

North District
Next Step?







Handwritten text on a wooden board, possibly a list or schedule, including the words "MA", "ADUK", and "D".







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What is the next step for the Brussels North District? The district that in the 1960's caused the eviction of 11.000 citizens to erect an international business center that never fulfilled its expectations, faces today increased vacancy and a new phase of redevelopment. Its modernist approach to urban space never really worked and needs to be rethought. Instead of projecting once more a utopian vision on this central part of the city, we must ask collectively: which direction do we take? Which defects should be solved, and which qualities strengthened? What kind of district does Brussels need and for who?

Altogether, the public authorities, the private sector, civic organizations and the Brussels citizens have the capacity to turn the district into an inclusive and attractive part of the city. Ideal connection to mobility networks and an abundance of open space make it into an ideal place for a dense and diversified district. This document serves as preamble, as first notes for a city-wide discussion. It resulted out of a dialogue between three partners, perspective. brussels, Lab North and the Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA). The document lists the challenges and potentialities of the district, and questions them through a collection of visuals. Rather than a report, it is as invitation for an ambitious city project to begin.

1. A HYBRID AND MIXED USE

The Brussels North District is famously known as an island in the city. Monofunctional multi-storage buildings are filled with administrations, banks and large corporations. Wide streets provide space for fluxes of cars and pedestrians flowing swiftly through the district. To relate the island to the city that surrounds it, a more diversified use of space must be stimulated. Different activities and users can make the district into a place to work, live and reside. Big organizations can share the district with smaller ones, such as ateliers, services and housing. Secondly, these spaces can be shared and 'hybrid': not defined for one use only. On different moments in time, the district can welcome different users that share space. How can the existing morphology of large single-use buildings be transformed to allow mixed use? Which amount of housing should be allowed and which typologies? And how can we make sure to build in a sustainable manner and allow future shifts in use?

2. RE-USE AND RE-INHABIT

The oldest building of the North District is merely 60 years old. Most of its building stock was built more recently. Today the first leasing cycles end and various building are being demolished. This results in long-term lock-down of entire building blocks, and large amounts of construction waste. High-end office standards demand for properties that are seemingly incompatible with the existing building characteristics. Different types of use ask for other standards: atelier spaces, collective workspaces, educational or recreational program can often do with less equipped spaces and different norms. Re-using existing office buildings, for work or living, demands creative solutions that ultimately create a more sustainable construction realm. Which norms and regulations are blocking the re-use of the recently build constructions of the North District? Which uses can serve as a test site for this re-use and re-habitation?

3. FROM SINGLE TO MULTI TENANT

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The real estate model in which big tenants rent large surfaces of office spaces is under pressure. A vast amount of buildings in the city suffer long-term vacancy in the wait for large tenants. A demand for another type of workspaces in Brussels increases: workspaces that are affordable and flexible in time and use. A multi-tenant model in which smaller organization share space and facilities, can provide for this demand. Smaller tenants requires new real estate and financial models as compared to the large corporations. They also do not provide their own services, such as food courts or coffee hubs, like large agencies do. Which breakthroughs need to happen to make this model find ground? And how can the affordability of space within this model be sustained?

4. GENEROUS OPEN SPACE

Tragically, the openness created by the tabula-rasa of the Manhattan Masterplan offers today a large potential for the district. Generous open space can provide room for mobility and uses otherwise pushed to the outskirts of the city. Which types of new mobility and logistics should be housed near to the city to become a zero-carbon city? How much inner-city biodiversity can occur when implementing vast green spaces? Or new green energy facilities? The abundance of space offers possibilities for lacking services. Which leisure and sport facilities cannot be housed in the historical city but would fit the modernist grid? Which colloquial settings can be invented for small and big encounters? Rather than filling in the emptiness with function, we could also let it thrive: an open space for urban activity, events; public and intimate at the same time.

5. A NEW GOVERNANCE MODEL

Since its heydays, the North District has been fragmented. It's development was a public trauma or case of 'Bruxellization'. Stretching over three different municipal boundaries, it lacks focus and care of the many public authorities. For a long time, the private sector, owning most of the land, was secured with safe long-term leasing contracts with private and public agencies. The increased vacancy triggered the attention of actors from different sides: public, private and civil. The challenge today is to find, in the pursuit of an inclusive North district, a governance model that aligns private, public and civil interests, amid their different agendas. How will this governance model, based be translated in actual plans, vision-development and projects? Which new instruments should be developed measure made on this specific context? The North District is a testing ground of a co-creative governance model.

6. START NOW!

We cannot afford to wait and see. Already today, test-sites are being implemented that transform the district. Meanwhile use showing the possibilities for mixed and hybrid use, initiatives striving for more green and local production of food or providing legal assistance for newcomers, administrations co-constructing public space initiatives, property owners exploring new tenant models, etc. While being fragile, these initiatives can be the foundation for a different future for the district: a future that starts now.

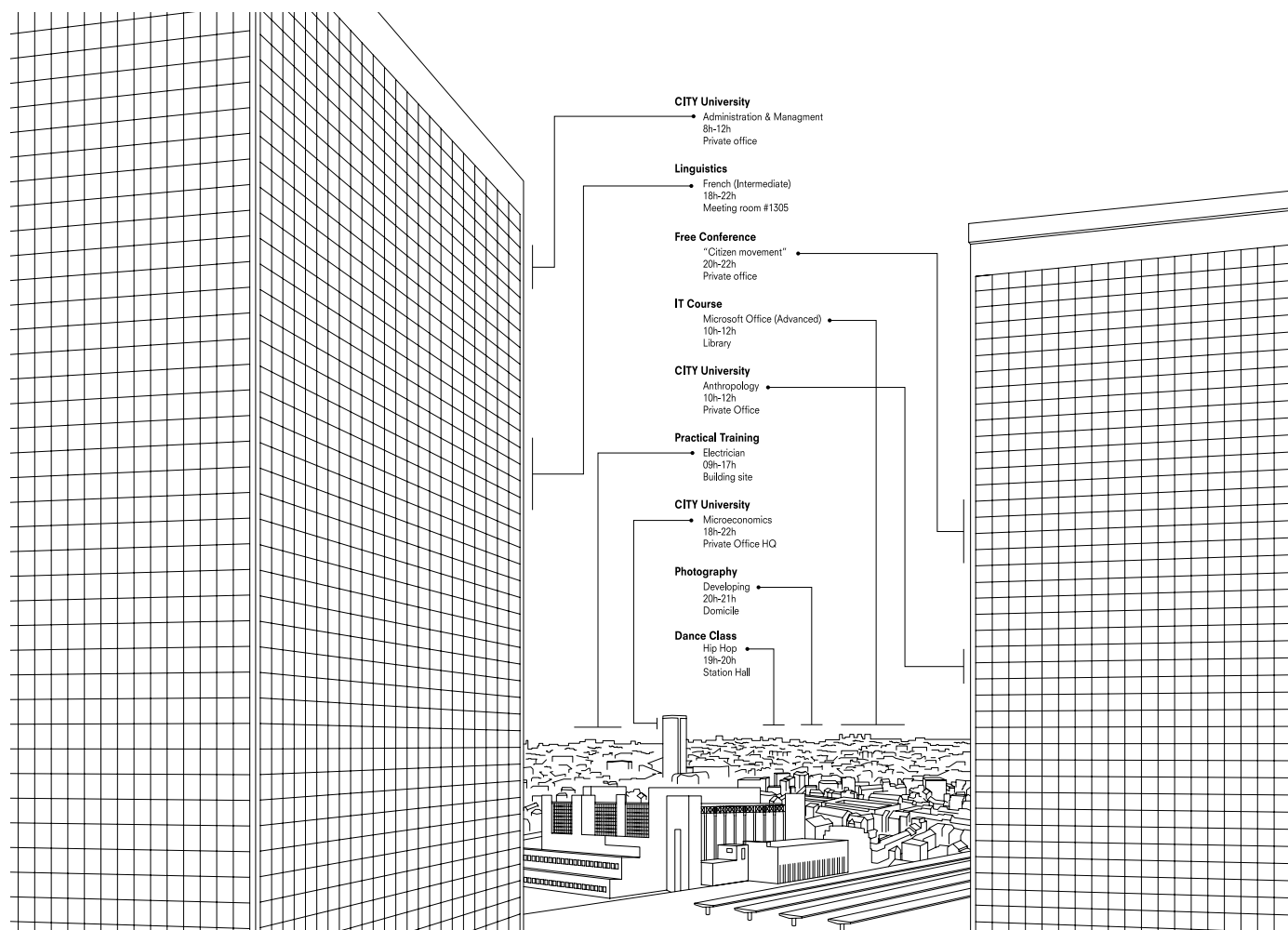
The conditions for a building to host various different functions that can migrate through the building and evolve through time go beyond the modernistic paradigm of neutral or polyvalent space. The inherent constraints of each program need to be integrated into a model of higher complexity.

PIERRE LEMAIRE,
PERSPECTIVE.BRUSSELS, 2018

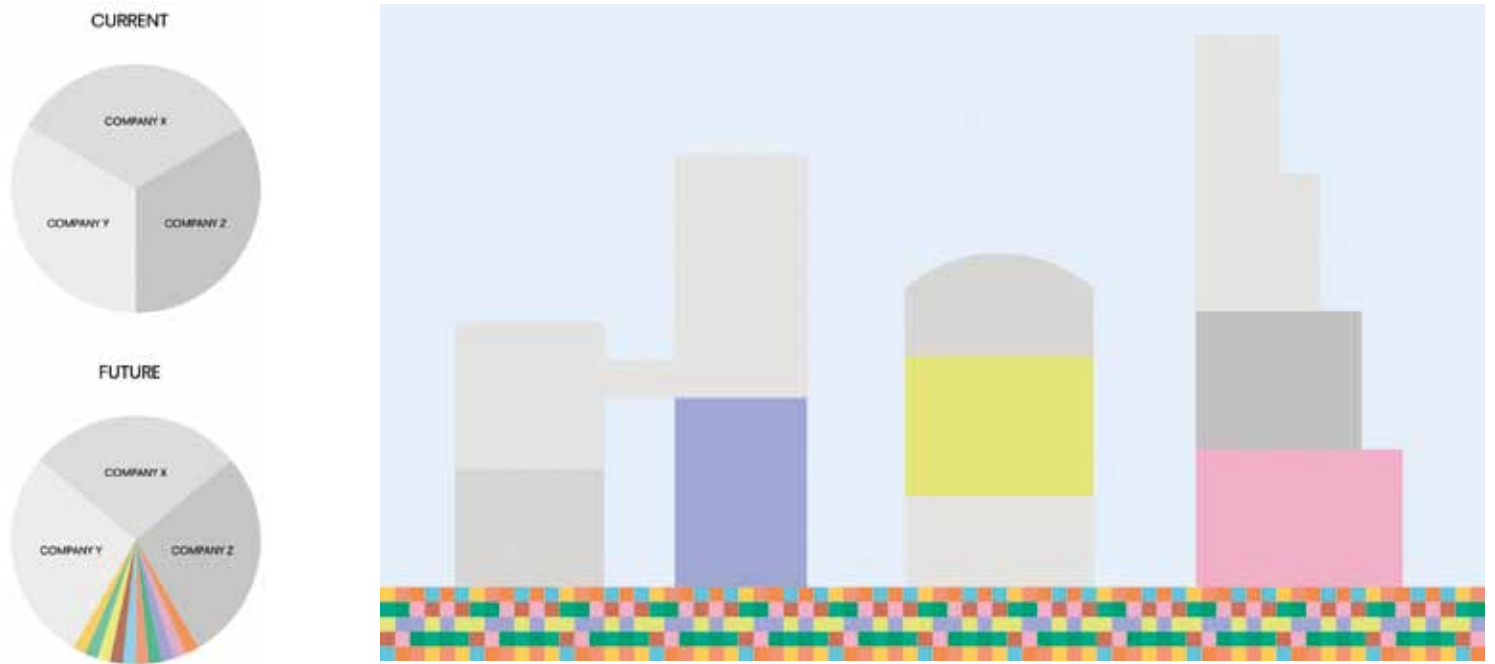


The conception of tower buildings as a vertical zoning plan, stacking parking, commercial base and office spaces.

Img. 02



Not only offices but different learning environments in one building.



Monopolization of spaces by big company is no longer sustainable and healthy for the district. Let's try to move to a more multi-tenant model.

Img. 04



100% Foreigner - 100% Brusselian represents the multicultural North District in its potential to help build Brussels for the future.

RE-DEVELOP THROUGH RE-USE?

The current legal approach to conservation, which started in 1932 with the Charter of Athens, is challenged a great deal. It fails to deliver on two stages: much needed methods for finding new, intelligent programs for existing structures taking account contemporary experiences and expectations, and, secondly, as a result of this, the uneasy relationship with new architectural interventions and its accompanying discourse. Could we, instead, approach the past as a 'package of sense', of built-up meaning that can either be accepted and transformed or suppressed? Starting from a user-centered approach, including the current method of 'meanwhile use', we need to explore new practical and theoretical possibilities.

KOENRAAD VAN CLEEMPOEL, FACTULTEIT
ARCHITECTUUR EN KUNSTEN UHASSELT, 2018

Img. 05

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In the late 1970s, a creative revolt arose that literally colored the district with 22 murals on the facades of houses. Shortly afterwards, the houses were demolished.

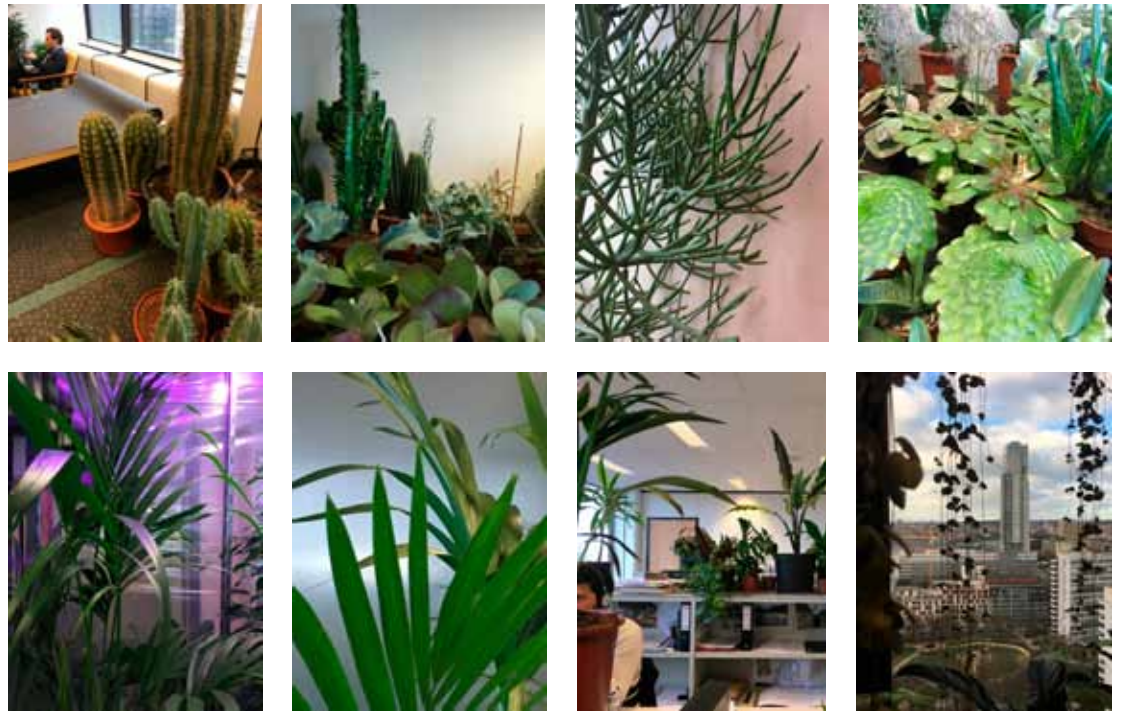
Img. 06



Simple interventions, like opening a window or raising in height can reveal a hidden quality.

Img. 07





Biodiversity in a building first, in the district after.

Img. 09



A poster of the Saint Roch church, demolished in 1971, next to the new one, a refurbished hangar opened in 1995.

Img. 10



From a formal fountain surrounded by cars, to a pool with a food truck in the middle of a road intersection.

The condition for this project to succeed, it seems to me that it is rather necessary to work with what is available than to reinvent the world. And this in spatial, social and economic terms. We will succeed in strengthening the identity of the district if we are able to integrate these three dimensions in our approach: the social dimension - the users, their expertise and needs; the spatial - about which we have and how can we turn things over; and the economic - where is the capital and how can alternative methods of financing be developed?

PETRA PFERDMENGES,
ALIVE ARCHITECTURE, 2017



Biodiversity in a building first, in the district after.

Img. 13

WTC II			
	26		
	25		
	24		
	23	③	
		THE FUTURE IS HERE	
	18		
	17		
	16		
Rooftop Garden		2	②
①			THE FUTURE IS A PRACTICE
THE FUTURE IS NOT REALISTIC			

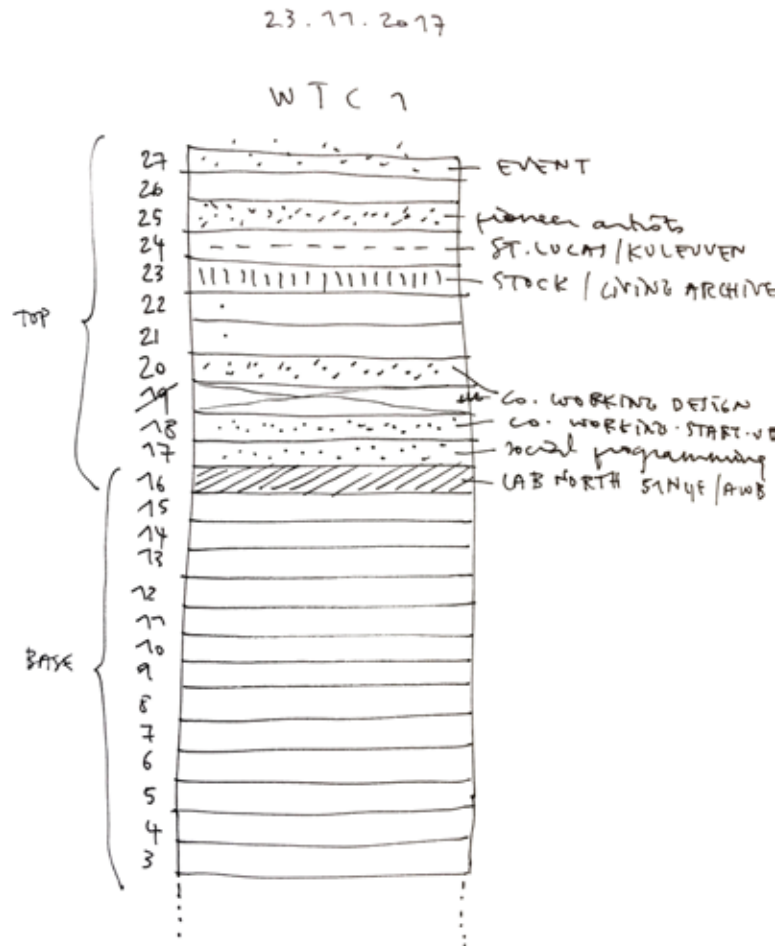
Platform North Occupants

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LabNorth is a partnership between non-profit Up4North, architectural practice 51N4E, think-and-do-tank Architecture Workroom and design agency VraimentVraiment. They join forces for a layered action in and on the North district, aiming to imagine how the district can gain back an inclusive place in the city.

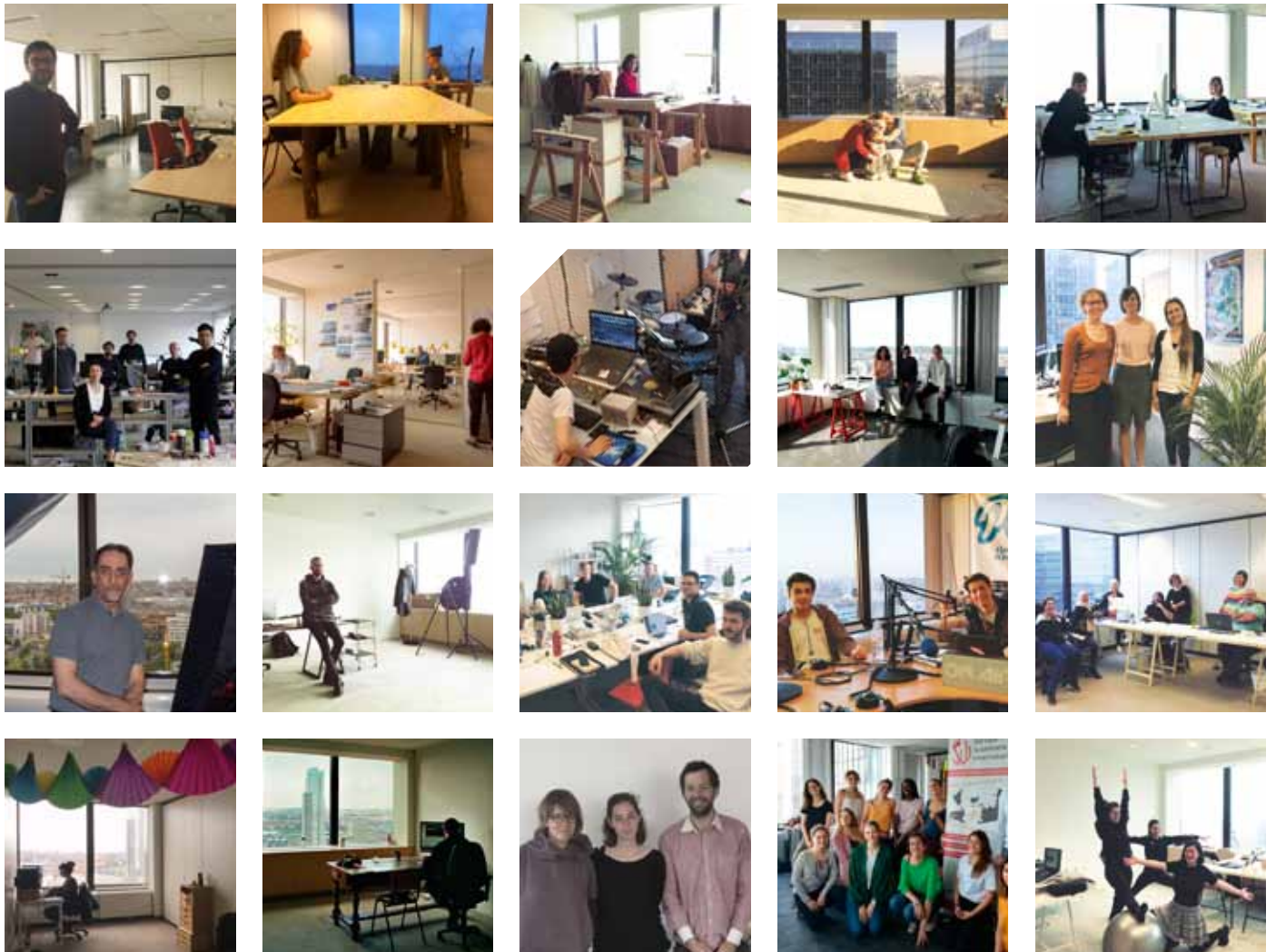
Platform North is the name of the temporary occupation project of LabNorth. It aims to attract a variety of actors, small or big, that can contribute to activate the North district in the dynamic of a new community, to share spaces and to inject a mixity of functions in the area.

Community-based offices more than occupiers.



A snapshot of the growing dynamics of temporary users in WTC I tower.

Img. 15



The Northern Quarter is very dramatic from the eyes of a city planner. In order to see concrete change, you'll have to wait at least 30 years—but as an on-going project currently in motion, it's an interesting playground today. And it will only improve. Brussels is saturated with many similar undefined spaces, so as a living "city project", our city is an ideal situation.

FREK PERSYN, 51N4E, 2018

Img. 16



The original Manhattan Masterplan foresaw a strict separation between cars on the ground level and pedestrians on the esplanades connecting the different buildings.

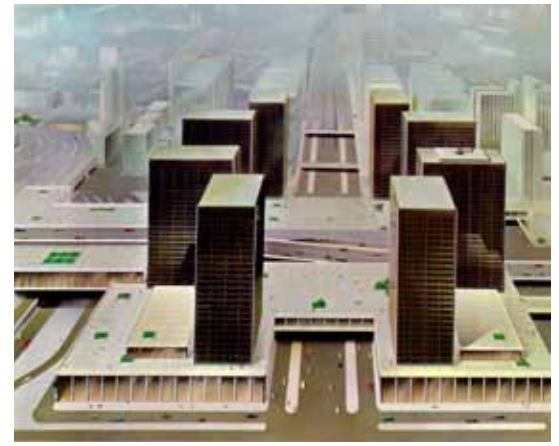
Img. 17



The station now forms a physical boundary between the North District and Schaerbeek while it can become a catalyst for a neighborhood in transition.



The WTC towers were standing alone on an empty field made of broken dreams and promises.



The Manhattan project from the sixties imagines a visionary future for the local neighborhood around the North Station.



A contemporary look at the generous space imagined by the Manhattan Masterplan.

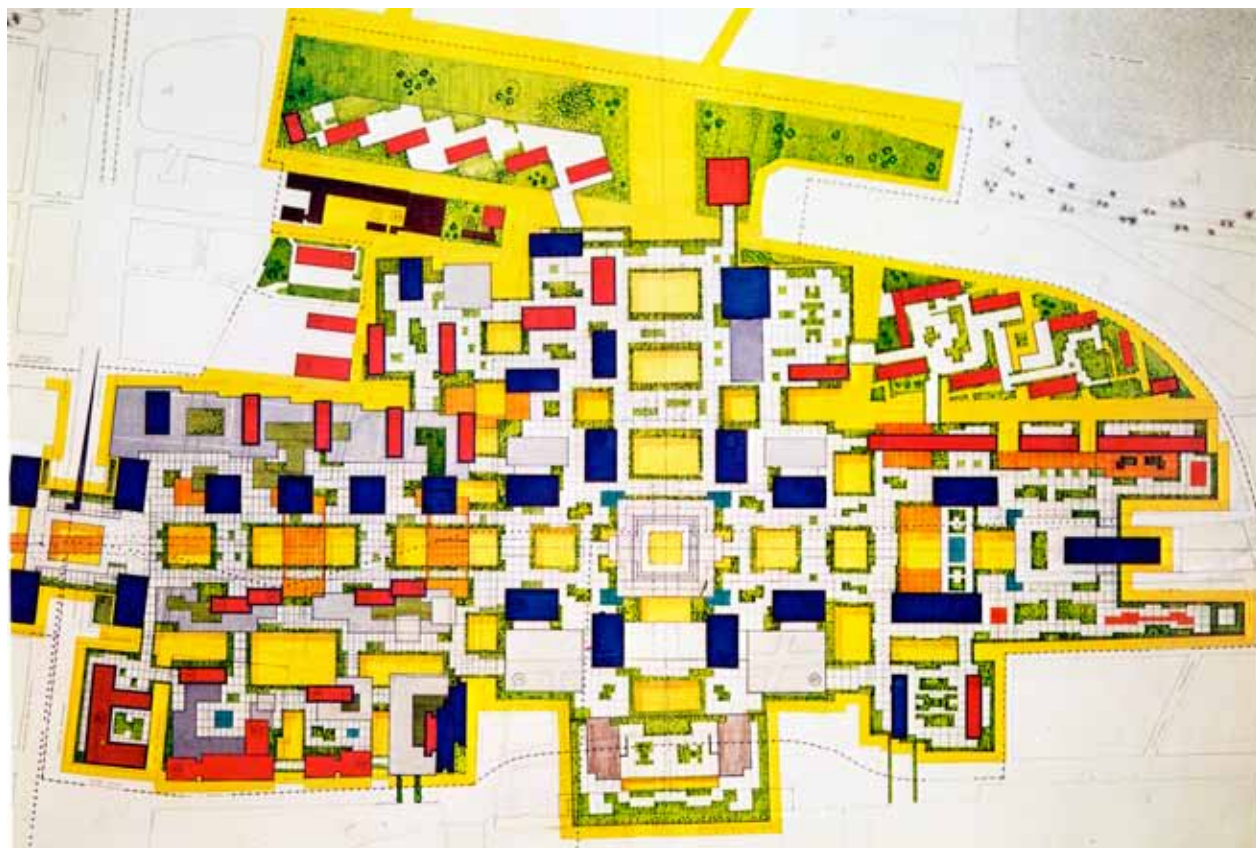
Today's city is varied, and its development is also manifold. The city is increasingly being created by countless new actors. This means that nowadays, the urban planner no longer strives to be a brilliant demiurge—a fashioner of the universe—but is a constellation of collective intelligence. The pendulum swing between top-down and bottom-up is something that I love. I believe in the paradox that a neighbourhood initiative can emerge thanks to the authorities, which offered a framework or provided a catalyst for it. The future is about interaction. And that's how the city will make itself.

KRISTIAAN BORRET, BMA, 2018

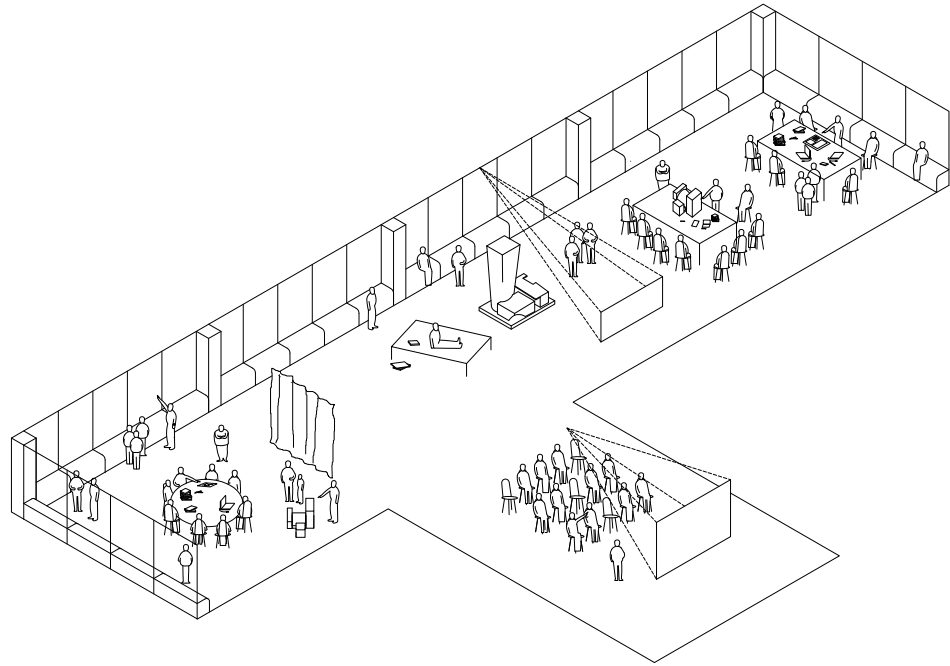


On-site studio as a way of collaborative learning about the district, taking into account multiple scales and points of view.

Img. 22



The Manhattan Master plan, as ultimate urban composition without scale and context, illustrates the incredible belief in the bankability of the city.



Img. 24



Brussels North District, Next steps? is an initiative by three partners: perspective.brussels, Lab North and Bouwmeester Maître Architecte BMA. During the fall of 2018, these three partners will invite different stakeholders and experts to discuss the challenges of the North District.

PERSPECTIVE.BRUSSELS

Perspective.brussels is the regional expertise center for matters related to urban planning. It is structured around three poles of competence: statistical monitoring of the region socio-economic realities; territory-based knowledge and inter-disciplinary diagnosis studies; and development of frameworks for the future development of the Region as well as developing urban visions and tools for the strategic zones of the capital. This last pole is leading the research on the North District within Perspective with an eye on creating synergies with actors of the academic world, the civil society and the private sector involved in the district. This collaborative approach is intended to explore new formats of urban projects, new ways of implementation and an innovative inclusive urban governance.

LAB NORTH

Lab North is a partnership between Up4North, a nonprofit supported by nine large property owners in the district, architectural practice 51N4E, think-and-do-tank Architecture Workroom and design agency Vraiment Vraiment. Since 2017, they share a collaborative workspace in the district. Amongst its actions is the coordination of meanwhile re-use of vacant office spaces and the co-organization of design research through master classes and collaborations with universities. In the summer of 2018, they hosted 'You Are Here', a public exhibition in the World Trade Center part of the International Biennale for Architecture of Rotterdam IABR-2018 + 2020 'The Missing Link'.

BOUWMEESTER MAÎTRE ARCHITECTE

The Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA) supervises the quality of city development projects in Brussels from an independent position. Since 2017, they have contributed by means of our main tools to projects aiming to transform the North district: the architectural competition for the transformation of WTC I & II, research by design in order to foster an overall vision for the area, and quality chamber guidance for the CCN redevelopment next to the train station. We believe a vacancy crisis in the North district is a gift. It makes all of us think upside down. If we turn our mental map of the North district upside down, we see the potential of an urban quarter midway between the Canal quays and the slopes of Schaerbeek. If we turn the governance models upside down, we swing between top-down and bottom-up initiatives and see new kinds of coproduction in city making. We love upside down.

IMAGE CREDITS

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