

## **europan 17 – brussels (be)**

### **le plateau du maelbeek**

the starting point of our proposal for the cinquantenaire park is a historical and geological reflection.

historically, etterbeek and specifically the junction at the now place jourdan of chaussée de wavre and chaussée saint-pierre is one of the oldest suburbs of the historic city of brussels – appearing as far back as the 10<sup>th</sup> century – and very soon becoming an important leisure and promenade place for the inhabitants of the city.

the park itself by comparison is very recent, and appearing only at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the world's fair. before then it was a maneuvering field on top of a plateau at the convergence of the maelbeek valley with one of its arms. the main axis on which the park is drawn - avenue de tervueren, only appearing for the construction of the park itself. the arches, acting as old city gates, were never used as such and are only decorative, as was a common gesture around the turn of the century.

urbanistically our proposal found the gesture of the park and its figurative appearance quite uninspiring, its story being one of the world fair and even the actual park plan being thought for the construction of pavilions make it difficult to appreciate it as an autonomous park with its own qualities even though they are very real and present. it's monumentality and symmetry alone are worth conserving.

our main reflection then became geological with the study of the context of the etterbeek town, the maelbeek stream and the plateau on which the park stands.

as mentioned earlier, etterbeek is one of the oldest suburb towns of the historic city of brussels. it appears at the bottom of the maelbeek valley, next to the maelbeek stream itself. the maelbeek stream has the particularity of being one of the few geological characteristics of the city surroundings still very present today – even though it was almost completely covered. the valley itself still has a very real presence in the urban fabric of the city with the source of the stream in the la cambre abbey, followed by a series of ponds connecting the stream all the way to its outpour to the senne in schaarbeek. some of the ponds still exist today, the most famous being the lxelles ponds near the place flagey and the la cambre abbey, the parc léopold, the square marie-louise - known as the st. josse-ten-node pond before the covering of the stream, and the parc josaphat. these are all very present in each respective neighborhood today and, as an ensemble, offer probably one of the most remarkable historical and geological characteristics of the city itself.

the valley itself was prone to several floodings in heavy rain, the stream easily flooded onto the neighborhoods – and it was covered in 1872. even then, floods were a problem until the recent construction of storm basins in belliard and flagey.

the park's position is particularly relevant in this context, overlooking the valley from the plateau on which it stands.

as much as the actual european proposal is limited to a very specific area of the park – we established two chronologies and areas of intervention. the first one, strictly following the demands of the brief, all the while establishing a longer term, coherent direction for the future development of the whole park.

two main factors were considered when developing this long-term vision for the park. its geography, and its role within the context of climate change. that change is coming at us fast and we should start proposing solutions to mitigate the inevitable problems we will be facing in the not-as-far-as-people-believe future.

the main reasoning being that while the park today is quite porous to rain water, due to its sheer size and configuration – mainly extremely large areas of grass, this will quickly change in the near future. we know for a fact that precipitation will grow with climate change. but most importantly, it will be less frequent and much more intense, especially in the summer. because of their irregularity, the earth dries in between each rain, and loses a lot of its carrying capacity. the sudden and intense rainfall then doesn't permeate as well into the land – creating large surface runoffs. this will be especially problematic given the immense surface we are talking about in the case of the park – more than 36 hectares of land, of which 30 are surface earth.

the positioning of the park itself is also to note, being on a plateau – and the topography directly pointing towards the valley, with a west-east level delta of about 20 meters. the runoffs going directly towards the maelbeek valley. this will inevitably lead to flooding problems once again.

this then became the main proposal for this project – to turn the park into an immense natural retention basin, that will allow the water to permeate by itself, and in case of overflow, to canalize the excess water in storm basins to control and mitigate the flow of water towards the covered maelbeek stream.

the mention of the tunnel opening in the middle of the park allowed us to develop our intervention in a contextual approach.

while studying the road traffic on the avenue de tervueren, and from our own knowledge of the city – it appeared to us that a quite simple, yet radical approach made a lot of sense in the near future : to decommission the tunnel entirely for road traffic.

as much as the entry point to the city from the east – from the highway, is still and will in the far future continue to be heavily used by traffic, the portion of the avenue de tervueren beneath the park won't. not only does the actual city entrance completely bypass that arm of the road, the south coming traffic also mainly bypasses that artery by following the big belt through montgomery. the park itself sits inside the big belt, and the scale of the tunnel is completely disproportionate for the intended future usage of the road. the brussels mobility plans all converge towards one main goal : greatly reducing the usage of the car within the confines of the city limits. and this is mostly the case we have here, the tunnel mainly channeling traffic from the south-east suburbs to the city center. but these exact routes are the ones being greatly reduced and replaced with soft-mobility or public transport.

we propose in the very-near future to seal the tunnel to road traffic, and keep only the bottom level for public transport as it is.

architecturally and urbanistically, our proposal follows the main axis of the park for the big interventions, all the while proposing a series of punctuated interventions that will allow for a better and healthy usage of the park in the future.

the first, and biggest intervention, is the creating of several water retention ponds along the main axis of the park. this gesture directly reflects the natural purpose we are giving the park, in a very visible and poetic approach. the old decommissioned tunnel will also be used as an underground storm retention basin in cases of extreme precipitation. two small pedestrian bridges follow the axes of the existing foot paths to allow an easier crossing of the park on its south-north route.

the proposal then rethinks the vegetation of the park by replanting most of the grass areas with natural tall growing grass and allowing for the formation of natural ponds in case of heavy rain for water retention. by giving the park a natural function, we redefine its role in the neighborhood and emphasize its naturalness – which is somewhat lost in the current configuration.

the park also suffers from a pedestrian permeability problem. being almost completely closed off by barriers on all its sides, with entry points that are seldom visible or adequate – the natural wandering that might happen from the streets is here completely impeded. this in turn has a negative impact on the usage of the park. the most problematic part in our analysis is the westward bank of the park, directly facing towards the city and the business center of schumann. the park is completely sealed off from the neighborhoods on that side, a problem further worsened by the presence of the old entry tunnels on both sides of the main axis – tunnels that will eventually also be decommissioned.

we propose in their place the only architectural intervention of our proposal with the construction of two large covered spaces – or agoras, which can be used completely freely by the people and different organizations. they provide permanent basic necessities – two public toilets, a coffee and restaurant, and an information and tourist point for the park and museums within it. these two buildings flank the western side of the park and act as entry points for the facing neighborhoods. since they are placed on top of the old access tunnels, their construction doesn't cover any permeable surface within the park, and only uses already waterproof surface.

in conjunction with the creation of the agoras, we propose a large plaza on the center of the axis and in place of the actual park entrance. this plaza serves as the main reference from the west axis. the plaza is shaped in such a way that a pond will form in its center when heavy rain occurs. the water acts as a thread between city and park – bringing the park to the city and vice versa.

finally we also propose some logistical changes such as the redefining of the museum entrances – to bring some clarity to their access and create a coherent ensemble with the park, unfortunately this isn't the case today.

together, these interventions redefine the park and its occupation, as well as its role of park in the neighborhood – by bringing back nature and using its innate qualities for helping us solve the problems we will be facing very soon.

a broader reflection is also part of our proposal, concerning the park as a whole – its issues are numerous, and a proposal for a solution seemed like an inevitability.

we propose to apply the same logic on the totality of the park, with the replacement of most of the grass areas with tall growing prairie grass. this grass can still be cut punctually to allow for the occupation of the space as a park. the rest of the areas are left completely wild, with nature retaking its

place. with the inevitable heatwaves, dry periods, intense precipitations that climate change will certainly bring upon us, the park will become a veritable oasis in the middle of the neighborhood, and even the city itself. together with the ponds and natural swamps due to the water retaining nature of the proposal, this will in turn recreate an ecosystem and biodiversity long lost since the creation of the maneuvering plain, and the covering of the maelbeek stream. the trees will be replaced as needed, when the old ones die or become sick, with endemic species to further cultivate the birthing biodiversity of the park.

our proposal keeps the almost exact arrangement of the garden as it is, with the trees in the same place, grass section left in their existing shapes, paths reduced but otherwise untouched, etc. the parks monumentality will contrast nicely with the vegetation and nature regaining its place – creating a truly new urban park, mindful of its history and serving a purpose.

accompanying this, the perimeter of the park also undergoes some interventions that will finalize its transformation. first, the totality of the barriers are removed – as they create an unnecessary distance between the neighborhoods and the park itself. and finally, the totality of the surrounding streets become carless – or severely reduced to local residents only, utilitarians, public transport and bike paths. the existing bike paths become pedestrian paths surrounded by nature as the edge of the park is pushed slightly outwards to the first row of parking surrounding it. we propose to prolong this transformation on the rue de la loi, up until the schumann roundabout. avenue d'auderghem and avenue de cortenbergh define the limit of the pedestrian area and remain accessible to traffic – being main arteries from the shumann center. on the other side of the park, the avenue de tervueren also becomes pedestrian up to the crossing with avenue des celtes and rue des tongues. this way, we completely encompass the public transports and mainly the merode metro entrances and exists within the pedestrian radius, and greatly improve access to the park – more importantly, that access becomes enjoyable and peaceful.

the north and south banks of the park will also undergo some changes. the north bank is the only one proposing some program to the residents with sports facilities and kids playgrounds, a mausoleum and other equipment. the lack of permeability of the park doesn't allow people to easily traverse it from the south neighborhoods and fully enjoy these facilities – and in any case, the size of the park doesn't properly support it either. in a context of complete inclusivity, we propose to place similar facilities on the south bank as well – so they can be offered to everybody and not just a select few people. in conjunction with the opening of the surroundings of the park, we believe it will make it accessible to a vast majority of people who have been kept apart from it – being parents from the south bank, people with reduced mobility, and all the different social classes of residents who might use the park for a variety of different reasons, depending on what is available to them.

these interventions, together, will redefine the totality of the park and yet still maintain its strong identity. by projecting ourselves into an inevitable future, we defined a clear guiding principle for all future interventions in the park all the while bringing nature and biodiversity back to such a large area within the city limits.

the geological approach of our proposal is what gave it its name – plateau du maelbeek. to redefine an area as it was before human intervention and therefore rename it to its natural condition.