

## Junction

Reinterpreting Parc du Cinquantenaire to imagine one of its possible futures, we need to understand its role at different scales. The body of Brussels is composed not only of 19 municipalities but also of infinite interconnected neighbourhoods with different identities. This diverse, rich and hectic *urbanscape* can be seen as one of the most representative European social and cultural environments.

At the scale of the city, Parc du Cinquantenaire represents one of the most vast and frequented public grounds still completely immersed in the urban fabric. Its immediate surroundings display an exemplary slice of Brussels' reality: spatially and socially speaking, it sits between vastly diverse neighborhoods – Etterbeek, SJTN, Ixelles and the European Quarter. It acts as a junction and catalyst for these realities and for the users that inhabit the city daily, temporarily, or permanently.

## Social Desert

While in the neighbouring areas we find many complex, successful and diverse social condensers and public spaces, towards the West of the park we encounter a peculiar urban state: a social desert. In the EU Quarter, mono-functionality, supra-human scale and aridity of public spaces make the entire district play by different rules. Only very few of the office buildings have a different function at the ground floor. The size of the blocks varies from 60x60m to 170x240m and even if similar dimensions can be found in the surroundings, the amount of buildings per block is consistently different (Brussels Noord: 30 to 60 buildings vs EUQ: 10 to 15 buildings). This type of urban fabric, made of masses fortified with mirrored facades, together with a lack of social infrastructures and diverse use, results in a reduced vitality of the entire area and in a lack of human-scale spaces. This leads to an urban experience in which interactions between building and streets, users and passers-by are discouraged. In fact, the few open spaces that can be found within the quarter - some more successful than others, especially during lunch time - are generally of difficult inhabitation/use (e.g. Jardin de la Vallée).

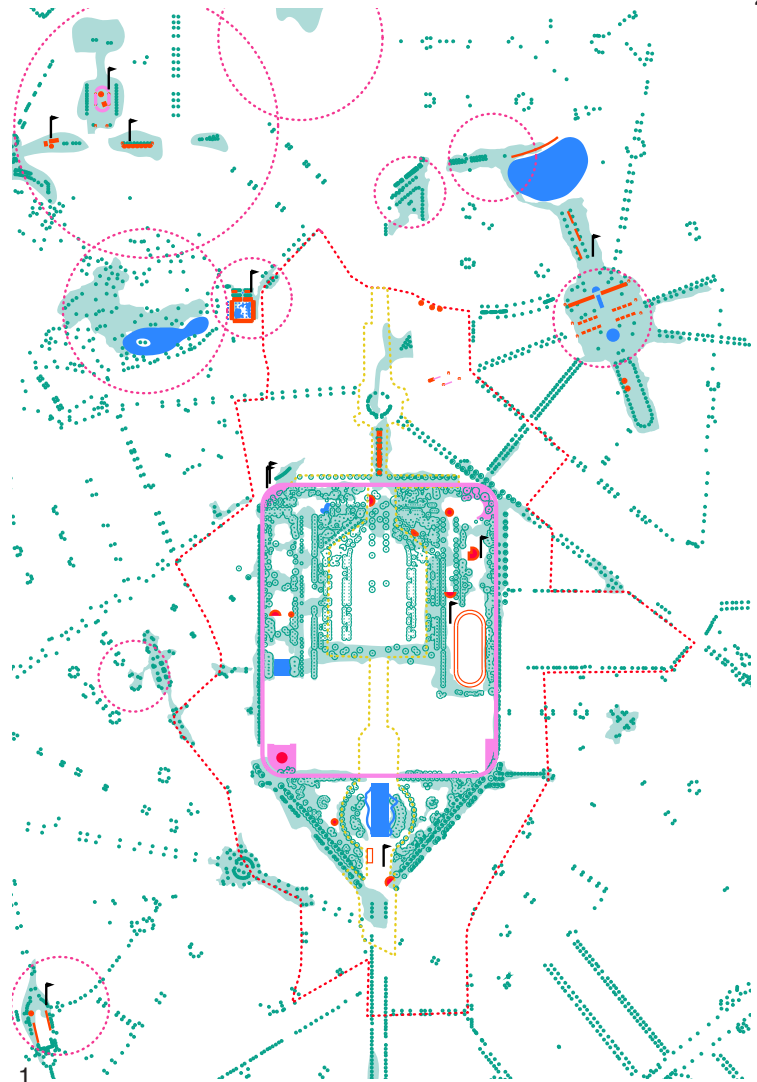
If we consider its dimensions, Parc du Cinquantenaire has the potential to fulfil the entire public space requirement of this social desert. However, relying solely on the park to absorb the entire EUQ's public space need is unhealthy and unrealistic. The park should represent the culmination of an already successful urban and social state. Thus, we escape both the yellow and red line. We look at potential expression spaces in the EUQ, and possible futures for a not-only-offices quarter (especially considering the already planned -50% in building occupation by the European Commission - from 50 to 25 buildings, mainly condensed around Schuman). The transformation of Parc du Cinquantenaire becomes an opportunity to generate an echo to its surroundings. (1)

## Echo

In this framework we don't propose a real estate strategy; it already exists and it is probably impossible to stop. We work within its lines to enhance the potential of the streets, the ground floors, the green areas and the overall social spaces that are now mainly just the empty space between spaceships.

The proposal aims to infuse the areas currently lacking middle-scale quality public space with *micro social infrastructures*, able to facilitate a more spontaneous domestication of the public space and generate a sense of belonging. These *facilitators* take the form of extremely ordinary elements: a step to overpass a small wall, a table attached to a fence, a bench, a bin, flowerbeds of local spontaneous vegetation, a shelter, a water fountain can already help sustain appropriation, activate the existing pockets and reintroduce human scale in a neighbourhood made of spaceships.

To complete the atlas of *facilitators*, simple yet hyper visible signals in the form of flags mark the presence of these condensers and micro-infrastructures. Their recurrence guides the users in a more conscious inhabitation of the public space. (2)



- 1 Extended intervention zone (EUQ)
- 2 Rue des Trevès



## Counter-monumentality

The whole conception of our proposal is guided by the will to take a critical distance from the monumental character of the park. This is achieved by avoiding a superposition of an additional layer of monumentality and by choosing contextualisation over deletion. Three fundamental aspects need to be addressed in this portion of the city: the permanence of problematic heritage pieces related to the Belgian colonial past; the presence of a mega-infrastructure, seen as an outdated monument to the 20th century car-oriented city; the overall obsession for an axis-centred public spaces' composition, a recurrent theme in the Brussels-Capital Region. In the framework of the strategy that has been outlined in February 2022 for the BCR, the management of symbols related to colonisation and the colonial period currently present between the trees of Parc du Cinquantenaire constitutes a crucial contribution to the complex act of *decolonising public space*.

We propose a layered yet simple strategy: problematic heritage pieces are not removed but complemented with an apparatus carrying information able to contextualise the piece and critique the meaning it carries. At the same time, *counter-monuments* complete the composition. Taking the form of stages, they are able to give space to the untold stories and hidden or erased sides of historical events by hosting storytelling, debates and performances. In addition, a new form of remembering and honouring is implemented in the form of a *garden of the righteous*. Here newly planted trees are dedicated to individuals and initiatives. Their names and histories are engraved on stool-like signs to support learning and contemplation.

In a society in which many of the 20th century's urban ideals are considered outdated, the presence of such an imposing piece of car infrastructure breaching into a public park raises many questions. We believe that its future will be related to uses that are very distant from its original one as it is already visible how it remains anchored to a surpassed conception of mobility. Possibilities are endless, especially if we don't limit our imagined scenarios only to the Kennedy portion but consider the entire tunnel system of Brussels. Aligning to the guidelines we are proposing and willing to allow future generations to have the greatest freedom in their reinterpretation of the tunnel system, we propose to not conceal the tunnel. Instead of burying it under an additional layer of monumentality, we choose contextualization and counteraction over deletion.

The spatial reinterpretation we propose is built on three key elements to counteract the overpowered directionality of the axis Schuman-Merode and the emphasis towards monumental complexes:

### *The soft border*

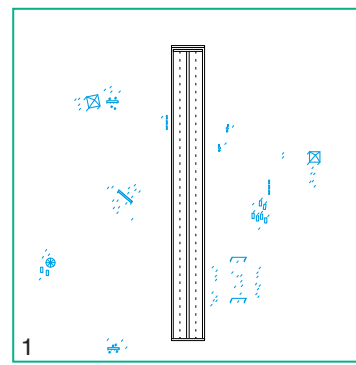
The existing outline of the park is a fence; even with its many gates and accesses, it represents a limit, a clear cut and definition of the dichotomy park-scape/street-scape. We propose a scenario in which the park doesn't have an actual border but a smooth transition – a gradient. Fences are avoided and a colonnade takes their place. A suspended passerelle, a running track/path/linear piazza between the tree canopies lightly covers the ground level path and links the framed landscape to its surroundings. (8)

### *The clearing*

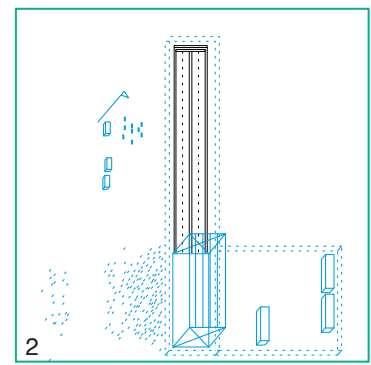
The centre is left empty, bare and generic. In this way it is able to host the most diverse and broad series of activities becoming a place for expression of infinite possibilities. (7)

### *The woods*

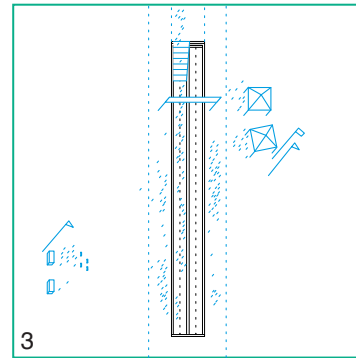
The thick vegetation surrounding it, the meadows, the wetlands, the perennials and the clearings are infused with diffused infrastructures dedicated to public, social, cultural and leisure activities. (7, Page 3)



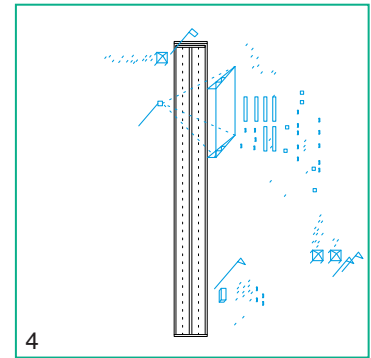
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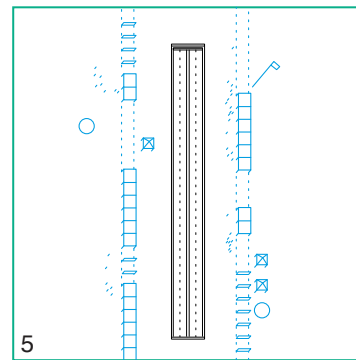
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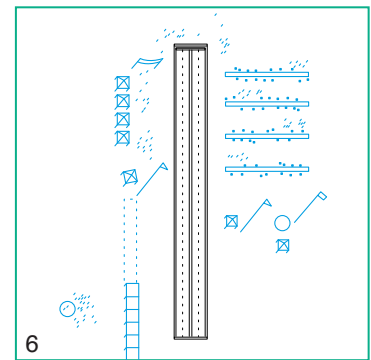
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8

- 1 Daily habitation
- 2 Concert
- 3 20km Brussels (tunnel version)
- 4 Cinema
- 5 Towards New Worlds exhibition
- 6 Collective picnic
- 7 The clearing
- 8 The soft border (passerelle)



## Framed ecology

The proposal aims for diffuse conditions in order to achieve a rich ecosystem manifested in a series of diverse landscapes, contributing not only to the urban climate but to make tangible the environmental forces. Following a broader meaning of ecology where difference and complexity are welcomed as fundamental principles to create atmospheres for human and non-human interactions, the approach escapes imaginaries of dichotomous notions of natural and artificial. The landscape is interwoven with the built environment and a process of infiltration of both the park with the program and the city with the park takes place.

The design focuses on revealing potentials of an ever-changing landscape, the appreciation of valuable compositions of plants, bacteria, fungi and animals instead of fixed functions and human-centred aesthetics. Moreover, a focus to the local conditions is established by working with spontaneous ecologies and zero maintenance areas. This requires the translation of sometimes invisible ecological processes into a cultural language so that it can establish a tangible connection to people's everyday lives by placing unfamiliar forms (such as brambles or mounds of dead wood) inside a familiar space. The conversion to a more diverse park complies with the recent *EU Nature Restoration Law*, calling for the rewilding of urban ecosystems. By going beyond the typology of a 19th century's urban park as a representation of power relations, domination and imitation of nature, the interventions are focused on providing a frame for making use of and making visible the existing material and energy flows.

In order to achieve a variety of ecosystems - including meadows, woodlands, shrubs and wetland habitats - a series of interventions of a structural nature and care are implemented:

- Non-mowing and unsealing of the soil through removal of pavements and turning over of the upper soil layers in areas of the park to allow the emergence of meadows. These are composed of a diverse mix of native wildflowers, grasses, and plants that improve air quality, enhance water infiltration, contribute to heat stress resistance and offer nesting sites.
- Collecting all surface runoff water from the existing roofs and using the *passerelle* as a collector to divert all precipitation to the park instead of the sewage system.
- Establishing a water collection system with reservoirs (tanks and basins) to compensate for the shift towards drier periods and intense rainfall events.
- Excavation of dips to create gradients and to dedicate space to water. This takes the form of wetlands and of a natural swimming pool maintained through the use of phyto-filtrating aquatic plants.
- Treating parts of the park as a spontaneous botanical garden where the evolving vegetation and fauna is studied, identified and taught.
- Providing pollinators, including moths, wild bees and butterflies with shelters. From the very initial phase of the transformation their action is crucial and needs to be supported.

All these evolving and interwoven landscapes are perforated by main yet silent paths connecting the passerelle to the clearing. These cross a series of platforms and structures creating a gradient of proximity and more remote and undisturbed areas guided by a reciprocal respect between the processes of nature and the human presence.

## Learning Landscape

The act of learning/teaching is perceived as an interactive process where the exchange of knowledge and know-how becomes central aspect in a reciprocal and equal relationship between groups, individuals and institutions.

This process of co-learning finds its way through the vegetation of Parc du Cinquanteaire: the areas surrounding the clearing are welcoming a series of platforms and plateaus to host discussions and workshops, lectures and practical activities. This space becomes a fundamental part of the city's cultural scene, a learning landscape seen as an extension of the city's museum-scape able to link the existing cultural institutions to the fertile ground that hosts them.

Underneath the trees, the *Museum of Military History* and the *Museum of Art and History* escape their rooms and archives and establish a new tangible connection with the city and the community. Even before and during the renovation works planned for their near future, a new typology of cultural space can start to arise. In this way, their social relevance is enhanced thanks to a direct connection to the inhabitants' daily life.

Many themes now crucial in the public cultural discourse become visible through the design of the park and encourage a process of tangible and concrete learning:

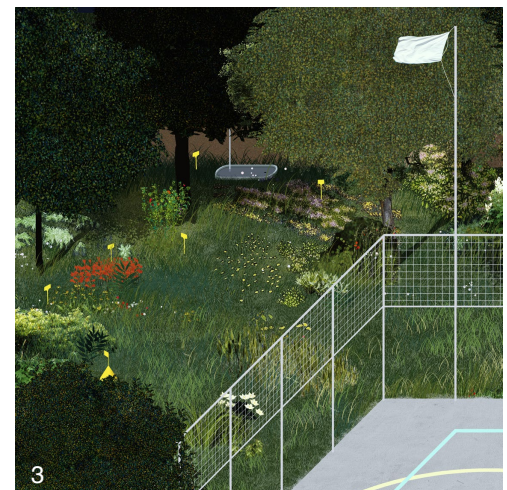
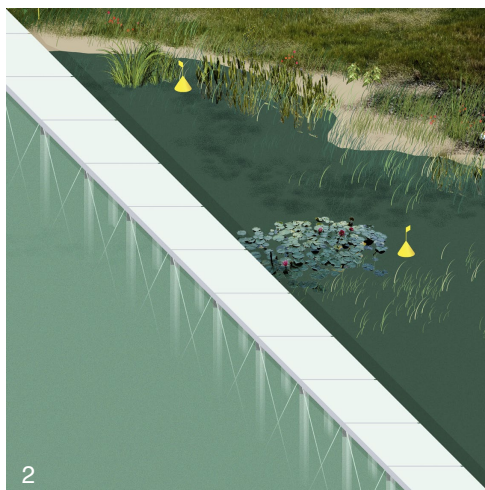
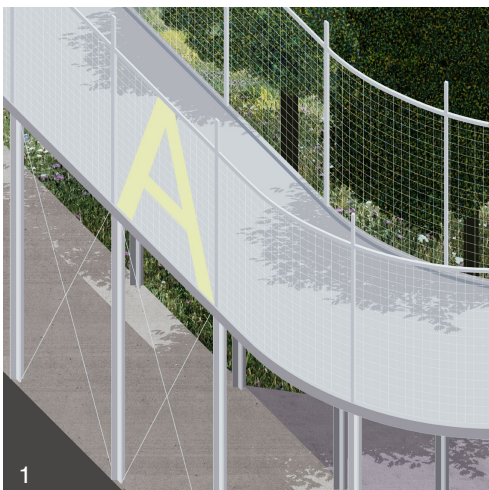
In a process of reciprocal influence between the park's environment and local cultural and social communities, a series of event-centred activities and debates will make use of the pavilions and platforms present in the park and its surroundings. These polyvalent and diverse spaces will host collective activities, moments of contemplation and debates that will kick-start a process of unlearning and questioning the 'common knowledge' to better understand some of the main global and local aspects that influence the contemporary public discourse

The meadows and wild vegetation transform the park (and the city as a whole) into a spontaneous botanical garden in which local species are recognised and labelled with highly visible info signs, allowing an organic process of learning about the ecology we live in (and interact with) to take place. This peculiar variation of the common botanical garden type is – in its simplicity - specifically addressing crucial themes recurrent in our proposal: biodiversity, decolonisation and inclusivity in the process of learning.

The water management system of the park, with its water collectors, pipes, basins and wetlands enriching the local flora and fauna, showcase how environmental facts are shaping everyday life.

Proximity to natural landscapes offers a unique opportunity to grasp circularity beyond mere use, reuse, and waste repurposing, understanding it in its complex sense. In ecologies, circularity is a vital component of their functioning. By observing the ecological processes of the park, users gain a deeper comprehension of circularity.

- 1 The passerelle
- 2 The pool and its phyto filtrating border
- 3 The woods

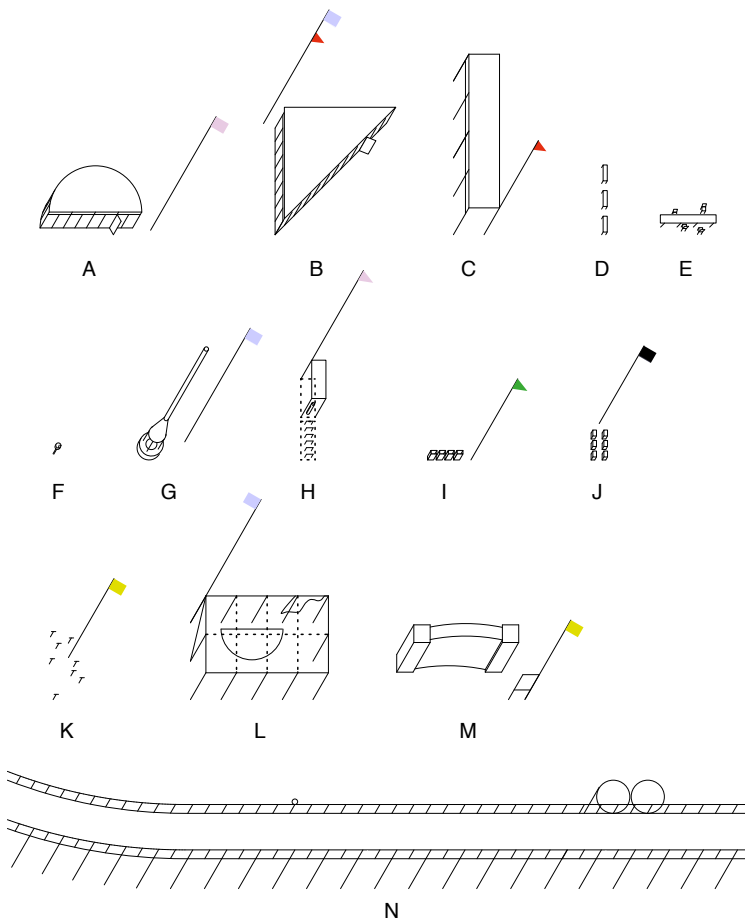




### Daily Camping

The multi-scale and layered transformation strategy that we propose finds its condensation in the conception of *Daily Camping*. Despite the site's heritage, symbolism and relevance for high-level events and its cultural and political role at a national and European level, the park remains deeply linked to its everyday use and to the daily life of its inhabitants. We strongly believe that in these days to day practices the park finds its identity as a condenser and a junction for the people, connecting their domestic life, work and the public sphere. *Daily Camping* refers to the necessity to enable people to inhabit and adjust their immediate environment to create a sense of belonging. Only here sometimes abstract concepts and invisible processes can find a tangible translation.

We propose to provide a framework to contribute to the urgent transformation towards a society of social and environmental sustainability. Entering the park, four *Daily Camping* stations can be found in the proximity of the *passerelle*. Here, a small catalogue of extremely ordinary objects is offered to support leisure activities and spontaneous appropriation: a chair, a pliable table, a sun umbrella, sport equipment and games, hammocks and reusable cutlery. A small range of tools able to generate a great impact on equality and accessibility of the public space: no matter if they are joining friends straight from the office, if they forgot their ball or if they just don't own it, passing by one of the stations will give everyone the same possibilities. Linked to a digital platform, it is possible to check the availability of the desired item or if someone already lent the equipment and left the game 'open' for others to join. These small immensities can reduce waste and facilitate access for underprivileged individuals and groups. But more importantly, a culture of sharing can emerge apart from platform capitalism, where the environment is understood as a collective resource.



- A Daily Camping storage
- B Changing rooms + toilets +
- C Lockers
- D Benches
- E Tables
- F Drinkable water fountain
- G Pizza oven
- H Bicycle + charging station
- I Recycling station
- J Shelter for pollinators
- K Spontaneous botanical garden
- L Counter-tables
- M Contextualised heritage
- N Passerelle

1 Framed ecologies  
 2 Garden of the Righteous

