

Take a look at this little metropolis (Eric Corijn)

For more than five years the revamped theatre project chafed against the rift in Brussels urban existence. Creating theatre for the big city from a base on the left bank of the canal amidst the poor immigrant neighbourhoods proved no easy matter. Not only did the conversion of a Flemish repertory project into a city theatre require great creative effort, but giving shape to a project like this in Brussels was also extremely hard. Because the city had and still has no self-image. Indeed, the institutions each represent a different image. The Brussels Region covers an area smaller than the urban fabric itself. The two independent communities represent monolingual societies. Nineteen boroughs are trying to maintain lost entities in the city while one borough identifies with the city as a whole. Brussels is the capital of a country that has carved itself into many pieces and refuses to seek unity. Meanwhile Brussels itself has become an international hub, with a very diverse population and great social inequality that is also spatially scattered. It was in this poor 'croissant' of Brussels (northwest of the Brussels pentagon, running from lower Vorst to Sint-Joost) surrounded by an 'other' population, that the KVS changed its skin.

Then it was time to return to their own accommodation, first to the Box and then to the fully renovated Vlaamse Schouwburg. Since then, in the course of about seven years, the Brussels city theatre has become firmly embedded here. With a clear profile. For a city that's an intercultural mix. For the world that's connected to Brussels in various ways, from Ostend to the Congo. For a fair social cohesion in which everyone is equal and has their place. With the KVS as a lever in the artistic landscape too, through collaboration with the Théâtre National and others, or by incorporating Dito'Dito into the team, or even by participation in the Brussels Kunstenoverleg (Brussels Arts Consultation Commission) and the development of the Cultural Plan. Since Flanders has a difficult relationship with the city in general and Brussels in particular, certain difficulties were unavoidable. So there was controversy. Because communication takes place in three languages or because criticism of the Flemish national discourse is allowed to be expressed on stage. Even though the project has to forfeit funds under current Flemish cultural policy, nobody can deny that creating art in a cosmopolitan urban context is substantially different from developing a repertoire for a national project.

### **Tok Toc Knock: an encounter with a city in the midst of its evolution**

In Tok Toc Knock – oops, trilingual again, isn't this a matter for parliament? – the city theatre goes outside its own walls to enter into dialogue with the city once again. There is no fixed format. Seventeen artists will be participating. From different disciplines and backgrounds. Whatever is created will be presented in various versions: performances, installations in the public space, walks, discussions, workshops, etc. And in June 2013 all this has to go back to the KVS for a grand finale.

The creators want their encounter with the city to be as unbiased as possible. They will see a city in motion, in extremely rapid evolution. During the postwar period Brussels was still the country's main industrial city. In just a few decades it became a city of services, with 91% of employment in the service sector (including restaurants, shops, theatres, hairdressers, lawyers and other service providers). This conversion is consistent with rapid internationalisation, not least through the growing importance of the European institutions. The industrial city and the rising standard of living has mainly led to the expansion of the suburbs. The old working-class neighbourhoods were abandoned for new residential areas in the city's outer circle or on its outskirts. Newcomers filled in the vacant places, both in the labour market and in the neighbourhoods where they first arrived. They too soon wanted to have their own house in the suburbs. But the postwar economic crisis and the relocation of industry caused large-scale unemployment, especially among the immigrants and so they remained stuck where they had arrived. Working-class neighbourhoods consequently became poor immigrant neighbourhoods. As the labour market offered fewer and fewer opportunities, they became increasingly focused on a local community economy. The economic crisis really wreaked havoc in the 'croissant' around the pentagon!

It is mainly the new middle class that is now employed in the large service sector. They are attracted by administrative bodies, international institutions and everything that requires logistics. Many young people seek their education in the city – with 70,000 college students, Brussels is the country's major student city – and continue to live here for a while once their studies are completed. But then a time comes for family life

and housing becomes too expensive and so they look for cheaper accommodation outside the city. And so the exodus from the city continues. As mentioned before, the urban fabric is much larger than the Brussels Region. Consequently, of the 700,000 jobs available in Brussels, more than 360,000 are filled by commuters and the growth of the economy mainly benefits the inhabitants of the outskirts. Hence the great paradox. Brussels is the second largest regional economy in Europe, but a third of the population lives on or below the poverty line and there are 10,000 job-seekers. One third of young people in Brussels live in families with no paid income and for most young people living in poor neighbourhoods the future is hopeless. They have switched to confrontation mode and their actions are responsible for sensational reports in the newspapers. School offers no prospect of social advancement: 28% of young people drop out of the system without a diploma or certificate. Consequently the split in society is replicated. Work, housing and school continue to be the three important issues.

The challenges continue to grow. The population of Brussels is rising again and is more than 1.1 million people. Demographers predict an increase of between 170,000 and 240,000 by 2020! This requires new infrastructure, about 50,000 homes, as well as nurseries and schools, and especially employment. We also know that the new Brussels inhabitants are mainly children in the immigrant neighbourhoods and new foreigners, this time mainly from Eastern Europe and central Africa. Consequently, Brussels is increasingly becoming a metropolis, cosmopolitan and multicultural, also much younger, and that is good, but probably also much poorer.

### **A finger on the pulse of three distinct districts**

Is this a sombre picture? I don't think so. Certainly, the problems are substantial and resources are scarce. But the metropolis also offers many opportunities and possibilities. It is the gateway to the world. However, we must not be afraid to think of the new society that will arise. We must dare to question the old forms and ideas on which countries are built. Brussels will be a mixed, coloured and multilingual city in the world, which does not quite fit the image of society Belgian politicians and the media wish to present. So it is good that the new KVS project is intended to start from the bottom up, without too much bias, and with a view of what everyday life is really like. Because one thing is clear: everyday life in Brussels is very different from the image of it presented by the press and the parties and in the stories of smaller cities and suburbs.

Three districts will be the ports of call, where art will be created together, working on the basis of the local reality but for the whole city. These neighbourhoods are each a personification of Brussels. In the European Quarter, Brussels has become the capital of the Union. Sint-Joost-ten-Node is the small multicultural community of the Region. The Model District in Laken is one of those postwar modern residential areas which now too has been absorbed into the maelstrom of the metropolis.

### **European Quarter: major reanimation plans**

It was quite by accident that Brussels became the capital of Europe. Fifty years ago all it had was a few hundred civil servants for a fledgling union of six countries. Today more than 40,000 people work for the EU in Brussels. These institutions also generate a string of functions. Indeed, Brussels has become the world capital of lobbyists, with between 15,000 and 20,000 of them camped here. International Brussels is good for more than 105,000 jobs. And the hub of this activity is in the European Quarter. Without much planning, and with one building project after another, starting with the Berlaymont building for the Commission, all the major institutions are now located in the Leopold Quarter and its vicinity. The original population and many functions have disappeared. The European Quarter has become a rather mono-functional business centre. There are now plans to give it a new lease of life. This is necessary to improve the quality of life here. It is also necessary if Brussels wishes to radiate the atmosphere of a European capital. There is a grand plan for the redevelopment of Wetstraat. There is a new spatial plan for the whole district. As well as offices there must be more housing. It must have other functions apart from international ones. The squares and the public space must be animated. What makes it all very special is that the public space mainly consists of parks. The central Leopold Park could become a real *urban park*, a Brussels Central Park with constant and frequent activity. And preferably activities that portray the diversity of this little metropolis rather than a

protocol-bound image of the European Union as a place of high-level consultation between countries. The arts could then certainly contribute towards shaping the district as a centre within the city.

### **Sint-Joost: the metropolis in a nutshell**

And then there is Sint-Joost-ten-Node, situated between central Brussels and Schaarbeek. With an area of 1.14 km<sup>2</sup>, it is the smallest borough, and with a population of more than 27,000 the most densely populated, in both the Region and Belgium. More than half of the population is of foreign origin. It is also the poorest borough in the country.

Sint-Joost has all the elements of the big city: the area around Rogierplein (with malls and expensive hotels), a part of the poorer station area east of Brussels North Station, part of the North District with its office blocks for Belgacom, the Flemish government and others, and the Leuvensesteenweg area with its colourful population. The European Quarter and Sint-Joost overlap somewhat. Not only because the EU occupies the Madou Tower, but mainly because the two districts overflow into each other's territory. This is clearly visible near Leuvensesteenweg, where everything from the shops to the graffiti tags signals different population groups.

### **Model District: a new economic model?**

The Model District in Laken, which was started in the 50s in connection with the 1958 World Fair, is located near the Heizel plateau. It was built between 1963 and 1972. It was designed by Renaat Braem and showed all the characteristics of the euphoria of the new welfare state. However, the social housing district did not escape the crisis. High-rise has had its day. The neighbourhood is suffering from unemployment, degeneration and illicit trade. Some refer to it as 'Cité Poubelle' (Trash Can City) rather than Cité Modèle (Model City). To adapt the houses to modern standards, major renovations are being carried out in several stages. However, it is probably 'too little, too late'. The blocks certainly need to be renovated, but the district no longer houses employed blue- and white-collar workers with a stable job and rising living standards resulting from certain economic growth! It will therefore be necessary to find new forms of urban economy which, apart from a renewed infrastructure, also offers the prospect of incomes and amenities. Perhaps the comprehensive renovation work offers us an opportunity to think about new forms of society and more cooperative neighbourhood services.

It will be a fascinating residency in these three districts, each of which incorporates the dynamics of Brussels and requires interpretation and expression. On the blog at [www.toktocknock.com](http://www.toktocknock.com), the coordinator of this urban project, theatre-maker and actor Willy Thomas, describes the preparations for the artists' residencies and the festivals. Anyone who wants to know more about the fascinating dynamics of Brussels will find more information at the Brussels Studies Institute (<http://www.brusselsstudiesinstitute.be>) or in the electronic magazine Brussels Studies (<http://www.brusselsstudies.be>). A city is not a country and needs its own form of art and culture.