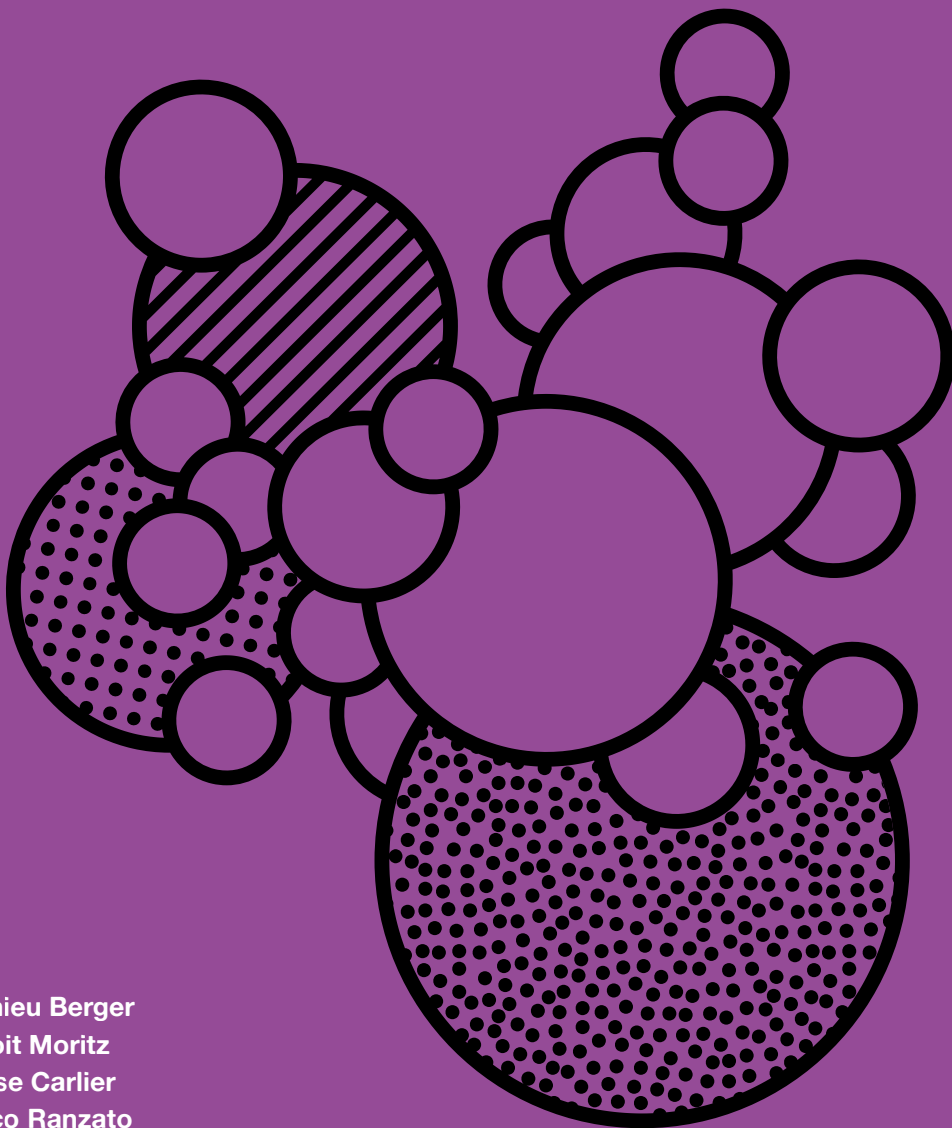


Designing Urban Inclusion

Metrolab Brussels MasterClass I



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Louise Carlier
Marco Ranzato
(eds)



Metrolab series

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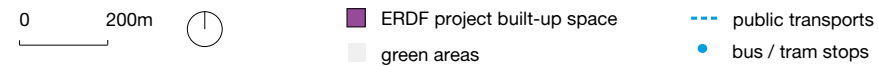
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Context plan



Site 3: Abbaye

Cultural project, community and participation

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**To invite****To create****To allow****To host****To share****To celebrate**

Introduction

The Abbaye de Forest, with its garden and church, is a historically and symbolically significant site located at the centre of the municipality of Forest, in the south of the Brussels-Capital Region. It was established in the 12th century as a place of worship and prayer, mainly dedicated to hosting noble and religious women from the aristocracy. Bought by the municipality of Forest in 1964, it was restored until the 1990s, when it became a protected heritage site used by the municipality. During this period, reflections were launched on its possible use as a cultural centre that would host a library, kindergarten, meeting rooms and concert hall. However, the Abbaye de Forest started to deteriorate, rendering many of its area unusable. Apart from some cultural activities in the former priory, it is now largely underused and in a state of advanced disrepair.

Behind the Abbaye de Forest is the Saint-Denis neighbourhood, characterised by a strong industrial urban fabric, mainly due to the presence of the D'leteren automobile factory since 1948. Today, the landscape and morphology of this district give the feeling of an enclosed area; bordered by the Audi factory to the west and north and a railway line to the east. Despite these boundaries, the site boasts certain inclusive qualities. The atmosphere on the site is conducive to various types of outdoor activities for different groups. Furthermore, since its refurbishing, the Saint-Denis square hosts a market at least three times a week, where people in the neighbourhood can meet. The ERDF project at the Abbaye de Forest led us to look into the municipality's plan to transform this religious space in a cultural centre; this has included a reflection on the concept of culture. Considering the wide conceptualisation range of this term, we decided to draw upon a broader pluralistic understanding where cultural spaces should focus on meeting current human needs without compromising the ability of several groups, each with their own values, lifestyles and activities, to meet their own needs and feel welcome in a common space dedicated to meeting and cooperation. On the basis of this conception of culture, we reflected on the ways in which the site and its specificities could be improved in order to become more inclusive towards all populations and better interact with its surrounding environment. As a result of this process, we have transformed the initial proposal for a cultural centre into a broader common public space building, allowing for interaction between different users.

Insights

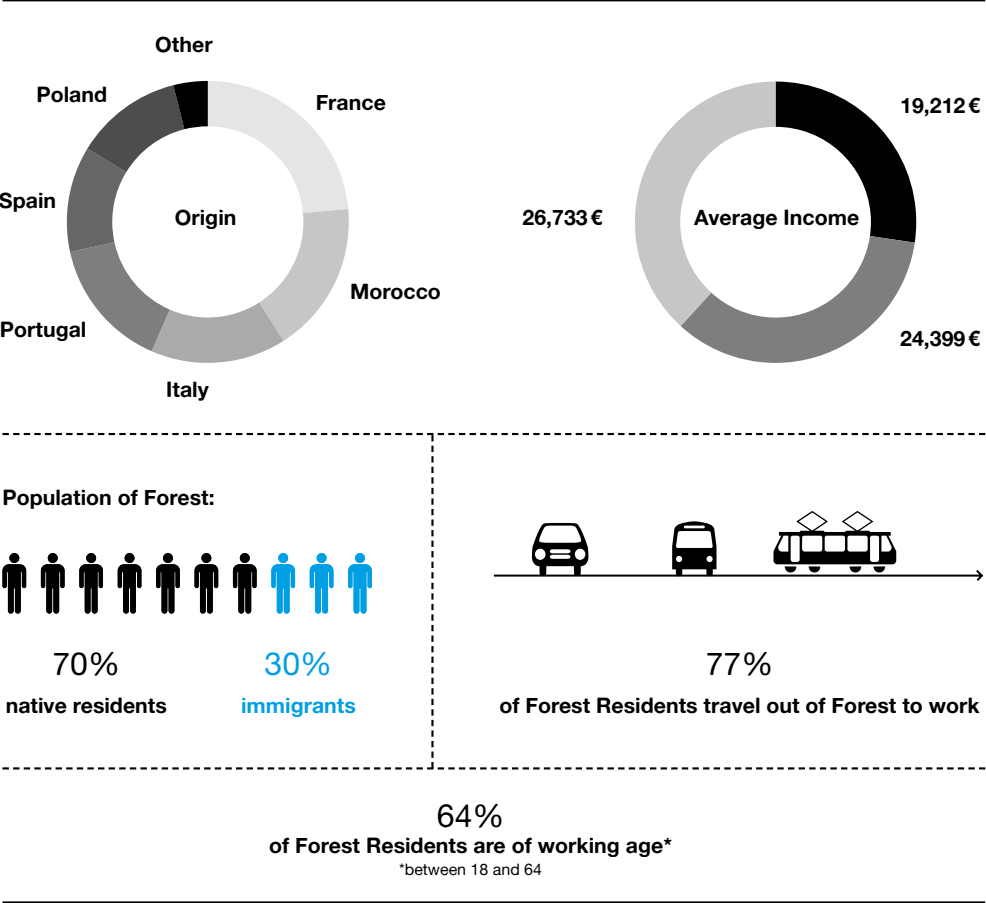
When we first delved into the characteristics of the municipality of Forest and the immediate surroundings of the Abbaye de Forest, we found consistent demographic similarities with the Brussels-Capital Region for most main indicators. Considering that Brussels is divided into different areas, it was interesting to see the same socio-geographical layout on a smaller scale. This still means that Forest, and more particularly the area surrounding the Abbaye de Forest, has high unemployment and low wages. Within this context, where pockets of poverty are prevalent, it is also crucial to shed light on the current real-estate developments geared to the middle class in the area. We also found that the fairly large number of residential projects geared towards the middle class is placing increased pressure on the social mix of the area.

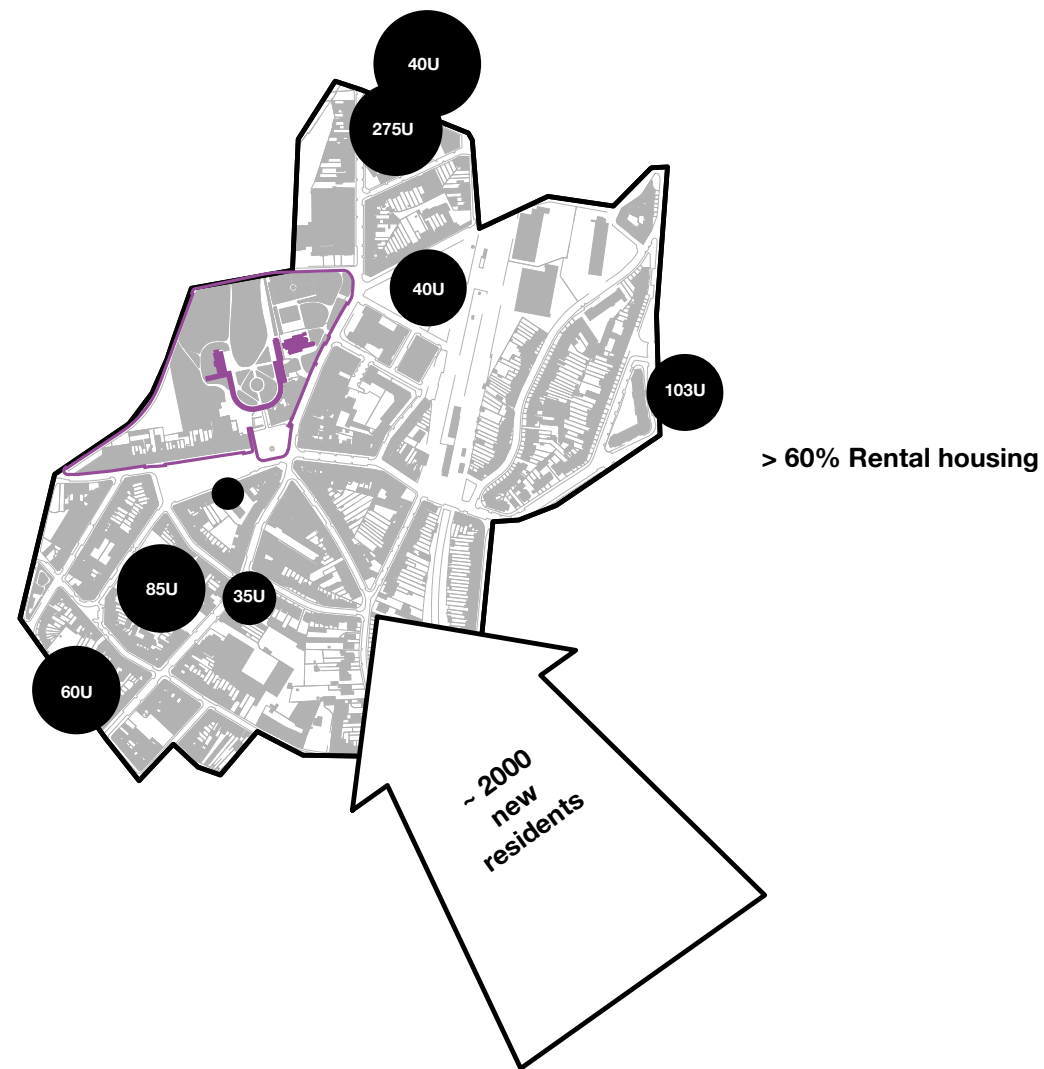
The ERDF funding for the Abbaye de Forest’s redevelopment was merged within a broader ‘Contrat de Quartier’, the fifth such project in the area. For us, this dual source of funding seems to be the ideal opportunity to improve certain problematic elements linked to the limited time and non-recurrent aspects imposed by the Contrat de Quartier funding. We believe that overhauling of the participative elements would be a perfect stepping stone to producing a project for the collaborative design and management of new flexible spaces in the Abbaye de Forest.

Forest: Brussels in a municipal scale ‘It’s Brussels in small Scale’

The demographic data from the ‘monitoring des quartiers’ initiative and the Brussels-Capital Health and Social Observatory shows us several similarities between the Saint-Denis neighbourhood, Forest, and the Brussels-Capital Region in terms of average age, foreign nationality rate, and unemployment rate.

	Forest	Brussels
Average Age	37,6	37,4
Nationality	30% #1 France #2 Morrocco #3 Italy #4 Portugal	32% #1 France #2 Romania #3 Morocco #4 Portugal
Income / Employment		
Emploment Rate	51%	47,9%
Unemployment Rate	25%	22,7%





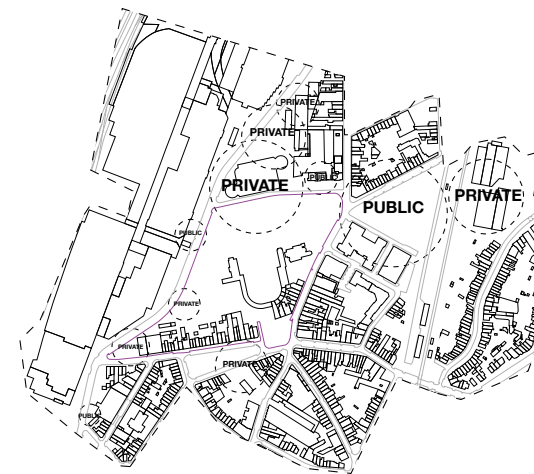
Housing situation (U = Units of housing)

Source: Dossier de base CQD Saint-Denis (2014)

A number of sites have development plans for higher value housing, aimed at new middle-class residents. In total, around 700 housing units are planned, which equates to approximately 2,000 new residents. This would increase the area's population by 50%. The arrival of higher value housing, improved amenities, and cultural activities (through the ERDF project) would raise the property values in the area and increase the pressure on the current rental market. This could lead to the displacement of those residents on the rental market who are the most vulnerable.



The Audi factory and its surrounding industrial zone, which extends over the entire western part of the municipality, is a significant border that cuts the area off from the rest of municipality. In addition, only 12 out of the factory's 2,512 employees live in Forest. This results in daily commuting patterns that are manifested through a large number of private and public car parks in the area.

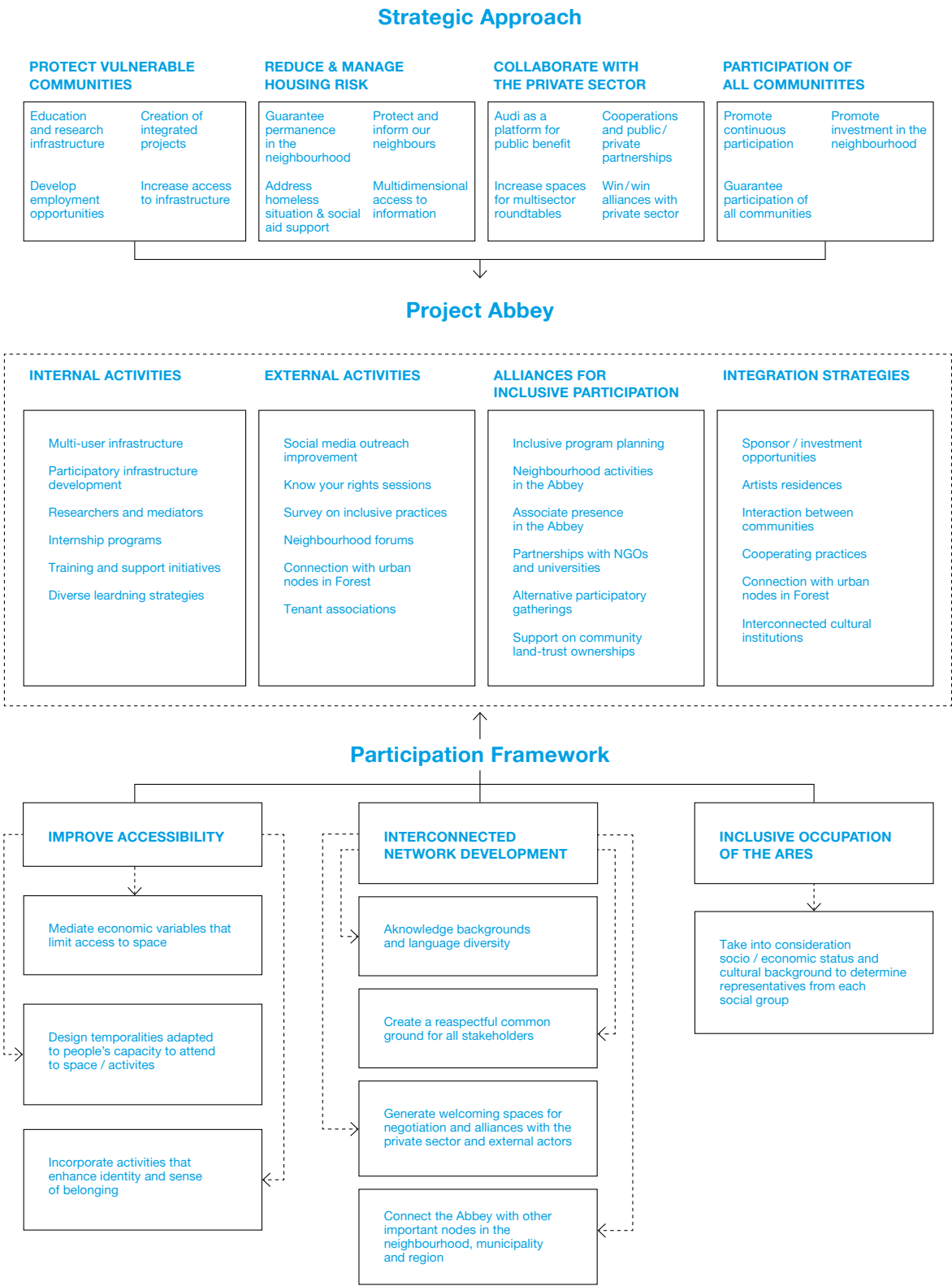


There are more than 12 parking lots less than a 1000m distance from Audi Complex. In addition to these parking lots, temporary vacant parking lots such as the public school gardens, marketplaces are also being used as parking lots.

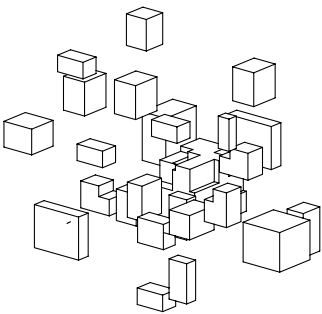
Scenarios

The revitalization project of the Abbaye de Forest addressed the basic infrastructural needs of the neighbourhood, but did not address the socio-economic needs of the resident community. It is important to acknowledge the diversity in population and networks when considering the development of a sustainable plan that will benefit the community. We unpack and illustrate the needs and relationships that exist within the community, and address those concepts, developing various plans that could benefit and motivate the community to engage with the Abbaye de Forest, making it no longer a neutral structure, but rather a hub for innovative designs focused on inclusion.

We decided to design a what-if scenario, focusing on the possibility of more inclusive and representative partnerships, at the scale not only of the Abbaye de Forest itself, but also encompassing the neighbourhood of Saint-Denis. It is important to include and unite the people within the neighbourhood, but also to involve them in the decision on what happens in the civic centre and beyond. Following this principle, we believe that it would be possible to imagine the new spaces in the refurbished Abbaye de Forest not only as a place for all citizens to receive services, but also as a place where collaboration would be central to the design process and allocation of spaces within the Abbaye de Forest. The Abbaye de Forest is a venue that should be respected in terms of its structural heritage, and that has potential to develop into a site that would meet the need of an intercultural community in the neighbourhood, benefiting inhabitants on multiple levels.

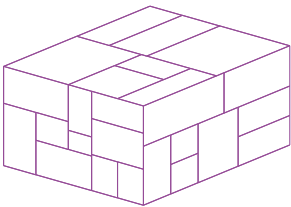


This diagram shows a process of combining important values, which we have determined from our analysis, with a framework of participation, in order to create sustainable projects within the Abbaye de Forest renovation project. The values were identified based on our observations, combining similar concepts together and assessing what is needed in order to support and sustain these values. The participation framework is a method for addressing variables that should be critically assessed when considering inclusive participation.



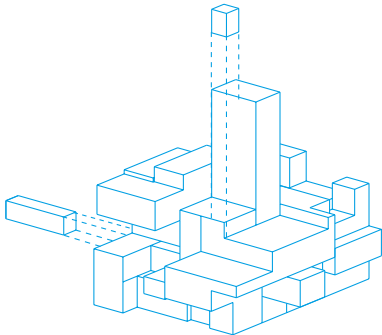
Situation 1
Underutilized Opportunities

- Scattered potential opportunities for a greater societal inclusion.
- Connect the Abbey with other important nodes in the neighbourhood, municipality and region.
- The plan addresses some elements of diversity within the local area but at a limited extent.



Situation 2
ERDF Proposal

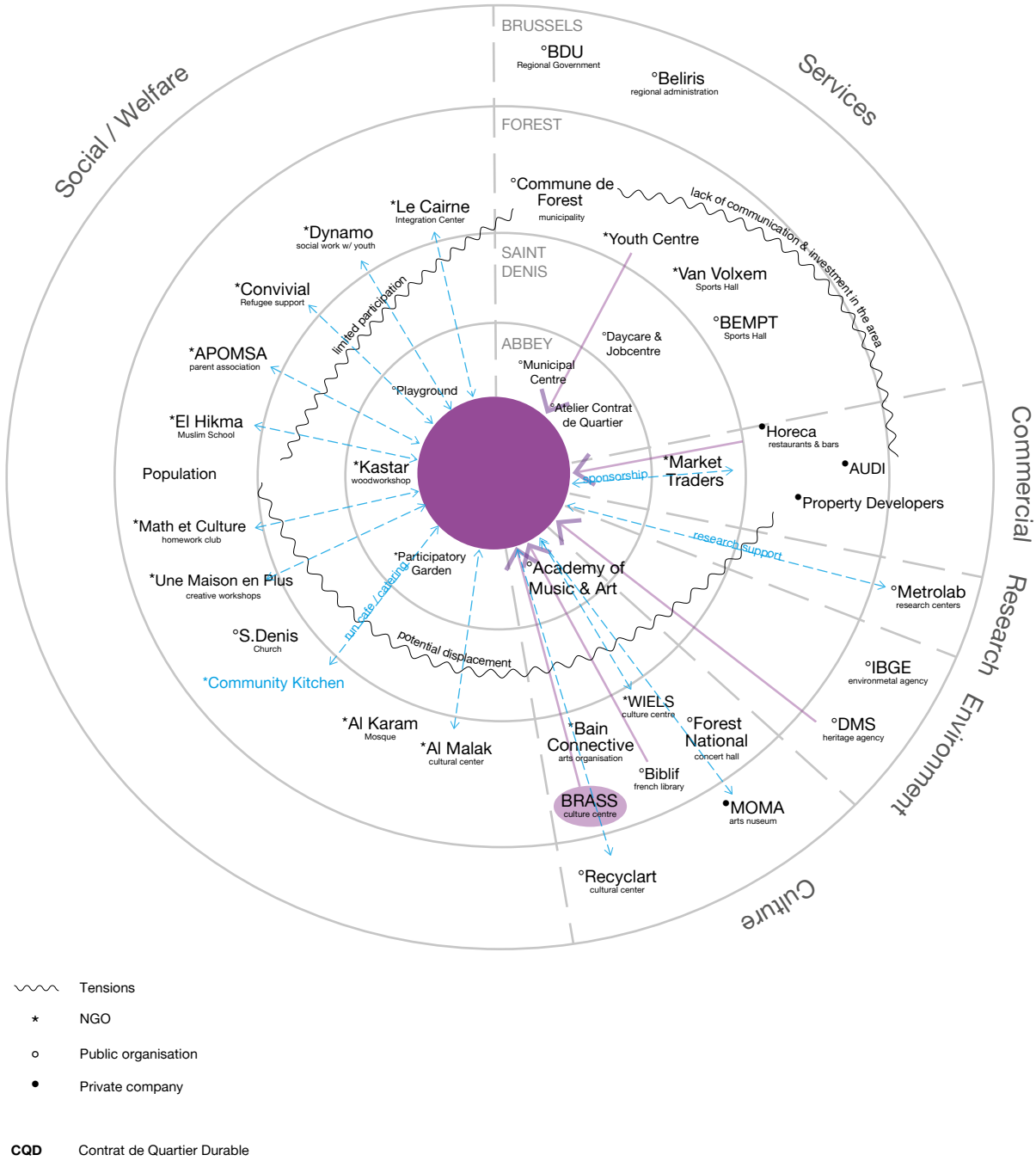
- Conventional concept of a Cultural Center with rigid programming.
- Difficulty incorporating diversity within the current system.



Situation 13
Expected Co-Existence

- Designing a socio-spatial platform to produce an inclusive participatory design process.
- Improve intersections and exchanges over time in order to embrace complexity.
- Promote inclusive diversity while celebrating the heritage of the site.

The testing box shows the existing situation, the ERDF plan, and our proposal to achieve a more inclusive space. First, by expanding the concept of culture we suggest focusing on each group by respecting their specific needs and values. Secondly, we show the opportunities that exist in the neighbourhood but that are currently scattered. The ongoing project for the Abbaye de Forest involves a rigid centre that tends to neglect the complexity of the neighbourhood. We offer a 'plug-in' to the ongoing project for the Abbaye de Forest, by designing a platform that enhances intersections and exchanges over time and that takes into account the new arrivals.



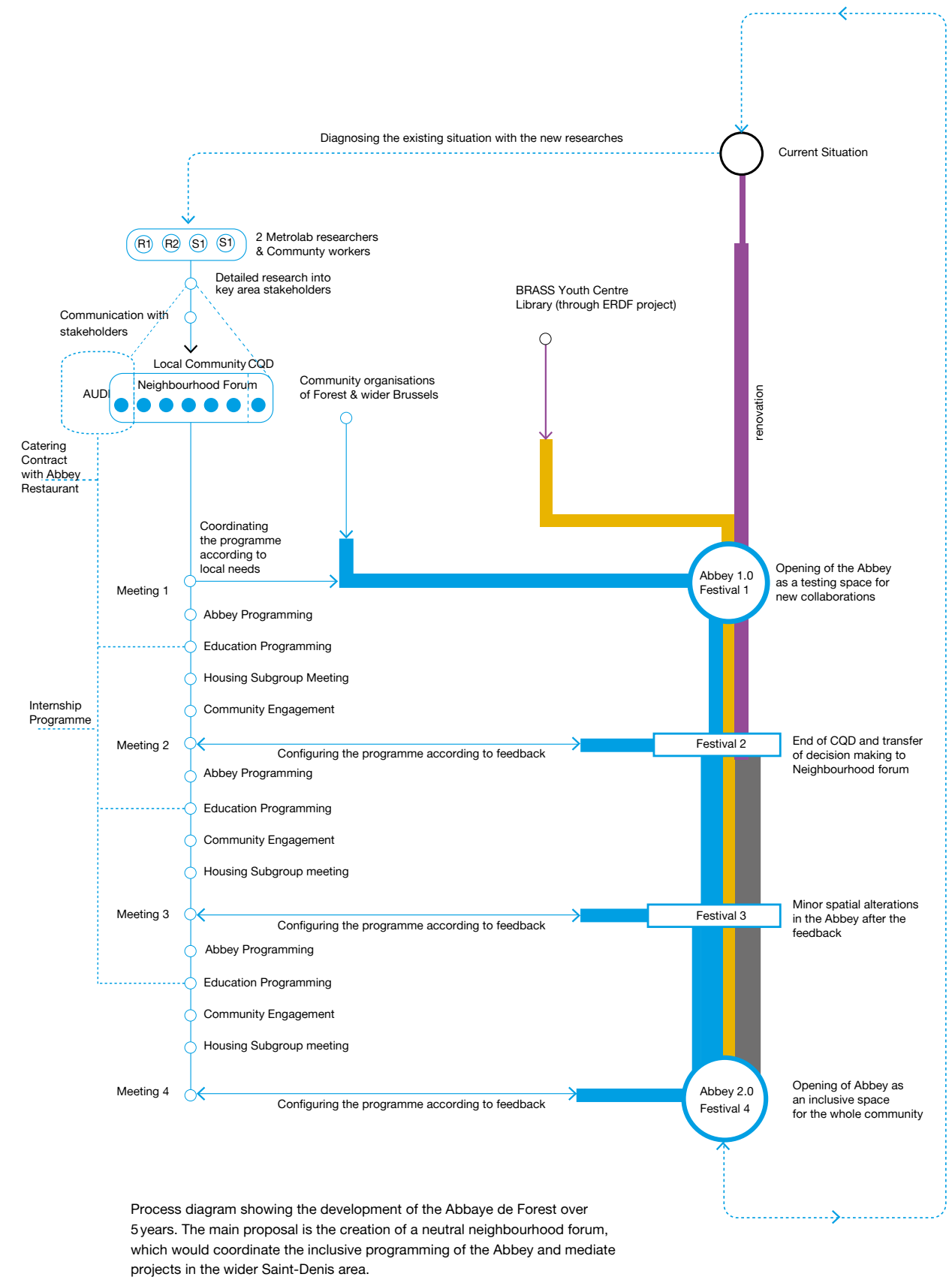
Currently, organisations that can contribute to the cultural and social development of the Saint-Denis neighbourhood are located at a considerable distance, which somewhat limits their effectiveness. At the same time, there are a number of tensions, such as the limited involvement of Audi in the area, the risk of displacement of the local population due to private developments, and the limited engagement of the municipality with the residents. The ERDF project would bring in a number of new, mainly cultural, players and activities into the Abbaye de Forest. Our proposal would add to these new uses by temporarily hosting various social and cultural organisations into the Abbaye de Forest. In this way, the local population would benefit from more diverse support.

Proposal

We believe it would be possible to create a participation initiative where an awareness campaign on the use of the Abbaye de Forest's flexible-use spaces would encourage actors to collaborate, in turn promoting the development of networks within the community.

In order to produce this collaborative Abbaye de Forest, we suggest a design plan tackling two main elements. Firstly, we developed a civic collaboration policy that would create a space where needs and opinions could be brought up, discussed, and mediated. Secondly, we designed a physical model based on flexibility in spatial and temporal terms. Our collaborative initiative is aimed at finding new ways to allocate spatial, temporal, and financial resources in the abbey through active and continuous civic participation within the neighbourhood's population. This process, outlined in the following figure, consists in a recursive system between multiple forums where the organisation of the Abbaye de Forest is mediated through the participation of a team of researchers and social workers. The process would then result in the organisation of festivals bringing the neighbourhood together.

In terms of spatial organisation, we suggest a system based on flexibility that would be able to accommodate the collaborative nature of the Abbaye de Forest's spaces. This system would allow to change the possible uses of the space depending on decisions taken by the forums, but would also enable changes to the divisions based on the developing networks between the actors using the abbey.



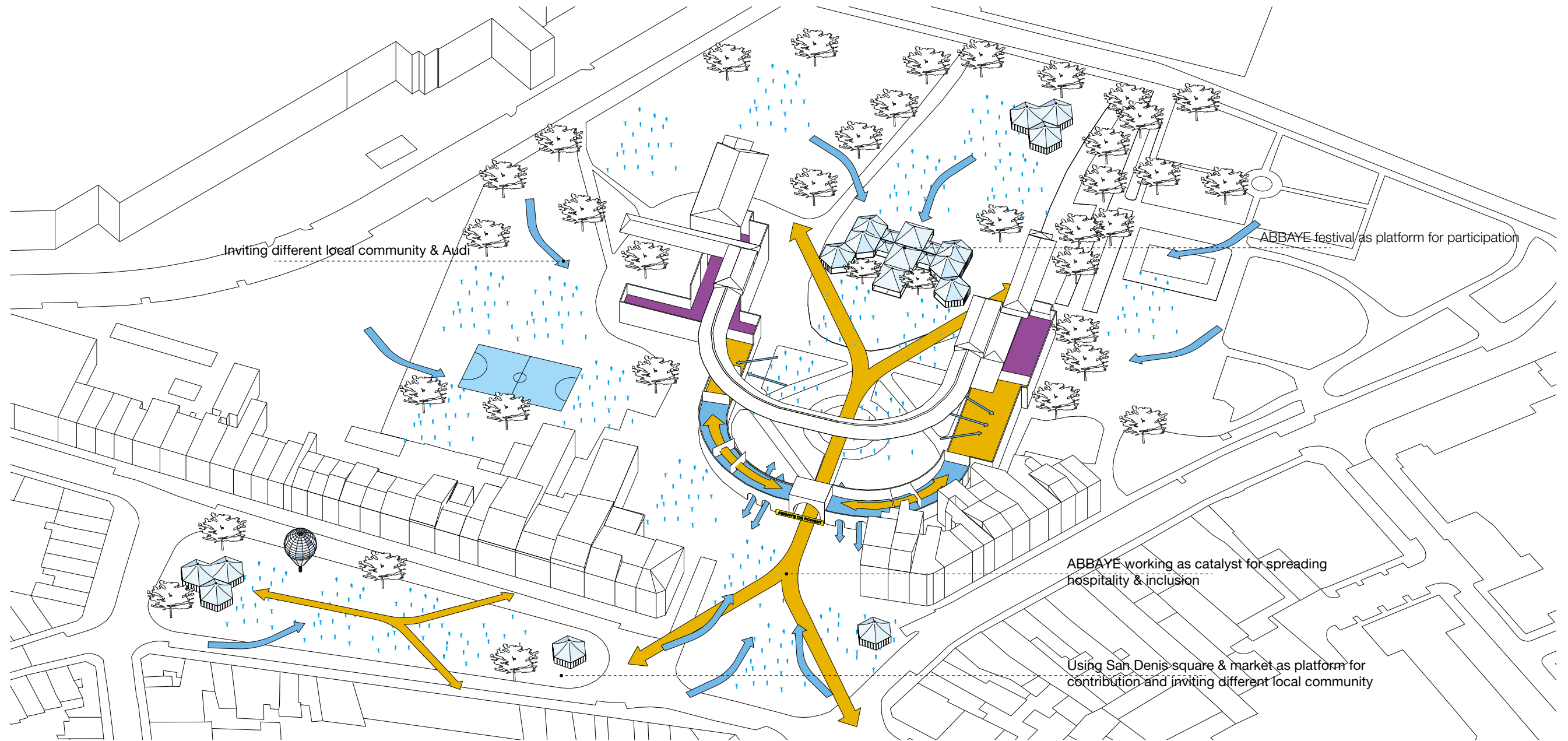
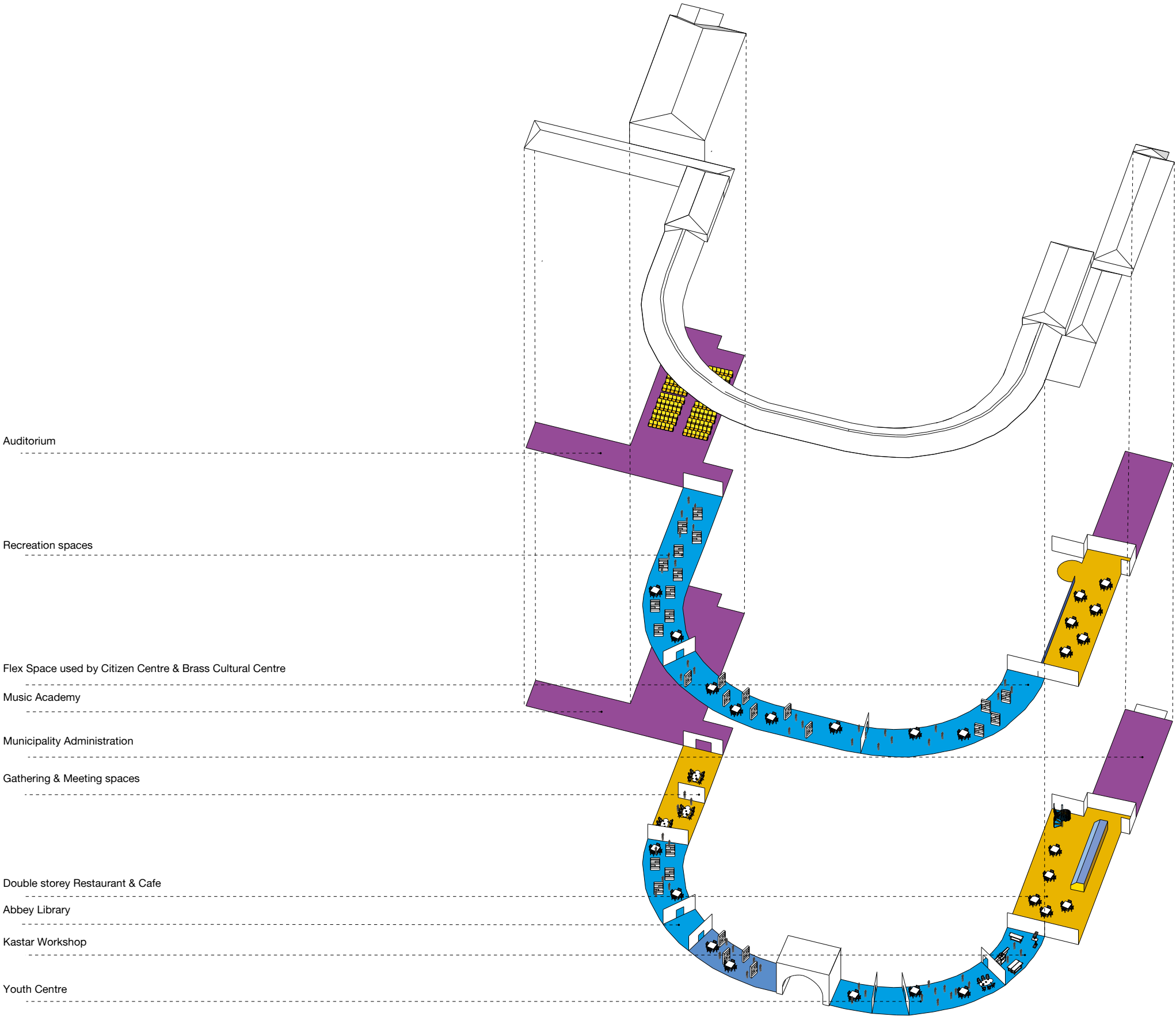


Diagram showing connections of the Abbaye de Forest with the wider Saint-Denis area. The proposed scenario shows a public use of the Abbaye de Forest and how it will work, using the example of a Festival. The festival's programme would both bring communities together and serve as a participation tool, possibly determining future events at the Abbaye de Forest.



Layout of the uses of the Abbaye de Forest, showing the proposed flexible space and the existing ERDF programme working together.

Conclusion

Louise Carlier, Simon Debersaques and Marine Declève

The project for a cultural centre in the Abbaye de Forest perfectly illustrates different dynamics of ongoing urban transformations within the municipality of Forest and more generally in the Brussels region, as well as in other European cities. Firstly, the surroundings of the abbey are facing a series of frictions between an industrial economy — with the presence of the Audi car production plant — and the post-industrialisation process turning the urban economy towards service and creation — a process to which the cultural project founded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) contributes. Secondly, the Saint-Denis district brings together a large number of highly diverse populations, from a socio-economic as well as a cultural or ‘ethnic’ point of view. The public spaces it contains, which are themselves the subject of different urban renewal policies, make these different populations co-exist in close physical proximity. Finally, this territory represents a sort of ‘urban laboratory’ or ‘microcosm’ of Brussels in the sense that it is crossed by broader social and political issues that are manifested and materialised on a smaller scale, but in a specific form.

The MasterClass provided an opportunity to reflect upon the cultural cluster project from the perspective of urban inclusion. It resulted in a set of proposals for a participatory process that could represent the diversity of social groups, both in the project’s design and in the scheduled activities that the site will host. The work carried out by the students in the MasterClass has the merit of placing the focal point as much on this issue of local participation as on the project’s temporality compartmentalised with public policies that may hinder its sustainability. The students present an inclusive governance model that would entrust the project’s management to an autonomous ‘neighbourhood forum’ composed of local actors. The forum would then decide on the schedule of activities and the organisation of spaces on the site¹. Thenceforth, inclusion of different groups through this process of participation is

considered as the means by which the site itself could be hospitable to them.

Beyond the idealistic aspect of this proposal and the limits of urban democracy — which have already been explored in depth by various researchers and highlighted in many works —, we can question the hospitality of the institutional design of ERDF policies compared to a more bottom-up approach. Basing the site’s design and programming on a participatory process, as suggested proposed by the students, assumes that the different stages of completion of the project show a certain flexibility. However, applying for ERDF funding requires having already planned a detailed schedule of implementation, including the necessary budget for each step, and having previously identified the partners that will be involved in the project. In other words, adopting a position of anticipation,

efficiency, and planning, such as making room for a more participatory approach — likely to bring in new ideas, new needs, new stakeholders — could only upset the reliability of the ‘project’. As such, the proposal resulting from the MasterClass points to the inevitable entanglement between the political, urbanistic, and cultural dimensions of inclusion: integrating a concern for inclusion within a cultural project would suppose involving different concerned groups both upstream and downstream, namely the design itself and the programming of the activities.

However, the students’ proposal also suffers from a certain lapse — perhaps linked to the lack of time to conduct a rigorous ethnographic survey. Even when it takes as its starting point the statistical data relating to the neighbourhood in which this project takes place and examines the intricacy of the different scales at play, it paradoxically tends to then ‘insularise’ the site in its own proposals, and thus to neglect the importance of the surrounding public spaces to which it is spatially connected. Although they may appear ‘insignificant’ at first glance, these public spaces are where the populations currently meet and engage, as the present situation of Place Saint-Denis clearly illustrates.

In this respect, the municipality of Forest, in charge of the renovation project for the Abbaye de Forest shows, in our opinion, the example of ‘good practices’ in terms of design that we believe are useful to point out. Through the ‘Contrat de Quartier Abbaye’ (2014-2018) — and its preliminary studies (Karbon, 2014) — the underlying approach of the project tends to consider the subtleties of the territory in which it is inserted, which is not always clear to many ERDF projects. Consequently, the main challenge of the project will be the transitional period between the ‘Contrat de Quartier’ (2018) and the ongoing project for the Abbaye de Forest (2022). Indeed, urban renewal projects in the vicinity of the site and the socio-economic activities developed on the premises of the Abbaye de Forest — which has also stimulated a municipal network of associations — from the ‘Contrat de Quartier’ should necessarily be integrated and developed into the ongoing project for the Abbaye de Forest. More generally, the territorial dimension of urban projects should be debated — a point that is at the heart of the research

carried out within the Metrolab. This would help to counteract the logic of ‘insularisation’ that currently accompanies the design and implementation of various urban projects, to the detriment of taking into account both the problems that cross the territories in which they take place and the members of the public who live there.

Notes

¹ This model of governance can be compared with a participatory budget system existing in Brussels known as the ‘Quartier Durable Citoyen’. This system supports collective initiatives and the projects they propose. However, they are limited to small interventions that must have an environmental dimension, propose a sustainable development and/or a networking of the resources of a neighborhood such as the creation of a collective kitchen garden or a bicycle shelter. It would be interesting to consider this type of device for projects that would also involve the conversion of an entire building such as the Abbey of Forest.