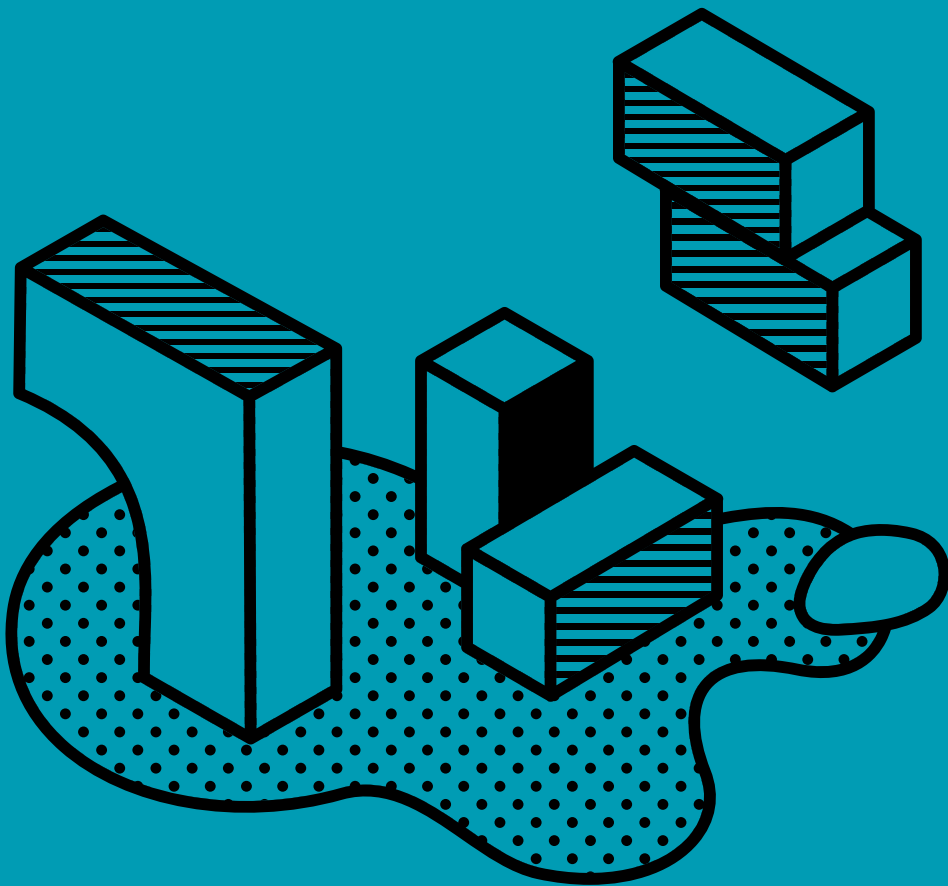# Designing Brussels Ecosystems

Metrolab Brussels MasterClass II

Bernard Declève
Geoffrey Grulois
Roselyne de Lestrange
Andrea Bortolotti
Corentin Sanchez Trenado

(eds)

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**Density**

Rythms in-between the city. Occupation of Time

Valentina Bonello
Julie Collet (stakeholder)
Gerd De Wilde (stakeholder)
Bernard Declève (tutor)
Ernesto Diez
Johans Figueroa
Nicolas Hemeleers (stakeholder)

Ellen Jacobs (stakeholder)
Géraldine Lacasse (stakeholder)
Didier Ledocte (stakeholder)
Dongxue Lei
Sâm Rosenzweig (stakeholder)
Anna Ternon
Ivana Vukelic

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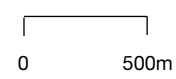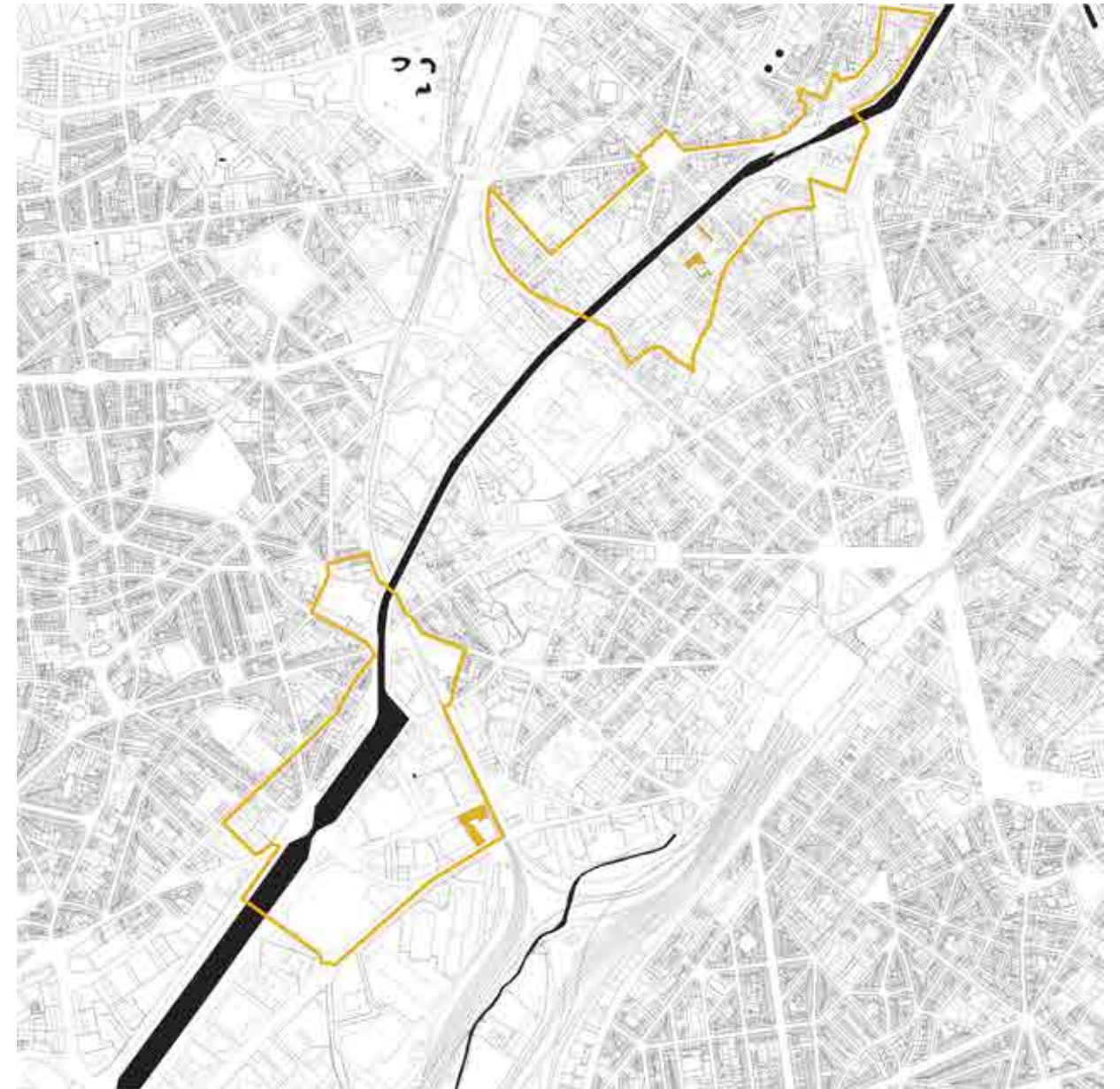
Introduction

The horizontal metropolis of Brussels (Vigano, 2018) is facing demographic growth as well as an increasing number of commuters. By 2020, the population will reach 1.2 million inhabitants, with 10,000 more each year until 2025 and up to 9,000 each year until 2040. Through its PRDD, the Brussels-Capital Region promotes a densification plan to develop dwellings, distribute them spatially and promote the urban economy and the attractiveness of urban spaces. This densification agenda, based on the quantitative aspects of urban growth, lacks a direct approach linked to the residents' origins, socio-economic factors and complex urban ecologies.

The canal area has once again become a new place of centrality of the city and its transformation processes (Plan Canal, 2016). New housing developments in the former industrial areas along the canal appear as islands in the urban landscape. In the canal neighbourhood, spaces as well as players are in transit. Old industrial plots are vacant or underused, and therefore transformed into new housing and mixed-use developments. Local players also adapt to these transformations, e.g. with second-hand car dealers giving way to real-estate companies. From the significant historical 'momentum' of these transitions to future scenarios arises the question of a new agenda based on qualitative values towards a more resilient, ecological and inclusive urban growth. In this transformative city, various occupation patterns find their place in space and in time, designing multiple cities within the city (Lefebvre, 1968). From a structured market-driven mechanism of occupancy to forms of solidarity and philanthropy. Temporary occupations attract and generate new dynamics within the city, based on economic activity, reciprocity or solidarity.

The workshop's goal is to tackle the challenge of urban growth by transforming an existing industrial heritage site using a time-based strategy. Time is understood as a tool and an instrument for urban planning.

A historical reading of current challenges and city settings provides us with valuable information about how to design for the future. Time is about temporary occupation, uncertainty, evolution, unpredictability and adaptation. A historical reading of the urban fabric teaches us that cities are constantly changing in terms of assets, goods, people and ecologies. The city has never been a static ecosystem. Nevertheless, most of our administrations and private players approach cities and neighbourhoods from a limited perspective, not taking into account constant urban adaptation.

Ecosystems & situations

The relationship between density and temporary occupation is a complex ecosystem of players, opportunities, urban contexts and socio-economic situations. Through an interpretative mapping of the various periods of transformation of the city, we can gain insight into the link between transformational processes such as densification and the temporary occupation of urban assets. The first settlements that eventually became the city appeared during medieval times, at the intersection of trade routes and near the river. The valley and the river were valuable assets for the new settlements.

The Senne valley suffered a drastic transformation during the Industrial Revolution, switching from agricultural land to an industrial region. Industries occupied the valley with new infrastructures, while the city continued its growth in opposite directions and towards its outskirts.

Nowadays, the city can no longer keep growing outwards, due to a suburbanisation process based on a spreading model. The valley and canal are seen, once again, as places of opportunity for a new model of the city. Currently, vacant plots and former industrial sites are under pressure from the densification agenda as well as from population growth.

The historical reading of the city of Brussels through an interpretative mapping shows the history of temporary occupations and the transformation processes that have occurred within the city. Temporary occupation is neither a neologism nor a current trend: it has always been a driver of the city's transformation and densification processes.

The interpretative mapping (see next page) shows the densification processes throughout history and the patterns of urbanisation. We can clearly see the various densification processes' preferred spatial patterns. The relationship between density and temporary occupation becomes clearer. Transformation processes such as densification allow transitory spaces to appear. The two are strongly related. Without a transformation of the city, there will be no transitory and temporary uses. The waiting spaces or transformative spaces defined as 'terrains vagues' (vacant lots) by Sola-Morales (1995) attract alternative and less obvious users (Desmet, 2013). The uncertain nature of these spaces allows them to be used for temporary uses. These generate dynamics and complex ecosystems in the city, as they enhance the urban context's ability to satisfy and include needs, while also increasing the agency of very different social actors. Understanding these ecologies is important in order to identify patterns of temporary occupations.
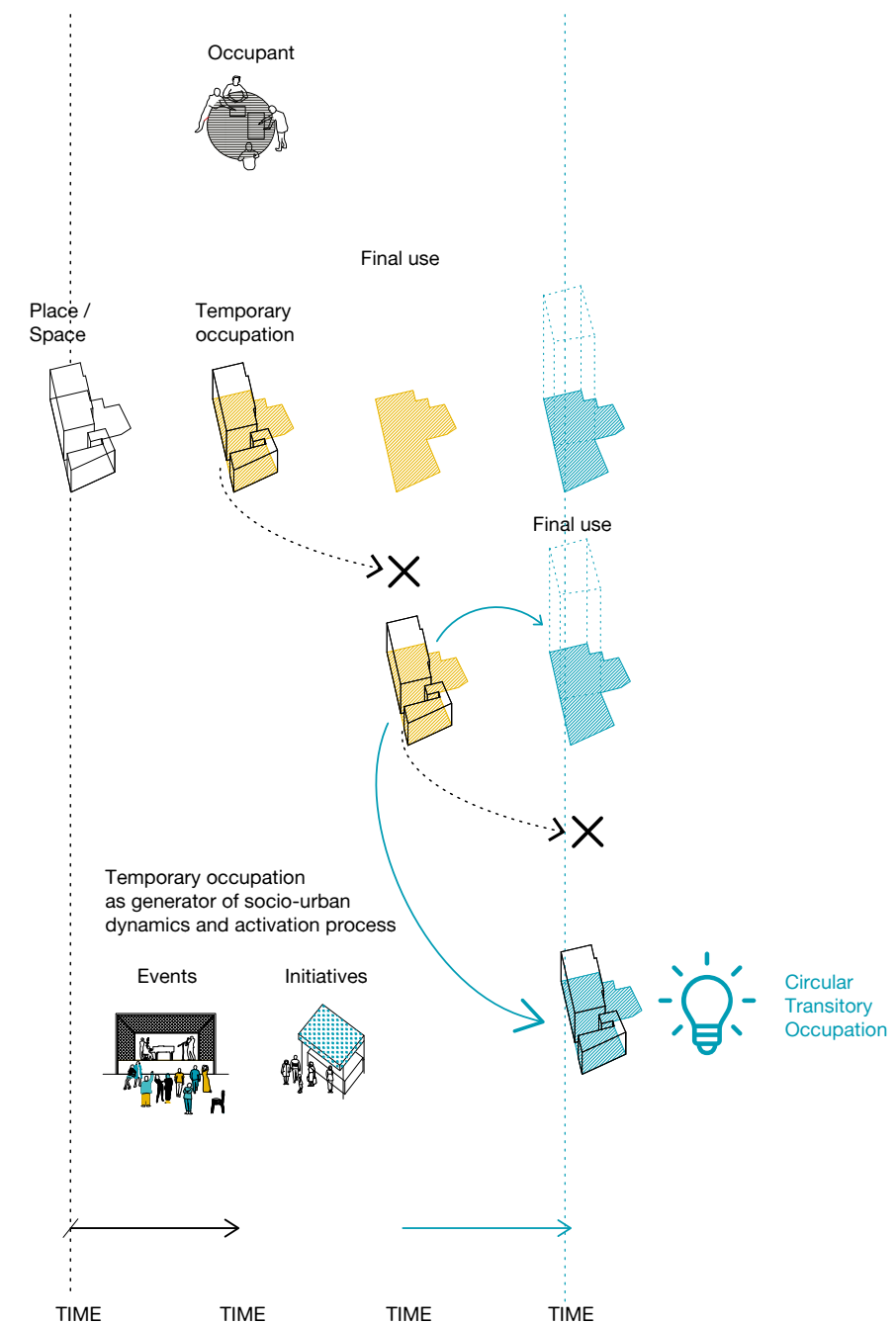

From temporary occupations to circular transitory occupations
The diagram shows how temporary occupations contribute to urban changes over time. During their conversion process, unoccupied spaces can host activities or generate new initiatives that can either find a place in the permanent project or relocate to a new space in the city and enter a cycle of transitory occupation.
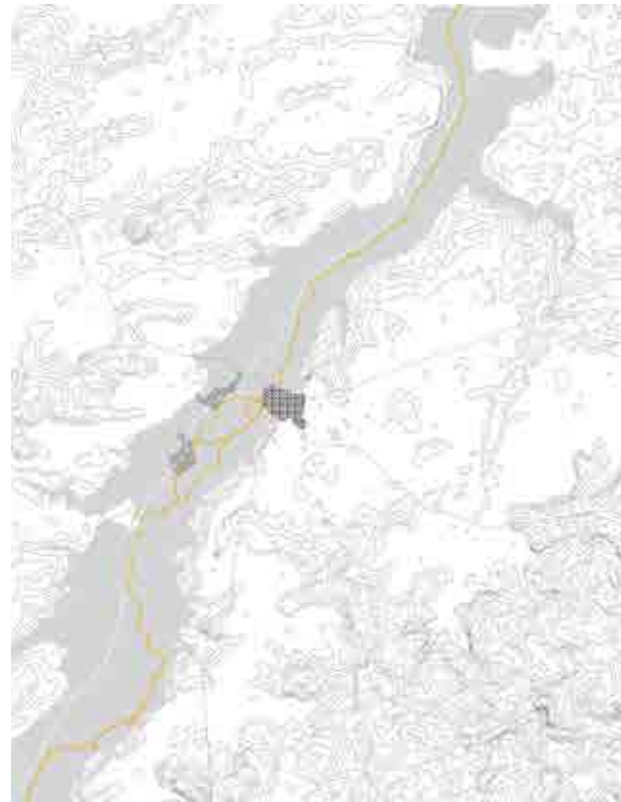
The Valley

The city

Research area

The Senne river
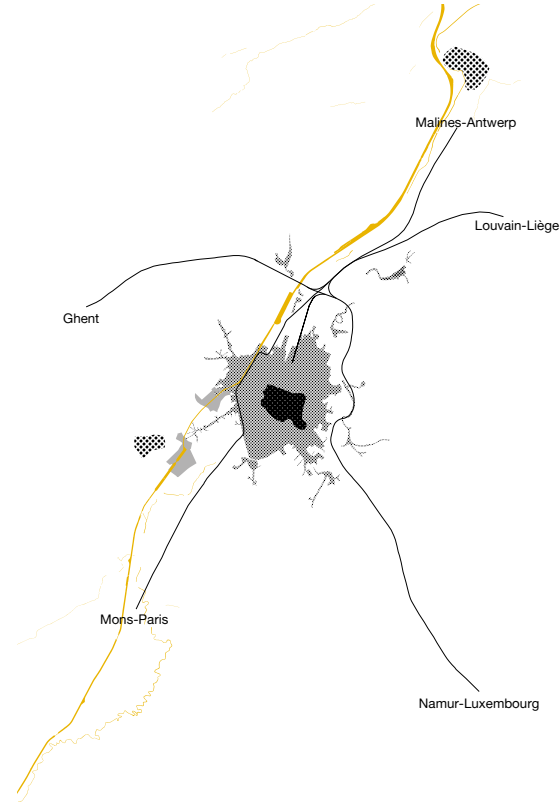
The city and towns in 1860s

The city in the xth century

Research area

Passengers and cargo lines
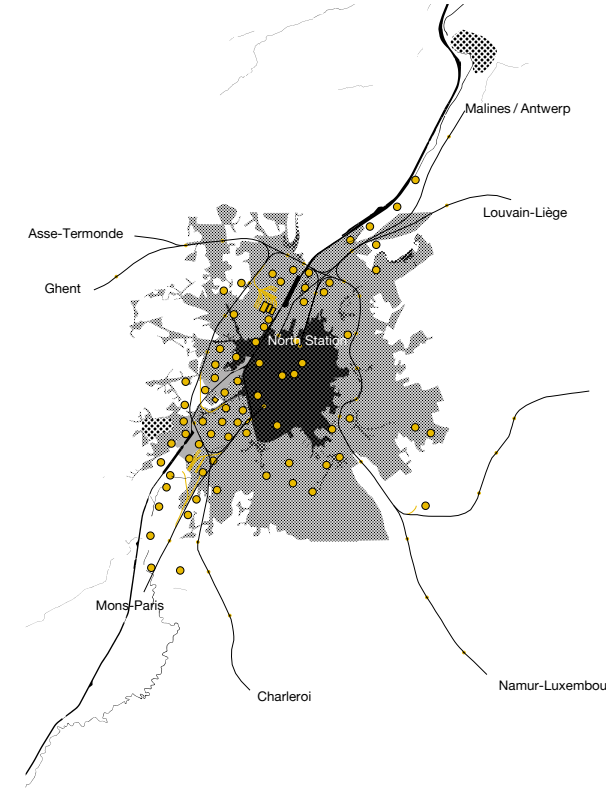
The city and towns in 1810s

Expansion of the city till 1930s

Industrial enterprises in 1910

Passengers railway stations

Goods and training lines

Passenger and cargo lines
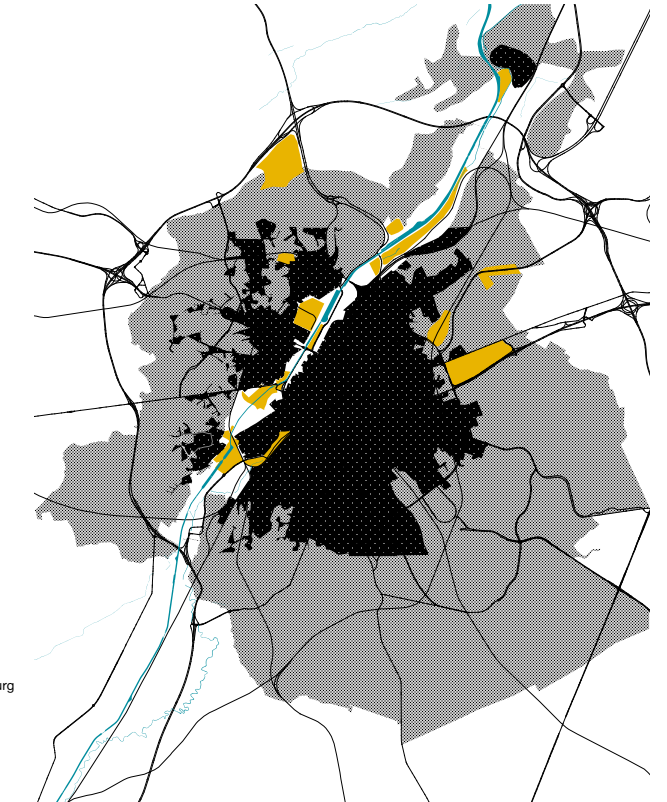
The city and towns in 1830s

Expansion of the city till now

The boundary of Canal Plan

Strategic pole

Road network

The historical reading of the city of Brussels through an interpretative mapping:
1.   The first settlements
2.   Transformation from agricultural land to industrial region during
        the Industrial Revolution
3.   The city continues its growth in opposite directions and towards the outskirts
4.   The city can no longer keep growing outwards due to a suburbanisation
        process based on a spreading model
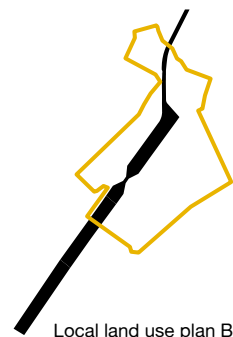
Local land use plan Biestebroeck

Case 1: Biestebroeck
The Biestebroeck basin is a priority site for the development of the canal neighbourhood. It is one of the areas subject to a new type of affectation ZEMU to the PRAS and subject to a PPAS. The objective is to promote the integration of port and productive activities in urban areas by developing innovative mixed solutions.
Yellow areas on the map represent plots affected by conversion projects.
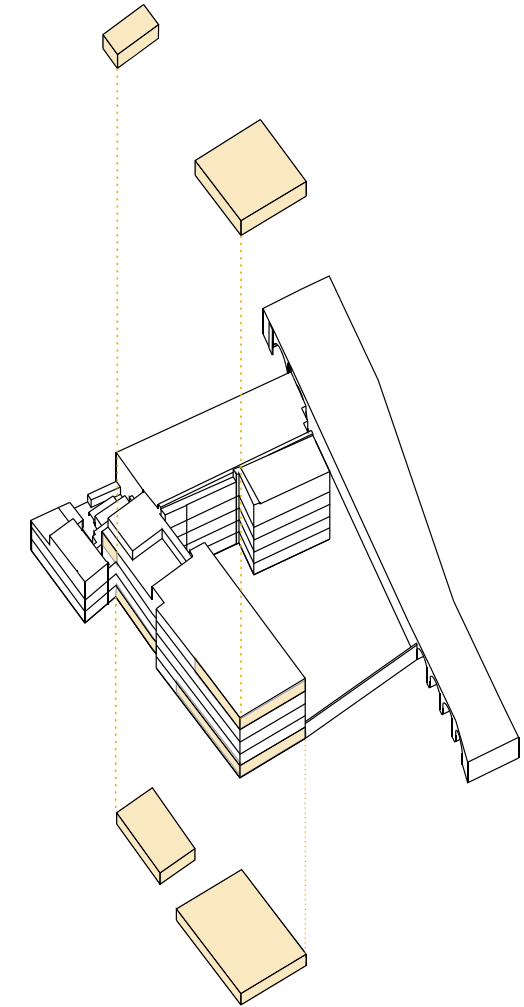
Studio CityGate
Studio CityGate is a transitory occupation project on the CityGate project site developed by citydev.brussels. Pending the start of the project, citydev.brussels has called on Entrakt to manage this transitory occupation. Entrakt is a corporation whose main business is the management of unoccupied properties by temporarily reallocating them. Spaces are rented between 1 and 10 euros per square metre and occupied by artist studios, cultural, social and economic activities, community facilities and a covered skate park.

L'uZinne

WIM (Wood in Molenbeek)

Decor atelier
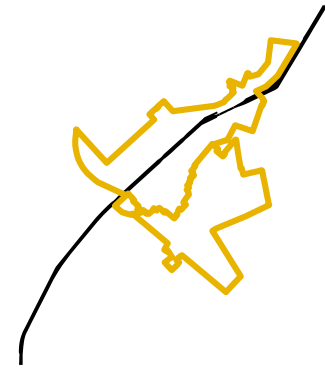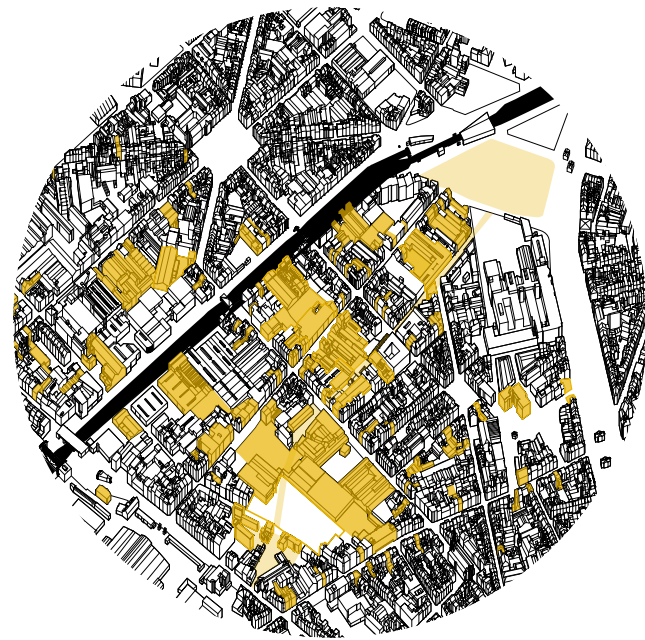
Neighbourhood Contract (CQ)
Petite Senne & Compass
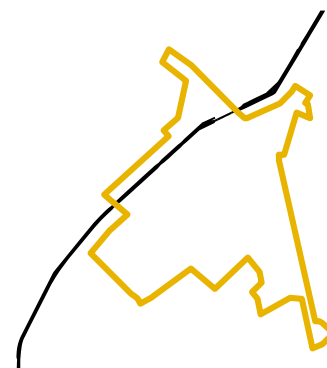
Urban renovation contract (CRU)
Heyvaert-Poincarré
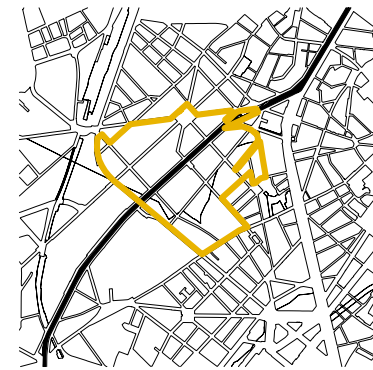
Urban renovation contract (CRU)
Heyvaert-Poincarré

▢ Projects under urban renewal projetcs

▢ Automobile dealers that could change in the future

Case 2: Heyvaert
The Heyvaert district is known for its many automobile dealers as well
as for the presence of slaughterhouses. A number of public revitalisation
strategies (neighbourhood contracts, urban renewal contracts) and
neighbourhood reconversion initiatives (master plan) are underway
in this area.

Pop-up Canal
As part of the sustainable neighbourhood contract 'Petite Senne', a
global subsidy of 100,000 euros is made available for the implementation
of project 'Pop Up Canal'. Its goal is to activate abandoned or
unexploited places and, at the same time, activate the neighbourhood's
social and relational fabric. 'L'uZinne'—coordinated by non-profit
association DAK-Domus Art Kunst—, project WIM (Wood in Molenbeek)
and Decor atelier are three examples of projects supported by the
municipality as part of 'Pop Up Canal'.

Designing ecosystem transition

In the current ecosystem, and in the general system of temporary occupations, we can find two main patterns or drivers: opportunism and activism. The 'opportunism' pattern of temporary occupation is related to transitional spaces located in upcoming projects. They are moved by creating added value (mostly economical) in the temporary space, and are answers to the neoliberal agenda's capacity of adaptation to densification pressure and new urban models. Connectivity, visibility and economic value are important values of this pattern.

Such spaces are seen as valuable economic assets by the city and private players, and their reach goes beyond the borders of the neighbourhood in which they are located. These spaces are mostly market-driven and follow certain constraints in terms of accessibility, inclusiveness and management. Visibility within the city is an important value. This model does not guarantee the permanence in time and space of the temporary uses. Projects are temporary in time and space and mostly volatile. CityGate is an example of a transitory occupation pattern driven by opportunism. The 'activism' pattern of temporary occupation exists even before spaces become available. They are moved by cultural or social values. They follow a strategy of changing the urban models' regime and are driven by solidarity, reciprocity and philanthropy (Iveson, 2013). They are well acquainted with the social fabric in which they exist, and hiddenness is often an important value. Flexibility in the use of the space and in its accessibility is appreciated. These spaces are a permanent reality in the city. The temporary activities deployed in the spaces are seen as an asset, but their continuity is also essential. Each of these spaces is unique and has a strongly self-organised model. Despite their meaningful impact in the city, they do not consolidate or establish. Volatility, contingency and adaptation are important values.

Both patterns of temporary occupation coexist within the city, bringing different dynamics and ecologies. Their coexistence might, in some cases, be a source of conflict. The various ecosystems in presence and the urban context of each site give priority to one model or the other. In some cases, both patterns are present and the Opportunism pattern is most likely to be preferred. The space in itself and the difficulties in term of regulations (perspective.brussels and BMA, 2018) might be significant obstacles to activism patterns.

Opportunism pattern

Drivers   Time   ·····>   Time

Inflexible space   Cultural exchange   C

                          Accesibility

Economic
activity
            Visibility   B   ?

                                                              A'

Not market-driven   Hidden   ?

Solidarity
reciprocity   A

            Local
            knowledge   Flexibility space   A"

Drivers   Time   ·····>   Time

Coexistence in time
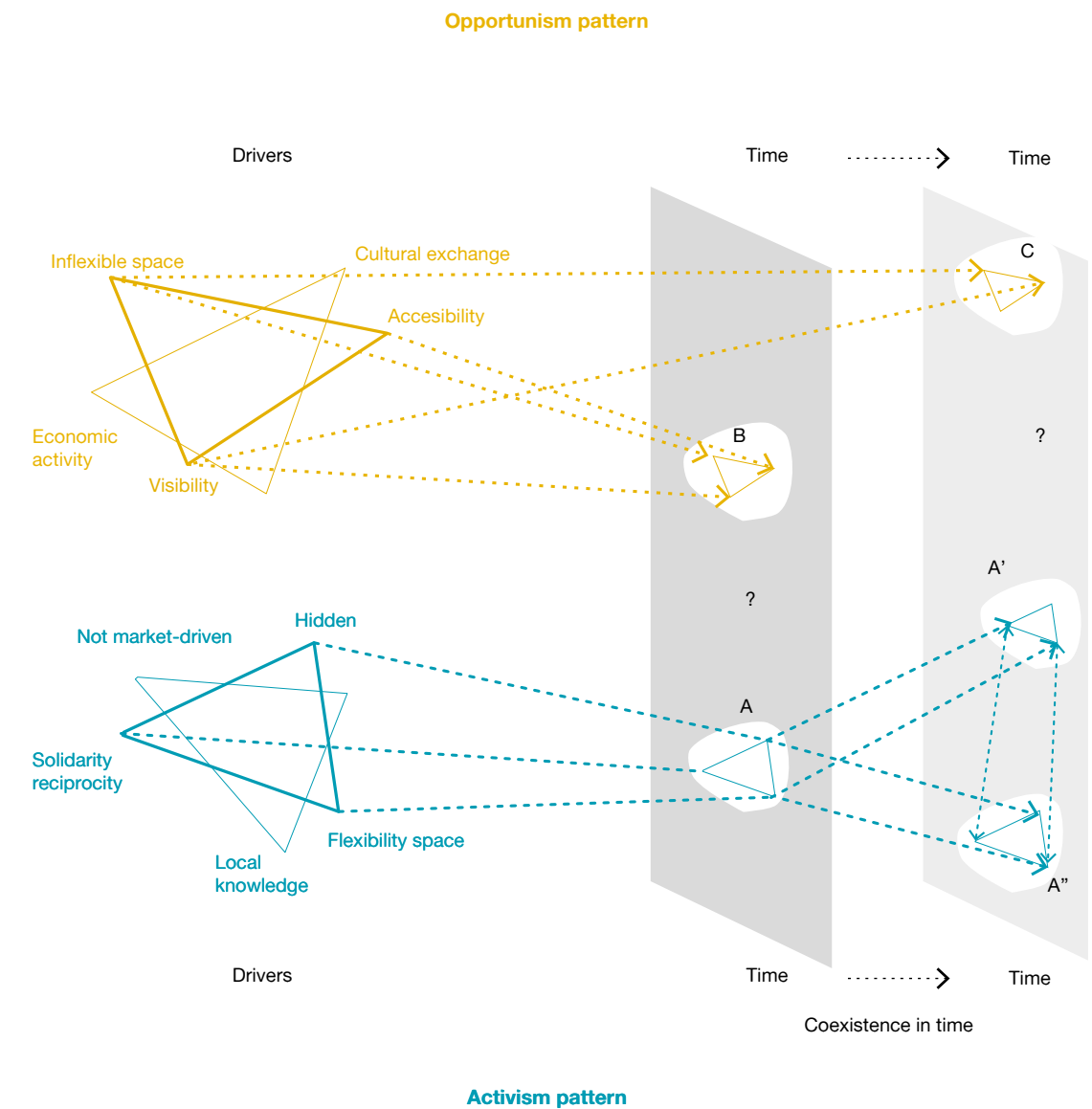
Activism pattern

Question of time of coexistence
How can new city models meet the need for a permanent temporal use of the spaces? Allowing and empowering spaces following activism patterns is an increasingly important strategy to keep a meaningful ecosystem in the city. Activism spaces can provide resilience and inclusiveness models that can deal with the city's current problems of housing, unemployment or economic disparities.

Case CityGate II

Case Pop-up Canal

- ○ Opportunism
- ○ Activism
- ✕ Missing aspect
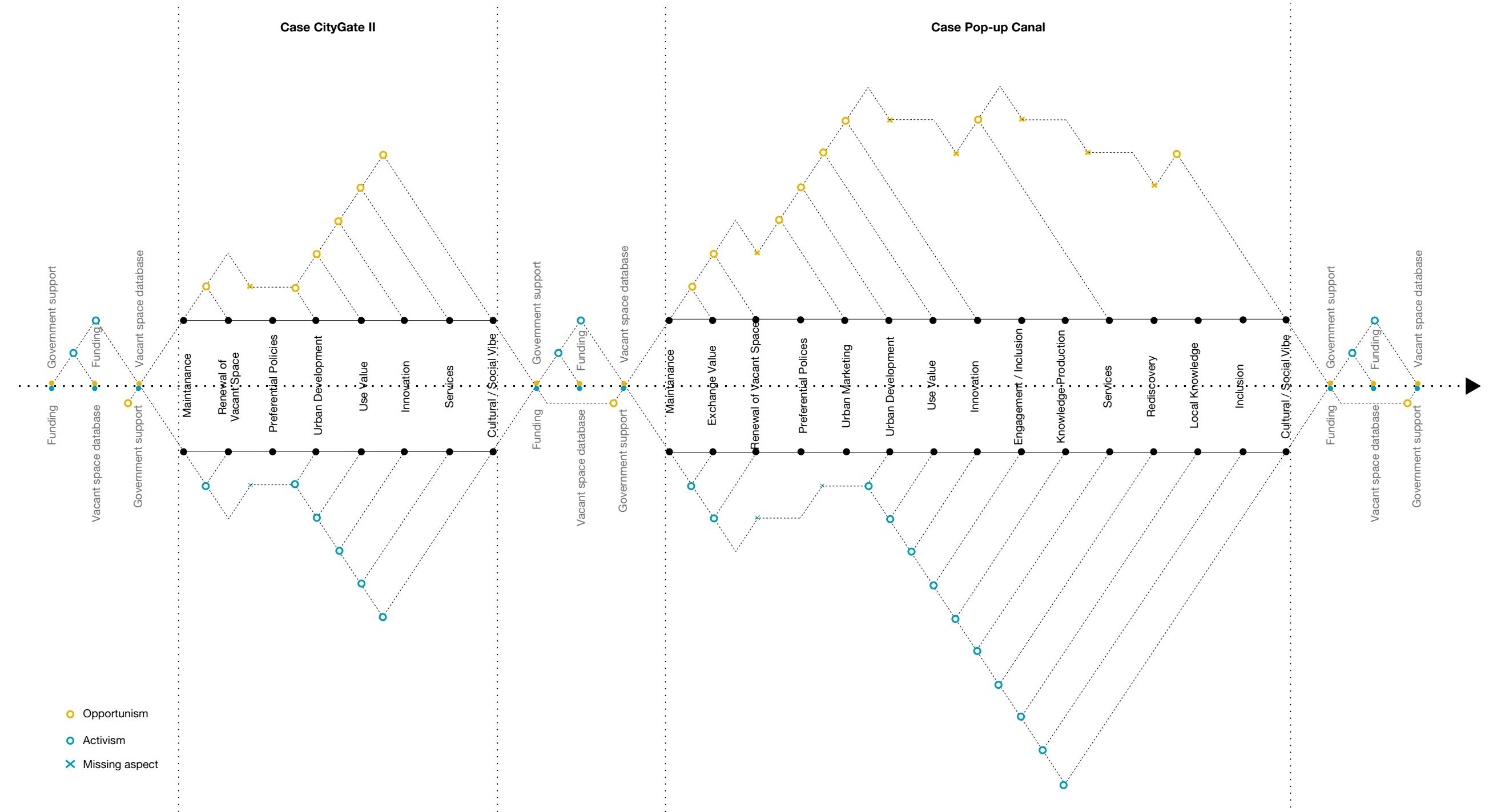
Regime change strategy
The two patterns of occupation in the densification process provide us with a system of strategies and drivers that affect the existing urban fabric and generate various dynamics and processes. Both patterns have their own values and aims, and they apply different strategies.

1. From temporary uses to transitory spaces:
Bringing underterminancy and uncertainty in
future design models
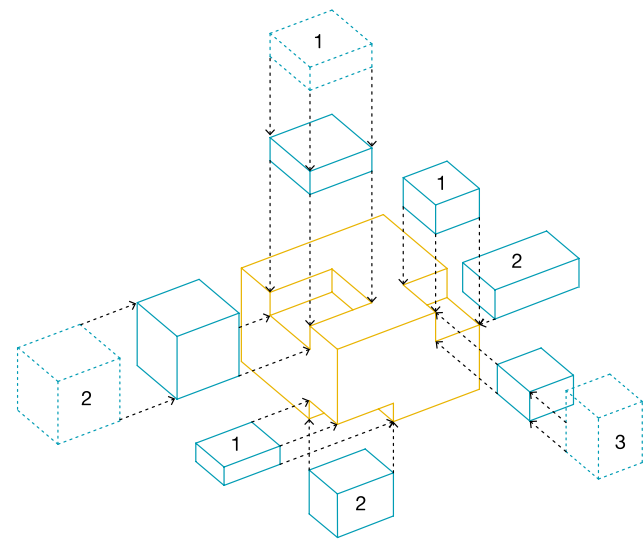
2. Flexible bureaucratic system:
Towards a regulatory system that takes into
account the ecology of the transitory spaces
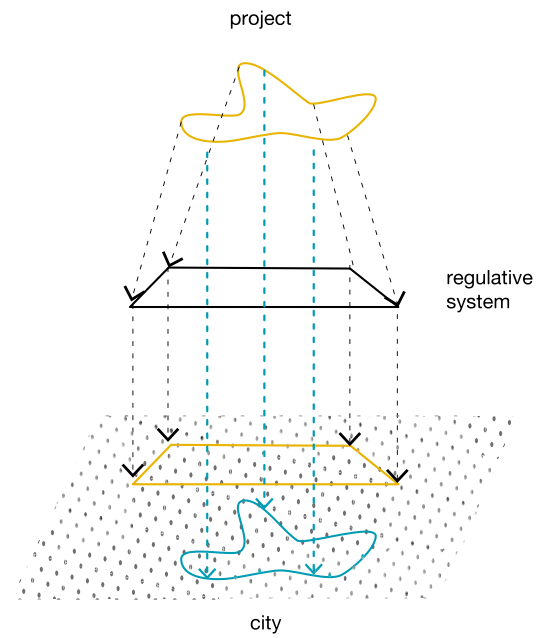
3. Urban context-theory of the holes
Urban context as an input for
The temporary spaces
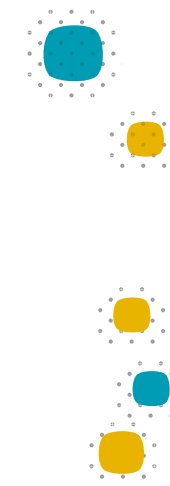
4. Time phasing
A time based approach in
a densification process

project

regulative
system

city
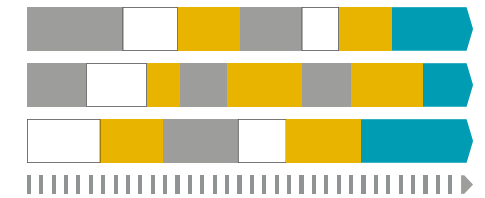
A combination of strategies is suggested in order to build a more
qualitative density and help multiple patterns coexist in the same
ecosystems; it also questions the idea of how temporal uses of
the space could have a place in a densified city.
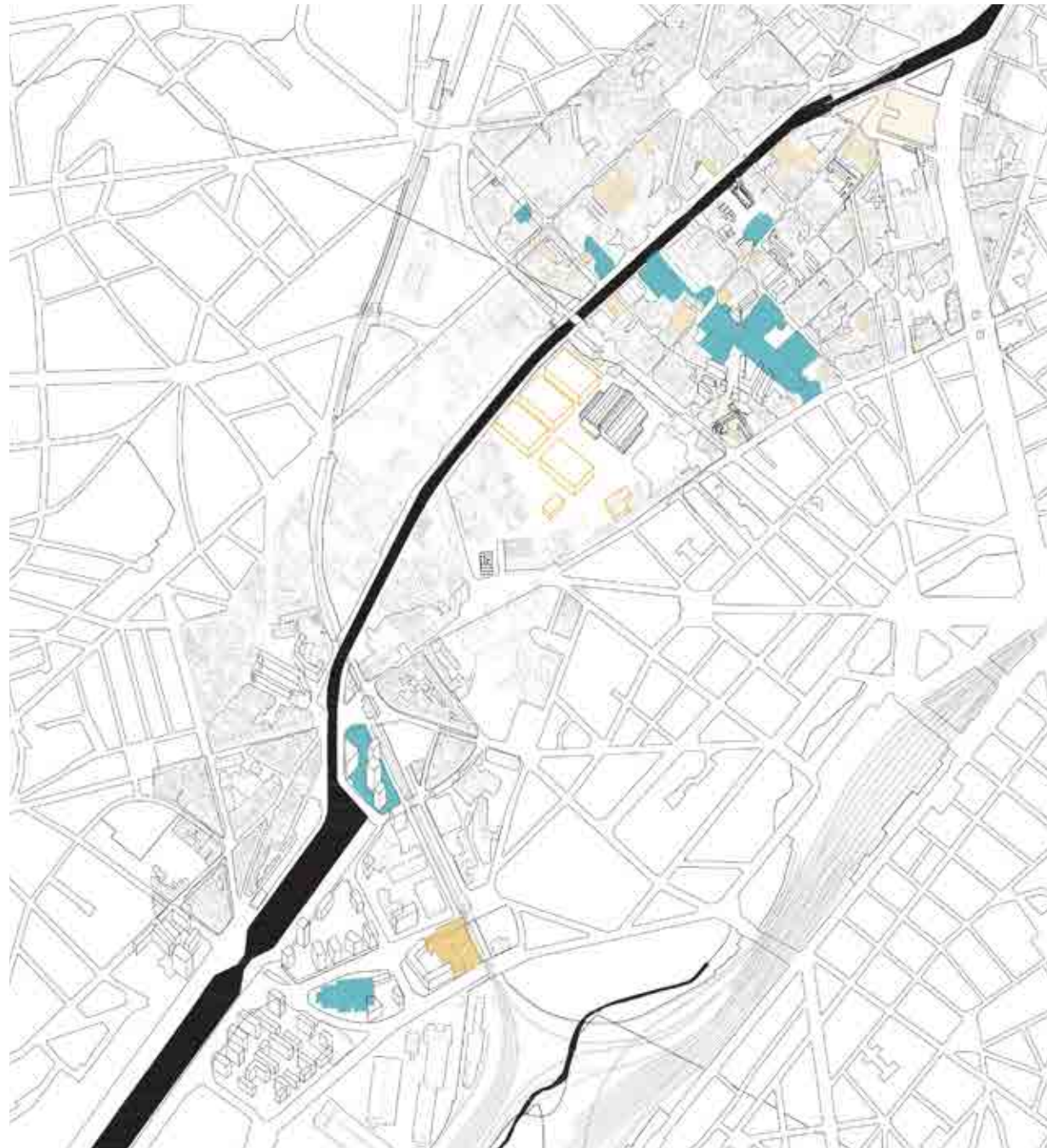
Time

s. XV
First settlements

s. XIX
Industry in the city

s. XX
Transformation of old industry

s. XXI
Densification models

Spaces of transformation

Industry

Temporary use

New developments

Densification

Opportunism pattern
Activism pattern

Activism pattern

Not market driven   Hidden

Solidarity reciprocity

Local knowledge

Unflexible space   Cultural exchange

Accesibility

Economical activity

Visibility

Opportunism pattern

Transitory spaces are a temporary spatial phenomenon,
but they are a permanent reality in the city. They are an
important part of the whole ecosystem of the city.
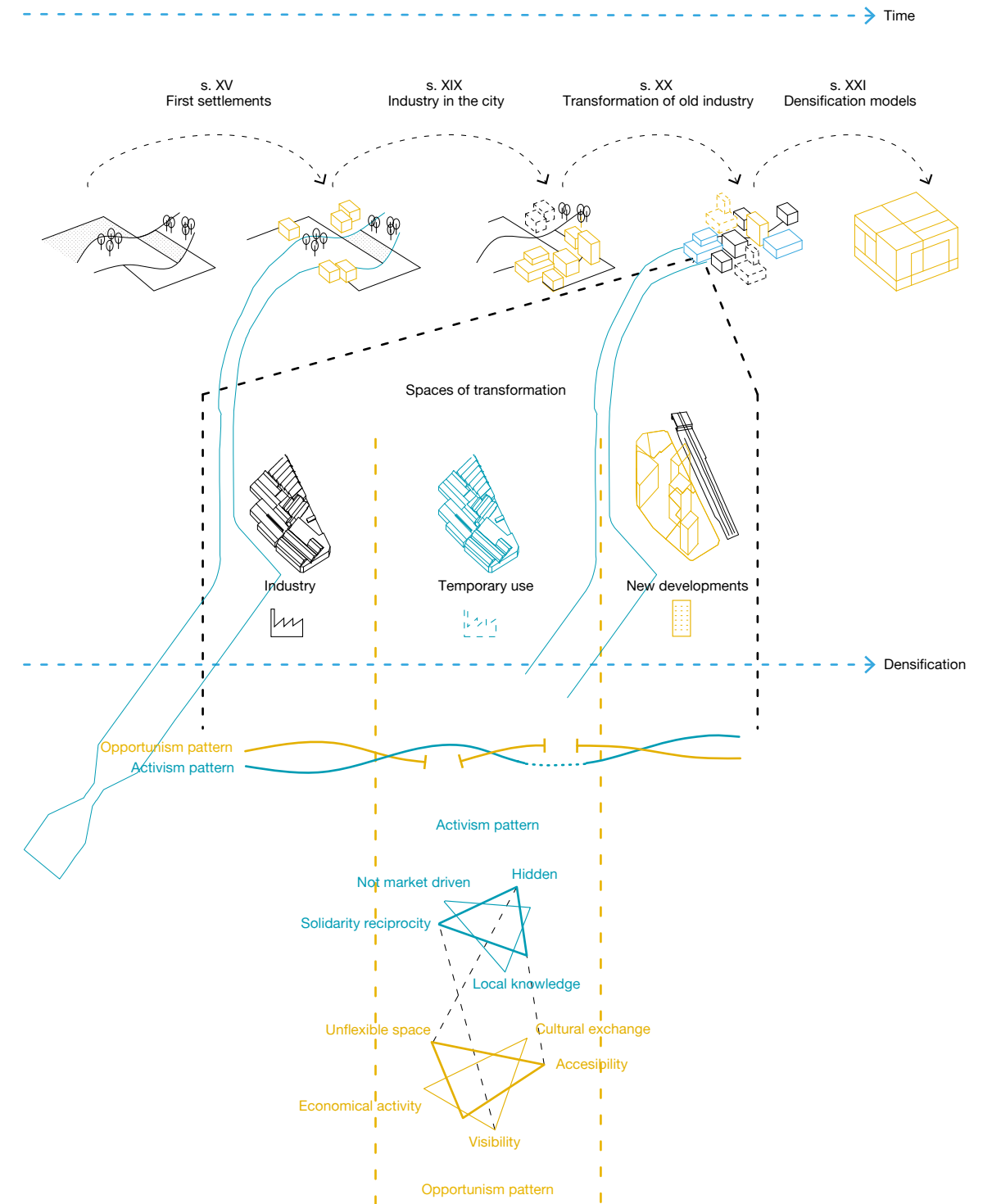
Conclusion

**Valentina Bonello, Ernesto Diez, Johans Figueroa,
Anna Ternon, Ivana Vukelic**

**Densification is probably one of the city's most important
transformation processes. An inherent process in the city,
densification has never been a linear process.
The current urban fabric is the result of the various waves
of densification processes.**

Urban transformation has constantly dealt with the multiple dynamics of urban growth or decline, urbanisation and economic flows. It has been a flexible model of evolution. During the various transformation processes, spaces characterised by indeterminacy, uncertainty and flexibility have appeared. Historically, these places have been spaces of opportunity and inclusion. Vacant plots or buildings have been extremely important places that help build a resilient and inclusive city. They help empower various mechanisms of self-organisation, activism and day-to-day survival in the city. New arrivals, disadvantaged population and natural landscapes have found here a place and a time for their inclusion in the city. These spaces have been neglected by the administration and the private market. Temporary occupations are strongly linked with these spaces, where they find a place to operate. However, today, new models of occupation appear linked with market-based profit systems. As we have seen, different patterns of occupation occur under a densification agenda, coexisting in time and space.

Today, in the city of Brussels, former industrial sites are developed in order to address the challenge of democratic growth. However, the current agenda deals with the transformation of uses in a quantitative vision. Transitory spaces are a temporary spatial phenomenon, but they are a permanent reality in the city. As an important part of the city's entire ecosystem, their existence must be guaranteed. Their dynamics of empowerment provide a constant source of inclusiveness and resilience. Still, the coexistence of two models must be understood as an opportunity to enrich the temporary uses of places in the transformation process.

The transitory spaces that have always existed in the city are no longer considered as part of a long-term strategy. Temporary uses of space are only envisioned during a short period of time until the final project is implemented. Still, we consider that — as history has shown — the temporariness of spaces must be a constant strategy in order to always provide spaces that promote inclusion and resilience and, at the same time, provide value and knowledge to a densification agenda. In order to design the city, we need to ensure the continuity of these spaces in order to develop a model of city based on values of inclusiveness, ecology and resilience.

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Stakeholder insights – Entrakt

**Interview with Gerd De Wilde, Former manager of Studio CityGate
This text is issued from an interview by Anna Ternon regarding
the project produced by the 'Density' group.**

Studio CityGate is a very complex project to begin with. The size of the site, as well as the state it was in, meant a lot of money had to be invested, including to bring it up to code. This investment put pressure on the projects developed on the site, especially because they could only be active during a limited time frame and because — in the case of private companies — their presence had to be profitable. In addition, while the occupation of CityGate is planned over a period of five years, each project's actual period of activity is never really five years, as occupants come in gradually.

The practice of temporary occupations is still developing, and there is not much expertise available yet; on top of that, legal aspects are not adapted to real-world practices. Public institutions are starting to take part in these initiatives, but there are many parameters that could make projects difficult and prevent them from reaching a positive conclusion. CityGate is an interesting case to learn from, considering its size, the building's state and the various players involved in the project and who are active on the site; this is a case study that will enable us to question what is meaningful and what isn't. As of now, the exercise is still ongoing.

Regarding the coexistence of the various players, I think it's important that different approaches are used. There is a huge difference, to me, between commercial players and non-profit players, and both are necessary. They do not work at similar scales, nor on the same types of projects. When you have money to invest, you can do many things that are not within reach for socially oriented projects with little money and subsidised employees; conversely, when you work on a commercial project, it's very difficult to dedicate much time to the project's social impact. Still, the data from the Saint-Vide-Leegbeek campaign shows that millions of square metres in Brussels are vacant; more than enough for everyone to find

what they need, and for practices to develop in all directions.

Regarding occupations that prefigure the site's future permanent use, this largely depends on what this permanent use is. It can be difficult for a temporary occupation to offer functions related to those of a planned school, for instance, or a hospital. On the other hand, temporary occupations are ideally suited to any future use related to creation or cultural events. It can also contribute to activating an area and energising a neighbourhood, even though this can be difficult to implement. In the case of CityGate, we have attempted to build relationships with the neighbourhood, but you also want to avoid setting people up for disappointment by creating something that will not necessarily last. The occupants of each location, who remain the main players involved, put significant efforts into just launching their project; and developing relationships with the neighbourhood only comes second. In addition, neighbourhood residents do not necessarily interact directly; it can take some time for people to socialise with a new entity, and this is not always compatible with the time frames involved in temporary occupation. What's more, projects will often reach the people who are receptive to such initiatives in the first place, and these are not always the same people who are in need of this type of activation.

Stakeholder insights – Communa

Sâm Rosenzweig, in charge of finances Interview conducted by Anna Ternon, following Dessiner la Transition seminar in April 2019, during which the 'Density' group's work was presented.

For Communa, what is most important in how temporary occupation practices evolve is the concept of transient urban planning, i.e. the idea that the temporary phase influences the public or private owners' long-term plans. Communa attempts to include this aspect in its projects. For instance, the 'La Serre' project in Ixelles should prefigure the community space planned as part of the future housing project. We have tested multiple uses, and the bicycle workshop has been very successful. We would like to explain what worked to the authorities of Ixelles municipality, so that they may include certain conditions when selling the building next year.

The practice of temporary occupation is becoming increasingly common, but there is no framework enabling the development of transitory urban planning. Temporary occupation is systematically activated at the end of the process, whereas it could be a valuable tool for 'upstream' reflections on urban planning, for instance in the context of neighbourhood contracts and urban renovation contracts. Adapting the regulatory framework should enable reflection on prefiguration with players beyond public or para-public organisations. The Region is considering this, keeping in mind the risk that it could benefit for-profit stakeholders whose management conditions often place occupants in an even more unstable situation. On this question, Communa has gathered with other associations to create Saint-Vide-Leegbeek, Brussels' '20th Municipality'. Our demand is that the regulatory framework would be made more flexible only for actors active in the social sphere and that the generalisation of temporary occupation contributes to the public interest. This division between stakeholders that are active

in the social sphere and others is not only about their business model but also about the status you give to the occupants, the rights you grant them, how you treat them, what your goal is in terms of integration in the neighbourhood and the model of your organisation itself.

Some also claim that generalising and institutionalising temporary occupations could make them inaccessible to minor players. However, I believe that the territory's resources are such that the temporary occupation movement enables different players to coexist, because the projects involved do not overlap. For instance, I do not think squatters would have occupied a building like the former mail sorting centre or the Ixelles barracks (Usquare). Smaller-scale occupations target a different type of building. Communa was born out of smaller occupations, and we will continue to support these projects and collaborate with the groups behind them.