

# The commons of Brussels



# The commons of Brussels

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# Relevance

*‘It’s about being part of a community.’*

The city of Brussels has a rich history of diversity with nineteen municipalities, over 180 nationalities and more than hundred spoken languages. (Manzano, 2021) This striking cultural diversity became apparent in our first visit to the city. Schaerbeek is a noticeable example of this multi-culturalism. When walking through the municipality, cultures and people changed on every street. Every street has its own unique characteristics.

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## ***Friche***

Noun

A fallow land *(Cambridge dictionary, n.d.)*

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The journey through Brussels with our guides generated my curiosity in the typology of commons. The visit to the friche, a wasteland in the middle of the city where a small group of people are striving to preserve the area as it is, generated even more excitement about this wasteland and the concept of a commons. Upon return from Brussels, the fascination with commons remained. This led to further exploration into ‘commons’ and the associated way of life.

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## ***Commons***

Noun

Land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community. (*Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.*)

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An ideology could be the most fitting way of describing a commons. A commons refers to the individuals living within a community and the rules they establish. The concept of commons encompasses the community itself, the established protocols, and values within it. The collective actions in sharing the usage and responsibility of their own environment are referred to as ‘commoning.’

Commons cannot exist without ‘commoners’ (the inhabitants) or ‘commoning’ (the established rules and adhering to these rules). As a result, commons are more than the mere combination of their components and can be viewed as a constant evolving entity. (Bezboroa, 2020)

Brussels is at the forefront of alternative housing in Belgium. Due to the intricate governing of Brussels, more is possible than in Flanders or Wallonia. A local example from a recent news article shows the situation of couples who collectively purchased, refurbished, and reimaged a building. If these people would have bought existing homes, it would have cost the same. However, now they had the chance to rethink their way of living.

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## ***Co-living***

Noun

The practice of living with other people in a group of homes that includes shared facilities. (areas, rooms, equipment of services for particular activities) (*Cambridge dictionary, n.d.*)

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02 | Trulli, Puglia | Italy



03 | Royal Saltworks, Arc-et-Senans | France

These couples decided to start sharing appliances and items, instead of owning all of them. This is what is known as the sharing economy. This concept centers around the need of ownership regarding household items, products, etc. Do people need to own everything they use? Can people share items they won't use every single day or week? In commons it is a normality of sharing products or items in the community. How could this concept be integrated into a possible modern common? The question could be asked, what is a modern common? (*Woningnood scherpt creativiteit aan: "Brussel is pionier in alternatieve woonvormen", 2023*)

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## ***Sharing economy***

Noun

an economic system that is based on people sharing possessions and services, either for free or for payment, usually using the internet to organize this. (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.)

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Our changing way of living is a multi-faced problem: demographics are changing with more older people than ever before; we are in the middle of a housing crisis and our way of living is changing as well. More people are living alone for example, which means we need different types of dwelling. All these individual housing issues results into a need for new collective solutions. These solutions should not only include the social aspect of a neighbourhood, but could also include food, water, energy production and the connection to nature.

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## ***Self-sustainable***

Adjective

Able to continue to exist without help from anyone or anything else. (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.)

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04 | Le Grand-Hornu, Hornu | Belgium



05 | Kalkbreite cooperative, Zurich | Switzerland

*Here lies the chance to reimagine the way we live, the chance to create a community which could be the example of how we could live together in the future.*

*This results in the overarching question:*

***How can a contemporary common be defined and effectively implemented on a neighbourhood scale on the Friche Josaphat site in Brussels?***

# Outline

## The Neighbourhood

Commons operate on multiple levels. In history many iterations of commons have existed on larger and smaller scales. To explore what a modern common could be like the research should be conducted on multiple scales as well.

On a larger scale, the history of commons will be researched. From the first settlements, which were autarkic and completely self-sufficient, to the industrial-era housing projects which were built by employers for employees and on company owned land. These extremes could be of help in exploring the possibilities of a new common. This research will focus on the inner working of historic commons in many different time frames, comparing them and extracting the positives and negatives of each given common.

*How did historic commons function and which features can be implemented in a modern commons?*

The following are examples of what this research can include:

- Which amenities were shared in historic commons, could that work in a modern common as well?
- Which public functions does a neighbourhood need? And can they be run by the inhabitants?
- How can social interaction be encouraged?
- Is (partial) self-sustainability possible?
- Which (age) groups could live in the neighbourhood?





06 | Brussels, Evere and Schaerbeek

# Outline

## The building

Another theme to be explored is how we will live together. In the modern era, smaller co-living and co-habitation projects have come to existence. These projects are focused on the building level. Which forms of co-living exist. Some examples could be LivingTown in Zurich, Le Lumen in Lausanne or the Co-living Frilingue organisation, all in Switzerland, which is a pioneer in co-living. Communities such as Christiania in Copenhagen, the Trulli in Puglia, the Royal Salt mines of Ledoux could also serve as an example. Multiple other projects will be researched as well.

This research will also examine who is able to live together. In recent years, people are taking their parents in to their homes because it is either impossible to find suitable living spaces or they are too expensive. Another example is couples buying and renovating buildings together to be able to create a living space to their liking.

### *How will people live together in a modern commons?*

The following are examples of what this research can include:

- What could be shared? (Household items for example)
- How can a building improve social interaction?
- What new ways of living are implemented now?

The findings of this research will conclude into a design proposal, although the research will continue further to feed new information and findings during the design stage of the project.





# Methods

The research will involve an extensive exploration into the concept of 'commons' and the historic existence of commons. This will entail a comprehensive literature research and will conclude to the selection of five to ten case studies.

After these case studies are selected, a further in-depth analysis of these will be conducted. The analysis will adapt a comparative approach aimed on gaining insights in all the different commons. To succeed with this, multiple definitions/terms need to be developed to ensure an objective evaluation. For both the building level and the neighbourhood level, different definitions/terms will be created.

The comparative research will serve as the foundation for the study to a new common on the friche. How this will be done has to be discussed in a later stage.

Furthermore, if the circumstance arises and the research would demand it, fieldwork could be included. The fieldwork may involve visiting some of the case studies, if possible, to gather information and insights.

# Design proposal

As of writing this research plan, I don't have a clear plan of what I will be designing. The result of the research could conclude into a greater plan of how a new common would work. This could be in the form of a masterplan, with me taking on a different role than just an architect. Although this will be defined later in the process. This could take shape in a booklet which in a visual way explain how this new district will function. Although I do recognize this could be a stretch too far.

The part for the research which will be conducted in during the P2 phase will grant me the information which is needed for the design proposal. Clearly the research will guide me into the direction of dwellings or a public building which will be situated in the Friche. As of now I do not know the scale of the neighbourhood and which possibilities will be present after the research.

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