

INTRODUCTION



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At the end of June 2015, the central boulevards of Brussels were transformed into pedestrian zones from Place Fontainas to Place De Brouckère. This major political decision was taken by the new Socialist Liberal majority following the municipal elections held in October 2012. It was a response to the numerous studies commissioned by the City of Brussels itself, and the demands various urban associations had been making for over fifteen years in favour of a transformation of the centre of Brussels and a reduction of vehicular pressure upon it. The high point of this mobilization appears to have been the ‘Picnic the Streets’ movement, initiated in June 2012. The municipal authorities presented the project as a paradigm shift in terms of both mobility and urban planning. After decades of dependence on speed and cars, and of peri-urbanisation in terms of housing, employment and trade, the pedestrian zone project was perceived as capable of inducing considerable changes within Brussels.

First, in terms of mobility, it would promote a transition, i.e., from a mobility based on fossil and carbon energy to a more sustainable, de-carbonized mobility. Such a transition, however, does not happen spontaneously, and requires the reorganisation of public space, transport systems and lifestyles.

From an ecological perspective, reducing the public space dedicated to the car would help improve air quality and reduce nuisances (including noise and traffic), at least in the pedestrian zone. It would also provide an opportunity to make the land more permeable and the city greener, conditions necessary for the improvement of living conditions and the reduction of urban temperatures in the context of global warming.

From an economic perspective, the pedestrian zone would make it possible to re-think the functioning of businesses within the city centre and the hyper-concentration of the tourism sector.

Lastly, on the social level, reducing the public space dedicated to the car increases the chances of encounters between the inhabitants and the city's users, leading to the emergence of new urban practices, which in turn, will strengthen social cohesion and the symbolic dimension of the centre of Brussels. Additionally, many cultural institutions present in the city centre would have an opportunity to reflect on the different ways they could interact with the public space.

However, despite these potential benefits, the pedestrianization of the centre of Brussels has been the subject of numerous controversies and strong opposition. These initially stemmed from several weaknesses in the project's design, management and communication, which revealed multiple concerns surrounding the direct and indirect impacts of the project. Among the elements at the heart of the debates were the mobility plan and what was referred to as a 'mini-ring', the (ultimately abandoned) plan to build new car parks in the city centre, a lack of communication and participation, a lack of support for traders during the transition, inadequate alternative solutions for deliveries, and a lack of planning of the public space and the built-up spaces around the pedestrian zone.

These controversies, and the opposition the project met, reveal the complexity of such a large urban project in which many issues have undoubtedly been underestimated. They have shed light on the fact that the development of the pedestrian zone must go beyond the local redevelopment of a section of public space: this zone lies at the very heart of the city and challenges the multiple dynamics, practices and imaginaries present there. Consequently, the challenges of such a transformation can only be addressed if it is placed within its territorial or societal context, and if it is aligned with the numerous dynamic citizens' initiatives – both private and public – already in place.

This book presents the activities undertaken by the *Brussels Centre Observatory* (BCO) over a four-year period. The initiative was driven by the *Brussels Studies Institute* (BSI), an inter-university and interdisciplinary collaboration platform for research on Brussels. With the support of the City of Brussels, BSI-BCO mobilised seventy researchers from a dozen research centres across five universities (ULB, VUB, USL-B, UCLouvain and KU Leuven). Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, these researchers attempted to address three main objectives. First, they sought to capitalize on existing academic knowledge on the challenges associated with pedestrianization in general and initiate reflection and concrete courses of action at the various relevant levels. The second objective was to promote discussion around both this knowledge and the proposals made with public actors and civil society within the context of existing discussion platforms or those created to this end. Third, they sought to identify unresolved issues and gaps in the knowledge and data.

These different objectives quickly revealed the need to broaden the scope of study and to reflect on what we refer to as the 'metropolitan city centre'. The study clearly revealed that the current centre goes well beyond the boundaries of

the historic Pentagon. Indeed, with the urban growth of Brussels over the last 25 years, the Region, which is characterized by a high density and diversity in terms of users and functions, and which aspires to the highest accessibility possible for the largest number, is now expanding to include a wider perimeter, including, in particular, the space within the loop of Line 2 of the Brussels Metro, the canal, and the areas surrounding the main train stations (North, South, Central, Schuman, Luxembourg, Ouest). This work, which has attempted to reconceptualise the extended metropolitan centre, has allowed us to further develop the role and functioning of the city centre as the main hub of the Brussels polycentric structure, as defined by the Regional Sustainable Development Plan (RSDP). The 'metropolitan city centre' is thus perceived as the most appropriate scale upon which to resituate the pedestrian zone and more broadly develop the paradigm shifts initiated there. While it provides a sufficiently broad framework that makes it possible to consider the multiple dimensions of urban issues and projects, it remains small enough to be analysed and concretely experimented upon. It allows actors to focus on the development of a specific territory, while taking into account its role and impact on the regional and metropolitan structure.

A fourth objective thus emerged for BSI-BCO. Indeed, it appeared necessary to initiate a process by which to assess the analyses and plans of action envisaged through the development of project scenarios, participatory co-design sessions and the experimentation of temporary solutions. BSI-BCO thus shifted from a research process organized around four transdisciplinary and inter-university working groups (space and society, economy and commerce, mobility and accessibility, and governance), to a process of research-by-design that reorganized the working groups around four territories revolving around three axes perpendicular to the pedestrian zone, and one around its northern and southern connections. This led to a collective learning process that allowed BSI-BCO to broaden its collaboration beyond the academic world and the City of Brussels, to civil society and regional administrations. BSI-BCO thus positioned itself as a mediator, independent of the classical procedures of urban public action and participation. The working methods developed have made it possible to understand the complexity of the urban project across different perspectives and take into account multiple actors. In such a scenario, the university becomes a potential actor in the formation of the urban fabric by creating an interface between public actors and citizens. In particular, it helps to objectify and better contextualize the debate, and also supports the emergence of an explicit vision of Brussels' urbanity that goes beyond the differences of opinions and interests.

1 > TWO BOOKS FOR THE METROPOLITAN CITY CENTRE OF BRUSSELS

This book, as well as the associated book for the general public¹, is organized into three parts.

- 1 Findings: This first part presents an analysis of the pedestrian zone and defines the opportunities and challenges facing the city centre of Brussels.
- 2 Vision: The second part conceptualizes the shared vision developed for the metropolitan city centre.
- 3 Action and projects: The third part details the methods certain projects have used, and explores their sources. It presents pilot and experimental projects on which BSI-BCO made some progress.

Both books were largely written before the COVID-19 crisis. This crisis highlights their relevance because they underscore the urgent need to implement an economic, social and ecological transition, for which the transformation of the metropolitan centre of Brussels lays down certain milestones. We will come back to this in the general conclusion section.

1 Mezoued, A., Vermeulen, S. and De Visscher, J.-P. (eds.) (2020). *Au-delà du Pentagone. Le centre-ville métropolitain de Bruxelles | De Vijfhoek voorbij. Het metropolitane stadscentrum van Brussel.* Brussels : EUB and VUBPress.