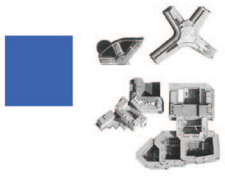
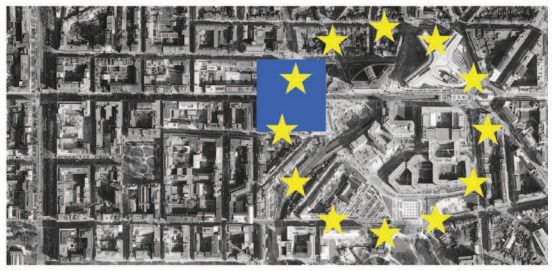




CONCEPT

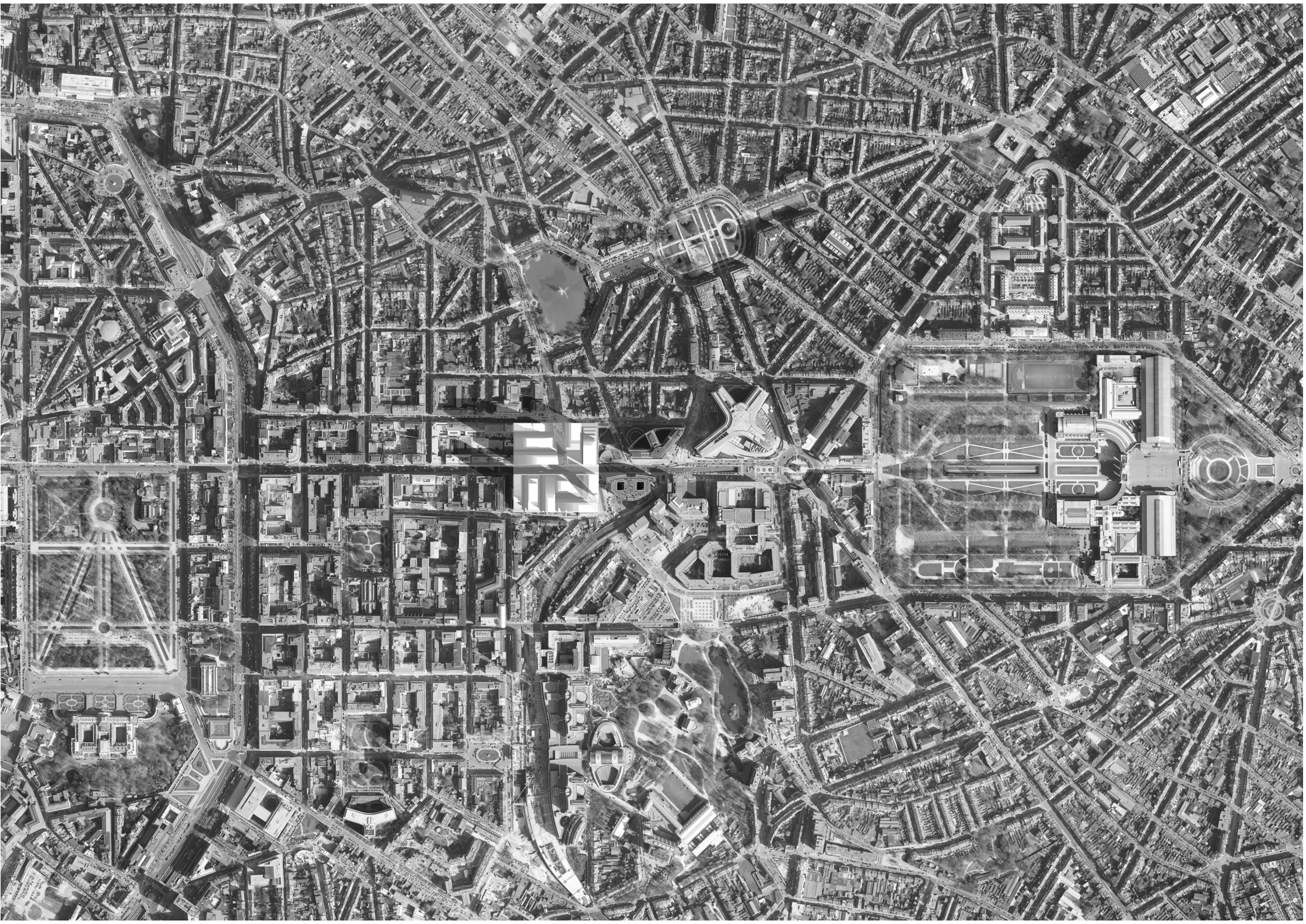
The project proposes to concentrate the whole required program in one unique high density urban block. This block is then cut by two central axis: the Rue de la Loi and the Chaussée d'Etterbeek. Within the proposed plot the latter is re-routed in order redefine its western edge. The square-based project imposes itself as a completely new urban element on the major axis of the Rue de la Loi and Avenue de Tervueren which links the Cinquantenaire to the Royal park. The project allows for a plausible solution to the difficult transition between the 'campus' of the Leopold quarter and the grid around the Rue de la Loi. It imposes itself in section while still integrating seamlessly in the existing urban fabric.

LOCATION

Within the patchwork of urban systems that Brussels is composed of, the neighborhood of the Rue de la Loi proves to be one of the most coherent. The structure of the orthogonal grid (unique in Brussels) is clearly linked to the establishment of the different levels of power in the city and has created a convincing balance between built mass and public space. The ratio between the width of the streets and the height of the buildings, the amount of green squares and parks does not allow for a simple doubling of the existing volumes to meet the demand for surface. Only the overly bureaucratic aspect of the neighborhood has to be questioned.

FORM

The square plot is defined by the orthogonal grid of the existing streets: to the East, through the extension of the Rue de Treves, to the North by the Rue Joseph I, to the South by the Rue Lalaing and finally to the West through the Maelbeek garden and its new extension on the Lex 2000 side.
The buildings are defined by canyons that seem to have been excavated out of a solid block. Strictly speaking, the buildings don't stand on a socle, but since the canyons never reach the ground level, the resulting towers remain connected through a base which allows for circulation from one to the other.



BRUSSELS:
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN XAVEER DE GEYTER AND DOMINIQUE BOUDET

DB: Paris, London, Barcelona, Amsterdam: it is enough to pronounce the name of one of these European metropolises to evoke the fundamental features that distinguish them from each-other. Nevertheless for Brussels; the 'de facto' administrative capital of Europe this is almost impossible. Maybe you can explain where this uncertain, blurred image comes from. What are the fundamental features of the city?

XDG: In brief, I would say that it is a city which consists of opposite districts. There are various poles, partially based on the different communes, partially on the industrial development as well as the political and bureaucratic development. All these factors generate a formally incoherent whole, full of contradictions and with rough oppositions. For my part, I find that it is a formidable quality of Brussels. It is the opposite of Paris; a city which aims at spatial coherence but which appears to me as a finished city with little potential for transformation. While Brussels, by its structure, has an enormous potential for change. Even if there are less interesting districts, like the North station quarter, this patchwork of contrasting zones works rather well and produces a dense urbanity, even if Brussels counts little more than a million inhabitants.

DB: Then Brussels is still a work in progress which allows it to welcome new contemporary urban forms which could simply add to the existing variety?

XDG: Absolutely, there is no urban system which defines the whole city. Because of this collage-like composition, Brussels can be a field of experiments for new urban forms. However two forces go against this evolution: on the one hand, the political decision-makers have an un-ambitious vision of the possible developments, and lack a long-term strategy; on the other hand, Brussels' citizens essentially dislike the city and prefer to live in the suburbs. This is an additional difference with regards to Paris: in Brussels, the elite chooses to live in the suburbs rather than in the center. It is the middle class or the immigrants who come to occupy the centre. The positive side to that phenomenon is that there is a richer diversity in Brussels than in Paris: the collage and the opposition between districts is also translated in the social configuration resulting in a genuine cohabitation of social groups.

DB: Simultaneously there is no sign of the movement which we witness in most other large European cities: the resurgence of an interest for the city centre, its modernization, its embellishment to reveal urban quality.

XDG: It is true that, so far, Brussels, does not participate in the race between cities. I would suggest that this is due to the very complex political situation in which Brussels is locked. While having become the 'de facto' capital of Europe, it is not considered as a region in its own right within the Belgian Federal landscape. On the other hand, inside the city, the decision making process is fragmented over 19 communes which blocks or makes city wide decision making very difficult. This limits Brussels' competitiveness drastically to the degree that it becomes a serious obstacle to its development.

DB: It is necessary to say that the fortune of Brussels is to have become the administrative heart of Europe. Yet it seems content with merely absorbing the populations of European functionaries.

XDG: It is an enormous resource to have become the capital of the Union. The city is geographically very well situated, but this advantage has not really been exploited. After almost 50 years of slow, step by step installation of the new European power, there is still no corresponding urban form. Its installation has been random, or rather ...

DB: Anarchic?

XDG: My impression is that we simply did not know how to house / materialize this new type of power in the city. The problem also resides in the very nature of this power: until today it is a power that has tried to remain rather hidden, even if it exercises a fundamental influence on everyone's daily life. In the course of half a century, this power which at first only concerned industry, was transformed into a political power which tends to decrease national power. This power was not translated into matter. Maybe simply because this type of power did not exist anywhere else and the form of its materialization had yet to be invented.

DB: That is to say that today the European Community is represented and housed by anonymous office buildings?

XDG: Until the 80s the star shaped Berlaymont building served a representational purpose. It was the introductory backdrop image in every television broadcast concerning the European Community. This certainly was not an anonymous building. But this was before its transformation, and more importantly before Europe started suffering from an overly bureaucratic image. But you are right, the European buildings all around it are anonymous and solitary office buildings which aren't anchored in the existing city fabric.

DB: Your proposal came about within the framework of a recent international competition, organised by the Region of Brussels in conjunction with the Commission, and which concerned the development of this district where a large density of offices are currently concentrated. This competition was the first implementation of the program framed by the Master plan of the European District, which we expect to improve the urban integration of the European institutions. Wasn't this integration of the offices of the Commission in an urban vision of the city of Brussels and the grouping and concentrating of its services precisely the opportunity to give the European institutions a material representation?

XDG: On the one hand, the competition aimed at finding a quantitative solution for the needs of the Commission in terms of surfaces (the program required an additional 230 000 m2), on the other hand it aimed at changing the image of the district by making it mixed and injecting 110 000 m2 of housing and 40 000 m2 of commercial functions. Herein lay the first contradiction: while the request was to concentrate an enormous mass of offices on a restricted and already very dense site, the Commission wanted to get rid of its overly bureaucratic image. Furthermore, with regards to the existing buildings, the Commission needed units of much larger floor area to improve its efficiency and synergy. The second contradiction: the site of the competition included the whole 'Rue de la Loi,' but not the nearby square Schumann around which the majority of European buildings are concentrated. In a sense it was necessary to operate on a site where are all levels of political power - national, regional, and European were nestled but in an anonymous way.
It was clear that the introduction of diversity in the district could not, by itself, solve the problem of bureaucratic image of the institutions. We cannot hide such a vast number of square meters in an already very dense site.

DB: You therefore broadened the study area of the competition and tackled the problem of the wider site. What was your analysis of the situation?

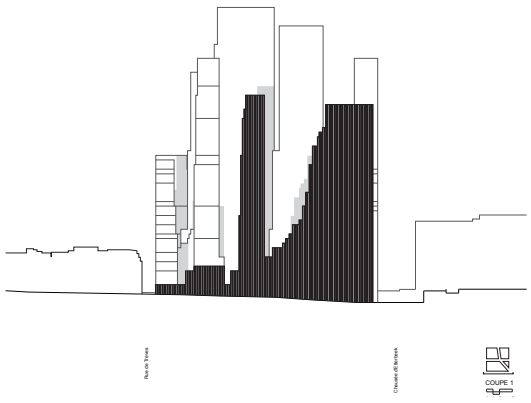
XDG: Firstly we made a very positive reading of the Rue de la Loi. One could say that it is a typically European district. Its structure dates from the 19th century and constitutes a very convincing urban base: an orthogonal grid, well proportioned streets with regard to the height of the surrounding buildings, generally 7 or 8 levels. A dense area punctuated by very attractive public spaces. However two major problems were identified: the congested traffic situation and the mono functionality of the district. After 5 pm the area is empty. This justified the request for functional diversity. We concluded that the district is very coherent in plan and morphology, and that it should not be densified and that the existing relation between built and void is a quality that should be maintained.
Our proposition therefore consisted of preserving the existing buildings by transforming some into housing and by providing stores or services at grade. Concerning the adjacent district, where buildings are isolated, it proved interesting to insert them in a kind of big park by transforming the available public space into a campus and by merging the latter with the existing nearby parks. Between these two contrasting territories, the dense district on one side, the green campus of the other, we proposed a radically new object at the crossing of the Rue de la Loi axis and the axis of the Chaussée d'Etterbeek. The grade level would then be populated by four islands of new office lobbies, the large congress center, housing and stores.
The whole program is contained in a compact urban shape, an enormous crystal, composed by a series of high-rise buildings which work together. Seen from the Rue de la Loi side, the shape is perfectly integrated in the orthogonal grid. Seen from the other side the building puts one foot in the campus. Car traffic in the the Rue de la Loi disappears in a tunnel and the street's former grade level is reorganized for slow circulation.

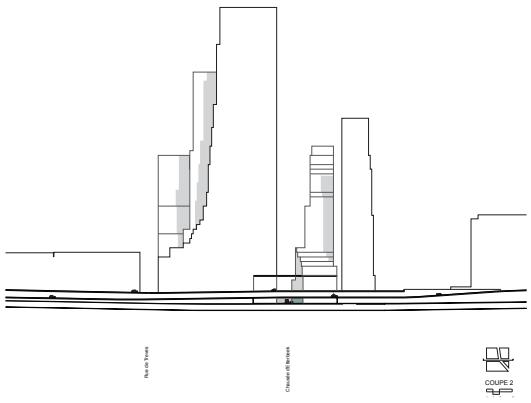
DB: In summary: a large, metropolitan, dense, varied urban square, making the junction between a classic district and a park. A proposition which answers the ambitions of the competition, but which once again was rejected.

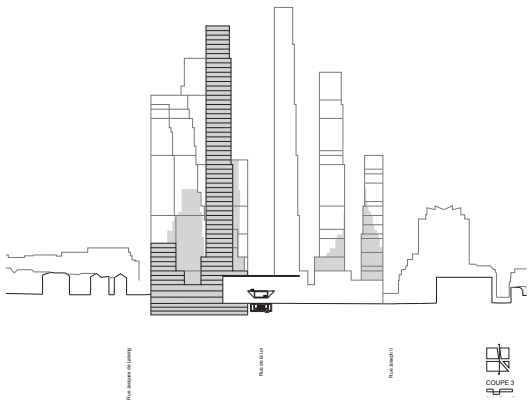
XDG: The inheritance from the 60s to the 80s probably played a major role. The general public sees current large scale projects as a repetition of the trauma associated, for example, with the North district: the destruction of a whole portion of 19th century city fabric to accommodate a context-less project. Obviously politicians follow this vision. So the jury in charge of the competition resisted modernity out of references which date 30 or 40 years when there was no place for liveliness or mixity. They failed to realize that the proposals we make today are in no way the same: they are really based on what exists and try to densify, to improve or to re-interpret the existing without inexorably destroying the city.

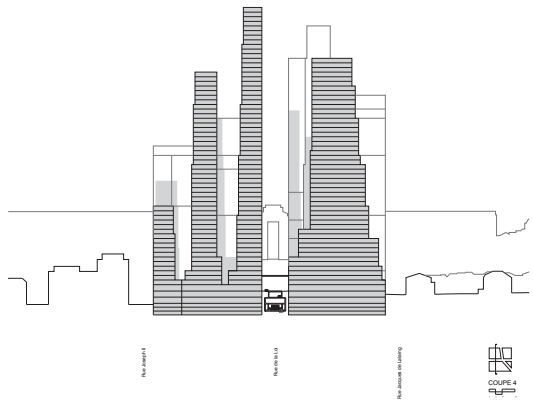
DB: Nevertheless, in this proposition, diversity was assured. The anxiety of the decision-makers is all the more regrettable as this project demonstrates what contemporary town planning can produce: correct the errors of the past and enrich the urban heritage of the city.

XDG: I believe our project is an enrichment of the existing structure of Brussels. Simply by adding an urban element which becomes integrated perfectly into the main Rue de la Loi axis and which shows Europe very clearly in the city. Our answer, while solving the problems of lack of diversity, preserves an existing district and proposes to strengthen it. Its most fundamental quality is that it has the potential to rectify 50 years of lack town planning in one go.

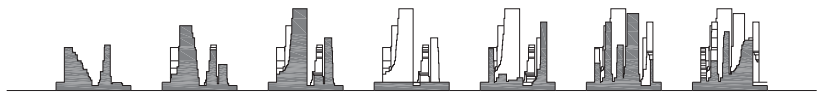








PROFILES RUE DE LA LOI

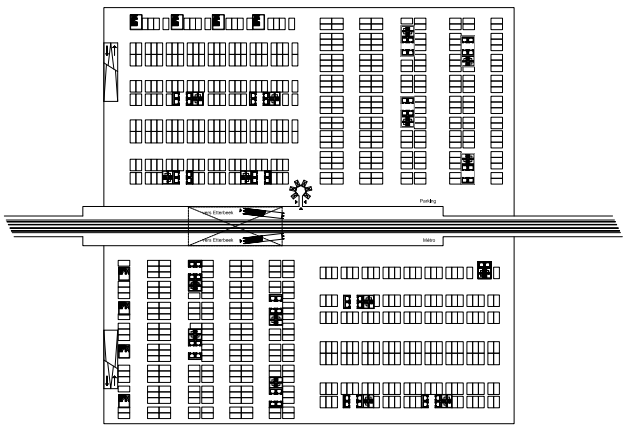


PROFILES CHAUSSEE D'ETTERBEEK

VIEW FROM CINQUANTENAIRE

ACCESSIBILITY

The chosen plot is located at the meeting of the different traffic infrastructures. The central square acts as hub that locates the Maelbeek subway station entrance at a minimal distance from the Schumann and Luxembourg railway stations, allowing for a clear interface between transportation modes.
With this location, the project proposes to integrate a new tunnel under the existing Rue de la Loi in a space that, today, is occupied by underground parking, thus allowing for the existing Rue de la Loi deck level to become dedicated to pedestrians, bicycles and slow car traffic.



PROGRAMME

PLAN NIV STATION MAALBEEK

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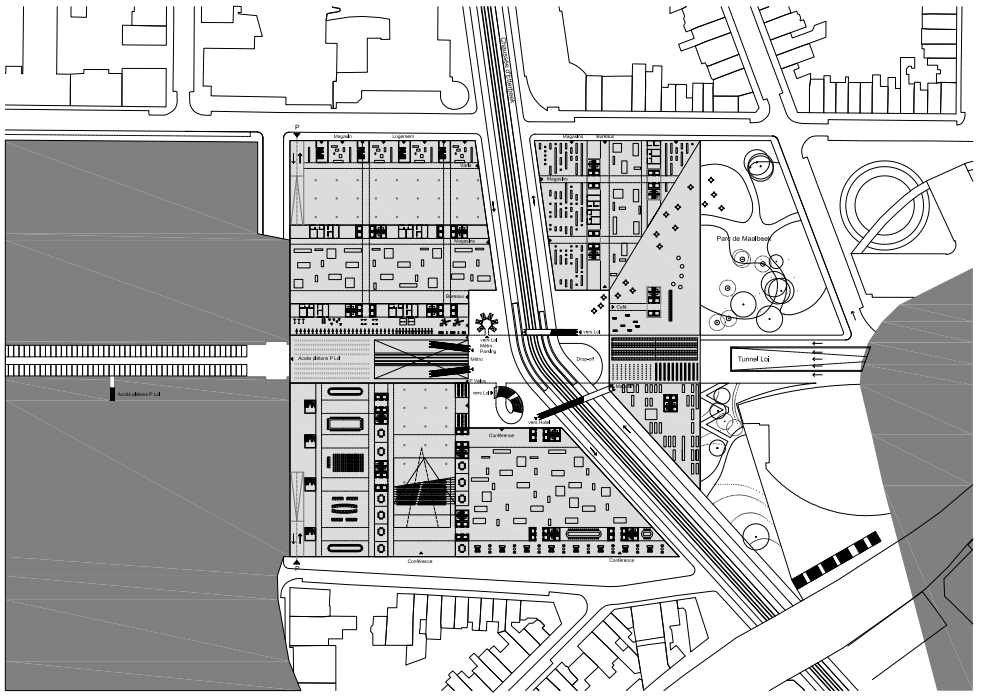

PROGRAMME

PLAN NIV CHAUSSEE D'ETTERBEEK

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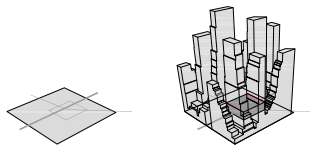
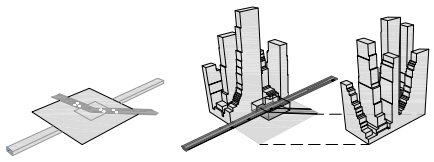


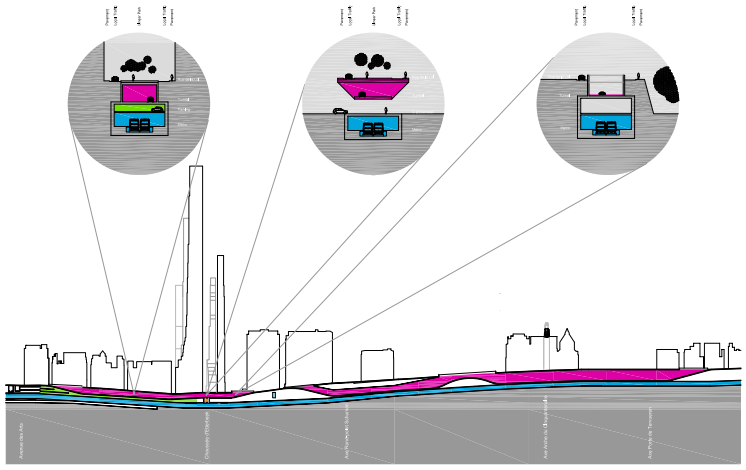
SQUARE

The central knot of the project is generated by the crossing of the two main streets. Here, a three dimensional space is carved out of the feet of the towers and crossed by the hovering tunnel of the Rue de la Loi. Covered by a floating transparent roof, this space links the two public levels and emphasizes the currently invisible subway station entrance.
This space is activated by a concentration of entrances and different programs.



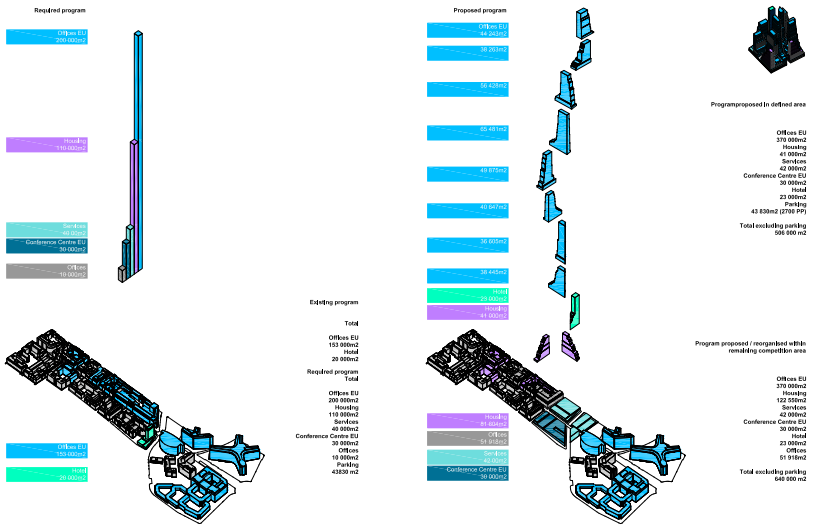
CHAUSSÉE D'ETERBEEK

The project proposes to reestablish a mixed residential and commercial program on the edges of the Chaussée d'Etterbeek; a version of metropolitan liveliness. The planned hotel will also contribute to enhance this aspect. The street itself will accommodate a tram line framed by two rows of trees and large sidewalks.



RUE DE LA LOI

The insertion of a new tunnel that also connects to underground parking under the Rue de la Loi allows the grade level to be dedicated to slow traffic and a new linear park in the middle of this previously saturated artery. Each side of the park provides one car lane, one cyclist path and one pedestrian sidewalk, which allows to re-establish traffic in both directions and thereby recover the perspective of the Cinquantenaire that was thus far lost in our rearview mirrors. The conversion of existing EU buildings to residential and commercial functions will improve the atmosphere of the street.



PROGRAMS

In addition to the office program, the project proposes to house two residential buildings, a hotel, a retail program that connects at both street levels and finally a 30.000 square metre conference center also accessible from grade, which will allow for a lively and constant use of the square. The different grade levels are populated by office lobbies, residential entrances, storefronts and the congress center. The facades of the Chaussée d'Etterbeek are mainly commercial and residential while the Rue de la Loi façades remain mainly administrative. While, in terms of surfaces, the program remains mainly focused on the institutional and office functions, the base levels will provide the experience of a completely mixed urbanity.

PHASING

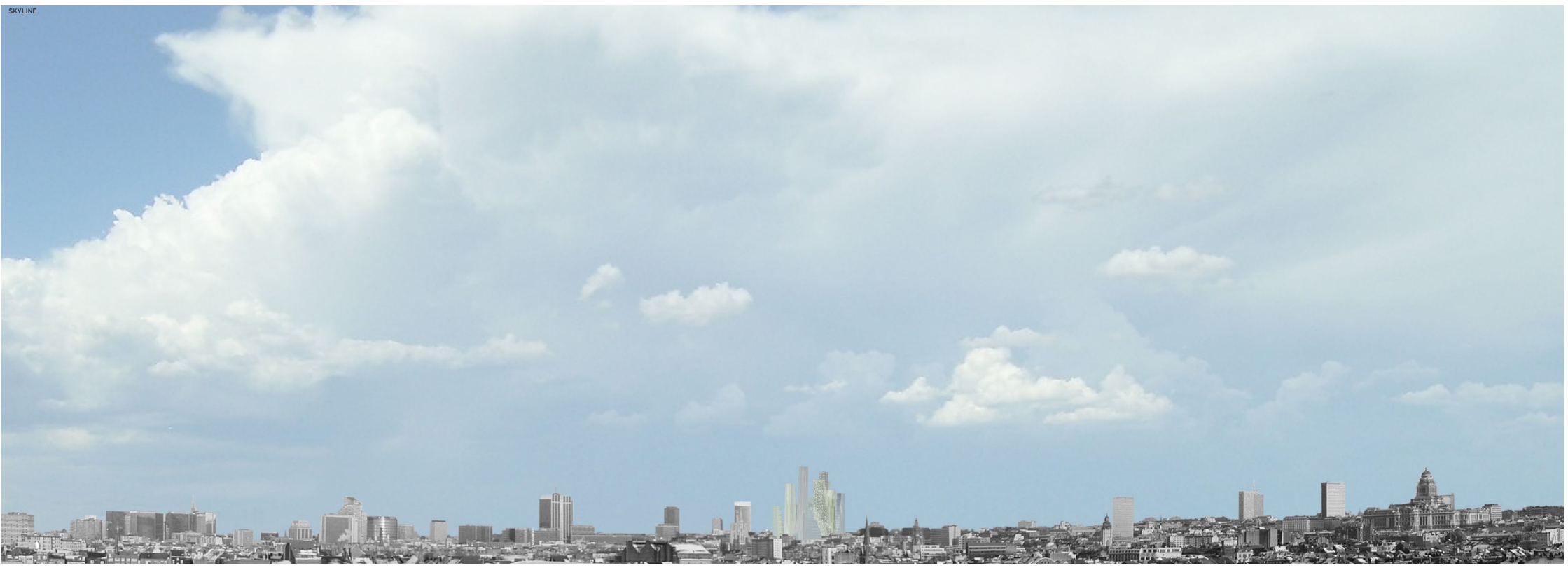
In opposition to the redevelopment of the entire competition site, the extremely concentrated size of the chosen plots allows for rapid and plausible development. Development on those sites that already belong to the European institutions will start first. The re-routing of the Chausee d'Etterbeek and the infrastructure works below the Rue de la Loi as well as the re-organization of the metro station can happen simultaneously. The availability of the plots on the East side of the project allows for flexibility in the phasing.

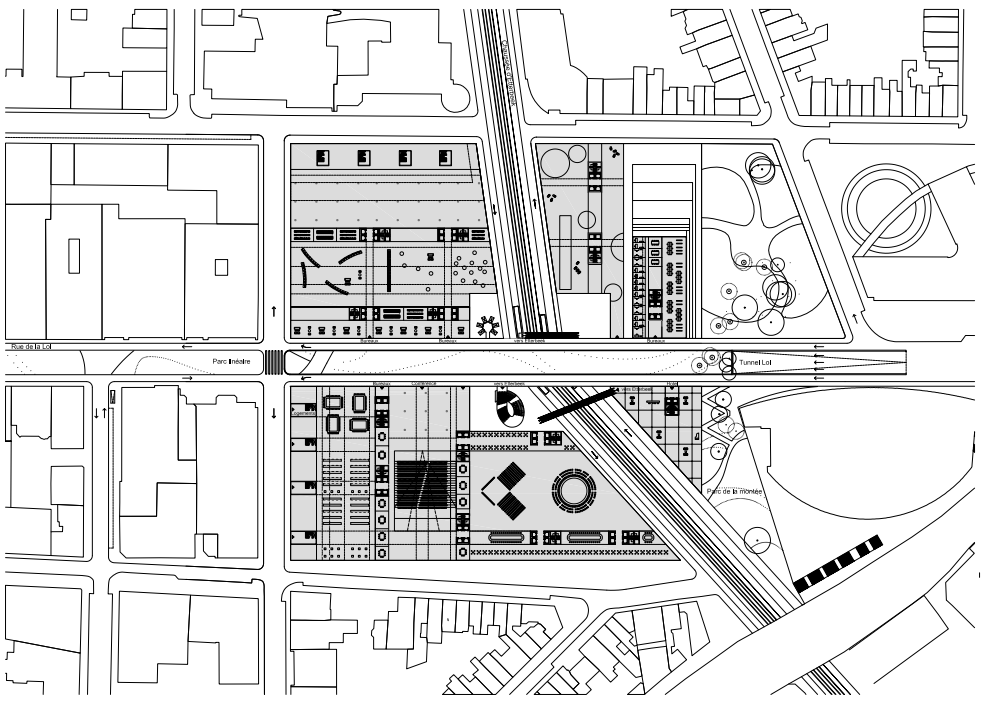
VIEW FROM SQUARE AMBIORIX

VIEW FROM TUNNEL LOI

VIEW FROM RUE DE LA LOI

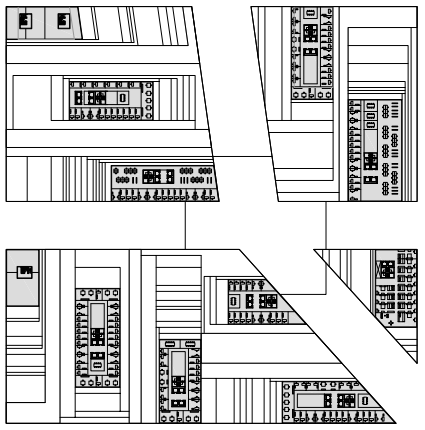
SKYLINE





DURABILITY

The project's density and location strategy allows to house a massive amount of office functions in direct proximity with public transportation and thereby attenuates the temptation of car usage. In comparison to a strategy that would spread the program over the whole Rue de la Loi territory, this proposal allows to reduce the amount of destruction / reconstruction and its inevitably massive ecological footprint. Finally, the offices left vacant by the institutions when they integrate the new project will be converted to housing with minimal consequences in terms of the environment. The buildings themselves will integrate all the latest techniques to render them energy effective and environment friendly.



PROGRAMME
PLAN NIV RUE DE LA LOI
0 5 10 20

PROGRAMME
PLAN NIV + 60m
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