

TRACING MODERN BRUSSELS

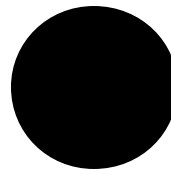
The Alpha Plan

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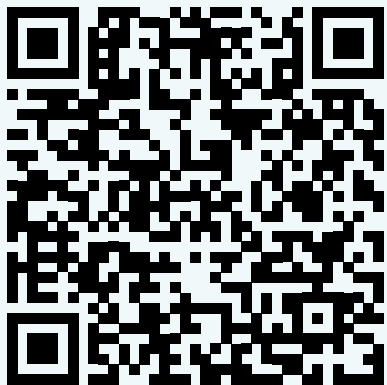
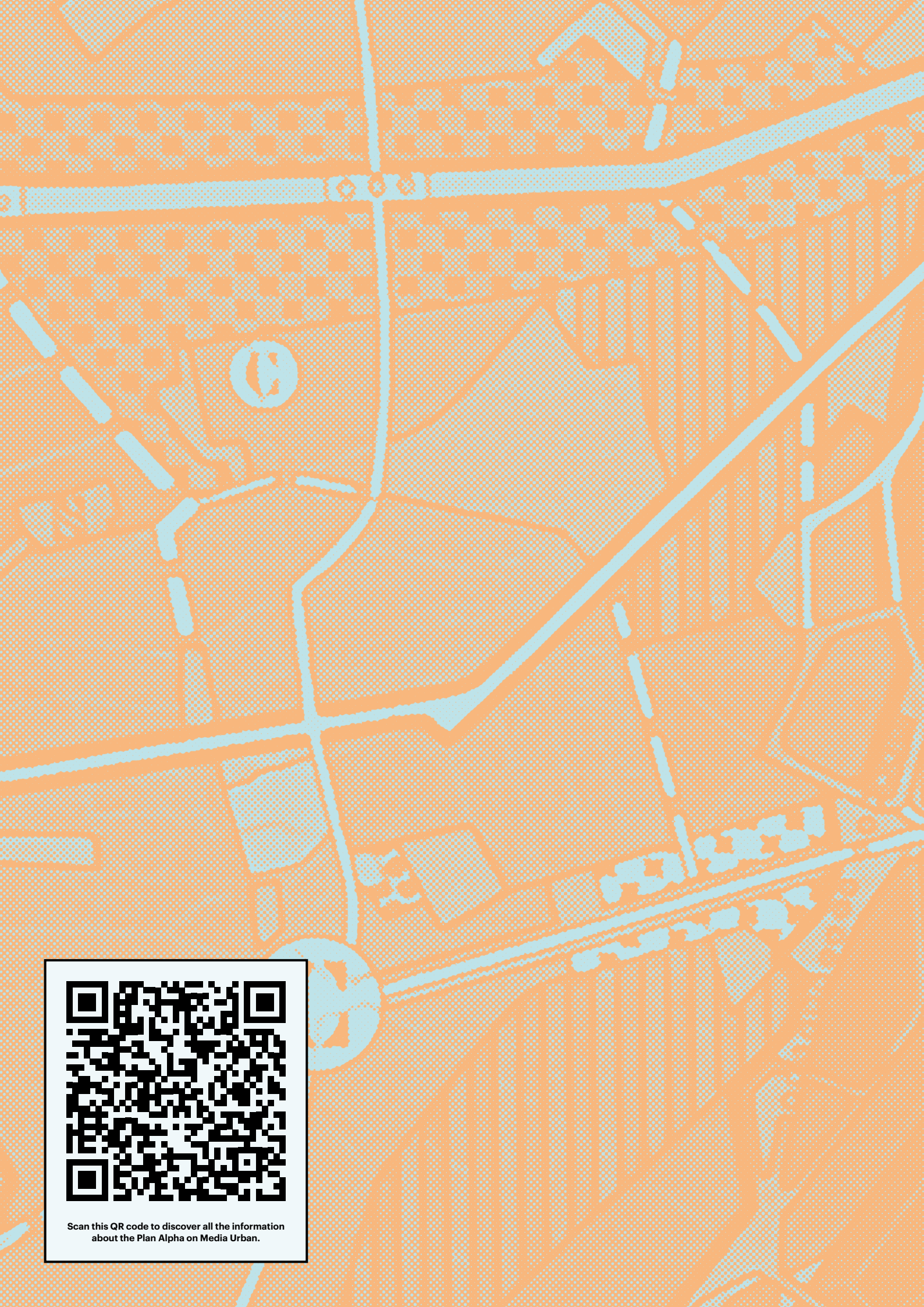


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The adoption of the organic law on urban and land use planning in 1962 led to the production of development plans, seen as the only effective instrument for achieving economic and social expansion in the country's various regions, which were divided into sectors for the occasion.

Groupe Alpha's urban planning architects were commissioned to draw up a preliminary draft for the Brussels agglomeration, after studying the capital's development within the country for almost 10 years between 1948 and 1957.

The preliminary draft is a reflection of its time, a highly technical document that demonstrates the designers' faith in the ability of modern architecture to reshape the urban landscape.

Drawn up between 1962 and 1967, then adapted by the Administration nationale de l'Urbanisme (National Urban Development Administration) until 1970, the plan was never approved, and was eventually totally abandoned in the climate of protest linked to the urban development of Brussels.

As part of Heritage Days 2024, the exhibition showcases for the first time the original project documents and some of the preliminary survey maps. These documents, preserved by Urban, allow us to trace the modern project for Brussels, which was to accompany the ongoing transformation of the capital into an international business centre.

The sectoral plan and land use planning in Belgium

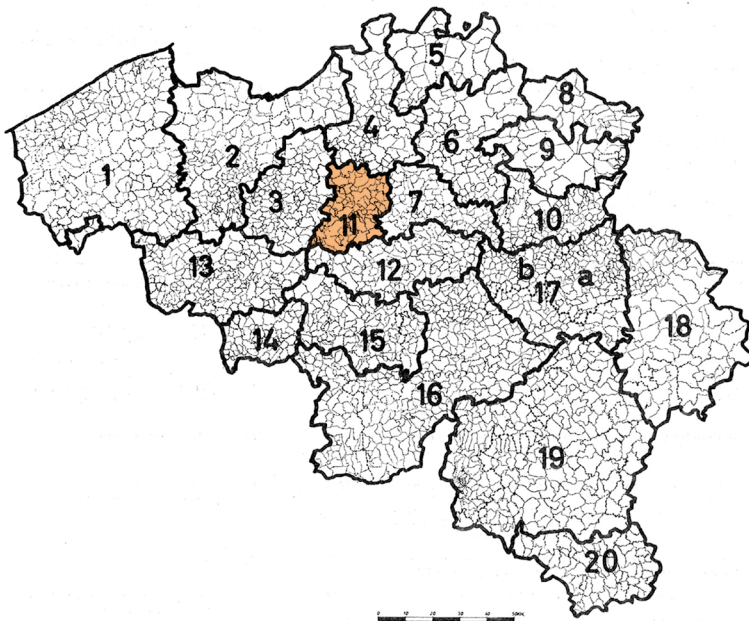
The Alpha Plan is a preliminary draft for the Brussels Sectoral Plan. A sectoral plan organises the territory on an operational level and provides specifications in relation to the general building regulations. This type of document is linked to the 1962 urban and land use planning law, which for the first time organised planning for the entire Belgian territory, divided into 48 sectors, including one for the 19 Brussels municipalities.

Sectoral plans reflect the idea of *comprehensive, rational, coordinated planning* for the whole country, i.e. the distribution across the territory of the various functions that modern rationality believed should be organised

1948

STREEKSTUDIES

ETUDES REGIONALES



■ 1948

Background to the sectoral plan. Launch of regional studies. Map of regional studies commissioned by AUAT between 1948 and 1962. (Source: Bricmont, G. Bure, V. Aménagement du territoire et urbanisme: commentaire de la loi organique du 29 mars 1962, Brussels: Larcier)

separately: housing, industry, mass mobility, leisure, education and spaces for agriculture and nature. This logic is linked to the emergence of modern urban planning theories at the turning point between the 19th and 20th century.

At the end of the Second World War, an Administration de l'Urbanisme et de l'Aménagement du Territoire (Urban and land use planning administration, AUAT, the forerunner of Urban and Perspective) was set up to plan the development of the country and its cities. The administration supervised the land use plans drawn up by the municipalities and produced regional studies. As an experiment, two studies

were launched in 1948, one for Liège and the other for Brussels, entrusted to Groupe l'Équerre and Groupe Alpha respectively. The regional plan for Brussels was finalised in 1957. It suggested containing the organic expansion of the capital by means of a green belt in which urbanisation would be concentrated around «satellite centres» offering all the services needed for daily life.

The organic law of 1962 created the sectors, an intermediate level between regional studies whose value was purely indicative, and general municipal plans, most of which were never finalised. The Minister of Public Works Joseph

1951



■ 1951
Background to the sectoral plan. Brussels Crossroads of the West: a summary of the first version of the Ministry of Public Works road plan for Brussels, redrawn by Groupe Alpha as part of their regional study for Brussels, 1958. (Source: «Bruxelles District européen» AGR, Archives Victor Bure [Inv. I531], n°82)

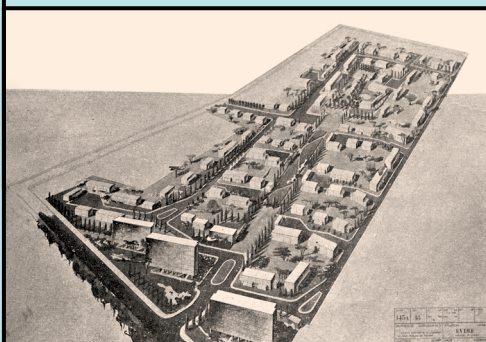
De Saeger introduced them as the reference planning level. In order to save time and benefit from the experience acquired to date, AUAT decided to take over the teams who had been working on the regional studies for the areas concerned, keeping Groupe Alpha at the helm for the Brussels area. An interdisciplinary research group linked to the Christian movement, "Mens en Ruimte", would be responsible for studying the plan for the peripheral sectors of Brussels on the Flemish side. The Alpha regional study included the concept of a green belt around the agglomeration, essentially for political reasons to curb the expansion of Brussels, as well as the

idea of developing urbanisation in this belt from a selection of existing centralities.

In 1967, Groupe Alpha's preliminary draft of the sectoral plan was finalised and adapted to the legal framework until 1972, but the plan was not countersigned by the Minister of Public Works. He was hesitant, reacting to growing public awareness of the transformations taking place in the city as a result of the construction of urban motorways and the increase in office buildings in neighbourhoods and on majestic avenues inherited from the 19th century. Against this background, the Ministry of Brussels Affairs was entrusted with drawing up the sectoral plan

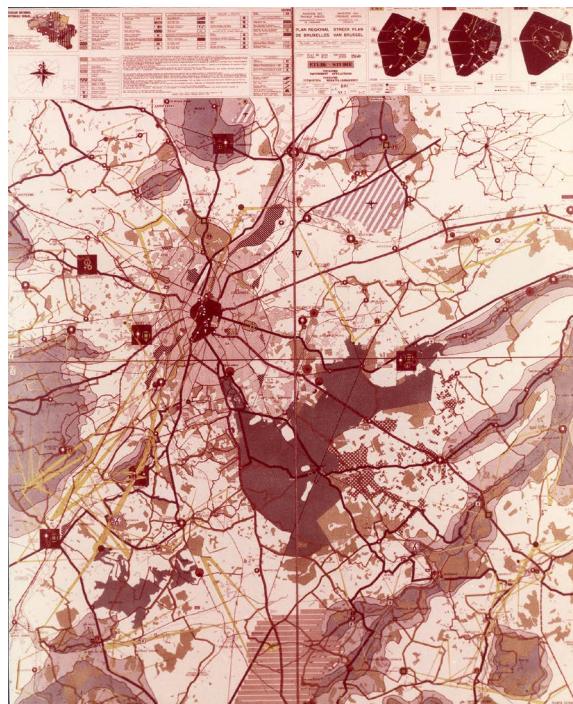
1952

1954



■ 1954
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the modern city – the green ring. "Tornooiveld" garden city, Evere.
(Source: Municipal archives of Evere)

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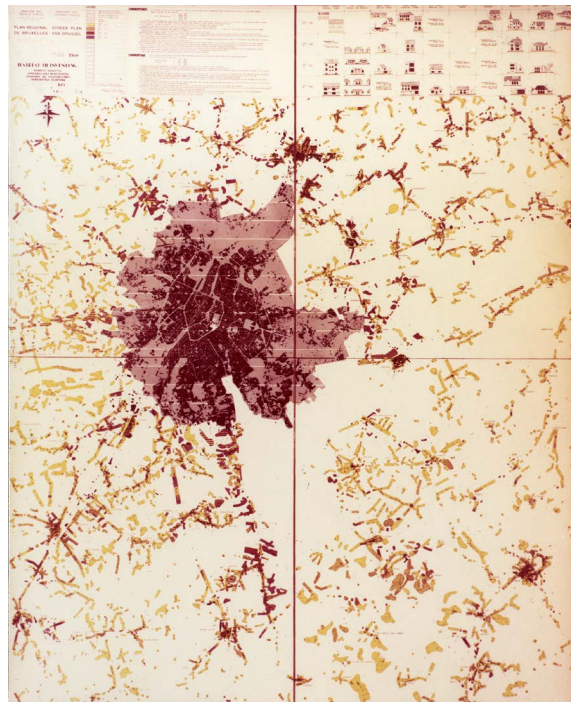
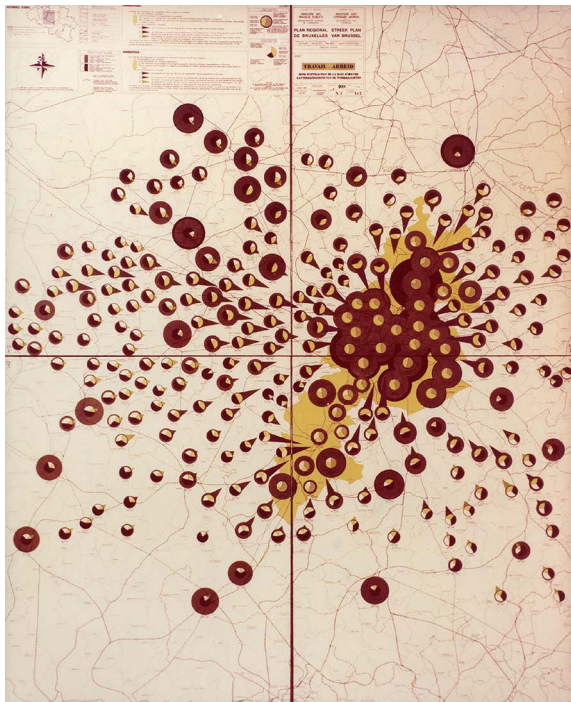
■ 1954
Brussels regional study, survey exhibition at the Centre for Fine Arts: "What will Brussels become tomorrow?"



■ 1952, 1954
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the modern city – the green ring. «Constellations» garden city, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert
(Source: «La Maison», 1955 n°11)

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in 1973. This was where, until its final adoption in 1979, a new version of the plan was discussed, focusing on the protection of existing buildings.

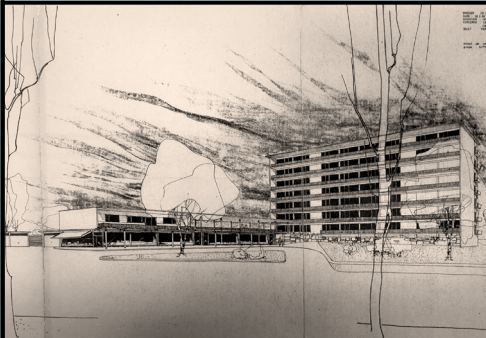


Groupe Alpha, architects and urban planners

The year 1948 marked the launch of the regional study for Brussels by the Administration nationale de l'Urbanisme et de l'Aménagement du Territoire (National urban and land use planning administration, AUAT). According to its director general, Victor Bure, Groupe Alpha was one of the few agencies with the skills and interdisciplinarity required for this mission.

Although the agency had just been commissioned to draw up plans for several cities in Congo and Burundi (Kisangani, Lubumbashi and Bujumbura), Groupe Alpha was still young at the time. It was founded at the end of the Second World War by Jean Gilson (1912-2000,

1955



■ 1955
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the modern city - the green ring. (Uncompleted) Commercial and civic centre project for the Constellations district, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert. (Source: AAM, Fonds Piron)

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1956



■ 1956
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the modern city - the green ring. «Pléiades» garden city, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert. (Source: La Maison, 1961, n°12)

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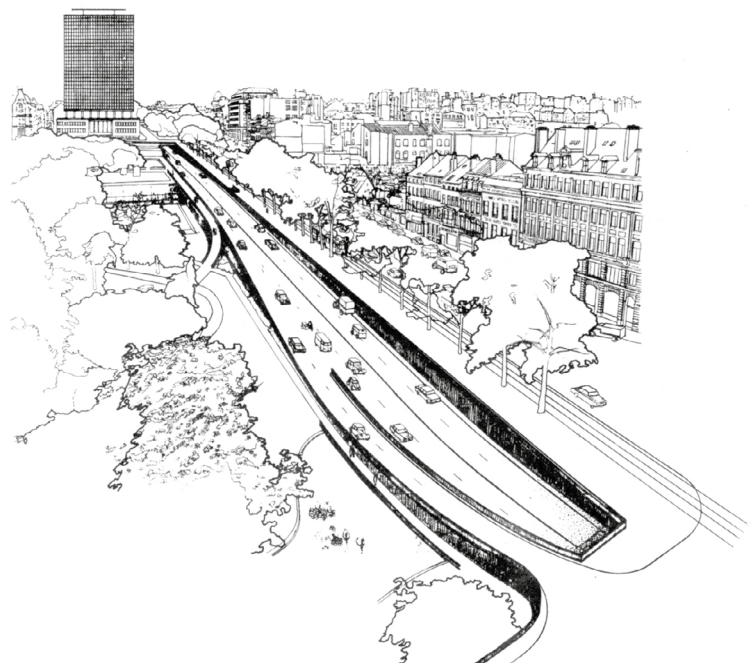
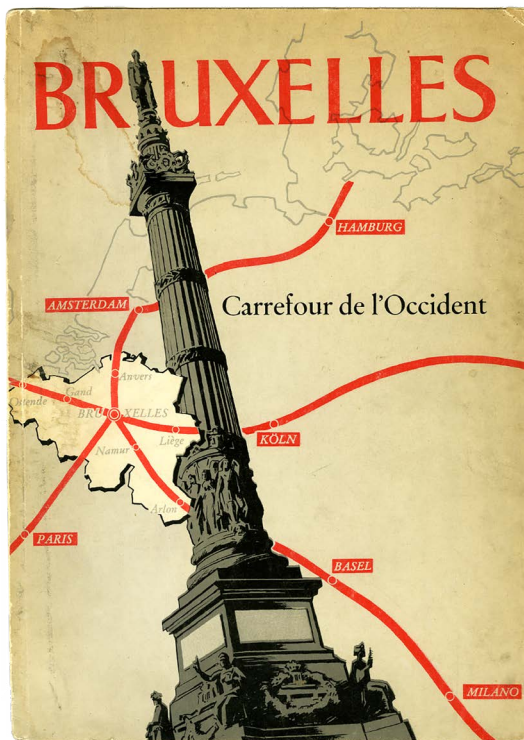
■ 1955
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the monumental aspect of a new services capital. Lead architects for the Cité Administrative de l'Etat project.

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graduated in 1937), René Piron (1918-2000), Alberto Vandenauwera (1918-1998, graduated from La Cambre in 1941) and Théophile Daens (1904-?, graduated in 1948 from the ULB's Urban Design Institute). For the Brussels study, the group called on the advice of specialists such as the young sociologist Simone Bellière and the landscape architect René Pechère, who was already enjoying a significant national reputation and was at the time advising the Ministry of Public Works on roadside development. Although the plan was never published, it was still exhibited in the Pavillon de l'Urbanisme at Expo 58, along with an imposing

model of the Nossegem satellite city project, near Zaventem.

René Piron directed the study for the preliminary draft of the sectoral plan, marked by an unwavering faith in the ability of modern architecture to reshape the urban landscape. Nevertheless, planning Brussels' future was far from purely theoretical. While it reflected on the future of Brussels, Groupe Alpha was a major player in the transformation of its landscape. It was part of the architectural teams for the Cité administrative de l'État (1955-1980) and the Berlaymont (1963-1969), headquarters of the European Commission, designing the new face



■ 1956
The sectoral plan as a summary of policies in force: Creation of the Road Fund to make Brussels the Crossroads of the West.

of the capital's political institutions, in two areas for which the plan called for a new monumental appearance. Jean Gilson was also involved in the design of the Monnaie Administrative Centre (1967-1971). At the time, the architects selected for this type of public operation were chosen according to the political composition of the commissioning authority. The fact that Jean's brother, André Gilson, was a significant Social Christian minister is no minor detail. It is also important to note that Jean Gilson was an advisor to the Social Christian Minister for Public Works, Oscar Bohogne, until the minister launched the regional surveys. Finally, Alberto Vandenauwera designed the Sablon tower

(1964-1966) for the company Blaton, replacing Victor Horta's Maison du Peuple (1895-1899).

Groupe Alpha also designed a series of garden cities in Brussels for social housing companies linked to the Christian pillar – Val Maria (1954-1959) in Neder-Over-Heembeek and Tornooveld (1954-1956) in Evere for Home Familial Brabançon, Clos des Peupiers (1952), Constellations (1952-1956) or Pléiades (1956-1961) in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert for Habitation Moderne – which places great emphasis on the landscape dimension and overall value. Also worthy of notice is Jean Gilson's Église Saint-Martin in Ganshoren (1965-1971).

1957

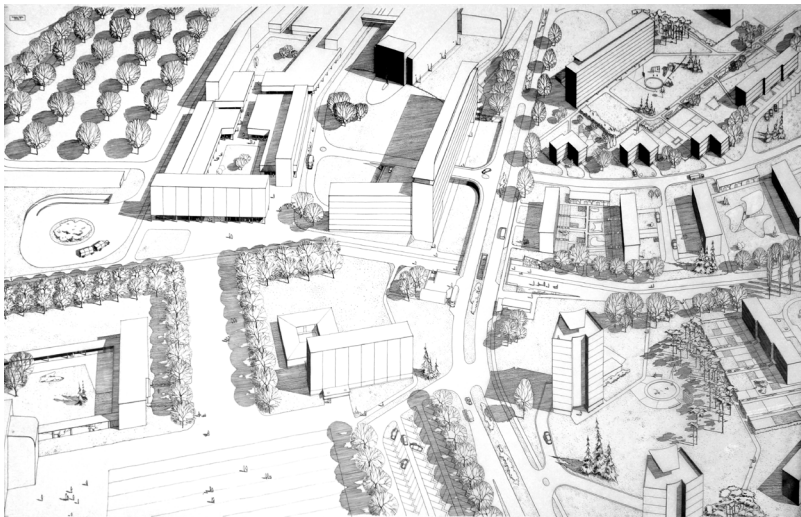
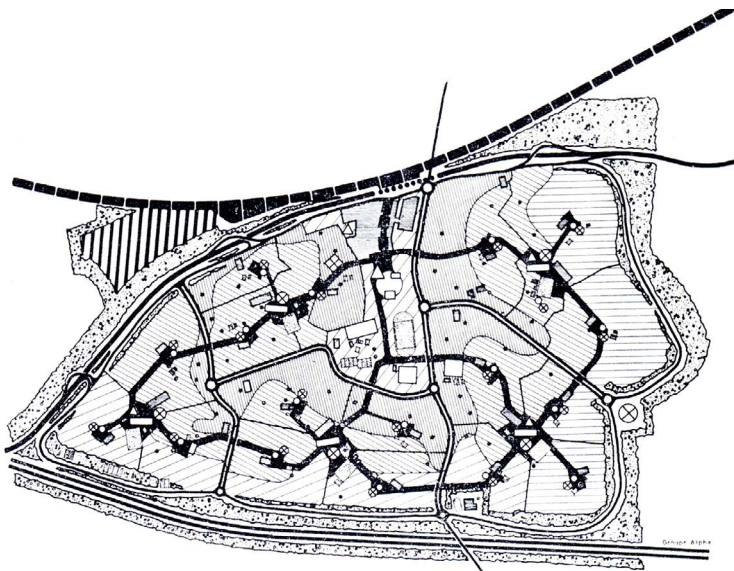


■ Green belt ■ Satellite centres

■ 1957
Background to the sectoral plan: Alpha Regional Plan for Brussels.
(Source: KU Leuven archives, Fonds Eyskens, Belgian Government, Bruxelles E, 1958)

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, straddling the worlds of urban planning and architecture, Groupe Alpha's architectural practice translates its urbanistic convictions of an urban landscape seen as a plastic unity, as well as a technical mastery of each of its urban components.

1958

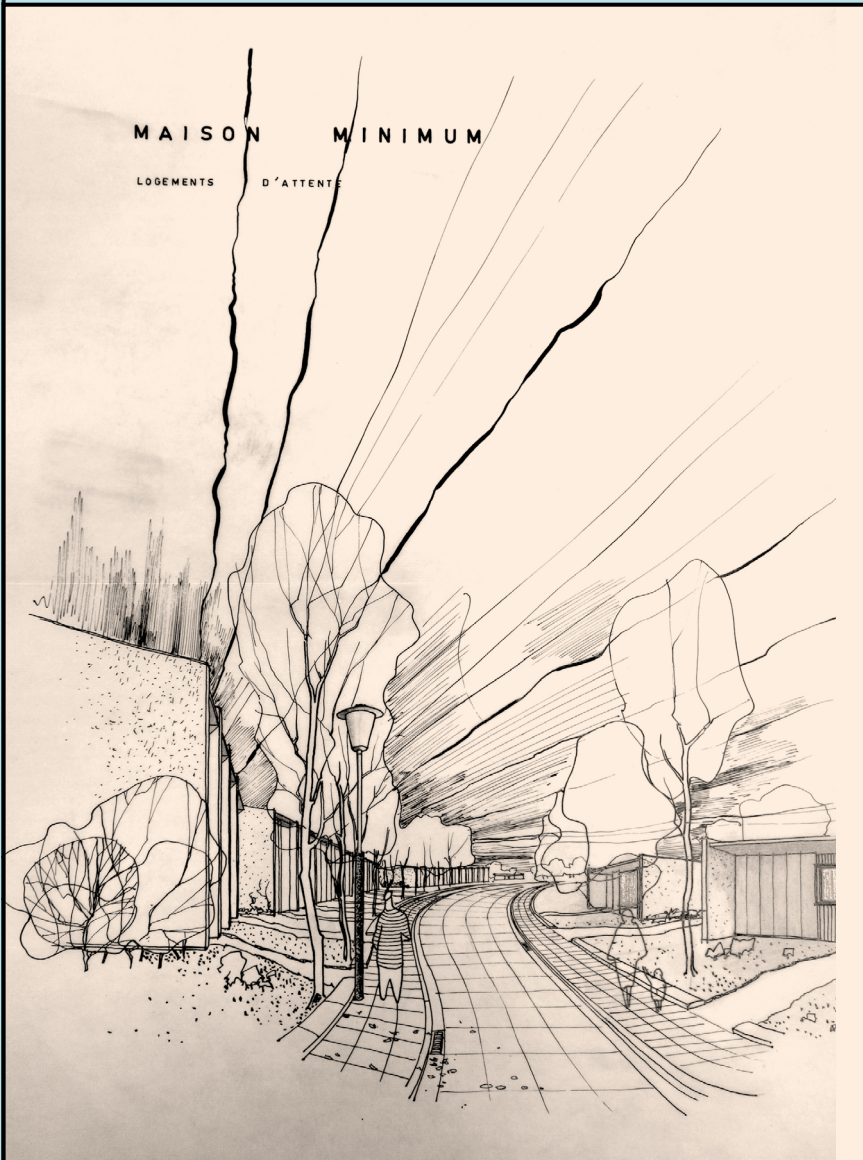


■ 1958
Background to the sectoral plan, Groupe Alpha.
Project for the Nosseghem Satellite Centre.

The preliminary draft of the sectoral plan as a summary of current developments in Brussels

The post-war period saw exponential growth in the tertiary real estate market, which very quickly disrupted the urban landscape in the absence of any binding regulatory framework at the urban scale. Nevertheless, the period during which the sectoral plan was being drawn up was extremely busy from a local planning point of view. The municipalities didn't wait for the adoption of a sectoral plan to think about how to frame the transformation of their environment. Several of them had master plans, with no legal force, against which they drew up specific land use plans. These local plans generally only concerned a one-off real estate operation, but they had the

1959



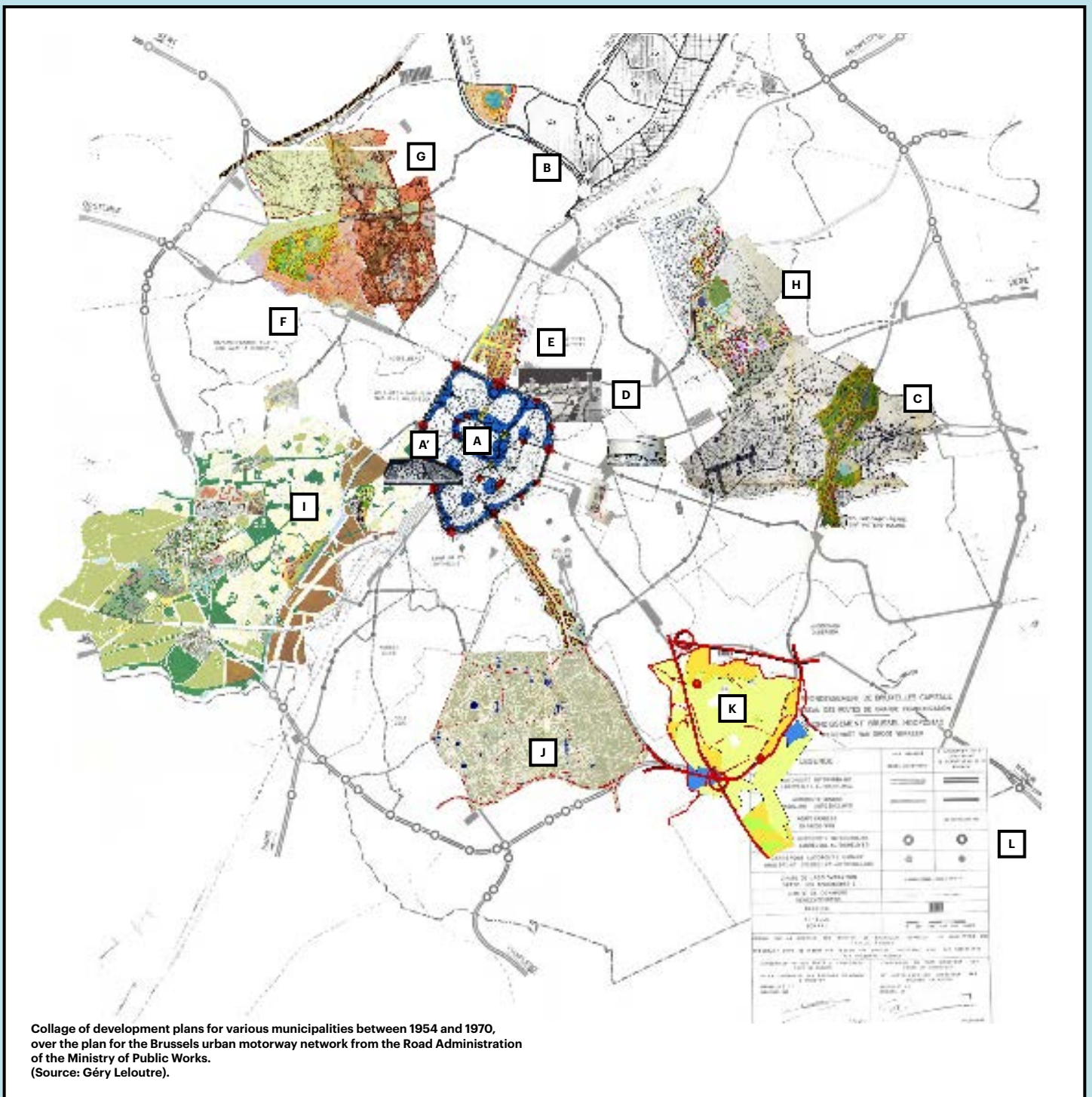
■ 1959
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the modern city –
the green ring. Val Marie extension project (Neder-Over-Heembeek, uncompleted).
(source: AAM, Fonds Piron)

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advantage of being perpetual, unlike building permits, and enabled expropriations to be launched to reorganise the land.

In 1960, the City of Brussels commissioned Tekhnê to consider the development of the Pentagon **A** and the former municipality of Neder-Over-Heembeek **B**. Tekhnê also studied Woluwe-Saint-Lambert in 1965 **C**. Groupe Structure, architects of the Phillips Tower on Place de Brouckère and NATO, sketched out a “20th Century City” for the municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (1962) between Place Rogier and Place Madou **D**, and studied a plan to transform the North District **E** into

a large services centre organised around a motorway junction (1962-1966). In the inner suburbs, Ganshoren **G**, Jette and Evere **H** were implementing their General Development Plans to develop housing districts surrounded by greenery, while Anderlecht **I** was using its land management unit to combine residential development with the construction of a *Park System* linking the older parts of the municipality to the vast Pede estate, protected from urbanisation. Finally, Uccle **J** and Watermael-Boitsfort **K** had drawn up a “Pilot Plan” outlining the mobility and equipment framework for their entire territory.



All these projects shared the same key ideas and reflected a shared vision for the future of Brussels, firmly rooted in the principles of modernist urban planning. These were based on an organisation of the territory into *neighbourhood units*, functionally autonomous districts of around twelve thousand inhabitants, protected from road traffic relegated to the outside on lanes marking out each unit. In this kind of approach, the ultimate social spot was no longer the monumental boulevard as it was in the 19th century, but a network of linear parks running through the units to link them together.

For the Administration de l'Urbanisme et de l'Aménagement du Territoire, the sectoral plan offered the opportunity to finally envisage this type of shared vision on an agglomeration-wide scale. To this end, Jacques Würth, director of the Brabant provincial division, regularly brought together all the departments involved in the capital's development, including the powerful Road Administration and its ambitious road plan [L].

Groupe Alpha was far from working in an ivory tower. The preparation of the preliminary draft of the sectoral plan for which the group was responsible was above all an opportunity

1960

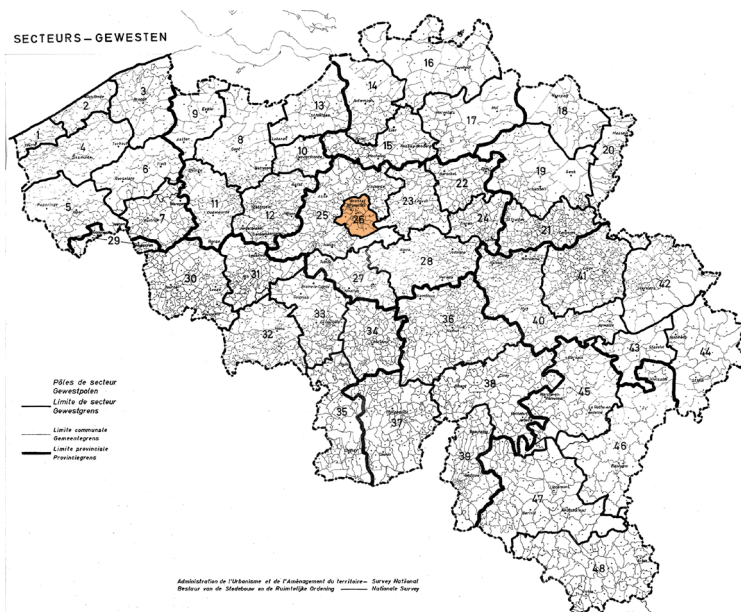


■ 1960
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the monumental aspect of a new services capital.
Study for a "European District" on the Plaine des Manoeuvres in Brussels.
(Source: AGR, Archives Victor Bure [Inv. I531], n°82)

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to take stock of the actions of a whole range of bodies, including the municipalities. This assessment involved a detailed examination of existing infrastructure projects and urban planning schemes (see plate D), but AUAT also consulted urban planners to check the suitability of current studies in relation to the options in the draft sectoral plan. Although the plan was never adopted, it served as a stimulus throughout the time it was being developed, between 1962 and 1970.

1962



■ 1962
 Organic Law on Urbanism and Territorial Planning. 48 sectors to plan.
 (Source: Bricmont, G. Bure, V. Aménagement du territoire et urbanisme :
 commentaire de la loi organique du 29 mars 1962, Brussels: Larcier)

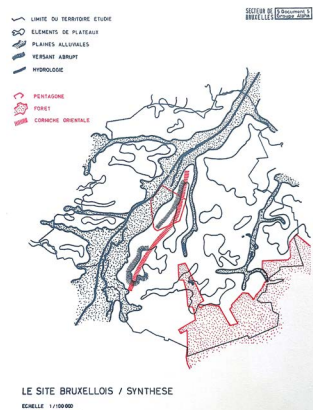
The ideas behind the preliminary draft of the sectoral plan

The preliminary draft of the sectoral plan for Brussels was specific in two aspects. Firstly, it followed on resolutely from the Brussels regional study carried out between 1948 and 1957. Groupe Alpha therefore already had in-depth knowledge of local dynamics. Then, for political reasons linked to linguistic tensions, in 1962 the Brussels sector was deliberately limited to the 19 bilingual municipalities of the agglomeration. Whereas in other sectors, planning was concerned with the functional distribution of space and the relationship of agglomerations with their hinterland, here the study focused exclusively on an urban perimeter, and was largely concerned

THE 3 MAIN PRINCIPLES OF THE ALPHA PLAN



■ PRINCIPE 1
Build a dense, airy green ring.

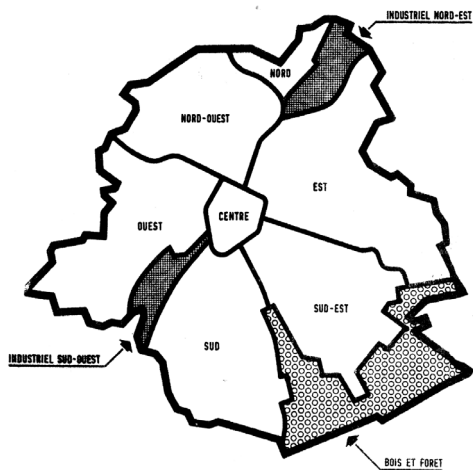


■ PRINCIPE 2
Enhance the landscape of the Brussels site.



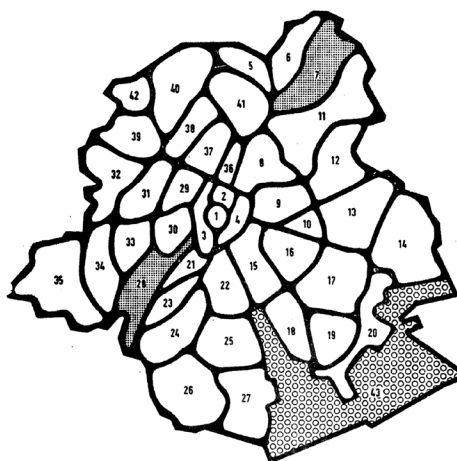
■ PRINCIPE 3
Build aesthetic hubs.

LES SECTEURS D'ACTION



SECTEUR DE PLANNING
BRUXELLES Groupe Alpha

LES UNITES D'AMENAGEMENT



SECTEUR DE PLANNING
BRUXELLES Groupe Alpha

Organise the city into 5 + 2 action sectors and 35 development units.

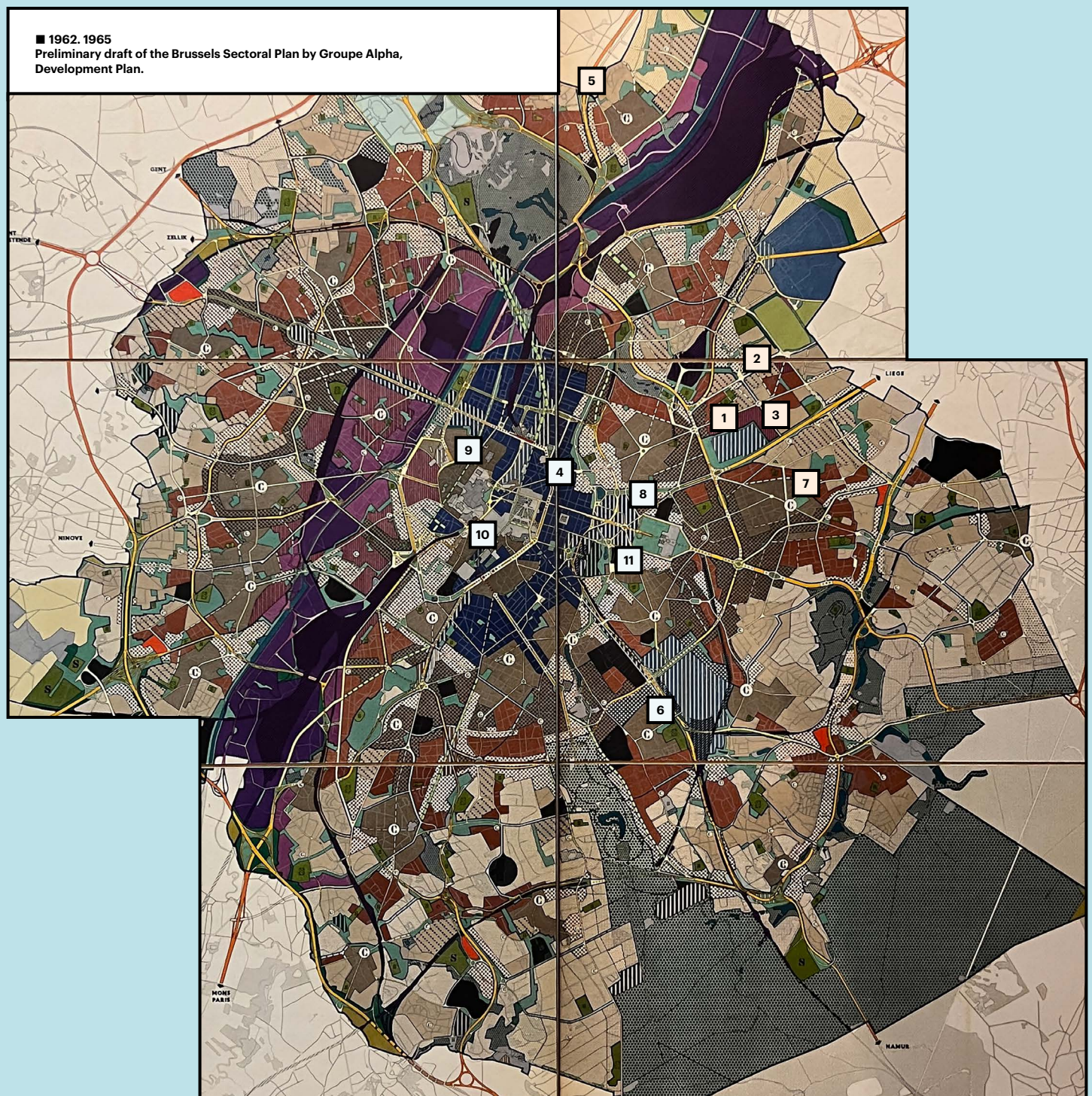
with the architectural and landscape form of the city. The result was a highly complex document, Plate E "Plan d'aménagement" (Land use plan), which is accompanied by a series of explanatory plates from A to F.

In terms of socio-functional organisation, the plan reflected the modernist thinking of its time, based on a subdivision of the territory into three levels of *planning grade*. The aim of this hierarchical subdivision was to ensure, within each grade, an appropriate distribution of the various elements that contribute to their internal balance.

The basic grade was made up of 5,000 to 15,000 inhabitants, and corresponded to the

traditional notion of a neighbourhood, bringing together everyday facilities within a radius of 350 to 700 metres. These were *neighbourhood units*, which were grouped into 35 *development units*, each with an *interchange centre* – marked by the letter C on plates E and F. These units formed the basis for organising collective mobility, with public transport linking the centres, and urban motorways outlining the units. Finally, the development units were grouped into seven *inner cities* (Plate B).

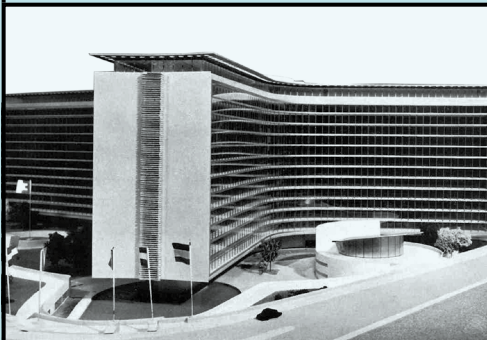
This methodical organisational approach must respond to the three priorities identified in the regional study (summarised in Plate A): the



need for housing due to demographic growth and to some existing buildings becoming dilapidated, employment growth outstripping that of the Brussels working population, which intensified daily commuting movements, and finally, the increase in road traffic. Groupe Alpha added to this the priority of the city's aesthetics: *Brussels lacked the magnificence of a capital city, so land use planning had to see the urban site as a plastic unit to be reshaped in an overall design in which every detail is connected.* The design of this plastic unit was based on three principles:

- Build a green ring around the agglomeration (light beige zones on the land use plan), with dense, airy neighbourhoods, to give it a clear boundary with a green belt to be protected;
- Enhance the urban landscape by reinforcing the relief. In this sense, the Maelbeek and Woluwe valleys were envisaged as *parkways*, as part of a general effort to enhance views and panoramas;
- Following on from this landscape approach, a series of *aesthetic hubs*, or *visual surprises*, were to be distributed at key points throughout the territory, combining with great *architectural designs* along different axes or on ridges. Among these great compositions is the Cité administrative de l'État, designed under the direction of Groupe

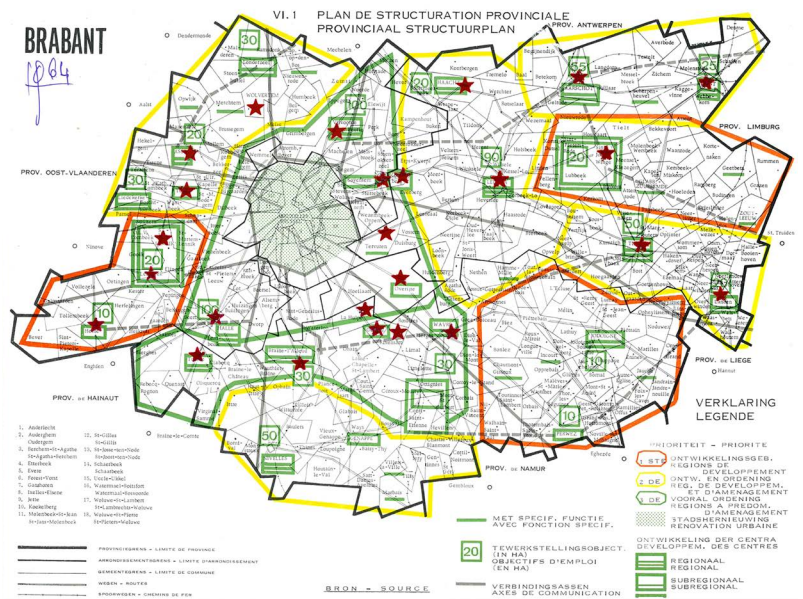
1963



■ 1963
Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the monumental aspect of a new services capital. Berlaymont, architect Jean Gilson with Lucien de Vestel and André and Jean Polak. (Source: *Présence de Bruxelles*, March-April 1961)

8

1964



■ 1964
Context of the sectoral plan. Province of Brabant: Outline of Brussels in Brabant defining the green belt and a series of "Centres to develop", *Mens en Ruimte* study. (Source: personal archives of Herman Baeyens, *Mens en Ruimte* urban planner)

Alpha, with particular attention paid to panoramic views from the various locations on the esplanade and the hanging garden designed by René Pe-
 chère.

1966



■ 1966
 Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the monumental aspect of a new services capital. Centre Monnaie tower, architect Jean Gilson, with Jacques Cuisinier, Robert Schuiten, Groupe Structure and André Polak
 (Source: Habiter, 1966 n°36)

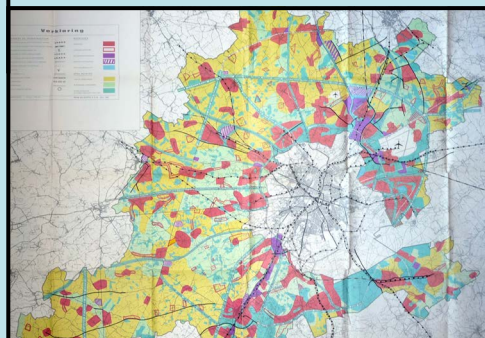
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1967



■ 1967
 Groupe Alpha, architects and designers of the monumental aspect of a new services capital. Study for the development of the Maelbeek valley, (Etterbeek, Place Jourdan).
 (Source: AAM, Fonds Piron)

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■ 1967
 Background to the sectoral plan. Preliminary draft of the Halle-Vilvoorde sectoral plan, Mens en Ruimte.
 (Source: IGEAT, ULB, Cartothèque)

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TRACING MODERN BRUSSELS

The Alpha Plan

Exhibition produced by Urban as part of the Heritage Days 2024. Urban is the Brussels public administration responsible for the implementation of the Brussels-Capital Region's policy with regard to urban planning, cultural heritage and urban renewal.

The exhibition features a copy of the "Alpha Plan" glued to its original stand, as currently preserved by Urban, as well as a selection of preliminary study plates.

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