



# A+ 299

December 2022 – January 2023

Special Edition: Quality Matters



## Opinion

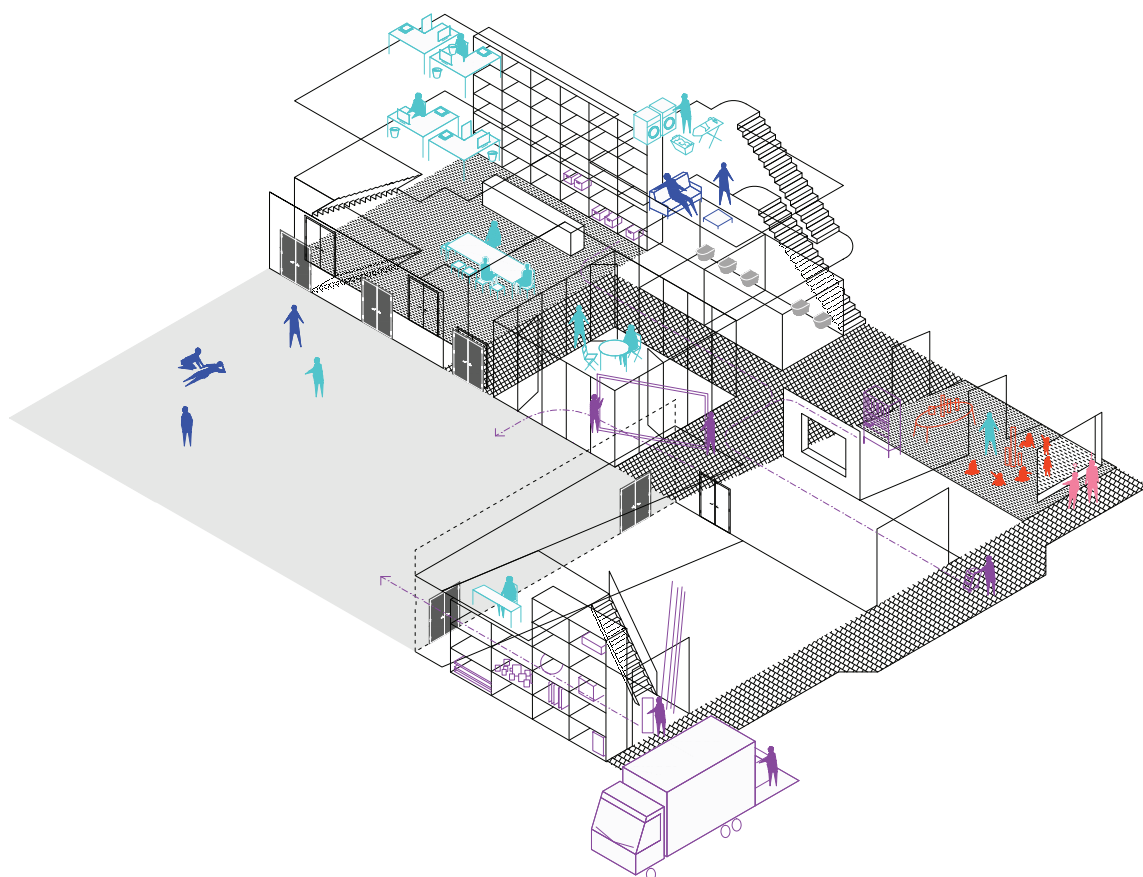
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*Emmanuel van der Beek*





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# Sharp edges, soft power

*Sven Sterken*

The Brussels Northern Quarter is the product of two generations of government-guaranteed property speculation in the 1970s and 1990s (see *A+295*). Today, several important tenants have reached the end of their contracts and the vacancy rate is peaking. In the absence of any long-term vision for the area, eight major real-estate owners founded Up4North in 2016 already, with the aim of forcing a transformation of the area through a co-creation process with local actors. In the meantime, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region sold its share in the central CCN building (a major transit hub next to the Brussels North Station), thus carelessly giving away a key element in the area's regeneration. As a result, the Brussels Government Architect (BMA) had to work hard to safeguard the urban qualities precisely of the future project, leading to one more a posteriori compromise between private and public interests.





By contrast, the transformation of the former neighbouring WTC Towers showed that the BMA can play a more productive role (see A+ 295). Although initially tasked with advising public clients, the BMA assisted the private developer in his search for an architect able to transform the planned monofunctional office tower into a multifunctional complex by means of an open competition. In the meantime, one tower was leased by Lab North (a partnership between Up4North and a number of local cultural actors) to a wide range of tenants from the creative and educational sectors, thus attracting a critical mass that helped to draw attention to the problems and the potential of the area – a combination of thinking and doing *in situ* that led to a lively public debate that planning studies do not normally engender. The BMA played a part in this bottom-up dynamic by organizing, with Perspective (the planning agency of the Brussels-Capital Region) and Lab North, a two-day symposium with foreign experts and a series of workshops with the three municipal administrations involved.

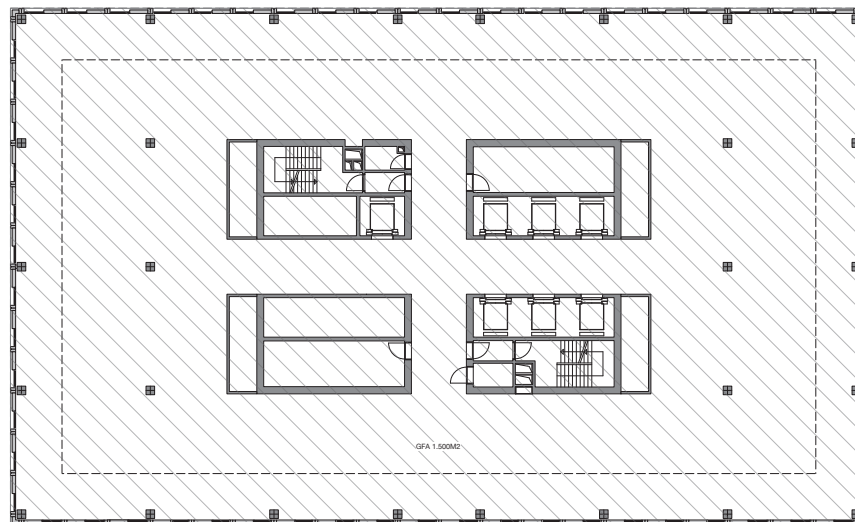
In order to be able to act not merely as a moderator but as a full-fledged active interlocutor with a distinctly personal vision and expertise, a design-research unit had already been set up within the BMA. It formulated ten principles to

boost the urban qualities of the Northern Quarter. One such principle was 'upside down': strengthening the east-west connections in the district (which is now structured almost exclusively north-south). Other principles included enhancing the liveability of the open spaces and activating the plinths of the buildings with smaller shops instead of large single-door shopping arcades. The 'double skyline' concept stated that an office tower may well offer maximum light and visibility for its users but should also entertain a meaningful relation with the street. Furthermore, it was agreed that not every building has to be multifunctional. Rather, a diversity of users and rhythms of use must be achieved at the neighbourhood level. Maximum reuse of existing structures was also recommended as a way to recreate memory after the *tabula rasa* of the 1960s. Lastly, there should be no delay: temporary use could become a first step towards Northern Quarter 3.0.

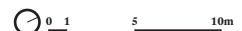
Rather than wait for these principles to be corroborated by official planning studies or policy documents, the BMA smuggled them into the public debate and its behind-the-scenes consultations. This persistence strategy paid off: 33 per cent of housing is now provided in the redevelopment of the two Proximus Towers and it is hoped that future projects →



Project developer  
Immobel and  
architects Neutelings  
Riedijk – Jaspers-Eyers  
are responsible for the  
redevelopment of the  
Proximus Towers  
in Brussels. The glass  
office towers near the  
Brussels-North station  
will house 393 housing  
units and different  
other functions.



Typical T-Tower floor plan



Architect  
Neutelings Riedijk  
Jaspers-Eyers  
Website  
neutelings-riedijk.com  
jaspers-eyers.eu

Project name  
Proximus  
Location  
Brussels

Programme  
Mixed-used project with  
offices (mainly Proximus)  
housing, facilities for  
collective use, a hotel  
and shops)

Procedure  
Real estate operation  
Client  
Immobel  
Budget  
N/a

↳ The overall concept of Zin, a design by 51N4E – Jaspers-Eyers – l'AUC, is a multipurpose tower with office floors, apartments and hotel floors.



Floor 19

Architect  
51N4E – Jaspers-Eyers –  
l'AUC  
Website  
51N4E.com  
laucparis.com  
jaspers-eyers.eu  
Project name  
Zin  
Location  
Brussels

Programme  
Mixed use: apartments,  
offices, hotel, retail,  
sports infrastructure,  
public (green) space  
Client  
Befimmo  
Landscape architect  
Plant en Houtgoed

Structural engineering  
Bureau Greisch  
Services engineering  
VK Engineering  
Building physics  
VS-a (façade)  
Acoustics  
De Fonseca  
Sustainability  
Drees & Sommer

Completion  
2023  
Total floor area  
115,000 m<sup>2</sup>  
Budget  
N/a  
Product/Supplier  
Modulyss (carpets)



may even commit to including 20 per cent of social housing. It is important to note here that the independent position of the BMA enabled it to intervene not only in the selection of the designers but also in the formulation of the assignment, based on the conviction that a good question leads to a better answer. To avoid vague promises, so-called project lines were also drawn up, an 'ambition memorandum' with agreements that is not legally binding but that is made public, thereby cleverly capitalizing on the corporate responsibility of developers.

A new, productive balance seems to be arising here between the dynamics of bottom-up initiatives by citizens or private actors and the longer-term perspective of government top-down planning. Indeed, rather than remedy after the fact, the BMA increasingly succeeds in mediating proactively. Its authority in this type of inclusive governance results from a clever use of soft power within a framework with sharp edges. It shows that more is achieved when people cooperate voluntarily than when they are forced to. While many of the BMA's interventions have so far been the result of coinci-

dences, personal connections and voluntarism, it is now a question of making this position essential. For the above modus operandi is not without risk: the current vision of the Northern Quarter has arisen implicitly from a process- and project-based approach within an ever-changing and often informal constellation of actors. This may prove to be a vulnerable model in times of crisis and is at odds with the inertia of the real-estate development sector. For developers prefer to do what they do well, i.e. realize a large building for one large customer, preferably without too many prying eyes.

However, the fate of the 4th WTC Tower (which never materialized) seems to prove that the sector also understands that this model has had its day: although granted a building permit in 2017 based on offices only, it will now include housing, a rooftop terrace, and cafés and shops at street level. The policy framework, too, is gradually evolving, along with these 'voluntary' commitments: the most recent coalition agreement includes a 'Real-estate charter' between government and developers, and at the beginning of this year the regional and municipal authorities jointly proposed a →

↓  
From July to September 2020, LabNorth installed, together with Plant en Houtgoed, a mobile forest on the sidewalk in front of the WTC4

building. It is an intervention travelling around the Northern Quarter that creates a green space for the neighbourhood.





'shared' vision for the Northern Quarter, symbolic of the idea that it can no longer be 'imposed' by just one official actor. In the meantime, a task force for the 'Northern territory' is also active within SAU/MSI (the Region's Urban Development Corporation), supervising the almost forty public and private projects that are in the pipeline in the area. There is thus a growing awareness that high-quality architecture and a sustainable urban environment create

added value for all stakeholders involved. However, where the latter dimension is concerned, the issue of public space remains open: planning taxes may well generate financial resources for the municipality, but they do not necessarily engender urban quality. Will the soft power of the BMA also be sufficient in this context, where there is much less to be gained? Or will the public sector eventually have to carry the load? ▲ ■ ●



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↗  
Conversation with Innovation Platforms, one of the workshops that took place in the WTCi Tower prior to renovation. (Temporary use with office spaces and the exhibition *You Are Here*, IABR – Architecture Workroom Brussels, 2018.)

→  
North Beach: Pool is Cool converted the large rotunda in the office district into a bathing spot for one day (1 June 2018). This fun-filled form of activism was a way to lament the lack of open-air swimming pools in the Capital of Europe.



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