

Chapter 11

Peterbos: Living in the Park, Inhabiting the City



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Abstract This paper explores the urban issues underlying the design experience in the Peterbos neighbourhood, Anderlecht, Brussels-Capital Region. It presents four themes, based on the living experiment of this urban project, which consists of a master plan for the renovation of public spaces (Studio Paola Viganò and vvv architecture urbanisme 2020). It starts with the critical perspective of a ‘project for the ground’. As an embodiment of modernity, collective living in high-rise buildings has made it possible to free up a large area of ground for use as a shared landscape. In Peterbos, this large ground has aged, deteriorated, and become disconnected from the city. Up until now, these characteristics have made Peterbos a place where all the ‘misery in the world’ (Bourdieu, *La misère du Monde*. Seuil, 1993) has been concentrated. A long transformation process is now underway: the renovation of housing and public spaces proposes new living conditions and a new image for the district. However, there are still questions about the appropriateness of such an investment in the absence of a radical rediscussing of what makes Peterbos an enclave for the poorest. Our analysis starts with the ground of Peterbos and its relationship with water flows, biodiversity, and the rest of the city. The modern project focuses on the liberation of the public ground. We see the Peterbos project as an opportunity for critical reinterpretation. Second, we reconsider the district’s position in the city and the need to reverse feelings inside and outside, aiming to renew relations with the metropolis. Third, a broader understanding of the environment is necessary in order to take part in an ecological transition. The notion of diversity and mixed-use as a fertile

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framework for emancipation and individual initiative is then discussed. Finally, in the conclusions, having explored the *progetto di suolo* as a manifold agent and pushed it to its limits, we conclude by examining the ‘stone guest’. Indeed, urbanism and investment in urban renewal do not represent an autonomous and self-responsible solution to the social and urban challenges society is currently facing. The design of public space represents a wide, but also a narrow, space for manoeuvre. When structural changes are implied, they do not tackle the basis of inequality concentrated at this site, linked to decisions made in the past that do not show the expected results. Interaction with economic policies is still too weak. We choose to use clear but sometimes burdensome vocabulary to discuss these spatial and social matters, not escaping the difficulty of the topic. All the same, urban and landscape designers have a responsibility and the possibility to assert the original meaning of politics as the organization of public life in the city, more broadly addressing actions in space and measures to reduce inequality and restore the dignity of the people who live there.

Keywords Brussels · Peterbos · Urban design · Urbanism · Ground · *Progetto del suolo* · Social housing · Housing policy

11.1 Introduction

Peterbos is a park in which people live. It is a modernistic neighbourhood built in the second half of the twentieth century in Anderlecht, Brussels. As an embodiment of modernity, collective living in high-rise buildings freed up a large area of public ground that was envisaged as a shared landscape where community relations could be enhanced. In Peterbos, this large surface area has aged and deteriorated. It has lost its services and facilities and is now socially and spatially disconnected from the city. A long transformation process is currently underway: the renovation of housing and public spaces aims to finally give the district a new image and quality.

This article describes the first steps of the ongoing project and research, developed by two architecture and urban design firms—Studio Paola Viganò and vvv architecture urbanisme (2020)—within the framework of a Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract. This is an urban renewal policy based on a regional subvention process—from the Brussels Region to the municipality, in this case Anderlecht—which is applied to a four-year programme of urban and socio-economic projects within a specific local perimeter in Brussels (Degros and Decléene 2014). In this case, the perimeter of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract literally corresponds to the so-called ‘Cité du Peterbos’, officially named ‘Parc du Peterbos’.

11.2 The Misery of the World/Space for Manoeuvre

Peterbos has the lowest labour force participation rates in the region and the highest rate of unemployment, especially among young people, which currently makes it an area of extreme poverty. Until now, these characteristics have made Peterbos a place where, as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in the 1990s, 'the world's misery' has become concentrated. Inevitably, in this context the question arises of what kind of project might make sense. A philanthropic goodwill project? A real political project carried out by all players around the table? As architects and urbanists, our focus and our only territory of action is, in this case, public space. Bringing together matters of architecture, landscape, urban design, and sociology, the project deals with the public ground as a prior object which is then considered through various understandings, tools, and actions. Our design starts with the ground (Fig. 11.1): with its relationship with water flows and biodiversity, the ground floors of buildings, and the rest of the city, and its ability to support programmatic diversity. It is a space for manoeuvres on both a wide and a narrow scale. Wide, because it fulfils a plurality of practices, ordinary and extraordinary: public space concerns everyone. Narrow, because our project does not have the power to transform the inequality concentrated at this site, which is linked to past decisions that have turned out to be ineffective from the perspective of social integration. Interaction with economic policies is still too weak.

Urban design and investment in the refurbishment of the spatial environment is not an autonomous and self-responsible solution to the social and urban challenges our society and poor neighbourhoods are facing today. Design claims that the core meaning of politics is the organization of public life in the city to more broadly implement actions and measures to reduce inequality and restore the dignity of the people living there. In such a context, public space can fully express its potential as an emancipation device, support, and capital on which to build.

11.3 Disclosing the Ground

To further elaborate on the ongoing project, we will conceptually break down the ground of Peterbos into four different themes, adding layers of complexity in order to start envisioning the multifactorial meaning and possibilities of this entity. The first section deals with the modern heritage of the ground and its possible reinterpretation. The second chapter develops the 'project of ground' (Secchi 1986) strategies and their potential in relation to the third part, which establishes the ambition to aim for a societal and ecological transition. The fourth chapter considers public space as a representative space of emancipation, respect, and diversity (Fig. 11.2).

By disclosing the ground project strategies, we seek to answer this question: how can Peterbos' ground be renovated to support its residents in becoming a fully integrated part of a larger urban context, while reinforcing the significance of the park as an exceptional qualitative context in a rapidly growing metropolis and establishing

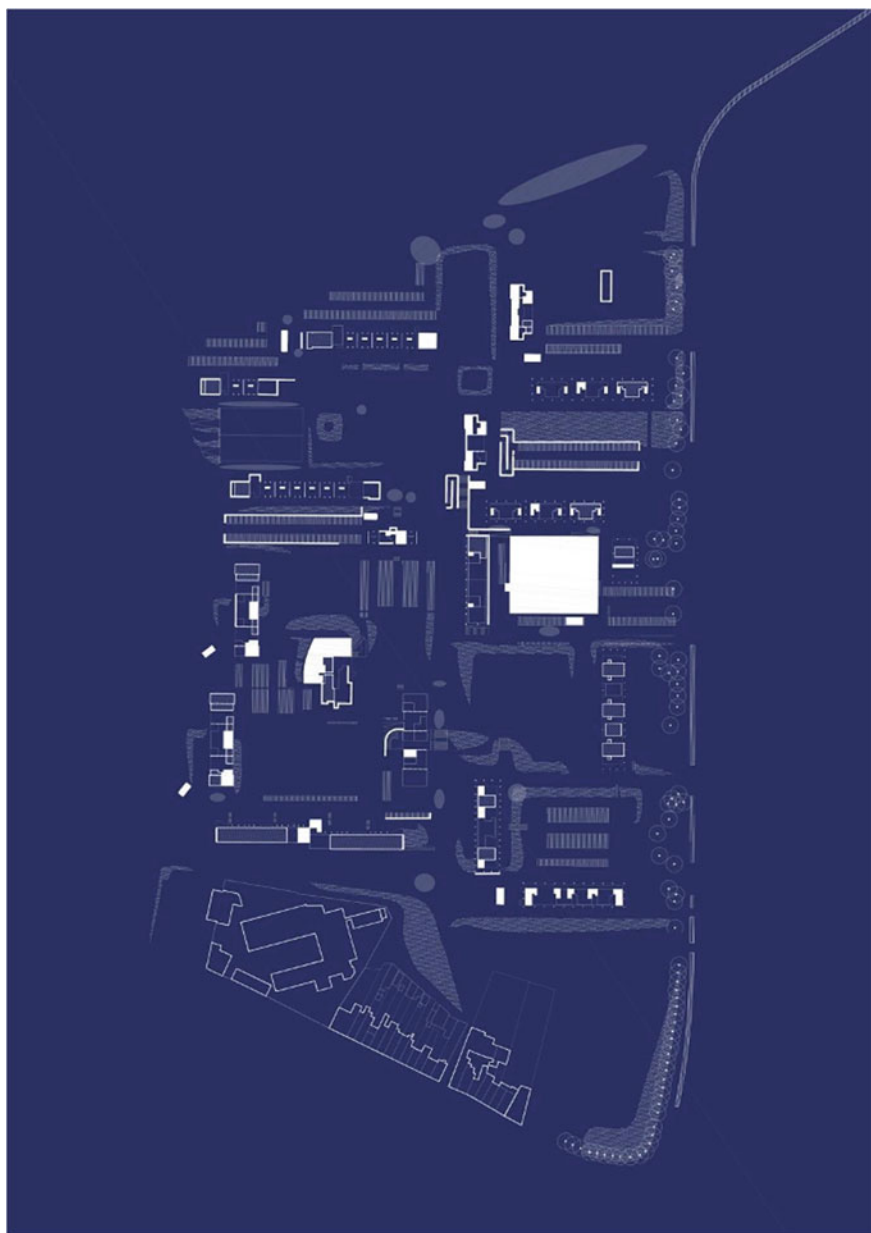


Fig. 11.1 The existing ground as an ensemble of barriers, obstacles, and topography



Fig. 11.2 Images from the master plan

permeable borders with the rest of this metropolis in order to experience the public space of Peterbos? How can the design and renovation of Peterbos' ground transform it into a living and inclusive part of the metropolis? What is it unable to solve that should instead be tackled by structural changes in socio-economic political programmes?

Our conclusion revolves around three main understandings: (1) the recognition of the richness of the original project, highlighting its potential qualities (a ground monument); (2) the recognition that a renewed alliance between spatial design and economic development theories (and between spatial design and enlarged public

investments and urban renewal policies) is necessary; (3) the strength of public space when it is intended not only as a physical feature but also as a tool to reformulate larger societal issues, and its design as a device to deal with the stone guest.

11.4 Reinterpreting the Modern Ground

11.4.1 *Brussels' Transformation in the 1960s*

The 1,600 apartments of the eighteen housing blocks of Peterbos were built between 1968 and 1980 under the impetus to modernize Brussels. Iconic operations—such as the universal exhibition ‘Expo 58’—and massive infrastructural investments, such as the north–south railway connection (1952) or the development of urban highways in the core of cities, mostly represent the iconic embodiment of a modern Brussels.

The housing question is less valorized or less able to sustain a powerful narrative about a productive modernity in a still conservative context but was nevertheless largely part of the modern transformation of Brussels. Contrary to other European countries and for reasons we cannot examine here, modern housing experiments were both somewhat delayed (the first garden cities were built in the interbellum) and took place in a less hierarchic centre/periphery relationship, with the formation of a specific form of *banlieue radieuse* (Leloutre 2020; Smets 1986).

These districts are made up of housing blocks based on industrial and standardized designs, with large green spaces as common areas. Developed by real estate or social housing companies on cheap agricultural land on the city’s outskirts, the authorities were in charge of building the roads, public infrastructure, and facilities. Mostly unfinished, these developments did not have sufficient community facilities or production equipment to become full-fledged neighbourhoods and instead became monofunctional enclaves (Sterken 2013). Both the city centre and the ‘second ring’ around Brussels were the locus of large housing projects during postwar urban development. Although some of them were conceived with careful attention to new ways of living with high spatial and landscape qualities, they still experience a variety of difficulties regarding their capacity to attract urban quality or embody a housing ideal and are therefore rejected from the collective imagination.

Peterbos is one of the peripheral developments of Brussels’ ‘second ring’. It was a new neighbourhood in Anderlecht which, according to the municipality’s communication, constituted an ‘open order, with social and commercial facilities on the ground floor, roads limited to the strict service of the residences and underground garages, and above all, a large proportion of green spaces extending further into a green park system that our municipality strives to create across its territory’ (Commune d’Anderlecht 1963).

11.4.2 A Long Time Span

The first phase of the construction of the Peterbos site (blocks 1 to 8) was carried out according to the project of the modernist and functionalist architectural firm ‘Groupe Structures’, founded by the architects Louis Van Hove, Raymond Steniers, Jacques Boseret-Mali, and Jacques Vandermeeren. Groupe Structures is well known in Brussels for social housing projects similar in typology and landscape, such as Rempart des Moines (1964–1966), Potiers I and II (1958–1965), and the ‘Cité Modèle’ of Heysel in Laeken. For the latter, an architect of Groupe Structures collaborated with some of the best modernist Belgian architects, such as Renaet Braem, Victor Coolens, Groupe l’Equerre, René Panis, and Jean Van Dosselaere (1954–1955, 1975) (Sterken 2013). The ‘Cité Modèle’ is composed of a set of towers and housing blocks grouped around a central high square surrounded by a pergola. It has car parks along the main roads, a monumental staircase connecting the existing city to the new city and its high square, and, finally, large green spaces and orthogonal paths between the towers. As for the ground, the high square is positioned on top of an underground car park, and the topography is partly made up of soil backfills. In the Rempart des Moines project in downtown Brussels, the blocks are laid out linearly in a north–south direction leaving a trapezoidal gap as public space. The ground here is the extended space of the street, made up of pavements which open up here and there with greenery or playgrounds (Strauven 1983). The approach is the same, however, as that of Peterbos: monumental ground for slabs and towers.

The Peterbos project was built over a long period of time. The first phase of the original design of Peterbos (blocks 1 to 8) has similarities with the other two projects by Groupe Structures. Car parks surround the housing blocks, accessible from the three roads and highways around the site (Boulevard G. de May, Rue de l’Agronome, and a former highway that is now a green walkway: *La promenade verte*). The ground at the foot of the towers is filled in and levelled to make a common plateau for blocks 1 to 7, at some points creating differences in height between the pedestrian area and the parking areas. The flat area of the central square is bordered by a canopy and a water basin (unbuilt but visible in the initial plans). The topography is shaped through architectural devices such as low walls, taluses, slopes, and monumental staircases. The high square is a plateau intended as common ground for residents and is situated at a distance from the city itself. The design therefore radically applies the functionalist principles of flow separation.

Despite the housing qualities in relation to the landscape, the initial intentions are lost in the southern part. The construction of the later phases appears to have been more fragmented and less attentive to the relationship with the ground, even though it had to deal with a steeper slope than the first phase of Peterbos, which is located on the flatter part of the site. The shared device of the common square of the first phase is replaced here by autonomous or twin blocks designed to accommodate the slope at their base (blocks 10 and 11, 17, and 18; framing tower 16). Tower 16, positioned on the steepest slope, has a massive base disconnected from the ground. Car parks

were built mostly between the housing blocks, reducing space for pedestrians. Over the years, pedestrian space has been carved out of what was left by the car parks.

Reinterpreting the imaginary of the ground on a larger scale, the Peterbos landscape fits into the park system of Anderlecht, a collection of green and public spaces built both on the geographical morphology and on the green belt for the Brussels metropolis, set up at a communal level by Mayor Bracops (1947–1966) and implemented by municipal engineer Georges Messin (Leloutre 2017). In that sense, the park of Peterbos can be understood as an inhabited park within the Scheutveld park, established in the same period (1968). The landscape qualities remain throughout the site: the artificial ‘plateau’ to the north, now linked to the *balade verte*, a green walkway; the large spaces between the towers with various facilities (car park, football field, playground); and diversified vegetation. The juxtaposition of these landforms is the common ground of Peterbos. Over the course of the twentieth century, this base-ground embodied the different imaginaries that were attributed to them: the modern belvedere as a rampart against the old city in 1960s, and the car park floor in the late 1980s and 1990s. Today, other images can be evoked to describe this *monumental base-ground*, which reveal the mix of nonorthodox influences in the modern green carpet, inspired by Italian Renaissance garden villa projects (Fig. 11.3): the monumental staircases of the Boboli gardens (along Peterbos’ central path); the green embankments that symmetrically frame the entrances to the Villa d’Este in Tivoli (entrance from the western boulevard in Peterbos); and the staircases as a backdrop to the Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola or the Villa Medici in Castello. This imaginary invokes another relationship with the ground: that of the garden, the monument, and the contemplative space from where one can extend one’s gaze. This sophisticated approach is not surprising, although rarely or never evoked in the reading of Peterbos’ urban and landscape structure. By reinterpreting these devices in the light of others in the history of architecture, a possible requalification strategy is initiated, aiming to transform physical or visual ‘barriers’ into potential places that reinforce the link with the natural ground, the slope of the valley.

11.5 Inside–Outside

Unlike most other European cities, Belgian cities and especially Brussels never implemented the project of a segregated periphery, de facto installing spatial injustice within its metropolitan space via a *banlieue* relegated to the ‘outside’ of the city, at a distance from the core. On the contrary, several social housing neighbourhoods can be found in different places in the city centre or within the ‘first Couronne’, the municipalities located directly around the centre. At a metropolitan scale, this sparse location of modern social housing units could be evaluated as a benefit for accessibility, social mixing, and spatial justice. At a local scale, there are still strong contrasts between these neighbourhoods and their direct vicinity. Even the rupture in urban fabric typologies, as well as the concentration of a poorer population, leads to a strong fragmentation of space, the feeling of a patchwork, and a barrier effect.



Giusto Utens
The Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens, 1602



The central path and its monumental staircase



Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
View of Florence from the Boboli Gardens, 1835



View from a roof towards the city



Giovanni Battista
Farnese Palace in Caprarola, 1655



Stair and ramp system from the boulevard

Fig. 11.3 Reinterpreting the modern ground

The modern urban language appears radically contrasted in Peterbos: the eighteen blocks and towers are surrounded by garden cities or postwar urban development. Although from an architectural point of view, important differences between successive construction phases of development inside Peterbos should be mentioned, the image reflected is that of a homogeneous, poor, and enclaved neighbourhood. The concentration of high-rise buildings and socio-economically poor populations, the lack of facilities, workplaces, jobs, and an ‘urban feeling’ create the figure of an outside area of the city, a peripheral space, right at the core of the metropolis. As an island, Peterbos has created strong and visible borders and gates that have to be crossed. As an island, one might also be inclined to bypass this area during daily movement in the city in order to avoid staying there or passing through it.

The project deconstructs this reversed figure of an outside inside the city, while maintaining the qualitative and even aesthetic specificities of the landscape and urban design of Peterbos. The challenge is to preserve what is beautiful about the island but at the same time increase the number of connections to open the site up to the city and vice versa. To deal with this morphological, topological, and social issue, the design of the open space took several approaches, rooted at different levels in the strong figure of ground continuity: describing the geography of the Broekbeek valley and valorizing the former monumental ground, while domesticizing it (1), extending the ‘centre’ to create a welcoming threshold between the site and the city (2), requalifying the *plaines* as public spaces (3), and proposing to name the streets and squares to weaken the stigma of living in Peterbos (4).

First, the recognition of the local geographic situation and the steep slope from the crest to the low wet point of the Broekbeek are initial elements to be addressed in most decisions about paths, flows, and spaces. Paths are designed to either find their way *en corniche* or go down the slope. Furthermore, the connection with the *balade verte* on the crest—a green route aimed at connecting all major green and open spaces on the outskirts/second Couronne of Brussels—and the Broekbeek, one of the catchment rivers and tributaries of the Senne valley that shapes the topography of Brussels and historically structures the old faubourg of Anderlecht, will make Peterbos part of a metropolitan system of parks. Second, the main entrance is reconceived as a primary link with the boulevards, a linear urban structure from the mid-twentieth century that crosses Anderlecht (the continuous string of Boulevards Paulsen, Herbette, and Graindor) (Fig. 11.4). Third, a system of *plaines*/squares (now partially encumbered by parking lots) adds diversity and different gradients of urbanity and, again, thresholds. The new equipment (developed via specific architectural competitions) will complete the improvement of the *plaines*/squares project. Fourth, the strategy of renaming the streets attempts to reinvent the notion of an address through workshops with residents. The idea is not to recreate the street following a model that is inadequate here, but rather reappropriate the place and not get lost. It seeks to reconnect the buildings to their ground.

These first steps aim to provide clear guidance which, as a whole, encourages the use of other forms of mobility than those planned in the 1960s. It links the transformation of space to the evolution of modern project imaginaries and, in parallel, to changes in mobility practices. More walking and less car usage can help reverse the

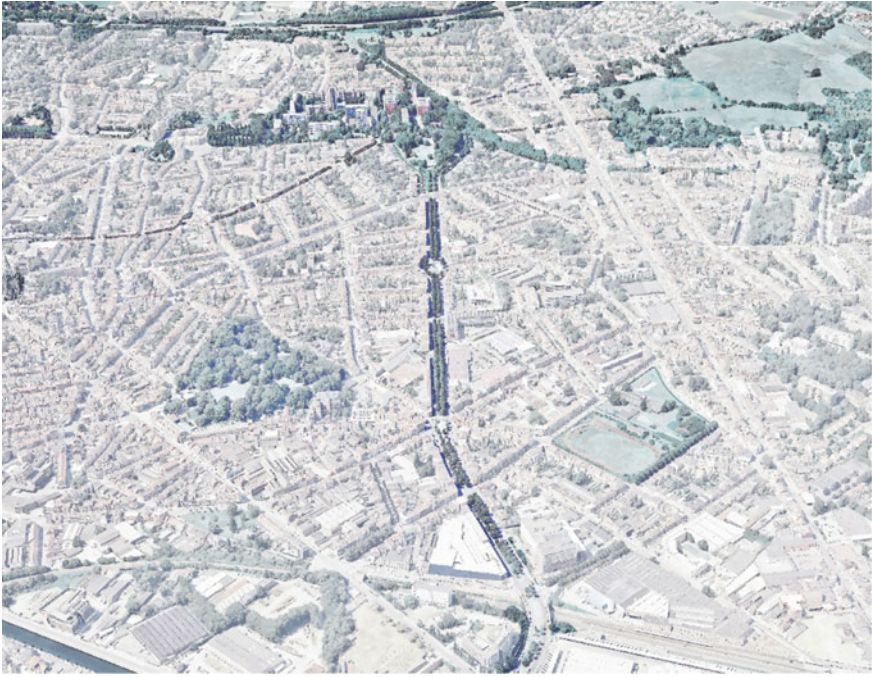


Fig. 11.4 Inside–outside

outside and inside image of Peterbos (currently with parking spaces as thresholds between the two). The ground is the locus of this reversal, addressing the open public space per se and in the city.

11.6 Setting the Scene for the Ecological Transition

Ninety per cent of the surface area of Peterbos is open, potentially green, and permeable. Here, soil and water are two transformative agents such that the design of public space deeply embodies in the ground. The renewal project represents an opportunity to propose an eco-systemic and metabolic shift for Peterbos. *What if* Peterbos was actually better equipped than traditional urban tissue to face climatic issues and climatic transition? *What if* Peterbos could behave as a ‘climatic body’? Could the large open ground play a key role in supporting this ecological and urban transition?

11.6.1 Resizing Car Parks and De-Sealing

A fundamental evolution is needed with regard to the ‘space of the car’. Today, Peterbos appears to be a gigantic car park, with the juxtaposition of an asphalt carpet at the foot of the buildings. The project reverses the dominant status of cars and the car-oriented design of the surrounding area by reorganizing the erratic spatial organization of the parking lots and considering reduced future car use in Brussels, included in the Good Move regional policy for mobility (Bruxelles Mobilité 2020). This reduction in car usage and parking spaces will go hand in hand with better overall pedestrian access to the site, enhanced connections to public transport, and direct paths between car parks and housing entrances. However, the proposed design maintains accessibility by car and a number of parking areas close to each building, as strongly advocated for by residents, including some women, who drew our attention to feelings of insecurity when moving around within their own neighbourhood. This is a preliminary step to allow other environmental strategies to take shape on-site, since part of the parking areas will be assigned to other purposes. This reduction allows for a further de-sealing of the ground, literally reducing the asphalt surface of car parks and unnecessary car roads crossing the site.

11.6.2 A Climatic Body

Increased permeability would then promote the idea of Peterbos as a climatic body, regulating atmospheric and flow parameters. Climate change presents us with extreme situations that an open space like this can help us tackle: increasing the cool island effect at an even larger scale (easier here due to the large vegetation patches than in the dense city), allowing water infiltration, and increasing ecological continuity. For instance, the design proposes diverting the rainwater drainage system from impermeable surfaces of the sewage system and guiding it into ditches and swales where the water has the space and time to infiltrate, reducing the downstream flood risk. This image of the ground as a climatic body could assist with the envisioning and reconnecting of some previously disconnected elements, for instance helping the built elements and their users be part of this system. As a carrier of flows, matter, species, and the atmosphere, the ground can offer a transformative landscape of wet and dry areas, slopes and plains, maintained areas, and others left to lie fallow.

11.6.3 Maintaining the Landscape of Ecological Transition

From a reductionist modernistic vision of the ground as an aesthetic environment to a relational reappropriation of the resources, along with the ‘wild’ uncultivated landscape comes the reclamation of the ground as a resource. The heritage of community

gardens and urban struggles shows that there is a long history of family gardens as collective and social objects, which are constantly at risk and have a dynamic geography (Cahn et al. 2018). The master plan proposes cultivating the ground of Peterbos in some areas, creating new value: as support for not only vegetable and food production, but also and mainly as a social catalyzer. Small structures will be developed in collaboration with local associations, such as a greenhouse and apiaries. Furthermore, this is an opportunity for new synergies with the ground floors of the buildings, which are left abandoned or seen as dangerous in most housing blocks.

These strategies reflect our ambition to prepare the ground for an ecological transition and make something out of this modern ground that meets the challenge of the present ecological and societal transition (Fig. 11.5). This approach is more metabolic than functionalist: it includes technical solutions and does not fear becoming transformative and experimental, but above all it aims to meet the requirements of human uses. This large public property represents an opportunity to create a 'Landscape of the Transition' that should not be missed. Nevertheless, the importance of a major figure in its maintenance, the gardener, should not be overlooked. Therefore, this transition must go hand in hand with residents' appropriation of and education on these new systems (ditches, late mowing) and public authorities' maintenance of these landscapes. This is essential to maintain the quality of a diversified landscape over time and slowly adapt practices and lifestyles.

11.7 Mixité: Emancipation and Initiatives

The ground of the city constitutes a common surface of interaction between the different projects or aspirations of the city's inhabitants. By means of an equitable distribution of programmes and accessibility to a plurality of social environments, urban space can encourage the possibilities for one person or more people to emancipate themselves through the development of individual or collective initiatives. However, the equity of these conditions is still not distributed to the same extent in the different parts of the city, and this common space contains asperities and omissions, so we must look for ways to avoid any further marginalization by questioning its future role.

The case of Peterbos, with nearly 3,500 residents, is no exception to the well-known imbalances found in large social housing estates. Urbanity is excluded there by isolation and spatial decay coveted by drug traffickers, gradually giving way to forms of territorial micro-tyranny and a gradual alteration of the neighbourhood's identity via the media. The late arrival of urban renewal policies in this type of neighbourhood and a certain denial of reality by public authorities has inevitably weakened social ties and the possibility of interaction with residents. They have in part become resigned and indifferent to any initiatives or participation developed by traditional planning policies, which often require a civic practice and a cultural codification difficult to apprehend (Pisecki 2007). Living in Peterbos literally means living in and with public space, and this is precisely what enables us to question our



Fig. 11.5 Setting the scene for the ecological transition

design practices and observe the limits to our ability to formulate a response beyond a mere reinterpretation of public space, namely interacting with specific practices and uses.

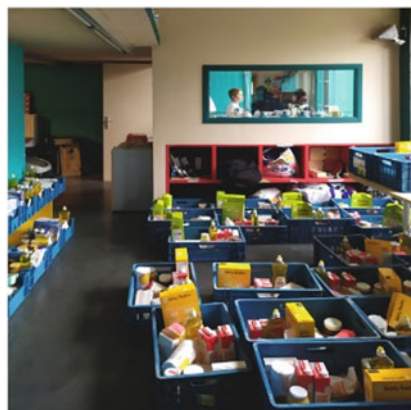
During the development of the master plan, we worked on the missing dimension of the ‘intermediate urban grain’ in Peterbos, which are spaces that are not part of the private sphere of housing and do not concern the large public space but can encourage more informal and small-scale practices, such as a repair workshop, an ephemeral coffee shop, and small-scale agricultural production and distribution. This idea is regularly considered in view of managerial, economic, or even regulatory difficulties, such as PRASS (*Plan régional d’affectation du sol*)-related restrictions on the possibility of using the ground floor of the buildings. Indeed, the latter is limited by the categorization of the different parts of Peterbos into predominantly residential areas and parks, as well as equipment and service areas for the collective or public interest, highly constrained by floor-surface limitations. This frustration is all the greater when you consider the number of jobseekers, the interest that emerged during discussions with residents in opening individual businesses, and the repercussions of inactivity for vulnerable people in Peterbos. It therefore seems fundamental to rethink on a regional scale the possibilities left to these places to reconceive this spatial intermediate grain and to undertake initiatives that meet specific needs and wishes. This missing intermediate grain is also applicable at a social level. Despite the large number of associations present in the neighbourhood, the social projects developed by public urban renewal policies, and the creation of a neighbourhood and participation branch in 2019, interaction between representatives and those represented is still very difficult. Moreover, one may question the means currently put in place by regional and municipal authorities to ensure the sustainability of these socio-economic projects—undertaken within the framework of its ‘Sustainable Neighbourhood Contracts’—since they no longer ensure the follow-up of these projects after the construction operations.

Previously, life in these neighbourhoods revolved around the figure of the ‘care-taker’ concierge, a key intermediary and a great source of knowledge of the various situations. Although some of them remain in the western part of Peterbos, their roles and involvement in the life of the neighbourhood have been greatly reduced to that of a technical and sanitary manager of the buildings. In recent years, this need to ‘take care’ has been taken up by the *opbouwwerkers* of the association *Samenlevingsopbouw* or by the educators of the nonprofit organization D’Broej who, as its name suggests, try to ‘deal with’ the resources available (Fig. 11.6). These associations, along with SoHoLab, have been valuable sources for learning about issues and practices, particularly for the design of public space in the neighbourhood. However, it is obvious that these structures will not be able to resolve a situation on their own that arose out of the obsolescence of a territorial management policy for several years.

The Peterbos experience leads us to a better understanding of what is missing in the balanced implementation of programmatic distributions and social cohesion factors in marginalized parts of the city. This common plane of interaction is therefore the result of a long process of listening and monitoring initiatives that are often fragile at the start. Setting up a coffee shop, installing collective farming practices, providing



Coffee meeting in Peterfoot



*Food distribution by the association
Samenlevingsopbouw*



*Education of the youngest in beekeeping on the
future agricultural plain*



*Conversation with young people about the use of
sports areas in the neighbourhood*

Fig. 11.6 Mixité: emancipation and individual initiative

mutual aid, and even organizing sports and cultural events are all aspirations that are difficult to initiate and perpetuate in Peterbos today. In addition to overcoming regulatory constraints and designing the intermediate grain of the space, it seems interesting to rethink the figure of the ‘caretaker’ (Fleury 2019) as an intermediary able to encourage and follow up on residents’ projects. This figure could take the structure of a cooperative, facilitating the interaction and action of the actors involved in the longer term to support certain experimental initiatives, while ensuring a form of project management (Dimeglio and Zetlaoui-Léger 2007). The Peterbos experience reveals to each stakeholder, politician, owner, designer, academic, or association the need to find other configurations and construction processes for this social space, which cannot simply be the repetition of a ‘daily problem-management’ policy. The

future of a *mixité* for these districts is therefore a project in which urban design participates as support and from which things are made possible, but whose results cannot be expected at a time ‘T’ but should rather be envisioned as a continuous process.

11.8 A Provisional Conclusion: The Stone Guest

During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, urban debates in Brussels centred around the *luttés urbaines* (urban struggles). Under the term *bruxellization*, standing for market law and the real estate operation of ‘modernizing’ Brussels by intense housing demolition and expulsion, activists and residents denounced the lack of a public voice in the urban question and reclaimed a ‘right to the city’. The end of the 1980s concluded with the creation of the Brussels Region, a regional institutional layer covering the nineteen communes. At the time, the causes and demands of the urban struggles culminated in the implementation of an official urban renewal policy, the main outcome of which is still the ‘Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract’ (Lenel 2013; Van Crielingen 2013). According to Van Crielingen (2013), the institutional birth of the Brussels Region in 1989 led to a project that favoured the return of the middle classes to the city, which went beyond the objective of social cohesion in working-class districts. Another element in the Brussels context of access to social housing relates to management by social housing companies, which moved from the municipal to the regional level in 1993. The change from an imperfect system, which left access to housing dependent on contacts and subjective assessment but implicitly favoured a form of village mix through the fluctuation of the selection process, to a more transparent system with the consequence of homogenization, concentration, and impoverishment of the inhabiting social strata. Furthermore, the departure of the middle classes who no longer fit into the redefined categories was experienced as class stigmatization by those who remained (Schaut 2017). Both of these elements suggest that disinvestment in social housing neighbourhoods dates back to the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and has worsened since, although many reinvestment programmes have been developed.

The radical transformation of Peterbos is now becoming a necessity and requires not only rethinking the social and physical context but also deconstructing the implicit socio-political project that stemmed from a series of likely good intentions, confronting fundamental questions on the place and role that we wish to grant these districts in our societies in the future. However, urban design and urban planning have major responsibilities in that they ‘govern by design’ (Aggregate 2012) and can worsen inequalities or revise them: ‘any policy which seeks to eliminate or combat them must take the urban project as its starting point’ (Secchi 2014). It is then important to note that the Peterbos Sustainable Neighbourhood Contract is the first to take over the entire perimeter of one of these neighbourhoods and is accompanied by actions that concern public space and housing quality as well as social interventions. The ground transformation we aim to initiate, with the multiple meanings developed

here, will never bring welfare, social cohesion, inclusion, and jobs by itself. But with its insistence on space as capital, an agent, and a mediator, it tackles the stone guest: it clearly highlights the possible starting point for reform and the assumption of collective responsibility.

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Accomplished projects by *Studio* include the Theatre Square and Spooroord Park in Antwerp, both awarded prizes for the best public spaces in Flanders, and the City Structural Plan; a system of public spaces in Mechelen, finalist of the European Prize of public spaces; the Courrouze district in Rennes, which won the Prix 'Nature en ville' of the Palmares Ecoquartier 2011 awarded by the Ministry of Ecology in France. Today, *Studio* is working on the projects Brest metropolitan Heart, Peterbos public spaces in Brussels, the Flaminio neighbourhood in Rome, and Lecco waterfront, among others.

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Within vvv, Guillaume Vanneste and Nicolas Willemet develop architectural projects and urban design in Brussels and Belgium. In particular, vvv has won a number of public projects, such as the Pocket parks and the C28 promenade on a former railway, the renovation of Place Marie Janson in Saint-Gilles, and the master plan for the Peterbos Housing Park in Anderlecht. The office's approach is to conceive spatial structures with care and interest in social and material terms while always maintaining a critical research perspective.

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