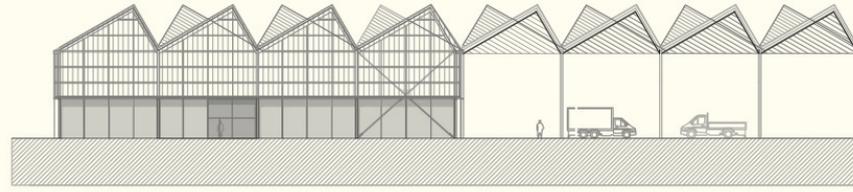


Since 2012, Brussels and its regional authority have been introducing an urban development strategy based on the integration of productive zones. “We must learn to take into account activities that take place behind the scenes as an integral part of urban life”, asserts Kristiaan Borret, master-architect (bouwmeester) of the Brussels-Capital Region.



EMMANUELLE BORNE

L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui: What are the main goals of the "Brussels, productive city" strategy?

Kristiaan Borret: When one looks closely at the urban development underway in other European cities, one thing stands out: the productive economy is a function that is systematically excluded. Activities of production have left the city, whether for industrial zones on city outskirts or countries on the other side of the globalised planet. We are not aiming to bring heavy industry back into the city. However, shouldn't our way of thinking about the city involve integrating zones with workplaces for white and blue collar workers? Is there not, among the pleasures of urban life such as bars, shopping and beautiful architectural projects, another "hidden world" of logistics, recycling and construction? We must learn to take into account activities that take place behind the scenes as an integral part of urban life, the same as we do for what is happening on front and centre stage.

AA: Could you name a few examples of these "productive" functions?

KB: It isn't about bringing the steel industry back to the city centre. We should also avoid the romantic fantasy of a return of preindustrial crafts. We are in the century of the "Millennials"; and creative industries are highly fashionable. From artisanal fabrication of jewellery to bicycle design, fablabs and even micro-breweries, this type of industry is certainly welcome in town, but there are others too. There has to be room for ordinary occupations, such as repair and renovation companies, materials suppliers and the proverbial plumber. There will always be a need for plumbers in the city! Isn't it absurd that the plumber who lives in Molenbeek has to start his day by going to a depot located in an industrial zone on the city's outskirts to pick up parts and then come back to do repair work on houses in the city centre? It is like this because there is no more room in town for warehouses. Under the framework of the "Next Economy", we are perhaps in the process of imagining a new future in which the economy can be more social, more ecological and more local. It would be regrettable if, in 10 or

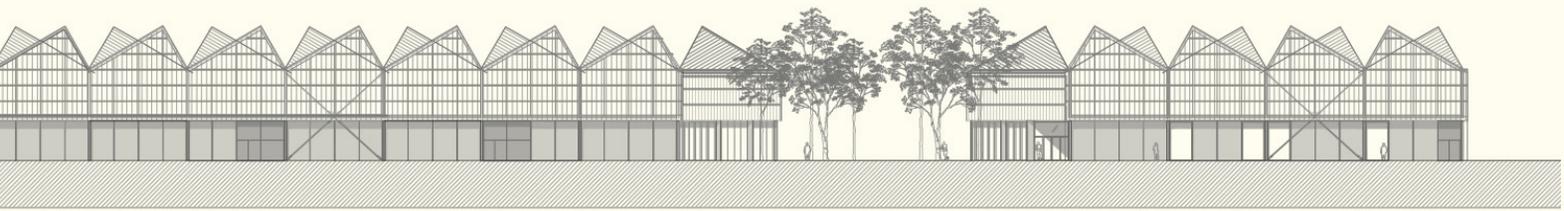
20 years from now, a new economy, easily compatible with urban life, never developed merely because we had forgotten to make room for it. It is especially worth the trouble to zone property for productive activities if it involves programmes that contribute to a more sustainable urban living. The circular economy in which the city is designed as a metabolism of flows is particularly suited to this idea of a productive city.

AA: What are the prerequisites for promoting the integration of productive functions in a city like Brussels?

KB: Although political will and planning tools can guarantee that productive activities remain in the city, they have not yet resulted in any specific spatial solutions. However, spatial planning proposals are essential because the combination of housing and productive activities can be a source of nuisance and mutual fear. Architects and urbanists still have work to do in this domain as we do not currently have ready-to-use examples or designers specialised in the integration of productive functions into the urban fabric. When compared to the 19th century, it is clear that many of the design skills this requires have been lost. In those days, factories, worker housing and the manager's home were all designed by the same person.

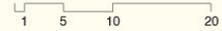
AA: What urban planning tools have you used to enable the integration of these functions?

KB: In addition to regulatory planning tools such as the ZEMU, "Zones d'Entreprise en Milieu Urbain" (Urban enterprise zones), and the strategic vision of the Canal Plan, we offer two methods designed to improve the quality of integration of these productive activities in town. The first tool involves research by project, which is focused on developments in progress. It is often the role of research by project to explain the benefits of a fairly complex, multifunction construction project to an average factory owner. The second tool is the one of the architecture competition, targeting a growing number of public and private developers. Competitions allow us to receive many new, unexpected and normally very high



Élévation. Les entrepôts fonctionnent comme des lieux multifonctionnels et modulaires combinant espaces de stockage, showroom et bureaux. L'ouverture sur le canal et sur la ville permet une meilleure intégration, voulue par le Plan canal.

Elevation. The warehouses function as multifunctional and modular spaces combining storage, showroom and offices. The opening on the canal and the city allows a better integration, as drafted in the Canal Plan.



quality proposals. In this way, the creativity of talented architects is captured and applied to more utilitarian programmes, thereby adding value to the daily activities of urban life. If we don't want the productive economy to disappear from the urban landscape, we have to invent new typologies that make it compatible with residential buildings and weave it into our cities public space. This is precisely our aim, to improve quality and stimulate project innovation in Brussels, which is key to the mission of the bouwmeester.

AA: What exactly does a ZEMU comprise?

KB: Brussels has been experiencing strong demographic growth. To meet this growth, we must build more housing. This is why in 2013 the Brussels-Capital Region decided to convert a series of lots, mainly important remnants of the productive economy dating from the early industrial era, into mixed-use development zones. It quickly became obvious that this would lead to further loss of industrial sites and is why a corrective mechanism was added to spatial planning, leading to the creation of 'Urban enterprise zones' (ZEMU). These are aimed at achieving a blend of uses in formerly single-function zones. So, in these zones, when there are important residential housing development projects (starting at 10,000 sq. metres), they must include a minimum percentage of productive economy in the renewal plans. This percentage is equivalent to 90% of the surface area of the ground floor. In this way, we encourage mixed-use work/life development. This approach based on active zoning may seem rather traditional but its effectiveness should not be underestimated. It enables the productive city to take root, both spatially and financially. In fact, companies' flight to the suburbs can mainly be explained by the unaffordable price of property. Offices and flats are far more profitable for property developers than for companies. So the ZEMU functions as a stabiliser for these market mechanisms by setting aside space for companies and, in so doing, breaks the typical price spiral that characterises the competition between flats and offices.

"It would be regrettable if, in 10 or 20 years from now, a new economy, easily compatible with urban life, never developed merely because we had forgotten to make room for it."

AA: One of the most prized areas for the productive strategy is the canal. Why the interest in this area and what does the Canal Plan aim?

KB: The most important strategic development zone in terms of the productive economy in the city is without a doubt the Canal Zone, which crosses the urban fabric of Brussels. In what other capital city will you find a functioning port only 15 minutes on foot from the historic centre, with loading and unloading activities on the quays, salvage and sorting companies in the recycling sector along with cement factories? Elsewhere in Europe, waterfront development has already been done, which, for many reasons, is not the case in Brussels. This exceptional situation must be appreciated as an asset rather than a liability. So, we took advantage of the opportunity to draw lessons from the redevelopment of waterfronts in other cities before tackling our canal. In 2014, the Region of Brussels approved the Canal Plan designed by French urban planner Alexandre Chemetoff. It outlines a coherent and comprehensive vision for the future evolution of the Canal Zone, by basing it on the integration of a productive economy ushering in new jobs for blue collar workers. The Canal Plan is in fact now in its second phase, the one of implementation, which will continue at least until 2025. Thanks to the Canal Plan, the number of projects involving the productive economy in the city has risen considerably in the Canal Zone, owing to both the favourable urban planning framework and the active supervision of the canal planning team. The former industrial harbour of Brussels is in the process of being completely reinvented. ■