

# POLITICS, AESTHETICS, ECONOMICS: IMAGINARIES OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACE AND THEIR RESHAPING THROUGH THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BRUSSELS CITY CENTRE



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## > Abstract

The pedestrian zone has given rise to multiple standpoints and controversies. These have provided an opportunity for debate not only regarding the pedestrian zone but also, more broadly, on views of the city that are defended. They harnessed urban imaginaries, visions made of what each and every one wished for Brussels, its public spaces, its mobility, its inequalities and its economy. This chapter analyses these imaginaries, which emerge as one examines the issues at stake: citizens' sense of ownership of the city, a city that is sustainable, open, safe, cosmopolitan, equitable, economic, attractive, participative, reflexive, well governed, etc. It highlights the three frequently interrelated views of public space that underlie the existing imaginaries, i.e., economic public space, political public space and cultural public space. It is probably in the pedestrian zone's configuration across these three spaces that lies the zone's core challenge.

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## 1 > THE PEDESTRIAN ZONE AS AN 'AFFAIR'

The life of a city, particularly a large city, is punctuated by the emergence of controversies around urban planning issues.<sup>3</sup> Some of these controversies are reinforced over time, attract wide media coverage, or get blown out of proportion. They put civil society actors in the spotlight, make citizen voices heard, lead or force players 'in the shadow' to 'come out into the open' or, conversely, force actors accustomed to media exposure to keep a low profile. These controversies require political and economic decision-makers to make public statements. They are transformed into 'affairs' (Boltanski, Claverie, 2007), and thus allow the various stakeholders to shed light upon what we will refer to here as 'urban imaginaries'.

An 'affair' is what the decision taken in 2014 by Yvan Mayeur, then mayor of the city of Brussels, to transform a Haussmann-type central boulevard into a vast pedestrian zone, became. This decision radically transformed the rationale behind the existing pedestrian zone, which was primarily associated with the tourist centre of the city and its configuration inherited from the Middle Ages. The authoritarian manner in which the decision was reached, the lack of preparation, the underestimation of its impact, alongside the strength of its opponents and many other elements would soon transform this decision into an affair, even though it was underpinned by long-standing urban planning projects and demands from civil society. The affair would then rapidly gain momentum, a degree of permanence, and experience several twists and turns. Beyond the 'games' of the urban players involved, we will focus on the 'imaginaries' that were mobilized by this affair.

## 2 > WHY IMAGINARIES?

The transformation of big cities has often been addressed from the perspective of the emergence of new 'imaginaries'<sup>4</sup> which begin to compete with old imaginaries (Genard, 2014). The concept of imaginaries seems particularly relevant, because it does not prejudge the forms in which the positions adopted are expressed. Naturally, these imaginaries can be made official in manifestos, reports, discourses, political decisions and development plans. They can also, however, be presented in caricatures, festive gatherings, occupations of space, films, performances and

<sup>3</sup> This chapter builds on an initial article on the same subject, written with less hindsight and intended for the general public (Genard, Berger, Van Hellemont, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> 'Imaginary' is used here in a sense very close to the notion of 'narrative', more frequent in English-language literature. However, the term 'imaginary', derived from French phenomenology, insists on the fact that these 'frames' of the public space are not only made of speech or language (as the notion of 'narrative' would suggest), but also of images and visions.

posters, i.e., in non-argumentative forms in which the aesthetic dimension plays an important role and is meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

Imaginaries are preformative. They guide and drive action, often without clearly defining or justifying it, and thus allow individuals to 'update' them in different ways. As driving forces, they are the object and the backdrop of controversies. Imaginaries may also be descriptive, they may attempt to describe the city. They may be normative when they narrate what the city should – or should not – be. Is Brussels a Flemish, French-speaking or cosmopolitan city? Should it be perceived as a city for its inhabitants, for its residents, or for those who do not live there yet keep it going, i.e., tourists, commuters, politicians, international civil servants? Should Brussels be approached through the perspective of the municipalities, the Region, the metropolis or from the angle of globalization? Should old-style paved roads be used to respect the city's heritage, or should modern surfaces, more suitable for people with reduced mobility, be preferred? These are some of the stakes at play that nourish and are nourished by the imaginaries that continuously inhabit Brussels's controversies, and which also build the city.

While these imaginaries appear as 'visions' of the city, they also affect political decisions and result in highly tangible materializations. They are embodied in events, public policies, development plans and architectural achievements. This has been the case with the imaginary of car mobility after the Second World War – with its highways that penetrated the region, its rings and tunnels – and the current opposing view, with its speed bumps, 30 km/h zones, pedestrian zones, car-free days, etc. Today, there is also the ecological imaginary which supports drastic standards for buildings or tax exemptions for energy savings.

Imaginaries, therefore, participate in the building of the city. In other words, they help shape what it is and what it becomes. Several imaginaries are entrenched, such as the car mobility imaginary that played a major role in shaping the city. Their strong foothold stems from the 'inertia' of their materializations and the habits they shaped. They have thus become obstacles to change. In contrast, other imaginaries are emerging and calling for change. These can appear somewhat utopian because of the firm grip that the ones they oppose have established across the territory. Given that they are not yet fully settled, these new imaginaries are shaped by the controversies around them. They therefore require spokespersons, supporters, protests, alliances and, above all, a place on the political agenda. Transforming the city centre into a pedestrian zone was part of this second configuration.

<sup>5</sup> The term '*aesthetic*' here does not refer to the artistic domain alone but rather to its primary meaning of '*aesthesis*', sensibility. Considering the aesthetic dimension of communication makes it possible to envisage urban gatherings both as events organized to defend a cause and also as '*aesthetic communities*'. This enables us to shift away from the study of controversies from a view of public space reduced to its Habermassian definition – i.e., a deliberative space – which analyses controversies only in terms of the sharing of opinions (Genard, 2017; Berger, 2017).

To gain credibility, the promoters of imaginaries must also provide 'proof' (Boltanski and Claverie, 2007) to defend the relevance of their positions or contradict those of their opponents. This evidence must be objective, for instance statistical data or indicators that transform controversies into a 'war of numbers'. But there is also a need for legal proof attesting to the legal (im)possibility of a proposed solution, social proof relating to the wishes of the people and the capacity to mobilize associations, or even political proof revealing the just or unjust nature of a given solution. Controversies therefore feed imaginaries and either strengthen or weaken them.

Imaginaries may have local roots, or their roots may go far beyond the context of Brussels, as is the case with the imaginaries of attractiveness or sustainability, which can only be understood in the context of globalization. The case of Brussels's pedestrian zone is interesting, as it anchored common imaginaries, typical of Brussels's controversies, into concrete standpoints. The pedestrian zone mobilized the ecological imaginary by opposing the 'Car as King' imaginary. The attractiveness imaginary was likely to undermine the imaginary of the primacy of the inhabitant defended by several citizen associations. The economic development imaginary threatened certain existing businesses. The participatory city imaginary appeared to be threatened by authoritarian decision-making. The creative and cultural city imaginary feared that a consumerist project could be hidden behind the entertainment project.

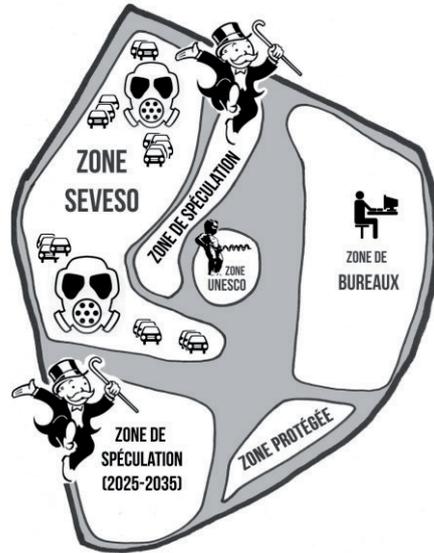
The sections below will attempt to shed light on the visions of the city which underpinned the different arguments used to support or criticize projects. Some arguments may be surprising. For instance, enthused by the project, the traditional defenders of the participative city promoted the ambitious city imaginary as a means to counter the potential criticism of a decision perceived as having lacked public consultation. Another surprising example was when the defenders of the city-dedicated-to-its-inhabitants occasionally found awkward allies in the groups defending cars.

Imaginaries are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are discursive repertoires that motivate the interlocutors who draw meaning and arguments from them. They meet with unequal degrees of development and are defended with more or less argumentative rigour, good and bad faith, energy and emotion. While these different imaginaries may appear isolated in their most radical and militant forms, they are often related. They often represent compositions on a spectrum of more or less solid, unusual or incongruous, depending on the characteristics and degrees of their compatibility or incompatibility (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991).

What, then, are these imaginaries, and around which challenges do they revolve?

> **Figure 1.** The pedestrianization zone for dummies

## Le piétonnier pour les nuls



Source: Platform Pentagone

### 3 > AN IDEALISED IMAGINARY OF URBANITY

The pedestrianization of the centre of Brussels is a long-standing issue. It dates back to when the central boulevards were designed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jourdain and Loir, 2016). The issue was revived by the *Picnic the Streets* protests (Van Hellemont and Vermeulen, 2016) which helped transform it into a ‘public affair’. These protests were organized via social networks, mainly Facebook, but were also relayed in more traditional media. They called for an occupation of the public square outside Brussels’s stock exchange building (the Bourse) – located today within the pedestrian zone – by organizing gatherings on different weekends. Faced with the inaction of political decision-makers in relation to a long-standing project which had already been the subject of studies and plans, these protests were intended to transform the project into reality, to implement it through citizen actions, and to ‘force’ political decision-makers to take action.

Beyond the scope of the pedestrian zone, two dimensions of the imaginary of the city stood out and took shape there, i.e., a participative city and participatory urban policies (see also Rosa et al., 2020 ; in this book). Challenging political inaction, the occupation of the pedestrian zone activated and embodied an imaginary of the transgressive re-appropriation of the city by citizens and social movements. This imaginary has actually been permeating the history of Brussels’s urban struggles since at least the 1960s and the battles of the Marolles and the North Quarter. These

battles were waged against modernist urban projects which, after having already heavily transformed the city, especially in relation to the 1958 World Fair, intended to demolish two working-class neighbourhoods (Carlier, 2016). This imaginary was maintained by a succession of struggles fuelled by the activism of numerous associations<sup>6</sup> and reactivated once again around 2008–2009 by the *Citizens' Forum of Brussels* (États généraux des Bruxelles).<sup>7</sup>

> **Figure 2.** Poster of the 2015 edition of *Picnic the streets*



Source: *Picnic the streets*

Grounded in the history of urban struggles, *Picnic the Streets* relied, however, on contemporary information technologies. It adopted the ‘urban meetup’ techniques previously employed within other cultural practices popular among young people (improvised evenings at the ‘urban interstices’ such as projects like ‘Gazon’ and ‘Boups’), which contrasted with traditional calls for mobilization, notably those used by traditional social movements. Such practices could make participants feel like they were sharing a secret and contributing to a trick or a ruse against the established power, which added a jubilant and festive aspect to the movement’s vindictive dimension, thereby contributing to the aestheticization of political action (Genard, 2019). It was a matter of reclaiming the city from cars and of doing so at a symbolic location, i.e. opposite the Bourse building, of course, but also on the traditional trajectory for major popular and political marches. The picnic model was, however, privileged over the march model, which asserts a ‘right of way’, by claiming a ‘festive right to occupy’.

<sup>6</sup> Brussels is often described as the ‘city of a thousand associations’.

<sup>7</sup> Joining civil society and representatives of the universities located in Brussels, the Forum jointly drafted a city project which it submitted to political parties before the upcoming electoral campaign.

The objectives were to transform Brussels into a car-free city and to rediscover a public space whose availability and quality would inevitably become increasingly essential in a world soon forced to assume the errors of growth at all costs, in particular by shrinking private spaces. The protests also sought to draw attention to the importance of the social question, marked in Brussels by a strong social and geographic divide. In short, the principle of dissent lying at the heart of the imaginary of the-city-reclaimed-by-its-inhabitants made it possible to bring together citizens committed to different causes, covering the different 'pillars' of sustainability: environmental, economic, social, cultural.

Beyond their different commitments and convictions, participants and initiators were also probably brought together by a participative approach to urban policy as opposed to a form of power monopolized by elites detached from the citizens. This perception was also supported by a broad view of what participation means, and went far beyond the usual arenas and forms of participation, integrating 'spontaneous' and festive occupations, down 'untrodden paths'.

This was the locus of an extension of the forms of urban struggle, which sought to extend the types of citizen participation far beyond the traditional spaces of discussion and deliberation by giving political meaning to daily and festive activities. Moreover, 'a hint of civil disobedience', as Philippe van Parijs wrote in his inaugural carte blanche,<sup>8</sup> and therefore the prospect of short-term imprisonment titillated those who were tempted by the experience of alternative political opposition. These commitments were influenced by situationist activism, but, more importantly, they contributed to the 'new' social movements that combined political denunciation, occupation of public spaces and citizen participation (*Indignés*, *Nuit Debout*, *Gilets Jaunes*, etc.), associating political action with cultural practices.

This reclaiming of the city was therefore drawn from a strong and renewed view of public space (Corijn, Vanderstraeten and Neuwels, 2016). It also rested on a recurring dimension of Brussels's imaginary of cultural and political contestation, which lies, for instance, at the heart of one of Brussels's major cultural events, the *Zinneke Parade*, which dates back to 2000 when Brussels was the European Capital of Culture, and which allows the 'zinodes'<sup>9</sup> from different – mostly peripheral and socially neglected neighbourhoods – to parade in the city centre during the event (Carlier, 2016). Whilst *Picnic the Streets* was about occupying the city centre, it was also about eating, having fun together and socializing: a conviviality elevated to a form of political dignity. Although the contestation was certainly political in

<sup>8</sup> Ph. Van Parijs (2012). *Picnic the Street!* In *Le Soir*, 24 May 2012.

<sup>9</sup> A zinode is a group of people who come together and develop a socio-artistic project integrated into the theme of the *Zinneke Parade*; this project is presented during the parade.

nature, it was played out through a cultural-reactionary vein, merging values of *civility* and *civism*.<sup>10</sup>

This imaginary perceived the development of the pedestrian zone as a real potential of urbanity. Rather than a ‘civil indifference’ (Goffman, 1963), the production of a new human landscape instead enabled a public space such as this to highlight and stage the civil bond: an aesthetic of gatherings. Unlike the discursive community specific to Habermas’s deliberative democracy, this referred to some form of aesthetic community, an ability to come together, to vibrate, to feel, to have fun together. Not only eating, playing or hanging out together as actors, but also as spectators, enjoying seeing others eating, playing and hanging out together. Whilst such a convivial public space may find one of its preconditions fulfilled in the existing background of ordinary civility, it can itself create a favourable climate for the development of ‘ordinary civism’ (Pharo, 1985), of a civic life rooted in pre-existing practices and in qualitative and accessible places. It therefore becomes a space of fraternization in which the collective is reassembled and where controversies fall silent, as was the case, for instance, on the pedestrian zone with the demonstrations and expressions of solidarity after the terrorist attacks in March and April 2016. Although this was not apparent in the formative stages of *Picnic the Streets*, the aim was also to create a space of highly symbolic value right in the city centre; a living and public gathering space where Brussels’s identity and solidarity could be constructed and reconstructed. This symbolic dimension was backed by the nostalgia expressed for the square *De Brouckère*,<sup>11</sup> but was reinforced by the expressions of solidarity following the attacks, as explained in the article ‘*La Place de la Bourse, ce lieu dont les Bruxellois avaient besoin* (*La Place de la Bourse, the place the residents of Brussels needed*)<sup>12</sup> published in *Le Soir*.

These paragraphs’ discussion, devoted to the imaginary of the city claimed by citizens, shed light on certain subsequent controversies. As the mayor of Brussels’s decision to create the pedestrian zone appeared to be a response to these grassroots movements, the future manifestation of the zone would then be constantly evaluated primarily against the backdrop of this imaginary of ownership that had been projected onto it.

In the very beginning, the existence of the pedestrian zone, precisely because of the unpreparedness of its implementation, appeared to head in the direction of these promises. The space, now freed from cars, provided real opportunities for citizens to claim ownership of the city during periods of fine weather: table tennis tables, giant chess games and *pétanque* courts were installed, with cultural actors

10 Since the theoretical studies proposed by Patrick Pharo (1985) on this issue, sociology has sought to empirically document the continuum and the tensions between civility and civism. It has drawn primarily from urban ethnography surveys (Berger et al., 2011, Bidet et al., 2015, Gayet-Viaud et al, 2019).

11 Jacques Brel’s famous song ‘Bruxelles’ was a reference point during the first *Picnic the Streets*.

12 J.-C. Vantroyen (2016). *La place de la Bourse, ce lieu dont les Bruxellois avaient besoin*. In *Le Soir*, 23 March 2016.

occupying the space. In other words, the pedestrian zone was temporarily transformed into a culturally vibrant space where everything seemed possible, where the utopia driven by *Picnic the Streets* could appear to come to fruition. Given that this first phase helped temporarily materialize the imaginary of the city reclaimed by its inhabitants, the multiple phases which followed produced, among the supporters of this imaginary, a disappointment and a feeling of betrayal that was all the stronger.

## 4 > THE IMAGINARY OF DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

The controversies around the pedestrian zone also provided an opportunity to confront different nuances of legitimacy in political decision-making and democracy: *autocratic, representative, participatory*.

Although it took place within the continuity of a series of demonstrations – and could therefore appear to be a response to the citizens' expectations – the decision to create the pedestrian zone was taken in an unexpected, uncoordinated and unprepared manner. The actors were therefore faced with what was essentially a form of preformative contradiction. Mayor Yvan Mayeur, who was no novice, had a rather autocratic manner of doing things. He represented an invasive figure for the advocates of the pedestrian zone, who positioned themselves as defenders and actors of participation. The paradox which is constitutive of the story of the emergence of the pedestrian zone stems from here: while the defenders of the pedestrian zone were happy with the essence of the decision, they had every reason to oppose its form.

This was not the only paradox in the structure of the controversies. For example, the city retrospectively declared its support for the implementation of participatory processes to prepare and guide the development of the pedestrian zone. What could have been perceived as a concession to the expectations of associations and an admission of the mistaken manner in which the initial decision had been taken, the legitimacy of these approaches was immediately suspected, despite the fact that an independent actor, *Artgineering*, was called upon. Participatory mechanisms were also invalidated or discredited because they had been organized through a top-down process and because the pedestrian zone's objectives, boundaries and traffic plan had been withdrawn from participatory debate (Van Hellemont and Vermeulen, 2016).

There was another paradox: certain studies and consultancies commissioned by the city, notably the 2009-2011 mobility plan, were used by associations to contest the scenario eventually selected, thereby presenting the mayor with his own contradictions and discrediting his initial autocratic attitude.

Lastly, to deal with the expert logic and the lack of citizen participation, certain associations, notably *Inter Environnement Bruxelles* (IEB), relied on surveys conducted

among local residents affected by the project. The tension between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge was thereby revived (Berger, 2008). IEB perceived the experience of actors in the field as 'expertise' more worthy than the distant and abstract knowledge of official experts.

Conversely, the mayor benefited from a democratic legitimacy acquired through the elections and the formation of a majority government, although questions could be raised about his legitimacy as an 'unelected mayor' given the few preferential votes he received. Although damaged, his legitimacy was accompanied by an authority which made him the obligatory interlocutor of all of the project's stakeholders. Divisions emerged between those who saw participatory mechanisms as the only space that allowed them to influence decisions, and those who at best saw them as a compulsory procedure and who negotiated directly with the 'real' decision-makers; decision-makers who were also the only ones able to gather the resources necessary for the execution of the project, of mobilizing Beliris<sup>13</sup> and of ensuring that Proximus, Telenet and Sibelga contributed to the success of the project. They viewed the political will of the mayor as an asset and as a precondition for success in the face of the procrastination that they had frequently criticized among political leaders, or the excessive attention that they gave to participatory mechanisms; an attention which they perceived as responsible for watering down projects or delaying their execution.

## 5 > OPEN CITY, ORGANIZED CITY OR 'WARRANTED CITY'

Compared to this imaginary of the city reclaimed by its citizens, the arguments relating to the unpreparedness of the project are interesting insofar as they allow us to further develop our analyses.

First, it should be emphasized that this lack of preparation encountered an imaginary that is strongly rooted in the people of Brussels, and perhaps even more so at the national level. This imaginary perceives Brussels as a city on the edge of institutional chaos – with multiple associated consequences – and one which has difficulties in decision-making, is poorly coordinated because of the division of the Region into 19 municipalities, and where political quarrels proliferate due to the necessary cohabitation of French and Dutch speakers. It sees in Brussels a 'dirty', 'unsafe' and 'mismanaged' city, which is how various international media will often describe it.

In some ways, the decision's lack of preparation was therefore fully consistent with this imaginary. It thereby provided 'new ammunition' for the project's opponents, some of whom did not fail to exploit it, such as the liberal party (MR) which had

<sup>13</sup> Beliris is a collaboration policy between the Federal State and the Brussels-Capital Region whose objective is to promote Brussels as the capital of Belgium and of Europe.

been relegated to the opposition by Mayor Mayeur during the previous elections. It must be mentioned that soon after his decision to create the pedestrian zone, several ethical scandals had an impact on the City of Brussels's management teams, resulting in the Mayor himself being forced to resign.

In parallel, the significance of this imaginary also found evidence in the extraordinary success of the pedestrian zone when it first opened, and was largely in line with the objectives set out by *Picnic the Streets*. This success caught Brussels's municipal administration by surprise and therefore led to several setbacks, waste accumulation, noise, etc. Although most of the problems were quickly resolved, and a nuisance management plan was implemented the following week, the dominant negative image persisted for several months, therefore somewhat downplaying the success of the opening of the pedestrian zone.

On the one hand, the unpreparedness of the project therefore reinforced the stereotype of bad governance which some considered 'stuck to the skin' of Brussels. On the other, paradoxically, this lack of preparation could be interpreted positively.<sup>14</sup> While several people criticized the project's unpreparedness and disapproved of the likely chaos, others argued that a weak level of organization was one of the attractions of the pedestrian zone, because it left the door open to the adoption of multiple ways of claiming the space. Opposed to 'groomed' public spaces and planning logics, the public space was perceived as a space capable of favouring the unexpected and the improvised, and a space where the city could be experienced without being permanently conditioned. Some therefore viewed the unpreparedness of the project as a real opportunity that allowed citizens to undertake initiatives prohibited by excessively groomed cities. While such urban experiments were accepted – or even encouraged – during the initial testing phase, many feared that they would ultimately be done away with in order to accommodate specific, delineated and functional uses. The other phases of the project proved them right, and there was a proliferation of discourses on disappointment and missed opportunities.

The open city was thus opposed to the 'warranted city' (Breviglieri, 2013), delimited by signposted tourist routes, viewpoints and 'compulsory' visits, prescriptions and safety measures, urban furniture designed to keep away the homeless, subsidiaries of major international chains and many other things<sup>15</sup> (see Rosa et al., 2020).

<sup>14</sup> The so-called Brussels institutional chaos is itself sometimes positively interpreted, the idea being that within this institutional maze, it will always be possible to find interlocutors.

<sup>15</sup> The relationships between the two are not always antagonistic: the warranted city can look favourably upon temporary occupations, experiments, and the artistic works of the artists from the 'open city' as a temporary means of livening up its wastelands, nooks and crannies while awaiting real estate projects, or can even consider them as fleeting moments providing new ideas for future development plans or future real estate projects.

## 6 > THE IMAGINARY OF SECURITY

The fight against car mobility was also built around claims associated with insecurity. Once the pedestrian zone was created and the risks associated with the presence of cars were done away with,<sup>16</sup> other forms of insecurity quickly appeared, with safety remaining a major issue. In its edition of 15 October 2019, the newspaper *Le Soir* pointed out that 'the majority of offences against pedestrians are on the rise throughout the territory of the zone. Thus, in two years, the number of robberies with violence has increased by 4%, that of pickpocketing by 12%. Nuisances, a generic term grouping noise-related problems, disturbances, fights, drunkenness, illegal dumping, nuisances associated with street drug dealing, violent and abusive behaviour, have risen by 7%. Interventions for people suffering from psychiatric disorders have also increased by 200% between 2010 (329) and 2018 (687). At the same time, six establishments have been closed for drug offences and 15 for disturbing public order.' It is also worth mentioning that the pedestrian zone had become a gathering place for festive events that occasionally got out of control, as was the case in November 2017 following Morocco's qualification for the Football World Cup. What is particularly interesting about the security imaginary is that it commands a shared commitment while at the same time revealing a profound contradiction with the attempts to regulate and manage it. Naturally, the very notion of public space presupposes the safety of those who occupy it. However, the installation of security mechanisms in the pedestrian zone appears to be a clear example of adhesion to this 'warranted city', which contradicts with the conditions of an 'open' public space, conditions which are projected upon this same imaginary. The issue of security therefore unfolds in a context of dual constraints.

Indeed, to some extent, through the pedestrian zone, it is also the image of Brussels, of its city centre, and of its perspectives in terms of tourism, that are played out. For those who have invested in Brussels economically or politically, securing the space is obviously important. Associations have also played an important part in increasing the levels of attention paid to this security imaginary. Feminist groups pointed to the insecurities that women and the LGBT population face. Focus was given both to its temporal dimension (insecurity increases at night) and to its spatial dimension (the urban furniture arrangements were linked to gender issues, the layout of benches for instance was accused of enabling male voyeurism). Significant attention was also paid to the cohabitation between different forms of mobility, first in the 'meeting zones' where cars subjected to speed limits were present and where pedestrians had priority – although things did not always work out exactly as planned – and second, between pedestrians and (other) forms of

<sup>16</sup> The elimination of the risks associated with cars was progressive, and depended on the evolution of the building works which, in certain phases, were linked to the acceptance of cars in certain sections of the pedestrian zone. Moreover, adopting a structural approach, certain buses were authorized to cross the pedestrian zone, as well as taxis and ambulances. At certain times, delivery vehicles or garbage trucks also had access to the zone.

active mobility, which led, for instance, to the introduction of rules to slow down cyclists<sup>17</sup> and delivery vehicles to 6 km/h. Regarding this subject, the Gracq, a group for the defence and promotion of cyclists, regretted that the development of the pedestrian zone had led to the removal of cycle paths, leading cyclists to adopt other longer or more dangerous routes, as they did not intend to comply with this slow speed requirement.

The contradiction – that structurally affects the management of safety on the pedestrian zone – will lead to, and has kept on leading to, the emergence of multiple controversies as each security measure is implemented. Some want more, others find what already exists excessive. This was the case, for instance, with the recent decision by the mayor of Brussels to ban the consumption of alcohol in the pedestrian zone. The Liberal Party and the Flemish Nationalist Party in particular judged the measure to be unrealistic, ineffective, and revealing of the weakness of political decision-makers. Others called for less repressive measures.

The everyday management of security also revealed this contradiction. The interviews conducted as part of the study commissioned by the *Mobile Lives Forum*<sup>18</sup> attest to this. In particular, this is evidenced through the interviews conducted with the neighbourhood policing teams who speak of situations in which they are faced with behaviours bordering on incivility, or even illegality. Both the interviews and field observations show the extent to which these teams are forced to play between repression and understanding, and how they must sometimes combine care with firmness, for example with regard to homeless people, drunk people, beggars who harass passers-by, or drug dealers.

In some ways, the pedestrian zone thus appears as a privileged stage where, behind the formal gathering around an imaginary of the necessary security of space, traditional oppositions formed around ways of living together are played and replayed.

## 7 > THE SUSTAINABILITY IMAGINARY VERSUS MODERNIST HERITAGE

From the very beginning, the sustainability imaginary has been at the centre of the controversies. This is hardly surprising if we consider that, since the 1990s, Brussels has been a stronghold of the green party (Ecolo), whose results are almost unparalleled in Europe. Moreover, there is a strong presence of environmental associations in the city, and since the green party became part of the Government

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gracq.org/pietonnier-axe-cyclable-alternatif>

<sup>18</sup> Created in 2011, the Mobile Lives Forum is a research institute that focuses on the mobility that 'prepares the transition to more desired and sustainable lifestyles'. The study commissioned was entitled *The city centre, pedestrianization and lifestyles*. Its results are available on the Forum's website: <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/projet/2019/01/17/centre-ville-pietonisation-et-modes-vie-12832>

of the Brussels-Capital Region in 2004, sustainability issues are perceived as political priorities for the Region. They have thus been incorporated into the public action landscape (for instance strict requirements with regard to the energy performance of public and private buildings) and have also helped restructure older schemes (neighbourhood contracts transformed into sustainable neighbourhood contracts).

What is specific to the pedestrian zone case is therefore not so much its justification through the imaginary of sustainability, but rather the types of arguments that were brought forward. Indeed, the intensity with which the different dimensions of sustainability were brought forward differed (Genard and Neuwels, 2016). The de-growth movement argued that there was a need to benefit from ample and hospitable public spaces because the future could only lead to a reduction in the footprints of private housing, and to a compulsory re-densification of city centres. The relationship with nature was also highlighted through the proposal for green public spaces and for the planting of trees.<sup>19</sup> Among the different dimensions of sustainability, the environmental dimension took centre stage, mainly with regard to mobility issues, the dismissing of cars and their effects, the fight against air pollution, and the promotion of alternative mobility. This structural relationship between sustainability and mobility was indeed long-standing, with the existence of the pedestrianization projects on the political agenda having its origins in the mobility plans ordered from *Groupe Planning* in 1998 by H. Simons, municipal councillor (Ecolo Party) of the City of Brussels in charge of urban planning issues (Van Hellemont and Vermeulen, 2016).

In terms of the competition between different forms of mobility, the active forms were thus faced with a dual reality test. On the one hand, this would highlight how and to what extent the city – and the way it is practiced – would be impacted by dedicating a large part of the centre to these forms of transport (walking, cycling, new fun modes of transport, skateboarding, scooters, hoverboards, or even what Philippe Van Parijs refers to as ‘pleasant immobility’<sup>20</sup>). On the other, it was necessary to organize, in ‘real time’, competition between different forms of mobility and manage the consequences. There was also a need to find alternative solutions for cars, which could no longer pass through the pedestrian zone, and even more so for public transport, notably buses, which provided an alternative to the car and whose routes passed through the pedestrian zone.

These controversies show that, while the sustainability imaginary was mobilized in multiple contexts (pollution control, reduction of noise pollution, return to

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<sup>19</sup> The Pentagon Platform association expressed its regret that the zone had never been, and was still insufficiently, green.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the interview with Ph. Van Parijs in the *Le Soir* newspaper published on 15 October 2015. <https://plus.lesoir.be/9054/article/2015-10-13/oui-le-pietonnier-bruxellois-est-une-grande-avancee>

more natural bodily practices such as walking, etc.), dismissing cars sparked the greatest debate, at least at the very start.

## 8 > THE CAR DEBATE

While the city imaginary of the 1950s (with its highways that penetrated the region, its *skyline* designed according to traffic networks, and its towers that became a characteristic of the landscape, its ‘small beltway’, its bridges, tunnels and flyovers, its underground car parks, its shopping malls on the outskirts) focused on vehicular mobility (Leloutre and Pelgrims, 2017; Vanhaelen and Leloutre, 2017), the development of the pedestrian zone and the controversies it generated instead brought the refusal of the car to the forefront and explicitly dramatized it.

As mentioned above, the opposition to modernist policies is long-standing and dates back at least as far as the 1960s or 1970s. However, backed by associations which would play an important role in Brussels’s urban policies (ARAU<sup>21</sup> in particular), opponents focused on the rejection of the ‘Car as King’ paradigm. They also insisted on citizen participation – as opposed to modernism’s common top-down approach to policies – and on the defence of a heritage-driven aesthetic, historically linked to the current of reconstructing the European City in which Brussels played a central role. However, sustainability issues were ignored and it is only recently, in the last 20 years, that they have begun to receive attention.

The modernist city that resulted from the major works undertaken in the 1950s was designed primarily against the backdrop of vehicular mobility. It is worth mentioning, however, that the urban visibility of the car was essentially associated with an aesthetic of speed, especially for car users, for whom modernist architecture, town planning and landscaping were expected to propose the relevant aesthetic qualities (Pelgrims, 2018; 2020). This modernist urban design – targeting both the functionalization and the aestheticization of speed – was combined with a strategy to exclude non-functional car mobility (ring-roads for car traffic that had nothing to do with the city and whose passage through the city would lead to slowdown and an urban nuisance) and to hide car immobility (underground car parks in the city, park and ride, or car parks located around commercial and industrial areas).

Gradually, car mobility policies integrated security concerns through attempts to limit speed (speed bumps, zones limited to 30 km/h, etc.) and the fight against car immobility spread to the entire region (parking charges, residents’ cards, the use of a parking disc, etc.). Beyond slowing cars down or making them invisible, by attempting to reject them completely, the pedestrian zone, drawing on active forms of mobility, revisits the question of an aesthetic and phenomenological relationship to the city which, as mentioned earlier, had a high degree of presence in the modernist project, but also of the hygienist and sanitary relationship to the city.

<sup>21</sup> The Urban Research and Action Workshop.

In contrast with the type of urban experience implied when driving a car, in which the aesthetic relationship with the city depends entirely on the tool allowing speed, the forms of mobility enabled by the pedestrian zone were appreciated for providing a first-hand relationship between body and space. The city was now experienced physically and according to the rhythms of the body, rhythms which also guaranteed a healthy expenditure of physical energy. Focus on the physical, phenomenological and sanitary relationship to the city also justified the introduction of the issues of car-induced noise pollution and air quality into the controversies. And where the car traffic boulevard was accused of dividing the city, while the pedestrian zone was 'stitching it back together' and ensuring its continuity and its isomorphism (Corijn, Vanderstraeten and Neuwels, 2016), in some ways, it is once again the idea of a tangible, sensitive and harmonious relationship to the city that was mobilized.

However, the 'good' arguments in favour of the fight against cars were forced to leave their comfort zone when they encountered other arguments where the relevance was directly fuelled by the 'collateral effects' of pedestrianization. The banning of automobile traffic on the pedestrian zone meant that it mechanically shifted to other roads and to other neighbourhoods. There was thus talk of a mini-ring-road to absorb this traffic, but this would cut across primarily working-class neighbourhoods which had until then been peaceful. Social justice issues therefore came to burden the imaginary of sustainability with a hint of social class privilege. It is worth mentioning that one of the *Picnic* sit-ins was organized not to call for pedestrianization – which had been acquired – but to denounce this mini-ring-road and the transfer of nuisances to other spaces.<sup>22</sup> This issue led natural defenders of pedestrianization – for instance elected environmentalists – to oppose the project, not in principle, but because of the transfer of nuisances.

Businesses which were dependent on customers with cars feared how this would impact their turnover. Several traders in the fashion industry, who were perceived as important for the image of the city centre, threatened to pack up and leave. What, then, was the link between pedestrianization and economic stakes? Was there a need to expand parking areas in response to this issue? Projects emerged, targeting once again neighbourhoods that are a symbol of urban struggles, notably the Marolles neighbourhood. From a security point of view, aren't cars a guarantee of nocturnal presence? What, then, might this 'pedestrian zone by night' be? And lastly, for whose convenience are cars chased away? Is the objective to ensure tranquillity for residents facing various inconveniences on a daily basis, or to promote the comfort of tourists in a city intended to compete in terms of attractiveness?

We will now turn our attention to other imaginaries. While some of these imaginaries were used to challenge the project, others sought to give it greater credibility.

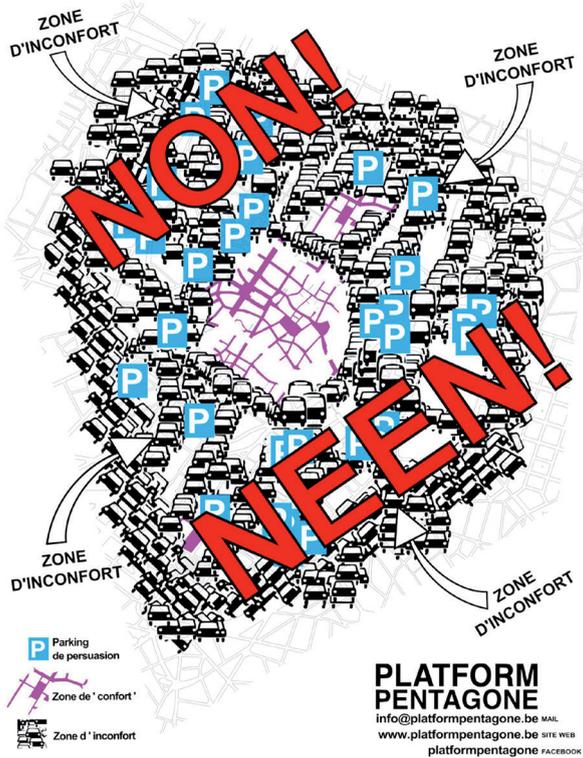
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<sup>22</sup> See, among many other viewpoints, the position supported by ARAU entitled 'Pedestrianization combined with a mini-ring is not the solution' (<https://arau.org/fr/urban/detail/301/la-pietonnisation-alliee-a-un-mini-ring-n-est-pas-la-solution>).

The majority of the imaginaries, however, applied in both directions. As mentioned earlier with regard to the inherent tensions between hospitality and security in the imaginary of the public space, or between the various pillars of the ecological imaginary, the imaginaries encountered were far from univocal, holding ambiguities that would reveal and highlight the ordeals and controversies in which they partook.

> **Figure 3.** This is not a pedestrian zone (criticism of the parking policy)

# CECI N'EST PAS UN PIETONNIER



Source: Platform Pentagone

## 9 > THE IMAGINARY OF THE URBAN COMMUNITY AND ITS STRANGERS

One of the issues relating to urban imaginaries concerns what one may refer to as the beneficiaries of the urban project. Is a city sought for its inhabitants and, if

so, for which inhabitants? Or, rather, is a city sought for its visitors and temporary occupants and, again, for which ones?

In the urban struggles experienced in Brussels in the 1960s, the figure of the inhabitant and the scale of the neighbourhood were central. With the controversies surrounding the pedestrian zone, it is clear that the urban imaginary's scale has broadened, following a more general change in scale, which has revealed itself, for example, within public action mechanisms with the move from neighbourhood contracts to 'priority development zones'. The pedestrian project quickly appeared to be set less against the backdrop of the inhabitants – at least at the neighbourhood level – and more about citizens at the regional level, as was imagined by the shared city imaginary supported by *Picnic the Streets*. The pedestrian zone gave the consumers who had abandoned the city centre a reason to return, and there was an increase in the number of short-term visitors and tourists whose extended stay would be economically beneficial.

The pedestrian affair had clearly put the question of the scale – the scale on which Brussels should be imagined – back on the agenda.

The initial justification for a pedestrian zone, notably with *Picnic the Streets*, was turned towards the Region (rather than a neighbourhood), which had probably been conceived beyond its institutional limits, even though the type of occupation and conviviality expected there resembled the forms of sociability specific to a neighbourhood.

It is nevertheless interesting to see how, over the course of the unfolding of controversies and the development of the zone, the tensions or oppositions between residents and citizens and visitors persisted. Set against the backdrop of 'the inhabitant', the social movements of the 1960s had succeeded in imposing this imaginary in urban planning policies via policy measures designed for the neighbourhood scale. The emergence of the attractiveness imaginary, as well as measures designed on a broader scale, gradually called the neighbourhood scale into question from the 1990s. However, it persisted in Brussels's civil society.

From the outset, the aim to promote conviviality on a regional scale via the pedestrian zone was confronted by the argument that the scale of the pedestrian zone would reduce the conviviality and the social cohesion that existed in these neighbourhoods. This argument was defended, for example, by a group of citizens and associations gathered together as 'Platform Pentagone'. In some ways, one scale of cohesion was pitted against another and sometimes, albeit less explicitly, xenophobia played a background role (Stavo-Debaugue, 2017). In these controversies, words occasionally revealed intuitions that would be refuted by arguments, such as when the social networks of the political representatives of the left-wing party, supposedly anti-racist, spoke of 'hordes of Japs' [sic] threatening the city centre.

Gentrification fears also led to the revival of the classic argument of a – somewhat ritualized – opposition to urban renewal projects. Indeed, by improving the image of the neighbourhood and increasing its attractiveness, the real estate values would also increase and therefore lead to the gradual departure of the less wealthy tenant populations in favour of more privileged classes, in this case the middle classes with high cultural capital. Much like urban renewal projects in general, the pedestrian zone was widely criticized in this regard. The criticism, however, downplayed the actual impact of urban renewal projects on improving living conditions in the central districts of Brussels (Berger, 2019).

The reference to inhabitants may either come from a generic set of claims integrated into an urban imaginary based on the figure of the inhabitant, or it may be endorsed by the inhabitants themselves who defend their neighbourhood and refuse the risk of nuisance. The controversy thus revealed a number of arguments held by actors who positioned themselves as potential victims of the project. They feared an increase in car traffic, in noise related to terraces, bars and restaurants, or even a decrease in parking spaces which could be detrimental to their business. The particularity of these arguments was that they had to be handled with care, as they could easily be stigmatized as NIMBY standpoints, verging on selfishness (Trom, 1999). The risk associated with the defence of the neighbourhood appeared even more important, as it proposed to defend private interests against a project involving public space.

Without going into detail about the evolution of the arguments raised around the pedestrian zone, it is clear that this zone, as reflected in its initial projects as well as in the imaginary around *Picnic the Streets*, acted as a lever for the extension of the scale at which the city is imagined. The significance of the project and its growing importance in the debates on the city helped awaken the interest of researchers, notably those associated with the Brussels Studies Institute, which had been founded in the immediate wake of the Citizens' Forum of Brussels (États généraux de Bruxelles). The researchers advised Yvan Mayeur, then still mayor, to set up an observatory of the pedestrian zone. Over the course of its development and with the agreement of the city of Brussels, this observatory was gradually transformed into the Observatory of the City Centre, reflecting the concept of a city centre or a hyper-centre in a metropolitan context.

## 10 > THE IMAGINARY OF THE FAIR SHARING OF SPACE

As noted, the topic of social justice interfered in the background – and often in the foreground – of the many positions taken. It came to be given its own space, because it emerged as a central issue during the realization of the project: its validity depended on its ability to convince stakeholders that everyone would benefit and that nobody would get a raw deal, especially those who lived there.

Chronologically, the issue of justice may have initially emerged in association with the shifting of vehicular mobility. In the name of social justice, the mini-ring-road was fiercely contested from the outset. Indeed, it was clear that the project could not shift its nuisance to neighbouring spaces, especially when those areas were already associated with socially disadvantaged populations. The very logic of the mini-ring threw political suspicion on the pedestrianization project, which was accused of contributing, once again, to the transformation and gradual calibration of the city, notably its centre, in favour of socially privileged populations.

Two dimensions further strengthened the credibility of this social justice argument. First, it was consistent with a well-established observation on the gradual increase of the inhospitality of the Brussels Region to economically disadvantaged populations (high unemployment rate, increase in housing costs). Second, given the strong socio-economic dualization of the pedestrian space (one of its extremities was located in a poor neighbourhood with a high concentration of immigrant populations), the pedestrianization project somewhat appeared as an instrument aimed at the socio-demographic transformation of the city centre. The usual arguments against urban renewal projects were raised regarding the gentrification risks associated with a potential increase in the value of property and rents. This gentrification was likely to have an important impact on the existing types of businesses, many of which were local, i.e., so-called 'ethnic' businesses.

Against these strong arguments, there was a need to show that there would be no 'victims' and, more positively, that all, or at least many, would benefit. The stakes associated with reviving the city centre were thus put forward, and it was shown that this injection of energy was essential to fighting against the tendency to shift activities to the outskirts, and to attract and extend the stay of visitors whose expenditure would help provide employment and income for residents. In short, a set of arguments that outlined social justice issues as dependent on an economic dynamism, a dynamism which the pedestrian zone would certainly help to induce.

In addition to these arguments framed from a medium- and long-term perspective, it was necessary, in the short term, to respond to the concerns of those whose activities were directly linked to the project: residents, passers-by, business owners, hoteliers, etc. Various improvements were thus made in an attempt to respond to different concerns, in particular those of powerful stakeholders, as was the case with the concession of allowing car access to Hotel Métropole, one of the most prestigious hotels located on the De Brouckère Square in the city centre. Moreover, the testing phase at the start of the project acted as an 'acid test' which proved certain fears right, in particular because of the considerable nuisances due to the scale of the development works or even the security issues mentioned above.

Beyond the issues of social justice, the question of equity was also raised in relation to the sharing of space, both with regard to sharing between different types of mobility within public space and between public space and private appropriations. The primacy, or near-exclusivity, given to pedestrians was clearly entrenched

in the very idea of the pedestrian zone. However, in a break with the tradition of the functional separation of forms of mobility inherited from modernism, the pedestrian zone experimented with the sharing of space. Firstly, space was shared between the different forms of active mobility – walking, biking, scooters, skateboarding – which led to few public controversies but to difficulties which were observed during ethnographic observations and interviews carried out on the pedestrian zone within the framework of the survey commissioned by *Mobile Lives Forum*. The sharing also took place between active forms of mobility, public transport and car traffic, during delivery hours, but also structurally during certain construction phases. The challenges of sharing space called for civil attitudes whose ‘codes’ had to be contextualized in relation to pedestrianization. For example, the presence of cars was viewed as a misuse of space. It placed motorists in the unusual position of illegitimate occupants of space, forcing them to adopt an attitude of restraint, and allowed passers-by to position themselves as the legitimate and priority occupants. Put differently, through the unusual partitions it proposed, the pedestrian space became some sort of inducer for the rules of civility, reshaping the hierarchies of mobility.

Naturally, this sharing of space was not based on the conditions of civility alone. It was also the subject of architectural and urban planning reflections. Ground covers, the positioning of urban furniture, the creation of obstacles or, more explicitly, the installation of shared space signs (different levels, borders, platforms, etc.), would all contribute to a better coexistence of the different forms of mobility.

Another issue of justice in the shared public space was linked to the various privatized occupations, irrespective of whether they were authorized or not. In particular, the extent of occupation by hotel, restaurant and café (Horeca) terraces was occasionally perceived as an illegitimate deviation from the essence of a space initially intended to be public. The fear of seeing the public space privatized by the ‘extensions’ of Horeca businesses was highly anticipated following the controversies relating to Sainte-Catherine Square (a square located close to the pedestrian zone) concerning urban furniture, in particular public benches. These controversies pitted different associations (in particular *Free 54*) that projected onto the square an imaginary similar to the one underpinned by *Picnic the Streets*, against the Horeca industry, which hoped to occupy the space with its terraces. Moreover, the service sector looked unfavourably upon the proliferation of benches, which would allow visitors to eat outdoors, reducing their potential role as clientele, and would also attract people likely to have a negative impact on their activities, for example homeless people. Similarly, questions were raised about the substantial presence of garbage bags which many users complained about, first for aesthetic reasons but also for challenging the legitimacy of these private outgrowths of shops and dwellings onto public space.

## 11 > THE ATTRACTIVENESS IMAGINARY

Although not always explicitly claimed, the project of the pedestrian zone was strongly linked to the attractiveness imaginary. At the outset, regional policies were considered from a narrower scope. However, in the different regional and municipal strategic plans (Regional Development Plans – RDPs – which have now become Sustainable Regional Development Plans – SRDPs), the attractiveness frame was given further importance as the competition between major cities intensified. Inherent to the concept of attractiveness today is the idea that culture (and the creation of cultural infrastructures), as well as urban atmospheres and events – associated with the quality of public space – should play a central role (Genard, 2014).

The pedestrianization project naturally fell within this context. The importance of improving the attractiveness of the capital of Europe was mentioned on several occasions, particularly in terms of its image and touristic contributions. Although the argument was not central to the discourse of those defending the pedestrianization project, its adversaries viewed it as an outcome of the policy of attractiveness which, since the International Development Plan (IDP) in particular, had increasingly permeated regional and municipal policies.

Beyond the explicit or non-explicit nature of the attractiveness frame, several elements demonstrated its presence and efficiency in the background of the project. Culture, in its different dimensions, is a crucial element in the attractiveness imaginary. This was the case in the pedestrian zone. For example, we can mention the project to transform Brussels's stock (the Bourse) exchange building into a beer museum, associating the idea of a museum with an 'object' that is playful, folklorist, used daily and firmly anchored in Bruxellois and Belgian identity. We can mention the transfer, which is already fairly old, but also the enlargement, of the *Plaisirs d'hiver* (Winter Pleasures) in the pedestrian area, as well as the organization of musical events during regional festivals. Lastly, the investment in urban atmospheres became an increasingly central element in attractiveness policies. Indeed, the entertainment made possible by the pedestrian zone, and the organized or improvised ways in which people were allowed to claim ownership of the city, helped shape urban atmospheres which would be attractive in themselves. One could choose to stroll in the pedestrian zone with no particular reason or aim, certain to find there the atmosphere which made the city vibrant. The pedestrian zone thus provided an opportunity to revive the disputes around this attractiveness imaginary. Defenders of a city dedicated to its citizens first and foremost were pitted against defenders of a city dedicated to its visitors, a primed city designed primarily with tourists, businessmen, politicians, civil servants and lobbyists in mind.

It is also worth mentioning that the attractiveness imaginary was, in some ways, fuelled by the sustainability imaginary. A redesigned, friendly, unpolluted and green space would in itself be a factor of attractiveness for its future users. Moreover, the pedestrian zone project came on top of other politically motivated

decisions seeking sustainability and which had ranked Brussels highly in the rankings of green cities. Sustainability and attractiveness went hand-in-hand.

While neither explicitly announced nor claimed, it is perhaps in its properties as an 'economic magnet' that the frame of reference of attractiveness was most frequently mobilized in controversies, as well as by economic investors. The pedestrian zone attracted investors, i.e., new economic players. Indeed, it quickly became a major stake in large-scale real estate projects. This explained how WeWork, the American start-up and world leader specialized in co-working spaces, 'purchased 16,000m<sup>2</sup> of the pedestrian zone' (as reported by the *Echo* newspaper on 15 January 2019), taking advantage of the long-term lease of the former Philips Tower (a 17-storey tower that initially housed offices), now the Multi Tower, undertaking grand renovation works to develop a real estate project centred on shared office space. In a similar vein, the ImmoReal real estate group 'bought almost the entire block [...] (in this case almost all of one side of the De Brouckère Square), and is preparing to develop a megaproject which will mainly provide residential housing', as mentioned in an article in the *Le Soir* newspaper dated 13 June 2019. The renovation projects are subject to strict environmental requirements, thereby strengthening their legitimacy, despite being at odds with the initial ambitions of the project defended by citizen associations. There are many other examples, including, on a more limited scale, for instance, the very rapid emergence, already present during the development works, of new businesses such as bicycle shops, or the – implemented or planned – establishment of new Horeca actors, such as Exki, Paul or Burger King. This was clear proof that these economic players were counting on the economic attractiveness of the pedestrian zone, as well as on a change in its potential clientele.

The attractiveness imaginary was less explicitly defended by the initiators of the pedestrian zone than it was mobilized by its opponents. It was fuelled, however, by the economic dimension, which assumed that public investments, financed by the municipality, the region, and Beliris, would have multiplier effects and attract private investors. There would be ripple and complementarity effects, in line with the rise in the legitimacy of public-private partnerships (PPP) due to the fact that public authorities, in particular in Brussels, could not rely on public investments alone.

Because of both its size and, paradoxically, the radical nature of the decision to create it, the question of the city's grandeur and ambition, as well as the pride of its inhabitants, lay at stake with the pedestrian zone. To a certain extent, the violent manner in which the decision was taken may have helped a break away from the image of indecision and procrastination often associated with political decision-makers. Despite the absence of widespread participation by citizens, the pedestrianization project may have given rise to the image of a city that has plans, that is ambitious and daring, and one that asserts itself. Although the motivations of the actors differed, the pedestrian project gave rise to an imaginary of greatness

and pride. This was clearly reflected in the assertion that the pedestrian zone would be ‘the largest in Europe, after Venice’, as Els Ampe, the deputy mayor for mobility, announced during a press conference. This policy of greatness and success was promoted by actors who defended very different visions of the pedestrian zone. It was also undoubtedly, and politically, promoted by a metropolization imaginary. By turning Brussels’s ambition of greatness into a reality, the pedestrian zone also provided a basis for illustrating and activating this imaginary. It revealed that the social, economic and cultural reality of Brussels spread far beyond its administrative boundaries. This point, which was often timidly supported by political authorities, received explicit backing in the different workshops organized around the issue of the pedestrian zone by representatives of the academic world, as well as by public agencies and associations associated with urban planning issues.<sup>23</sup>

## 12 > THE IMAGINARY OF THE COMMERCIAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL CITY

Business owners and their local associations often lay at the heart of the controversies. Their arguments were based on different elements. The first revolved around accessibility, notably vehicular accessibility. Naturally, they received the support of important car-related associations (in particular the Touring association). This was the case for both ‘small’ businesses and major local economic players such as the Métropole hotel. These business owners also expressed their fears with regard to the shift to a pedestrian zone, notably concerning the construction phase, which was likely to decrease their profit margin.

The economic impact of the project occupied an important place in the controversies. Beyond temporary difficulties or nuisances, the pedestrian zone was framed as a potential means to ensure the economic revitalization of the city centre. The public authorities never missed a chance to put forward such arguments: reinvestment of private actors in business, shopping centre projects, reinvestment in real estate, etc. They levelled criticism against local business owners who refused to question and modify their way of doing things and who rejected new forms of consumption, for example e-commerce. Critics challenged these arguments, instead claiming that potential investments would be made by economically strong groups at the expense of local business owners. They argued that real estate investment would inevitably drive up prices, and that the arguments for economic development were simply concessions to new forms of experiential consumerism. The *Picnic the Streets* movement had raised similar fears and had organized, in June 2014, a sit-in entitled: ‘No Mini-ring, no bling bling’.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, the workshop organized at the initiative of *Perspective Brussels* in April 2019: <https://perspective.brussels/fr/actualites/workshop-sur-la-planification-spatiale-lechelle-metropolitaine>; the workshop ‘Brussels. The productive metropolis’ organized by *Architecture Workroom*, in June 2016.

In reality, beyond these arguments around functional aspects, the positions defended were far-reaching. Indeed, the view of public space defended by traders' associations was directly linked to the market and to consumer activities. This view was both contemporary and radically at odds with the historical view of public space, which differed from the private sphere to which economic activities were confined (Habermas, 1988). This commercial view of public space was extremely significant in urban planning. It resulted in specific typologies, such as shopping centres (Vanhaelen and Leloutre, 2017) as well as the first pedestrian zones in Brussels; these included pedestrian crossings or zones next to major traffic lanes, for instance the development of the pedestrian zone on the Boulevard de la Toison d'Or and, later, one on Rue Neuve, which was entirely devoted to shops. This has been the case for all the pedestrian zones in the city centre located around the Grand-Place and in the medieval fabric, most of which are occupied by hotels, cafés and restaurants (Pelgrims, 2020). Although rarely explicitly referred to in these terms, what became major factors were the nature of public space and the role of commercial activities in urban dynamics.

Traders were not the only economic actors involved in these controversies. As mentioned earlier, controversies occasionally resulted in splits between 'local' traders and 'external' economic players likely to benefit from the pedestrian zone, the constructors of car parks, commercial investors, and even real estate investors. The question of at which scale the city was to be imagined was revived once again.

Lastly, the short history of the pedestrian zone clearly reveals the sheer magnitude of the mobility among the actors present upon it, who helped shape it and materialize it. While civil society initially played a leading role, political decision-makers eventually took charge. Gradually, economic actors, including extremely powerful actors, emerged, embodying some of the fears that had been expressed from the start regarding the nature and purpose of the pedestrian zone.

## 13 > THE IMAGINARY OF THE REFLEXIVE CITY

We would like to draw attention to a dimension of which this article is part and parcel. Indeed, multiple urban, sociological and environmental studies have analysed the pedestrian zone. The 'Observatory of the pedestrian zone', several academic studies funded by the research administration of the Brussels-Capital Region, and the Metrolab project, which was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), have also focused on this zone. Moreover, multiple masterclasses have taken place, with architecture schools, in relation to or dealing with the project of the pedestrian zone, for instance the 'Zoom in/Zoom out' masterclass which was the locus for in-depth reflection on the transition from the pedestrian zone to the urban project (De Visscher, Mezoued and Vanin, 2018). These studies have all participated in what may be referred to as an imaginary of the reflexive city (Genard, 2007).

Indeed, the reflection around the pedestrian zone revealed, but also helped operate, a shift in the spaces that guide the urbanistic reflection on the city, and also led a shift in the ambitions of economic investment. A return to the past reveals a succession of the spaces around which the reflection on the city has been focused. First were the North and Marolles districts in the 1960s and 1970s, then the European District. More recently, focus has been placed on Place Flagey and on the zone around the canal. Undoubtedly, the development of the pedestrian zone helped shift reflection from the canal area towards the city centre and led to the emergence of new concepts such as the hyper-centre (Vanderstraeten and Corijn, 2017), a concept that had previously been barely applied in Brussels.

The production of knowledge, the initiation of specific research and the publication of academic texts 'observing', in real time, the progress of these developments and the controversies they give rise to may also be interpreted against the backdrop of an 'urban imaginary' and a specific 'urban project'. As is the case with other imaginaries, when observing initiatives driven by an increase in the reflexivity of public action, one should pay attention to their preformative effects. Concretely, articles about urban imaginaries, such as this one, which seek to reduce the complexity of the multiple and varied communications upheld by the actors and interlocutors concerned, establish them in the public sphere – once classified and categorized – as urban imaginaries. These imaginaries may then be adopted as such in the public debate by the different stakeholders involved in each controversial issue.

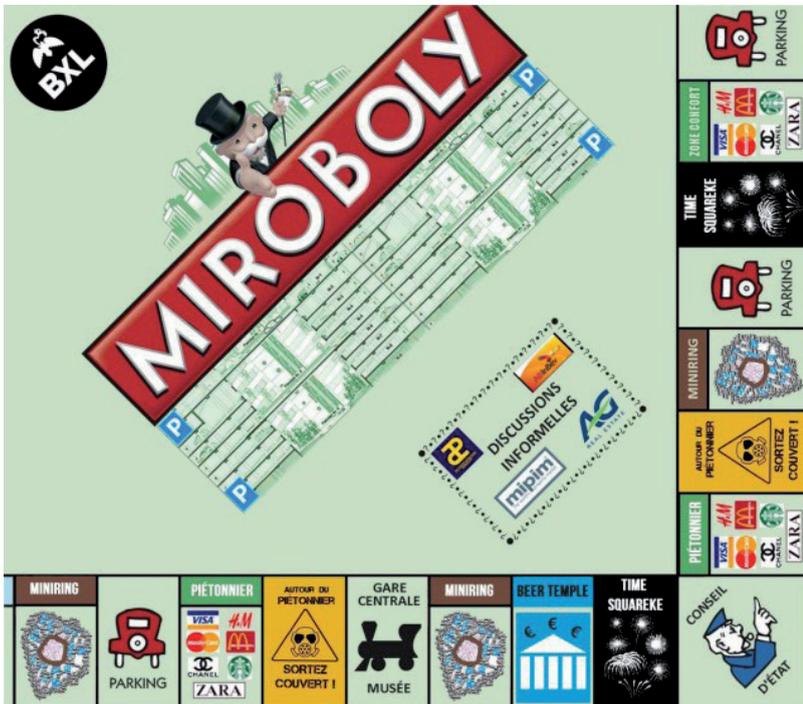
Assessing the preformative effects of these reflexive practices therefore requires one to also focus on how they resonate with, or respond to, citizens' demands, the voluntary sector, economic actors and public authorities. In this particular case, the City of Brussels quickly found itself in need of reflexive support from universities from the summer of 2015 after the national press published articles about the pedestrian zone written by academics.

University initiatives undertaken for the purpose of creating knowledge about urban phenomena should therefore also be assessed on their interactions, interferences and possible reassembling with the other imaginaries mentioned earlier. For instance, by analysing the heterogeneous public associated with the issue of the pedestrian zone, and by establishing the plurality of imaginaries, the observatory's endeavour appears to be committed to 'values' in line with ideals of a broad governance and a highly stringent concept of democratic legitimacy.

By highlighting the complexity of a public problem such as this one, with its various ins-and-outs, the adoption of reflexive practices inevitably provokes the criticism of specific imaginaries, their self-referential nature and their cognitive or normative limits. This criticism is also levelled against imaginaries that appear to be generally agreed upon within public discourse, such as the imaginaries of sustainability or the claiming of the city by its citizens. Lastly, the fact that the observatory's initiative responded to a genuine demand from the mayor's cabinet must be

put into context. Indeed, Yvan Mayeur was caught in the crossfire of criticism from citizens (poor participation) and criticism about his technical and management skills (excessive improvisation in the implementation of the project). A partnership with universities (mainly with the humanities and social sciences) around the 'meaning' of public action and the evolution of ongoing actions made it possible to counter this criticism with an 'autocratic-reflexive' compromise which, among the combinations of imaginaries considered so far, is particularly worthy of note.

> Figure 4. Microboly (criticism of the speculation around the pedestrian project)



Source: Platform Pentagone

## 14 > CONCLUSION

The controversies around the pedestrian zone provided an opportunity to highlight a number of city imaginaries. While all these imaginaries are related to particular stakes, and lead to different interpretations and/or result in different ways of doing things, they all also aim to serve the common good. Some were more 'costly' to defend, because they upset the dominant imaginaries. Others embraced mainstream values, for instance the attractiveness imaginary. Importantly, the careful analysis of these controversies has shed light upon the complexity of the different positions.

The analyses presented above sought to follow and scrutinize the arguments revealed by the positions held by multiple stakeholders. To conclude this discussion, now may be a good time to take a step back and focus on whether the many issues raised in this chapter may help reveal cross-cutting matters. The brief conclusion below highlights our preliminary thoughts on this.

With regard to the city, a pedestrian zone is undoubtedly a public space above all. It is therefore hardly surprising that the question of what an urban public space is, or should be, was raised either explicitly within, or as a background to, the controversies. These controversies reveal three very different views, which we refer to as the 'the economic and commercial public space', 'the political public space' and 'the aesthetic (or cultural) public space'.

The defenders of the *commercial public space* consider that the quality of the pedestrian zone project depends on its ability to ensure the economic revitalization of the city centre, and even of the entire Brussels region. Business is a central concern, and the issues raised involve, for instance, the provision of service areas capable of ensuring accessibility. The challenges associated with property valuation and the ability to attract investors are essential elements which provide a framework upon which to think about and shape the space. The attractiveness of space is judged primarily based on these aspects. This attractiveness notably depends upon a set of guarantees, for instance the security of the neighbourhood. From this perspective, walkers and the act of walking aren't approached as a bodily experience, but rather as potential customer traffic.

The defenders of the *political public space* consider that the essential challenge lies in the capacity of people to claim ownership of the public space. This ownership is associated with the decision-making sphere, on the one hand, and with the modes of 'governance' of public space on the other. It is primarily measured through the participatory mechanisms established to configure the space, the forms of co-management implemented, or even the reflexive processes guiding it. It is also assessed based on the capacity of the space to represent and be hospitable to 'the political' and to be favourable to demonstrations, sit-ins and celebrations of togetherness. *Picnic the Streets* and the political demonstrations and commemorations in front of the Bourse building are good illustrations of this. Public space also – and perhaps primarily – draws its richness and its value from this.

Talking about an *aesthetic public space* may seem confusing. Those who defend this vision of public space perceive it as culture and as experience. First and foremost, a public space is viewed as a meeting place, a lively space. It provides an opportunity to experience things (Genard, 2019). Its quality is measured by the number of activities it proposes, its atmosphere and its festive potential. The term 'aesthetic' is used here in a broad sense that goes beyond artistic and cultural events. Above all, *aesthesis* is about sensitivity. The quality of life, conviviality, the pleasure of being there and a *joie de vivre* are all important measures. Generating something common from the experiences of being together is one of the essential purposes of

a public space. However, to achieve this, it is necessary that those who come here do so by being available and open to these experiences, which is not necessarily the case if one's presence in the public space is motivated by consumption or commercial purposes. It is undoubtedly in this vision of public space that the sensitive dimension of strolling takes on special meaning. Unlike the car, walking provides a direct physical experience of the city, and its slow rhythm increases the opportunities to meet people. To fully live these experiences, the pedestrian zone must avoid taking on an overly defined shape, .

We believe that the main challenge of the pedestrian zone will depend on how these three spaces interact with one another and must leave room for appropriation by the people.

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