

2021

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**URBAN RESEARCH
SERVING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

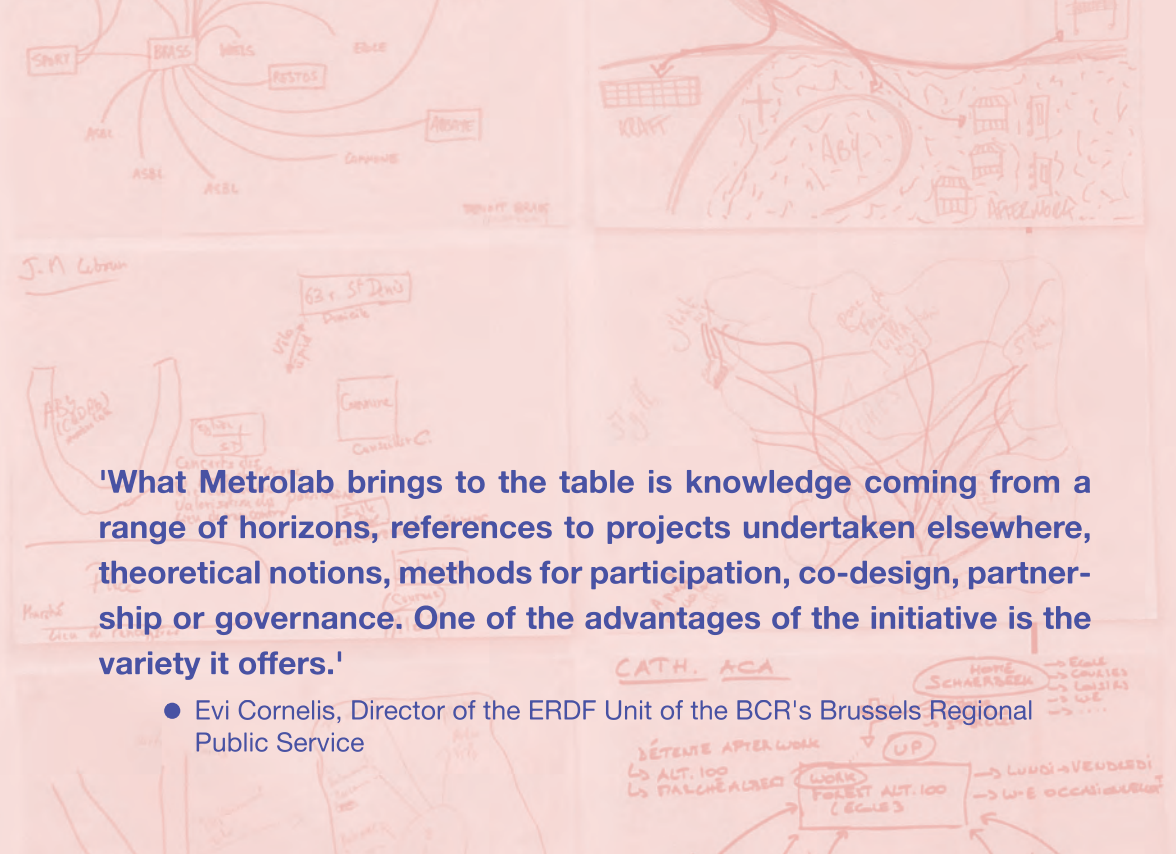
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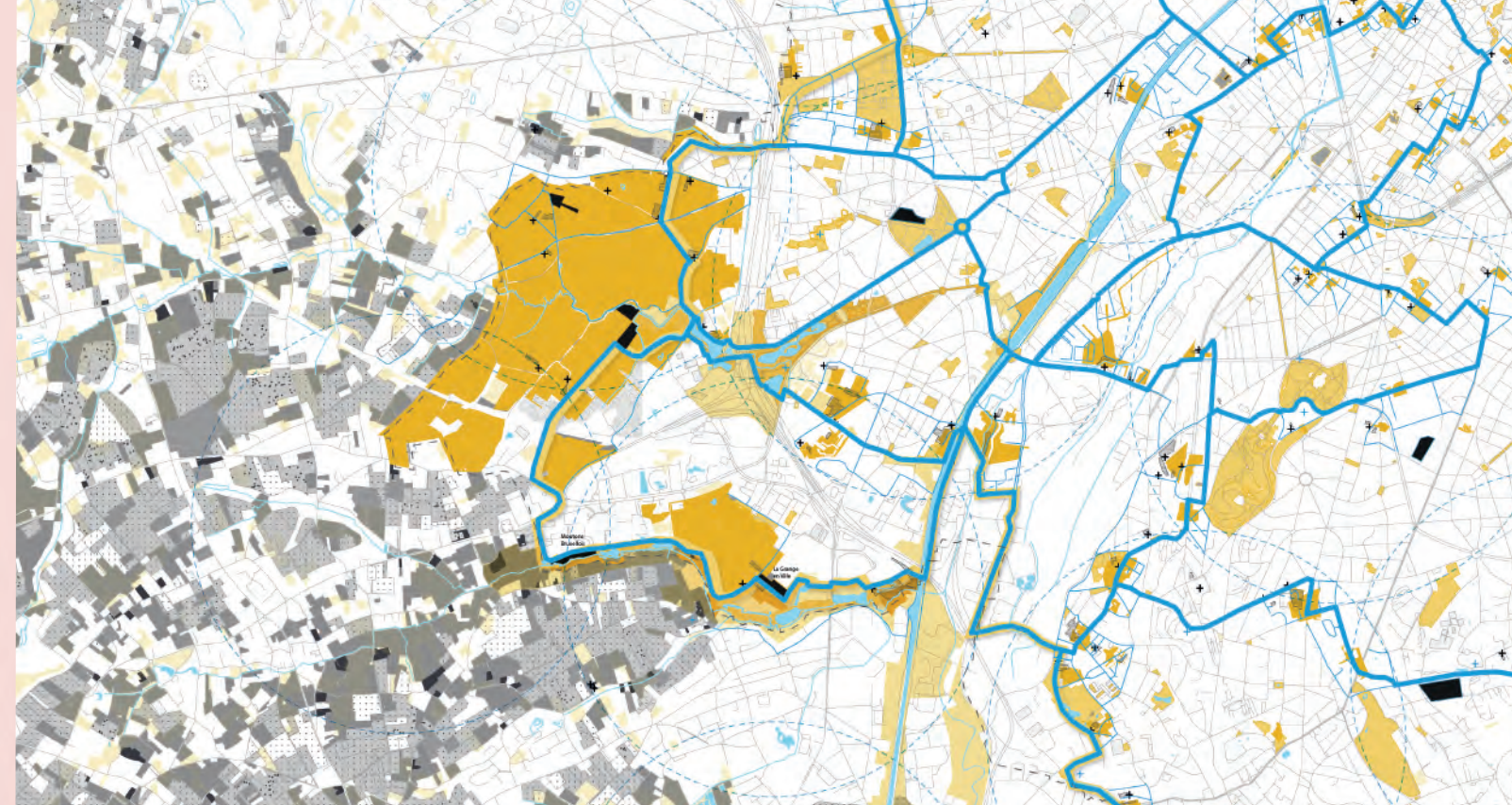
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'What Metrolab brings to the table is knowledge coming from a range of horizons, references to projects undertaken elsewhere, theoretical notions, methods for participation, co-design, partnership or governance. One of the advantages of the initiative is the variety it offers.'

- Evi Cornelis, Director of the ERDF Unit of the BCR's Brussels Regional Public Service



Metrolab, applied and engaged urban research

In a city-region that is becoming increasingly complex, the regional government, through its projects and actions, must address simultaneously a combination of issues (economic crisis, social exclusion, climate change). As the area is split into various territorial, institutional and linguistic units, achieving a common vision and finding the appropriate measures in response to these **complex issues** is a crucial, yet difficult, task.

Universities can play a key role in addressing this growing complexity. The challenge for Metrolab researchers is to actively participate in urban policies of the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) and to develop a proposition capacity in policymaking.

Metrolab Brussels (MLB) is an interdisciplinary and inter-university laboratory that focuses on a specific programme: the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**. Metrolab's contribution nevertheless covers the full set of Brussels policies on urban development and renewal.

Metrolab has assembled a range of research skills in order to **assist public actors in the reflexion on their policies** and the search for the most appropriate and sustainable solutions possible.

In order to meet the challenge posed by complexity, the different types of expertise, methods and sensitivities involved in studies of the urban environment must try to meet and agree on the basis of practical situations and cases. Thus, in Metrolab, **urbanists, sociologists, geographers and architects** come together to analyse the Brussels-ERDF policy and help the managing authorities and project leaders in the implementation of their action.

The laboratory-observatory is situated at the interface of the different actors in Brussels concerned by ERDF projects: decision makers and agents of regional and municipal administrations, project leaders, technical experts, users, citizens and associations. Metrolab thus contributes to the **consistency of a regional urban policy**.

'Metrolab is a reflexive experience unique in Europe: a laboratory for applied, transdisciplinary and critical research that has made its place directly in the field of contemporary urban policies and socio-economic innovation niches of the ERDF programme.'

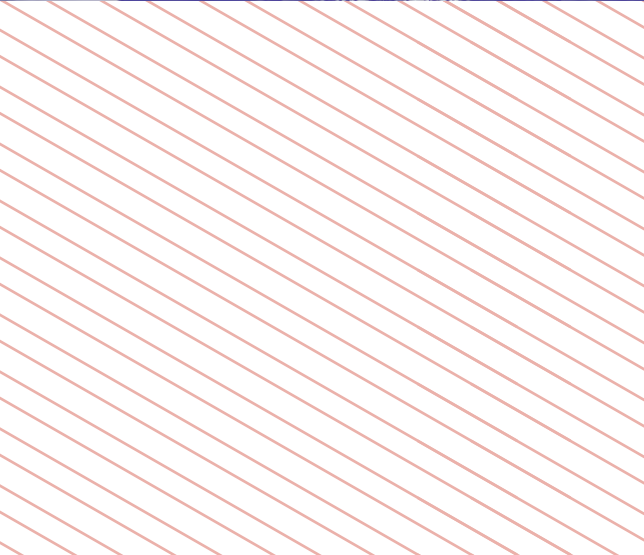
- Geoffrey Grulois, Professor of Urban Planning (ULB, Metrolab)



Metrolab's field of study

From 2016 to 2021, Metrolab accompanied **14** of the 46 urban development projects funded by the ERDF in the Brussels-Capital Region.

A good number of the projects followed are located in the Canal area, where Metrolab decided to install its offices to be closer to the realities on the ground. The spatial proximity means that experiences and issues can be shared in common. It also helps develop a **collective intelligence of the city** at a scale that is both local and regional.



Metrolab's missions

Thanks to its interdisciplinary nature, Metrolab is **polyvalent**. It works primarily with public and private actors involved in the production of knowledge about the city and urban know-how.

Metrolab plays an **expertise role**. Organised in interdisciplinary units, the researchers place their knowledge at the service of ERDF projects and seek to bring added value to the practices of professionals in the field. This leads to new concepts – such as the 'inclusive enclave' (see p. 13 below) – **for a better way to think about and shape the city**.

'Metrolab does not work as a "consultant". Its work must be seen more in terms of following and monitoring the implementation of the strategy and improving it through feedback.'

- Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies, European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC).

Metrolab plays a **mediation role**. Applied and engaged research is intended as a mediation between Brussels institutions, city professionals and civil society, for an urban development that integrates **plural forms of knowledge** all the while remaining **close to the research field**.

'We are not a little bubble of creative people, but researchers who are engaged with their environment, keeping a close eye on the realities and perspectives of everyone involved.'

- Mathieu Berger, Professor of Sociolog (UCLouvain, Metrolab)

Metrolab plays a **scientific role**. The laboratory educates researchers, PhD students and other students in interdisciplinary studies and in urban action research. Through its publications and the scientific networks it has organised at the international level, it works to promote an **urban research that is more practical and committed**.

Mission

Intervention

Methodology

Expertise
Innovating in conducting urban projects

- Analysing realities on the ground
- Following the programming
- Evaluating practices

Situational analyses, diagnostics, comparative studies, overall analysis of the ERDF programming, spatial and social mapping, compiling databases, spatial modelling of projects

Assistance in drawing up technical specifications, identifying the needs of the target public, help in decision-making, recommendations to the project developers, scenario design

Designing evaluation forms, analysing the project planning, evaluating a project's social, economic and environmental impact, recommendations on regional policies

Mediation
Experimenting with new methods for collaboration

- Reinforcing synergy among ERDF projects
- Forging collaborations among researchers, managing authorities and the target publics
- Mobilising and organizing networks of Brussels and European actors

Organising encounters between different projects, workshops with ERDF programming actors, platforms for sharing knowledge and best practices

Centralising and comparing experience and know-how through co-design workshops and joint organisation of seminars

Developing institutional partnerships, representing actors networks and identifying potentials for collaboration

Scientific
Bringing added value to urban research through action

- Bringing added value to interdisciplinary action research in academia
- Directing urban research practices towards action
- Publishing general knowledge gained from specific practical cases

Turning individual action research projects into PhD dissertations, creating an international scientific network with Metrolab as the hub, mobility of our researchers in this network

Organising a series of seminars, master classes, colloquia, summer schools, highlighting the results (through social networks, video clips, interviews,...)

Producing and disseminating a large number of works in various formats (thematic books, logbooks) and scientific articles based on our action research projects

Metrolab in figures

● Activities related to ERDF projects

23 group visits to the sites studied

94 public seminars on applied urban research with professionals involved in city projects

18 collective workshops with actors of the 14 ERDF projects followed

5 institutional events for the ERDF funds and Brussels institutions responsible for urban policies

● Research activities

6 PhD theses relating to the Brussels territory

17 conferences, with the participation of European or international experts

3 interdisciplinary master classes for Brussels and international students

3 international colloquia on applied urban research

● Productions

2 public exhibits related to an ERDF project

24 video clips with Brussels actors and Metrolab researchers

4 collective thematic works

7 logbooks (research notebooks)

14 academic articles published in scientific journals

44 articles, publicly accessible, on the Metrolab site

● Audience

7359 visitors to the Metrolab site in 2020

28722 visitors to the Metrolab site since it was set up

1800 subscribers to the Metrolab Facebook page

8839 views on Metrolab's Youtube channel

5843 articles mentioning Metrolab on Academia.edu

Metrolab's three thematic axes

The overarching objectives of the ERDF 2014-2020 operational programme aim to make the Brussels-Capital Region an area that is more inclusive, greener and smarter. Metrolab has organised these objective in **three axes**:

- The **urban inclusion** axis focuses on forms of social inequality, their consequences on access to the city and appropriation of its spaces, and possibilities to promote inclusion through appropriate planning.
- The **urban ecology** axis approaches the city as an ecosystem (a set of interdependent relations) and studies the continuity between human /built environments and natural environments.
- The **urban production** axis examines the relations between the logics underlying the production of city spaces and the different issues at stake in maintaining economic activities as part of the urban fabric.



Urban ecology

How to understand urban ecology in a broad sense, in order to reconcile the environmental dimension with the city's social, political and architectural dimensions?

How can ERDF projects contribute to socio-ecological transition?

How to approach the ERDF projects as parts of a larger urban ecosystem? How can we fully grasp the ecosystem of actors concerned by a project?

How to develop metropolitan autonomy in terms of food production? What can be done to enable agriculture and habitation to co-exist?

How to develop an urban waste management policy that is more sustainable ecologically?

Urban inclusion

How to articulate the ERDF projects with their immediate social environment?

How to conceive of spaces, facilities and infrastructure for a plurality of actors and publics?

What degree of consistency is needed between project objectives and the needs of future users?

How can the ERDF projects offer welcoming and hospitable places for the most vulnerable publics?

How to align the dimension of common good with that of the personal benefits that individual users may derive?

Urban production

How to include the objectives for inclusion and ecological transition in one and the same urban project, also making this part of the Brussels economy?

How to develop spaces for sustainable production in the city?

How to reconcile improvement of urban spaces and job creation?

How to think about movement of workers within and outside metropolitan Brussels?

How to promote the implementation of small producer-to-consumer circuits at the metropolitan level?



'It was important for our place of work and encounters, intended as a crossroads for the different ERDF projects, to be located at the heart of the action zone for this policy which, despite recent extension, is still the Canal zone.'

● Mathieu Berger, Professor of Sociology (UCLouvain, Metrolab)



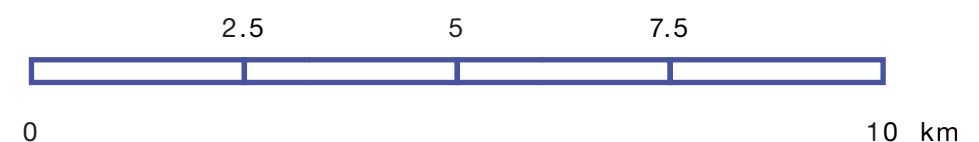
From 2016 to 2020, Metrolab moved its offices closer to the projects they were following, to a former industrial building converted into offices and association headquarters, at the crossroads of socially diversified spaces: a place where several citizen publics converged.

Projects mapping

Mapping of the projects that received European funding from 2014 to 2020 along with in-depth follow-up by Metrolab. Metrolab's headquarters were located at the heart of the intervention zone chosen by the ERDF, the Canal zone.



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Five case studies

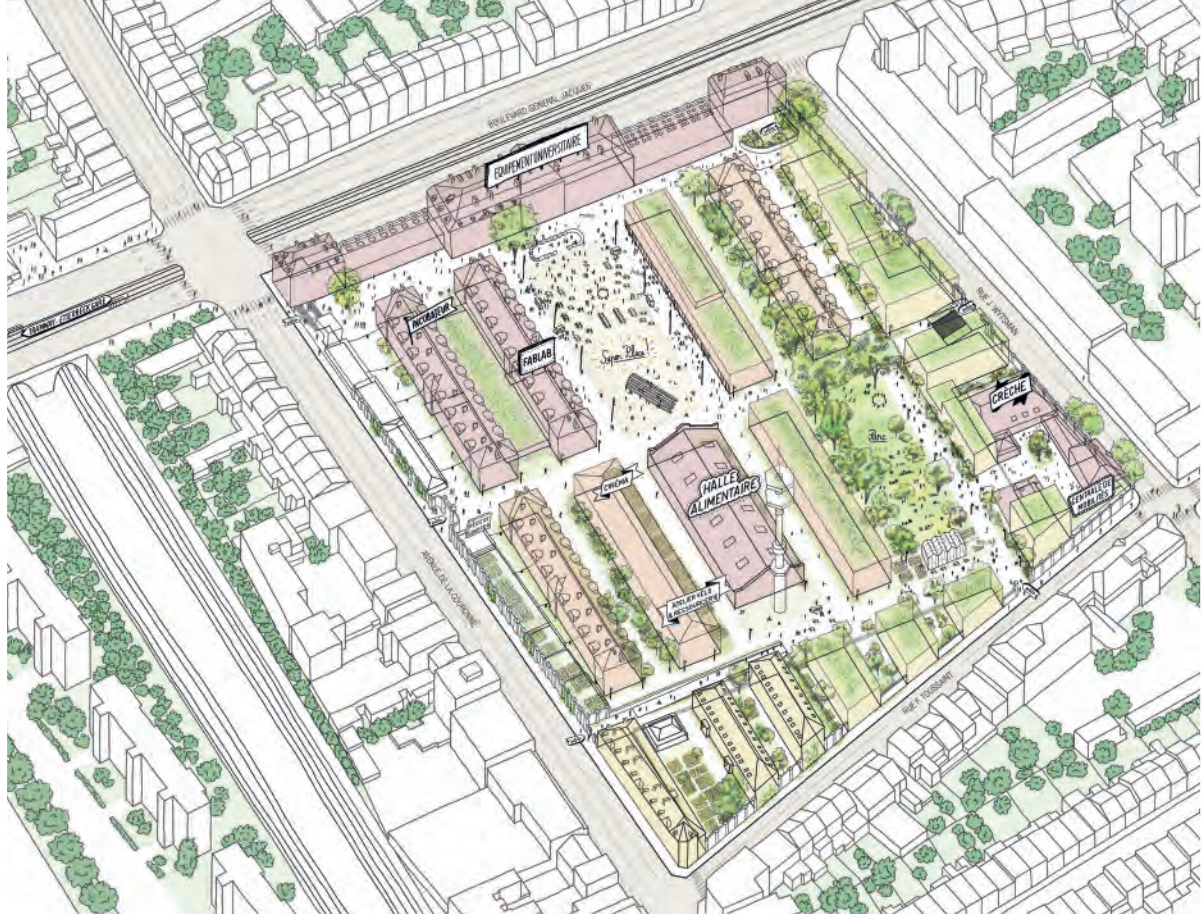
Managing Authority
Société d'Aménagement Urbain (SAU)

Timeline for collaboration with Metrolab
first quarter 2019

Thematic axe
Urban inclusion

Type of collaboration
Advisory and conceptual development

Budget for undertaking the project
11 800 000 €



Considering urban complexity: Usquare.brussels and the notion of the 'inclusive enclave' (Ixelles)

Description of the project

Usquare.brussels is a project, in Ixelles, to transform the Fritz Toussaint gendarmerie barracks into a sustainable and international neighbourhood that includes student lodging and affordable housing. Prior to the procedure to designate a team to design the public spaces, the managing authorities contacted Metrolab to help identify the issues involved in developing this plot, historically closed, and to find solutions to have it 'open up to the city'.

Metrolab's contribution

Organising and conducting a seminar on development of the open spaces at Usquare.-brussels with the participation of the managing authority (SAU) and its partners (ULB-VUB, perspective.brussels, BMA).

'The process of identifying and reflecting on the intrinsic qualities and the challenges of this site in the aim to make it open and inclusive was quite instructive (...). In a nutshell, the exchange was rich, instructive and took place at the right time to consolidate our vision with our ambitions!'

● Sébastien Rodesch, head of the Usquare.brussels project at the SAU

How has the concept of 'inclusive enclave', coined by Metrolab, nourished the project?

The project's managing authority was interested in this concept when considering the **barracks areas** as a special type of public space, as these spaces are enclosed and circumscribed. As such, they are invested with **an interiority that is favourable to hosting a variety of social, educational and cultural activities**. The seminar questioned the project's impact on the sustainable and inclusive city and the articulation of these two dimensions, without limiting the former to open spaces and the latter to inside space. The process was one of highlighting the tensions and opportunities that can be generated by the interaction of these activities in a place like the barracks.

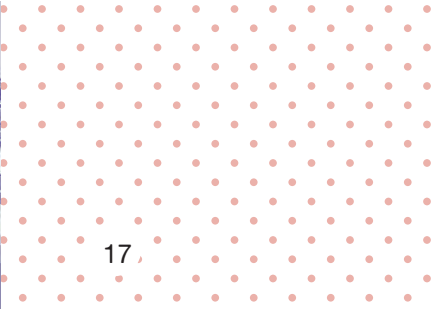
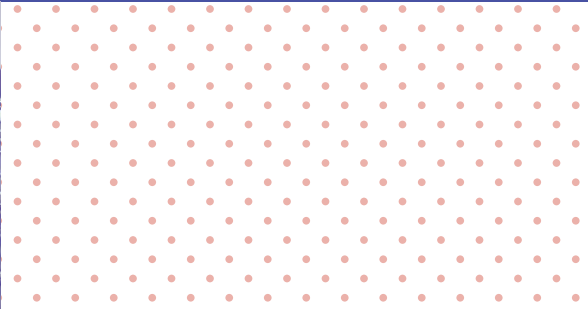
The project by the Anoyji Beltrando agency, selected at the end of the public tender procedure, takes these challenges into account. It emphasises the building's architectural identity. The plant component is introduced in the form of gardens having an inclusive scope. Lastly, the project preserves the ground floors by articulating the built-up space with open areas through re-vegetation of the grounds.



Urbain inclusion

● Key accomplishments

Summary of the issues at stake in planning the USquare.brussels public spaces, which was integrated in the technical specifications of the public tender launched by the SAU and then included in the project submitted by the Anoyji Beltrando agency.



Managing Authority
Bruxelles
Environnement

Timeline for collaboration
with Metrolab
2016-2020, with
extensions on to 2021.

Thematic axe
Urban ecology

Type of collaboration
Prospective analysis
and knowledge sharing

Budget for undertaking
the project
5858000 €



Promoting synergies between projects: BoerenBruxselPaysans (Anderlecht)

Description of the project

BoerenBruxselPaysans (BBP) aims to further the Brussels-Capital Region's transition towards sustainable food systems. It is an initiative that aims to develop activities for agricultural production and biological transformation in the city. The pilot projects are concentrated in Neerpede (Anderlecht) where the BBP facilitates access to land for future farmers and provides them with logistical and technical support.

'Being able to count on a partner like Metrolab to create occasions for reflexive and prospective think- ing was an incredible opportunity. The contribution in terms of method, contacts and contents enabled us to explore the five themes of the Agropolis seminar with a variety of viewpoints and analyses, which enriched our experience on the ground'

● Catherine Fierens, Project Coordinator,
Bruxelles Environnement

Metrolab's contribution

- Organising and leading the Agropolis seminar cycle (October-December 2020);
- Preparing the publication based on the seminars (organising writing workshops, problematisation of issues and formulating recommendations);
- Preparing a publication in the form of a roadmap for 'Metropolitan agro-ecologies'.

How did the Agropolis seminar cycle nourish the project?

Following five years of experimentation, the Agropolis seminar cycle, organised jointly by BoerenBruxselPaysans and Metrolab, proposed a **prospective reflexion on agro-ecology in and for metropolitan Brussels**. The thematic discussions, taking place over five morning sessions, enriched by the presence of managing authorities of similar projects, drew up **concrete courses of action** as well as **recommendations** for public authorities. This cycle of seminars also led to a **process of operational learning** on the questions raised by experience on the ground, based on enquiries conducted with the pilot projects.

Metrolab's involvement had an impact **beyond the sole BBP context**. For Belgium's three Regions, concerned by the problem of food supply, the cycle of seminars organised and conducted by Metrolab offered a forum for discussions, knowledge sharing and finding synergies. For instance, the **office of the Brussels Regional Minister for Agriculture made use of the conclusions** laid out in the Agropolis publication to underpin the development of its future regional policy.

Urban ecology



● Key accomplishments

Publication of recommendations and concrete courses of action intended to nourish the agricultural policy of the Regional Government.

Managing Authority
Médecins du Monde

Timeline for collaboration
with Metrolab
2016-2018

Thematic axe
Urban inclusion

Type of collaboration
**Analysis of the social
context; co-design of
the premises;
mediation between the
local actors and the
managing authorities**

Budget for undertaking
the project
3 720 000 €



'We were able to produce a programme, an architecture organisation chart and, more importantly, a document containing recommendations on the values, effects and impressions that the people should be able to find in an integrated health and social care centre. For this to come about, it was truly thanks to interdisciplinarity, both within the research team (an urban architect, a sociologist and a medical doctor) and among the workshop participants. The impression I retain of this experience was its efficiency: in the end we spent little time, attained a really concrete result (we have technical specifications), and also produced more theoretical knowledge. This was truly an interesting intersection.'

● Isabelle Heymans, Coordinator of the CSSI
Cureghem project for Médecins du Monde Belgium

Co-designing care spaces : CSSI Médecins du Monde (Anderlecht)

Description of the project

The NGO Médecins du Monde (MdM) wished to build an Integrated Health and Social Care Centre (CSSI), of 1500 m2, in the Cureghem neighbourhood in Anderlecht, an area marked by wide social disparity. The centre was intended to occupy the ground floor of a building holding 35 subsidised housing units developed by Citydev.

The CSSI is intended to improve the healthcare offer in a neighbourhood that is home to many different migrant and vulnerable populations. Another aim, however, is to propose other services such as a Mother-Child services, physical therapy or training in healthy nutrition, etc.

Metrolab's contribution

- Networking and synergy development among actors in the field: The 'Cureghem in perspective' workshop organised encounters among local associations and actors in the field. The workshop's objective was to ascertain the view of these parties on the rapid urban changes underway, to discuss them and then to identify both the challenges and potential synergies among the actors;
- Developing tools for spatial representation and modelling for the workshop participants, including a mapping of the social issues raised by the urban development projects going on in Cureghem.

What value-added did Metrolab bring to the Médecins du Monde project in Cureghem?

The goal for a 'one-stop-shop' healthcare centre is greater access to a full range of care services – both health and social assistance – for a vulnerable population. However, the target public must also feel at ease in such places. It is therefore crucial to think carefully about the design of the premises and to take the future user into account in its design and construction.

Metrolab created **spaces for dialogue** between associative care service actors in Cureghem, healthcare professionals, social workers and Médecins du Monde. By enabling each actor to speak and providing practical tools, the workshops helped smooth tensions, study the reality of the project and **adapt it to the needs of the people in Cureghem**.

Metrolab worked with the project's managing authorities in order to **integrate their perception regarding spatial concepts as well as care practices** into the special context of Cureghem, marked both by a strong socio-cultural diversity and by many social barriers.



● Key accomplishments

Preparation of a **co-design workshop** on the care centre, the results of which were **integrated in the specifications** drawn up by the contracting authority for the process to select the project designed by an architect firm. The final project design integrated several recommendations coming from the work produced by Metrolab.

Publication of an article: L'architecture du lieu de soins: comment l'espace peut-il soutenir l'accueil des usagers? Le cas des Centres de Santé-Social intégrés à Bruxelles. M. Vignes, M. Ranzato, I. Heymans, S. Hinz Niklewicz, B. Scheen, M. Vaneeckhout. Ethica Clinica, n°93 June 2019

Managing Authority
Forest Municipality

Timeline for collaboration
with Metrolab
2016-2018

Thematic axe
Urban inclusion

Type of collaboration
**Analysis of the social
context; reflexive
monitoring and media-
tion between potential
users of the site and
the managing authority**

Budget for undertaking
the project
7 359 272 €



Grounding a project in its social environment: ABÿ – Abbaye de Forest (Forest)

Description of the project

The ABÿ project intended to restore the site of the Abbaye de Forest, listed as a historical monument, a section of which is now deconsecrated. The objective was to improve the cultural offering and renovate the courtyards to turn the area into a place to share in common and fostering personal fulfilment. This project is part of a broader programme aiming to revitalise this working-class neighbourhood which had once been an industrial area. A team of Metrolab researchers followed the project, starting before the programme was elaborated and prior to the tender to select the architect firm, in order to identify the issues at stake in renovating this site – originally conceived as a building closed on itself, dedicated to religious activities and monastic life – and turning it into a space dedicated to hosting activities in its immediate environment in which each person can 'feel at home'.

Metrolab's contribution

- Leading nine mapping workshops with over 40 local residents and current or potential users;
- Organising an exhibition at the Abbaye, based on the maps produced by the workshop participants (26/05/18);
- Spatialising a development proposal based on work by students in the 'Urban Inclusion' MasterClass, organised by Metrolab;
- Contributing to the diagnosis of the Abbey's public spaces and gardens and on their programming.

'It is a good thing when an academic reality becomes involved with reality on the ground [...] but it is also an exercise for the municipality to work with research [...] It's a way to help the public become aware, a way to launch the debate [...] to show the problems and highlight the expertise [...] It can be a basis for further thinking on the programming.'

- Managing authority for the ABÿ project, the Urban Revitalisation Service of the Municipality of Forest

What added value did Metrolab bring to the ABÿ project?

In the early stages, Metrolab studied the project's social environment, through the uses, experiences and perceptions of the different publics who presently come to the Abbaye site and its surroundings, but who were missing from the mediation spaces set up by the ABÿ managing authorities. These analyses nourished the diagnosis of the neighbourhood by providing a tangible picture of the actual practices of the vulnerable publics and they added to the drafts for redesign of the site by making the managing authorities aware of the needs and experiences of these publics.

Later in the project, the researchers played a role as mediator between the various users of the neighbourhood (who differ according to their associative activities, gender, age, religion, political status, cultural identity, etc.) and the managing authorities. One facet was making these publics aware of the issues involved in the site development. Another was taking into consideration any **tensions** that were hardly voiced or heard in the participation forums set up by the managing authorities. Metrolab thus brought a new perspective on **the way these publics can be included** in the Abbaye's new cultural facilities.



● Key accomplishments

Drawing up maps of the living spaces to supplement the activities planned by the ABÿ project;

Writing a collective work summarising the analyses by the Metrolab researchers;

Preparing a brochure for the managing authorities and the associations that participated in the enquiry.



Urban inclusion
23

Masterclass
● **Urban Inclusion**
23.01.2017-03.02.2017

Masterclass
● **Urban Ecology**
28.01.2019-08.02.2019

Masterclass
● **Urban Production**
27.01.2020-07.02.2020



Training in interdisciplinarity for innovative urban research: the Metrolab MasterClass series

Description of the activity

Organised in Brussels in three sequences, each lasting two weeks, the Metrolab MasterClasses are seen as **occasions for educational and practical experimentation** on concrete urban situations.

Organised by the Metrolab team, they bring together students, researchers, university professors, local urban actors and city professionals coming from different disciplines and institutions (architects, city planners, civil servants, public and private actors, involved at the Brussels, European and international levels).

During each sequence, the participants (from 30 to 50 depending on the Master-Class) get **hands-on experience with the field** when they visit the sites themselves to analyse the actual undertaking of certain development projects followed by Metrolab and financed by the ERDF.

Metrolab's contribution

- Producing conceptual and visual tools serving to **rethink the design** of ongoing projects;
- Developing **innovative mediation tools** to promote dialogue between the different actors involved in urban development projects;
- Creating **spaces for encounter and shared work** between professionals who are usually closed off in their own respective practices;
- **Organising networks** of different urban development professionals involved in ERDF projects and beyond that, involved with the Brussels-Capital Region;
- Developing **international ties and exchanges among academics**, including between researchers and other city specialists at an international scale.

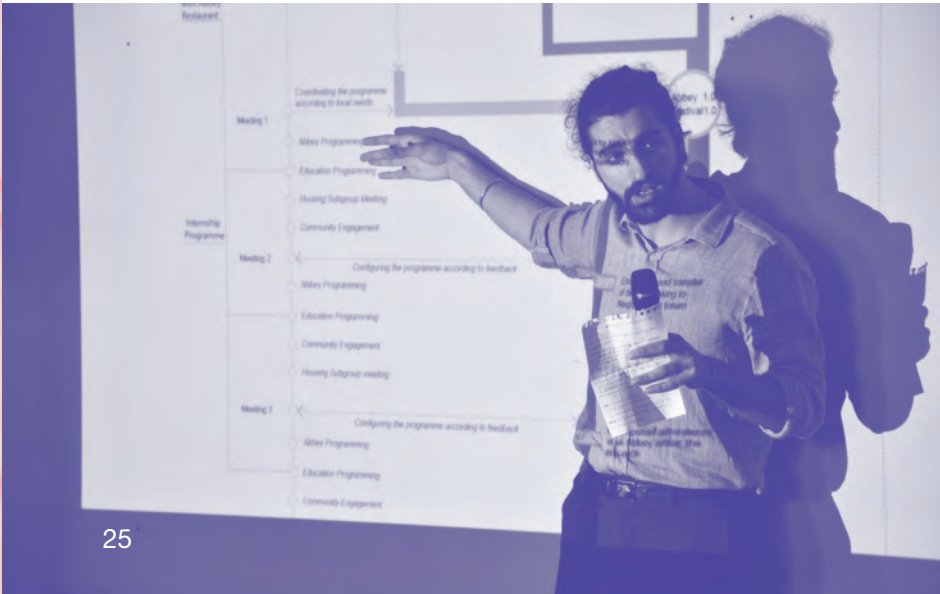
What has been the added value of these MasterClasses?

The first objective is to bring the participants to **think together and in an interdisciplinary manner** on the issues arising from projects followed by Metrolab and financed by the ERDF. In return, the collective work by the MasterClasses aims to **draw up concrete recommendations** that can serve to improve the urban public policy in the Brussels-Capital Region and beyond.

The second objective is to incite the participating students and researchers to move beyond the university environment and deal with the knowledge and expectations of urban development professionals and ordinary citizens. In so doing, they **ground urban research in the context of a city as it is being shaped**, placing scientific methods and analyses at the heart of the ongoing transformation.

The third objective is educational. In organising its MasterClasses, Metrolab hopes to play a role in training a new generation of researchers and urban professionals who are able to **think about and shape the city together**, in the respect of the residents' contexts and the needs of its inhabitants.

Masterclasses



● Key accomplishments

3 books, each published after one of the sequences, available on the Metrolab site;

Interviews filmées de participants aux Masterclasses, disponibles sur la chaîne Youtube de Metrolab;

Outils de modélisation, cartographies et designs des projets étudiés, élaborés au cas par cas, disponibles sur le site de Metrolab.



What comes next for Metrolab?

From 2015 to 2021, thanks to its financing by the ERDF - Brussels-Capital Region, Metrolab endeavoured to lay the groundwork for an enhanced integration of urban research in urban policy. It also sought to demonstrate the advantages of **monitoring regional development through research and experimentation**. This document illustrates the major objectives attained. Thanks to this successful dynamics, Metrolab is now on firmer footing and benefits from greater recognition. We are proud that, as researchers, we were able to gain the **trust of the ERDF's various actors** – from the project leaders to the managing authorities.

The successful inclusion of a research laboratory in this public policy has been recognised not only by local and regional actors. It was also highlighted by the European Commission Joint Research Centre, which presented Metrolab as a **European reference practice** in its Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies (2020). The international recognition of the Metrolab experience by **world-leading universities and significant scientific journals** also shows that this type of applied research can obtain the attention of academia's cutting edge. Beyond this institutional recognition, we are pleased to see the **large Metrolab community** that has taken shape around our activities, especially through social networks.

This first experience, a pioneer for research and leading to transformations in public action, urged us on!

These next steps will be taken first in the **Brussels-Capital Region**, where we wish go further with the work already undertaken, whilst adapting the tool to evolutions in priorities and accounting for the new European, national and regional context (recovery plans, European Green Deal, etc.). Even as we continue to innovate in the scientific following of programmes and projects, we believe it is important to institutionalise the initiative to ensure that the **Metrolab approach can enter into the DNA of urban policies in the Brussels-Capital Region**.

On the basis of our experience with Brussels, it appears interesting to also open the initiative to **other territories and other regions** in Belgium, through partnerships with universities based in Wallonia or Flanders, or even further abroad, through international collaborations with similar laboratories, **at the European level**.

Whatever form it takes, we will continue to do our utmost for a transdisciplinary urban research, one that is increasingly applied and engaged!



Metrolab, a regional and international network



The Metrolab Team

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Metrolab general coordinator
and scientific director

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2 project managers

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