and (loud) populism imply on a public sphere – and it also

⁶⁸⁵ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁸⁶ See Filter Café Filtré Atelier, “Filter Maritiemwijk”.

⁶⁸⁷ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁸⁸ See Verdickt et al., *Open (the) Debate – Boulevard Leopold II Laan*, 14.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ See Post, “Filter Café Filtré mag de Maritiemwijk autoluw maken”.

⁶⁹¹ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁹² See Verdickt et al., *Open (the) Debate – Boulevard Leopold II Laan*, 15.

⁶⁹³ See Van den Panhuyzen, “Mobiliteitsprotest doet gemeenteraden in hun voegen kraken.”

⁶⁹⁴ See Verdickt et al., *Open (the) Debate – Boulevard Leopold II Laan*, 15.

showcases the difficulty of *how to react* to such outbursts. Annekatrien Verdickt argues about the premature termination of the test:

“This is the very worst thing you can do, you truly can’t do anything worse in a community than, when screamers and vandals say something, pull it away immediately, you rather have to explain it and sit out the test but you don’t remove it before the end – or else better not allow it already on the forehand.”⁶⁹⁵

Full-grown test periods or experiments are indeed crucial for grounding the debate, as shows research on the pedestrianisation of the Anspach Boulevard. Although this pedestrianisation cannot be considered an undivided success, as argued before, inquiries from before and after its implementation have shown an important overall increase in support for pedestrianisation among Brussels’ citizens. Today, a majoritarian group expresses their support for the statement that “more streets should be dedicated to pedestrians”.⁶⁹⁶ Furthermore striking is the observation that support is particularly high among young people and among inhabitants living in the environment of pedestrianised areas, while being mostly low within circles of private car-owners and car-dependent commuters.⁶⁹⁷ So, when working towards a future city that puts its inhabitants in the first place, the argument for tactical pedestrianisations holds.

The Anspach researchers therefore conclude that “despite the typical initial controversy, pedestrianisation of the centre has become increasingly accepted and that support for pedestrianising the city’s central boulevards is highly correlated with support for further pedestrianisation”.⁶⁹⁸ In essence, this consideration to some extent proves Verschaffel’s forementioned argument that “the myth of the street is the ideology of populism”.⁶⁹⁹ As I argued, representative democracy sometimes requires unpopular and (at best) visionary decision-making beyond public opinion. Nevertheless, explanation, interaction and inclusive debate are then quintessential. The balance herein is often difficult to be found. While public opinion should not refrain decision-makers from effectively making decisions, the core challenge for a democratic society lies in the permanent interaction and mutual accountability between representants and represented, as I also concluded earlier.

Clearly, putting away the anti-voices (both of the filter as well as the broader Good Move plan) as purely irrational and narrow-minded would be very problematic. Although the means of some (physical and verbal intimidation, online insults, ...) are deplorable, their concerns are important to be heard. For instance, the issues of commuters must nevertheless be considered and possibly addressed with e.g. ambitious public transport solutions. Or, worries about gentrification and subsequent housing inaccessibility are equally valid and require conjoined policy. Therefore, a (physical) context must be found to confront each other. This is however not evident, as prove both the complete chaos during the municipal council meetings in Brussels and the case of FCF-a, since Verdickt indicates that several invitations (e.g. to municipal councillor Ahmed El Khannouss after yet another online attack) for discussion have been turned down.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁵ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024. My translation.

⁶⁹⁶ See te Boveldt et al., “Pedestrianisation as a step in a societal transformation?”, 9.

⁶⁹⁷ See Ibid., 10-11.

⁶⁹⁸ See Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹⁹ See Verschaffel, “De mythe van de straat”, 110-111.

⁷⁰⁰ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

The intensity of these confrontations can for the most part be explained by an insufficient realisation of the time-space dimension of political (public) spaces.⁷⁰¹ The filter by FCF-a forms a perfect illustration in this regard. After all, “it is within the everyday practices of people in (public) spaces that those conducts that are up for change can be found”.⁷⁰² So, when starting from the conviction that there is something to be changed, there are, however, various ways of achieving such shift. A major difference exists in this regard between on the one hand searching, and taking, the time-space to gradually work towards such change, while both hearing and debating all different concerns, or on the other hand conceiving a solution, even when based on a certain amount of co-creation, and implementing it straight away in space to more drastically challenge one’s thoughts and opinions.⁷⁰³

Both stances have their arguments in favour and against, and the right tactic largely depends on the radicality and difficulty of the prefixed change. Nonetheless, politics is a slow process and political (public) space is therefore rather a constantly evolving dynamic than a stable entity: both conception and use unceasingly evolve in a dialectical interaction, as I argued earlier. So, in order to achieve a political space which shows an alternative vision, without experiencing such intolerant and violent antagonism (fundamentally disrupting the idea of a public sphere), it is crucial to extensively consider the time-space dynamic.⁷⁰⁴ Arguably, the filter was too dogmatic from one side and did not sufficiently take into account the time-space needed to change sclerosed mentalities, which caused such abundant and extremist outrage. Once strengthened by a handful of populist politicians, who saw an electoral opportunity, this breakdown of constitutional elements of any public sphere and political public space became irreconcilable.

Furthermore, these difficulties also highlight how participation in architecture often remains based on “oppositional pairs: between architect and user, top-down and bottom-up, and high and low culture”, or even more fundamentally “between democratic decision-making and individual authorship, and between social empowerment and material solutions”.⁷⁰⁵ This is paradoxically combined with “the fact that participatory models, unwittingly or not, thrive on a political model based on consensus”.⁷⁰⁶ Consequently, this atypical blending leads to an often rather neoliberal, collective pacification of participatory processes. To counter this threat to democratic integrity, Isabelle Doucet argues that the fundamental challenge for participatory and co-creational processes in architecture lies in finding a rethought “model of consensus that is more open to conflict, and valuing of disagreement, risk, and uncertainty as intrinsic parts of the negotiation process”.⁷⁰⁷ Through their skills to imagine and visualise material and formal solutions, architects are potentially able to build such bridges between “expert and non-expert” – at least, this is true when the interaction between design responsibilities and participation is considered “without falling into formal dogmatism or domination”.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰¹ Declerck, interview, 8 May 2024.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 111.

⁷⁰⁶ See Ibid., 117.

⁷⁰⁷ See Ibid., 117-125.

⁷⁰⁸ See Ibid., 124-125.

In line with the previous considerations, it remains essential for FCF-a to continue experiments for change, despite outbursts of anger from parts of the public opinion. Nevertheless, the failure of the filter called for reflection on the time-space dimension of political public space and on the processes of interaction between designers and inhabitants. Verdickt indicates that lessons have indeed been learned in two regards.⁷⁰⁹ Originally, the focus lied on “co-creation ateliers”. These were based on open invitations to join and rethink the streets during workshops. Nevertheless, these ateliers in reality mostly attracted highly educated and motivated neighbourhood inhabitants and thus rather formed “a coalition of the willing”.⁷¹⁰ Since the summer of 2022, FCF-a also organises “mediation ateliers”. Within the scope of these, they “go to the street themselves” on multiple occasions throughout the year and enter into discussion with local inhabitants and passer-byes.⁷¹¹ These discussions are thematic and related to the specific event that takes place at that time: e.g., after a flea market, the streets were cleaned up together and meanwhile discussion was held with all participants about public cleanliness.

However, this type of interaction is close to Verschaffel’s myth of the street when “the opinion of the man of the street”, who is essentially a consumer, is considered as truthful and representative public opinion.⁷¹² This does not mean it is not valuable effort, but rather that through erasing the context and boundaries of political public space, the necessity of critical and reasoned thinking disappears and the expressed concerns are mostly based on feelings of (non-) contentment. So, such interactions (which are actually opinion polls) are relevant to get in touch with people’s preoccupations and define the topics of later political action and discussion, but they are not political debate in themselves:

“After all, there is only one way following which one can successfully engage in politics on the street: by addressing the ‘man-in-the-street’ as a consumer and saying he is always right. Whoever says the street is right wins. The street and so-called ‘public opinion’ are certainly an important social force to be reckoned with. Something completely different, however, is to believe that one should *listen* to the street. [...] And it is politically much more important to remember that politics itself is not a spectacle but ‘theatre’, and that therefore even the simplest political act – voting – requires one to step into a ‘role’.”⁷¹³

Therefore, it is rather the second part of the change in strategy of FCF-a that I believe holds high importance and potential. Building on the continuous success of the summer streets (which contrasted with the failure of the filter), the focus for OpenStreets 23 shifted from radical ‘snaps’ in the neighbourhood to tactical small-scale interventions intended to last beyond those summer streets.⁷¹⁴ While again transforming 8 streets in the Maritime Quarter for each a week during the summer, “the temporary self-management of the streets now led to micro-interventions, such as an extension of the street corner at the Barmacie (Picard Street) with a green planting and a

⁷⁰⁹ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² See Verschaffel, “De mythe van de straat”, 110-111.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 119. My translation. Original emphasis.

⁷¹⁴ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

swing” (figure 3.40).⁷¹⁵ These micro-interventions are valuable as they show tangible steps of a more gradual and inclusive process towards a mentality shift.

Furthermore, the mediation ateliers about themes of common interest to the neighbourhood were now equally and explicitly held throughout the entire week and in the specific street that was opened up. This was done through various means: spontaneous chats, a concluding open workshop to discuss the specific experiences of that week, usage of a panel posited in the street with statements to launch discussions, ... (figure 3.41). I believe that this is, by contrast to undefined opinion polls, a very precious way of addressing the political imperative of public space. Through combining the performance of a political act in and through public space (namely the temporary transformation of the street into an alternative scenario for the future) with continuous public debate, these streets truly become a key space for both discussing, enabling and promoting societal transition.

In essence, the street is then transformed into an accessible *playground* for vision confrontation and political expression, while at the same time the space’s potential for different kinds of alternative usage, claim-making, gathering, and even temporary appropriation is demonstrated. Within the social meeting place of the (summer) street, specific time-spaces of political public space are embedded. This is done through a careful articulation of both spatial and temporal boundaries. The fundamental strength of the OpenStreets project subsequently lies in its conscious handling of both social and physical factors such as accessibility to all, variation in scale levels, (non-)control and auto-governance, multi-publicity, ... Therefore, when architect and Brussels Architecture Prize jury member Meriem Chabani describes OpenStreets as “a joyful exploration of what can be achieved through collective action” and “an inspiration in terms of how activism and public organizing can help to both achieve healthier cities and reclaim public space for all”, I think this is absolutely rightful and spot-on.⁷¹⁶

Throughout the years, a few permanent results have also been achieved within the action domains of FCF-a. Since 2022, the City of Brussels has, assisted by, inter alia, FCF-a and AWB, implemented a new circulation plan within the light of the regional Good Move. An important ambition herein is the gradual implementation of a network of traffic-low school streets and forecourts. Among the first realisations in 2023 was the particularly polluted and noisy Vlaamsesteenweg, where the FCF actions originally started in 2018. Moreover, traffic-low streets have become a more serious and broadly-shared ambition within the BCR, as e.g. the future redevelopment of the Picard Street shows following the planned installation of a new tramline nearby. Although not made entirely car-free, this redesign has strongly been inspired by the imagination atelier of Filter Café Filtré a few years ago (figure 3.42).

Nonetheless, there still remains work beyond the symbolic interventions, and discussions about Good Move and mobility remain particularly polarised in the city-region. Following the announcement of the future redevelopment of the Picard Street, the alderman for mobility in Molenbeek (Abdellah Achaoui) was enraged by the probable disappearance of 150 parking spaces due to the installation of the new tramline. In an interview, he subsequently publicly claimed that

⁷¹⁵ See Boie, “Red de stad, open de straat!”, 62.

⁷¹⁶ See Brussels Architecture Prize, “OpenStreets 22”. Open Streets 22 won the people’s choice award during the Brussels Architecture Prize 2023.

he had not been consulted by the region and that the “pedestrianisation of a small part of the Picard Street near to the Jubilé Boulevard was something to please the asbl (FCF-a)”.⁷¹⁷ While his statements are not true for various reasons, since on the one hand the street will remain accessible to one-directional car traffic, and on the other he was explicitly consulted during all the steps of the process, it shows how the emotions still run high.⁷¹⁸ Moreover, two days after the interview with Achaoui, the front window of the Barmacie was smashed with a stone – which is at least a suspicious coincidence.⁷¹⁹

Meanwhile, FCF-a continues to action in public space. In September 2023, a public debate about Good Move was held on the notoriously polluted bridge between the Dansaert Street (Brussels) and the Gentssesteenweg (Molenbeek) during Car Free Sunday – thereby inviting both advocates and opponents in a political time-space (figure 3.43). In view of the elections in June 2024, a large action was held in late May in front of numerous schools in Brussels and Antwerp in order to put the topic of air quality again on the forefront of the political agenda. This proves necessary, as most parties (except for both the French- and Dutch-speaking Green parties) now opportunistically plead for at least a partial abandonment of the Good Move plan, instead of an ambitious revision or the addition of conjoint needed policies battling e.g. gentrification (even several of those who initially implemented it, are now against it, as e.g. also the francophone Socialist party who have appointed the minister-president of the BCR for the last twenty years).

Annekatrien Verdickt therefore highlights that “negative protests (vandalism, disruption of the municipal council, violence, ...) are rewarded and policy is too quickly reverted even before it has been properly carried out and tested”.⁷²⁰ Clearly, public debate beyond symbolism and populist claim-making is needed more than ever, both on urban mobility and all other (urban) themes. In this regard, the FCF-a approach continues to hold high potential for true political action, which will be further exploited in the soon-to-come OpenStreets 24.

3.2.3 Decoratelier: performance or public space?

Throughout this thesis, I have been discussing a conceptual approach to (public) space as a (political) stage. Based on the performative character of both architecture and democracy, this has been conceptualised through the metaphors of theatre and playground. However, it is interesting to inquire what happens when this stance is radicalised and inverted: instead of conceptually thinking public space as a stage for performance, (theatrical) stages and performance are then used for claim-making about public space, or even as models for an ideal public space.

This is what is at stake in the Decoratelier in Molenbeek. While blurring the line between scenography and public space, and between performance and (urban) reality, an explicit attempt is made to engage with the political imperative of public space. The Decoratelier physically experiments with the question if theatrical stages can be more than mere conceptual models but rather truly become idealised versions of public space. In addition, the Decoratelier also allows

⁷¹⁷ See X., “l’ASBL Filter Café Filtré Atelier réagit aux propos tenus par l’échevin”.

⁷¹⁸ See Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Verdickt, interview, 6 May 2024.

⁷²⁰ See X., “Brusselse leerlingen houden lig-in”.

for a concluding discussion about the role of the maker – both artist or architect – in the creation of, inter alia, political public spaces, making it an interesting meta-reflection to the framework of thought that I have been building throughout this thesis.

The Decoratelier is fundamentally characterised by a complex mix of tension fields: between art and social work, between scenography and public space, between anti-institutionality and institutional embeddedness, ...⁷²¹ This intriguing entanglement of ambitions is already inherent to the shared name of both place and working. Founded in 2016 by artistic director and scenographer Jozef Wouters, together with technical director Menno Vandeveld, Decoratelier was first not a physical location but the name given to their cooperation as artists-in-residence with Meg Stuart's acclaimed dance collective Damaged Goods.⁷²² Soon thereafter, however, Decoratelier also became to indicate a real location. This started as Wouters' and Vandeveld's atelier but quickly started to assume a broader working of "social working place, residential space, plant asylum, night club and unconventional art centre" (figure 3.44).⁷²³

The last few years, Decoratelier has been praised in the media as the "cultural institution of the future" and its productions and performances as "bridging architecture, theory and imagination".⁷²⁴ It prominently exemplifies an emerging scene in Brussels' art circles which "consider engagement and political consciousness cornerstones and paradigm's for an art of the future with high stake on social and intercultural ambition".⁷²⁵ In addition, the physical location of the Decoratelier has been described as "the realisation of the wet dream of the arts sector: the creation of a radically inclusive public space without fixed agenda and which can be appropriated by diverse artistic communities and neighbourhood inhabitants".⁷²⁶ The sum of these spatial descriptions, of course, caught my attention, especially in combination with the explicitly political agenda of its inspirer(s).

Originally located in the Liverpool Street, in the Heyvaert Quarter in Molenbeek, Decoratelier moved to the little further located Manchester Street in May 2019. Inspired by its large and left-behind stock of former warehouses, the Manchester Street has these last years become somewhat of an anomaly. While situated in a precarious and semi-industrial neighbourhood, which forms the epicentre of the second-hand car business in Brussels, the Manchester Street surprisingly houses a handful of impactful cultural institutions such as also Recyclart, Charleroi Danses and Cinemaximiliaan (figure 3.45).

Surfing on the recent cultural success of this location, the street has now become a strategical pole of the city renewal contract 'Heyvaert-Poincaré'. In the light of this, a large redevelopment project, englobing several of the buildings which today house those institutions, of the site into a permanent "cultural, artistic and creative production centre" is about to start construction, following a design competition won by BC Architects and Civic Architects.⁷²⁷ This has, however, led to the recent departure of Decoratelier towards a new location in the Kortrijk Street, also

⁷²¹ Desmet, interview, 15 April 2024, and see also Desmet, "*The World is Really There*", 54.

⁷²² See Wouters and Agha, interview.

⁷²³ See Wouters, interview. From the introduction to the interview by De Somviele. My translation.

⁷²⁴ See De Somviele, "Een geheime tuin vol dromen", and see also Hoet, "Scenograaf Jozef Wouters timmert met zestien nieuwkomers een eigen park in elkaar".

⁷²⁵ Desmet, "*The World is Really There*", 58. My translation.

⁷²⁶ See Wouters, interview. From the introduction to the interview by De Somviele. My translation.

⁷²⁷ See bMa, "Factsheet Manchester".

located in Molenbeek. The location in the Manchester Street was therefore festively closed in May 2024. Nevertheless, since the relocation is currently still underway, it is the space and time in the Manchester Street, which housed Decoratelier for the last five years, and the first location in the Liverpool Street that form the objects of this discussion.

Decoratelier's approach to the realisation of public space cannot be cut loose from their scenography. The physical space in Molenbeek must indeed be understood as "a form of expanded scenography", which originated from the question how, departing from their own work, a platform could originate where others could join.⁷²⁸ In this way, Decoratelier became a place where artistic projects and collaborations are initiated as well as an accessible multi-disciplinary atelier and (semi-)public space.⁷²⁹ It is exactly this intertwinement of scenography and public space that makes Decoratelier valuable for a critical reflection on the potential pitfalls of the proposed performative character of political public space, as both playground and theatre, that I drew earlier – but let's not run ahead of ourselves.

In his book *Moments Before the Wind*, Jozef Wouters explains how scenography for a performance "mustn't copy space, but translate it".⁷³⁰ So, rather than a fiction, it should become an alternative reality or perhaps a *representation* of reality. A constitutive element to scenography is then the eye of both spectator and performer, and the way that space is perceived:

"Scenography is defining the point from where to look at something. Scaffolds and seats are just a beginning. They don't make the space. They are simply an instrument used to place the eyes of the spectators in a certain position. Only then, in the organized gaze, does the space emerge. *A space made of eyes*. A visual field that turns, blinks, looks away, and can close down. Scenography orients the gaze, the design is a visual field."⁷³¹

Arguing that a scenography is fundamentally not complete without the interpretation of its public, it must therefore remain explicitly unfinished – "a space is only a space if it leaves room for other desires".⁷³² Continuing hereupon, this stance can be further radicalised and scenography can be understood as "having a conversation by means of space", or even "letting conflict become space".⁷³³

The ambitioned intertwinement between public space and scenography is explicitly expressed in Decoratelier's performances – perhaps most notably in the critically acclaimed *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* (2019). This performance was made in collaboration with Globe Aroma during the last months in the Liverpool Street. Through its engagement with Brussels' political reality and its claim-making about public space, this performance is a strong illustration of the tensions that arise when reality and performance – "somewhere between truth and illusion, you will find the land *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*", as mentions a review – become unclearly entangled.⁷³⁴

⁷²⁸ See Wouters, interview.

⁷²⁹ See Desmet, "The World is Really There", 8.

⁷³⁰ See Wouters, *Moments Before the Wind*, 16.

⁷³¹ Ibid., 33. Emphasis added.

⁷³² Ibid., 39.

⁷³³ See Ibid., 51.

⁷³⁴ See Snoekx, "Underneath Which Rivers Flow".

The performance was made in the wake of a controversial police raid that took place in Globe Aroma in 2018 in search of people without documents, thereby brutally disrupting their ambition to form a low-threshold safe space.⁷³⁵ The performance formed the outcome of a several months long collaboration between Decoratelier and a group of participants from Globe Aroma, who were all at different stages of their recognition as refugees, and openly ambited to form a secure “negative space” to this world of hostility.⁷³⁶ This political incentive was combined with a critical reflection on the soon-to-start redevelopment of the location in the Liverpool Street into a public parc and nursery under the scope of neighbourhood contract ‘Zinneke’. The new parc would be fenced and have specific opening hours, thereby fitting into a common pattern (in Brussels) that “there has to be either total visibility or nothing – the space in-between does not exist”.⁷³⁷

So, the project, which took the full extent of the large Decoratelier warehouse, took up the gauntlet and evolved into a broad alternative vision to both space and publicness:

“The transparency we demand from refugees – about their past, their present and their future – is no less than an ideology that translates into the way we design our public space. Most of the architectural choices in the new park coming here start from a desire for *visibility and control*. Just think of the planting, lighting and fences at the entrance. In this sense, our temporary cosmic park is an experiment with *other forms of space and being public*.”⁷³⁸

The space created during the performance of *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* is, for the sake of contrast, presented as a secret garden wherein imagination and representation would merge (figures 3.46 and 3.47).⁷³⁹ This effort of a secret garden overtly resonates principles of Michel Foucault’s reflection on heterotopias:

“Fifth principle. Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, one does not access a heterotopian emplacement as if it were a pub. Either one is constrained, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else one has to submit to rites and to purifications. One can only enter with a certain permission and after having performed a certain number of gestures.”⁷⁴⁰

Public space, in the Decoratelier, is proposed as a space where not anyone should enter at the same time, nor does everybody need to know about its existence.⁷⁴¹ This stance, which originated from the *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* performance, is further developed in the everyday policy of the Decoratelier.

Contesting that “open is good and closed is bad”, the courtyard of Decoratelier is not always accessible to everybody at the same time.⁷⁴² By explicitly claiming the right to open and close their

⁷³⁵ See Van den Bergh, “Cultureel = crimineel?”.

⁷³⁶ See Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”.

⁷³⁷ See Wouters, *Moments Before the Wind*, 106.

⁷³⁸ Jozef Wouters in Hoet, “Scenograaf Jozef Wouters timmert met zestien nieuwkomers een eigen park in elkaar”. My translation. Emphasis added.

⁷³⁹ See Snoekx, “Underneath Which Rivers Flow”.

⁷⁴⁰ Foucault, “Of other spaces”, 21.

⁷⁴¹ See Wouters, *Moments Before the Wind*, 107-109.

⁷⁴² See Ibid., 105.

door to specific persons and groups at specific moments, to protect the “energy inside”, Decoratelier wants to confront the felt “dogma of visibility and transparency” in public space and provide an alternative and less rigid (but far more opaque) conception of openness in public space, arguing that this better protects individual freedom and expression of others.⁷⁴³ So, it alludes to become “a sort of counter-emplacements, a sort of effectively realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable”.⁷⁴⁴

Such fundamental claims about public space and policy, which are visibly expressed in *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, clearly blur the line between performance and reality through balancing “on precisely that pivotal point: the fiction that dreams of reality and reality that catches up to fiction”.⁷⁴⁵ The secret garden is indeed used as a utopian counterpart to the plans of the neighbourhood reconversion, even though this addresses a true societal need. By making a radical illusion become tangible reality, Decoratelier explicitly wants to challenge the debate about democracy, visibility and appearance in public space in Brussels.⁷⁴⁶

Moreover, during *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, Decoratelier’s space is portrayed as a free political space, wherein one can move independently, and as a place of resistance against the state.⁷⁴⁷ This protest is reinforced by the formulated considerations on visibility and control, the opposition to the razzia in Globe Aroma and the undefined legal status of its participants. The piece is then not in the first place proposed as an aesthetic production, but rather a political statement wherein the participants, who otherwise would most probably not have the same platform, are “granted their own public” in space.⁷⁴⁸

Following these claims and ambitions, it becomes both necessary, relevant and interesting to critically reflect on Decoratelier’s value as political public space. As a form of expanded scenography, the physical location of the Decoratelier fundamentally coincides with the considerations made during the performances. The location in Molenbeek forms, to a large extent, the longer-lasting physical and material realisation of the reflections on public space that are made during performances such as *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*. More recently, similar ideas were also expressed in other performances such as the 2020-2021 summer festival *Something When It Doesn’t Rain*, the 2023 performance *A Day is a Hundred Years* and the 2024 closing festival *It For Now* (figure 3.48). Decoratelier intends to be such a utopian/heterotopian space where everybody can safely express themselves and where power differences don’t exist.⁷⁴⁹ It wants to be a space wary of external influence, where nobody tells one how to do something and everyone “can build out loud together”.⁷⁵⁰

So seen, it seems that several socio-physical considerations regarding the political imperative of public space are addressed in the Decoratelier. Nevertheless, although sounding very promising,

⁷⁴³ See Wouters, “brief aan de stad”.

⁷⁴⁴ Foucault, “Of other spaces”, 17.

⁷⁴⁵ See Snoekx, “Underneath Which Rivers Flow”.

⁷⁴⁶ See Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ See Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”.

⁷⁴⁸ See Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ See Van Gerrewey, “A Day is a Hundred Years”.

⁷⁵⁰ See Wouters, interview, and see also Snoekx, “Underneath Which Rivers Flow”.

questions must be raised about the truthfulness of those claims. The Decoratelier is in fact not a political public space which can give place to performance, of e.g. democracy, but is rather a performance which presents itself as a political public space. This forms a fundamental difference, and the latter is misleading.

Based on French writer Olivier Neveux, Anton Jäger (whom I discussed earlier in the light of hyperpolitics) discusses the observation of an alleged “political imperative” of theatre.⁷⁵¹ This indicates the felt need for theatre to imply itself in reality, and both document and criticise it.⁷⁵² While it is not up to me to analyse the politicisation of theatre, since it is not my research topic, it becomes, however, problematic at the moment that theatrical scenography is confused with true public space. Or, when the supposed political imperative of theatre (about which I did thus not theorise, since it is not my domain) is confused with the political imperative of public space (which I have to some extent theorised – or, at least, that’s what I believe to have done).

In the case of *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, this ambivalence becomes overtly visible. While the warehouse of Decoratelier is presented as an alternative political vision on public space, which opposes itself to the harsh policy outside and manifests another emancipatory approach to newcomers, this is perhaps more inspired by “organisational cleverness”.⁷⁵³ Through navigating between performance theatre and political claims about public space, a critical exemption is somewhat obtained: “political issues are offset with aesthetics, while brittle aesthetics are absolved by political grandstanding”.⁷⁵⁴ This is furthermore reinforced by the explicit choice not to direct the performance but rather give the participants total freedom in what to do and make. This creates a strange tension field: nobody takes the explicit responsibility for the aesthetic outcome, while the participants strangely seem to figure in a space made by someone else.⁷⁵⁵ The result is then mostly “a form of *ersatz*-engagement, which masks a lack of true political courage”.⁷⁵⁶

This becomes more clear when compared to Gordon Matta-Clark’s work, a reference Decoratelier regularly uses (e.g. through the mythologisation of a hole in the wall during several performances, among which *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, where it formed the entrance to the ‘secret garden’, figure 3.49).⁷⁵⁷ Decoratelier indeed tends to position itself in relation to the conceptual-artistic heritage of Matta-Clark’s “anarchitectural” work from the 1970s, which was new and radical in its usage of space as a performative gesture, its overt institutional critique and its search to redefine the relationships between audience, object and author.⁷⁵⁸ Nonetheless, as Robbrecht Desmet, who gives a critical insight into *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* in his film *Het open oog*, argues: “in contradiction to artists as Matta-Clark, the generation which introduced the recuperation of (post-)capitalist urban space and the theatricalisation of the space of the street as rightful artistic

⁷⁵¹ See Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”.

⁷⁵² See Ibid.

⁷⁵³ See Ibid.

⁷⁵⁴ See Ibid. My translation.

⁷⁵⁵ See Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ See Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Desmet, interview, 15 April 2024, and also Verbesselt, mail conversation, April-May 2024.

⁷⁵⁸ See Desmet, “*The World is Really There*”, 52-53, and see also Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969”, 140-143.

motive, the art field to which Wouters belongs, is strongly institutionally embedded, networked and financially supported”.⁷⁵⁹

After all, even though it appears to be inspired by its aesthetic, the Decoratelier is neither an alternative space such as 112 Greene Street in New York was, nor a socially engaged working such as the temporary occupation of e.g. Allee du Kaai in Brussels was, but “an institutionally conceived social arena that acts as an alternative space and spatial alternative, but is paradoxically permanent and established” (figure 3.50).⁷⁶⁰ Decoratelier started and continues to exist because of its institutional embeddedness in Damaged Goods, and the performances and locations are made with the generous fundings of several cultural institutions and public subsidies.⁷⁶¹ This is essentially not an issue (but can be very positive) nor a value judgement, but it becomes problematic when a fog of anti-institutionality is lifted and visions about “new public spaces” are performed.⁷⁶² In that case, it comes rather close to what research group BAVO has described as NGO-art. This is a form of art that, even when explicitly socially committed, can easily be fitted into the logic of NGOs: “as a local alternative to social welfare work, it often exists thanks to and in function of government structures, so that the government does not feel compelled to do anything about certain problems itself.”⁷⁶³

What is fundamentally lacking in the Decoratelier to make it truly political, is a sense of engaged and grounded *collective action* from which the politics in space emerge – or, a true politization of aesthetics.⁷⁶⁴ Instead, political engagement is here aestheticized and supposed radical positions are mostly fed by an urge for self-exposure and creation of public mythology.⁷⁶⁵ One comes to an event, and leaves again without having been confronted nor challenged by debate or antagonism but after *enjoying* a supposed “authentic” and “provocative” experience. The public does not freely engage in the space: it is rather selectively curated, both in regard to who can enter and in what they can do, and the conflicts are willingly chosen. Herein lies an essential pitfall of performance that proclaims to form a public space: the space cannot be used by the public as a stage, but the usage of the space by a selected public is rather staged – which does clearly not require the same critical effort. Instead of dialogued theatre, politics become spectacle.⁷⁶⁶ The Decoratelier thereby to some extent conforms to the world it attempts to escape:

“In the context of participatory art, Bishop argues that ideals of social inclusion, creativity, and collectivity are important virtues of politically and socially engaged art. But these virtues are equally promoted by European neoliberal politics, interpreting creativity in terms of entrepreneurialism, risk-taking, self-interest, and performance, and positing even the artist as a model of flexible labour.”⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁵⁹ See Ibid., 61.

⁷⁶⁰ See Ibid., 61, and also Verbesselt, mail conversation, April-May 2024.

⁷⁶¹ Desmet, interview, 15 April 2024, and see also Wouters, interview.

⁷⁶² See Delbecke, “Secret Gardens, Ritualistic Renovations and Modernist Failures”, 94.

⁷⁶³ Verbesselt, “De geëngageerde kunstenaar als katalysator”, and see also BAVO, “Hoeveel politiek kan de kunst verdragen?”, 110-111.

⁷⁶⁴ See Buchloh, “The Twilight of the Idol”, 61.

⁷⁶⁵ See Ibid., 59.

⁷⁶⁶ See Verschaffel, “De mythe van de straat”, 111.

⁷⁶⁷ Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 117.

The result is an odd combination of “feel-good” and “ersatz” engagement. Through engaging with topics of the “outdoor world” in a non-binding manner, leaving out what one wants to leave out since “the burden of the real always results in fenced parcs, transparency and police”, the positioning towards space and politics is too reductionist to truly launch public debate.⁷⁶⁸ A striking (and quite reprehensible) example of this failure to trigger debate, but rather allowing people (and mostly politicians, who prove to be very prone to this) to wallow in ungrounded self-satisfaction, is given by Desmet:

“In March 2019, then Flemish culture minister Sven Gatz, who was at the end of his term at that time, descends to the Liverpool Street in Brussels to attend the performance *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*. The performance ends, or turns into, what the group has gradually come to call guided tours. The audience walks from the stands onto the stage, taken by the hand and invited to take part in a group choreography to in this way be led through the secret garden and given explanations by the performers at each of the set-sculptures. One of those performers is Idris Hassan Hardi [...] Idris’ contribution to the secret garden was a 1:1 scale model in recycled wood of his room in the Little Castle registration centre where he had stayed until shortly before the start of the project [...] It is a strange encounter between institutionalised social art and governmental politics. The political moment is a strong illustration of the ersatz role that cultural participation plays here [...] The minister-culture-lover can see with his own eyes the deployment of the generous budgets that his cabinet donated to the performance in the form of extra support. He sees in the meeting with the makers of the performance “*what a city of arrival, culture and refugees have in common*”, he announced on Twitter the same evening.”⁷⁶⁹

Importantly, this is not to discredit the Decoratelier and its working. It is, clearly, a socially valuable place for the city, which organises good events, where one can gather with friends and strangers, and where interesting performances are held from time to time. It holds cultural importance as a space for artist residences and as a space for artistic experiment. Moreover, it is laudable that, through sometimes opening their courtyard, the Decoratelier attends to open up culture towards the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. However, branding it as a political statement which bridges the gap between architecture, theory and imagination, or as an “unbuilt school of architecture” (as is mentioned above the entrance door to the Decoratelier), is completely off the mark.

In its attempt to shape a heterotopia behind its gate in “soft blue carpet, to give some softness to the street”, Decoratelier essentially illustrates the “fundamental ambiguity of those spatio-temporal constellations” as pointed out by Heynen (figure 3.51).⁷⁷⁰ After all, from a political point of view, it is not clear from Foucault’s description whether the heterotopias are spaces that maintain the status quo or if they are spaces of subversion and emancipation.⁷⁷¹ In parallel, heterotopias are potentially “liberating practices”, but it is crucial to question if this liberation applies to everyone who is involved.⁷⁷² Therefore:

⁷⁶⁸ Jozef Wouters in Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”.

⁷⁶⁹ Desmet, “*The World is Really There*”, 61-62. My translation. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷⁰ See Wouters, “brief aan de stad”, and see also Heynen, “Heterotopia unfolded?”, 321.

⁷⁷¹ See Heynen, “Heterotopia unfolded?”, 317.

⁷⁷² See Ibid., 321.

“Indeed heterotopias seem to be the spaces where *the interplay between normative disciplining and liberating transgression* manifests itself most clearly. They therefore seem to be able to flip from one side to the other. They can easily be presented as marginal spaces where social experimentations are going on, aiming at the empowerment and emancipation of oppressed and minority groups; they can as easily be presented as instruments that support the existing mechanisms of exclusion and domination, thus helping to foreclose any real possibility for change.”⁷⁷³

So, although heterotopias hold potential for protesting and contesting political consensus, this does not mean it will necessarily happen. While aiming for the first, disrupting the outdoor political world, the Decoratelier rather fits into the pattern of the latter, contributing to the status-quo. Space and spatial practice which wants to question the collective imagination of society and undermine what appears to be political consensus, must simultaneously question its own self-imagination and self-institutionalisation.⁷⁷⁴ Forming a space for critical debate demands the possibility to attack political decision-making with two feet upfront, at any moment and any time, which is fundamentally impossible in a space whose existence is entirely based on subsidies and approval of those same decision-makers.

Therefore, the safer option is chosen in this case, which is to portray the space and its working as socially engaged and as an open place of empathy. Nevertheless, the feelings of compassion and consensual sympathy towards each other that come forth here from (e.g. in *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* towards the participants), are arguably the most a-political emotions one can experience, and quite opposite to political emancipation.⁷⁷⁵ It is thus not a space of transgression, nor of alternative usage and critical claim-making, but rather a space which is sustained and needed by (cultural) institutions to boost their own credibility.⁷⁷⁶ This is where the Decoratelier, in my eyes, falls short to truly fulfil its ambition of a political public space. And, thereby, it highlights a few possible yet dangerous confusions to the framework I have been building on political public space.

The foregoing considerations on the Decoratelier also lead to a final reflection on the role and position of the “maker” – in my case, the architect – in order to avoid opaqueness on authorship. After all, this is a fundamental criticism by Jäger towards the *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* performance, where a misleading “horizontal” engagement of Decoratelier with participants is presented to the public (the rightfulness of this criticism is also strongly portrayed by Desmet in his film *Het open oog*).⁷⁷⁷ Besides pointing out City Mine(d)’s interesting role as a mediator, an important question has largely remained untouched throughout the thesis: *who serves who* in a co-creational time-space. Claire Bishop has influentially described a social turn in the arts during the 1990s, a tendency which can be paralleled to architecture and urban design during the same era following Isabelle Doucet:

“To put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable,

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 322. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷⁴ See Jans, “Het publiek en het publieke”.

⁷⁷⁵ See Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”, and also Verbesselt, mail conversation, April-May 2024.

⁷⁷⁶ Desmet, interview, 15 April 2024.

⁷⁷⁷ See Jäger, “Kunst als ersatz”.

commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*.”⁷⁷⁸

This change in relationality raises questions on how to critically assess the value of a work and its maker (both of art or architecture): based on its supposed “social merits” during the process or on its aesthetic outcome (wherein, for Bishop, the second is often neglected but equally as important). After all, the maker becomes more and more a “facilitator” of relationships (or is at least portrayed so), and authorship subsequently becomes rather hazy.⁷⁷⁹ At the same time, however, the setting (both in space and time) remains to large extent a construction from the maker, wherein “everyone who participates, whether in the audience, on stage or in the (Decor)atelier, still seems to remain primarily a *figurant* in his (the maker's) devises”.⁷⁸⁰

This question is particularly pertinent in architecture. As a design profession, whose outcome is a physical space, Isabelle Doucet argues that “architecture's democratic programme can never be fully disconnected from its aesthetic ambition” or from its “projective nature” – although the one has historically been difficult to relate to the other.⁷⁸¹ Participatory efforts should not refrain the creative autonomy of a designer, nor dump the architect as elitist.⁷⁸² At the same time, however, including participants in design should go further than pseudo-efforts solely contributing to the good name, acceptance and symbolic capital of the designer and its project. In fact, both previous stances form two sides of the same coin. It is only through overcoming this polarisation and going beyond the alleged opposition of individual authorship and democratic participation, whereby promoting the one would absolve the other, that steps can be made towards the design of political public spaces.

Fundamentally, this comes down to an effort of truly re-engaging politics with aesthetics.⁷⁸³ Such consideration is relevant for two reasons, following Isabelle Doucet:

“Firstly, instead of *relocating* aesthetic-political judgement through a shift from architect to user, aesthetics to anti-aesthetics, or from grand theory to practical criticism, it values creative achievement *as part of* the political merits of the project. Secondly, by emphasising the creative merits of participatory works, it counters the judgement of critical art (and architecture) in solely political and ethical terms.”⁷⁸⁴

In an effort to consider the role of the “maker” within the scope of e.g. political public space, it is indeed necessary to go beyond the idea of the artist/architect-facilitator, even though this has become a commonplace within dominant discourse surrounding “socially engaged” art or architecture.⁷⁸⁵

The suggestion by Bishop to approach “makers” as “directorial instigators” is very promising in the domain of architecture too, since it proposes an interesting double capacity for the

⁷⁷⁸ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2. Original emphasis. See also Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 114.

⁷⁷⁹ See Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 21.

⁷⁸⁰ See Van Gerrewey, “A Day is a Hundred Years”.

⁷⁸¹ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 111-112.

⁷⁸² See *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁸³ See *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 122. Original emphasis.

⁷⁸⁵ See Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 36-37.

architect.⁷⁸⁶ On the one hand, the architect becomes seen as an *enabler*: “one who triggers action, makes things possible, but is never fully in control of the work”.⁷⁸⁷ On the other, this does not imply an architect must refrain from authorial and directorial responsibility: “the capacities of the designer remain essential to the existence of the work”.⁷⁸⁸ Perhaps, when performing in this regard, the architect can become a truly contributing (f)actor to the shaping and existence of political public spaces.

⁷⁸⁶ See Ibid., 37.

⁷⁸⁷ See Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture*, 124.

⁷⁸⁸ See Ibid., 124.



Fig. 3.31: Limite Limite tower on a small waste land in the Brabant neighbourhood (Schaerbeek), 1998. (© City Mine(d))



Fig. 3.32: Arabesk Palaverboom by Recyclart and Jozef Legrand on the Breughel Square in the Marolles, in the shadow of the Palace of Justice, finished in 2005 (picture from 2020). (© Arter architect + DDGM architectes associés)



Fig. 3.33: image of 'Kookmet', which provides an inclusive shared dinner every Friday during the weekly market and perfectly illustrates the typical Cultureghem actions in the ancient *abattoirs* of Anderlecht. (© Abattoir)



Fig. 3.34: indoor warehouse space of the temporary occupation Allee Du Kaai by Toestand, 2014-2023. (© Toestand)



Fig. 3.35: view of the Parckfarm social greenhouse in the Tour&Taxi's Parc, ca. 2020. (© Parckfarm)



Fig. 3.36: visualisation of the re-imagination by FCF-a of one of the busiest traffic axes in Brussels, the Leopold II Boulevard, leading from the city centre towards the E40, 2022. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.37: first edition of the Picard summer street (Sint-Jans-Molenbeek) in 2020. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.38: summer street in the Villa Avenue (Saint-Gilles) during OpenStreets 21. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.39: filter by FCF-a on the crossroads between the Vanderstichelenstraat and the Vandenboogaerdenstraat (Sint-Jans-Molenbeek), dividing the crossroads in two one-directional loops and thereby making cut-through traffic in the neighbourhood impossible, August 2022. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.40: installation of the extended Picard street corner as a permanent micro-intervention by FCF-a, 2023. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.41: panel with statements used during OpenStreets 23 on which people could indicate whether they agreed or not with the claim, in order to easily launch discussions about the themes of common interest to the neighbourhood. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.42: imaginary vision by FCF-a for the Picard Street, with the Barmacie on the left, 2021. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.43: public debate, in public space (on the Bridge between the Dansaert Street in Brussels and the Gentsesteenweg in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek), about Good Move on Car Free Sunday in September 2023. (© FCF-a)



Fig. 3.44: inner courtyard of the Decoratelier in the Manchester Street, 2021. (© Séverin Malaud)



Fig 3.45: impression of the Manchester Street in Molenbeek by day, with the entrance to Recyclart on the left (white gate), the entrance to the courtyard and building of Decoratelier via the lower building besides, and Charleroi Danses situated in the high brick building on the right, March 2024. (© Author)



Fig. 3.46: view of the indoor space of the Decoratelier in the Liverpool Street during *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, 2019. (© Illias Teirlinck)



Fig. 3.47: view of the Decoratelier indoor space during *Underneath Which Rivers Flow*, showing the public being led through the secret garden, 2019. (© Illias Teirlinck)



Fig. 3.48: view of Decoratelier's courtyard during the *It For Now* closing festival, for which several organisations were invited to collaborate on the courtyard, among which Toestand vzw in this image, April 2024. (© author)



Fig. 3.49: hole in the wall to enter the 'secret garden' during *Underneath Which Rivers Flow* in the Decoratelier, 2019. (© Wannes Cré/Robbrecht Desmet/Ewoud Vermote/Laura Van Severen/Illias Teirlinck/Pieter Dumoulin)



Fig. 3.50 (from top to bottom): indoor space of the Decoratelier in the Manchester Street, indoor space of 122 Greene Street and indoor space of Allee du Kaai. (© author, Cosmos Andrew Sarchiapone, Toestand)



Fig. 3.51: entrance door to the Decoratelier in soft blue carpet, seen from the street and showing the subscript of “The unbuilt school of architecture” above, ca. 2020. (© Jozef Wouters)

4. Conclusions

The case study on the Brussels Capital Region has simultaneously underwritten both the possibility, necessity and difficulty to address the *political imperative of public space*. In its intricate appearance as a “small world city”, Brussels has proven particularly interesting and peculiar in regard to both its politics and its public space.

In terms of politics, I highlighted how Brussels is marked today by a waning connection between its inhabitants and the representative democratic instances. This is partially due to the ungraspable administrative complexity and political stratification. Such sense of disaffection is combined with a more general climate of unease, political extremization and *hyperpoliticization* in Belgium. Political differences between the country’s constituent parts become increasingly extrapolated and Brussels is often left dragging behind as a liability instead of being considered as a valuable asset.

In another thread, mention is regularly made today of “a reappropriation of public space”. However, I have argued that any such discourse is a bit blunt and that the contemporary progress is rather relative. Although slowly positive steps are being made regarding public space in the city-region, a long way remains towards a socially more just and ecologically more sustainable public space. Moreover, and most importantly for this thesis, the “revitalisation” of public space in Brussels is often combined with creeping processes of *depoliticization* of those spaces and their environment.

Within this context, some distinctive initiatives were nevertheless discerned, both on the more “formal” as well as “informal” level, in regard to the political imperative. Based on the first chapters of this thesis, the political imperative of public space alludes to the inherent yet often underexposed spatial dimension of any public sphere – indeed, “an understanding of public space is an *imperative* for understanding the public sphere”, as Low and Smith suggest.⁷⁸⁹

Following analysis of notably Habermas’s, Fraser’s and Arendt’s accounts, a public sphere was described as all the practices through which citizenship is actively lived and performed, and where the deed of *being political* can emerge. The public sphere therefore holds an *essential but limited* contribution to democracy:

“Its contribution is *essential* because it represents the sole locus where public opinion and political will are formed [...] the contribution of the public sphere to the formation of public opinion and political will in a democracy is *limited* because, as a general rule, no collectively binding individual decisions are taken there [...]”⁷⁹⁰

However, one of the major contemporary challenges today to any conception of the public sphere is its *delocalisation* and *disembodiment*. This is threatening, since public space is an essential constituent of a vital public sphere and provides it with, among other things, material characteristics and geography. Therefore, it proved essential to theorise how public space could potentially become, or serve as, *political public space*. As I argued, public space should in this

⁷⁸⁹ Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 6. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹⁰ Habermas, “Reflections and Hypotheses”, 150-151. Original emphasis.

regard be understood as a *relational stage*, which implies considerations on both its socio-physical and spatio-temporal patterns of co-production towards the creation of *place*.

The delocalisation of the public sphere often comes in parallel with either a total neglect of public space, or an increasing *homogenisation* and *smoothening*. Brussels both historically and contemporarily forms no exception to these patterns, as is most explicitly showcased through an analysis of the Schuman Square. The Schuman Square forms a remarkable point of convergence for multiple (political) symbolisms. While situated in a neighbourhood emblematic for the 20th-century waves of *Brusselization* and urban transformation, it simultaneously highlights the rather troublesome connection between the European institutions, and the European political ideal, with the European citizens (and especially those living in Brussels).

The nearly-realised design by XDGA for the square illustrated both the potential and the limitations that large-scale and formal public spaces bear in regard to the political imperative. While forming an explicit physical reflection to the *theatre metaphor*, it would have been an interesting attempt to formally embed political (inter)action in public space. Nevertheless, its success or failure will forever remain unsure: the design was ultimately abandoned and the now-ongoing construction works for a much more commonplace canopy somewhat testimony the oft-put emphasis (in Brussels) on social landmarks instead of political places for potential dissent.

A different, more informal interpretation to political public space was given through an analysis of FCF-a's OpenStreets project. As argued throughout the thesis, the joint focus on these radically different formal and informal public spaces comes forth from a desire to refrain from *hierarchisation*. It is rather more interesting to avoid normativity and polarisation but instead consider different public spaces in the city as relational and co-dependent. Plurality and diversity is not only important to people, but also to (public) space.

FCF-a provided an interesting insight into the spatio-temporal intersection of *interstitial activism from-within and architectural culture*. Such intertwinement formed a convincing starting point to politicise public space. Through originally mobilising around a major theme of common interest, air quality, and gradually involving other related concerns about the city, FCF-a illustrated the political dynamic that can emerge within public space. Through its initial struggle with the time-space dimension of political change and its subsequent successful adaptation of methods, FCF-a showcased an interesting practical approach to the relationality of space. Their interpretation of the space of the street as a metaphorical *playground* and therefore a place for confrontation of different visions holds high potential for further political action in public space.

As a final meta-reflection to the framework that I built within the scope of this thesis, the Decoratelier proved a strong and interesting zoom-in. Indeed, when the space as stage relationship is inverted, and the political imperative of public space is confused with other (supposed) political imperatives, then the true political potential of space and its active usage become misleading. It is not enough to pretend engagement in politics: the aspects of free *collective action and confrontation* are non-dismissible to political public spaces. In its attempt to physically shape a heterotopia contributing to empowerment and emancipation, it rather contributes to the foreclosing of any real possibility for change, as I argued.

Clearly, inquiring the presence and state of political public spaces in the Brussels Capital Region remains continuously pressing. Within common dynamics of public space redevelopment,

facilitating the possibility of citizen's political action is hardly ever taken into account. However, public space bears the potential, and as I have argued even the *imperative*, to both *allow, enable and contribute to* political expression. A struggle for public space to be conjointly shaped and enable plurality, thereby allowing both debate and conflict, is itself crucially at stake within our democracy.

I believe, and hope to have argued, that public space can be a contributing, but surely not unique, antidote to polarisation and one-sided perspectives through making abstract matters and disagreements both visible and tangible. However, this requires public space to be conceived in such a way that its usage is an *inherently political experience*, because of one's constant negotiation with others and the space itself. Clearly, patterns of homogenisation and smoothening are fundamental threats hereto.

In order to become a space wherein one's beliefs are "*reality checked*" and confronted, political public space cannot be considered as a commercial space nor as a community space. It is also not a space inhabited by an overarching "we" or a consensual meeting place aiming at a feeling of contentment. Instead, it is a place where democracy is *performed* and whose usage requires to "play the game" of debate and argument. It is true that the impact of public space might be *limited*, but it is nevertheless *essential* since it enables claim-making, opinion-formation and scrutinization of the powerful with a certain degree of (public) *visibility and audibility* in space.

Besides the latter, a number of other *socio-physical and architectural considerations* are useful to evaluate the extent to which a specific public space is allowing, enabling or contributing to political dynamics. These considerations for instance range from *accessibility over control* to the *multi-dimensionality* of a space regarding publicity and function. Furthermore, the possibilities for *alternative/non-predestined usage*, as well as *transgression* and even *temporary occupation*, are also crucial. Such dynamics are obtained through e.g. a careful *articulation of boundaries*, both socially as well as physically.

The final goal hereby is to localise political public spaces as *spaces for representation*, both of different publics as well as society as a whole. This also requires considerations on the *relationship between the space and the media or institutions*. Activation of a political public space is only generated through a sense of *collective action* as well as placemaking processes resulting from processes of *participation* and *co-creation*. Lastly, as pointed out with FCF-a, it is therefore indispensable to regard political public space as a matter of *time-space*.

Architecture and architects have a non-neglectable responsibility in paving the way for such political possibilities within space. Space must in this regard be considered as an *actor* in itself to societal and political dynamics – which imposes a fundamental ambition on its design to truly re-engage politics and aesthetics. In this light, the perspective of *directorial instigator* provides an interesting position to architects as both *enabler and author* at the same time – thereby potentially going beyond public mythology and pseudo-democracy towards real alternatives.

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Endfigure (© Isabelle Marchal, 2017)

Appendix

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