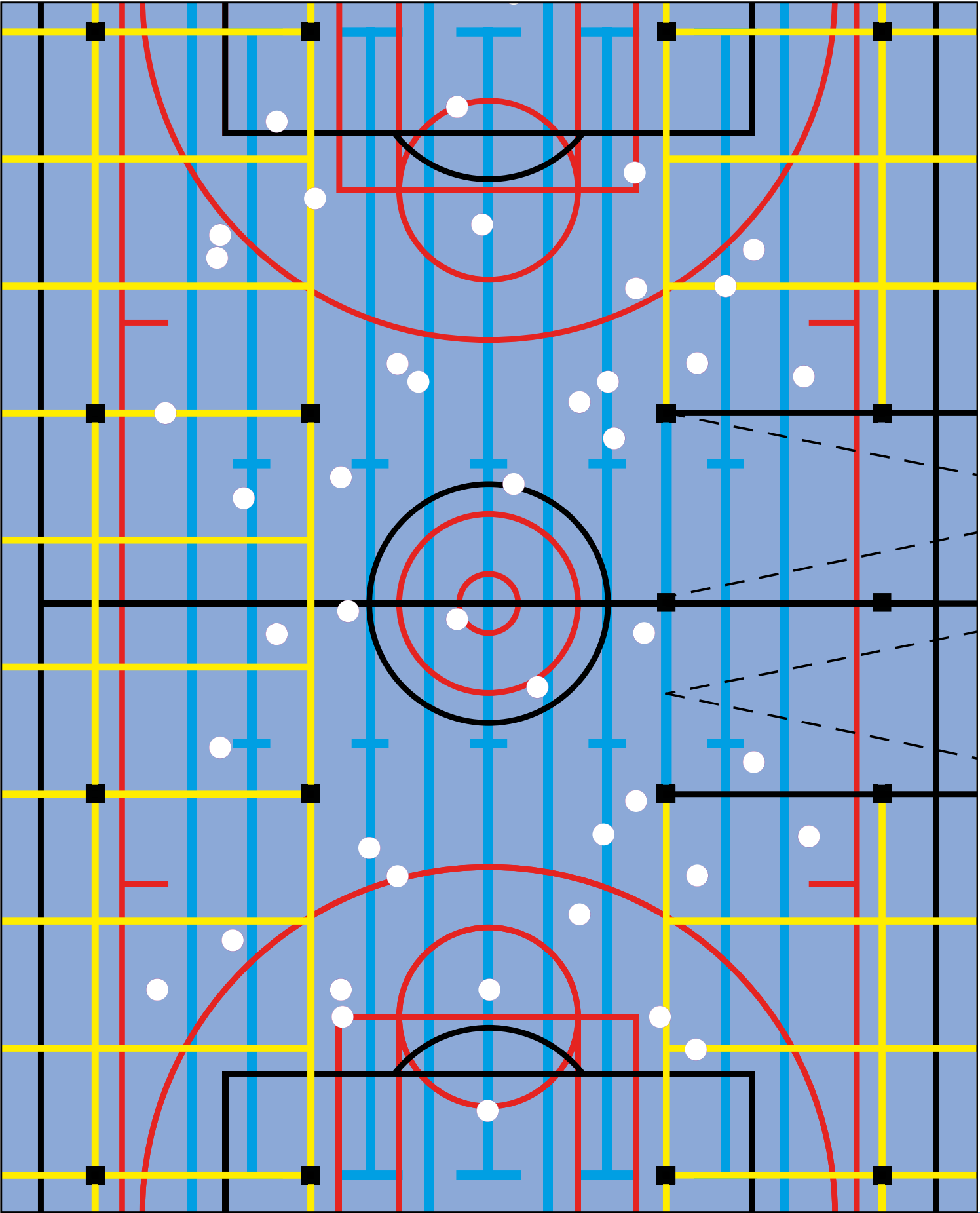


IN SEARCH OF
HEYVAERT'S IDENTITY

BRIEF



“Identity is hence anything but static,
and [the architectural goal] is not about
preserving identity but about
strengthening it.”

— Office Winhov (2024)

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An average person from the streets of Brussels would not know where Heyvaert is, yet thousands of kilometres away, in places like Niger or Guinea or Togo (Casabella & Bouillot, 2018), the name is instantly recognised, not for its architecture or landmarks, but for the object that stands at the centre of its economy: the car.

The present identity of Heyvaert is inseparable from this object. The streets, facades, and garages all reveal the car's physical imprint. For almost 50 years, the second-hand car trade has influenced not only the economy of Heyvaert but also the social and spatial dimensions of the urban environment (Casabella & Bouillot, 2018). The actor network of people, objects and practices ties Brussels to Sub-Saharan Africa through a steady flow of vehicles deemed obsolete in Europe but given a second life elsewhere (Vandecandelaere, 2021).

Given the network of dependencies that the car creates in this area, the question is what would happen to the communities, practices and the space if the car disappeared from the neighbourhood's landscape, and what is more, what then would be Heyvaert's identity without the car at the centre of it?

STUDIO: CAR LEGACY (PRESENT IDENTITY)

Cars in the neighbourhood serve function not only as traded products, but more importantly as temporary residents, often standing in storage garages, occupying parking spaces, and waiting to be sold and sent out to west Africa.



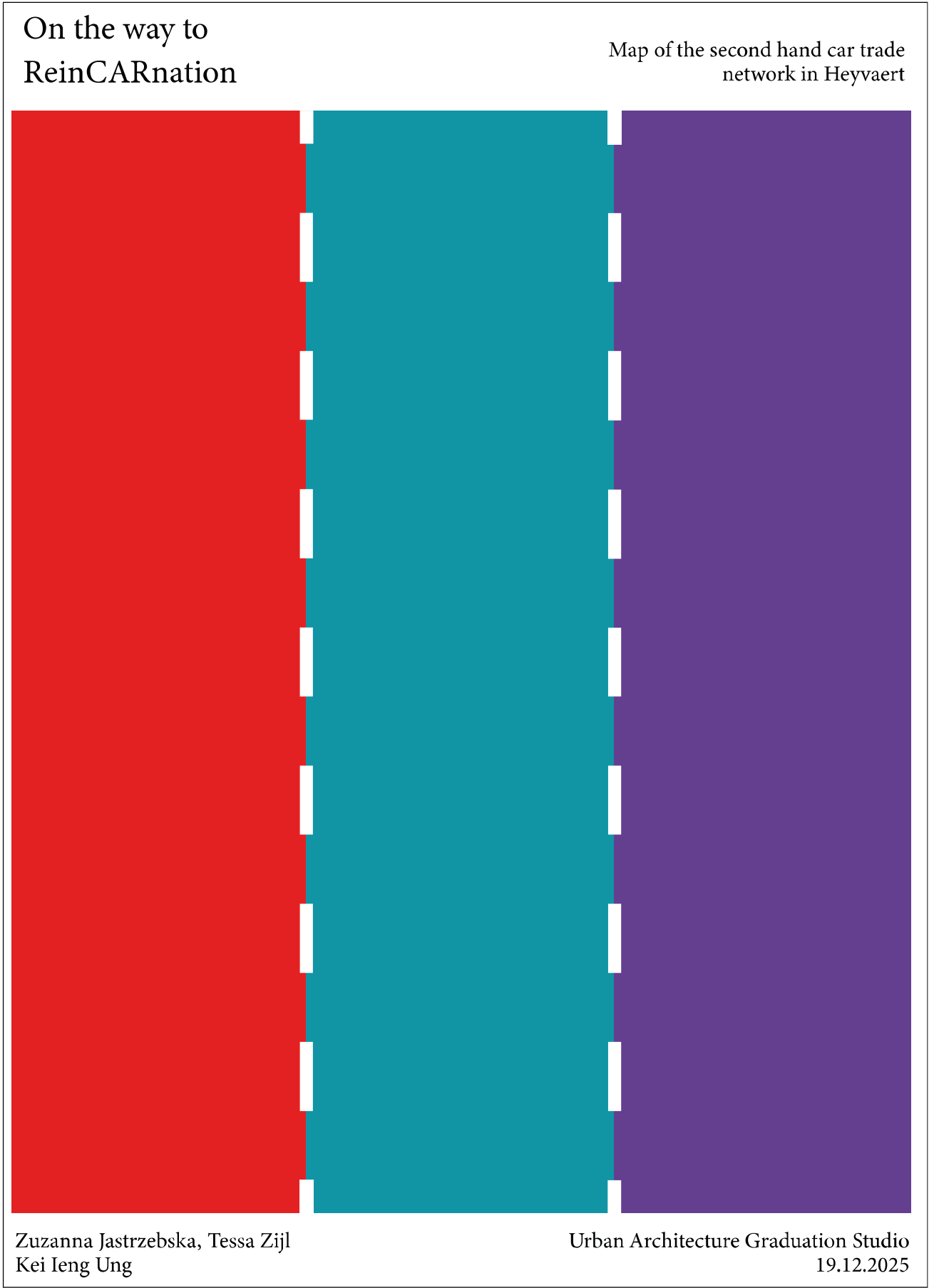
BRIEF: STUDIO

Heyvaert is located almost at the heart of Brussels, on the western edge of the city's historic Pentagon. Despite its central location, this relatively small neighbourhood is largely dedicated to the second-hand car trade, with nearly one in every three buildings occupied by activities related to the car trade industry.

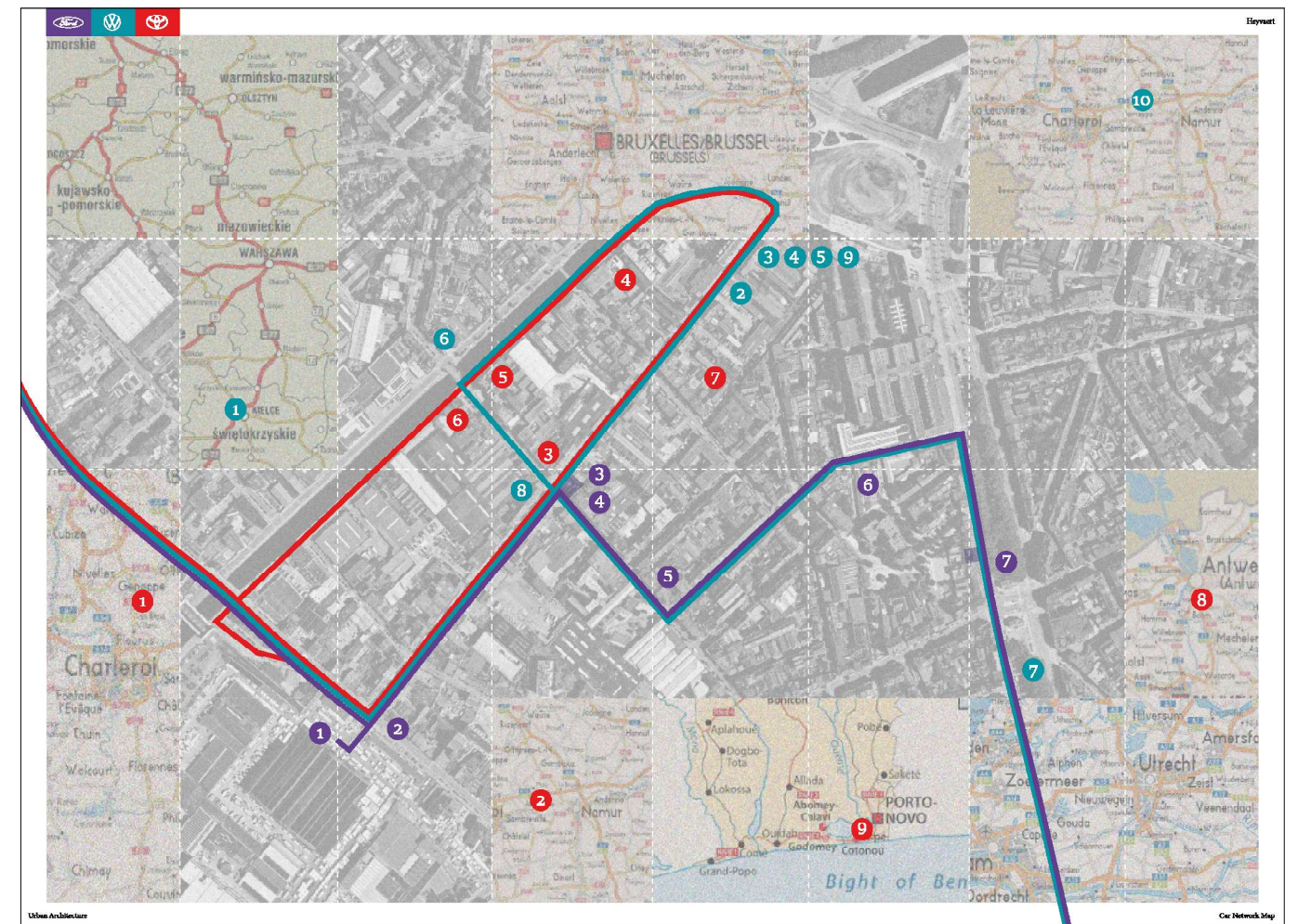
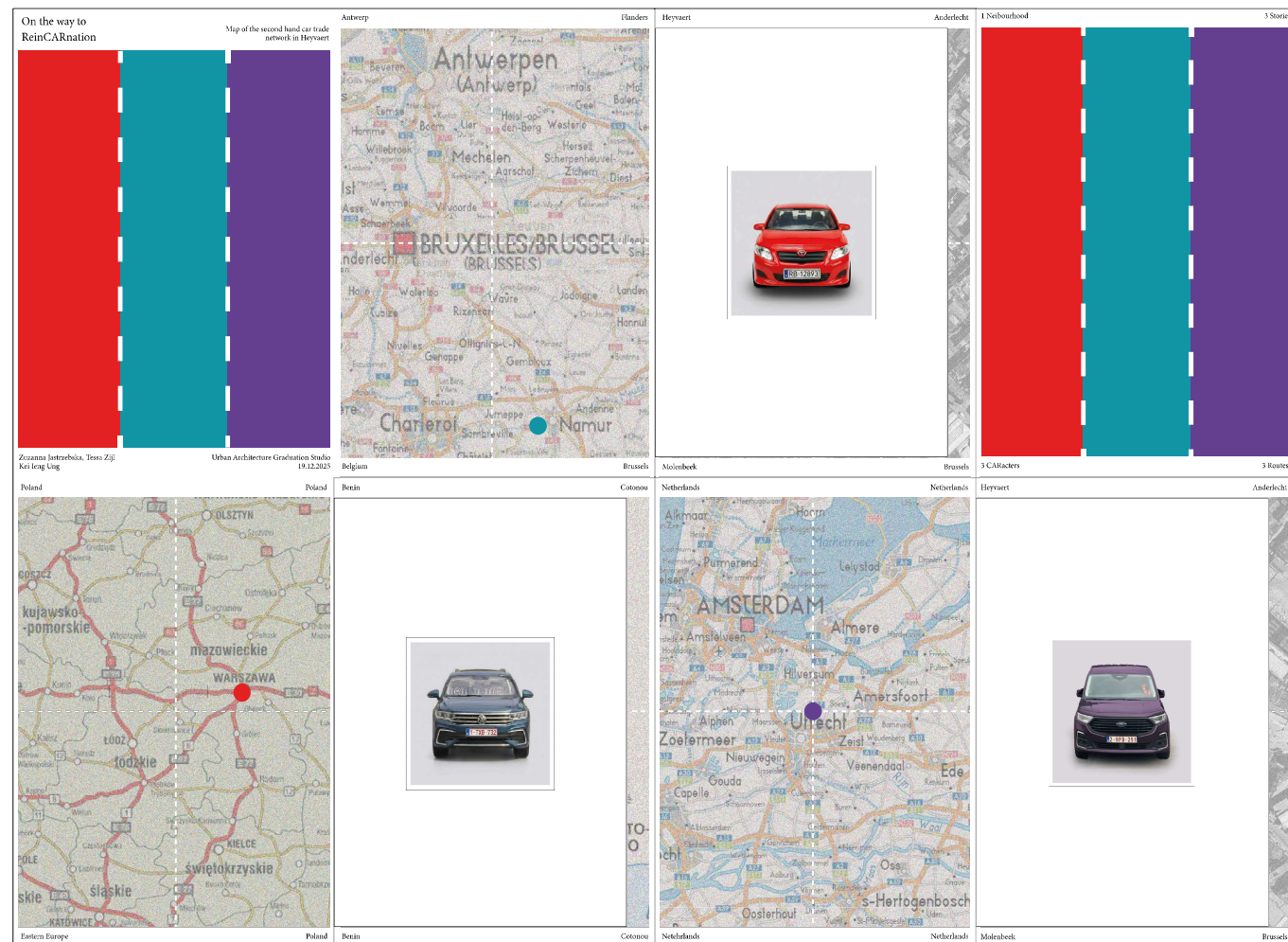


Such a concentration of car-related commerce is highly unusual in a contemporary urban context. Over recent decades, automotive industries and trade have largely been displaced from city centres, relocating to suburban areas where direct highway access and extensive open space facilitate the efficient movement, storage, and sale of vehicles.

Heyvaert therefore represents a unique urban condition. Its dense inner-city setting accommodates an industry typically associated with the urban periphery. At the same time, this coexistence generates significant urban challenges, including noise and air pollution, traffic congestion, and pedestrian-unfriendly public spaces dominated by the trade and circulation of cars.



On The Way To ReinCARnation was a study on the actor-network of the second-hand car trade in the neighbourhood, done in collaboration with Tessa Zijl and Kei Ieng Ung. It follows the route of three archetypal cars occupying the streets of Heyvaert on a daily basis. It presents how the car-related places in the neighbourhood are linked to areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and locations in Eastern Europe. It shows how the global scale of trade has influenced the urban development of a small Brussels neighbourhood.



Cars have not always been the main protagonists of Heyvaert. The neighbourhood's first major transformation came with the establishment of the great slaughterhouse. This formed the characteristic architecture of long sheds with limited daylight used for the storage of cattle and the industrial processing of the animal bodies (Vandecandelaere, 2021). In the 1980s, the new hygiene regulations disrupted these practices and cleared a space for the new industry of car trading to move in (Vandecandelaere, 2021).

This shift was not simply the result of market demands, but it was driven by the architecture itself. The cattle bodies and the practices associated with the meat industry influenced the formation of the building fabric permanently enough that even the sudden food market change did not erase the architectural heritage of it. Instead, the qualities of the building remained the same, but they found a new use on their own, which happened to be the car storage, brought by the Lebanese merchants who found a potential in the deep spaces of the Heyvaert's sheds (Vandecandelaere, 2021). This way, the grand urban adaptive reuse got initiated not by the architect but by the buildings themselves, which offered a potential for a new productive activity to move into the area.

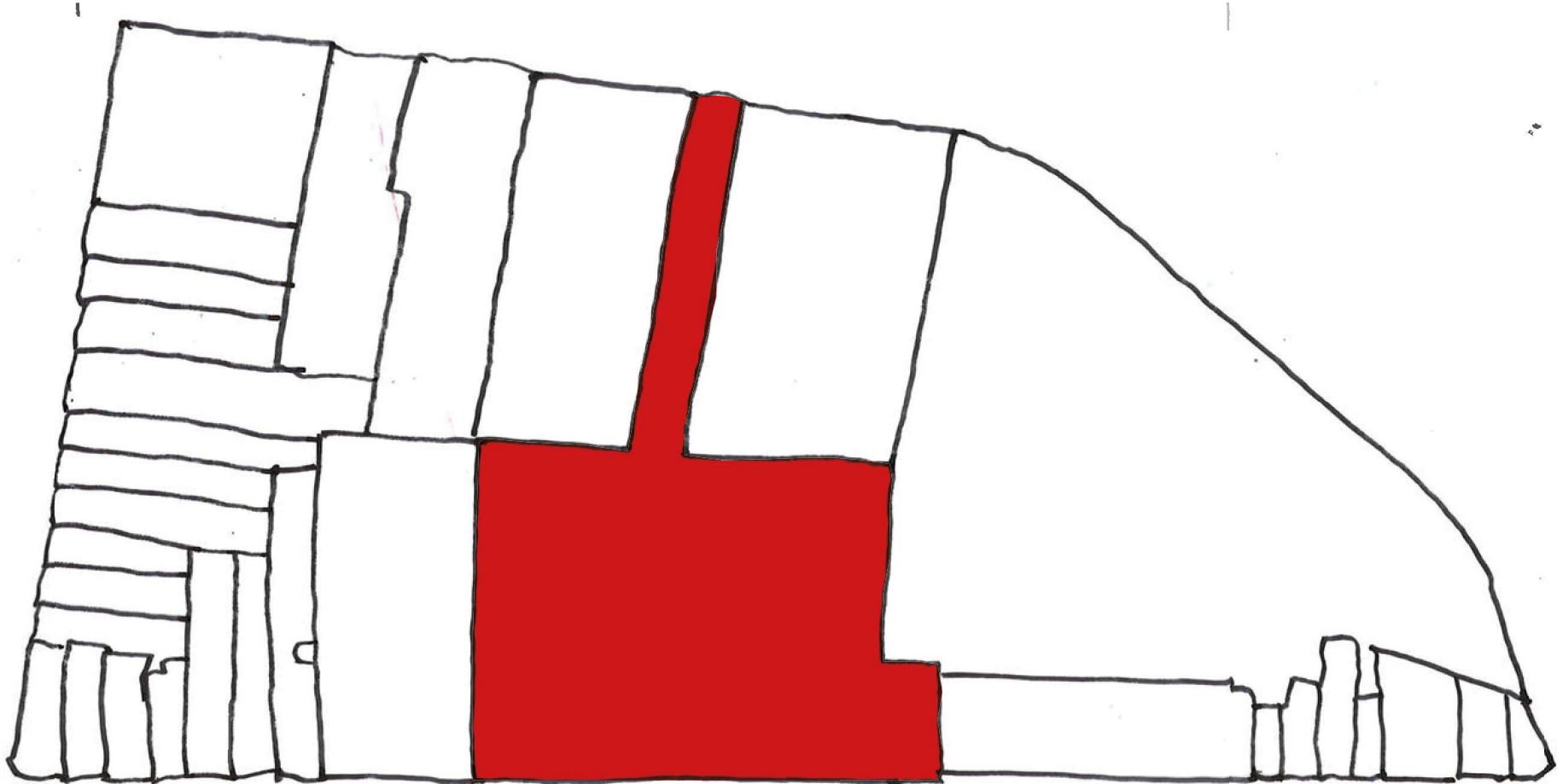
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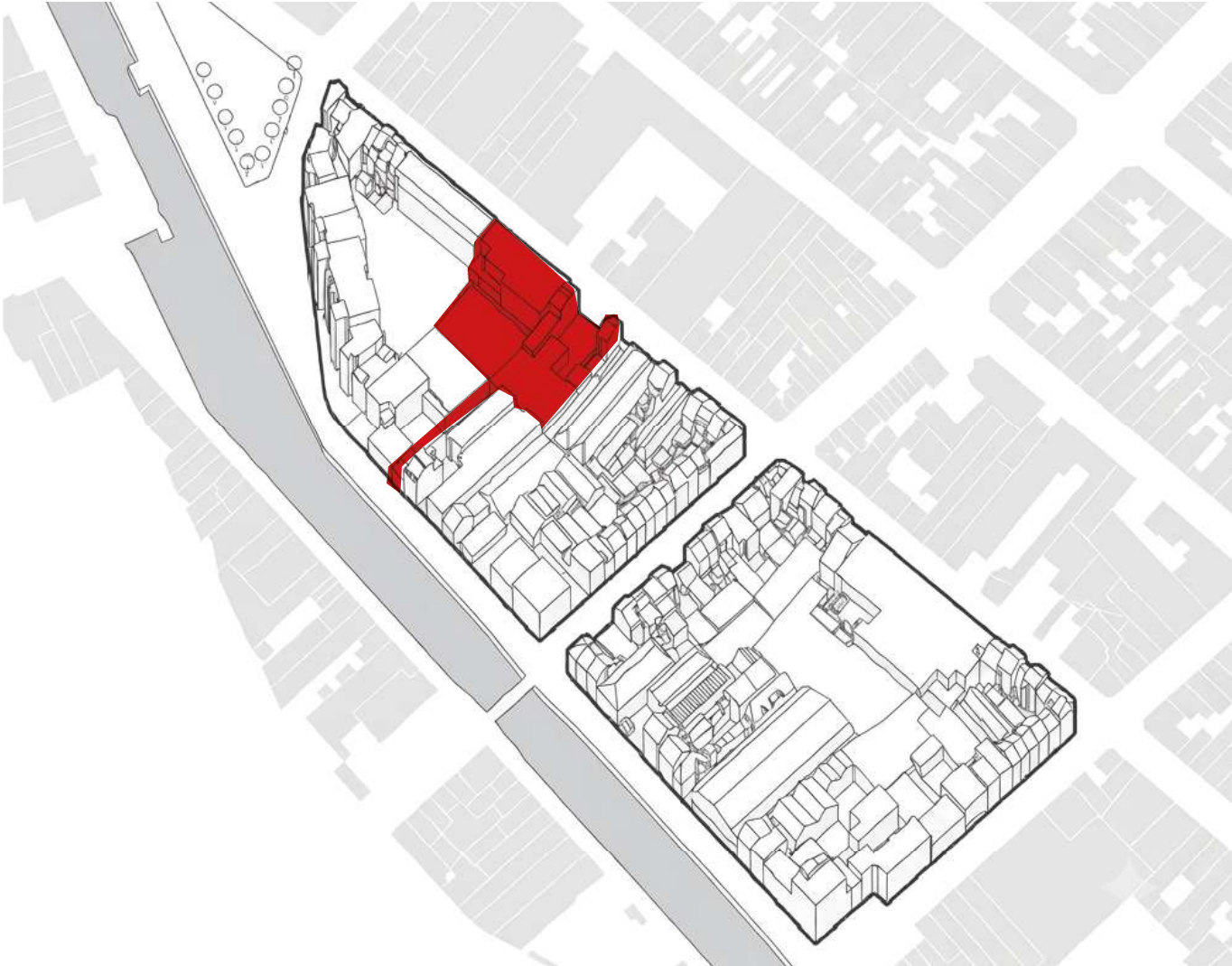
SITE: FROM COWS TO CARS (PAST IDENTITY)





The garage plot of the IMS shipping company is one of the building examples representing this process. It is positioned on a large co-urtyard plot in the middle of the urban block, hidden behind the typical narrow Brussels housing.





Lefort. (2022). Heterogeneous urban fabrics: A resource for urban adaptability: The case of Brussels.

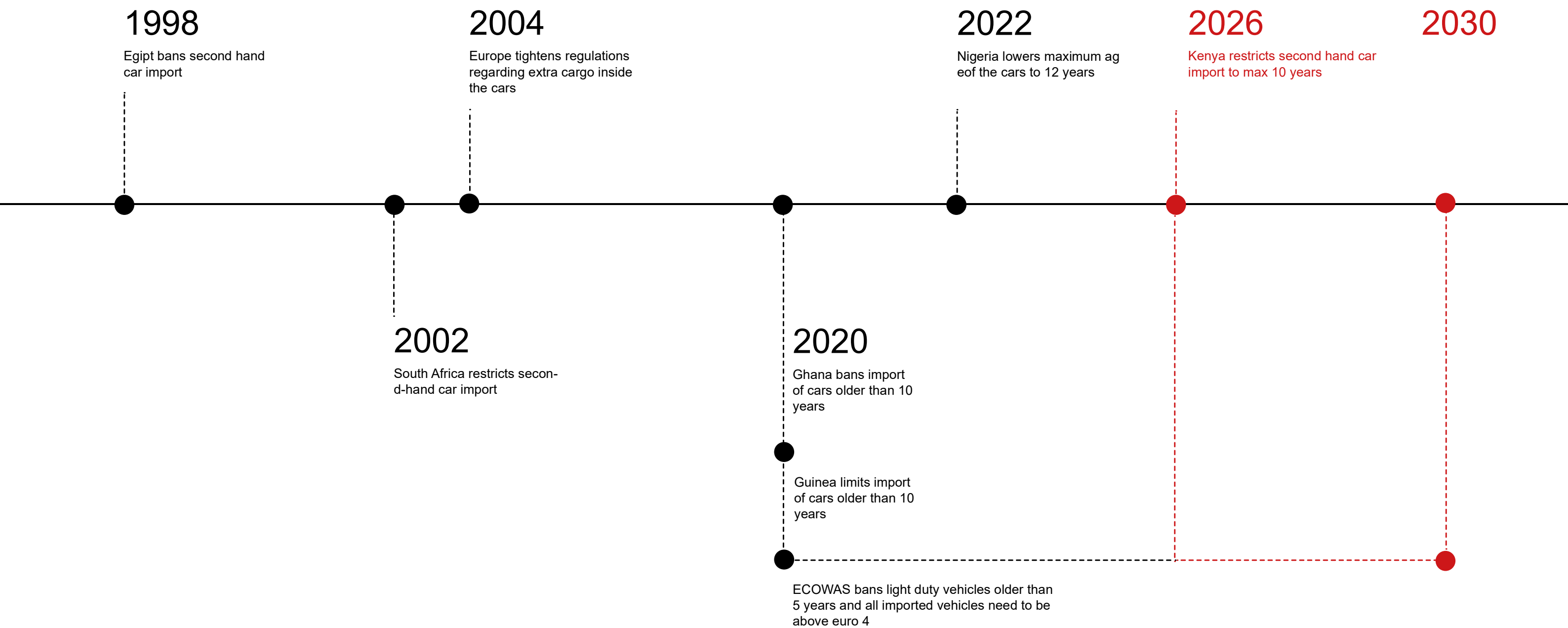
Historically, this was the typical urban morphology in the area, expressing the mixture of productive and residential uses (Ledent, 2024). The urban block is located along the large industrial street, with the larger plots in the middle of the block having direct access to the main street, as they used to be the busy production spaces. The block as a whole is sliced with a smaller secondary street along which there are more compartmentalised plots usually populated with typical Brussels narrow housing units.

Over the years, these plots moved from production to trade and transformed into storage units with minimal daylight and limited street access (Ledent, 2024). As the migration kept inflowing to the place, the need for housing increased, and the new residential units emerged along the street lines, covering up the storage units away from the street's eye. This way, these storage buildings completely lost touch with the street and formed a series of hidden car park gems trapped behind the courtyards of the street housing.

This unique combination of urban spatial qualities is efficient for the current second-hand car trade practices and gives the neighbourhood its unique identity. But as the car market faces a decline, this highly customised “carchitecture” will not be useful forever.

According to the recent changes in the regulations for the global car trade, a sudden economic collapse could happen in 20/10 or even in 5 years (Inter-Environnement Bruxelles, 2015).

In such a situation, the new wave of adaptive reuse in Heyvaert is just ahead of the neighbourhood, which means that soon the buildings will have to find themselves a new use again. The question is, what will be the new function this time? What will take over the place of the cars in the Heyvaerts identity?



The new urban development claims take out the car at the centre of the neighbourhood's identity and replace it with the people of Heyvaert. The main goals are to create more residential spaces for the current residents and the newcomers, and dedicate the former car industry spaces to the public. The idea is simply to replace cars with people and repopulate these currently isolated, deep industrial spaces with human activity (OKRA Brut, 2021).

While these proposals are well-intentioned and reflect the economic and social transformations already taking place in the area, the urban vision does not fully respect the industrial heritage embedded within the existing urban fabric. The redevelopment strategy significantly alters the characteristic industrial morphology of the site and overlooks the potential of working with the unique spatial qualities found within the interiors of the transformed plots.

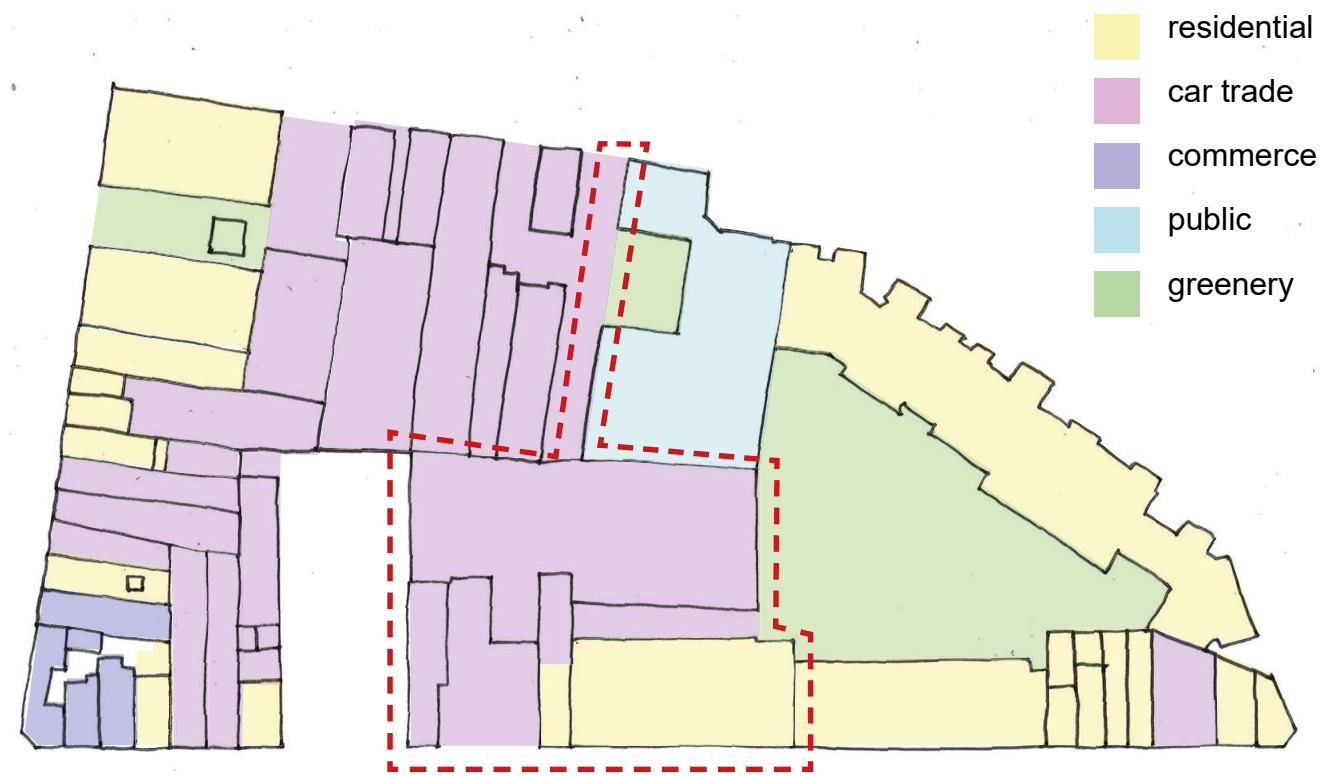
Having studied the history of Heyvaert and the adaptive capacity of its built fabric, the question emerges: how can future development respect and build upon the district's industrial urban heritage? More importantly, how can the design process work not only within the context of this heritage but rather WITH IT as an active driver of transformation?

POSITION: FROM CARS TO PEOPLE? (FUTURE IDENTITY)

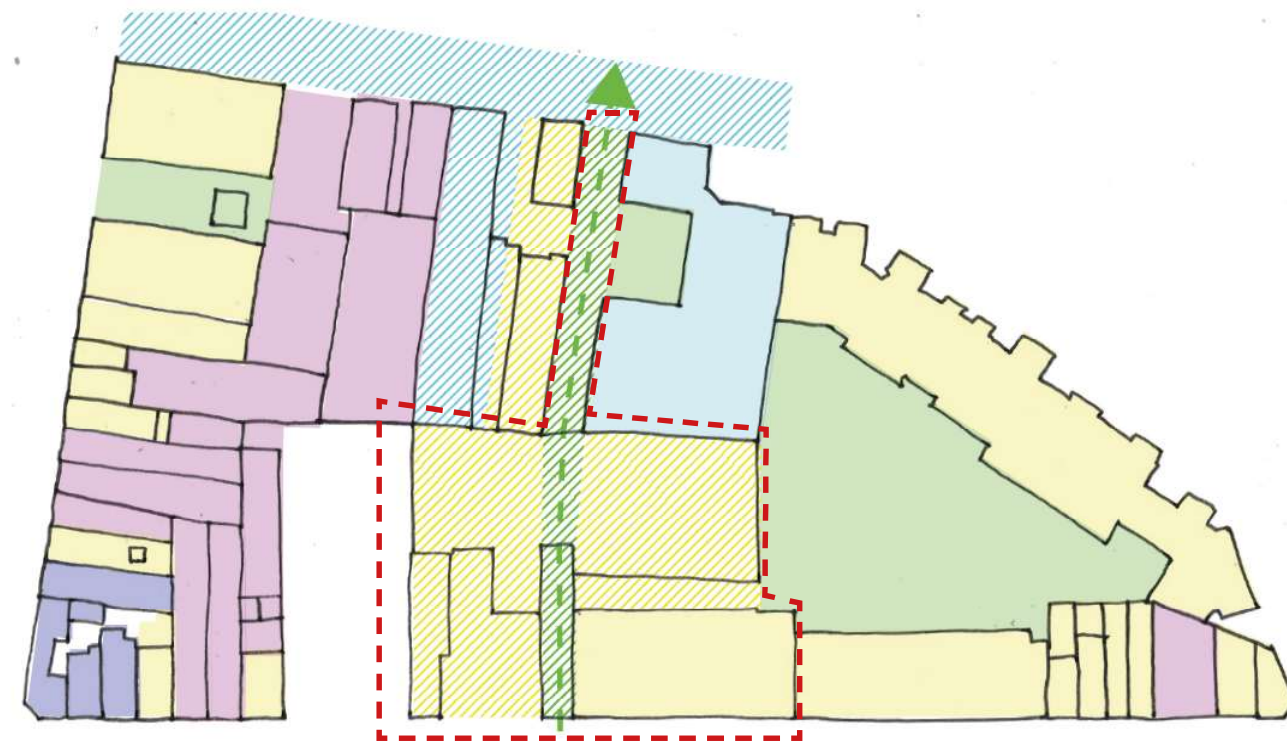
Among the key developments is the proposed linear park, envisioned as a central spine connecting the area's public-space projects. By cutting directly through the industrial plots, it is intended to act as a catalyst for transformation, initiating change and creating a framework for the gradual redevelopment of the surrounding urban fabric (Perspective Brussels, 2024).



One of the outbranches of the park happens to cut directly through the IMS shipping plot suggesting the emergence of the new residential units in the place and creating a narrow green corridor between the central park and the canal.



the current function arrangement on the urban block



propoeed function arrangement in the municipality materplan

HOW CAN
FUTURE DEVELOPMENT
RESPECT AND
BUILD UPON
THE INDUSTRIAL
URBAN HERITAGE?

HOW CAN
THE DESIGN PROCESS
WORK WITH
INDUSTRIAL URBAN HERITAGE
AS AN ACTIVE DRIVER OF
TRANSFORMATION?

The project proposes a site-specific strategy for the future development of Heyvaert. Its main approach is to explore the adaptive reuse of the typical Heyvaert car garage understood as a valuable spatial asset capable of supporting a transition toward more civic forms of urban life. The proposal demonstrates how the district's car-related infrastructure can strengthen and connect Heyvaert's past, present, and future identity.



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