

Potential of African Diasporic Spatiality in Adaptive Reuse and Postcolonial Placemaking

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preface

Recently, stricter migration policies have been implemented resulting in hostile deportations fuelled by rising anti-immigrant sentiments in Western nations. Additionally, conservative and far-right groups are intensifying racial debates over who qualifies as a European or North American citizen. This has sparked global discussions about migration, identity, belonging, and displacement, which I believe should be addressed with an understanding that the diaspora condition requires empathy and nuance.

I come from Nairobi, a densely populated city in Kenya, a country within East Africa that has been one of the few on the continent to experience long-term political and economic stability. This has attracted a significant number of immigrants, mostly asylum-seekers from neighbouring nations, including Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, over the years. Certain districts within Nairobi have developed an urban identity influenced by the diaspora residing there. The area where I was raised is renowned for its substantial population of South Sudanese and Ethiopian migrants, a demographic that has continued to expand. Throughout my upbringing, I maintained close relationships with members of these communities. Upon returning to Nairobi after completing my undergraduate degree, I became increasingly aware of how the presence of the Ethiopian and South Sudanese diaspora had markedly transformed my hometown, exemplified by the emergence of small enterprises such as Ethiopian cafés and salons that have reshaped the streetscape.

This observation has sparked my interest in examining how migrant communities occupy and modify urban spaces, thereby influencing urban development and collective perceptions. The informal nature of these spaces—designed to facilitate social interaction and foster community—has piqued my curiosity and motivated me to investigate how such aspects of migrant occupation can inform the adaptive reuse of buildings. Given that the concept of adaptive reuse is relatively underexplored within the African built environment, I have chosen to situate my study within the Belgian context, particularly focusing on African migrants.

Moreover, influenced by a social and political background shaped by the aftermath of colonisation and European imperialism, I couldn't ignore its impact on Global South-to-Global North migration, the growth of diaspora and the tensions surrounding African immigrants in the metropolis. Consequently, I decided to incorporate a postcolonial framework that addresses and challenges modernist orthodoxy in architecture and urbanism.

“...It is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination; diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons.”

Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Post-Colonial Criticism’, Redrawing for boundaries, ed. Geenblatt and Gann.

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abstract

By examining the postcolonial condition of the European metropole, as influenced by colonial and postcolonial migration, this thesis explores how African diasporic communities in Brussels engage in spatial practices as a legitimate form of architectural knowledge. Focusing on Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Matongé, it argues that the incremental, vernacular adaptations through which African migrants appropriate and reinterpret the European built environment constitute an alternative approach to placemaking. This approach has often been overlooked by conventional heritage and planning systems.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, diasporic urbanism, and African diasporic spatial practice, this thesis develops a critical framework for reading African diasporic spatial practice not as informality or deficit, but as a culturally embedded, socially driven architectural knowledge. This framework is tested through ethnographic research of Luce Beeckmans and site-writing, following Jane Rendell's concept of critical spatial practice, and applied through a design project for a former industrial complex at Rue de Courtrai and Rue d'Ostende in Molenbeek.

The design proposes an adaptive reuse strategy grounded in the African diasporic logic of negotiated visibility—the practice of managing presence and withdrawal across the city and building scales simultaneously. By preserving existing street façades, directing transformation inward through the inner block, and retaining existing users, the project translates African diasporic spatial qualities into an architectural methodology capable of producing inclusive social infrastructure while resisting the displacement pressures of ongoing urban renewal. In doing so, it positions adaptive reuse not as a technical or aesthetic strategy but as a cultural and political redefinition of space—one that recognises the African diaspora community in Molenbeek as spatial agents in postcolonial placemaking.

chapter 1

[01]

introduction

[i] Background, Problem Statement and Research Question

Colonisation and globalisation facilitated the movement and settlement of people worldwide. In the mid-twentieth century, decolonisation and global economic developments led to the migration of colonised and formerly colonised peoples to European states, resulting in a significant demographic shift by the start of the twenty-first century.

In Belgium and across other Western European states, immigrant communities have played an integral role as active historical agents in shaping and developing cities.¹ Despite this inherent role, immigrant contributions—particularly those of the African diaspora—are frequently marginalised and excluded from modern architectural narratives. Architectural theory and praxis have historically been anchored to Eurocentric narratives that privilege fixed notions of form, function and authorship.² Such a paradigm tends to frame immigrant-occupied localities as problematic and lacking, as portrayed in political and media discourses. Consequently, this conceals the manner in which these diasporic communities actively reinterpret and appropriate the built environment, integrating cultural memory, social practices, and alternative spatial logics into European architectural forms. Therefore, the lived experiences of African migrant communities are seldom recognised as agents of placemaking or urban transformation.

In recent years, discourse has emerged on a postcolonial critique of the built environment, investigating and challenging Eurocentric architectural scholarship and notions of modernity, as well as the legacy of Eurocentrism in architecture globally. Inextricable from this discourse is the notion of decolonisation in architecture, presented as a postcolonial framework for challenging cultural dominance, transgressing colonial legacies in architectural practice, and moving towards recognition of diversity and legitimisation of subaltern spatial practices. Within this framework, this thesis seeks to comprehend how African migrants' appropriation of the modern built form through adaptive reuse can redefine traditional Eurocentric concepts of architecture and reinterpret space and belonging with diasporic African communities as spatial agents in postcolonial place-making.

In recent years, discourse has emerged on a postcolonial critique of the built environment, investigating and challenging Eurocentric architectural scholarship and notions of modernity, as well as the legacy of Eurocentrism in architecture globally. Inextricable from this discourse is the notion of decolonisation in architecture, presented as a postcolonial framework for challenging cultural dominance, transgressing colonial legacies in architectural practice, and moving towards recognition of diversity and legitimisation of subaltern spatial practices. Within this framework, this thesis seeks to comprehend how African migrants' appropriation of the modern built form through adaptive reuse can redefine traditional Eurocentric concepts of architecture and reinterpret space and belonging with diasporic African communities as spatial agents in postcolonial placemaking.

Diasporic communities alter rigid European architectural structures by challenging traditional designs through spatial practices that emphasise social function over strict form and fluid boundaries between public and private spaces, disrupting conventional architectural hierarchies. Shops, places of worship, housing units, and community spaces frequently operate through adaptive reuse, informal modification, and layered occupancy. These practices reveal an alternative architectural intelligence that exists outside formal design processes yet remains deeply responsive to social and cultural needs.

Within a postcolonial context, this study of immigrant appropriations of European built form is necessary in expanding architectural thinking beyond Eurocentric narratives, especially in the field of architectural conservation. Moreover, it seeks to legitimise their significance in creating a new architectural narrative in the contemporary architectural landscape. Adaptive reuse—informal or formal—when practised in this dimension, shifts from a purely technical or aesthetic strategy to a political and cultural redefinition of space.

Notes:

1. Martiniello, M. "Locating Migration: Rescaling Cities and Migrants" In *Contemporary Sociology* 41, no. 3 364-365, 2012.
2. Charitonidou, M. "Rethinking Europe's Position in the Formation of Architectural Histories: Is a Non-Eurocentric Narrative Possible?" 2021.

[ii] Scope of the Study

This research engages Luce Beeckman's study of African spatiality in the Belgian context. She has studied multiple spaces of sub-Saharan African occupation, detailing how they engage with the European urban landscape. I also engage with other African diasporic spatial practices I observe in Belgium, particularly Brussels. Therefore, the scope of this thesis is situated within Brussels, in the towns of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Matongé, Ixelles. The municipalities have historically served as points of arrival for successive migrants and have become emblematic of Europe's complex narratives about migration, identity, and belonging. While often portrayed through reductive and securitised media lenses, these towns actually hold a rich spatial record of migrant adaptation and cultural layering.

This research utilises an extensive literature review and historical and archival research. I use ethnographic research—including the observation of everyday spatial practices, informal uses of public and semi-public space, and community-oriented spatial adaptations—to guide my understanding not only of African diasporic spatial practices but also of the site where my thesis and project are situated. I employ Jane Rendell's concept of site-writing and architecture-writing as a method of critical spatial practice to engage with the urban contexts of Molenbeek and Matongé. Site-writing is utilised as a situated and reflexive research tool that allows spatial observations to emerge from lived experience, embodied engagement, and critical reflection.¹

Accordingly, the objective of this thesis is to comprehend African spatiality in the public urban spaces of Brussels through a diasporic lens, exploring postcolonial perspectives on architecture as they manifest in adaptive reuse practices. The research seeks to understand how African diasporic communities negotiate, appropriate, and reinterpret existing European architectural forms, and how these spatial practices operate as both cultural expression and everyday survival strategies. Furthermore, the thesis aims to present an aspect of postcolonial discourse, cultural hybridity, which challenges dichotomies—such as Western versus non-Western and Eurocentric versus non-Eurocentric frameworks—by foregrounding African diasporic spatiality and examining its inscriptions on the contemporary European architectural landscape. In doing so, the research resists reductive readings of migrant spaces as merely informal or

temporary, instead positioning them as active contributors to urban spatial production. Moreover, this thesis discusses diasporic spatial practices as incremental, negotiated, and often constrained interventions within pre-existing architectural and socio-political structures. This critical positioning allows for a more balanced understanding of agency, recognising both the creative adaptations enacted by diasporic communities and the structural limitations imposed by planning regulations, economic precarity, and social marginalisation.

Following the introduction, the second chapter consists of a comprehensive literature review of the theoretical frameworks briefly introduced in this chapter. I discuss the historical development of African-to-Europe migration, the African diaspora in Europe, diaspora space in the urban context, and the cultural and architectural relevance of Molenbeek & Matongé, and to apply a postcolonial theoretical framework to discuss the current state of architecture and urbanism. Postcolonialism is approached here through two interrelated dimensions: The first considers post-colonialism in its explicit temporal sense, referring to the period following political independence and the material and spatial aftermath of colonial rule. The second approach is postcolonialism as a critical theoretical framework that interrogates and challenges the enduring effects of colonial power relations on global institutions, knowledge systems, and cultural production, particularly from the perspectives of formerly colonised subjects.

The third chapter focuses on the methodological framework of the thesis, elaborating on the use of ethnographic research and site-writing, and examining their relevance and inherence within the overall research outcomes. This chapter justifies the adoption of qualitative, interpretative methods in architectural research, situating them within broader debates on critical spatial practice and postcolonial discourse.

The fourth chapter discusses Brussels as a migrant city, focusing on the historical and cultural contexts of Molenbeek and Matongé. I will provide a situated exploration of both locations, drawing on my critical experience. Additionally, I will discuss the manifestations of African spatiality and analyse how African diasporic spatial practices manifest in public and semi-public spaces, and how these practices engage with existing European building typologies, such as industrial and residential, drawing on Luce Beeckmans' ethnographies of African spaces in Belgian cities.

The fifth chapter will present my design project for Rue de Courtrai and Rue d'Ostende in Molenbeek. I will provide information about the site and its surrounding context pertinent to my design project, and explain my design strategies and design proposal, informed by diasporic spatial logics and the local cultural context.

Terminology:

Throughout the thesis, I use descriptive terms like "migrant," "immigrant," and "diasporic" interchangeably to refer to the communities studied. I also use "African" in a continental sense, covering both North Africans (Maghrebis) and Sub-Saharan Africans (Black Africans), unless otherwise noted. The term 'European' is used interchangeably with "Western European." "Non-Western" and "non-European" refer to regions and peoples outside Europe and North America, emphasising non-European (white) heritage.

Therefore, 'Western' refers to regions and peoples from Europe and North America with European heritage. I use the term 'Eurocentrism' to describe a worldview that considers European culture, history, and values to be superior, 'normal,' or at the centre of global development. I refer to the capitals of European nation-states as 'metropolis' or 'metropole.' Additionally, I use 'subaltern' to describe marginalised, oppressed groups excluded from social and political power— a term often employed in postcolonial theory to refer to colonised people lacking agency.

Notes:

1. Rendell, J. "Architecture-writing." In *The Journal of Architecture* 41, no.3 pg. 255-264, 2005.

chapter 2

[02]

**theoretical
framework**

[i] Colonial and Postcolonial Migration and the African Diaspora in Europe

To understand the extent to which the current European metropolitan landscape is built on diasporic livelihoods, it is essential to recognise that colonisation and globalisation significantly shaped global movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. This encompassed not only the migration and settlement of Europeans within colonial territories but also the migration of colonial subjects to European territories to serve as indentured labourers and soldiers for European armies during the World Wars. Subsequently, due to international tensions over colonial territories, imperial powers began implementing policies that effectively modified citizenship rights in their colonies to safeguard their imperial interests.

In French colonial territories, Buettner writes that, to defend its imperial status quo, in 1946, the French Union (previously the French Empire) officially inaugurated a constitution that granted its colonial subjects Union citizenship.¹ In French Algeria, those who already possessed the right to migrate – mostly Berbers and Arabs – achieved French citizenship in 1947. Consequently, most of the migrants arriving in metropolitan France were Algerian. Other countries, like Portugal, which shared its intent to maintain its empire, treated its colonies in Africa and Asia as overseas provinces in 1951, essentially granting them Portuguese citizenship in 1961. Britain, to consolidate its relationship with its other colonies, passed an act that allowed its Commonwealth subjects to migrate and settle freely. Following the 1940s, migratory policies and legal provisions in late-colonial Europe led to the swift growth of an ethnic minority population. These policies across these European countries meant that colonial (as well as later postcolonial) peoples who travelled to Europe were often not identified as ‘immigrants’ but as what Buettner calls ‘internal migrants’.²

The process of decolonisation began in the mid-to-late 20th century as a post-World War phenomenon, in which subordinates of colonial empires rejected colonialism and, through resistance and armed struggle, attained independence. This dissolution of formal colonial subjugation by European empires in the Global South — territories of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania — rapidly transformed the world’s political geography.³ Consequently, decolonisation led to the repatriation and emigration of European settlers to their former European territories after independence.

Consequently, decolonisation led to the repatriation and emigration of European settlers to their former European territories after independence. However, this also altered the citizenship rights of (post)colonial subjects. This was indicative of the fact that Britain and Portugal, with the intent to discourage and prevent migration to European metropolises from decolonising Africa, withdrew citizenship rights in the early 1960s and just before independence, respectively.⁴

However, achieving political independence couldn't entirely eradicate the colonial legacy in these former colonies. In the African context, colonialism disrupted Africa's development process. At the expense of Western Europe's industrial growth, colonial rule fostered political and economic cultures bound to the exploitation and underdevelopment of the majority in the name of the prosperity of a few. These colonial systems were subsequently perpetuated and maintained by opportunistic African political leaders who gained power during and after independence. Therefore, a few years post-independence, post-colonial Africa was encumbered by economic inequality, conflict, and political instability, as evidenced by the ubiquity of military coups and civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ This perilous situation in post-independence Africa, in conjunction with globalisation - international connectivity and mobility - led to an exodus of Africans from their home countries to seek refuge and better opportunities.⁶

For example, France's most marked increase in Sub-Saharan migrant arrivals occurred in the 1980s. The Congolese (never having had citizenship rights due to colonial Belgium's strict policies against *métissage*, i.e., race mixing, as well as preventing most Africans from seeking work or education before Congo's independence) only began to migrate in small, selected groups around the 1950s as part of the *évolués*, the Europeanised Congolese elite.⁷ By the 1960s and 1970s, migration had only increased to a few thousand, mostly students. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, deteriorating political and economic conditions under Mobutu's regime and the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 increased Sub-Saharan African migration to the Belgian metropolis.

However, in the 1960s, the largest wave of African migrants to Europe came from North Africa, particularly Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Before the policies regarding postcolonial migration were fully implemented, Western Europe faced a labour shortage caused by postwar economic growth and industrial expansion, which facilitated temporary labour migration of Maghrebi (North Africans) to countries such as France, Belgium, and Germany. This labour migration only began to curb after postcolonial policies terminating labour migrations outside the European Economic Community and revoking citizenship that facilitated easier migration took effect in the late 1960s-1970s, a period heightened by the 1973 oil crisis. This saw the transition of former North African labourers permanently settling.⁸ This settlement of North Africans, as well as the influx of sub-Saharan Africans as settlement in the late 20th and early 21st century, led to the establishment of substantial diaspora populations in European metropolises. The migration and settlement of Africans into specific metropolises were largely influenced by colonial ties and European relations. This continued settlement of migrants over the 21st century has driven a demographic shift in the populations and cultures of Western Europe's metropolitan areas.



fig [2.1] *The Congolese évolués*

Therefore, it is widely acknowledged that many European cities, especially the metropolises, are now notably multicultural and cosmopolitan, drawing on diaspora populations of people of African descent, as well as Asian, West Indian, and beyond. Such a phenomenon, Vertovec refers to as ‘superdiversity’. Vertovec argues that superdiversity is shaped by complex interplays of variables “among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade.”⁹

When conceptualizing the diasporic identity of Africans in Europe, McEachrane discusses a cultural perspective, where the African diaspora is

“...emphasis is on the specifics of cultural groups, identities and processes. In this sense, it is relevant to speak of diasporic connections to cultural groups in Africa in terms of continuity, retention, survival, tradition, interconnectivity, networks, exchange, dialogue, translation, hybridity, transformation, and/or identity.”¹⁰

Therefore, this cultural attribute of the African diaspora is realised through their inhabitation of urban areas, materially demonstrating these diasporic links by assimilating new and diverse environments to not only sustain their connections to their homeland but also to establish identity and a sense of belonging as immigrants.

The historical trajectory outlined in this chapter — from colonial labour recruitment and citizenship manipulation to postcolonial settlement and demographic transformation — shows that what emerged from this history in the streets of Paris, Brussels, and London was a diaspora, bound by multiple forms of displacement. The African diaspora’s presence in Western European cities is not incidental but structurally produced: the direct consequence of colonial economic extraction, postcolonial political instability, and migration policies that both facilitated and later sought to curtail movement between former empires and their metropolises. It is a living, breathing cultural negotiation between origin and destination, between memory and adaptation, and between belonging and exclusion. As Vertovec’s concept of superdiversity captures, these are not monolithic communities but layered, transnationally connected, legally stratified populations reshaping the very fabric of European urban life.¹⁰ To understand the modern European city, one must therefore reckon honestly with this history by viewing the cosmopolitan metropolis as a postcolonial inheritance.

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7. Haas, H. "The Myth of Invasion: the inconvenient realities of African migration to Europe." In *Third World Quarterly*, 29 no.7, pg.1307, 2008.
8. Vertovec, S. "Super-diversity and its implications." In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, no.6, pg 1024, 2007.
9. McEachrane, M. "On Conceptualising African Diasporas in Europe." In *African Diaspora* 13, no.23, pg. 163(4), 2021.
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[ii] Diasporic Urbanism, Informality and Adaptive Reuse

As migrant populations increasingly occupy and shape cities, some diaspora theorists have developed the concept of diasporic urbanism to account for the social, political, and, most importantly, spatial implications of diasporic settlement within urban areas, challenging traditional urban planning. Diaspora urbanism emphasises how migrant communities – through transnational and multiple interconnected sites - fundamentally transform urban space, identity, and the meaning of home.

As Ashtutosh writes, this framework “draws from debates on urban space over the multi-sited and transnational simultaneity of diaspora that radically transforms the conceptions of place, identity and home.”¹ This ‘simultaneity’ of migrants’ lives shifts the focus of contemporary urban practice to address urbanism rooted in everyday migrant social practices. Diaspora spaces emerge predominantly in urban peripheries, where they frequently forge distinctive social and political environments. In her seminal work *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Avtar Brah describes diaspora space as the social terrain in which the native and the migrant, or the “here” and “there,” intersect and co-constitute one another.² The interaction of both indentities in this shared space, challenges the traditional dichotomy of foreign versus native. Therefore, diaspora space is not solely about migrants; it also concerns how migration transforms societies.³ The urban element in diaspora space indicates that the city is not just a place for reimagining the homeland, but is also reshaped through the combination of various spaces and connections.⁴

This is illustrated by Suzanne Hall and Ayona Datta’s study of a translocal street, where visual signscapes evoke material and embodied links between the street and the neighbourhood.⁵ Awan discusses diasporic urbanism as a method for mapping contemporary urban practice through a diasporic lens and as a tool for representing migrant spatialities. In her research, she shifts the discussion of urbanism from form to the experience of the urban, focusing on the everyday practices of those who dwell in cities. She uses the concept of displacement, an inherent aspect of the diasporic experience, to understand how it shapes diasporic space. She states that diaspora urbanism

“therefore addresses the difficulties of operating with diasporic space and of

accommodating the material complexities of migrant lives, whilst at the same time acknowledging that the everyday inhabiting of space by those in the diaspora challenges traditional modalities of architecture: the conceptualisation of space as rational, ordered, unified and measurable, of subjects as being representative of a whole, or the idea of an exemplary architectural subject”.⁶

She further argues that the strictness of traditional architecture—seeing space as constant, logical, and structured—is challenged by the lived experiences of the diaspora. Her view highlights how daily actions of diasporic individuals challenge the concept of an “exemplary architectural subject” or a consistent, orderly city. This is exemplified by the bottom-up approach, in which migrants actively shape their environments, in contrast to the top-down system of urban development.

To create spaces of familiarity and belonging, migrants appropriate and transform urban space through informal strategies. In the European city context, informal strategies serve as crucial, adaptable tools for navigating exclusion and reclaiming spaces beyond rigid & formal planning. This informality is characterised by a diasporic system that resourcefully adapts the built landscape to meet the immediate needs of migrant communities. Because diasporic communities tend to face a number of systemic challenges integrating into urban space, such as housing discrimination, they are incentivised to search for other alternatives. Therefore, informality provides the means to operate under constraints. Occurring in urban peripheries, in spaces often underutilised and neglected. Spaces are reused and reclaimed through incremental adaptations, as Beeckmans’ strategy of incremental placemaking demonstrates, improving spaces through gradual expansion.⁷ Through gradual modifications, collaborative utilisation of space, and reliance on social networks, migrant communities can establish footholds within often exclusive urban environments. More often than not, these informal spatial practices occur within the historic fabric of the city, particularly in cities that have rich, albeit neglected, industrial pasts.

In discussing informality as a reuse practice in diasporic urban appropriations, I frame it as user-led interventions within the context of informal adaptations. Plevoets & Van Cleempoel describe these interventions as ‘vernacular’, referring to the spontaneous and informal modifications of historic buildings.⁸ The term originated with Fred Scott in his book *On Altering Architecture*, specifically in the chapter ‘The Literate and the Vernacular’, where he emphasises the significance of user agency and highlights the benefits of allowing buildings to adapt and evolve through use. Scott favours ‘colloquial interventions’, i.e. vernacular over a more formal, ‘literate’ design (Le Corbusier’s work at Pessac), permitting adaptation and inadvertently attributing heritage value to the informal, spontaneous interventions made by users.⁹ However, while these informal adaptations are gaining recognition within conservation debates as part of heritage, this acknowledgement is inconsistent. In particular, the collective diaspora urban space, especially that of the African diaspora, often does not receive the same level of ‘heritage’ consideration. Although these spaces reveal complex layers of informal transformation, they are often viewed through a lens of deficiency, illegality, or transience rather than as vibrant sites of cultural expression.

Rooted in histories of marginalisation, the African diaspora is cast in a subaltern role, and its spatial practices are treated mainly as issues to regulate rather than as valuable contributions to understanding or preserving. This creates a significant blind spot in mainstream architectural and heritage frameworks: although vernacular adaptation is praised in some contexts, it is often ignored or undervalued elsewhere. Recognising African diasporic urban spaces as sites of vernacular adaptation thus requires expanding existing theories and confronting the racialised and political factors that determine which interventions are accepted as heritage and which are sidelined.

As adaptive reuse gains prominence as a method of architectural conservation, it holds the potential to recognise diasporic urbanism and to facilitate the development of conditions that enable individuals beyond the privileged to envision the conservation and reuse of buildings within the urban landscape.

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5. Hall, S. & Datta, A. "The translocal street: Shop signs and local multi-culture along the Walworth Road, south London" In *City, Culture and Society* 1, no.2, pg. 69, 2010.
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[iii] Modernist Critique and Postcolonialism in Architecture

In the 1950s and 1960s, criticism against modernism—in the field of architecture and urban planning—began to rise. In North America, Jane Jacobs published her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 which critiqued the urban planning policy of the 1950s.¹ Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was a 'gentle manifesto' that critiqued orthodox modernism's obsession with purity and simplicity.² In the same league was Italy's Aldo Rossi, who published his seminal work, *The Architecture of the City*, arguing against modern functionalism and positioning the city as complex, shaped by collective memory and enduring urban artefacts.³ However, in the same year that Jane Jacobs published her book, Frantz Fanon, a vocal critic of French colonisation of Africa, published *The Wretched of the Earth*, psychoanalysing the dehumanising effects of colonisation on the individual and the nation, and examines the wider social, cultural, and political impacts of creating a social movement aimed at the decolonisation of both a person and a people, laying the basis for what would become postcolonial theory or postcolonialism.⁴ As the framework developed, most postcolonial scholars came to believe that modernism and the colonial enterprise were closely intertwined.

In 1978, Edward Said published his magnum opus, "Orientalism," which criticised modernity from a non-European perspective and shifted the narrative regarding European hegemony, becoming one of the foundational texts in postcolonialism. Heynen writes,

"Following the lead of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, it is argued that colonial discourse was intrinsic to European self-understanding: it is through their conquest and their knowledge of foreign peoples and territories (two experiences which usually were intimately linked), that Europeans could position themselves as Modern, as civilized, as superior, as developed and progressive vis-à-vis local populations that were none of that [...] The other, the non-European, was thus represented as the negation of everything that Europe imagined or desired to be."⁵

Furthermore, Said also showed how 'identities were culturally constructed rather than inherently characteristic'.⁶ Europeans constructed their identity in opposition to the people of the territories they occupied and universalised every aspect of the world in

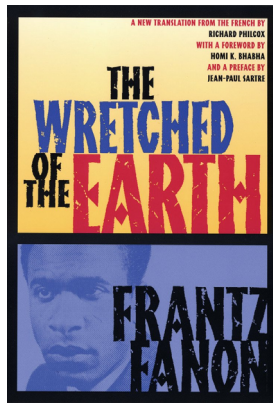


fig [2.2] Cover of *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon, 2005 edition_Goodreads

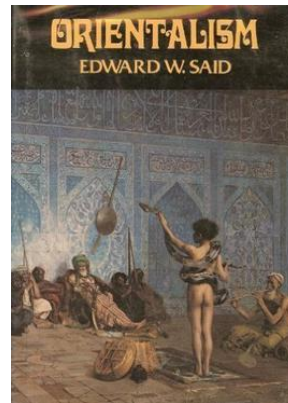


fig [2.3] Cover of *Orientalism* by Edward Said, First 1978 edition_Wikipedia

reference to this identity, establishing cultural hegemony. Dichotomies such as ‘West’ versus ‘non-West’, ‘modern’ versus ‘traditional’ were founded on the Eurocentric canon. Modernism’s universal claims framed ‘non-Western’ traditions as primitive or irrational, justifying their replacement.⁷ This was achieved through the application of modernist experimentation and imposition in colonial territories. In Paul Rabinow’s *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (1989), he argued that French colonial Morocco served as a laboratory for modern urban planning techniques that could not be executed within legal parameters in France.⁸ Similarly, Gwendolyn Wright’s *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (1991) examined design strategies in France and its territories—Madagascar, Indochina, and Morocco—and concluded that these seemingly antagonistic strategies, which included, but were not limited to, highly rationalised modernism, all supported imperial objectives.⁹ Postcolonial theories were further developed as a new way to think of the ‘non-West’, particularly by non-Europeans, or former colonial subjugates.

Soon enough, postcolonialism was applied to interrogate and challenge the prominence of Western orthodoxy in architectural history, theory, and practice as well as urbanism, which privileged fixed notions of form, function and authorship.¹⁰ It did this through not only interrogation and critique but also the recognition and legitimisation of non-European histories, and the enabling and empowering of alternative epistemes in architecture.¹¹ Postcolonial theory countered the established dichotomy of the non-West vs West dogma previously argued by Said. This was done through the concept of hybridity. This concept, developed by Homi K. Bhabha and central to postcolonial studies, delineates the emergence of new cultural forms, identities, and meanings within the “in-between” space of colonial interaction.¹² Here, he challenges the binaries of coloniser and colonised. This relation disrupts any notion of a “pure” culture. Hosaghrar writes,

“Other recent studies have also regarded the seemingly dichotomous categories such as ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, or ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ as fluid and shifting, seeking out areas of hybridity, ambivalence, and crossing over of cultures. In emphasizing interconnections and infiltrations, they have highlighted the active engagement of the subordinate groups in the making of their landscapes and identities.”¹³

Bhabha further contends that hybridity undermines rigid ideas of identity and questions

prevailing power systems by opening up new avenues for cultural adaptation and opposition. It is in these hybrid contexts that marginalised individuals and communities can assert their agency and contest dominant narratives enforced upon them.¹⁴

As diaspora studies became more intertwined with postcolonial studies, the ways in which diaspora was understood expanded. In his 1990 essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall delineates two perspectives for understanding cultural identity and, by extension, diaspora: as a shared essence and as a process of continuous transformation/production.¹⁴ The latter, closely linked with postcolonial concepts such as hybridity, recognises that identity is dynamic and that the process of becoming is ongoing. Consequently, Bhabha's concept of the Third Space—the “in-between” zone where cultural meaning, identity, and power are in constant negotiation—becomes a significant point of reference in discussions of diasporic spaces.

Within the framework of diasporic urbanism, which seeks to legitimise the lived experience of migrant lives in urban spaces, postcolonial perspectives “recognise subtle ways in which even the most marginalised populations actively shape and negotiate the spaces they inhabit.”¹⁵ Negotiation of space involves the ongoing, often daily effort by diasporic communities to claim, share, or repurpose physical and social spaces in their host countries. This process requires balancing competing needs in urban and social environments, and often entails negotiating between formal regulations and informal, temporary adaptations to determine how a space is used.¹⁶

Nevertheless, postcolonial theory can further inform architectural conservation. Here, postcolonialism intervenes by interrogating whose heritage or past is worth preserving, restoring, or adapting. In adapting buildings for a greater community, “a postcolonial agenda...is advanced by the emphasis on enabling, empowering, and partnering with the community so that residents become active agents of transformation rather than passive objects of improvement that only increases their dependency.”¹⁷ An example is SESC Pompeia by Lina Bo Bardi, where she formalised and built upon the existing community's informal adaptation of the factory. The informal adoption and repurposing of modernist forms by marginalised groups can be interpreted through a postcolonial

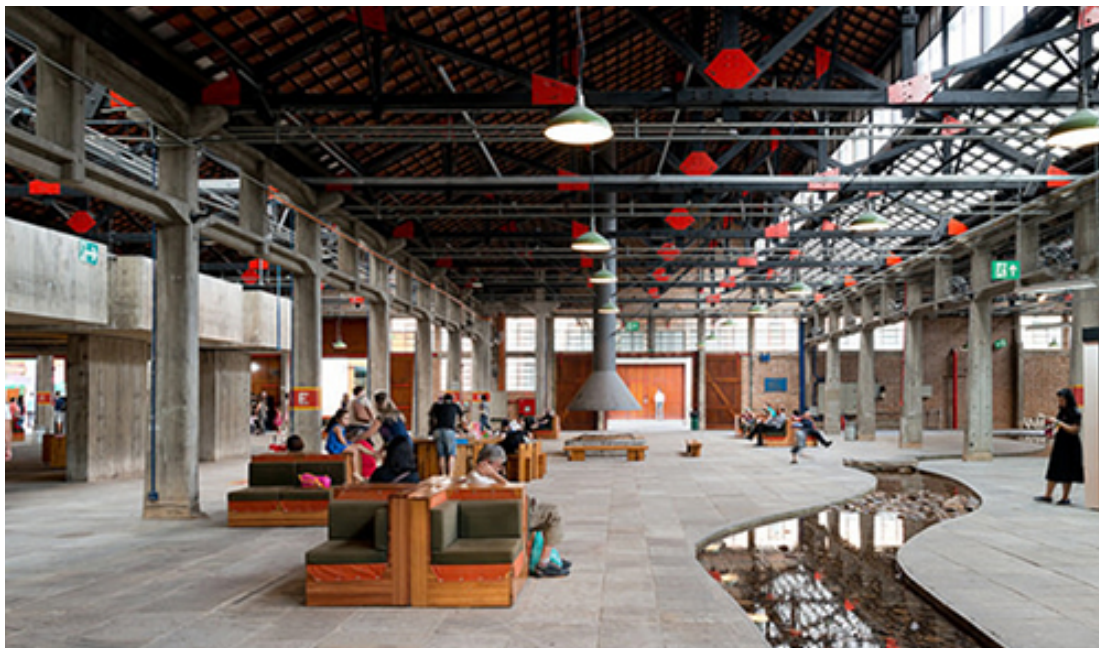


fig [2.4] Interior of SESC Pompeia_Baressp

lens when formally acknowledged. Ultimately, the postcolonial critique of adaptive reuse hinges on who holds authority over the reuse processes, whose stories are recognised, and whether the intervention enhances or limits the community's power over the space.

Notes:

1. Jacobs, J. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961.
2. Venturi, R. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966.
3. Rossi, A. *The Architecture of the City*, 1966.
4. Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961.
5. Heynen, H. The Intertwinement of Modernism and Colonialism: A Theoretical Perspective, pg. 12, 2013.
6. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 72, 2012.
7. Angasu, F. *The Critique of Modernity in Post-colonial African Situation*, 2010.
8. Ranibow, P. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*, 1989.
9. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 73, 2012.
10. Charitonidou, M. "Rethinking Europe's Position in the Formation of Architectural Histories: Is a Non-Eurocentric Narrative Possible?" 2021.
11. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 71, 2012.
11. Mambrol, N. "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity." In *Literary Theory and Criticism*, April 2016.
12. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 74, 2012.
13. Mohammed, M., A., M., I. "Hybridity in Homi K. Bhabha's Theory and its Relevance to "Absalom and Achitophel." In *Journal of Sustainable Studies*, pg 1731-1732, 2024.
14. Hall, S. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, pg. 222-237, 1994.
15. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 72, 2012.
16. Bhandari, N. "Negotiating Cultural Identities in Diaspora: A Conceptual Review of Third Space." In *Curriculum Development Journal* 42, pg. 79-89, 2020.
17. Hosagrahar, J. "Interrogating Difference: Postcolonial Perspectives in Architecture and Urbanism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, pg. 81, 2012.

chapter 3

[03]

**research
methodology**

[i] Site-Writing and Architecture-Writing

Site-writing is a vital spatial practice first developed by Jane Rendell. In the *Journal of Architecture*, she initially presents the practice as a method of art criticism and then discusses how this embedded critical approach can inform architectural critique. It inherently involves engagement with interdisciplinary intersections, ranging from architectural history to feminist theory, from architectural design to conceptual art practice, and from art criticism to writing. Site-writing requires practitioners to step outside their disciplinary boundaries and engage with the spatial qualities of other fields to find a space in which they can reflect on their positionality in relation to their areas of study. Therefore, inquiring: “how criticism can engage with...and investigate the positions we occupy in relation to works, the sites they are located in and the issues they raise, conceptually and ideologically?”¹

Subsequently, she furthers her discussion by introducing architecture-writing, developed from site-writing, as a form of architectural criticism which (through interdisciplinary exchange) “allows us to...rethink...what architecture is, what it might be, how we might think, write and make buildings critically.”² Therefore, architecture-writing requires one consider our medium of criticism to be more than detached description but a critical reflection, gleaned from beyond and within the discipline of architecture.

In my research, the importance of this approach lies in my choice to incorporate postcolonial theory. The interdisciplinary exchange among conservation architecture, postcolonial studies, and cultural and anthropological disciplines is crucial for critically examining Western European modernism and validating alternative (non-European) histories and narratives in architectural practice and discussion. In this framework, site-writing functions as a methodological tool—employing context-specificity and narrative techniques to explore how architecture and place are influenced not only by dominant powers but also by the lived experiences of the subaltern.

Criticism of modern architecture has been carried out by multiple renowned architects from Aldo Rossi to Robert Venturi, in which they present their own theoretical analysis the city and its architecture (*L'architettura della città*) and challenging orthodox modernist purism by embracing complexities and contradictions in architecture. Despite Venturi and Rossi's critical work being some of the most significant criticisms of architecture through writing, there is a fundamental gap in their work that stems from the sole focus of European and North American built forms and lack of interdisciplinary approach (and global perspective) that would encourage them to challenge and question their positionality as European architects in the zeitgeist.

In conservation architecture, heritage is often regarded as the primary value of historical edifices. However, the term 'heritage' itself possesses multiple meanings within contemporary social imaginaries. Some critics argue that "heritage itself is a Western concept" and that "places of heritage are frequently contested; one person's heritage can be the symbol of another's oppression."³ When considering adaptive reuse within this context, deliberate efforts to redefine heritage, acknowledge, and challenge oppressive histories can be viewed as a vital practice.

An exemplary case is Lina Bo Bardi's helicoidal staircase during her restoration of the Solar do Unhao Bahia Museum in Salvador, Brazil. The building resides within Salvador's historic core, carrying a significant legacy of slavery. Bo Bardi's intervention took into account the impacts of slavery not only on the district but also on the 18th-century complex, which included a warehouse, a church, a nobleman's residence, and notably numerous supplementary structures serving as slave quarters for enslaved Africans arriving from Benin. Her critical approach—while respecting the site's diverse histories—involved preserving only the church, the manor house, and some warehouses, while demolishing the remaining ones.⁴ The staircase, inspired by the geometry of an ox cartwheel, was constructed and integrated into the museum to acknowledge the building's history and its association with slavery.⁵ However this is not done to honor or mock Brazil's colonial legacy but to uplift and recognize the significant contribution of enslaved Africans to the development of Salvador, honoring the traditions and cultures of they brought from Benin. Consequently, Bo Bardi's intervention underscores the interdisciplinary engagement inherent in adaptive reuse, involving an examination of the building's history (heritage) and its locality. Such critical engagement can facilitate the transformation of buildings with complex legacies.



fig [3.1] *The Ox Cart*_painting by Frans Post (1638)



fig [3.2] Bo Bardi's Helicoidal Staircase_Wolff, I.



fig [3.3] Exterior Solar do Unhão_1959-1963

Therefore, I contend that adaptive reuse necessitates site-specificity and a profound engagement with the conditions of architectural production within historical, social, and political contexts. Consequently, this process can legitimise marginalised histories and narratives. Consequently, critical adaptive reuse of historic buildings can be regarded as a postcolonial act. I have employed site-writing as methodological tool in my research, drawing on my interpretation of Jane Rendell's architecture-writing. I chose to approach my critical investigation by positioning myself within Brussel's public realm. I specifically analyse, through embodied engagement and critical reflection, how African migrant spatiality, within a socio-cultural context, has transformed Molenbeek and Ixelles's urban fabric. I present this as a literary narrative—an essay in the second sub-chapter in the fourth chapter of this thesis. The reflective essay recounts my visits to Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, primarily the area known as Lower Molenbeek, such as Ribaucourt, Étangs Noirs, Comte De Flandre, as well as Place de la Duchesse de Brabant closer to Brussels-West train station. For my visit to Ixelles, I focus my reflection on Matonge. Accompanied by relevant photographs from both towns, the reflection offers insights into my perspective on a 'both/and' approach to urban life. North African and Sub-Saharan African diasporic communities concurrently inhabit and negotiate spaces "here" and "there", sustain transnational and translocal connections across neighborhoods and the homeland, demonstrating a dual sense of identity.

Notes:

1. Rendell, J. "Architecture-writing." In *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no.3 pg. 257, 2006.
2. Rendell, J. "Architecture-writing." In *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no.3 pg. 261, 2006.
3. Nitschke, J.L. & Lorenzon, M. "Archaeology, Architecture and the Postcolonial Critique". In *Postcolonialism, Heritage, and the Built Environment New Approaches to Architecture in Archaeology*, pg.5, 2020.
4. Wolff, I. "Critically Selecting Artifacts to Conserve". In *Lessons in 'spatializing' heritage – the conservation work of Lina Bo Bardi*. 2007.
5. Ox carts constituted the most prevalent mode of inland transportation employed to move slaves from maritime ports to the mainland. Moreover, ox carts were also operated by slaves as part of their en-forced labour within the American plantation system (fig 3.1). This fact further under-scores the contextual importance of Bo Bardi's intervention. Regrettably, during the research of this aspect, most sources and architectural reviews of Bo Bardi's intervention neither recognize her critical approach nor consider the buildings' sordid heritage, specifically their associations with slavery.

[ii] Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research, as a qualitative approach, is widely employed in sociological and anthropological disciplines; however, it is less commonly utilised in architectural research methods. Ethnography involves a systematic investigation of human behaviour within a specific cultural setting. Through ethnographic study, one can gain a deeper understanding of how people live and interact within their communities. As a social research technique, it emphasises participant observation, engaging with the community by examining and recording social practices.

When applied as an architectural research methodology, this inherently anthropological approach can significantly contribute to architectural design practice by integrating local community perspectives and fostering inclusive, culturally responsive architecture. Furthermore, regarding human behaviour, it offers a comprehensive understanding of spatial experience that transcends mere functional and aesthetic considerations.

Abásolo-Llaría et al. explore how ethnographic methods significantly enhance architecture by examining “the extent to which ethnography acts...as a critical practice capable of challenging and reshaping disciplinary foundations” in architectural design.⁶ Additional analyses are undertaken to understand ethnography in architecture as a methodological and epistemological approach. The study contends that ethnographic methods offer a detailed and nuanced understanding of spatial experience that surpasses what conventional architectural analytical techniques can achieve. Consequently, it positions ethnography in architecture as a valuable tool for capturing embodied knowledge.

Within the context of conservation architecture, ethnographic research seeks to comprehend how communities inhabit and assign value to structures, thereby defining heritage. In the practice of adaptive reuse, it inherently bridges the gap between the technical aspects of conservation and social values, such as the lived experiences of individuals within spaces undergoing transformation. Consequently, it positions adaptive reuse as both a technical and cultural strategy.

When applied within a postcolonial framework of architectural praxis, ethnographic methods—particularly when emphasising subaltern voices—can contribute to legitimising alternative architectural epistemologies, challenging hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms, as elaborated:

“As Mignolo argues, the colonial matrix of power was historically entrenched through the re-mapping of territories and the silencing of indigenous epistemologies, a dynamic that continues to shape knowledge production today. Thus, decolonising architectural and ethnographic research demands more than diversification; it calls for a radical interrogation of the spatial, linguistic, and epistemological foundations upon which scholarly legitimacy has been constructed. Only by confronting these structural inheritances can a genuinely decolonial, reflexive, and pluriversal mode of architectural and spatial inquiry emerge.”⁷

This study employs ethnographic research to investigate the manifestations of African diasporic spatiality and also examines how the African diasporic community functions as a spatial agent in urban placemaking. I utilise ethnographic evidence, namely the ethnographic work of other researchers. These ethnographies inherently involve fieldwork documentation through either an anthropological or architectural perspective, or both. The referenced ethnographies explore and analyse the diasporic spatial practices of African migrants across Europe, with particular emphasis on Belgium. The main research engaged in this study is Luce Beeckman's extensive ethnographic studies conducted across African (semi)public spaces in Belgium's mid-sized cities are cited. In the anthropological context, ethnographies published on migrant cities such as Brussels are utilised.

Additionally, the other ethnographic method I employ in this research is participant observation of the African diasporic community in Molenbeek. This method inherently involves fieldwork through passive observation of community engagement with existing public spaces. The former is used to support, analyse, and interrogate the findings within the city, thereby leading to a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which African spatiality influences the place-making practices of Molenbeek's residents. These findings are pertinent to the design outcomes, as they inform the implementation of strategies that are indicative of diasporic spatial practices as they manifest in Molenbeek and across the city.

Consequently, this method derives the spatial qualities of public spaces and the place-making practices of the African migrant community. These findings are corroborated with specific spatial and social characteristics observed within the social context of Molenbeek & Matongé.

Notes:

6. Abásolo-Llaría, J., & Vergara-Perucich, F. “Beyond the Drawing: Ethnography and Architecture as Contested Narratives of the Human Experience of Dwelling”. In *Humans* 5, no.24 pg. 3. 2025

7. Abásolo-Llaría, J., & Vergara-Perucich, F. “Beyond the Drawing: Ethnography and Architecture as Contested Narratives of the Human Experience of Dwelling”. In *Humans* 5, no.24 pg. 17. 2025

[iii] Historical Research and Archival Sources

This qualitative method is used in this thesis to collect data on Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Historical research is used to gather information on the municipality's history, particularly its migration history and the factors that led to the growth of the African diaspora in the last century. Furthermore, historical research is used in the analysis of the project site, the Courtrai-Ostende block. Archival sources here are used to identify the transformation of the site (both at a macro and micro scale). Combined with ethnographic research, this method aims to uncover Brussel's African migrant and postcolonial condition.

The archival sources used in this study are from public sources, i.e., online newspapers and government records. Historical data is gathered from various published documents on the city. Where possible, multiple sources are cross-referenced to ensure the reliability and depth of the historical narrative. This approach enables a more layered understanding of temporal change, linking policy decisions, economic shifts, and spatial transformations to lived experiences. By situating archival findings alongside ethnographic insights, the research constructs a more comprehensive account of the site and its broader urban context, foregrounding the interconnectedness of memory, migration, and the built environment.

chapter 4

**[04] the metropolis
as a postcolonial
urban landscape**

[i] Brussels: A Postcolonial Metropole

As one of the most ethnically diverse metropolises in the world, the Brussels-Capital Region is recognised as the world's second most cosmopolitan city and Europe's most cosmopolitan city, according to the World Migration 2015 report.¹ It is undeniable that the region's diversity has increased significantly over the past 10 years. Currently, an estimated 70% of the Brussels-Capital region's population is foreign-born, or born in Belgium to foreign parents. Among this population, 36% are of non-European origin, with the majority having Turkish, North African (Moroccan), or Sub-Saharan African backgrounds.²

During the 1960s, North Africans began arriving in Belgium. Among them, the largest group were Moroccans. Direct bilateral agreements for temporary labour migration in the mining and manufacturing sectors initiated significant flows of Moroccan migrants to Belgium. Following the 1973 oil crisis, labour immigration was halted, but family reunification policies led to permanent settlement, therefore increasing the population of North Africans in Belgium.³ However, the migratory and settlement circumstances were different for Sub-Saharan Africans. The migrant population originating in Sub-Saharan Africa began to grow only from the end of the 1980s. The inherent reason is that—unlike other Western European countries—Belgium did not encourage labour immigration from its former colonies. In the 1960s and 1970s, only a few thousand, two-thirds of whom were of Congolese nationality, were recorded in Belgium for short-term educational stays. From the 1980s onwards, and especially in the 1990s, arrivals from Sub-Saharan Africa increased, notably due to economic and political crises on the home continent. The profiles of people arriving in Belgium also changed, with an increase in asylum migration and family reunification.⁴

Historically, metropolises have served as hubs for migrants of all backgrounds, offering economic opportunities, social networks and logistical support. Therefore, it was expected that Brussels would become a lucrative destination for most migrants after arrival.



fig [4.1] Moroccan Immigrants_ L'immigration marocaine en Belgique

Although most of the coal-mining industry was located in the Limburg and Wallonia regions and in areas surrounding Brussels, such as Charleroi, most of the recruited labour force did not settle in those regions. Nevertheless, there were other prospering industries in the Brussels region. One major industrial hub was 'Little Manchester', located along the Brussel-Charleroi canal in today's Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Molenbeek, located within Brussels, had been successful as an industrial town since the Industrial Revolution. As the need for labour expanded beyond the mining sector, the town attracted migrants not only from the Flemish region but also from North Africa in the 1960s. Consequently, the majority of the Moroccan labour force settled in Molenbeek, along with other migrant labourers from Italy and Turkey, creating a dense, working-class migrant neighbourhood. In the 1970s, the industrial sector began to decline, leaving much of its infrastructure abandoned.⁵ During that period, the Moroccan labour force faced unemployment, and many temporary migrant labourers settled permanently in the town, turning Molenbeek into the migrant locality it is today.

Regarding Sub-Saharan Africans, the limited number who migrated during the 1960s and 1970s, aside from students, comprised a mobile segment of the elite: dignitaries, diplomats, civil servants, the majority of whom were Congolese. Their arrival and presence in Brussels would be situated around Port de Namur. There, an urban cluster would begin to form: a reception and accommodation centre (the "African House"), shopping arcades (the Ixelles Galleries located between the Chaussée d'Ixelles and Chaussée de Wavre, and between the Chaussée de Wavre and Porte de Namur), and a nightclub ("Le Mambo").⁶ This neighbourhood later adopted the name 'Petit Matongé' after the commercial district of the same name in Kinshasa, DRC, renowned for its vibrant nightlife. In the 1980s and 1990s, political unrest in the former Belgian colonies of Rwanda and Burundi prompted many asylum-seekers to migrate to Belgium. In this context, Matongé remained a hub for diasporic communities, thriving through its lively nightlife and vibrant economic life.⁷ The area presently hosts a diverse population originating from various regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, extending beyond solely Congo.

now repurposed into a space that, as Briers, citing De Clercq, notes, blurs the line between public and private, serves as a sheltered version (from European cold and rain) of Kinshasa's street life.⁹ These are not equivalent conditions for adaptive reuse. Industrial buildings offer spatial generosity—volume, structural flexibility, the absence of domestic hierarchy, and (mostly) no definitive heritage status—that diasporic communities have appropriated with considerable effort, converting warehouses into places of worship, community association spaces, and hybrid commercial interiors. The modernist building styles in Matongé provide less spatial flexibility but are still creatively utilised. Their rigid forms are negotiated through layered uses, colourful overt signage, and social practices, forming what this thesis refers to as an alternative architectural episteme. In both examples, these adaptations happen gradually, informally, and largely go unnoticed by the heritage and planning frameworks that govern the city's built environment.



fig [4.3] Interior Galerie d'Ixelles_by Waltery, F.



fig [4.4] Interior Galerie d'Ixelles_appropriated_by Gui Mag.

In Molenbeek, the Canal Zone is undergoing substantial urban renewal driven by municipal initiatives (perspective.brussels) and larger development projects along the canal corridor. This includes Tour & Taxis, where the renovated industrial building, as described in van der Saag's ethnographic study, is viewed by local residents as both beautiful and useful, since they have limited options for such types of spaces. This project, which has received some criticism, has also led to new housing projects being built or planned, such as the proposed Bijzondere Bestemmingsplan (BBP) for the Tours & Taxi site.¹⁰ Regarding the new housing stock already built, a resident Rawiya (of Moroccan decent) says:

"It's too bad that the apartments there are too expensive. It's again building, building but for a certain category of people. For example, I won't be looking for an apartment there because I know I do not make enough money. It's very beautiful but

you can immediately see you won't be able to live there. It's not built for you but for a different type of person.'¹¹

The Dockside Tower project, still under dispute at the time of writing, exemplifies this trend. It is a residential tower with studios and one-bedroom apartments planned for one of the densest and most polluted squares in the region. This is despite the municipality's and residents' explicit wishes, as most local residents have larger families and face serious health problems due to pollution. This is attributed to the area being heavily affected by real estate speculation on that plot since the late 1980s.¹²



fig [4.5] Exterior of Gare Maritime_Tour & Taxis by Filip Dujardin



fig [4.6] Interior of Gare Maritime_Tour & Taxis by Filip Dujardin

In Matongé, the neighbourhood faces a different kind of pressure: the expanding European quarter to the east and the upscale Avenue Louise corridor to the west drive intense real estate speculation, driven by a top-down approach to rationalising Brussels' urban layout. Meanwhile, a superficial label of multiculturalism is applied from above—highlighting the area's intercultural diversity, as Arnaut suggests—to create a marketable identity out of elements that are otherwise uncontrollable.¹³

Both cases follow a similar renewal pattern: physical improvements to buildings, activation of ground floors, and improvement of public realm legibility. And in both cases, the consequence is broadly predictable. Displacement. An exodus of inhabitants who can no longer afford rising housing costs are forced to leave.

The colonial histories of Molenbeek and Matongé have shaped separate communities, architectural styles, and relationships with the Belgian state. Despite these differences, the current wave of urban renewal poses a shared risk: displacement, which planning frameworks are often structurally unable to adequately recognise as a loss.



fig [4.7] Project proposal render for Dockside_ V+ / ms-a / TRANS / BB



fig [4.8] Current site of proposed Dockside project corner of Place Saintelette_2022

Notes:

1. World Migration Report. "2.2.1 Global Cities," 2015
- 2 World Population Review. "Brussels Population 2026," 2026.
3. de Haas, H. "The Myth of Invasion: the inconvenient realities of African migration to Europe," in *Third World Quarterly*, 29 no.7, pg.1307, 2008.
4. Bruno, B., Flahaux, M., Demart, S., Vaussy, E., Hezukuri, C., Toma, S., Neya, S., Derveeuw, S., Godin, M., Nsengiyumva, J., March, L. & Nappa Usatu, J. "Sub-Saharan populations in Belgium: a brief history." In *A portrait of people of Sub-Saharan African origin in Belgium*, pg. 9, 2025.
5. van der Saag, E. "The Case" *In Situated Accounts from Within a Stigmatized Area : An Ethnographic Study on Local Views and Experiences Relating to Urban Developments in Molenbeek, Brussels*, pg. 29, 2023.
6. Demart, S. "Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles) : un miroir postcolonial." In *Mémoires et migrations en Afrique de l'Ouest et en France*, 29, no.1, pg. 136, 2013.
7. Briers, C. "Matonge in the middle" pg. 9, 2025.
8. Briers, C. "Matonge in the middle" pg.15, 2025.
9. Briers, C. "Matonge in the middle" pg.13, 2025.
10. van der Saag, E. "The Case" *In Situated Accounts from Within a Stigmatized Area : An Ethnographic Study on Local Views and Experiences Relating to Urban Developments in Molenbeek, Brussels*, pg. 36, 2023.
11. van der Saag, E. "The Case" *In Situated Accounts from Within a Stigmatized Area : An Ethnographic Study on Local Views and Experiences Relating to Urban Developments in Molenbeek, Brussels*, pg. 50, 2023.
12. van der Saag, E. "The Case" *In Situated Accounts from Within a Stigmatized Area : An Ethnographic Study on Local Views and Experiences Relating to Urban Developments in Molenbeek, Brussels*, pg. 47-49, 2023.
13. Briers, C. "Matonge in the middle" pg. 4,15 2025.

[ii] Essay: A Helix is A Spiral: Both/And, Here/There

En route, Rue de Courtrai

Entering the town via Étangs Noir station, I noticed the town's silence, punctuated by the rumble of the metro as it left the underground station. We are on our way to Rue de Courtrai. The sidewalks displayed what I recognised as the quintessential Brussels character: narrow and compact. Slow walking, fast walking, just walking. I mean, that is what streets are for, right? However, where I come from, the streets are lively and sometimes crowded with people, food stalls, smoke, and the loud racket of vegetable and fruit vendors hawking fresh, juicy mangoes in January's heat (it is mango season every January). However, the streets here feel somewhat dull and melancholy, at least during the first five minutes of walking along Rue de la Carpe. There is not much foot traffic on a Thursday mid-morning. As we reached the corner of the block leading to Rue d'Ostende, we passed a group of three or four men seated outside a cafe, chatting in Arabic.

At Rue de Courtrai, we cross the street, take photos of the building(s)—necessary for a wider view. Rue de Courtrai 47 houses Cassonade, a community kitchen. It is hidden between the building's modern industrial facade, practically invisible from the streetscape, perceptible only through the tiny sign protruding from the exterior wall and the loud thumping bass of West African pop music. The further we walk, the more housing blocks we see. Invulnerable. Dense. At the end of the street, we see a grocery store. Fruits & vegetables lined up against the shop front, prominently on display.

At Rue d'Ostende, we have the fortunate opportunity of meeting a Moroccan gentleman who kindly agrees to show us the interior of Rue de Courtrai, 92. This act constitutes one of his charitable deeds for the month of Ramadan. Only N'Yélé is capable of conversing with him in French. He inquires about my origins and the languages I speak. I do not speak French nor Arabic. Through N'Yélé, he informs us that he knows many Malians, Congolese, and Syrians; however, his primary acquaintances are Moroccans. He has resided in Molenbeek since 2004. While much can be improved in the town, the older generation remains largely uninterested in redevelopment projects



fig [4.9] Translocal connection from Molenbeek to Matonge_Image by author

until such initiatives begin to impact their familiar streets and urban environment. That is when intra-community concerns are voiced. I reflect upon whether this stems from a fear of gentrification. Back at Rue de Coutrai, the interior block. A cluster of buildings rises imposingly over the courtyard where scaffolding platforms and outdoor tables sit dejectedly in the sombre weather. We huddle together, looking uncertainly at Google Maps, trying to understand the block's complexity and density. It's an overwhelming feat. The buildings, brick walls stacked high, quintessentially industrial, are unwelcoming and impervious to our curious gazes. Lunch at Cassonade. We are welcomed by a warm and cosy interior, informal in its design.

Spring in Place de la Duchesse de Brabant and Comte de Flandre

I am at Place De La Duchesse de Brabant on a sunny Tuesday morning. This is the best of Belgian weather I have seen since the year began. The warm discomfort I feel in the jacket is a testament to the changing weather. I dressed too heavily. The walk from Brussels-West station was uneventful, with a quiet atmosphere broken only by locals crowding to board the tram. Place de la Duchesse de Brabant is different. On any other day, it would be your boring car park, your quiet, empty public space. However, today, on a Tuesday morning, it is boisterous and busy. It is market day. Tents rise from the ground, encompassing the entire square and car park. Some stalls sit close to the road, in the open, as women rummage through the merchandise. Sellers enthusiastically promote their goods—food, clothing, and spices—shouting in Arabic. The atmosphere feels distinctly different. I sit with an older Maghrebi couple. I smile at an African woman enjoying the sun as she waits for the bus. I cannot help but watch as the market boldly takes over the entire area, despite congestion along adjacent roads. Today, it is not about the cars; it is about the market. The smell of raw fish and spoiled food hits me, as if it is emanating from beneath the cobblestones. It seems as though it has always been present—lingering even after the market—which operates only until noon, shuts down. It leaves behind a sign of its presence, almost as if the market asserts, “it is my right to be here. I am the community, and the community is me.” All and sundry belong in this space.

Comte de Flandre. Crossing the canal bridge. To get there, I am walking along the streets leading past Ribaucourt, where little tea houses line the sidewalks. Spring sunlight invites me to claim a spot among the gaggle of patrons at Café Liberté. I pass the stylised facades of the boucheries, restaurants with Arabic script on their signs, and grocers with their produce lining the street as usual. And then I am leaving the canal district. Crossing the bridge.

Porte de Namur, The Gateway to Love?

The street from Port de Namur is lively. I observe that beauty salons adjacent to the closed HEMA and H&M are open. As I traverse the passage of the Galerie, I notice numerous murals adorning the walls of the building. When passing by a salon, I am beckoned by Congolese hairdressers who ask if I would like my hair braided—a familiar experience. It happens in Nairobi too. They often ask this question even if one is bald. I politely reject them and walk down the corridor.

I can tell, despite the rudimentary appropriations on the shop doors, the chair scattered along the passage, that most businesses are closed. I'm near the exit. Again, I am beckoned by two African men in a barbershop. One is Burundian, the other Congolese. "Oh, you're Kenyan. We have multiple Kenyans here in Matongé," the Burundian says, "Go down this street, and you'll find a restaurant. Not opened today, though. Come back on Saturday. It's busier." I am surprised he can guess my background. Probably based on the way I speak. I ask if he lives here. He denies and says matter-of-factly that most Africans don't live in Matongé. I observe the vibrant mural opposite the barber shop. "Are all the shops here owned by Africans?" I inquire once more. He exchanges a glance with the Congolese man beside him. "Yes," he responds concisely after confirming through eye contact. The ground floor is shops, the upper floors are apartments, maybe offices. I'm walking through the building once more. The decorative murals covering the once plain walls, as well as the numerous African stores, are likely beyond the imagination of Jean-Florian Collin when he designed the shopping arcade in 1953. The space exhibits a distinct atmosphere compared to any modernist building I have encountered in Brussels.

Back at Port De Namur, in the beauty shop, a blend of reggae and soukous music is playing as I peruse the hair products. I experience a sense of camaraderie, feeling as though I could belong, akin to a character in Cheri Samba's mural. Despite throughout the morning expressing, "Désolé, je ne parle pas français," I feel comforted. It is windy as I proceed towards Gare Central, yet my heart remains tranquil.

[iii] Manifestations of African Diasporic Spatiality & Everyday Spatial Practices

African diasporic spatial practices are inherently a multi-scalar engagement. Buildings in European cities are often appropriated by African migrants in a conscious way that allows diasporic communities to survive and thrive in an urban landscape and presents itself as a contestation of belonging. Multiple ethnographies have examined how these modern buildings are appropriated, particularly in the context of placemaking. Luce Beeckman's studies examine everyday spatial practices of African migrants in mid-sized cities in Belgium. In a study of Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers, she focuses on "the shared spatial knowledge: a set of place-making practices" and reveals a set of non-limiting strategies undertaken in place-making, zooming in from the city to the building and, lastly, to the interior. Her other study of an African shop in Ghent reveals how the transformation of an ordinary terraced house into a commercial "public" space challenges conventional usage of space in Ghent's ordinary houses. Benchelabi's study of Maghrebi women in Brussels reveals another dimension of African spatiality—where African diasporic placemaking and cultural displacement are used to negotiate belonging, juxtaposed against Brussels' public space.

Therefore, the key aspect of diasporic spatial practices in the public realm is reflected in the creation of spaces "where the right to the city is re-negotiated".¹ A significant way in which African diasporic spatiality manifests itself is through negotiations of visibility in the public realm, which Beeckmans refers to as a 'strategy of invisibility'.² A look into the African shop in Ghent shows how publicity levels vary throughout the building, with certain functions having a more public character, e.g., the shop, whereas others operate more privately, e.g., the women's salon.³ Afro-Christian churches operate under "high invisibility," where changes to the façade involve minimal interventions and few semiotic markers, such as small, semi-fixed signs or none at all. This high invisibility in the streetscape is also witnessed among Islamic religious spaces such as the Al-Khalil Mosque in Molenbeek. The deliberate invisibility is a way to avoid disputed presence in the public space. These negotiations of visibility challenge, contrary to the European perspective, what is deemed "public" and "private".



fig [4.10] Exterior of Al-Khalil Mosque_ Photomontage_ Document TDA, 2012

At the city scale, the street becomes a public space where high visibility is a strategy to assert belonging, especially in European conventional urban spaces, where visibility is salient. As Ranzini and Olcuire write:

“In the European urban tradition, visibility in public space is regarded as a significant – though not exhaustive – indicator of the extent to which individuals and groups are socially included and recognised as integral components of society... However, visibility – and thus recognition – depends not only on the physical presence of bodies in space but also on other spatial markers that signal the existence, languages, and practices of individuals and groups. These markers serve as symbols of appropriation: «From the way it looks, a local shopping street delivers a powerful message about whether a neighbourhood is rich or poor, with a majority of one ethnic group or another.”⁴

This results in an active, lively streetscape where the threshold between (semi)public and public is blurred. Imposing a different functional relationship between streets and buildings, the migrant appropriation of shopfronts and frontages transforms the street from an interstitial space to a space of high visibility, as seen in the stylistic appropriation of facades and mercantile wares along the street, which facilitate social interaction. These shopfronts most of the times signal, quite overtly, that the shop is ethnically North or Sub-Saharan African, with specific country names or the general “African” moniker. Despite operating these shopfronts under legal precarity, this method of reclaiming the streetscape positions African diaspora spatial practices as an integral part of a locality’s urban identity, as seen in Little Matonge, Ixelles.



fig [4.11] Shopfront in Matonge, Brussels_photo by Niel Hanssens (Flickr)



fig [4.12] Street scene in Matonge, Brussels_photo by Christopher Sogholan (Flickr)



fig [4.13] Street scene in Matonge, Brussels_photo by Christopher Sogholan (Flickr)

(In)visibility as a strategy is further realised in what Beeckman calls the “strategy of interiorisation”.⁵ There is an inversion of what is deemed public, where such spaces are located inside buildings, sometimes in homes, places that are considered private. Among Maghrebi women in Brussels, due to a lack of interest in European public space, “the domestic space is public and private at the same time: it organises all forms of social, religious, and family gatherings. It takes on new meanings. It is a form of resistance against an alienating “outside”.⁶ Due to unfamiliar regimes of visibility in the European public sphere, the African diaspora’s interiorisation of public space is the realisation of deliberations over visibility and invisibility in the public realm. Less visibility offers a sense of security.

As public space is interiorised, facilitating degrees of publicity in the interior layout results in a ‘strategy of compartmentalisation’.⁷ The multifunctional and hybridised arrangement of interior spaces challenges the monofunctional aspect of the modern built form. As buildings are adapted to accommodate multiple functions, interior spaces are created with varying degrees of privacy. In the case of the African shop in Ghent, the adapted terrace house has a shop in its main commercial spaces, further back, freezers and seating transform the space into a meeting place where people share a drink, essentially functioning as a bar.

A corridor space at the back reveals an office used by the son of the shop’s owner. On the upper floor, in addition to the owner’s living space, semi-public functions take place. There is a large kitchen where the owner’s wife prepares food not only for the family but also for patrons, blurring the boundaries between private domestic space and more public space, echoing Benchalabi’s statement of domestic space. Further hidden on the upper floor is a women’s salon, known only to clients by word of mouth.⁸ [fig 4.7] Further hidden on the upper floor is a women’s salon, known only to clients by word of mouth. In the case of Afro-Christian churches, this compartmentalisation and arrangement of spaces differ depending on the type of building being adapted; however, significant transformations do occur, with walls removed to open up space in house churches and new spaces created to accommodate other church-adjacent activities—welfare & hospitality—in larger buildings.⁹ In warehouse churches, this is executed by enclosing larger parts. Hybridisation of space is evident in the incorporation of wider diaspora groups through community spaces that draw on daily life and culture, a manifestation of transnational connections.

In a strategy I deem re-territorialisation, African diasporic subjects have reclaimed neglected spaces for use, such as the aforementioned warehouse churches. There are descriptions, according to Beeckmans, of “how Afro-Christian churches have territorialised the ‘gaps in the post-industrial city’,” such as vacant warehouses, factories, and other industrial infrastructure.¹⁰ By incorporating physical place-making tactics that mediate visibility through the interiorisation of space, stylised facades, and multi-functionality, these neglected spaces are transformed into a translocal diaspora-led architecture that redefines the urban context, an aspect of diasporic urbanism.

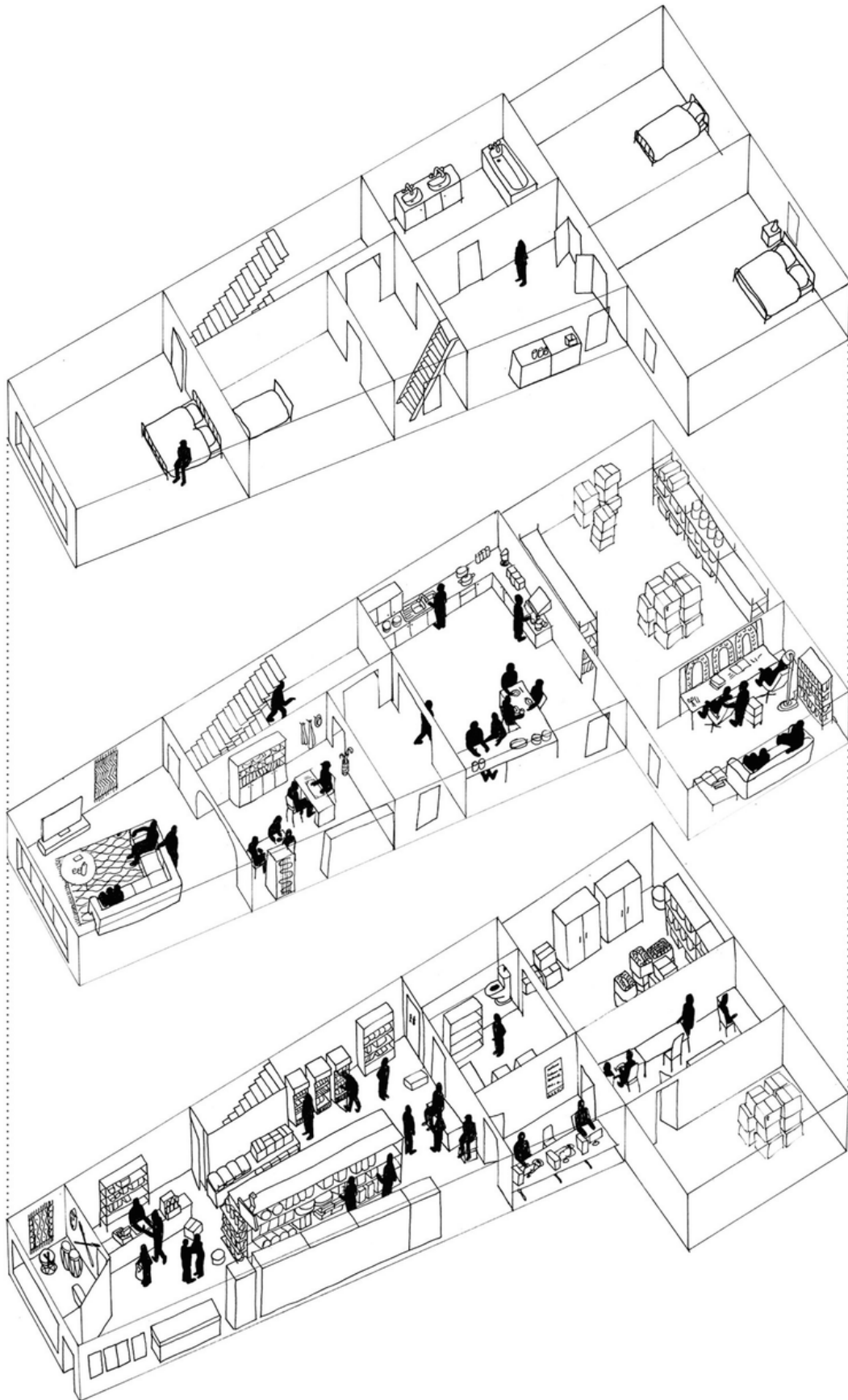


fig [4.14] Drawing of African shop visualising multifunctionality and levels of privacy_by Jade Kerremans & Luce Beeckmans

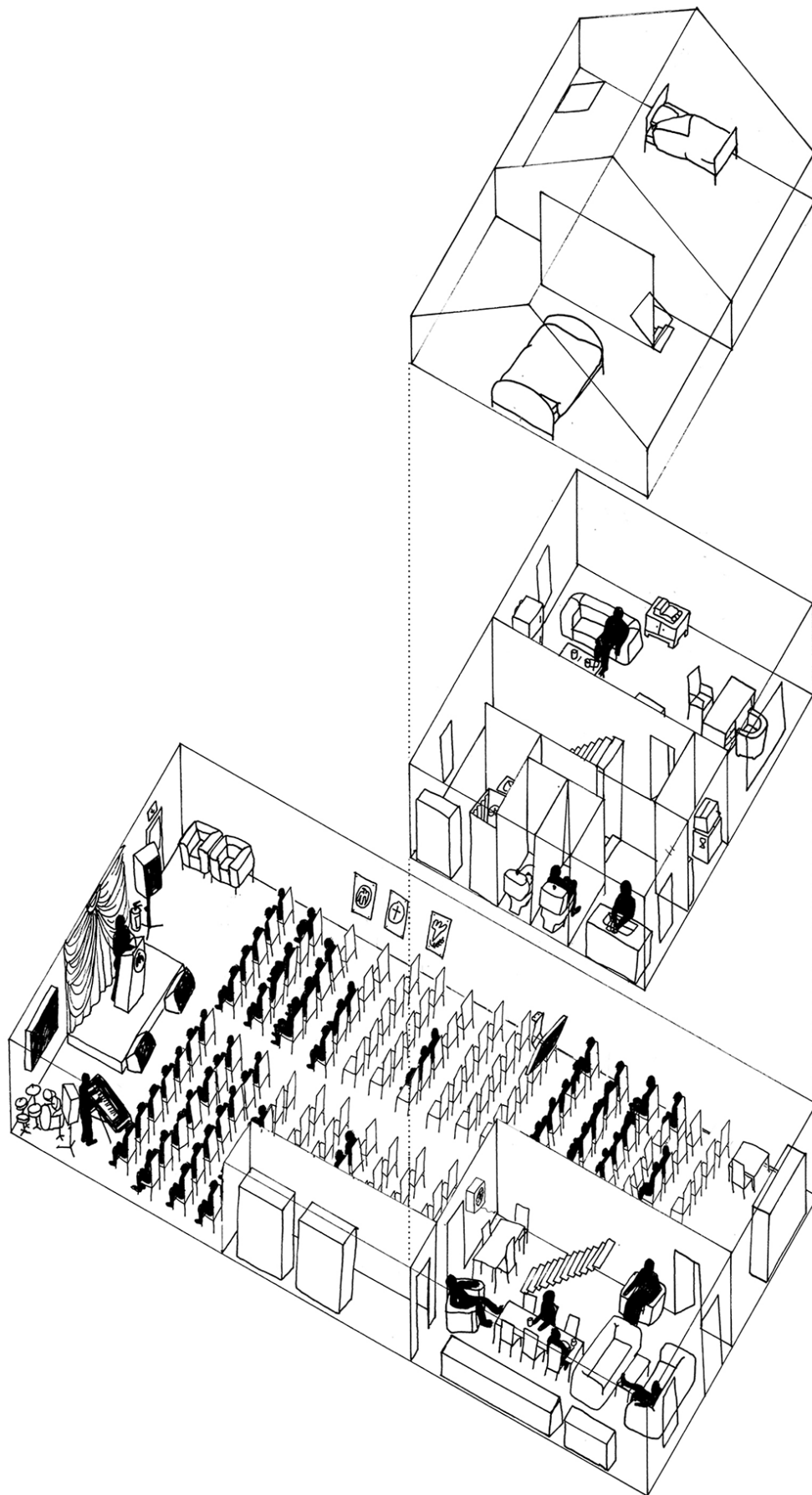


fig [4.15] Drawing of a house church illustrating a combination of domestic and worship spaces with a shared kitchen & a worship hall in a former fitness centre_by Jade Kerreman & Luce Beeckamns

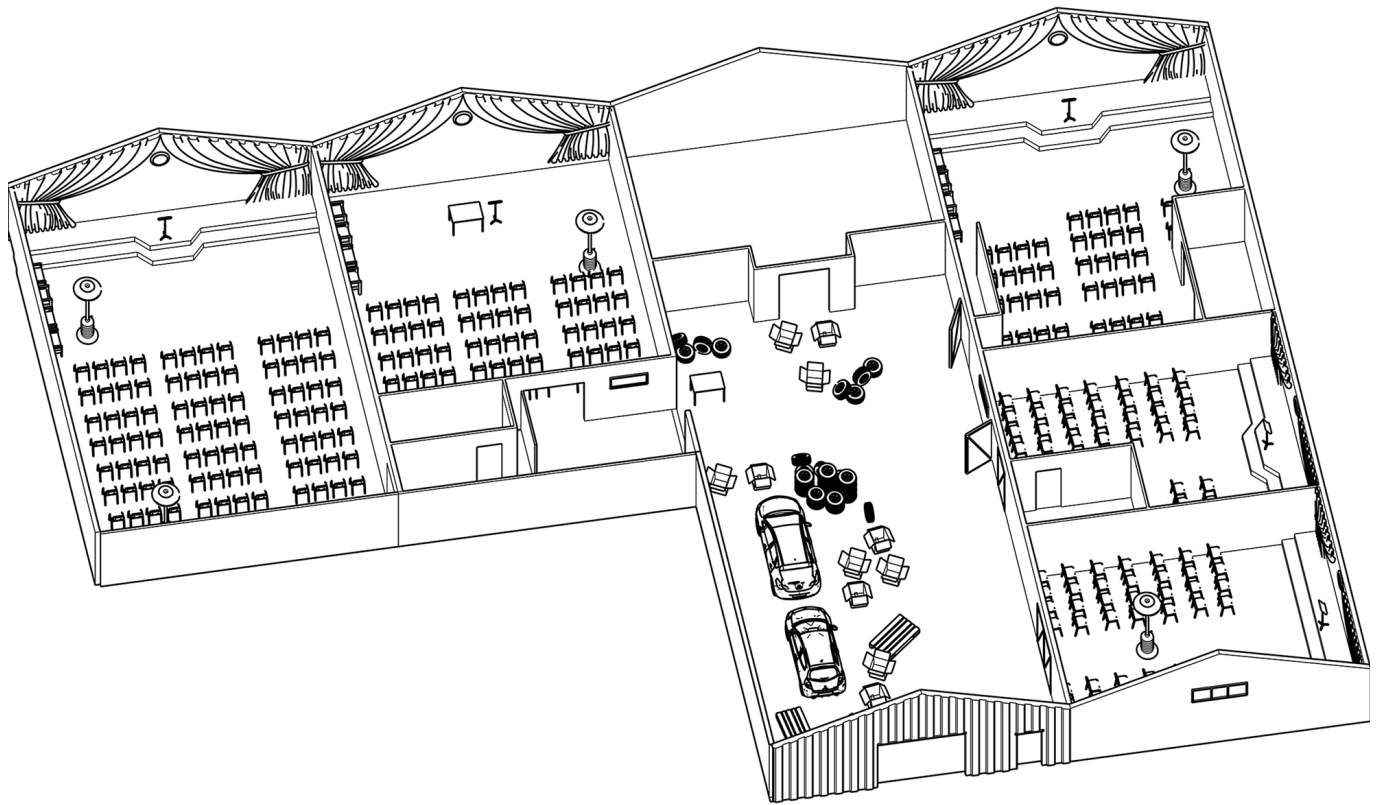


fig [4.16] Drawing of a warehouse church established in a vacant garage depot divided into multiple worship halls_drawing by Hendrik Bostoen, Aiko Friant & Joachim Nijs

However, it is important to note that some of these spatial practices arise from a parochial and gendered culture in which less publicity is more often practised by women than by men, especially in the Maghrebi localities of Molenbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. For that reason, spaces that are inherently occupied by women, like the home, negotiate visibility by being both public and private at once. As Benchelabi writes, “The home seems to be more than a container of traditional values; it acquires new uses, meanings, and values stemming from the culture of immigration.”¹¹ Therefore, domestic space—within the context of an immigrant household—becomes a (semi) public space for gathering, fostering more intimate gatherings than those possible in conventional public spaces.

Conclusively, these everyday spatial practices represent a contestation of belonging, bridging the tension between visibility and invisibility, allowing diasporic communities to survive and thrive. African diasporic spatiality offers a counter-narrative to orthodox modern spatiality, reconfiguring Eurocentric forms through spatial practices that foster community and social connectivity.

Notes:

1. Beeckmans, L. “Postcolonial Manifestations of African Spatiality in Europe: The Invisible “Public” Spaces of Ghent”. In *Postcolonialism, Heritage, and the Built Environment New Approaches to Architecture in Archaeology*, pg. 53, 2020. / Lefebvre, H. *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos. 1968.
2. Beeckmans, L. “Mobile urbanism from below: Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers in European midsized cities”. In *Urban Studies*, 62, no.10, pg.1997-1998, 2025.
3. Beeckmans, L. “Postcolonial Manifestations of African Spatiality in Europe: The Invisible “Public” Spaces of Ghent”. In *Postcolonialism, Heritage, and the Built Environment New Approaches to Architecture in Archaeology*, pg. 48, 2020.
4. Ranzini, A. & Olcuire, S. “Fluctuating (in)visibility. Addressing the gap between the attractive city and the inclusive city” In *Cities* 170, pg. 3-4, 2025.

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5. Beeckmans, L. "Mobile urbanism from below: Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers in European mid-sized cities". In *Urban Studies*, 62, no.10, pg. 1998-1999, 2025.
 6. Benchelabi, H. "Cultural Displacement in Brussels with Maghrebi Women." In *Journal of Architectural Education*, 52, no.1, pg 4, 1998.
 7. Beeckmans, L. "Mobile urbanism from below: Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers in European mid-sized cities". In *Urban Studies*, 62, no.10, pg. 1999-2000, 2024.
 8. Beeckmans, L. "Postcolonial Manifestations of African Spatiality in Europe: The Invisible "Public" Spaces of Ghent". In *Postcolonialism, Heritage, and the Built Environment New Approaches to Architecture in Archaeology*, pg. 50-52, 2020.
 9. Beeckmans, L. "Mobile urbanism from below: Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers in European mid-sized cities". In *Urban Studies*, 62, no.10, pg. 2000, 2024.
 10. Beeckmans, L. "Mobile urbanism from below: Afro-Christian churches as place-makers and scale-makers in European mid-sized cities". In *Urban Studies*, 62, no.10, pg. 1995, 2024.
 11. Benchelabi, H. "Cultural Displacement in Brussels with Maghrebi Women." In *Journal of Architectural Education*, 52, no.1, pg 4, 1998.

chapter 5

**[05] placemaking at
courtrai-ostende**

[i] Site Information and Surrounding Context

The site of my master project is located on the Courtrai-Oostende block. It is a collection of dense housing buildings with industrial warehouses within the block. The city block is bordered by 4 roads: Rue d'Ostende, Rue Vanderdussenstraat, Rue de Courtrai, and Rue de la Carpe. In 2023, the site was selected for an urban renewal project in the Brussels region, as part of a larger urban revitalisation program, officially named 'The Contrat d'Axe d'Ilot' (CACI).



fig [5.1] Map showing location of the Courtrai-Oostende block

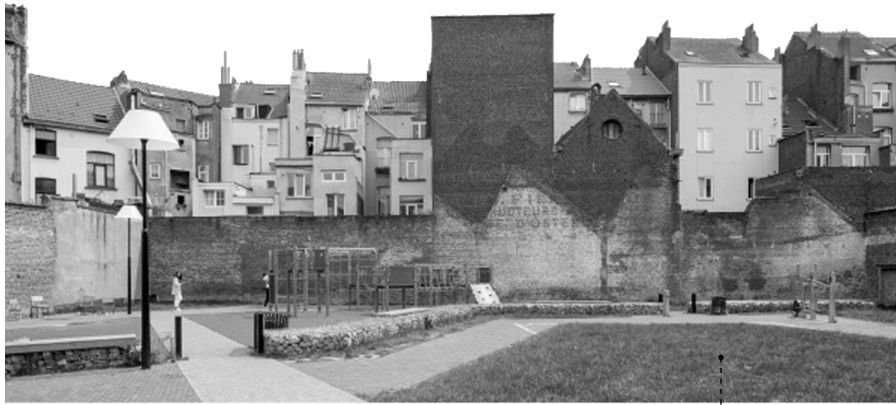


fig [5.2] Parc Etangs Noirs_Urban Brussels (2021)



fig [5.3] Map showing urban renewal program

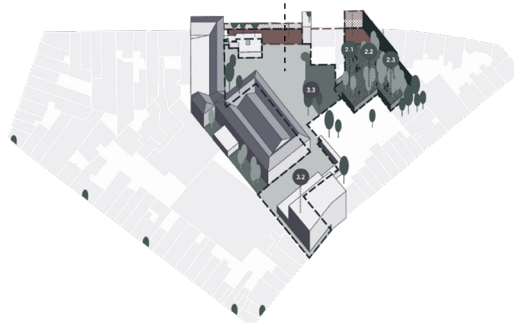


fig [5.4] Ecole La Rose des vents_Urban Brussels (2023-2027)

This urban renewal program intervenes at a micro-scale to implement de-densification, de-sealing, intensification of uses, etc., on a city block or similar axis. As the selected city block for this project, the Courtrai-Oostende block is in an area already subject to revitalisation programmes such as the “Etangs Noir” Sustainable Neighbourhood Contracts, the “Autour de Simonis” Urban Renovation Contract, and the “La Rose des Vents” School Contract.

The housing block, similar to other blocks in Molenbeek, is highly impermeable. There is a lack of public alleys or passages that allow easy access to the interiors of those blocks. Moreover, there is a severe lack of functional green spaces in the area, with the only available public green space being Parc Étangs Noirs.



fig [5.5] View from Inside block showing density_CACI



fig [5.6] Rue d'Ostende



fig [5.7] Impermeability of the area.

The housing block hosts a range of economic activities. Most are concentrated in the housing blocks, with commercial use on the ground floor and residential use on the upper floors. There are many garages not only on the adjacent streets but also within the block. The hospitality industry is not particularly significant, but commercial activity is substantial. There are very few recreational or engaging public spaces, though the industrial warehouses along Rue de Courtrai have been converted into a community kitchen (hospitality) and a workshop/exhibition space (arts and culture).

In the housing block, the buildings selected for the revitalisation project are Courtrai 47, 49, 51, 53 and Ostende 74 and 92. There are buildings in the interior of the block that are not defined by street or house number. Therefore, I'll refer to them by the buildings they are closest to or connected to.



fig [5.8] Axonometric drawing show the activities the block and existing situation



fig [5.9] Grocery at the corner of the block_CACI



fig [5.10] Restaurant_Rue Vanderdussen_CACI



fig [5.11] Garage & Carwash_Rue d'Ostende

- housing blocks | residential
- housing blocks | social facilities
- housing blocks | hospitality
- housing blocks | commerce (car wash , garage)
- industrial warehouse | hospitality (restaurant) , arts & culture



fig [5.12] warehouse shed
Courtai 51



fig [5.13] Ostende 92



fig [5.14] Ostende 74_CACI



fig [5.15] warehouse Ostende
74_CACI

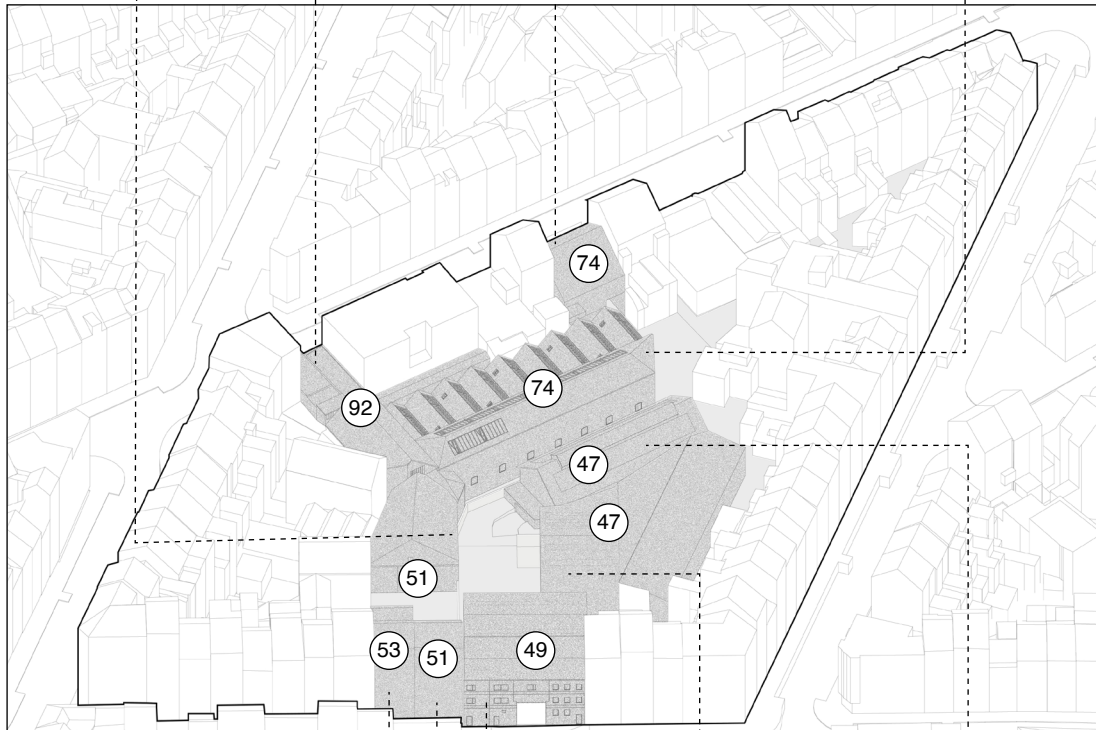


fig [5.16] Axonometric showing the buildings selected for urban renewal program and existing situation



fig [5.17] Courtrai 53, 51, 49_left to right



fig [5.18] Courtrai 47



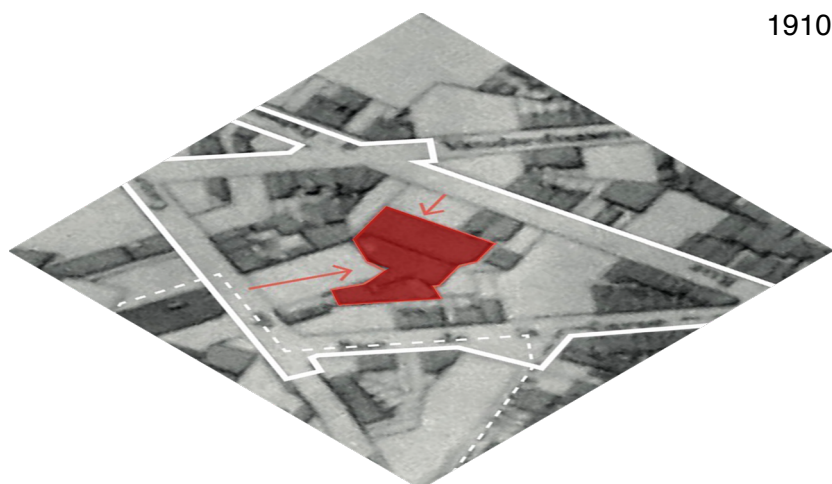
fig [5.19] warehouse Courtrai 47

[ii] Site Transformation & Existing Conditions

The housing block began in 1910, when Engineer H. Rigaux built his warehouses on what is now the inner block: warehouses at Ostende 74 and Courtrai 47. These were among the earliest buildings, predating the current houses along the streets and forming the housing block seen today. 25 years later, in 1935, F. Lochten built the warehouse at Ostende 92, as well as other warehouses in the inner block and at Courtrai 47 along Rue de Courtrai, the current main entrance to the block. F. Lochten's presence established the economic fabric of the block, with other factories and workshops cropping up both around and within it. For example, a mechanical sawmill was located at Courtrai 51, an art studio at Courtrai 49, and an office furniture shop, a carpentry shop, and a general furniture manufacturer along Rue de la Carpe and Rue Vanderdussen.¹ During this 25-year period, H. Rigaux also built Ostende 74 on Rue D'Ostende, which currently provides access to the interior of the block. In 1973, F. Lochten secured a permit to pave the road at Ostende 94 and purchased Courtrai 47 in the inner block from H. Rigaux.² Sometime between 1973 and 1977, Courtrai 47 was demolished.

In 1977, Courtrai 47 was rebuilt into its current state. In 1990, F. Lochten sold the warehouse/factory at Courtrai 49. Subsequently, it was demolished, along with some inner blocks, which were probably also purchased by the same person. In 1996, Courtrai 49 was reconstructed into its current state with two extra levels. The building's use changed, and it became a warehouse for chrome plating vehicles.³

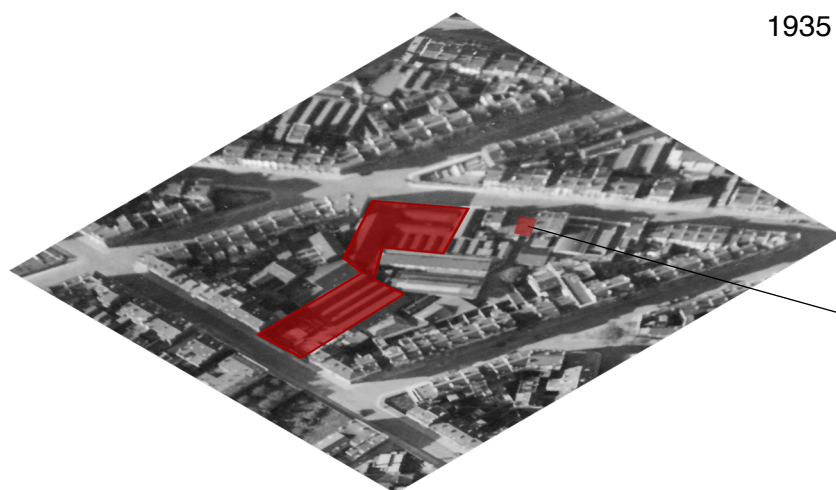
Throughout the site's transformation, there were multiple demolitions and rebuilds, always maintaining the interior block's dense quality. Despite the change in ownership and the rebuilding, only Ostende 92, Ostende 74 and its warehouses, the warehouse of Courtrai 49 (in the middle of the block), Courtrai 51 and 53, and the shed adjacent to it have not undergone any renovation or reconstruction and maintain the same structural character since they were built in the early twentieth century.



1910

H. Rigaux's inner block
warehouses

fig [5.20] map of block_1910_CACI_MoMuse

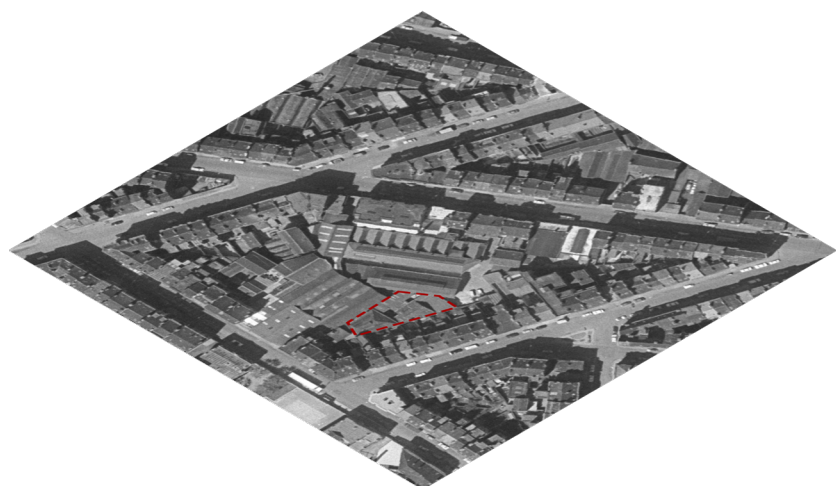


1935

F. Lochten's warehouses: Rue
d'Ostende - Rue de Courtrai

H. Rigaux's house: Ostende
74

fig [5.21] map of block_1935_BruCIEL



1973

F. Lochten purchases Courtrai
47.
Demolished

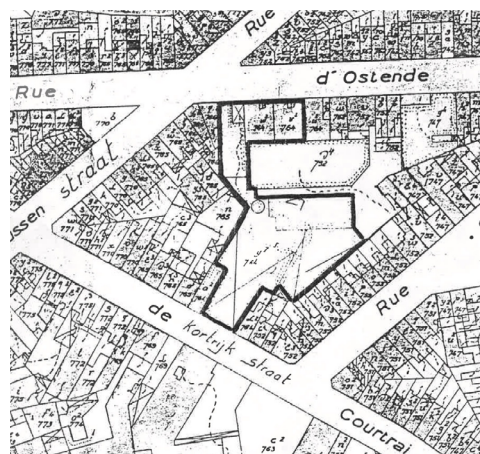


fig [5.23] map of block_1970s_CACI

fig [5.22] map of block_1973_BruCIEL

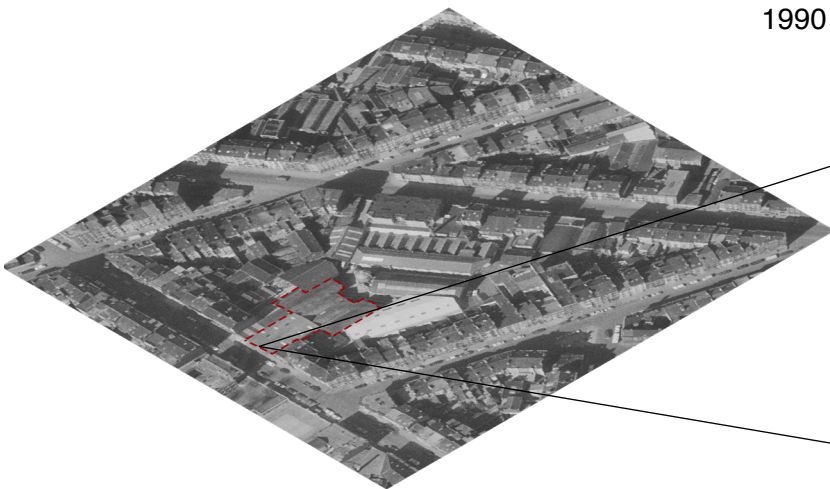
1977



----- Courtrai 47 is rebuilt

fig [5.24] map of block_1977_BruCIEL

1990



----- Courtrai 49 is demolished

fig [5.25] map of block_1990_BruCIEL



fig [5.26] Front facade of F.Lochten's Courtrai 49_AAM,
CIVA_1980-1982

1996

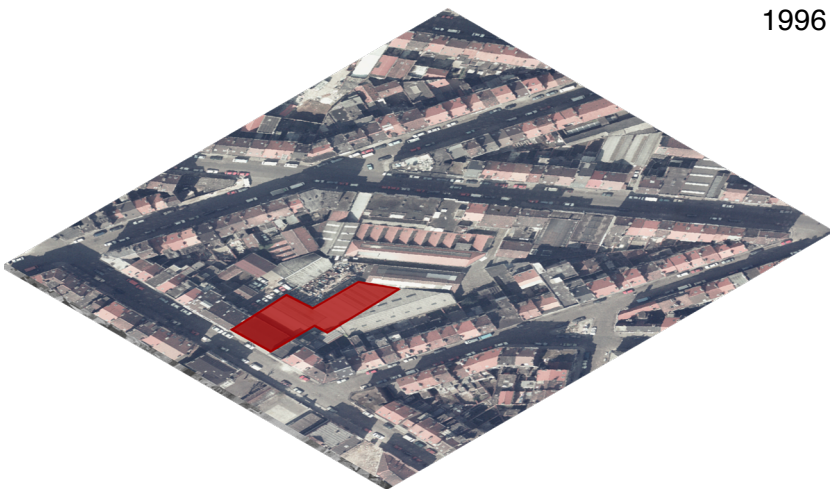


fig [5.27] map of block_1996_BruCIEL



fig [5.28] interior of warehouse Ostende 74_CACI



fig [5.29] interior of Ostende 92



fig [5.30] interior of warehouse Courtrai 47

As reported in the CACI urban renewal project report, the site's current condition is poor. Aside from the housing block lacking green spaces, the entire site's soil is contaminated due to its former use as a galvanising factory. This makes it difficult to plant and grow plants unless the entire soil is overturned or a new layer of soil is added. The effect of this is evident in the fact that the only 'greenery' growing well is trellis plants, which occupy the wall of the warehouse shed.[fig 5.39]

Regarding the building usage, Courtrai 47 and 49 are occupied by Decoatelier and Cassonade, respectively. Decoatelier is an open artist/construction/scenography studio established by Jozef Wouters and Menno Vandeveld. Originally located at Rue Manchester, they were offered Courtrai 47 by the municipality in 2024 after leaving their previous space, which was undergoing renovations.⁴ They utilise Courtrai 47 not only as a workshop but also as an exhibition and gathering space, and extend their use of space to the courtyard and the centre of the block for other activities, such as music events.

Decoatelier then invited Cassonade to temporarily establish their community kitchen at Courtrai 49, as their previous location was also undergoing renovations. Cassonade is a solidarity (community) kitchen established in 2021 by the residents of Molenbeek to foster community through food. The kitchen has now become an informal meeting place and is integral to the neighbourhood. The interior of the kitchen is informally adapted (improvised) from the film set built by Stijn Verhoeven for the series Grond (Soil). Upon arriving at Courtrai 49, the kitchen's interior is a reversion of the film set, a refitting by Decoatelier. The windows, walls, furniture, doors, etc., were dismantled, moved and rebuilt at this temporary location.⁵



fig [5.31] setting up Cassonade at Courtrai 49_@cassonade_1080



fig [5.32] courtyard used by both Cassonade & Decoatelier



fig [5.33] interior of Cassonade

The rest of the buildings, Courtrai 51 and 53 (owned by the municipality), Ostende 92 (privately owned), and the warehouses of Ostende 74, are currently unoccupied. The warehouse of Courtrai 47 is being used by Decoatelier, primarily for storage. Most, if not all of the unoccupied buildings are structurally sound.

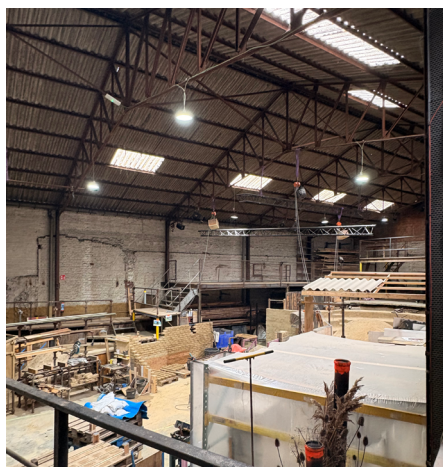


fig [5.34] Interior of Decoatelier



fig [5.35] Exterior of Cassonade leading to Rue de Courtrai



fig [5.36] Interior of Decoatelier



fig [5.37] Exterior of Decoatelier



fig [5.38] Roof of Ostende 92 & Warehouse shed



fig [5.39] Warehouse shed with exterior wall with overgrown plants



fig [5.40] Facade of warehouse Ostende 74



fig [5.41] Back facade of Courtrai 49

Notes:

1. Karbon' architecture et urbanisme. "Un historique/Een historiek." In *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot Rapport diagnostic*, pg.66-70, 2025.
2. Karbon' architecture et urbanisme. "Un historique/Een historiek." In *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot Rapport diagnostic*, pg.79, 2025.
3. Karbon' architecture et urbanisme. "Un historique/Een historiek." In *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot Rapport diagnostic*, pg.80, 2025.
4. BRUZZ. "Decoratelier krijgt nieuw onderkomen in Molenbeekse Kortrijkstraat." *BRUZZ*, April 2024.
5. @decoatelier_brussels. "We are thrilled to announce our first artist in residence in the new Decoratelier." *Instagram post*, September 2024.

[iii] Design Strategy and Proposal

To develop my design concept, I drew on the inherent aspects of African diasporic spatiality outlined in the previously discussed strategies. It involves negotiating publicity (visibility) at two scales: the building scale (interior) and the city scale (the street and façade). At the city scale, there is active, lively engagement with the street (high visibility) through shopfronts; however, this is juxtaposed with the (in)visibility of some diasporic public spaces, where the façades bear minimal to no interventions. At the building scale, public space is interiorised to varying degrees of (in)visibility, with domestic spaces also functioning as public space. Moreover, there is a compartmentalisation of space, creating multifunctional and hybrid spaces within buildings.

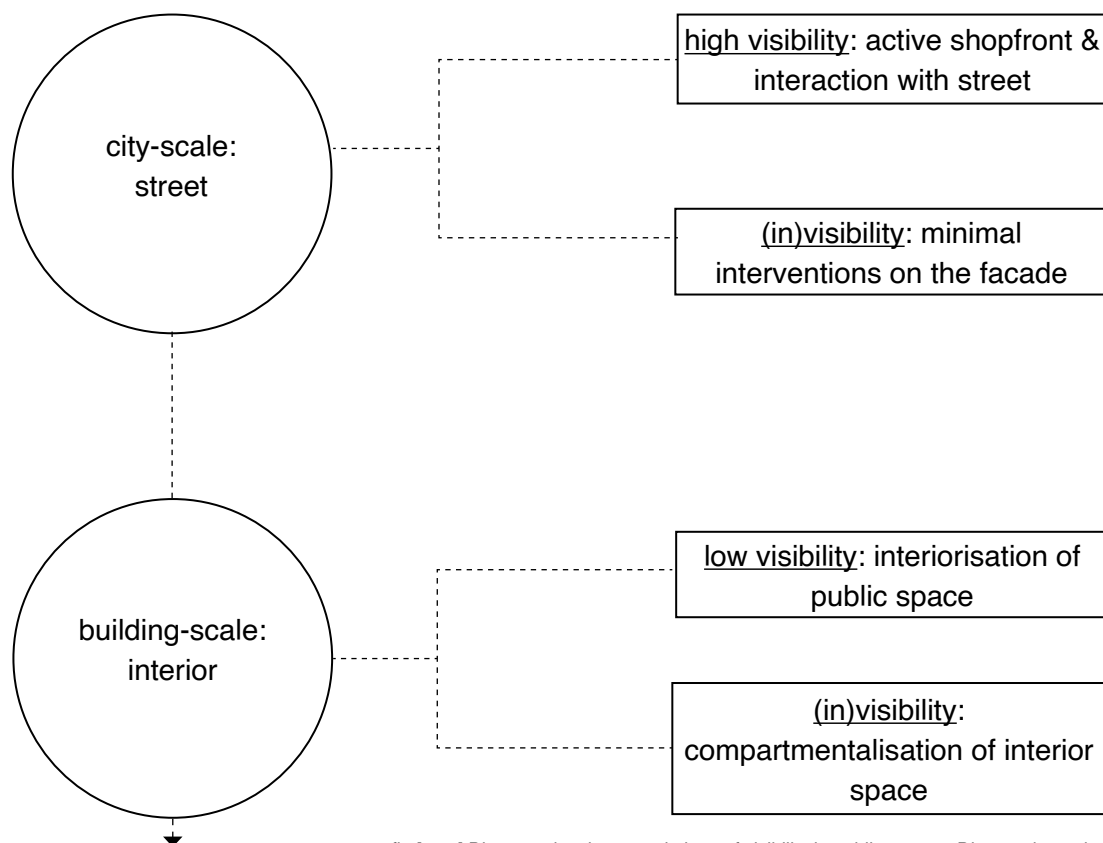


fig [5.42] Diagram showing negotiations of visibility in public spaces_Diagram by author

I translate these aspects through the following strategic interventions: to maintain low visibility, I preserve the existing urban wall and do not interfere with the facades on either Rue de Courtrai or Rue d'Ostende. This preserves the urban fabric the community is most familiar with. To foster engagement and meaningful connections within the inner block, I treat the 'îlot' (interior block) as a miniature urban system. I demolish walls within the block to create internal permeability, connecting the entire site and positioning the existing paths as 'streets' or 'alleys' [fig 5.43]. This strategy draws on the idea of reclaiming interstitial spaces and activating them in a manner similar to diasporic spatiality's occupation and appropriation of the streetscape, thereby following the high-visibility approach. Consequently, I use the site's historical morphology (F. Lochten's buildings) to create 'streets' that begin at Ostende 92 and lead towards the warehouse shed, Rue de Courtrai at Courtrai 51, and Cassonade [fig 5.44]. This is reminiscent of street-trading practices, common in Africa and other parts of the Global South, which I also connect to the highly visible practice of shopfronts.

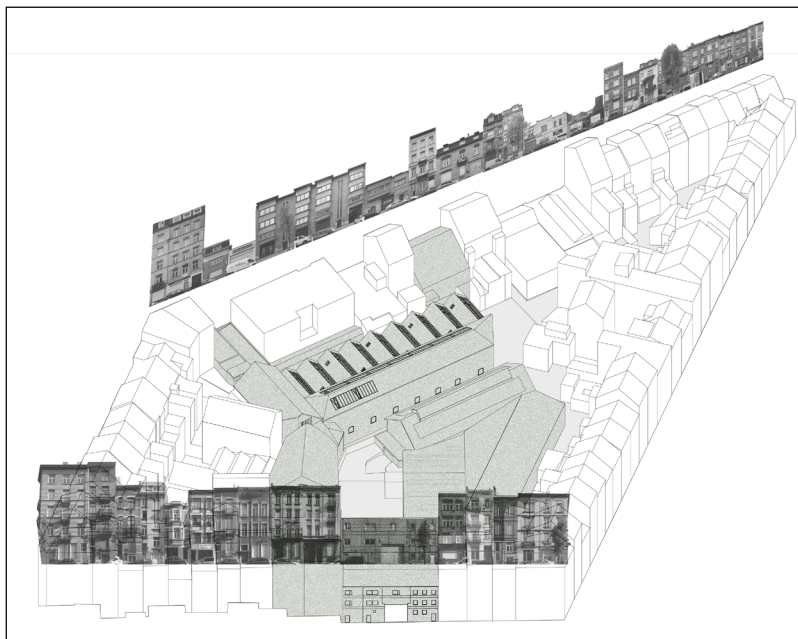


fig [5.43] Axonometric showing the existing urban wall of Rue de Courtrai and Rue d'Ostende

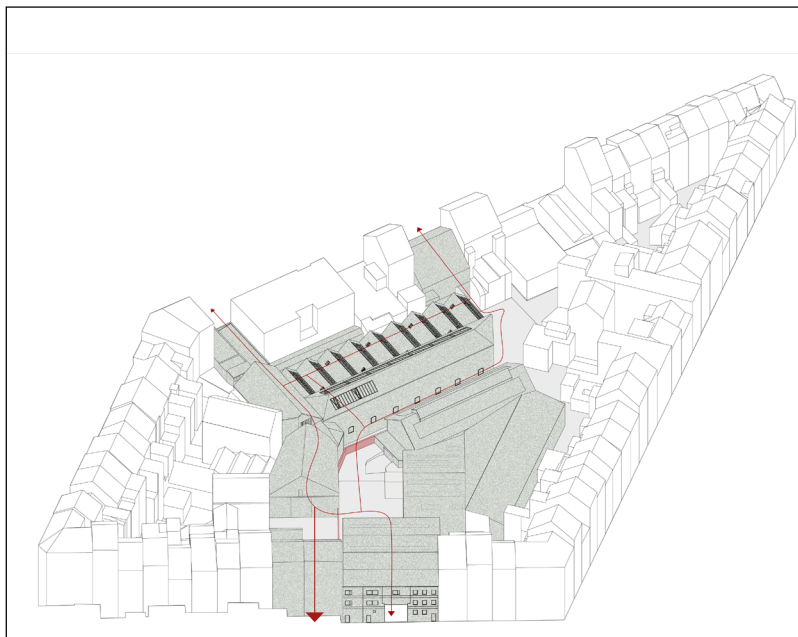
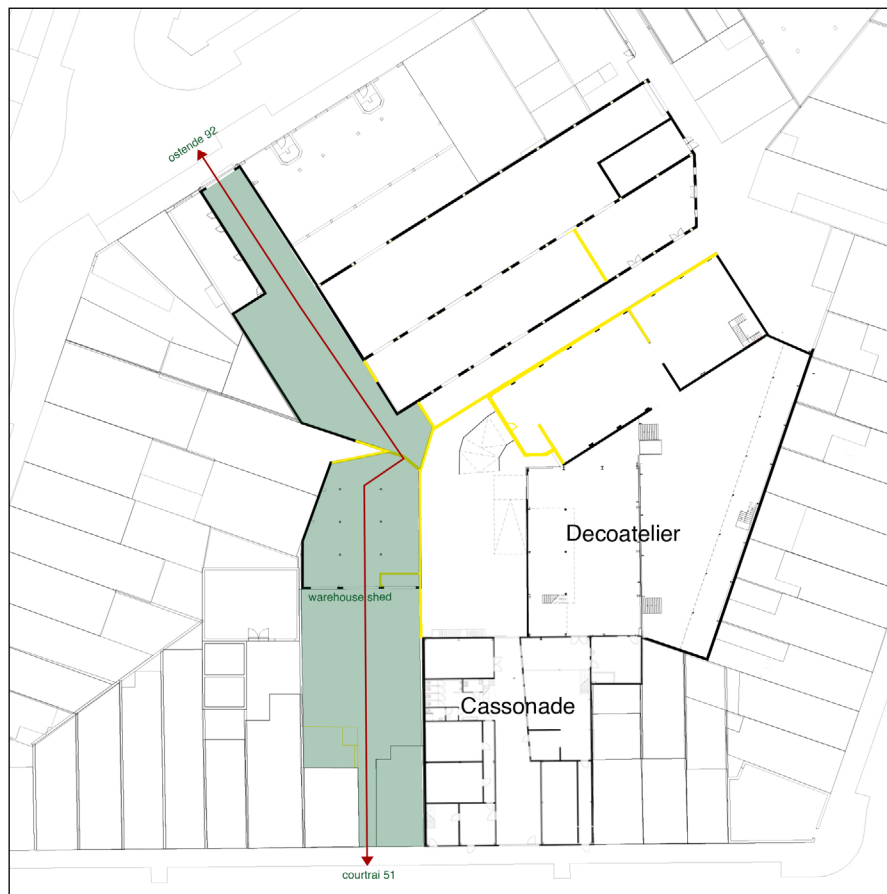


fig [5.44] Axonometric showing the inner block permeability to be created



[fig 5.45] Diagrammatic floor plan showing wall demolitions & the 'street' imagined from Ostende 92 to warehouse shed & Coutrai 51

To further mediate visibility, the outer warehouse building of Ostende 74 serves not only as a passage but also as a threshold, gradually leading to the spaces inside the inner warehouse of Ostende 74 (the sawtooth roof), borrowing from the idea of the veranda or closed compound. I create an interplay of (in)visibility, segmenting the warehouse into indoor public spaces that are 'hidden' and further interiorised. The (multi)functionalities of the spaces are inspired by what already exists on site. Throughout my intervention, I retain Decoatelier and Cassonade's presence on site, using it to establish a programme that complements theirs. Therefore, after partially removing the slab of the upper floor and the roof of the outer warehouse of Ostende 74, I create an open space intended as an urban farming space for Cassonade and the community of Molenbeek. The space is accessible via staircases leading from the walls. The walls are retained, with their windows and doors removed, leaving opening silhouettes that admit more light. I further imagine functional green spaces, like a green roof on the warehouse shed's flat roof and exterior green walls, responding to the current "colonisation" of plants of the walls—a metaphor—for what I believed is another negotiation of spatial occupation due the hostility, impermeability and toxic of the soil.

In the inner warehouse, I have created "domestic public spaces" of varying sizes. Here, I propose an area the community can engage in less public facing activities, and the spaces can be further segmented by site users (Decoatelier) into residences for invited artists. The intent is to keep the space open to further appropriation and to

create intimate recreational spaces that can also serve the community of younger families with children, while taking into account surrounding urban renewal programmes, such as La Rose des Vents. The multi-purpose potential of these spaces is intended to encourage future adaptability by site users.



fig [5.46] Ground floor plan with interventions & entrances_NTS



fig [5.47] First floor plan with interventions _NTS

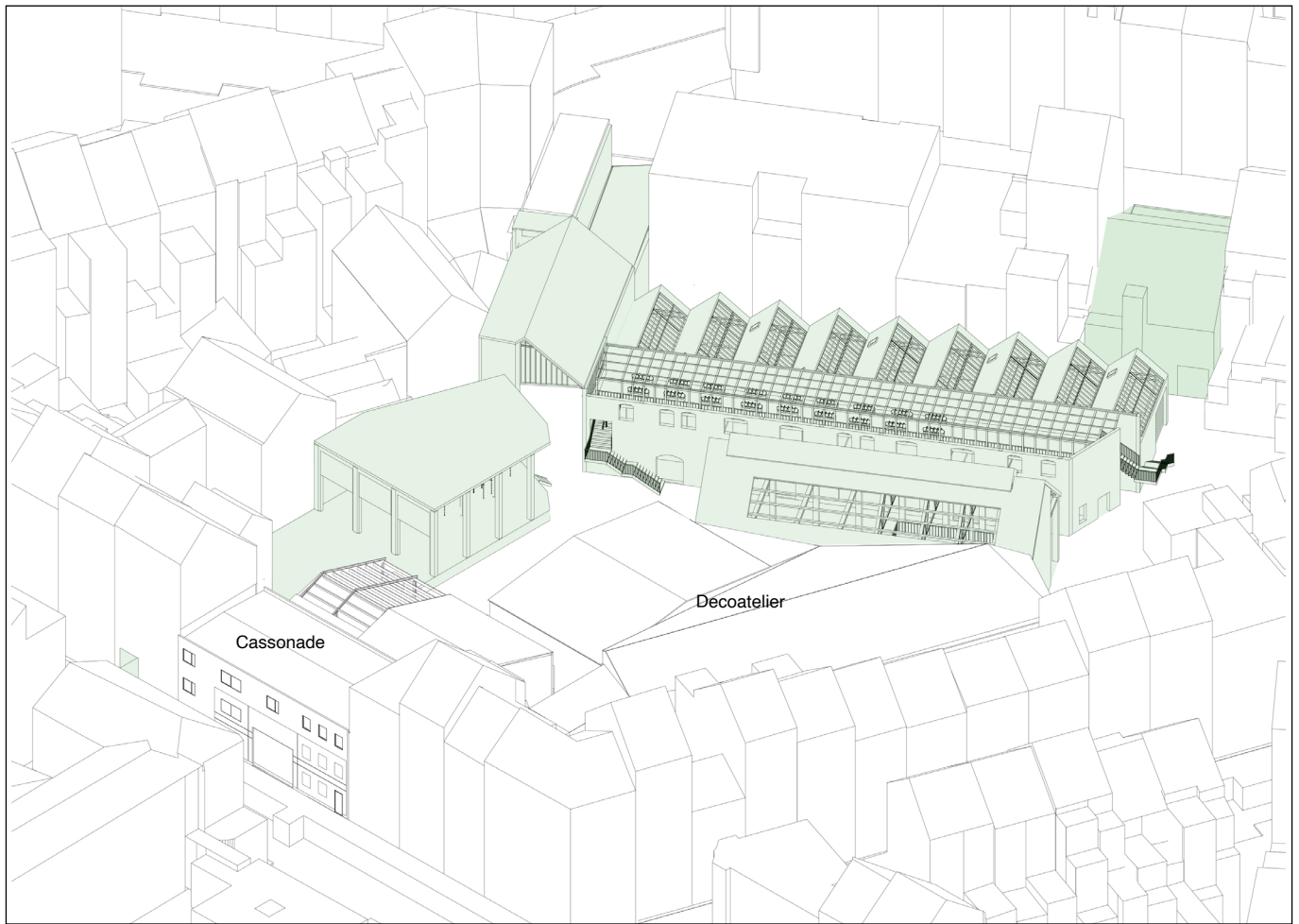


fig [5.48] Axonometric showing selected buildings with interventions_from Rue de Coutrai & Rue de la Carpe

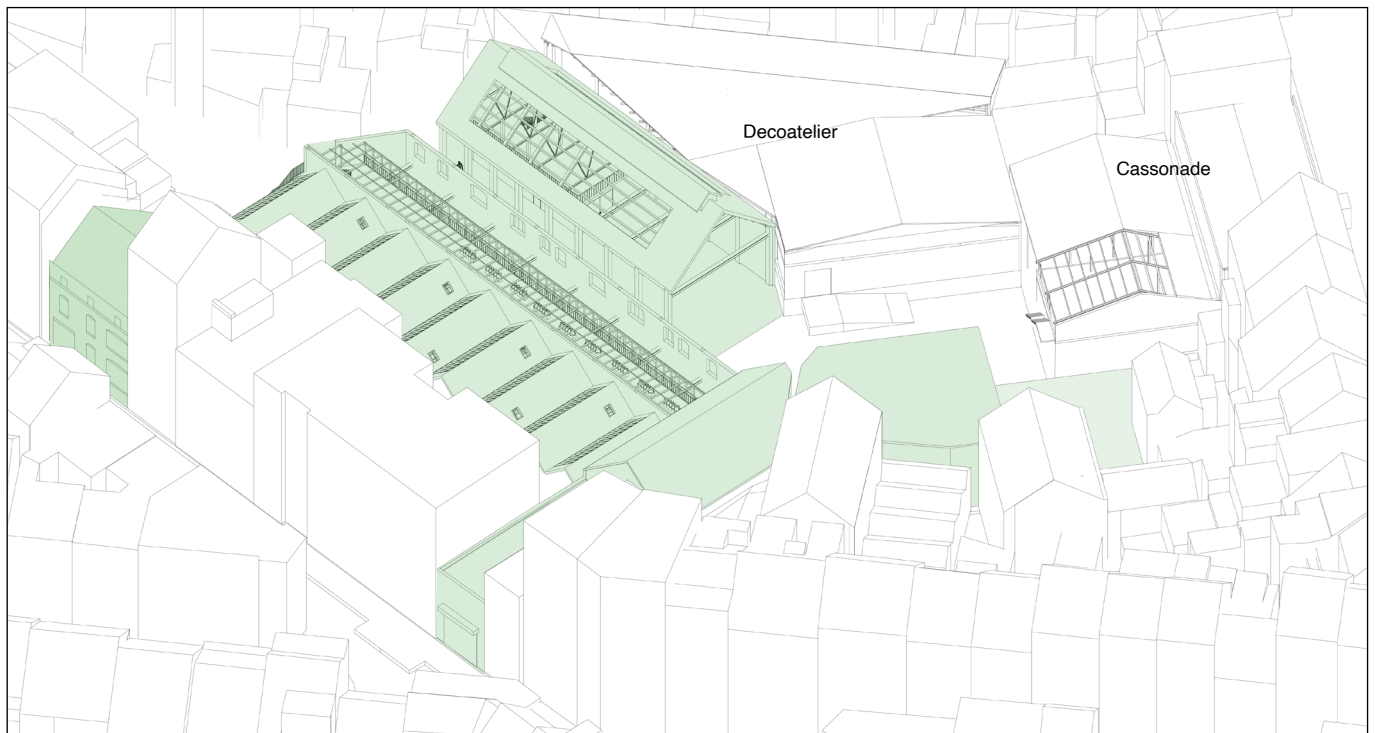


fig [5.49] Axonometric showing selected buildings with interventions_from Rue d'Ostende & Rue Vanderdussen

Non-exhaustively, this proposal aims not only to harness the potential of African diasporic spatiality in placemaking but also to create an intervention that recognises the community's agency as active producers of urban space. Hybridity operates here not merely as metaphor but as an architectural method: layering a new, multifunctional, diversely programmed intervention onto the site's industrial fabric disrupts its singular identity, producing a spatial condition that is neither wholly old nor wholly new, characteristic of adaptive reuse yet grounded in the diasporic practice of inhabiting and reinterpreting inherited European form. The project's argument is spatial before it is programmatic: by maintaining low visibility on both street frontages, directing transformation inward through the îlot, and anchoring the intervention in the retention of existing tenants rather than their displacement, the design proposes that African diasporic spatiality, specifically its practice of negotiating presence (visibility) and withdrawal (invisibility), constitutes not only a cultural but also an anti-gentrification logic.

In the context of Parc des Étangs Noirs and the broader urban renewal reshaping Molenbeek's inner fabric, the maintained façade resists speculation, the interior urbanism is a bypass of scrutiny; and the preserved social network of Cassonade and Decoatelier recognises that displacement, once enacted, is irreversible by design alone. These three moves function as a system, each reinforcing the others, to produce a building that participates in renewal without becoming its instrument. Here, rather than imposing an invasive, entirely formal architectural intervention that erases the entire d'îlot to create open empty green park spaces that are definitive of European public space, this design operates as spatial translation of what's existing in a multi-scalar dimension (d'îlot to the greater Molenbeek). As I explore and translate African diasporic spatiality into this site, I reframe adaptive reuse as a decolonial act, that allows the legitimization of diasporic spatial epsitemes within the constraints of the European urban fabric.

chapter 6

My research question in this thesis was not, in its entirety, an architectural one. It asked whether the spatial practices of African diasporic communities in Brussels—their appropriations, modifications, and reinterpretations of European built form—could be recognised as a legitimate and generative architectural intelligence, rather than managed as symptoms of informality, marginalisation, or cultural deficit. Answering that question required not only acknowledging the migration connected to the colonial enterprise and its effects on the diaspora, but also simultaneously exploring various disciplines and theoretical frameworks. This included diasporic urbanism (space), postcolonial theory, and critiques of Eurocentric architectural discourse; examining the unique histories and spatial cultures of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Matongé; using ethnographic observation, site-writing, and architecture-writing as methods of producing situated knowledge; and ultimately, translating the argument into architectural design, where it is demonstrated through action rather than statement.

This analysis establishes that African diasporic communities in Brussels are active spatial agents, producing what this thesis describes as an alternative architectural episteme—one that emphasises social function over rigid form, functions through layered occupancy and incremental adaptation, and negotiates fluid boundaries between public and private spaces in ways that conventional European typologies neither expect nor accommodate. This form of practice is not informality is integral and quite formal, contrary to what planning discourse may argue. However, it is a different kind of formal, organised according to spatial logics rooted in African diasporic cultural memory, social practices, and the conditions of postcolonial life in the European metropolis.

On the methodological level, the text demonstrates that ethnographic research and site-writing, Jane Rendell's idea of critical spatial practice, are integral to, rather than supplementary to, architectural knowledge. The spatial insights gained from physically engaging with Molenbeek and Matongé, along with an attentive study of Luce Beeckmans' ethnographies of African spaces in Belgian cities, fostered an understanding of diasporic spatial practice that no formal architectural survey could achieve. The research has shown that a methodology based on lived experience and critical reflection can reveal what conventional architectural analysis, which tends to focus on objects, typologies, and formal properties, often misses. This approach offers a valuable methodological contribution to architectural research at large, extending beyond postcolonial studies.

To propose a design effectively, this research synthesises spatial observations from ethnographic engagement with African diasporic practice in Brussels and from Beeckmans' research: that diasporic communities negotiate visibility at two simultaneous scales: the city scale, where shopfront engagement with the street produces high visibility, and the building scale, where public life is interiorised, compartmentalised, and selectively rendered invisible to the outside. This is not informality. It is a coherent spatiality, developed under conditions of political and economic precarity, that manages presence and withdrawal with considerable skill.

I cannot fully attest to the extent to which this research and its potential can contribute to discussions on building reuse. This uncertainty is due to the specific forces that produce the conditions it addresses—economic precarity, planning discrimination, and the political contestation of diasporic neighbourhoods as problems rather than assets—operate at scales that design alone cannot reach. However, I am optimistic that the framework created here can be applied at a broader, projective scale. Molenbeek is not unique; many European cities face similar issues, such as deindustrialised areas, postcolonial immigrant communities, pressures from gentrification, and planning approaches that overlook the diaspora-built landscape as architecture. The design principles applied to Rue de Courtrai and Rue d’Ostende—emphasising circulation, connectivity, porosity, and viewing mixed-use, hybrid spaces as social infrastructure—act as a scalable framework rather than a site-specific solution. While each context would require adjustments to include the relevant diasporic spatial knowledge, the fundamental epistemological approach of starting from that knowledge rather than the building itself would remain consistent.

This thesis has argued that the built environment of postcolonial Brussels cannot be understood or justly transformed without taking seriously the spatial agency of the communities that have shaped it. That argument is grounded not only in theory but in the spatial practices observed in Molenbeek and Matongé i.e., the incremental adaptations and negotiated thresholds through which African diasporic communities have produced, under conditions of constraint, an architectural knowledge that heritage and planning frameworks have consistently failed to recognise. The intervention proposed at Rue de Courtrai and Rue d’Ostende does not resolve this failure; it responds to it by centring the existing community without excluding a wider demographic, producing a social infrastructure whose inclusivity is a consequence of its method rather than its intention. The reuse of this industrial building is informed by a spatial practice that is neither wholly African nor wholly European. It is diasporic — a Third Space of ongoing negotiation, in Bhabha’s terms, and a site of incremental placemaking in Beeckmans’. It is dynamic, hybrid, and perpetually in production. If adaptive reuse is to fulfil its potential as a cultural and political redefinition of space rather than a technical or aesthetic strategy, it must learn to begin here: in the in-between, with the community, from the practice that is already taking place.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.

In writing this thesis, the author used Claude (Anthropic) during the final stages of as an editorial tool in the drafting and refinement of selected written sections of this thesis, specifically parts of the conclusion and some chapter closing statements, and to organise the bibliography (APA). All theoretical frameworks, design decisions, research findings, and intellectual positions are the author’s own. All AI-assisted drafts were reviewed and revised by the author. Grammarly was used to improve readability, remove grammatical mistakes and reduce redundancy.

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[fig 4.14] Drawing of African shop visualising multifunctionality and levels of privacy, (2020) [Drawing] by Jade Kerremans & Luce Beeckmans. Retrieved 25 April 2026 from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60858-3_4

[fig 4.15] Drawing of a house church illustrating a combination of domestic and worship spaces with a shared kitchen & a worship hall in a former fitness centre, (2025) by Jade Kerreman & Luce Beeckmans. Retrieved on 25 April 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980241304938>

[fig 4.16] Drawing of a warehouse church established in a vacant garage depot divided into multiple worship halls, (2025) [Drawing] by Hendril Bostoen, Aiko Friant and Joachim Nijs. Retrieved on 25 April 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980241304938>

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[fig 5.1] Map showing location of the Courtrai-Oostende block, (2026) [Image collage], by author.

[fig 5.2] Parc Etangs Noirs, (2021) [Photo], by Séverin Malaud. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from <https://quartiers.brussels/1/qp/296>

[fig 5.3] Map showing urban renewal program, (2026) [Image collage], by author.

[fig 5.4] Ecole La Rose des vents_Urban Brussels (2023-2027), (2023) [Drawing/ Screenshot], perspective.brussels. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from <https://perspective.brussels/fr/projets/contrats-ecole/la-rose-des-vents>

[fig 5.5] View from inside block showing density, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot], author unknown. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 11)

[fig 5.6] Rue d'Ostende (2026), [Photo] author unknown.

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[fig 5.10] Restaurant_Rue Vanderdussen, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot]. Retrieved 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 149)

[fig 5.11] Garage & Carwash_Rue d'Ostende, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot]. Retrieved 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 149)

[fig 5.12] warehouse shed Courtai 51, (2026) [Photo]. by author.

[fig 5.13] Ostende 92, (2026) [Photo]. author unknown.

[fig 5.14] Ostende 74, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot]. author unknown. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 88)

[fig 5.15] warehouse Ostende 74, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot]. author unknown. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 119)

[fig 5.16] Axonometric showing the buildings on site selected for urban renewal program and existing situation, (2026) [Drawing]. by author.

[fig 5.17] Courtrai 53, 51, 49_left to right, (2026) [Photo]. author unknown.

[fig 5.18] Courtrai 47, (2026) [Photo]. author unknown.

[fig 5.19] warehouse Courtrai 47, (2026) [Photo]. author unknown.

[fig 5.20] map of block_1910, (1906) [Map]. MoMuse. Retrieved on 02 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 66)

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- [fig 5.27] Front facade of F.Lochten's Courtrai 49, (1980-1982) [Photo]. AAM, CIVA. Retrieved on 22 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 82)
- [fig 5.28] interior of warehouse Ostende 74, (2023) [Photo/Screenshot]. author unknown. Retrieved on 21 March 2026 from *CACI-Le Contrat d'Axe et le Contrat d'Ilot rapport diagnostic* (pp. 90)
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- [fig 5.31] setting up Cassonade at Courtrai 49, (2024) [Photo/Screenshot]. @cassonade_1080. Retrieved on 24 Feb 2026 from https://www.instagram.com/p/C__RoTvtO63/?img_index=2
- fig [5.32] courtyard used by both Cassonade & Decoatelier, (2026) [Photo] by author
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