

## **Industrious Flanders and Brussels – the Northern Area case**

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### **Abstract**

For almost two years, Flanders and Brussels are cautiously starting to cooperate on territorial challenges. The cross border northern area, with old industrial estates, the airport, new vacant offices and old villages, is the testing ground.

In the cooperation we will assemble a territorial development program. The first phase consisted of confronting local and regional stakeholders with different types of research by design and student work. This paper will focus on work done by students of CassCities (London Metropolitan University), 1010 architects + urbanists, Artgineering and Studio 014 associato Bernardo Secchi – Paola Viganò. Ideas and concepts can help convince stakeholders to embrace the wonderful life in the Brussels northern area, making sure that industrial and production activities can remain side by side with housing and leisure in mixed industrial estates, along highstreets, or in old villages.

The aim is to show how we can incorporate the urban fringe into the vibrant city of Brussels. This will not happen by demolishing and reconstructing large areas, but through accepting the value of what is there, by nurturing the possible and defining what is missing. Careful looking, embracing lucky finds and stimulating everyone to accept and promote urban production seem to be key to success.

*'Industrial areas [...] are not well-understood. Most people have no idea what is made and assembled in their borough, because industrial areas are unwelcoming and do not have a public face. It is difficult to gain an appreciation of their scale and purpose without observing them first hand.'*

Scott, Gort, *From Around Here: Tottenham Employment Study* (London: Haringey Council 2013), p. 4

## 1 a challenge for the Brussels Metropolitan area

“Brussels, like many large metropolises around the world has grown beyond the city’s administrative boundaries. Also like some other major cities, Brussels is a city region, surrounded by another region with different actors, plans, political and economic goals and histories. What makes the case of the Brussels city region special is the existence of different official languages and cultures on both sides of the city’s boundaries. Any attempt to propose a common urban and development plan for the metropolitan region that crosses Brussels’ borders will be challenged by a patchwork of histories, cultures, municipalities, regions, languages and identities. The current search for a vision for the Northern Area, a border-crossing area that includes the Zaventem airport and other national and international institutions and infrastructures therefore poses major challenges to architects, planners, and politicians. Any spatial solution expressed into a planning vision for this area will have to take into account the particular regional and local framework.” (Hein C., 2014)

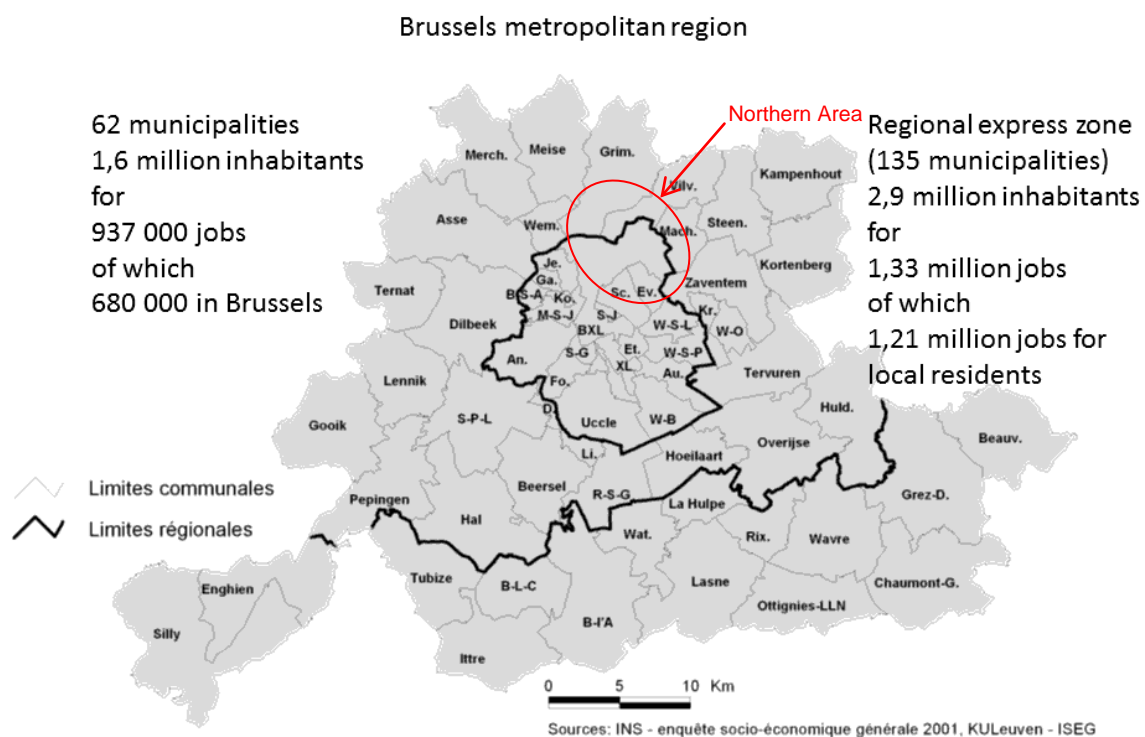


Figure 1: Brussels’ Northern Area situated within the metropolitan region

During the 2014 CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen summer school, Eric Corijn<sup>1</sup> formulated the major challenge for the Brussels metropolitan area as follows: *"to truly understand the*

*dynamics of Brussels, one must acknowledge the extremely rapid growth of the population. The downward demographic trend which began from the historical population maximum in 1968 (1.079.181 inhabitants) is turned. ... On January 1, 2013 1,154,635 people were registered in the Brussels-Capital Region (19 municipalities). Between 2010 and 2020, a net growth of over 140,000 people is expected.” Specific for the Brussels situation is that the net growth of the population is associated with an ongoing suburbanisation. The Brussels-Capital Region keeps losing around 5,000 people annually to the other regions. Between 2005 and 2013, the Flemish suburbs gained 25,000 inhabitants to a total of 415,000 people.”*

The industrial production based society evolved since the late 1950s to an advanced service economy, while Brussels slowly profiled itself as the capital of the European Union.<sup>ii</sup>

Unemployment in the industrial working class remains structural, especially among young people and workers with a migration background. One-third to over half of young people in some neighborhoods are unemployed. Nevertheless, the economy continued to grow in Brussels in the service and healthcare sectors and as a result there are more than 710,000 jobs, of which 365,000 are occupied by commuters. 54 percent of commuters living in Flemish or Walloon Brabant. According to Eric Corijn over 105,000 jobs are directly connected to international functions of Brussels. Corijn: "This internationalization of the Brussels economy is also present in the suburbs and the fringe, more specific in the logistics activities and the airport region." Lack of sufficient demand for low-skilled productive work in Brussels results in a strong dualisation of society and poverty. Social and economic integration of the periphery in the dynamic of Brussels-Capital Region will also be visible in the form of urbanization. The new residents of the fringe bring higher densities and social multi-culturalisation. Part of the population moving out to the fringe do so because of upward social mobility from the (impoverished) canal neighborhoods of Brussels. These social developments are at odds with the detached housing trend that dominates the Flemish periphery today. Densification is necessary to strengthen urban functions and services, especially in the existing smaller cities, like Vilvoorde and the old villages.

Production of goods remains a very important element of economy, not least for employment. New Industrial Policy in Flanders (Flanders in Action, Pact 2020) is mend for 'Maintaining prosperity and competitiveness in a changing world by transforming 'industrial activities'. Elements of the strategy are competition in a globalised world, prosperity and safeguarding our environment.

For spatial policy facilitating economy often means providing places, well-equipped locations, where (industrial) production happens. Spatial policy is interested in the concentration of activities and in reducing employee trips by car. We know that cities, towns and smaller settlements have the largest concentration of inhabitants and are therefore the main areas of recruitment for employees. In the structure plan of Flanders (1997), the vision on space, the goal is set that mixed use of space is to be improved. Nevertheless in the years since approval of the structure plan industry seems to get expelled from the settlements.

Traditional spatial policy seems to favour separation of the economic function, and especially production, from dwellings and away from the centres of cities, towns and other settlements.

Flanders has dedicated hundreds of hectares to large business parks in the process of demarcating urban areas. In doing so the space for production activities has been included in the urban area, more or less near the city but almost always on greenfield locations, mostly on land formerly used for agriculture. In strategic port zones, the same kind of development is being planned and equipped for future harbour and logistic activities. Provinces are responsible for the development of a vision on space of the smaller towns and economic nodes. They made the same choices, providing space on greenfield locations for middle-large business parks when demarcating town boundaries. Municipalities are providing space for small business parks next to their main village. Overall, there have been a significant amount of planning initiatives for the separation of production sites from settlements.

In the same period former industrial sites or harbour sites in or nearby city centres were abandoned, because of problems with congestion, size of infrastructure (or size of ships and trucks), delocalisation of activities or industry (Zajac 2015). This economic reality provided the opportunity to rethink the future of those former production sites, called brownfields. Most of those sites were not reconverted into production sites, or even into sites where production sites are mixed in. The redevelopment mainly concerns dwellings, with a rather limited addition with offices, hotels, restaurants, cafés, shops and services: e.g. The Old Dockyards Project in Ghent; The Islet Development in Antwerp etc.), but also inner-city production sites, the large old factories (eg. Vilvorde Renault-site; Mechelen, Lamot and Comet-sites), are locations to create new city neighbourhoods, but without integrating or incorporating production space. These are projects led by the government or institutions commissioned by the government.

It is not only the government which promotes reconversion of production sites into dwellings. Smaller industrial buildings in the urban fabric are often redeveloped into lofts or apartments. In two studies concerning the economic value of a parcel, the findings reveal relevant arguments. For private developers return on investment and profit is without any doubt an essential condition for considering a project.

From a developers' point of view, residential development is far more lucrative (Maring et al. 2015, Pisman et al., 2015, Dugernier 2014) than development of production sites. For an entrepreneur in search of space it is probably easier to buy a ready-to-build plot of land than an old building that needs to be demolished or at least adapted.

## 2 Planning with stakeholders, researchers, designers and students

The research for this case study is strongly embedded in the Brussels Northern Area project. For the first time since the establishment of the three Belgian regions in 1989, the Brussels Region and Flanders are collaborating on a 'territorial development program'. Previous regional plans hardly even mentioned the existence of other regions. Planning has therefore to be nimble, avoiding stubbornness and obstinacy, and aim for collaboration and consensus building. The Northern Area project explicitly want to leave the old functionalist planning paradigm (shown in chapter 1) behind, for two main reasons:

1. Old recipes that worked perfectly in one region, will only arouse suspicion within the Northern Area project. If Flanders would propose to proceed as they usually do, the Brussels' partners will almost naturally be opposed to the approach and the outcome. A fresh start is needed to emphasize the fact that this is a first attempt to do Belgian cross-border planning projects.
2. For more than 20 years, all spatial planning initiatives resulted in a further suburbanisation of the Brussels Metropolitan Fringe. Industry was pushed out and replaced by either Dutch style residential developments or office parks. Both types of development created build up areas that have no link with a real urban experience, and these monofunctional areas are struggling.

Gibbons' 'Making space for Dalston' project (Gibbons, 2010) could not give a better description of our ambitions with the Brussels Northern Area project: *"Making Space in Dalston is a design led example of deliberative planning; the process of constant feedback between thinking and doing, where partners prefer to get their hands dirty in collaboration with local people rather than spending money on reports or subscribing to conventional top-down approach typical of the masterplanning process. Having been conceived over three years ago the methodology of valuing what's there, nurturing the possible and defining what's missing, from grass roots up, [...] it offers an early insight into the practical and design implications of shifting the balance of power. By involving local people in decision-making, it allowed local partners to take ownership of the projects, discuss governance and evolve together the mechanisms for future sustainability. [...]"*

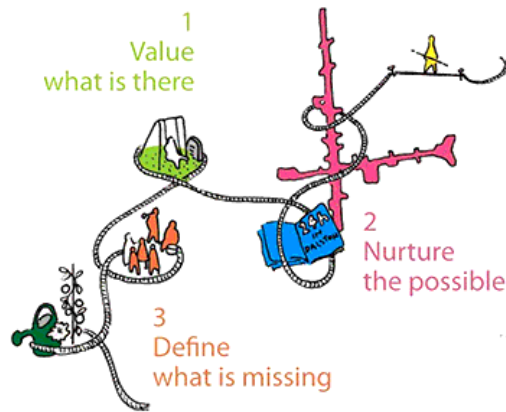


Figure 2: Making space in Dalston: the principles of the study (Gibbons 2010)

[...] The project has promoted the role of an open dialogue in delivering responsive and meaningful change. By building trust and enthusiasm about public space in Dalston, and with a modest spend matched with a significant quantum of sweat equity from stakeholders, the project provides a test case for how the idea of the Big Society will play out at the point of delivery of new urban plans. It demonstrates the possibilities of incremental regeneration in evolving fine-grained deliverable innovations, particularly given an area of natural cultural diversity, and the entrepreneurial approach of the designers. The process forged new alliances, formal and informal, delivering relevant projects within a tight timeframe to composite client groups and interested parties, under a strategic umbrella, with restricted means, not reliant on economic fortune.”(Gibbons, 2010)

Like Dalston, the Northern Area project was initiated as a bottom up process, with no official agenda nor goals. Local stakeholders were asked to join the discussion and to take part in the construction of a real common understanding and vision of the northern fringe of Brussels. As the northern area is significantly larger than Dalston, we chose a more structured approach, involving researchers and design teams to enable an open dialogue.

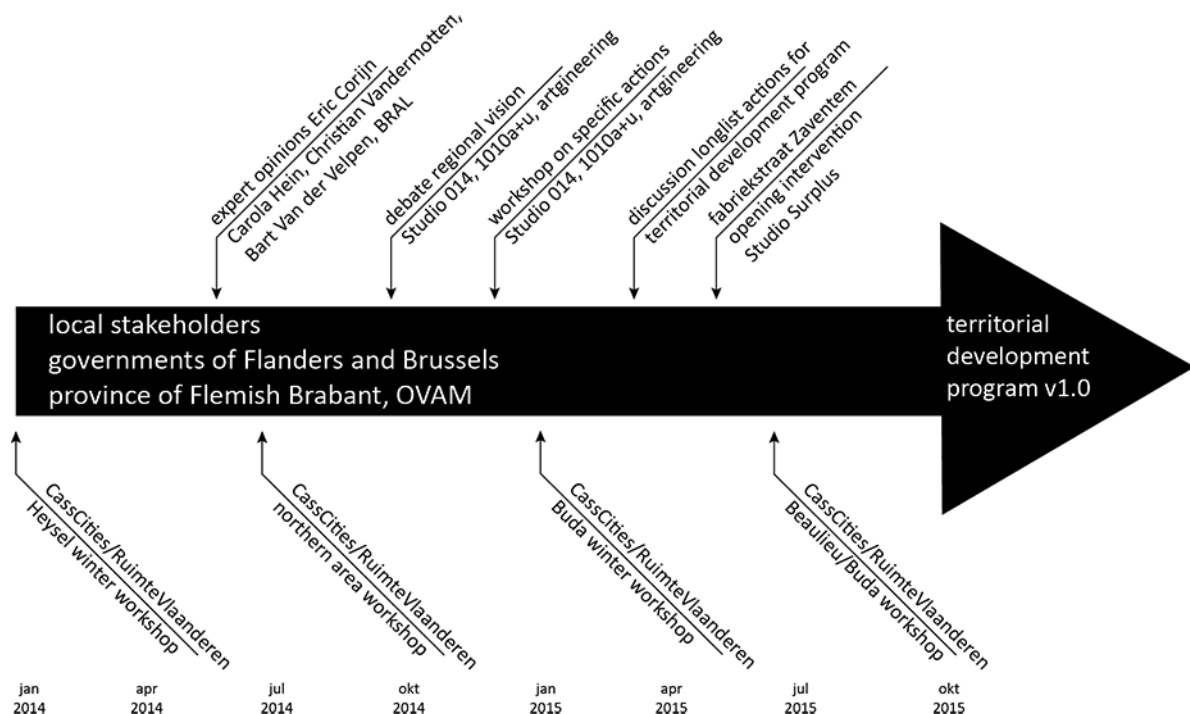


Figure 3: Brussels Northern Area Project scheme 2014-2015



Local stakeholders are at the center of the planning process, and, after some joined fact finding, did propose a first long list of what can become an action program called 'territorial development program'. To help discussion and promote debate, RuimteVlaanderen, the spatial development department Flanders, invested in research and design. Instead of commissioning one big comprehensive study, we asked for different research and design opinions. The divergent research or design statements were used as a starting point for stakeholder workshops and debate. Five well known Brussels' researchers or opinion makers (Eric Corijn, Christian Vandermotten, Bart Vander Velpen, Carola Hein, BRAL) presented their expert opinion on what to do with the Northern Area, and four design teams (Studio 014 associato Bernardo Secchi – Paola Viganò, 1010a+u, Artgineering, Studio Surplus) each focused on a specific area or topic. Both researchers and designers were chosen because their previous work showed that they have a sharp opinion on the development of the Brussels Metropolitan area.

The open planning process is driven by the input of designers and researchers, and continually adjusts the assignment of the design projects. Stakeholders were invited to discuss the research and design proposals and give guidelines to the teams for the next phase. The input (research and design) and the output (development program) are intertwined and cannot be seen separately.

To avoid self centeredness and to open our minds to fresh and different views, a collaboration with teachers and students from Cass Cities (London Metropolitan University) was initiated. Through two winter workshops with Cass Cities students, and two international summer workshops, a vast number of excellent and new ideas were produced and introduced in the planning process.

As the Northern Area project only finishes its first year at full speed, we have mainly been involved in valuing what is there, and started to nurture the possible. During the 2015 summer workshop, we engaged three owners/developpers of different sites to participate in the discussions and debate with students and other stakeholders.

### 3 Four CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen Workshops

In this paper will limit ourselves to the impact the four student workshops had on the project. The other research and design results will only be discussed if there is a clear link between the workshops and what the research or design teams proposed.

#### 3.1 Heysel Winter Workshop 27-28 January 2014

The imminent debate on the construction of a new national football stadium pushed RuimteVlaanderen to propose Heysel as the site for the first workshop. Students from Cass Cities<sup>iii</sup> were assigned to look for a good green link, some 20,000 new homes and a place for a new football stadium.

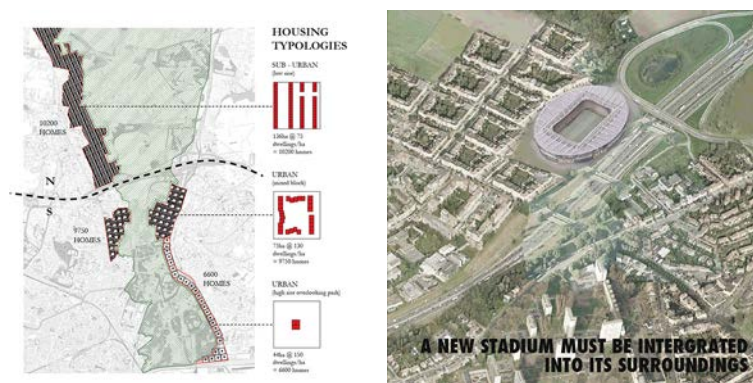


Figure 4: Heysel workshop proposed 26,000 new homes (left) and an urban football stadium (right)

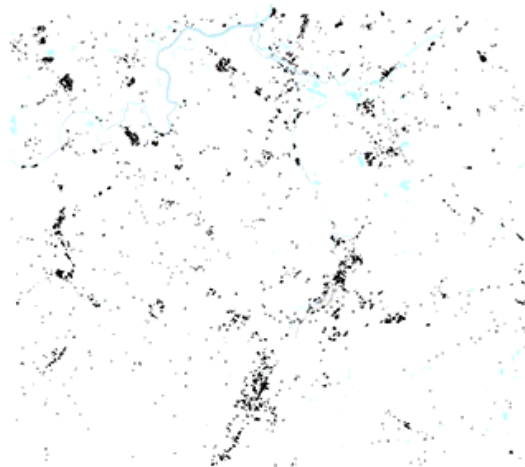
Students questioned territorial assets that everyone in the Belgian or Brussels context is so used to that no one even thinks of challenging it. Every national function, from the inaccessible royal park to the exhibition center was compared with good European examples. Originally conceived as a world expo, the Heysel area was supposed to be a large experience park, but is now taken over by cars and mediocrity. The workshop proposed not 20,000 but 26,000 homes, including building high rise housing on the royal Avenue de Meysse.




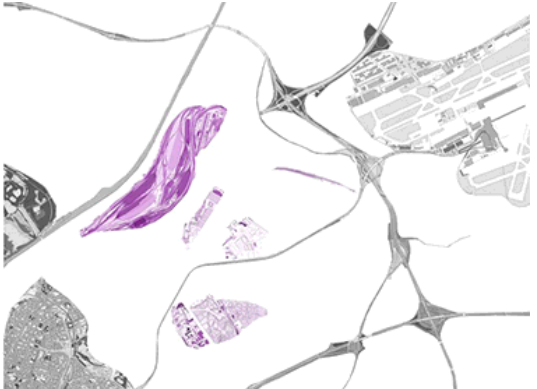
This first workshop was so successful that almost all the concepts and ideas still are part of the territorial development program. Meanwhile, a political decision has been made to construct a new stadium, but without the proposed urban environment. Extension of the public transport network will be part of the new development.

### **3.2 Northern Area Summer School 30 June – 6 July 2014**

The second workshop was open to all international students interested in cities. 20 students<sup>iv</sup> were accepted to join the complex discussion on the future of a vast part of the Northern area. As the assignment was to look for the future of this part of the metropolis in a context of demographic growth, students focused more on valuing the existing and looking for missed opportunities. Careful looking on a vast territory proved to be difficult, yet it revealed these 7 lucky finds (Fig 5.)

In the approach described by Gibbons (2010), the students and teachers valued what is there, and thus awarded some territorial assets with the ‘lucky find’ title. Lucky finds are the things everyone takes for granted, but that from a functionalist planning point of view should no longer exist. The lucky finds make the city liveable, vibrant and generally interesting. They make streets nice to walk along, and contribute to the urban look and feel of the place. Lucky finds are a crucial means to communicate to politicians (and other stakeholders) what is really valuable.

1	The galaxy comes to town	
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2	A filigree economy	
3	A good and growable transport network	
4	An eccentricity of residual landscapes	
5	Compounds and blockages	



6	Very European	
7	Old streets	

*Figure 5: 7 lucky finds, CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2014 Summer School*

Though these lucky finds do not seem very spectacular, they helped focusing the process on the essential parts. All 7 lucky finds influenced the choice of main topics in the territorial development program. A good example is Bordet and the ‘Good and growable transport network’.



*Figure 6-7: elaborating the Bordet public transport node: left: CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2014 Summer School, right: Artgineering 2015*

Bordet is on the verge of four lucky finds (very European, transport network, old streets, the galaxy comes to town). One of the student’s proposals (Fig.6) evolved through the work of Artgineering to a full new intermobility hub (Fig. 7) and became a crucial part of the Framework action ‘international boulevard’ (Fig. 8).

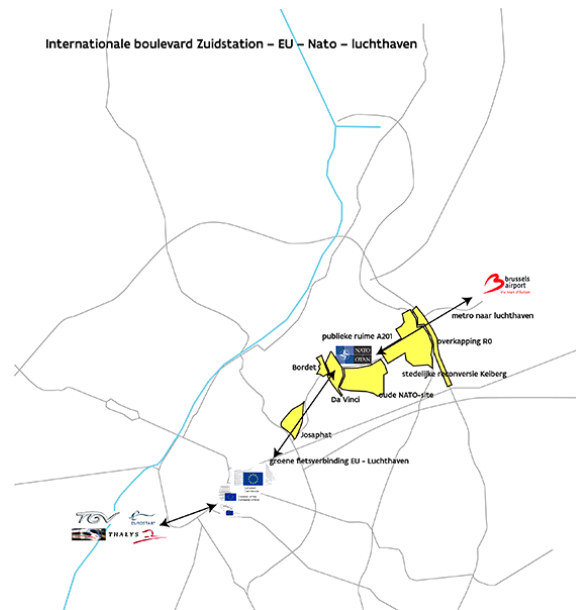


Figure 8: Northern area framework action 'International boulevard'

### 3.3 Buda Winter Workshop 22-24 January 2015

Both 2015 workshops focused on the area around the Buda train station. The winter workshop with CassCities students<sup>v</sup>, mainly worked along the canal and proposed 20 ideas. Most of the work involved 'valuing what is there', showing 'Buda Lucky Finds' and even a postcard. (Fig. 9-10) Other students took it a step further to 'nurturing the possible', where they proposed interventions that could revitalise the area.



Figure 9-10: Buda Lucky Finds (left) and postcard from Buda (right) CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Winter Workshop

Examples are the transporter bridge, an inventory of assets of Buda that need upgrading, or creating access to industrial processes and wholesale companies.



Figure 11-12: extrovert plastic flower wholesale (left) and transporter bridge (right)  
CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Winter Workshop

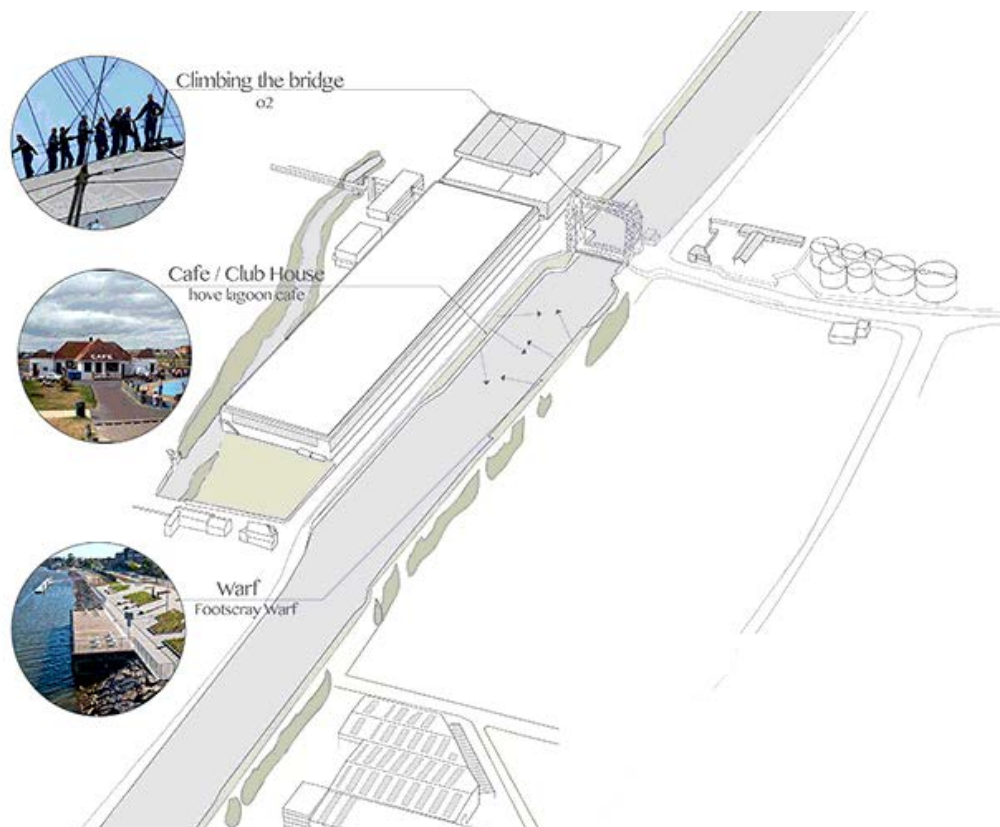


Figure 13: Nurture the possible at Buda Bridge CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Winter Workshop

During this 3-day workshop, many great ideas were developed, that showed to RuimteVlaanderen and to other stakeholders the power of this positive approach. Showing the vast array of possibilities, and explaining how you can make them happen, was for most stakeholders the first time they heard someone talk this positive on the Buda Area. One local investor joined the discussions, and is one of the early adaptors. His company is now developing a bar and a shared workshop in a shed that was hardly used.

Thus, the third workshop proved that the valuing and nurturing approach could activate inspired action. This also convinced partners in the Northern Area project to get investors involved in the planning process and in the 2015 Summer School.



### 3.4 Beaulieu/Buda Summer School 6-10 July 2015

As we proposed to work on four smaller sites within the Buda area, the 27 international students<sup>vi</sup> took the big step from *valuing* and *nurturing* to *'define what is missing'*. The owners/developpers of three sites were actively involved in the *'defining'* ideas and proposals during the workshop.



Figure 14: Four sites in Buda

Students started with careful looking to the assigned area, and did first steps to inventarisation (eg Fig 15: catalogue of vacant space), and truly understanding the place through interviewing residents, owners and workers. The focus on a smaller areas brought discussions closer to reality, and resulted in proposals that took advantage of dead end streets and remote or enclosed spaces. The Bruulstraat backyard roller coaster shows that you can do amazing, creative things in an invisible secluded space.

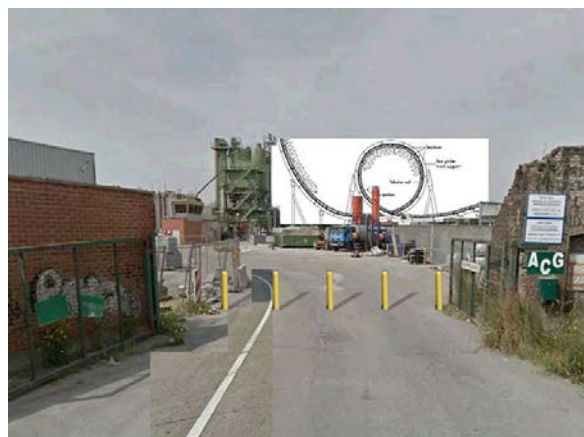
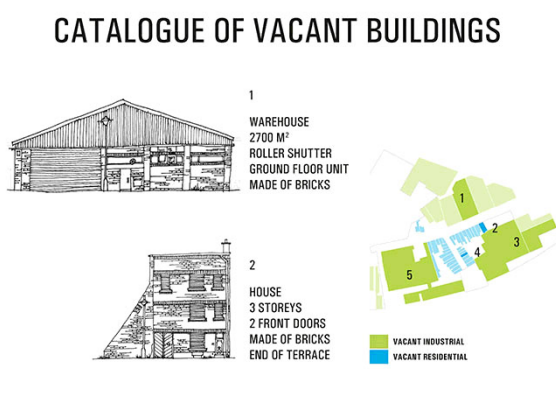


Figure 15-16: Catalogue of vacant buildings (left) and Backyard roller coaster (right)  
CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Summer School

One group worked on the area surrounding a new giant shopping mall. Not everyone is in favour of such a big building, focused on its interior space, but the group managed to show

how the surrounding areas could benefit from this multi million investment. They made two sets of postcards for Buda One set showed the existing assets, another the possibilities of the area. In one final proposal they wanted to show the investor what a real urban dialogue with the surrounding industrial area would mean, and even how he could make additional profit.

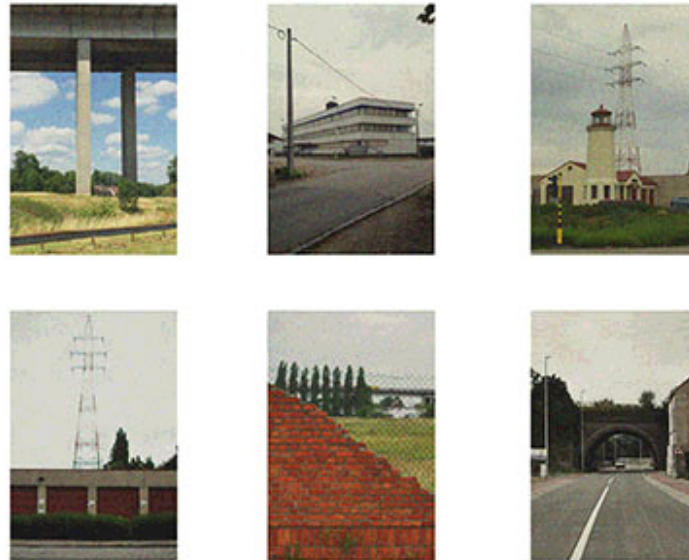


Figure 17: six postcards of the existing fabric CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Summer School

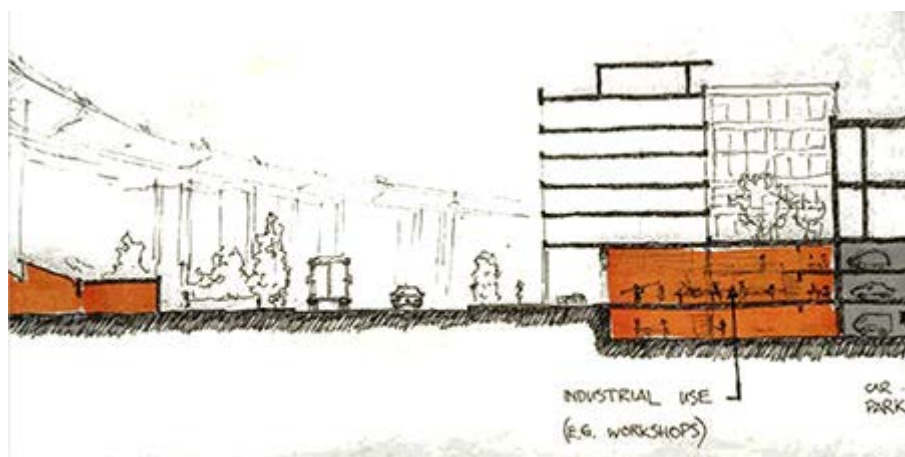


Figure 18: Proposal for integrating the planned shopping mall in the industrial area CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Summer School

On the adjacent IRET development site, others went as far as giving architectural proposals for the “Kerklaan” street. In collaboration with the developer, the proposed different versions for his site, and showed how he could incorporate contemporary industrial use into a housing project. The idea evolved into a promising final debate where the developer engaged himself to study the proposals. He then asked RuimteVlaanderen to support him in discussions with local and other administrations to bring good ideas and concepts in realization.





Figure 19-20: new development along Kerklaan (left, in blue and green) and proposed new street front Kerklaan (right) CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Summer School

#### 4 discussion

The Buda workshops show the importance and fragility of ‘old’ industrial areas. One important element is to make them visible and enjoyable as an urban experience. Celebrating industrial production by staging events, such as the Brussels’ Festival Canal seems a crucial step if we want to move away from functionalist planning methods.



Figure 21-22: Workers’ giants parade in Lokeren (left) and proposal for a Buda giants event (right) CassCities/RuimteVlaanderen 2015 Summer School

Organising a Buda-fest where local companies make giants, following an old tradition from medieval processions, and 19<sup>th</sup> century workers’ traditions (Fig 21). Creating urban legends, or even just recent traditions (eg Zinneke parade in Brussels) will prove necessary to regain an urban pride of old industrial areas. If we want to have a chance changing the urge to sweep everything away. We have to move from sweeping change and transform it into planting seeds for next generations.



For the Northern Area project, the challenge to come is to deliver real change on the field. To assure that the first attempts are reasonably successful, and that the enthuse other investors to start working on a larger scale.

However, the pragmatism of the ideas we are developing also needs some sort of economic or commercial dimension that begins to explore the feasibility of taking advantage of the developable areas the analysis is revealing. Some sort of research that begins to demonstrate the economic value that we are potentially unlocking for the city, for the community and other stakeholders could provide some very interesting headline figures and make people pay attention.

This would begin to demonstrate the financial value of the whole project and help spur the authorities' and the market's interest in the project.

## It's real! It's worth a lot of money!

This work is very valuable to Brussels and to the regions, and could transform the economic future of Brussels. Ways of measuring this might include attaching a notional value based on current real estate values to the land uses contemplated. This could then be measured against costs of creating the opportunities.

*“And here is my article (book introduction for a never published book) advocating an extrovert economy:*

### ***An extrovert economy.***

*A few months ago I visited a big Dutch new town. It's one that's doing reasonably well, and it's all very green and neat. But there's something odd about the place, in a way we've all seen before. Something seems to be missing, because it's hidden away. It's the economy that's tucked away beyond the trees, out of view. The office blocks and the industry are off on their own, landscaped and screened. The schools, colleges and the healthcare buildings are lurking around the back on quiet suburban roads. The shops and community centres, and the places to get a meal or a drink, are in little precincts that you go to when you need to, and only then. It feels like that town turned out the way it did because people had in mind an idea that the economy is something others do for you, or do to you, that it is okay for it to be over there, not here, that there is no need for it to be exposed.”*

*Mark Brearley, as cited in Snow (2015)*

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<sup>i</sup> Corijn E. (2014)

<sup>ii</sup> Hein C (2014)

<sup>iii</sup> Students Heysel workshop: Jacob Neville, Huan Rimington, Hannah Danks, Hadas Even-Tzur, Toby O'Connor, Lee Mallett, Elena Boni, Sophie Wallis, Andi Rupf, Alex Mann. Teachers Mark Brearley, Adam Towle, Sarah Considine, Fenna Haakma-Wagenaar, Jan Zaman.

<sup>iv</sup> Students 2014 Summer School: Jennifer O'riordan, Aoife Marnane, Tuong Vi Phon Le, Jacob Neville, Eleanor Figueiredo, Molly Judge, Simeon Shrebunae, Holly Harrington, Lorenzo Santosuosso, Eimear Egan, Alix

Denercy, Cigdem Hacioglu, Iulia Galinescu, Elise Candry, Jan Ackenhausen, Alberto Innocenti, Anneloes Van Noordt. Teachers: Mark Brearley, Adam Towle, Francesca Benedetto, Sarah Considine, Dann Jessen, Merritt Bucholz, Peter Carroll, Jan Zaman.

<sup>v</sup> Students 2015 Winter Workshop: Amanda Impey, Leon Donald, Jennifer Monaghan, Dan Sweeting, Adam Isaaks, Helmi Valkola, Nikolai Almeida, Charlotte Savage/Calver, Andrew Catcheside, Jon-Scott Kohli, Laura Lamont, Joseph Henry, Alex Spicer, Kaiyil Gnanakumaran, Eleanor Pedley. Teachers: Mark Brearley, Adam Towle, Sarah Considine, Finn Williams, Lara Kinneir, Jan Zaman.

<sup>vi</sup> Students 2015 Summer School: Katie McClure, Alexander Sarafian, Kato Allaert, Colm macAoidh, Andrew Catcheside, Kyra Galjee, Matt Bloomfield, Alpa Depan, Irene Kali, Emilio Mossa, Rob Brink, Diede Onzia, Jana Culek, Piergianna Mazzocca, Hugo Corbett, Lea Soret, Anke De Smet, Els Vernimmen, Lorenzo Alaimo, Pamela Snow, Eoghan Hurley, Alex Griffin, Sarah Mannion, Cigdem Hacioglu, Alessio Minto, Elena Borghese. Teachers: Mark Brearley, Dann Jessen, Adam Towle, Francesca Benedetto, Annette Kuhk, Jan Zaman.