

Albert Martens

Ten years of expropriations and evictions in the Brussels North Quarter (1965-1975): what are the legacies today?

Translation : Jane Corrigan

At the end of the 1960s, the urban area of Brussels underwent a modernisation process which deeply transformed certain neighbourhoods. Ten years earlier, Expo 58, the North-South junction and the construction of the state administrative district had already brought modernist architecture to Brussels. The enthusiasm generated by these projects, the very weak reactions on behalf of those who were affected and the strong growth of the Golden Sixties (1960-1970) kindled a will among certain local politicians, town planners and architects to pursue the large-scale modernisation of the city. Due to the promise of a significant increase in wealth, a coalition of interests was established with money lenders and the destruction of entire neighbourhoods was organised. This led to the appearance of the urban struggles in Brussels such as those in the Marolle and the North Quarter. The former was a victory and allowed the neighbourhood to be saved. The latter, however, was not able to prevent the destruction of 53ha of urban fabric and the eviction of more than 3,000 families. A comparative analysis of these two events allows a better understanding of the multiple stakes, the strategies of urban stakeholders and the effects of these struggles on the emergence of a new urban and civic 'conscience'.

Albert Martens is sociologist. Emeritus professor at K.U.Leuven and member of the Comité d'action du Quartier Nord (1968-1974), he has published various articles on the struggles of inhabitants and tenants' movements and organisations such as: 'Bureaux contre habitants? A view from outside' dans *Bruxelles: ses bureaux, ses employés*, Observatoire des bureaux. Special issue 2009.

Contacts :

Albert Martens, albert.martens@soc.kuleuven.be

Michel Hubert (ed. in chief), 02/211 78 53 –
0485/41 67 64 – hubert@fussl.ac.be



'It is due to the resistance on behalf of the inhabitants of the North Quarter, in parallel with the action in the Marolles, [...] that the voice of the inhabitants is finally being heard.'
R. Schoonbrodt (2007) *Vouloir et dire la ville*, p 384

In the euphoric reminiscence of Expo 58, modernist architecture is being revived and is attracting attention, and has been the subject of many debates. The 2008 celebrations of this fiftieth anniversary have provided a new opportunity to promote works which were strongly criticised by those who associated them with real estate anarchy and the destruction of the city ('Bruxellisation') (Dessouroux, 2008: 99-132; Demey, 1992). Admittedly, the city is not only made of buildings, streets and public spaces. There is also a continuous interpenetration of three other factors: economic/financial, political/administrative and social. The city of architects and town planners therefore coexists with the capital and commercial city, the city of public, legislative and administrative authorities and the city of the 'people': citizens, inhabitants, users, neighbours, owners, commuters, tourists, etc. This article discusses the history of the inhabitants and users of a neighbourhood which has experienced large-scale expropriation and destruction: 53 hectares razed and 11,000 inhabitants evicted or whose buildings have been compulsorily acquired. The review of these events is not aimed at reshaping the 'historical truth', but at understanding how the individual and collective reactions of a local population were able to trigger a collective debate on urban operations and lead to different measures – which are still valid today – to build and rebuild the social construction of the city.

At the end of the 1960s, the urban area of Brussels underwent a modernisation process which deeply transformed certain neighbourhoods. Ten years earlier, Expo 58, the North-South junction and the construction of the state administrative district had already brought modernist architecture to Brussels. The enthusiasm generated by these projects, the very weak reactions on behalf of those who were affected and the strong growth of the Golden Sixties (1960-1970) kindled a will among certain local politicians, town planners and architects to pursue the large-scale modernisation of the city (Hubert, 2008). Due to the promise of a significant increase in wealth, a coalition of interests was established with money lenders and the destruction of entire neighbourhoods was organised. This led to the appearance of the urban struggles in Brussels which are the focus of our analysis.

The paradigm of urban struggles in Brussels: the Battle of the Marolle

On 7 July 1969, the inhabitants of five blocks located below the Law Courts in Brussels ('the Marolle' neighbourhood located at the heart of 'the Marolles') received notice of expropriation in connection with the project to extend the Law Courts. The inhabitants joined forces with a charismatic figure as their leader: the priest of the Minimes church, Jacques Van der Biest. Together they created the *Comité Général d'Action des Marolles* (CGAM, general action committee in the Marolles). This committee denounced functionalist architecture and defended the functional mix typical of this neighbourhood of great symbolic importance for the inhabitants of Brussels. The population took action and made its opposition to the project to extend the Law Courts known publicly, with numerous meetings, demonstrations, slogans painted on walls, etc. These actions were widely covered by the media, and culminated in September 1969 with the victory of the *Battle of the Marolle*.

Immediately afterwards, the new minister for public works and expropriating authority, Alfred Califice (Parti Social-Chrétien, Catholic party), repealed the expropriation plan, and also agreed to negotiate a redevelopment plan for the neighbourhood with the CGAM. The plan was accepted by the government in 1972. The amounts earmarked for expropriation were maintained, but were allocated for neighbourhood and housing renovation. The *Opération Pilote de Rénovation de la Marolle* (OPRM, pilot operation for the renovation of the Marolle) was gradually carried out from 1974. The last renovation operations were completed in 2004, i.e. thirty years following the acceptance of the plan. The local population were not only able to continue living in the neighbourhood, but could also benefit from thoroughly renovated and transformed living conditions whose street and block structure had been maintained along with the friendly neighbourhood feeling, etc. There has been a significant rejuvenation of the population as a result (50% of the population are currently under age 20, whereas the majority of the original population were over age 60). The functional mix has not been maintained, however, with local shops and artisans having disappeared long ago.

The 'revolutionary' character of the 'Battle of the Marolle' and its impact on the mentality and imagination of 'urban stakeholders' can never be emphasised enough. For the first time, the public authorities had to backtrack and agree to negotiate a counterplan to the benefit of the inhabitants and another vision of the city. It also marked the beginning of many debates regarding the city with the *Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines* (ARAU, an urban research and action association), *Inter-Environnement Bruxelles* (IEB, a federation of neighbourhood committees and associations), *Archives d'Architecture Moderne* (AAM, Modern Architecture Archives), *Ecoles Urbaines* (annual seminars), etc. (Schoonbrodt, R., 2007).

There is no doubt that the success of these actions was due to a combination of circumstances and internal and external factors which did not necessarily repeat itself afterwards:

- In the wake of 'May '68', the questioning of public authorities and the protests by a fraction of the population were considered acceptable.
- The City of Brussels had been evicting inhabitants and demolishing houses in the North Quarter already since 1965 (see below), which represented a threat to all of

the working-class neighbourhoods in Brussels. This development had to be prevented in other neighbourhoods.

- In the Marolle, the 'enemy' was clearly identifiable (the Ministries of Justice and Public Works) and the area covered was clearly defined: a total of 5 blocks (i.e. 1.5 ha).
- This operation concerned a relatively small population (1500 people) under one municipal authority: the City of Brussels.
- In Brussels as well as outside of the city, the Marolles had a reputation as the epitome of the Brussels working-class neighbourhood. It enjoyed a high level of public and media support as well as undeniable symbolic strength.
- The contribution of 'organic intellectuals', beyond any ideological and community cleavages, was made by the charismatic leaders Jacques Van der Biest, parish priest in the Marolles, and René Schoonbrodt, one of the founders of the ARAU, close to the *Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien* (MOC, Christian Workers' Movement). Their shared ideology with the Minister concerned, Alfred Califice – who, as a member of the *Parti Social-Chrétien* (PSC),¹ adhered to the 'Christian democracy' of the MOC – more than likely had a favourable impact on the outcome of the conflict.
- The media were vastly sympathetic to the image of a David confronting a Goliath.

Unfortunately, such circumstances did not exist in the North Quarter – at least not to the same extent.

The North Quarter, or the unleashing of power

This is the appropriate title given to a chapter in René Schoonbrodt's work *Le quartier Nord ou les brutalités de l'urbanisme* (Schoonbrodt, 2007: 375).

A large number of people living in the North Quarter (11,000 inhabitants or 3,000 households) were threatened with losing the homes and neighbourhood they were very attached to for different reasons.

If the property developers had had to buy the land they coveted, they would have lost a huge amount of money. Inasmuch as they obtained land use plans which were voted by the municipal councils and approved by the supervisory authority (Minister for Public Works, Jos De Saeger CVP²), the 'freeing up of land' was the responsibility of the public authorities which had all the legal means to act in the name of 'public utility' and urgency; and it makes one wonder, considering the results four decades later (*Le Soir*, 24 February 1966, and 3 & 4 April 1966). The inhabitants were indeed threatened, but it was legal.

By means of three area development plans, the royal decrees of 17 February 1967 (*Moniteur Belge*, 9 March 1967, 2421-2422) provided for the expropriation and

¹ Now called the cdH (catholic party).

² Christelijke Volkspartij (now called the CD&V): Flemish equivalent of the PSC

Some noteworthy dates in the history of the North Quarter:

- 1936: the North Quarter was split in half following the works carried out on the North-South railway junction (completed in 1952).
- 1958: construction of the road viaduct on Boulevard Léopold II which resulted in the isolation of the pentagon area.
- 1959: first plan to extend Boulevard Jacqmain through the North Quarter. Whilst waiting for concrete proposals, the city no longer invested in public spaces, and the uncertainty regarding the future of the neighbourhood caused owners to allow their property to deteriorate.
- 1959: construction of the Centre International Rogier at Place Rogier, on the former site of the North Station.
- 1962: presentation of a first outline of the plan proposed by Groupe Structures: complete restructuring of the neighbourhood covering 20 hectares, along a lengthened Boulevard Jacqmain lined with tall buildings, some of which would be built on podiums.
- 1964: presentation of a motorway plan for Brussels: the North Quarter would become the crossing point of the Ostend-Liège and Antwerp-Paris motorways.
- 1966: presentation of a modified version of the plan proposed by Groupe Structures according to the motorway plan, called the Manhattan plan: 70 tall buildings, half of which were over 65 m high, as well as 5 buildings over 135 m high. The plan covered a surface area of 53 hectares. The 100-metre-high buildings had to be built on podiums and connected to each other via a raised walkway at 13 m. This project led to an imbalance between housing (5,000) and the number of jobs (22,000).
- 1967: first expropriations: 12,000 people would leave the neighbourhood.
- 1967: adoption of the land use plan intended for the Manhattan plan.
- 1968: beginning of construction works on the Manhattan Center (currently the Sheraton) as well as on the metro along the small ring.
- 1969: Charles De Pauw's project to create a World Trade Center in the North Quarter as part of the Manhattan plan. Two waves of expropriation took place between 1969 & 1972. Beginning of construction of the WTC I tower.
- 1970: beginning of construction works on social housing in the Harmonie neighbourhood (Amelinckx buildings). Completion in 1974.
- 1971: beginning of construction works on the RTT tower.
- 1972: beginning of construction works on social housing in the Foyer laekenois.
- 1973: completion of the WTC I tower. It lost its vocation as an international centre due to the difficulty to let out this first tower once the motorway project had been given up. The Manhattan project was thus signed away. The public authorities decided to let out part of the tower to save the development project.
- 1974: construction of social housing at Place Gaucheret; beginning of construction works on the Centre de communication Nord, inaugurated in 1982.
- 1983: completion of the WTC III tower. It would be occupied by the Ministry of Public Works so that it would not remain empty.
- 1985: inauguration of the Président hotel on the prolongation of Boulevard Jacqmain.
- 1987: beginning of the construction of buildings intended for the Flemish Community. This investment was an indication that the North Quarter had managed to get back into the good graces of the public administration. Construction of the Morgan Guarantee Trust building at the corner of Blvd Jacqmain and du Jardin Botanique.
- 1988: beginning of the construction of the Pleiad towers (occupied by Belgacom).
- 1989: revision of the 1967 municipal development plan: housing was planned for both sides of Chaussée d'Anvers.
- 1990-2005: construction of the last buildings along the prolongation of Boulevard Jacqmain, which became Boulevard du Roi Albert II. The occupants of the buildings were mainly from the public or semipublic sector.

(Source J Th. Demey, Brussels, *Chronique d'une capitale en chantier*, Brussels, Legrain-CFC, 1992, cited by *Le courrier de l'ARAU*, 2005, n°73, p. 19)

demolition of 536,900 m², i.e. more than 40 blocks, on the west side of the North Station. Three municipalities were concerned: the City of Brussels (32.74 hectares), Schaerbeek (10.38 hectares) and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (10.57 hectares). Once the neighbourhood was razed, the City of Brussels could build 54 tall buildings (between 18 and 135 metres high), Schaerbeek, 8 (between 30 and 162 m) and St-Josse, 18 (between 23 and 135 m). This could be done along two urban motorways (60 m wide) which would cross each other at right angles at the foot of the eight buildings of the World Trade Center. The 80 buildings had to be built on a podium 13 metres high, which pedestrians could walk on without danger. The traffic would be at ground level in tunnels, viaducts, etc.³

For the three municipalities involved, the plan developed by Groupe Structures (architects J. Boseret-Mali, R. Stenier, J. Vander Meeren and L. Van Hove – sympathisers of the PSC) made provision for 684,000 m² of offices, hotel infrastructures for 22,000 people, 554,000 m² of parking and warehouses, 375,000 m² of business spaces and 405,000 m² of housing for 13 to 15,000 people in 5,000 new dwellings.⁴

The expropriation and demolition of blocks took more than 10 years and the reconstruction took more than 40 years, all in an utterly disorganised manner. The public authorities were not capable of managing this destruction with any amount of coherence. The collectivisation of the land following the expropriations provided the three municipalities with an extraordinary land reserve, but it was very difficult for them to find buyers and private property developers to develop it. They blamed the property crisis and the highly unattractive environment of this disaster-stricken neighbourhood and took their speculative activities to other areas (Avenue Louise, Schuman roundabout, etc.). And as the municipal authorities allowed themselves to squander their land assets lightheartedly,⁵ they refused just as lightheartedly to consider the rights and basic aspirations of the inhabitants.

It is not easy to relate all the aspects of their struggle over the years. We shall attempt to do so by highlighting the establishment of a coalition of interests to set up and impose a large-scale urban project on the one hand, and on the other, the difficulty to create an effective and lasting anti-establishment force.

³ The *Comité de Coordination des Travaux du Nord* report, written by Groupe Structures and by the *Société Belge d'Economie et de Mathématiques Appliqués* (Sobemap) at the request of the three municipal authorities. Later, these documents were resumed under the acronym CTN. CTN, 1 March 1971: 45. See also CTN, report from 8 December 1969. (MARTENS, 1974, 26).

⁴ Presentation brochure of the 'Manhattan Center' published by the developers and printed by J-E Goossens in Brussels. See also the special edition of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 September 1973: 'Mélodie pour la résurrection d'une ville moderne' (sic). See also (MARTENS, 1974, 25).

⁵ At €250/m² (estimation much lower than what it was in actual fact), the expropriation was supposed to have cost 1.314 million euros.

The coalition of private interests

A coalition of private and public interests has rarely been as strong and effective, to the point of obtaining the destruction of 53 hectares in the middle of a city. In 1963, the media began to sing the praises of the Manhattan plan in often extravagant terms. Only the communist newspaper *Drapeau Rouge* refused to participate, unlike the socialist press, which supported the plan vigorously (Aron, 1978).

It was not until 1969 following the protests of the evicted inhabitants, that the press agreed to reconsider its view of the plan. Only *La Cité* (Christian democrat) and *Le Peuple* (socialist) did so in a slightly more radical manner. A few television programmes (RTBF: Manu Bonmariage, Josy Dubié, Willy Estersohn) attempted a more critical examination of events in 1997.

The major asset of this plan was to rely on the support of representatives of *all of the political parties* at the time (apart from the Communist Party, which represented a very small minority in Belgium, particularly in Brussels). As three municipalities were involved – each with different political majorities – all of the political parties (Christian democrats, socialists, liberals and FDF) had to approve the project. Furthermore, its scale and the surface area made available led to competition between the three municipalities and the different political factions. Any potential resistance was quickly brushed aside. Certain elected officials protested bravely, such as Roger Leblanc (PSC), Louis Van Geyt and Jacques Moins (communists) and Roger Daubresse (FDF), who intervened on several occasions to oppose the plan or to take issue over the way in which it was implemented.⁶

Even the *Conseil d'Agglomération* (city council), established at the end of 1972, could not intervene. Municipal autonomy allowed the local authorities to unite with the property developers against a population which was already in a position of weakness and unfortunately without any voting power, due to the fact that foreigners did not have the right to vote.

Furthermore, among the members of the coalition, we should also mention the Acquisition Committee of the Ministry of Finance responsible for negotiating the compulsory purchase of property with the owners. Their mission was to buy the plots at the lowest price and they were armed with a convincing argument. In order to find new housing within a reasonable amount of time, the people whose land was expropriated had to obtain their compensation as soon as possible. They therefore did not tend to complain about the low compensations.

Finally, private property developers and their money lenders were incontestably the keystone of the coalition. Their organisation was extremely complex and was characterised by inextricable economic and financial ties. Certain stakeholders emerged: CDP (Charles De Pauw development company), Entreprises l'Écluse s.a., Sotrah, Lotimo s.a., Régie des Téléphones et Télégraphes, Société Nationale de Crédit à l'Industrie, François & Blaton, Entreprises Baudoux, Compagnie d'Entreprises CFE s.a., Bernard-Levy-Delec s.a., Manhattan Center s.a., Neue Heimat International (German union property group), as well as deputy-mayors such as Paul Vanden

⁶ On Daubresse: see MARTENS (1974: 424-431); on Leblanc: MARTENS (1974: 44, 123); on Van Geyt: MARTENS (1974: 92, 123).

Boeynants PSC, among others, who received strong support from Caisse Privée s.a.⁷

With the support of this nebula, Charles De Pauw was incontestably the key figure and official initiator of the project 'launched by J. Cruysmans, one of the directors of Caisse Privée (the bank of Belgian nobility). J. Cruysmans was also Paul Vanden Boeynants' banker' (Hirson, 1973: 87).

This conglomerate was capable of imposing its views on the political authorities and the media on the one hand, and, on the other, of keeping its objectives secret. It therefore escaped democratic control.

The emergence of protest

A shaken population

What was the state of the population living in the neighbourhood at the time of the promulgation of the plans in 1967?

The transformation of the neighbourhood had been well under way since the beginning of the 1960s. Following the damage caused by the war (1940-45), the works on the 'North-South' railway junction, the modernisation of the city and the construction of the viaduct (Boulevard Léopold II) for Expo 58, the North Quarter was isolated from its urban environment. This situation and the talk about the necessity to transform the neighbourhood had shaken the population considerably. As in many similar cases, those with a certain amount of capital – financial, real estate, social or cultural – understood that there was a future for them elsewhere and left without delay. Those who could not or would not leave remained (some opponents and an elderly or disadvantaged population), along with some newcomers who took advantage of the empty and affordable housing: mainly immigrant workers.

The 'housing social service' of the Saint Roch parish

In a traditionally Catholic country, a parish may be a place of strong social cohesion. This was the case with the Saint Roch parish which, after being involved in the struggle for several years, even received the visit and support of the Primate of Belgium.⁸

In a parish social service, a social assistant (Nicole Brasseur-Purnôde), some inhabitants and several conscientious objectors in the civil service tried to confront the situation. They soon realised that rehousing people individually as they were evicted and as their homes were demolished was attempting the impossible. The support of committed lawyers was requested, and the first legal advice centre in the neighbourhood was opened.

In addition to individual social support, collective mobilisation and organisation was necessary in order to obtain the promised housing, a general rehousing plan for all of the inhabitants and financial aid from the public authorities. With the support of

⁷ For a detailed description of real estate and construction groups and companies, their interests and connections, see MARTENS, 1974, 612-808.

⁸ On 2 March 1972, Cardinal Suenens visited the neighbourhood incognito (MARTENS, 1974, 266).

the association *Les Amis des Marolles*, the *Comité d'Action Local (CAL Quartier Nord)* tried to develop a strategy for negotiation and dialogue with the representatives of the City of Brussels. It was the beginning of a long and tedious task, especially due to the recurring *bureaucratic obstruction* of a city which would not take its responsibilities.⁹ It refused to consider the inhabitants who had come to live in the neighbourhood following the promulgation of the three area development plans (17/2/1967), to make a census of the inhabitants affected by the project, to issue 'insalubrity or overpopulation orders' to families forced to leave a dwelling which would be demolished (depriving them of special benefits called '*Allocations Déménagement-Installation-Loyer*' – ADIL) and to recognise the representatives of *CAL Quartier Nord*. A war of attrition began and would last more than 10 years. It would nevertheless allow 15% of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood to be rehoused, in a manner of speaking (Vande Eede and Martens, 1994).

The events endured by the inhabitants of Brussels would be repeated for those of Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. The spadework accomplished through struggles, negotiations and dialogues with one municipal authority could not be transmitted to other municipalities. An 'administrative barrier' crossed the neighbourhood and separated the inhabitants. The battle therefore had to be fought on three fronts.

The various adherences and rivalry among militants

To paraphrase Julien Benda (1927), the battle was not only waged against enemies who were exterior to the neighbourhood: there were also opposed factions of inhabitants or even rivals who fought it out, resulting in a division of the movement, which was symbolised by the cohabitation of two community centres for several years. Several movements thus coexisted within the neighbourhood. First of all, there was the *Comité des fêtes de la chaussée d'Anvers* (owners and shopkeepers) which was in charge of organising the neighbourhood fair every year. The *Comité d'Action Local (CAL)* and the *Service Social Logement (SSL)* were also stakeholders in the fight. Their distinctive characteristic was that the social workers who collaborated with them were aware that the extent of the rehousing requests and urbanistic stakes was beyond them and that assistance on a case-by-case basis was insufficient. They defended the idea that a more ambitious project of 'community development' should come into being. The position of these stakeholders was to confine themselves strictly to the collective will as formulated during the community's general assemblies.

As of 1972, the *Groupe d'Action du Quartier Nord* was established in the North Quarter and attempted to intensify the struggle. It tried to convince the inhabitants to abide by the slogan: 'We'll stay here until the municipality finds us a new home' (militant song written by the CGAM). There was a clear opposition to the case-by-case rehousing tactics which were felt to weaken the resistance and allow a capitalistic management of the neighbourhood. The militants of the *Agence Schaerbeekoise d'Information* and *La Parole au Peuple*, led by the former president of the

⁹ See the responses of the City of Brussels to the petition (MARTENS, 1974: 112-120), the obstructions of municipal administrations (MARTENS, 1974: 132-139) (MARTENS, 1974, 255-256), the failure of the round table meetings (MARTENS, 1974: 408-423), and criticisms regarding the dialogue (MARTENS, 1974:889-896).

Schaerbeek cultural centre, were opposed to 'reformist' work which did nothing but foster domination and exploitation, and refuted the merits of the approach in terms of 'community development'. On several occasions, they attempted to step up the action by organising demonstrations in the neighbourhood and by squatting in empty houses. They had an undeniable impact on the media.

The *Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines* (ARAU) wished to keep out of the fray and preferred not to intervene in the debate at first. 'Although it showed strong solidarity, the ARAU had reservations as long as the local committees refused to take action against the North Quarter plan and its urban consequences. The ARAU intervened at the end of the 1970s, which was too late to try to prevent the destruction linked to the plan.' (Schoonbrodt, 2007: 378) It was not until the end of 1972 – when three quarters of the neighbourhood had already been razed – that the ARAU agreed to write a critical analysis of the Manhattan plan and to propose feasible town planning alternatives (Schoonbrodt, 2007: 375-396). According to the ARAU militants, the criticism directed at the property developers and public authorities should have focused less on the social catastrophes which would result from the Manhattan plan than on the vision of the city and type of urbanism which it attempted to impose. As long as the priority was not to criticise the very foundations of the plan, it would be misleading to believe that a reversal in the relationship of power would lead to a noticeable improvement in the fate of the inhabitants.

The most noticeable absentees: the workers' organisations

Although the North Quarter was inhabited mainly by workers – immigrant workers for the most part – or retired (Belgian) workers, they received very little support from workers' organisations (unions, mutual benefit associations and political groups) in their struggles. Only the Communist Party and some militants from the *Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien* (MOC) and the *Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique* (FGTB) intervened in the debate in favour of the inhabitants. At the time, the urban struggles took place outside the scope of workers' struggles, despite the fact that workers' housing was seriously at risk.

According to us, this situation was the result of five factors:

- As supporters of the 'Fordist model' whereby the state contributed to full employment or at least to the reduction of unemployment through major building sites, the unions felt that the Manhattan plan was the perfect example of a major building site: 530,000 m² to be demolished and rebuilt.
- The unions did not want to prevent the realisation of this plan in any way whatsoever, making 'When the building is alright, everything is alright' their motto.¹⁰
- The plan was only a threat to the housing of urban workers – often immigrants with little or no qualifications – who were a minority within the organised working class as well as the union system. The others – the 'true' workers and militants – came from elsewhere: the outskirts of Brussels or from the provinces.

¹⁰ Among the developers on the board of directors with employer representatives (Fabrimétal, Sidérurgie, FEB) were the Société Nationale du Crédit à l'Industrie (SNCI), L. Dereau and J. Keuleers (CSC national secretariat), as well as G. Derieuw and A. Genot (FGTB national secretariat) (MARTENS, 1974: 619-622).

- The Manhattan plan enjoyed the support of a German social housing company called *Neue Heimat International*, issued from German unions (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* – DGB). This influential group had built more than 400,000 dwellings in the Federal Republic of Germany and had become involved in speculative activities abroad, thus going to the aid of Brussels property developers in difficulty at the end of 1972.¹¹
- Finally, the property developers painted an enticing picture of the thousands of jobs to be created in the renovated neighbourhood (50 to 75,000).¹²

Marolles, North Quarter... same combat?

We began this article with an overview of the successful struggle to save the Marolle. We shall end the analysis of the battle waged by North Quarter inhabitants with an acknowledgement of failure. This gives rise to a simple question: why did the two struggles lead to such different results? In an attempt to answer this question, we have compiled a table comparing the characteristics of these situations which seemed likely to provide an explanation. We have taken the geographical and urbanistic data into account, as well as the population and its capacity to react, the projects' authors, the tensions and confrontations, the impact of the media and the results obtained.

¹¹ Despite the support of the German government, *Neue Heimat* ended in scandalous and sensational bankruptcy in 1985 (A. Power, 1993: 132-142).

¹² *Le Soir*: 22 January 1970 (MARTENS, 1974: 24, 700).

	Battle of la Marolle	Struggles in the North Quarter
Project/stake	Installation of administrative archives. Extension of the Law Courts (Brussels)	Renovation and modernisation of a neighbourhood via expropriation and complete destruction
Administrative management of the territory	City of Brussels only	Three municipalities: Brussels, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode
Number of blocks concerned	5	41
Surface area	1.5 ha (La Marolle) in a neighbourhood covering 2.5 ha (Les Marolles)	53 ha including Brussels (33) Schaerbeek (10) Saint-Josse-ten Noode (10)
Resident population at the time of the project's announcement	1500 people, 50% of whom were over age 60	11,000 people (3,000 households) of many different types, minorities
Social capital of inhabitants	Weak	Weakened: departure of local elite
Authors of the projects	Public stakeholders. Ministry of Public Works (Buildings Authority) for the Ministry of Justice.	Private and public stakeholders. Conglomerate of allied and rival groups (developers, speculators, financiers, etc.) Three municipal authorities with different and rival majorities
Media	Very favourable towards the inhabitants' opposition to the project	At first very much in favour of the developers' project and opposed to the local population
Duration and intensity of the confrontation	Intense and short (1969) period before the plan was repealed. Longer until an alternative plan was realised (1974-2004)	Very long and difficult (demolitions spread out over 10 years) and begun late. Heavy losses, a few rare victories which were scattered and non cumulative (1967-1980). The planned reconstruction has lasted more than 40 years and is still not entirely finished.
Objectives of the confrontation	Repeal of expropriations and evictions. Renovation of the neighbourhood and maintenance of the initial population. Population's access to renovated housing	No eviction without prior rehousing of inhabitants in decent, accessible and affordable dwellings. Rapid construction of housing (social and other) provided for in the plan.
Spokesperson for the inhabitants	Charismatic, unequivocal and uncontroversial. Accepted without much opposition by the public authorities.	Democratic and subject to external and internal opposition. Ongoing struggle to be granted a certain legitimacy by the public authorities
Evaluation of results with respect to the stated objectives	Objectives reached, but long and great efforts to obtain the promised renovation	Rehousing of about 15% of the initial population
Overall evaluation	Example to be followed yet exceptional	Major defeat, but led to radical criticism of this type of urban project

Table 1. Comparison of the two urban actions in Brussels (end of the 1960s)

Conclusions

To what extent have the first urban struggles discussed above contributed to the advancement of participatory democracy in terms of urban planning and management? Have the relationships of power between the opposing stakeholders been modified?

As a conclusion, we would like to mention two legacies of the urban struggles discussed above. Firstly, the perception of urban development and construction appears to us to have been deeply affected; and secondly, local organisations aimed at preventing the repetition of this type of experience have emerged.

An example not to be followed?

Although the struggle of the inhabitants of the North Quarter was not able to hinder the disputed project, its authors were nevertheless greatly discredited, which rebounded on the municipalities involved. The Manhattan plan is typical of 'Bruxellisation' in that it has gone down in history as a perfect counter-example (Dessouroux, 2008: 114). The slogan 'never again a North Quarter' was definitively accepted overall by both the architects and the political authorities.

However, the property developers had been aware of the difficulty to obtain approval for such a project, and developed a campaign to denigrate the neighbourhood before the plans were accepted, attacking various unfinished projects and condemning the entire existing social fabric. When they were finally able to present their project, they integrated it into a futuristic and idyllic vision encompassing much more than the 53 hectares which were directly concerned. They were going to do a public health deed by making a sordid part of the city disappear. They even made it sound as though it was social work on their behalf, as it was indecent to let people live in such conditions. Their approach was in line with a particular vision of the city as a place where it is not good to live, where the service industry must dominate, and where all the means of access must allow people to live in the 'countryside' and to go to the city centre to work. In this perspective, the property developers painted an attractive picture of the thousands of square metres of offices, the tens of thousands of jobs, the hundreds of thousands of people going to the hotels, consulates, businesses, banks, etc. Who could ever disagree with such a wonderful project?

Today, the contestation of this type of project sounds like a collective condemnation of a certain vision of the city. The right to housing or rehousing and urban renovation via the restoration of buildings rather than their demolition have become commonly accepted principles.

Preventing history from repeating itself

How can we ensure that what happened in the North Quarter never happens again? This is naturally the question which arose following the struggles. The idea was born whereby tenants would unite before the appearance of catastrophic projects. The objective was to create an association of tenants which could act collectively by renting buildings in order to sublet them to affiliated members. The first *Union des Locataires* was thus founded in 1975. Since then, associations of this type have multiplied and have been grouped within the *Fédération Bruxelloise des Unions de*

Locataires (Fébul). They have also founded the *Agence Immobilière Sociale (AIS 'Quartiers')*.

Another path was taken during the '*renovation of the Botanique neighbourhood*': the inhabitants were informed of the projects of a property developer (AUXARI/EMPAIN) and took the initiative. With the support of the *Conseil de l'Agglomération* (city council), they forced the municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode to establish an area development plan to preserve the neighbourhood and ensure the rehousing of its inhabitants (Bozzo e.a., 1992).

The *Groupe d'Action Saint-Josse-Schaerbeek (GASS)* was formed to stop the spread of the demolition related to the creation of urban motorways leading to Zaventem. They organised several information meetings and demonstrations to raise awareness among the population of the municipalities concerned (Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode).

As the inhabitants took control of their future in the city, a more participative view of urban planning developed. The place of citizens in these matters was gradually being recognised.

The various neighbourhood struggles, the mobilisation of local committees and the views developed by different citizens' institutions (AAM, ARAU, IEB, BRAL, etc.) thus allowed another urban policy to emerge. With the establishment of a new step in regionalisation, the Brussels urban area organised a public consultation 'concerning the development measures provided for in the draft development plan' (1976-1977), inviting the inhabitants to voice their opinions on the future of their city. This democratic evolution later materialised in the Regional Development Plan (PRD) and the Regional Land Use Plan (PRAS). In the municipalities, municipal development plans were defined. There is no doubt that the North Quarter experience made political representatives aware of the necessity and usefulness of citizen participation to legitimise public action in the area of urban development.

Thus, a consultation committee has existed in each of the 19 municipalities since 1979 to hear the viewpoints of inhabitants. These committees are made up of representatives of the public authorities and are responsible for expressing opinions intended to assist the administrative authorities in their decision-making tasks. Their opinion is required before planning permission may be granted (in the cases provided for by the law) and before the elaboration of certain regulations (special land use plans, municipal urban planning regulations). They may also be approached by the authorities in other matters.

Although the institution of these commissions represents undeniable progress in terms of the information provided to residents and users as well as a remarkable opportunity for them to express their demands and criticisms, this form of participation is nevertheless limited. The fact that information is often provided late regarding projects which are already well under way or finalised no longer satisfies these citizens, who want more than just to be heard.

Since 1993, the *Commissions locales de développement intégré (CLDI)* have forced the public authorities to consult inhabitants before projects begin. In addition to the usual public inquiry mechanism for urban planning, the decree regarding urban regeneration agreements provides for the establishment of a CLDI through which the

inhabitants of the neighbourhoods concerned may express their opinions on the course of action and its implementation. The CLDs are therefore more than consultation bodies; theoretically, they are also bodies providing assistance in the preparation of projects to be implemented by the public authorities. More recently, in the framework of the development of 'areas of regional interest', the 'master plan' mechanism stems from the same approach to a certain extent (Delmotte and Hubert, 2008).

Finally, the organisation of local assemblies in the areas of housing, development and the environment has become widespread throughout the urban area. Let us mention, for example, the *Four Cities* project (1999), an initiative financed by the European programme *Interreg IIC*. It constitutes a partnership between four cities (Belfast, Brussels, Dublin and Liverpool) aimed at uniting the local authorities responsible for urban planning and an educational body in order to improve local participation in urban renovation. This project has also published a 'learning guide for participation in planning' (Four Cities Project, 2002).

We therefore cannot deny that participatory democracy has made progress since the 1980s, even though the road to travel still remains long. The voice of inhabitants may be heard today, but does anyone really pay attention? The events in the North Quarter revealed the power of certain financial and real or personal estate stakeholders, the weakness or complicity of different public authorities, and the inexperience and incapacity of inhabitants as regards the creation of an effective anti-establishment force. It remains unclear as to whether this relationship of power has indeed been reversed.

** We would like to thank those who revised this article for their pertinent remarks and corrections: the anonymous revisers at Brussels Studies as well as J-P Closon, A. Deroitte, W. Hauwaert, N. Purnôde, L. Schweitzer.*

Bibliography

- ARON, J., (1978), *Le tournant de l'urbanisme bruxellois*, Bruxelles, Fondation Joseph Jacquemotte.
- BENDA, J. (1927, 1975), *La trahison des clercs*, Paris, Grasset.
- BOZZO, I., MATTHYS, C., MARTENS, A. (1992), *Mobilisation + organisation = rénovation + relogement*, Bruxelles, Comité de Quartier Botanique & Département Sociologie (KULeuven).
- DELMOTTE F. et HUBERT M., ss dir (2009), *La Cité administrative de l'Etat. Schémas directeurs et action publique à Bruxelles*, Bruxelles, Les Cahiers de La Cambre Architecture n°8, 318 p.
- DEMEY, T. (1992), *Bruxelles, chronique d'une capitale en chantier*, 2. De l'Expo '58 au siège de la C.E.E., Bruxelles, Legrain. (Voir surtout le chapitre 3 : Le plan Manhattan).
- DESSOUROUX, C. (2008), *Espaces partagés, espaces disputés. Bruxelles, une capitale et ses habitants*, Bruxelles, Ministère de la RBC, Direction Etudes et Planification.
- Four Cities Project (2002), *Enflammer l'imagination. Guide d'apprentissage de la participation à la planification urbaine*, Belfast, Universities Press.
- HIRSON, N. (1973), *Paul Vanden Boeynants, sa carrière*, Bruxelles, Ed. Capitale.
- HUBERT, M. (2008), « L'Expo 58 et le 'tout à l'automobile'. Quel avenir pour les grandes infrastructures routières urbaines à Bruxelles ? » *Brussels Studies* n° 22, 20/10/2008. www.brusselsstudies.be
- JANSENS, Y., CARPENTIER, N., SNICK, A., VAN ISTENDAEL, G. (2008), Hoge cultuur is bij uitstek voor zozegd simpele mensen. Vier teksten over participatie. [momenten...], 1. www.demos.be
- LIEVENS, J., BRASSEUR, N., MARTENS, A. (1975), *De Noordwijk van krot tot Manhattan : de grote stad een geplande chaos*, Leuven, Davidsfonds.
- Luttes urbaines à Bruxelles. *Contradictions*, n° 5, Janvier-juin 1974.
- MARTENS, A.(ed.) & Collectif (1974), Dossier. *Le Plan Manhattan ou Que crèvent les expulsés ?* Bruxelles.
- PURNÔDE, N. (2001), *Les politiques européennes et leur impact sur les programmes de rénovation urbaine en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale*, Bruxelles, Ministère de région de Bruxelles-Capitale, Administration du Territoire et du Logement, Service Rénovation urbaine.
- SCHOONBRODT, R. (2007) *Vouloir et dire la ville*. Atelier de recherche et d'actions urbaines, Bruxelles, AAM Editions.
- TOURAINÉ, A. (1994), *Qu'est-ce que la démocratie ?* Paris, Arthème Fayard.
- VANDEN EEDE, M., MARTENS, A (1994), *Quartier Nord. Le relogement des expulsés*, Berchem, EPO.