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# The heart of Molenbeek

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ACB Archives of the City of Brussels  
CIVA Centre International pour la Ville, l'Architecture et le Paysage  
KBR Royal Library of Belgium  
KIK-IRPA Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium / Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique  
RMFAB Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium  
MCB Museum of the City of Brussels

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Town hall and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church at Molenbeek-Saint-Jean  
(© Antoine Horenbeek).

# The heart of Molenbeek

Marie Demanet and Catherine De Zuttere



Aerial view of the centre of Molenbeek.  
(Schmitt-GlobalView © urban.brussels)

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# Introduction

The historic centre of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, sometimes referred to as *Old Molenbeek*, is clearly bounded by the canal and by the Boulevard Léopold II, with the Chaussée de Gand as its central artery. It grew up around the medieval village core, located on the site of what is now Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste. The

tight network of narrow streets, flanked by industrial premises large and small, is very different from the rest of Molenbeek. It is also a lively hub of activity and home to the municipality's main public amenities.

## A village on Brussels' doorstep (12th - late 18th century)

The proximity of the nascent medieval city of Brussels and the importance of the commercial thoroughfare (*Steenwech* or paved road) running through it from east to west, seem to have been key factors in the development of the village of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Of the several clusters of scattered dwellings located on the west side of the Senne valley, one developed into what is now the historic heart of the municipality.

A village grew up along the *Steenwech* (the present-day Chaussée de Gand), a stone-paved trade route dating back to the 13th century linking Flanders to Cologne. This linear settlement is clearly visible on Jacob van Deventer's map.

Map of Brussels and its surroundings, Jacob van Deventer, 16th century. Beyond the second city wall (1), the few buildings are concentrated around the church (2) and along the road (3). (© KBR)



The old Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church (A) c. 1665, depicted by Jean-Baptiste Bonnecroy (© MRBAB), and (B) between 1834 and 1931, on a postcard. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB - urban.brussels)

Meanwhile, a bit further away, another small nucleus formed around Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church, where the Senne valley joined the sides of another valley, that of the *Molenbeek*. The earliest known reference to the church – "*ecclesiam Sanctii Iohannis de Molenbeke*" – appears in a papal bull of 9 April 1174 confirming the subordination of this church to Saints-Michel-et-Gudule Collegiate Church in Brussels.

Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church was built on the edge of the low-lying wetland, with a circular cemetery surrounding it. While the original structure was probably erected in the 12th or

late 11th century, a succession of buildings was to follow from the Middle Ages through to the 20th century, each falling victim to destruction or the need for expansion. All were located on the site of the square in front of the current church (Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste). In 1834, the church was rebuilt on a larger scale, to a design by the architect Louis Spaak. Though this was subsequently demolished to make way for the square, many pictures of it still survive.

### FIELDS AND GARDENS

The Brussels region, particularly the north-west, was known for the quality of its soils, which were highly conducive to agricultural development. The agronomic conditions were perfect: upland plateaus for growing high-yield cereal crops, damp valley bottoms which, once suitably drained, were ideal for market gardening and livestock farming, a temperate climate and gentle slopes. For a long time, Molenbeek remained an essentially rural village. A census in 1755, for example, found that 152 out of 194 households were living off the land, with the rest made up of

traders, artisans or non-agricultural workers. Land development led to the establishment of a few large farms and, especially in the centre of the village, a myriad of market-garden smallholdings, either scattered or clustered into groups of dwellings. For efficiency reasons, these hamlets were located as close as possible to the cultivated plots. Ransfort farm, which gave its name to a street running perpendicular to Chaussée de Gand, was the only larger farm in this part of Molenbeek. Dating back to the 13th century, the property belonged to the Saint-Jean

hospital in Brussels. Extending over 63 hectares, including 43 in Molenbeek, it straddled the border between the highly fertile agricultural plateaus and the wetlands, allowing it to combine both arable and livestock farming. The farm, together with the smallholdings, provided an abundance of produce for the nearby urban centre. It was eventually demolished in 1827 to make way for the construction of the Charleroi Canal.

Over time, from the 16th century onwards, the area became home to a number of large country houses, used for recreational purposes by the well-to-do. Proximity to ponds was a sought-after feature, and several of these properties adjoined the Étangs Noirs (Black Ponds). One such was *De Motte*, located near Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church at the entrance to Rue de Ribaucourt.

The house was built on a mound ('motte' in Dutch and French) and surrounded by water. During the Napoleonic era, it was home to an open-air tavern named *Au Fort Sainte-Hélène*.



Ransfort farm, as depicted in the map book of the Saint-Jean hospital (1709-13). The various buildings and vegetable gardens bear witness to an extensive estate. (© CPAS de Bruxelles)

The valley's gently sloping terrain afforded a panoramic view of Brussels, with the Molenbeek countryside in the foreground. Many artists took advantage of the high ground at Scheut to draw the vista below: a bucolic landscape of woods and groves, meadows bounded by hedgerows or lines of trees, dotted

with large houses and small hamlets.

On this engraving by Jean Uyttersprot, the depiction of shepherds and peasants with sacks, baskets and carts evokes a busy agricultural scene. The presence of gentlemen heading into the city, horse-drawn carriages and ladies out walking shows how, already at this early stage, the area immediately outside the city walls was being used for recreational purposes. Along the road are various large buildings as well as inns where travellers arriving at Brussels after the curfew, could spend the night. One of the inns is named after Saint Sebastian, the patron saint of archers (a group of fencers can be seen outside it).



View of Brussels from the west (detail), J. Uyttersprot, 1574. (© KBR)

## THE RAMPARTS OF BRUSSELS AS A BACKDROP

In the countryside adjoining the ramparts, the close ties between the small town of Molenbeek and the city of Brussels were much in evidence. The area was a hive of activity in its own right, despite the fortifications that created a visual barrier and restricted people's comings and goings. The second set of walls, complete with seven gates, was built in the second half of the 14th century as a means of protecting the city. Old pictures of the Flanders

Gate (*Porte de Flandre*), of which many survive from a later date, all show a fortress-like structure with circular towers, walls and crenellated towers. The military complex was continuously reinforced, with bastions and demi-lunes added to the defensive walls from the late 16th century, as well as ravelins near the gates. The triangular shape of the ravelins has survived in the layout of some present-day streets such as Rue du Cheval Noir, Rue des Mariniers and Rue du Chien Vert. Bodies of water and the marshland in the valley base were exploited for the city's defences, with



Map of the bombardment of Brussels by the King's army, Harmanus van Loon, 1695. The map illustrates the military importance of Molenbeek's location. The damp land in the valley base was exploited for Brussels' extensive system of defences, while the high ground at Scheut allowed the French artillery to pound the centre of the city. (© MCB)

ditches dug along the ramparts and filled with water from the River Senne. While the current Chaussée de Gand connects directly to Rue de Flandre, the old *Steenwech* was forced to circumvent the imposing fortifications. After forming a loop towards the current Quai du Hainaut, the medieval road then joined and crossed a watercourse called the *Petite Senne* (Lesser Senne).

The late 17th century was a particularly turbulent and bloody time in this part of the world. When France's King Louis XIV mounted an assault on Brussels, then capital of the Spanish Netherlands, Molenbeek was transformed into a battlefield due to its ideal

location for positioning cannons. Farms such as Ransfort bore the brunt, with the farmhouses being requisitioned for housing troops and targeted by repeated looting and fighting.

## THE WATERS OF THE MOLENBEEK

Water has played an important part in Molenbeek's history. The *Molenbeek* brook crossed the area from east to west, before flowing through Brussels' Grand Béguinage district and into the Senne. In the centre, two more watercourses, the *Paruck* and the *Korenbeek*, flowed into the Molenbeek from the north-west. In addition, there was the *Petite Senne*, an arm of the Senne created in around the 14th century to regulate the level of the main river and prevent flooding in the city.

Cabinet map of the Austrian Netherlands, created by Count de Ferraris (detail), 1771-1778. (© KBR)

1. Étangs Noirs
2. Large pond
3. The Molenbeek
4. Petite Senne
5. Fortifications
6. Willebroek Canal



Known by various names, this man-made channel later came to play an important economic role.

Indeed, for centuries, water was exploited for crafts and small-scale industry. Diverted, canalised, controlled by multiple conduits and basins and used as a drain for disposing of waste, it supported the work of dyers, tanners, launderers, brewers and papermakers, among others.

The water also fed a number of mills, as the place name itself reminds us: *Molen-beek* means *mill brook* in Dutch. Whether water- or wind-powered, mills played a central role in the economy of the Ancien Régime, as well as in political ambitions and urban development. From the second half of the 12th century the Duke of Brabant developed a network to secure his hold on Brussels and watermills sprang up along the various branches of the Senne river. Strategically located, their dykes served as dams as well as crossing points. Mills therefore came to shape both the landscape and people's habits.

Bodies of water were also a common feature of this well-irrigated area. They performed a number of functions, the first and foremost of which was as a larder, being used for rearing or conserving fish. The most common freshwater fish were pike and carp, with a street near the Étangs Noirs metro station now named after the latter (Rue de la Carpe). Some ponds, known as *poelen* in Dutch, were also used for storing water in case of fire, for watering

livestock or sometimes as retention basins for rainwater; one such *poel* is recorded at the Flanders Gate from the 14th century. Another function, quite conceivably, was leisure and relaxation: the ponds would have made ideal places for swimming or boating and even skating during harsh winters.

The scattered Étangs Noirs (Black Ponds) marked the boundary of Molenbeek village centre and survived in some form until 1880. A huge pool nearer to the old city walls has also disappeared without trace, having been removed by the early 19th century. It covered an area of 1.7 hectares between what is now Rue Fernand Brunfaut and Rue Ransfort. Despite all being drained or covered over in the 19th century, the traces of these bodies of water can still be seen today within the urban fabric. The location of the *Petite Senne* is particularly apparent as the Groot Eiland workshop has created a huge 2,000-m<sup>2</sup> vegetable garden at the back of its premises, on what was once the riverbed. Meanwhile, in Rue Fin, Le Jardin Urbain has recreated a small pond inside the urban block, on the site formerly occupied by the large pool.



The *Petite Senne* while still exposed, view on the brewery De Coster, 1936. (© La Fonderie)



The dry bed of the *Petite Senne*, now a vegetable garden for the Groot Eiland workshop. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)



View of Brussels from the countryside at Scheut (detail), Antoine Cardon, 1777. The engraving shows an agricultural landscape on the eve of the Industrial Revolution and the urbanisation of Brussels' suburbs in the 19th century. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, B208311)



Digging the new canal basin opposite Chien Vert, Paul Vitzthumb, 1830. (© KBR)

## Shifting suburbs (1800-1830)

The 19th century marked a turning point in the area's history: during the decades prior to Belgian independence in 1830, it underwent its most profound changes, following the dismantling of the ramparts and the digging of the Charleroi Canal.

The imposing towers of the Flanders Gate were demolished in 1784 and the ramparts were removed shortly afterwards, from 1793. The land was offered for sale to private individuals, who were able to divide their

holdings into plots. The authorities also retained some land, using it to undertake the first urban development work, including straightening Chaussée de Gand from the gate to the *Petite Senne*.

In 1795, Molenbeek became an independent municipality. While its population increased significantly in the 18th century, agriculture and small-scale industry continued to dominate the area until the Industrial Revolution.

### THE WILLEBROEK AND CHARLEROI CANALS

River travel was a problem as early as the 15th century. Despite widening and straightening works, the Senne silted up all too frequently, making it unsatisfactory for navigation. The Willebroek Canal, built between 1551 and 1561, was the first large-scale project bypassing the Senne to connect Brussels to the River Scheldt. It heralded the decline of the Ancien Régime riverside economy, including mills, in favour of

a growth in trade, paving the way for a complete transformation of the Molenbeek landscape.

The idea of creating an efficient waterway link between Brussels and Hainaut resurfaced repeatedly and with increasing urgency over the centuries. In the end, construction of the Charleroi Canal connecting Brussels to the River Sambre did not begin until 1827, when the

region was part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. By the time it opened in 1832, canals were facing growing competition from the arrival of the railways. Nevertheless, traffic on the waterway increased rapidly, from 200 vessels initially to 20,911 in 1845. During its lifetime, the canal underwent several upgrades to expand its capacity.

From the outset, the section of the canal located within the old ramparts helped to maintain a strong separation between the City of Brussels and the centre of Molenbeek. This was in contrast to the developments on the eastern and southern sections of the former ramparts, where Jean-Baptiste Vifquain's civic improvement plan (1818) fostered permeability and a new dialogue between town and country. The canal, a navigable highway with an economic purpose, separated two areas whose uses, built environments and treatment of public space could not have been more different: on the City of Brussels side, a tree-lined boulevard was laid out, flanked by middle-class houses;

the Molenbeek side was dominated by warehouses and storage depots for coal – the 'black gold' of industrialisation – with narrow banks to facilitate industrial activity. The towpath was also located on the Molenbeek side.



The Brussels-Charleroi Canal at Porte de Ninove in Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, 1930. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, E023155)

## FAUBOURG SAINT-MARTIN AND FAUBOURG DE FLANDRE

South of the Chaussée de Gand, a neighbourhood developed around a number of streets built in approximately 1803 on the properties of Martin Godfurneau and Martin Van Beveren, who gave their name to this area. This *Faubourg Saint-Martin* grew very rapidly and from the outset was characterised by its mix of housing and small industrial premises taking advantage of the nearby water of the *Petite Senne*. The textile and chemical industries were first on the scene, with others following soon after. Trade links with the nearby urban centre were a major draw for those setting up in the suburb. Its semi-urban, semi-rural character endured for a long time, as evidenced by the presence of a farmhouse in Rue des Quatre-Vents in the late 19th century. There was a lively social scene, thanks in part to a number of *estaminets*, including *Au Chasseur Vert* (The Green Huntsman), a popular haunt for boatmen, and *À l'Ancien Saint-Martin* (The Old Saint

Martin) in *Rue du Billard* (now Rue Fernand Brunfaut).

In another suburb, the *Faubourg de Flandre*, the urbanisation process began slightly later and in a more organic and spontaneous way, with houses being built gradually along the old country lanes. The original function of these roads was to provide access to the meadows and vegetable plots (as reflected in the present-day street name Rue du Jardinier, meaning Gardener Street). This explains the rather tightly packed structure of the blocks in the old centre and its exceptional urban density.

A key landmark in this neighbourhood in the 19th century was the *Pont du Diable* (Devil's Bridge, now demolished), which carried Rue du



The old *Pont du Diable* (Devil's Bridge) in Molenbeek, Jean-Baptiste van Moer (between 1840 and 1849). (© MCB)

Ruisseau over the *Petite Senne*. This bridge was often referenced in official communications and deeds of sale. A tavern called *Le Premier Sol* opened nearby in around 1800. Two more substantial roads passed through the neighbourhood: *Chemin de l'Église* (Church Lane) connecting Chaussée de Gand to the church (foreshadowing the route of the current Rue du Prado and the second section of Rue du Comte de Flandre; and *Chemin des Moutons* (Sheep Lane), whose winding route can now be traced along Rue des Ateliers where it joins Place Saintelette.



Old farmhouse at the Quatre-Vents crossroads in Molenbeek, n.d.

(Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)

## ÉTABLISSEMENT GÉOGRAPHIQUE DE BRUXELLES

At the time when the canal was being dug, the talented young cartographer Philippe Vandermaelen (1795–1869), supported by his brother François, transformed an old laundry – a family property acquired by his father in 1815 on the banks of the *Petite Senne* – into the setting for an ambitious scientific enterprise with universal aims. Set in its own botanical garden, the *Établissement Géographique de Bruxelles* (Brussels Geographical Establishment) opened its doors in 1830, largely unaffected by the Belgian Revolution.

The property was located in the heart of the village and had many features typical of an early-19th-century estate. It was accessed from the banks of the canal, at no. 8 Quai des Charbonnages, via a large drive that later became Rue Vandermaelen. Within an English-style landscaped park stood five buildings, including three houses on Chaussée de Gand, as well as a pond and glasshouses containing collections of exotic plants. The main building, a large neoclassical edifice, was designed by Charles Van der Straeten, the architect behind William of Orange's palace (now the Palace of the Academies). Composed of two large

symmetrical wings connected by lower central sections, it housed the drawing and cartographic engraving workshop and its printing house, a well-stocked library and reading room, offices, research and teaching rooms, a museum of ethnography, a natural history gallery and a planetarium, all located around a central courtyard. The library contained scientific works in all fields and encompassed the full range of human knowledge, primarily in the form of periodical journals published by learned societies in Belgium and abroad. The richest collection was to be found in the *mappothèque*. This housed countless maps, atlases and relief maps in a large central cabinet with drawers, surmounted by a spectacular rotating globe measuring 10 metres in circumference, which could be examined from a mezzanine. The glasshouses contained some 15,000 plants growing in different climates, whether temperate, hot or specialised. Some of the plants were specially brought back from foreign expeditions, forming rare collections of orchids, camellias and geraniums. There was free public admission every day. Keen to pass on their knowledge, Philippe Vandermaelen

*Établissement Géographique fondé par Mr. Ph. Vandermaelen à Bruxelles*, lithograph by Adrien Canelle, in *La Belgique industrielle*, ed. Gêruzet, 1854–1856. (© KBR)





Plan parcellaire de la commune de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean avec mutations jusqu'en 1836 (detail: the 'Faubourg de Flandre'), plot map of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean by the Etablissement Géographique de Bruxelles, which itself occupied a huge site in the centre of the municipality. © KBR

and his colleagues organised many scientific lectures and courses, even attempting to set up various forms of free education, such as an *école normale* (teacher training college) and an industrial school, in the years around 1838–1840.

This private initiative was a remarkable venture at a time of great scientific excitement when Belgium's first public institutions were being established. It was an age fascinated by time, space, the earth, the heavens and, above all, by geography, the science that made it possible to understand the whole world. However, this

pioneering enterprise came at a huge financial cost to the Vandermaelen family and in a bid to save the collections, they made a hasty attempt to subdivide the property. Unfortunately, this proved unsuccessful. After Philippe's death, his son Joseph continued his father's work until 1879. The site was then sold in 1880 and the collections largely dispersed, except for the map collection, which was acquired by the Royal Library of Belgium.



© KBR

### PHILIPPE VANDERMAELEN (1795-1869)

Born into a well-to-do family in 1795, Philippe Vandermaelen was a self-taught cartographer and geographer. He understood geographical science in its broadest sense, encompassing knowledge of living beings and of the farthest-flung corners of the world. In 1825–1827, while still very young, he compiled a 400-page Universal Atlas of Physical, Political, Statistical and Mineralogical Geography, which immediately established him among the leading geographers of his time. In 1830, he set up his *Établissement Géographique de Bruxelles*, designed to contain "a well-organised digest of everything that exists in the world", where he surrounded himself with talented colleagues. He also produced a detailed 42-sheet topographical map of Belgium based on the maps of Count de Ferraris and became Belgium's official state

cartographer. Between 1846 and 1854, he published a second 250-sheet topographical map of Belgium at a scale of 1:20,000.

Vandermaelen was in contact with researchers, scholars and artists from around the world, amassed countless scientific publications and made his institution into a cradle of learning that spawned some leading scientific figures. He also compiled a Dictionary of Men of Letters, Scholars

and Artists of Belgium, with a list of their works (1837). A forerunner of the globalist Paul Otlet, who developed the Universal Decimal Classification half a century later, Vandermaelen accumulated a huge amount of learning, which he transposed onto more than 3 million index cards, and embarked on an ambitious project to catalogue the world's scientific knowledge: Epistemonomy, or General Indicative Tables of Human Knowledge. Unfortunately, he failed to raise the necessary funds for this project, which precipitated the family's financial ruin. Vandermaelen made an outstanding contribution to cartography due to the volume of his output, the precision of his topographical surveys and his innovations in lithographic reproduction, on which he collaborated with renowned printmakers. As well as being a distinguished scientist, he was also a philanthropist who left his mark on Brussels society and that of the municipality in which he lived.



Inauguration of Belgium's first railway at Allée Verte, anonymous printmaker, 1835. (© MCB)

## An industrial destiny (1832-1880)

Molenbeek's geographical location together with geopolitical circumstances made it exceptionally well suited to industrial development. The combined advantages of the canal as a navigation channel and the *Petite Senne* as a river water resource, its central position in relation to Belgium's communication routes and its location at the gateway to Brussels – now confirmed as the new nation's capital – were key to accelerating the establishment and development of enterprise on available land within the municipality.

Opened in 1832, the Charleroi Canal extended the Willebroek Canal to create a navigable route all the way from the Hainaut coalfield to the port of Antwerp, via Brussels. This made it possible to transport coal, the all-important fuel for driving steam engines, which at that time were expanding rapidly as a form of mechanised power. The canal also facilitated the transportation of heavy materials and of the abundant raw materials used in the processing industries. Three years later, in

1835, the opening of the country's first railway on the Allée Verte marked the start of a period of industrial development that would turn Brussels into Belgium's leading economic centre. A series of upgrades to the canal and the construction of the port and marine facilities in the first half of the 20th century ensured that Molenbeek remained an attractive location for industry.

It was in this context that Molenbeek's first two major industrial plants sprang up, both in the metalworking sector and both linked to the railway. Pauwels and Cail & Halot, situated side by side on the outskirts of the centre of the municipality, were the largest companies of their kind in Brussels. Compared with other industrial areas of Brussels, the municipality of Molenbeek had a very varied industrial profile in terms of both the sectors involved and the size of the plants that set up there. There were businesses manufacturing metal structures in iron and bronze (steam engines, railway equipment, coachwork, artworks), electrical

appliances, timber products, furniture and building materials; a gasworks, chemical plants, soap factories, textile and spinning plants, clothing and leather manufacturers, a tobacco depot; as well as numerous food and beverage plants (primary processed products, flour mills, breweries, factories producing sugar, chocolate, pasta, and so on).

The various manufacturing operations and large warehouses for storage were located around the edge of the village centre, which continued to be used mainly for housing and social activities. As companies evolved, they moved premises, some expanded and built extensions or set up subsidiaries, while others took over rivals. It was not uncommon for specialised buildings, such as those used for brewing or milling, to be occupied by a succession of firms engaged in the same type of production.



Quai des Charbonnages in 1909, postcard. Industrialisation radically altered the landscape of Molenbeek. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)

Several of these companies have left a lasting mark on the area and continue to shape its identity to this day. The following pages profile some of the most iconic of these businesses.



An ambitious plan (never realised) for a diversion of the Brussels-Charleroi Canal, 1864. As well as creating a new ship canal and 'seaport' in the municipality (blue), the plan would have seen the Senne, Petite Senne and part of the existing canal disappear to make way for boulevards (red). (© KBR)

## THE CAIL & HALOT FACTORY (1838-1900)

The picture of the Cail & Halot factory appeared in a book by G eruzet promoting Belgium's early industrial development. It offers a bird's-eye view, in which the observer is placed inside Molenbeek's still rural landscape. We see several huge industrial buildings located around two courtyards and accessed via an alley, a



 tablissement Derosne & Cail. Soci t  J.F. Cail et A. Halot & Cie., lithograph by Adrien Canelle, in *La Belgique industrielle*, ed. G eruzet, 1854-1856. (  KBR)

factory manager's house, outbuildings, smoking chimneys, people and some large boilers. The chimneys point to an activity requiring motive power: forging. Buildings of contrasting size and scale are spread over a large area in which a variety of functions are interwoven to create architectural diversity. The factory manager's house is part of the industrial site, which it dominates by virtue of its greater height. An entry gate, topped by a pair of sphinxes (or possibly lions), is an Empire-style version of an 18th-century ch teau entrance.

The company was founded in the Chaillot area of Paris by a chemist, Charles Derosne, who had perfected a process for manufacturing beet sugar and subsequently (around 1810) set up boilermaking workshops to implement the process. In partnership with Jean-Fran ois Cail, the company expanded and occupied several sites in France before establishing a



The former gateway to the Cail & Halot factory, now the entrance to Parc de la Fonderie. Rue Cail et Halot. (  Urban.brussels)

branch in Brussels in 1838. Labour there was plentiful and raw materials were cheaper. Within a few years, the business was growing internationally. The firm showcased its machine tools for sugar refineries at the *Exposition de l'Industrie Belge* in 1841 and went on to diversify its metalworking product range with various machine tools for industrial production, followed by vehicles and locomotives. The management of this large company attempted some advances in employment practice by not hiring staff under the age of 16, but at the end of the 19th century, its workers spoke out against the very poor conditions they endured.

##  TABLISSEMENTS FRAN OIS PAUWELS (1848-1867)

This railway equipment company was founded by a carpenter (a former assistant to Fran ois Vandermaelen), who moved into transport equipment and the manufacture of wagons, machinery and railway equipment. With the arrival of the railways, Fran ois Pauwels seized the opportunity offered by a new industrial market, on the advice of F lix Dubois, a close associate of Philippe Vandermaelen.

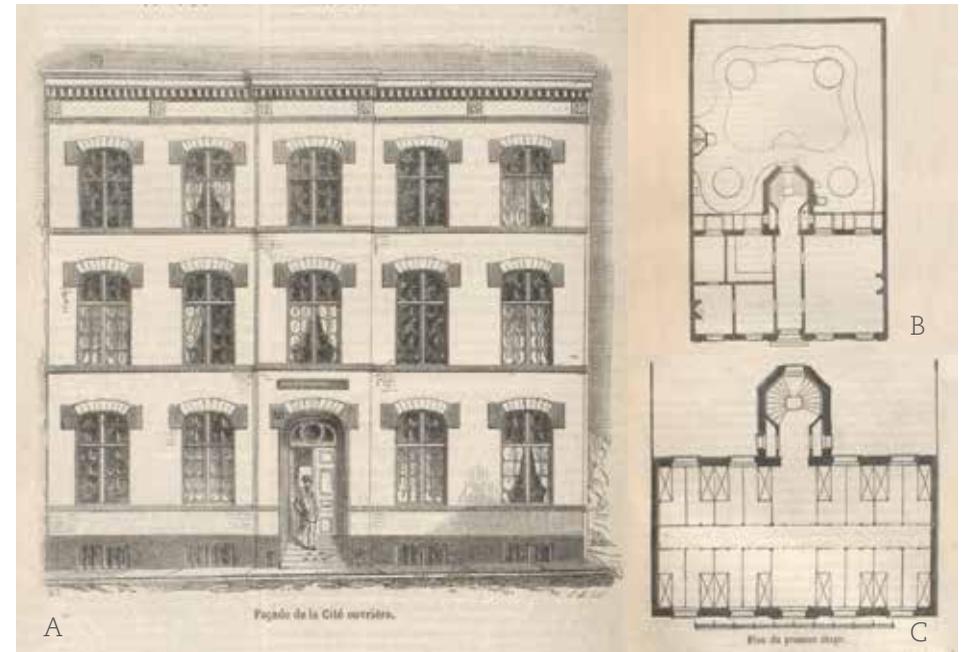
The company employed nearly 1,000 workers in 1857 and was already a major player by 1854 when it featured in a print by Adrien Canelle. The print shows the factory covering a huge



Ateliers de construction pour mat riels de chemins de fer de Fran ois Pauwels, lithography by Adrien Canelle, in *La Belgique industrielle*, ed. G eruzet, 1854-1856. (  KBR)

site on the edge of the village centre (now Rue Delaunoy). It is symmetrical in structure, with two large manufacturing buildings connected by an entrance porch. The gabled fa ades are designed in a neat neoclassical style, conveying an orderly, controlled and reassuring image of the company.

hailed as a model achievement. He supported the education of his workers by also building a school of practical design and a library, thus keeping alive the tradition of intellectual improvement in Molenbeek begun by Philippe Vandermaelen.



Plans for Cit  Pauwels published in *L'illustration* on 15 November 1851: (A) fa ade, (B) plan of the ground floor with vestibule and foreman's apartment, and (C) plan of an upper floor with bedrooms for workers. (  KBR)



Compagnie des Bronzes, workshops, c. 1900. (© La Fonderie)

## COMPAGNIE DES BRONZES

In 1854, the company Corman & Cie, based in Rue d'Assaut in Brussels, diversified from manufacturing metal items in zinc and iron, as well as lighting equipment, into the production of furniture and statues. At this time, it set up a firm named *Compagnie des Bronzes*. In 1862, the company established some of its workshops in Rue Ransfort, Molenbeek, before moving all of its operations there in 1887. The site was relative-

ly enclosed, sitting alongside the Cail & Halot foundry. It comprised a large complex of buildings, the longest of which housed the carving and lathe operators' workshop, with a storehouse for models and drawings upstairs. The large smelting hall (600 m<sup>2</sup>) and the bronze moulding hall were located to the rear of the site, surrounded by the assembly and decoration workshops and a special assembly hall for large items. There were also a number of sheds and stables, as well as the manager's house, a neoclassical building facing onto the street.

The foundry specialised in art objects and its reputation grew with the development of the lost-wax casting technique, which led to public orders for statues and monumental artefacts. The company's reputation, which earned it some prestigious commissions, was further enhanced by its canny practice of exhibiting larger pieces when they left the workshop, before they were delivered to the client. For example, the spectacular entrance gate to New York Zoo (11 metres high, 26 metres long, 28 tonnes, 18 months of work) was put on display from 5 to 15 July 1933, prior to its departure for America. A catalogue lists the many prestigious pieces produced, including the statue of King Albert I on Mont des Arts, the sculptures of guilds and the statue of Counts Egmont and Horn in the Petit Sablon, the monument to Everard t'Serclaes, the Brabo monument in Antwerp... and many others in Belgium and beyond. Meanwhile, the company



Entrance gates to New York Zoo made by Compagnie des Bronzes, on display before being shipped. (© La Fonderie)

continued to make light fittings and could even boast some royal commissions! *Compagnie des Bronzes* closed its doors in April 1977. The site was bought by the French Community and a project to preserve and enhance its social and industrial heritage was led by the Molenbeek non-profit organisation *La Rue* (The Street). *La Fonderie* (The Foundry – Brussels Museum of Industry and Work) moved into the renovated premises in 1986.



The former Compagnie des Bronzes site, now La Fonderie - Brussels Museum of Industry and Work. (© KIK-IRPA - Urban.brussels, X119716)

## BREWERIES - BELLE-VUE

Breweries consume a large amount of water and until the early 20th century, were usually sited in valley bottoms. Water is used in the production process for various purposes, including as a raw material and for cooling the wort. Several large lambic breweries set up in Molenbeek, occupying multiple sites, moving and expanding, competing with each other and taking one another over. The last one still in operation, the *Belle-Vue* Brewery, was strategically located on Quai du Hainaut, until it left

Molenbeek for Sint-Pieters-Leeuw in 2008. It was the third brewery to occupy the site. The first was a brewery and malthouse called *Le Cornet de Poste* (The Post Horn). Originally opened in Rue des Fabriques in 1865, the brothers Louis and Émile De Coster relocated it to Molenbeek in 1916, between the canal and the *Petite Senne*. The brewery, which produced gueuze, was enlarged between 1931 and 1935 by the architect René Serrure into an imposing five-storey building bordering the canal. The De Costers' brewery became the *Brasserie De Boeck Frères de Koekelberg* in 1966, which was



Brasserie Louis & Émile De Coster, letterhead depicting the brewery, n.d. (© MAM/MoMuse)

itself merged with the Belle-Vue Brewery (established by the Vanden Stock family) in 1969. Belle-Vue, Belgium's biggest lambic brewery, was taken over by the AB InBev Group in 1991. The site has now been repurposed. Brewing necessitates some very specific and bulky equipment, including vats for the brewhouse/malthouse, large casks (tuns) to hold the beer and facilities for storing raw materials (grain, malt, hops, etc.). Then there is the distribution side, for which stables (and later garages) were required. For example, in

1910 a brewery called *L'Étoile* (The Star), located not far away on Quai de Mariemont, was fitted out with one of the largest stables of any Brussels brewery – housing 60 horses, which were used to deliver around 22 types of beer. As the municipality became more densely populated, land became scarcer and buildings taller.

### HOW TO BREW LAMBIC

- » Mash 50–70% barley malt and 30–50% wheat.
- » Add hops during the boiling process.
- » Collect the wort, and cool and ferment it by exposing it to the open air (from October to May).
- » Transfer to casks (made of oak or chestnut) for fermentation and maturation (for between six months and three years).

*Gueuze* is a blend of young and old lambic that undergoes a secondary fermentation in the bottle to produce a slightly sparkling product. *Faro* is a lambic sweetened by adding a little brown candy sugar, while *Kriek* is a lambic to which fruit has been added.

### FARCY FLOUR MILL – L'ÉPI

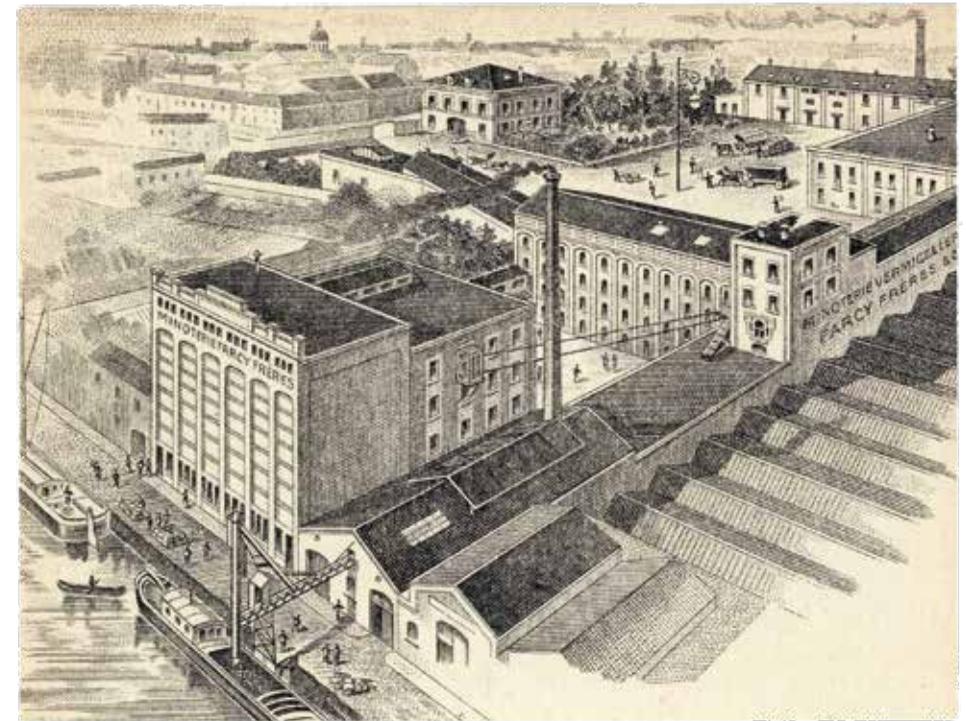
Flour mills (also known as 'steam mills') became an important urban industry in the 19th century and were a legacy of Molenbeek's agricultural past (the municipality still had two windmills on the high ground at Scheut in the mid-19th century).

The Farcy flour mill, on Quai des Charbonnages, was founded in 1836. After being damaged in a major fire, it began milling flour again in 1851. By 1900, the company, now renamed *Le Moulin à Vapeur et à Cylindres Farcy Frères et Cie*, was making pasta and biscuits under the brand name *L'Épi* (Ear of Corn), as well as producing flour.

The site expanded in phases, with a series of high structures – including the central building housing the flour mill and a large wheat silo fronting the canal (c. 1930) – together with some low-built annexes and the manager's house forming an enclosed complex around

internal courtyards. The transformation of wheat into flour took place in tall buildings, with the processed product flowing down from top to bottom on tiered trays. The rear façade of the main wing featured a regular pattern of large pilasters and was built in a classical architectural style of semicircular arches reminiscent of the Romanesque. A freight lift dominated the façade. This was external to the building so as not to encroach on and weaken the architectural structure. The flour mill remained in operation until 1960.

In the 2000s, the main building of this enclosed site provided an opportunity to create a public square, linking up a series of old no-through roads and thus reshaping the neighbourhood.



The Farcy flour mill, letterhead, c. 1900. (© MoMuse)



Rear façade of the Farcy flour mill before the development of the current square, c. 1980. (© CIVA)



The design of Place de la Minoterie (2001-2005) makes the most of the Farcy building's monumental façade. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2022 © urban.brussels)

## DE WAELE ENTERPRISES

The De Waele family opened a carpentry workshop on Quai aux Pierres de Taille in Brussels in 1866. In 1867, Jean and Louis De Waele moved the workshop to Rue de l'Intendant in Molenbeek, where the family already had a timber warehouse. In addition to the carpentry business, the brothers set up a flooring company, which required specific expertise, and over time the firm gradually developed into a general building contractor. Louis expanded the business and relocated it to Rue Adolphe Lavallée in 1888. The vast three-storey premises were designed by the renowned architect Henri Beyaert and were nothing short of a model factory. On the ground floor was the huge machinery room for processing the timber, as well as the assembly and shipping areas. The site also included a neo-renaissance town house designed by Émile Janlet. In 1928, a new phase of construction was overseen by the architect Eugène Dhuicque, in keeping with Beyaert's work. The resulting buildings were very well designed and equipped with sophisticated tools. With a view to 'moral improvement', consideration was given to the comfort of workers, who benefited from a huge canteen, large changing rooms and showers. There was also state-of-the-art electric lighting powered by an on-site substation, as well as a large shed used for storing construction equipment for the most important jobs. The three renowned architects who worked on this exceptional site followed in the same architectural tradition. Today, all that remains is the façade designed by Janlet.

In 1910, to coincide with the Brussels International Exposition, Jules De Waele published a map of Brussels illustrated with vignettes of the city's 50 leading companies. As well as being a very modern piece of PR, promoting the family business and fixing it in the collective memory, it is an interesting document that tells us a lot about the industrial situation in the capital at this time.



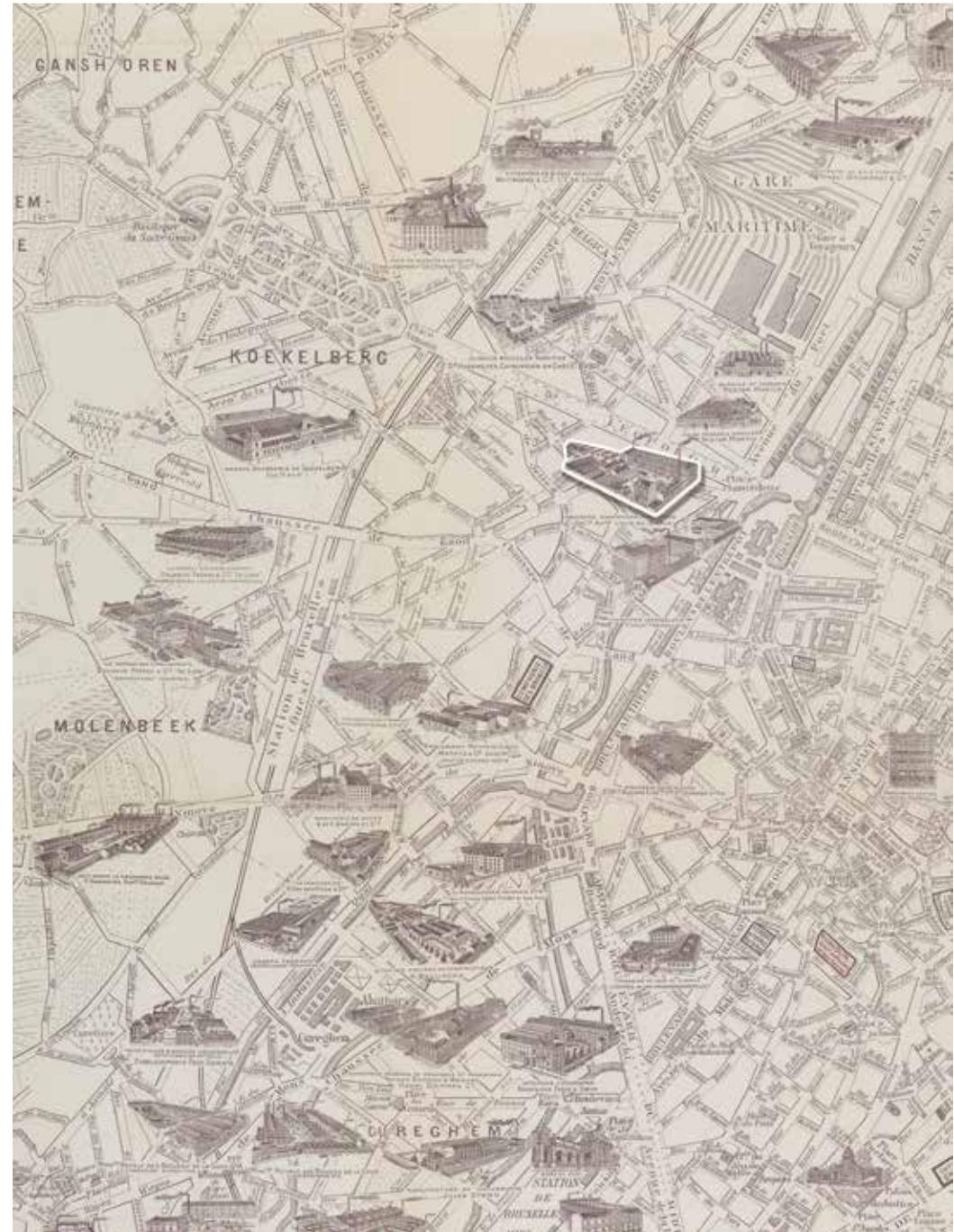
Entreprises De Waele viewed from Boulevard Léopold II, 1894. Left: Rue Lavallée and the factory designed by Henri Beyaert. Right: Émile Janlet's town house. (© AVB)



Entreprises De Waele viewed from Boulevard Léopold II, 1927. Left: the extension by Eugène Dhuicque. Right: the town house designed by Émile Janlet. (L'émulation, 11, 1927, p. 129)



View from Boulevard Léopold II of Émile Janlet's town house, now incorporated into a modern office building. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2022 © urban.brussels)



Nouveau Plan De Bruxelles Industriel Avec Ses Suburbains (detail). Verwest, Auguste, Vanderroot and Xhardez, 1910. The Farcy flour mill and Compagnie des Bronzes can be seen near the De Waele factory (shown in white). (© Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent, BRKZ.KRT.1747)

## AJJA TOBACCO WAREHOUSES (1875, 1910)

Located in the interior of a block and constructed perpendicular to the *Petite Senne* at a time when the river was still uncovered, this industrial building occupies practically the same footprint as the main building of Vandermaelen's *Établissement Géographique* and its glasshouses. The imposing façade consists of a line of five gables and was built in two phases. The first three gables were designed in 1875 by the highways inspector Victor Besme for the tobacco-importing Jacobs brothers. The other two are a 1910 extension by the architect Victor Delpierre, who conferred a new monumentality on Besme's work while respecting its composition. In 1928, André-J. Jacobs *Aîné* ('the Elder') decided to specialise in the supply of tobacco to cigarette manufacturers and set up the renowned rolling-tobacco company AJJA (based on the initials of his own name). He had the brand emblazoned on the front of his warehouse.

There were many tobacco companies in Molenbeek at that time, ranging from the imposing (*Odon Warland, BAT, Saint-Michel*) to the discreet. An example of the latter was the *Vittoria Egyptian Cigarette Company*, located in the centre of the municipality on the corner of Rue Courtois and Rue Adolphe Lavallée (c. 1919–1925).

## FACTORIES, BOSSES AND... WHERE THE WORKERS LIVED

Factories were the subject of much architectural attention, earning them the nickname 'châteaux of industry'. The high-quality façades built in Molenbeek still bear witness to this today. The practice of depicting company buildings in publications or on letterheads indicates the extent to which a firm's image was associated with its buildings. However, it was a very different matter with the workers' accommodation, which was of least concern



AJJA tobacco warehouses. The unusual shape of the building reflects its position alongside the *Petite Senne*.  
(A. de Ville de Goyet, 2022 © urban.brussels)

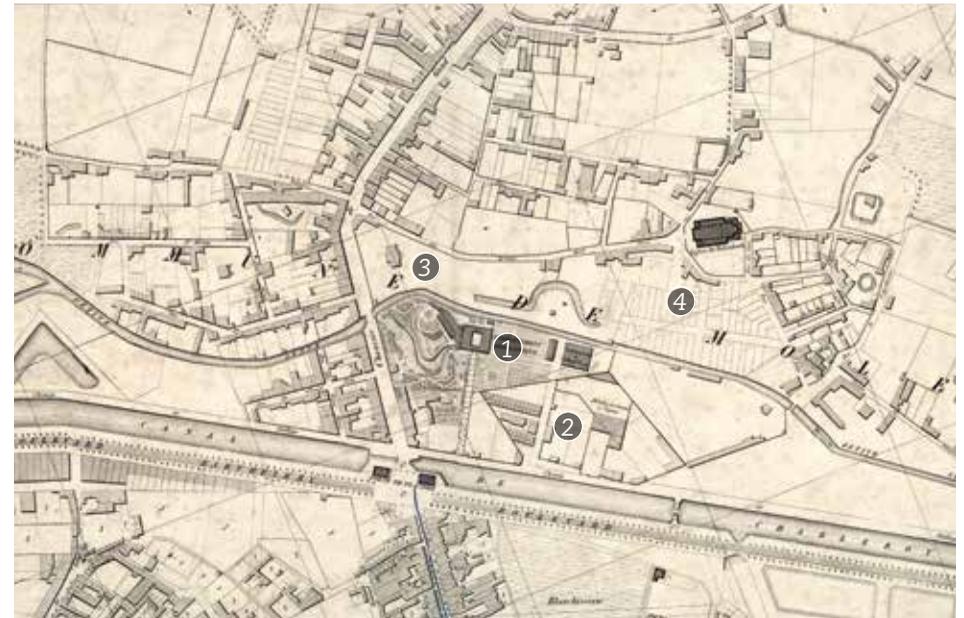
to both architects and factory owners. Packed together down narrow, dead-end alleys known as *impasses*, workers endured appalling living conditions in miserable dwellings built at minimal cost. The 1820s saw the emergence of *bataillons carrés* ('square battalions'), tightly packed rows of small two-storey houses with one, or sometimes two, cramped rooms per floor, with no water and very little light, each room occupied by a family. There could be between 10 and 20 people living in a house, often with only one latrine per *impasse*. As there were no visible street frontages, these



Workers' houses in Rue des Ateliers.  
(A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)

Plan géométrique de la Ville de Bruxelles dressé en 1835 (detail),  
W.B. Craan. (© ASB)

1. Vandermaelen property
2. Impasses around the Loos premises
3. Le Prado
4. Project by *Compagnie Immobilière* (now Rue de l'Avenir and Rue de la Prospérité)

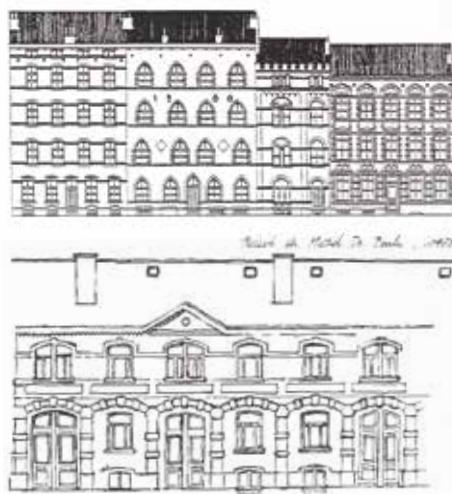


houses were not legally required to have planning permission.

An 1830s map of the area around the Loos premises in Molenbeek shows a cluster of one main *impasse* and two smaller ones near the Vandermaelen property – on land freed up by the dismantling of a bastion in the city wall – in which around 60 families were living! Some tentative efforts at improvement were made around 1850, such as *Cité Pauwels*, built to house unmarried workers of the railway equipment company. While the house offered some comfort for its 40 occupants, it also allowed their employer to keep a close eye on them.

The municipal archives contain plans by *Compagnie Immobilière*, which also appear on the maps of central Molenbeek drawn up by Willem Benjamin Craan from 1835. They show two streets in the shape of a cross (corresponding to what is now Rue de l'Avenir and Rue de la Prospérité), each 10 metres wide with cut-off corners and flanked by regular plots. This plot division, somewhat reminiscent of the model company town at the Bois-du-Luc coal mine, seems to reflect the municipal authorities'

desire for better-quality housing. However, these plans were never fully implemented. Workers' housing took various forms, sometimes linked to the fact that the industrialists who paid for it wanted to be able to monitor and control their workforce. While the boss's house was usually located at the entrance to the company site, the workers' accommodation was built around the perimeter – small clusters of modest houses outside the factory walls. Some had elaborate façades, such as the small houses in Rue des Ateliers built by *Raffinerie Bruxelloise*, or the rental-apartment buildings in Impasse Darimon.



Façades of workers' houses in Rue des Ateliers and rental-apartment buildings in Impasse Darimon, surveyed by Michel de Beule, 1978. In *Patrimoine immobilier industriel et social bruxellois*, 1992. (© La Fonderie)

## Development of a modern neighbourhood (1860–late 19th century)

The industrial districts that sprang up along the canal, on both sides of Chaussée de Gand, initially developed spontaneously, without any structured planning. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that the network of urban thoroughfares designed by Victor Besme at royal behest provided a framework for the westward expansion of Brussels. Meanwhile, large-scale developments and public amenities in the centre of the old settlement marked the incorporation of historic Molenbeek into Belgium's emerging capital city.

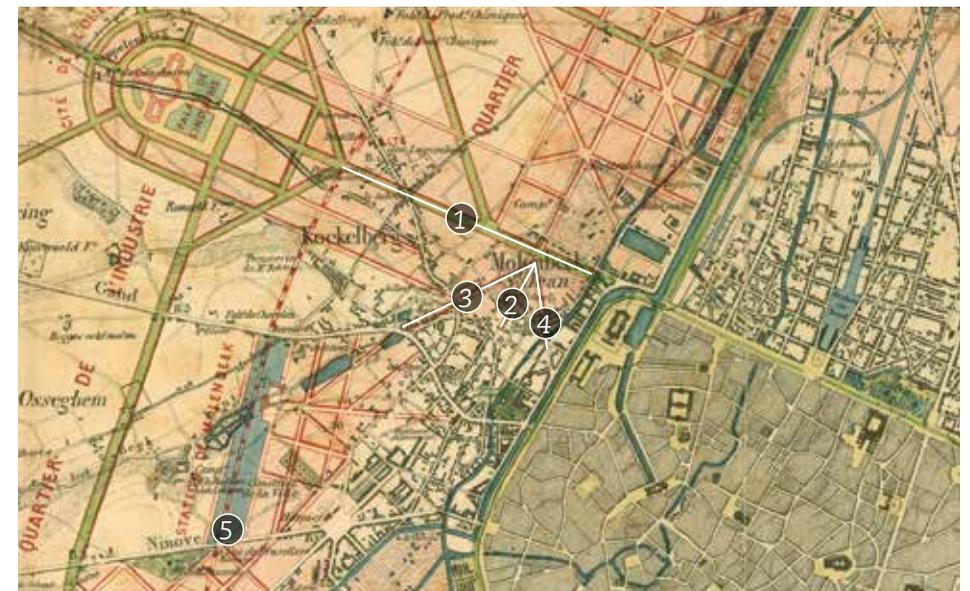
after whom it was named, running in a straight line from Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste to Rue Picard. In 1862, Victor Besme proposed extending Boulevard d'Anvers as far as the Koekelberg plateau. This route was confirmed in the plans for a *Nouveau Quartier Royal de Koekelberg Lez Bruxelles*, drawn up in 1864 and carried out at the instigation of King Leopold II. Work got under way quickly, with the section from *Porte du Rivage* (Waterfront Gate) to Place Simonis being completed in 1873. Now known as Boulevard Léopold II, it was an imposing thoroughfare, modelled on the boulevards of the inner ring road: 40 metres wide, it comprised a central walkway planted with rows

### NEW THOROUGHFARES

To the north, efforts to organise the *Faubourg de Flandre* began with Rue de Ribaucourt. The road was built privately in 1839 on rural land owned by the wealthy and prominent family

*Faubourgs de Bruxelles – Plan d'ensemble pour l'extension et l'embellissement de l'agglomération bruxelloise* (detail), Victor Besme, 1866. (© Fonds Victor Besme, Urban.brussels)

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Project for Boulevard Léopold II | 4. Rue de l'Espérance                          |
| 2. Rue de Ribaucourt                | 5. Site of present-day Bruxelles-Ouest station |
| 3. Rue Piers                        |  |



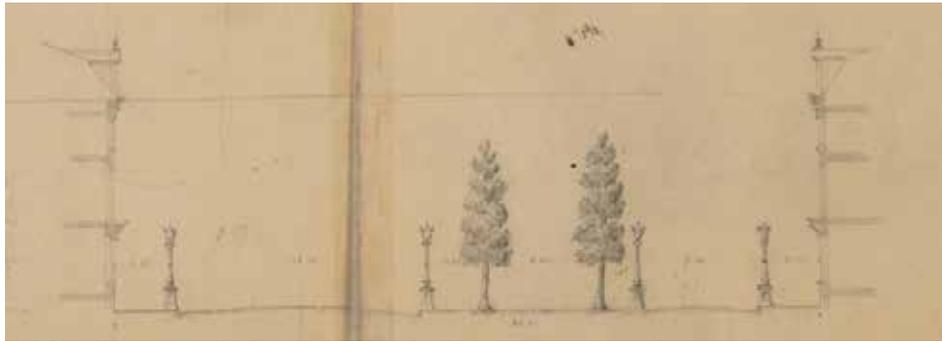
### EUGÈNE LAERMANS (1864-1940)

Eugène Laermans was an internationally renowned painter with a deep attachment to Molenbeek, where he lived all his life. Born at no. 92 Chaussée de Gand, the youngest child of a middle-class family, at the age of 11 he contracted an illness that isolated him from the outside world. Left deaf and nearly mute, he immersed himself in reading, devouring the writers of the late 19th century, particularly those that voiced the demands of the proletariat. He took drawing lessons first at the drawing school in Rue des Quatre-Vents then at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, where he studied under Jean-François Portaels.

Alert to the difficulties faced by industrial and agricultural workers and committed to combating social exclusion, his work portrays humanity in its collective dimension. His major works feature dramatic depictions of poverty: *Un Soir de Grève* (The Evening of the Strike, 1893), *L'Aveugle* (The Blind One, 1898), *L'Ivrogne* (The Drunkard, 1898) and *Les Chiffonniers* (The Raggpickers, 1914). The street named after him offers a fine view of Molenbeek's Academy of Drawing and Visual Arts.



Country folk waiting at a door, Eugène Laermans, 1894. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, km003814)



Royal Quarter, Koekelberg plateau, survey of plots along the extension of Boulevard d'Anvers and profile (detail). Profile of the future Boulevard Léopold II designed by Victor Besme, 1869. (© Fonds Victor Besme, Urban.brussels)

of horse chestnut trees and separate traffic lanes for carriages and trams.

In 1866, Besme attempted to build new roads on the agricultural land that still surrounded the village core. He designed a small *patte d'oie* radiating out from Boulevard Léopold II at the end of Rue de Ribaucourt. While Rue Piers did see the light of day, running in a perfectly straight line to join Chaussée de Gand at Étangs Noirs, the second branch (now Rue de l'Espérance) was thwarted by the industrial facilities located along the *Petite Senne*.

Further west, the desire to create a central

## HOUSING IMPROVEMENT POLICIES

Based on a statistical study of the 1842 population census, the statistician Adolphe Quetelet and the lawyer and journalist Édouard Ducpétiaux (who also served as inspector-general of prisons) established a link between the problem of hygiene in workers' housing with frequent outbreaks of cholera. Highways inspector Victor Besme also criticised landlords' "shameful specialism" in "housing workers at an extortionate rate by taking as much money off them as possible without giving them in return even the amount of air needed not to die a slow death". Concerned about hygiene, he repeatedly expressed the urgent need to clean up the narrow streets of the old village, which were damp and had no

railway station for Molenbeek gave rise to an ambitious plan to link this station with Chaussée de Gand by a new artery crossing the area known as Les Quatre Vents (Four Winds) and build a new neighbourhood with a grid street plan. This plan reflected the major role that the new no. 28 railway line was intended to play. In the end, Besme's design for the area's street network did not materialise and only a modest station (Bruxelles-Ouest) was opened there in 1872.

sewers. His proposal to the municipal council to have some 10 streets in the area paved and drained by a comprehensive network of channels was acted upon, and the scheme also resulted in some streets being widened and straightened.

From the 1840s onwards, the municipal council attempted policies to improve building quality and sanitation. In 1845, it made building permits mandatory and drew up regulations to enhance the quality of designs by requiring the paving of courtyards and lanes, the cementing of walls, the installation of sewers and a water supply, and so on.

## THE PRADO – AN UNUSUAL VENUE

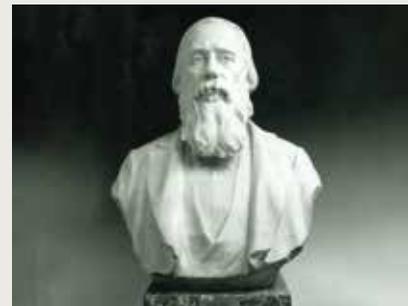
The *Prado* was one of the most curious places in the *Faubourg de Flandre*: a fashionable entertainment venue in the heart of this industrialised village, where "riders will only be admitted if they are wearing a hat". The establishment occupied a large premises situated along *Rue de l'Église* (now Rue du Prado).

From 1847 onwards, its summer gardens hosted balls, concerts, fireworks, garden parties and banquets, the green surroundings being very popular with city dwellers from the nearby capital. Spectacular attractions, such as an aerial railway and the flight of "several grotesque balloons", drew in the crowds. In 1848, a flight by the English balloonist Charles Green was apparently watched by



Poster for a show in the Prado summer gardens, featuring an 'aerial railway' and the 'ascent of grotesque balloons' (detail), 1 August 1852. (© KBR)

King Leopold I himself. The summer garden and its entertainments were later supplemented by (mainly amateur) theatrical performances, many of which enacted stories of life in the municipality. The venue became the centre of Flemish theatre in Brussels from 1864 to 1867 and the former *Prado* theatre was converted for a time into the municipality's town hall.



Bust of Jean-Charles Houzeau de Lehaie in the Palace of the Academies, Léon Gobert, 1903. (© Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique)

## JEAN-CHARLES HOUZEAU DE LEHAIE (1820-1888)

Jean-Charles Houzeau de Lehaie was an outspoken and revolutionary figure closely associated with the *Prado*. A scholar, renowned

scientist and committed politician, he began his career as a journalist and assistant to Adolphe Quetelet at the Royal Observatory of Belgium. In the mid-19th century, a republican movement sparked by labour unrest brought together a number of high-profile individuals. After being banned by the liberal government, political meetings began to be organised under the guise of 'banquets'. The most famous of these was the *Prado Banquet* held on 25 March 1849 at the instigation of Jean-Charles Houzeau. When the republican plot was uncovered, Houzeau was sacked by Prime Minister Charles Rogier and sought refuge abroad, in Europe and later the Americas. He finally returned to Brussels in 1876, having been personally recalled by King Leopold II to reorganise the Royal Observatory and take over its management. An avenue in Uccle leading to the observatory bears his name, as does a street straddling Molenbeek and Koekelberg.

## PLACE COMMUNALE AND THE 'WHITE TOWN'

The creation of Place Communale (Municipal Square) was undoubtedly the biggest urban development project undertaken by the municipal council. Its large rectangular shape and the prominence of the town hall occupying one of its four sides, proclaimed the square as a locus of identity, a nerve centre and an institutional hub. Directly echoing Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste in the heart of the old village, it was to become the new focal point of the municipality.

It was in 1855 that an opportunity arose for the municipal council when the *Prado* summer garden and surrounding land were put up for auction. It decided immediately and unanimously to purchase them "in order to build a municipal square, town hall, municipal school and courthouse for the Justice of the Peace". The square was inaugurated in 1858 and it was immediately agreed to establish a market on the site. However, the plans for the school and town hall proved more contentious.

The municipal school was relegated to a less central location in Rue des Quatre-Vents, reflecting the councillors' negative view of this kind of amenity and the inconvenience it would cause in the vicinity. As for the new town hall,

that would not be built for another three decades.

Place Communale has retained most of its original buildings. Their alignment reflects the original division of plots, which were sold off to private buyers. The square's architecture follows the classical tradition that became fashionable across Brussels in the second half of the 19th century – sober, symmetrical and homogeneous. Groups of three or four identical houses gradually sprang up around the square, making architectural ensembles its dominant feature. The main decorative elements of these ensembles were friezes, first-floor balconies supported by corbels and, in some cases, moulded window frames and modillion cornices. Form and composition were predominant, with decoration being of lesser importance. Although most of the ground floors are now commercial premises, the buildings were originally residential. The many old pictures of the square attest to the bustle created by the market stalls and the crowds they attracted.

The neoclassical style with its homogeneous building fronts, their unity reinforced by smooth, light-coloured plaster, spread to the surrounding area during the last quarter of the 19th century. The areas around the square and around Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste and Rue de

Ribaucourt – a new hub of activity since the creation of Boulevard Léopold II – became increasingly built-up.

Walking around these streets today, one can observe the many variations on the prevailing style, seen in everything from more modest commercial or residential properties to lower- and upper-middle-class houses: flat façades with increasingly spaced openings and unified by a stringcourse,

emphasising of the central bay or *bel étage* (by a pediment, round-headed window, etc.), semi-detached houses, groupings following the rule of axial symmetry, façades featuring eclectic elements such as moulded frames with ornate keystones and ironwork, and so on.

This vast and remarkable urban ensemble also includes small groups of lower, two-storey workers' houses, as in Rue des Ateliers, Rue Anglaise and Rue du Niveau.



Neoclassical façades on Place Communale. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)

## INCARNATIONS OF THE TOWN HALL

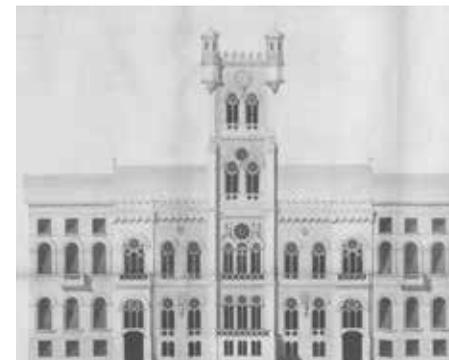
The town hall was originally located at no. 23 Chaussée de Merchtem, on the site of the current Parc Bonnevie. Initial plans from 1847 involved relocating it to the road to Ninove, on Place de la Duchesse de Brabant. These failed to attract unanimous backing and were abandoned. The municipal council then decided to move its premises to the former *Prado* theatre. However, there was much dithering over the future of this building and its condition gradually deteriorated. An 1885 report detailed its dilapidated state and cramped conditions. Advocates of the

building's demolition did not mince their words, calling it a "hovel unworthy of a municipality of 45,000 inhabitants, a real hotbed of infection". The pressure was such that in 1886 the council, led by liberal mayor Henri Hollevoet, decided to rebuild the town hall on the same site.

The new design, by municipal architect Jean-Baptiste Janssens, was representative of the public architecture of the time, whose eclectic style drew on the classical vocabulary of antiquity and the Renaissance. Janssens' vision managed to combine the utilitarian and the aesthetic, fulfilling the design brief while also staying within budget. The construction provided work for local businesses and craftsmen: woodwork was supplied by the De Waele brothers' factories, ironwork by *Compagnie des Bronzes*, and so on. The paintings on marouflaged canvasses adorning the ceiling of the mayor's office are the work of Amédée Lynen. The scale and structure of the building reflected the prestige of the municipal authority. Outside, the corner tower topped by a spectacular dome marks the junction between the square and Rue du Comte de Flandre. Inside, the staircase and first-floor gallery are on a monumental scale.



The town hall and market on Place Communale, postcard, early 20th century. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)



Jean-Frédéric van der Rit's design for a town hall on Place Duchesse de Brabant (never built). (© MAM)



Molenbeek Town Hall. (A and B) Allegory of municipal administration and life's journey, painting on canvas in the mayor's office, Amédée Lynen, 1889. (C) Staircase and first-floor gallery. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, X009013, X009015 et X009007)

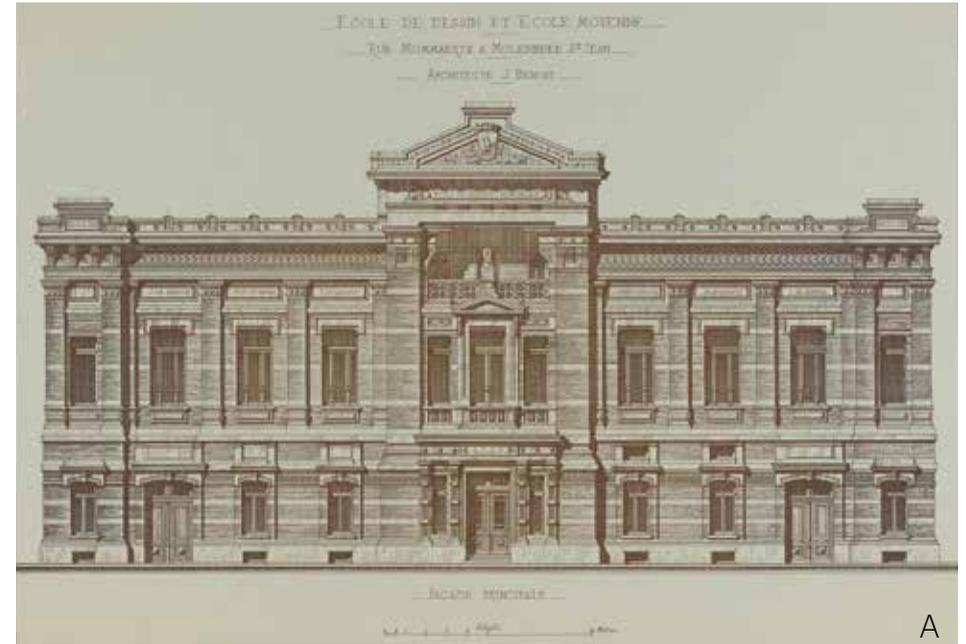
## DRAWING AND MODELLING SCHOOL

Against the economic backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, a school of drawing and modelling was established in Molenbeek in 1865. Another 15 or so opened across Belgium at around the same time, all driven by the same trend. Their primary purpose was utilitarian: to train workers and craftsmen to read and draw plans. But while the aim of the teaching may have been to upskill the workforce, artistic training was far from neglected. Indeed, given the fierce competition in Belgium and internationally and the need for local businesses to stand out, artistry and the pursuit of form and aesthetics occupied an important place. Owing to the state of municipal finances at the time, the classes had to take place on one storey of an existing school, located in Rue des Quatre-Vents. Within less than 20 years, the drawing school had become too cramped and the municipality decided to construct a new building, for which they called on the services of the architect Joaquim Benoît in 1878. Benoît, who had worked under Joseph Poelaert, designed a solid and stately edifice whose composition and eclectic style recalled that of his eminent predecessor. Both the façade and the interior expressed prestige, solemnity, authority and rigour, reflecting the

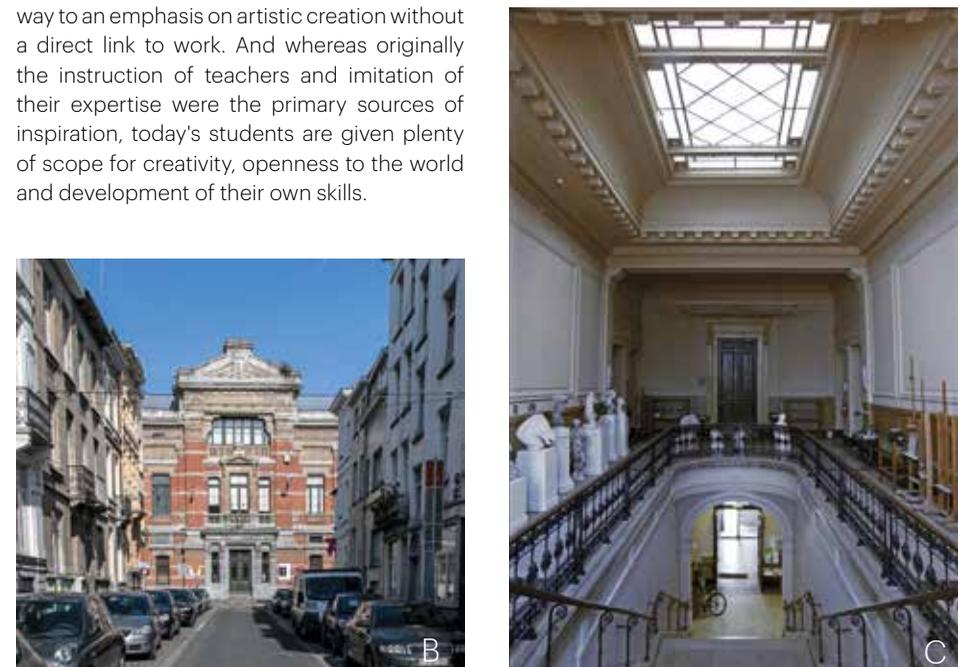
middle-class values and morality that the teaching aimed to convey. The school's motto was *Recht en Vooruit* (Straight Ahead). Features of note included an imposing marble and wrought-iron staircase, six-metre-high workshops and large windows letting in plenty of natural light. Benoît had been a professor of architecture at the drawing school (later made an academy) since 1872 and became its director in 1901.

The authorities chose to locate a middle school for girls on the same site as the academy, which was a doubly progressive move for the time, combining female education with the social advancement of workers. In view of the rather high entrance fee, the municipal council made classes free for Molenbeek residents, at least for the first few years. The registers show that, in addition to locals, many students came from further afield, including Flanders, Wallonia, Britain, France and Prussia.

The academy has now been running successfully for over 150 years. Since the 1970s, it has evolved its approach to keep pace with changing times, while retaining the same ethos. The initial vocational focus combining trades, industry and art has given



Drawing and modelling school. (A) Design of the main façade by Joachim Benoît, 1878, and present-day views of (B) the main façade and (C) the staircase. (© CIVA en A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019/2010 © urban.brussels)



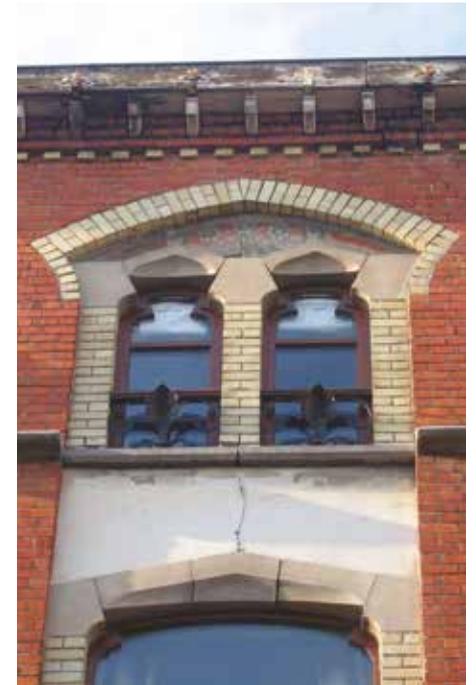
way to an emphasis on artistic creation without a direct link to work. And whereas originally the instruction of teachers and imitation of their expertise were the primary sources of inspiration, today's students are given plenty of scope for creativity, openness to the world and development of their own skills.



The cooperative bakery of Molenbeek's Maison du Peuple, postcard, n.d. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB - urban.brussels)

160 members. As business expanded, alternative premises had to be sought. The bakery relocated to Rue Heyvaert in May 1883, then to various other addresses in Brussels, before returning to Molenbeek in 1896, setting up at no. 78 Quai des Charbonnages, where the cooperative already had coal stores. By that time, production had risen to over 5 million kilograms per year. The bakery remained at this site until the interwar period. Molenbeek's rather modest *Maison du Peuple* was built at no. 85 Chaussée de Gand, on the corner of Rue du Cinéma, in 1905. It was designed by the architect Richard Pringiers, who had collaborated with Victor Horta on the Brussels *Maison du Peuple* and was at that time the official architect of the Belgian Labour Party.

Also worth mentioning is the Catholic Party's *Maison du Peuple* (now the *De Vaartkapoen* cultural centre), a fascinating building with a performance hall at no. 76 Rue de l'École. It was designed by the architect Édouard Ramaeckers in a masterly blend of neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau styles.



A blend of neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau: the façade of De Vaartkapoen, Rue de l'École. (© Urban.brussels)

## THE COOPERATIVE BAKERY AND THE HOUSE OF THE PEOPLE

In the final quarter of the 19th century, the first *Maisons du Peuple* (Houses of the People) sprang up across Belgium. Often driven by basic needs and by the struggle for decent living conditions, many such initiatives started with the creation of a cooperative bakery. The city of Ghent led the way: following a first apolitical cooperative in 1873 (*De Vrije Bakkers*, or The Free Bakers), the socialist cooperative *Vooruit* (Forwards) was founded in 1881, its model based on the need to link the struggle for food with the acquisition of social rights. After an instructive visit to *Vooruit* in Ghent, Louis Bertrand founded the *Boulangerie Coopérative Ouvrière de Bruxelles*, which began operating on 3 September 1882. The first bread was baked

at no. 10 Chaussée de Gand in Molenbeek, in an existing oven at the back of a café: 538 loaves were produced in the first week and after six months, output was 680 kilograms per week and the cooperative had

The Maison du Peuple cooperative bakery on Quai des Charbonnages. (© CIVA - Institut Vandervelde)



The Maison du Peuple on Chaussée de Gand. (© MoMuse)

# New century: a lively and innovative neighbourhood (1900-1960)

## SHOPS AND CAFÉS

In this industrial neighbourhood, small retailers reigned supreme for many years, even after the advent of department stores. Shops were concentrated on Chaussée de Gand, long established as a commercial artery, and later along two streets running perpendicular to it: Rue du Comte de Flandre and Rue de Ribaucourt. The goods sold were related to the products manufactured nearby, even though few if any shops were direct outlets of the manufacturing firms.



Chaussée de Gand, postcard, early 20th century. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)

The sophistication of the shop at no. 38 Rue du Comte de Flandre, named *Aux 100.000 chemises* (100,000 Shirts), echoes the grandeur of the building it occupies. Its Beaux-Arts frontage dating from 1910 retains decorative features such as fluted stucco pilasters and an entablature with metal sign. The interior is also well preserved, including furniture, a display area and parquet flooring. Also worthy of note on the same street are no. 36, the Mady grocery store with its enamelled brick letters still adorning the façade, no. 40, the former De Smedt stationery shop founded in 1862 and

run by five successive generations and the horse-head sign above the door at no. 42. The Demaret confectionery and chocolate shop has strong ties to the neighbourhood: founded in Rue du Niveau in 1894, it moved to Rue de l'Avenir, before relocating again to Rue Ossegem. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were many shops selling tobacco, wine, beer and spirits. Even in the years following the Second World War, tobacco remained a popular recreational product, marketed as "calming for some, stimulating for others, but always a pleasure for all". Another pleasure was photography: founded in 1861, the photography firm Verhassel had its head office at no. 4 Chaussée de Gand.

Grocery stores and small cafés known as *cabarets* could be found in pretty much every street, with some establishments doubling up as both. They were often located on corners, where their signs enjoyed maximum prominence. They served as key social hubs, a vital extension to overcrowded housing and a welcome refuge from the rigours of working life.



*Aux 100.000 chemises*, shopfront on Rue du Comte de Flandre. (© MDi immo)



The café run by the non-profit organisation *La Rue* on Rue de la Colonne. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)

A census of Rue de la Colonne in 1892 recorded no fewer than nine café owners, one for every seven buildings! The café at no. 30 is a reminder

of those busy times. It was given its name in 1976 by the non-profit organisation *La Rue*, in reference to the street as 'the people's living room' and a place in which to make their voices heard. The establishment was formerly known as *Café de la Colonne*, *Chez Pierre* and *Café des Sports*. At the corner of Rue Ransfort and Rue de la Colonne was a *cabaret* run by Jan Paes (1883-1961), a Flemish playwright, lyricist and popular singer. The larger cafés and brasseries were located along major thoroughfares such as Boulevard Léopold II. The

Molenbeek philanthropic society *Le Cercle* (The Circle) used to meet in café Léopoldville.

## FROM RENTAL HOUSES TO APARTMENT BUILDINGS

The need to accommodate an ever-expanding population, both families and single workers, led to the development of a more diverse range of housing types. Of course, the growth of industry had fostered densification from the early 19th century onwards, but by the turn of the 20th century, people's expectations of a certain standard of living were triggering a change in demand.

Houses divided into rental flats were one response to this change. They blended into the urban fabric without altering its structure, except perhaps for a raising of the building height. Even so, they differed from the homogeneous neoclassical style through their pursuit of individuality in the use of materials and decoration. The façades reflected the styles in vogue at the time – late neoclassicism and eclecticism. Their composition largely followed the same pattern and the interior layout was conventional.

The years after the First World War saw a rapid expansion in multi-dwelling units, as the need for large-scale construction encouraged economical production. Developers extolled the new lifestyle offered by apartments – light,

single-storey homes complete with all mod cons. Apartment buildings began to spring up



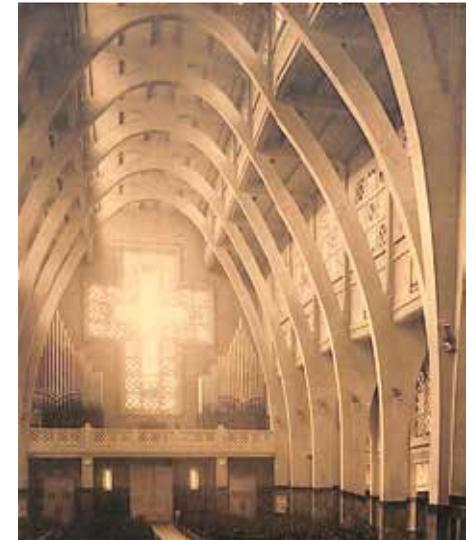
Eclectic façades, Rue du Comte de Flandre. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2022 © urban.brussels)

in residential streets, most often on corners but also sandwiched between other properties in the line of the street. Featuring oriels, they were moulded to the shape of the plot and the size of the surrounding buildings. The examples at nos. 61 to 69 Rue du Comte de Flandre were among the first of their kind and show a remarkable, eclectic development, extending over several plots. The imposing 1920s and 1930s apartment blocks around Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste bear the hallmarks of Art Deco and Modernism. Two matching sets of building façades flank the streets either side of Saint-Jean-Baptiste, comprising a series of small rental-apartment buildings.

The Art Deco front elevation of Rue Hélène Ryckmans no. 5. Plan submitted for planning application, 1935. (© MAM)



interrupt worship, and was inaugurated in 1932. It has a compact footprint, midway between a Latin cross and a cathedral nave. The majestic nave with seven parabolic concrete arches creates an effect of lightness and grandeur, as Victor Marrès, a Belgian expert in religious architecture, wrote in 1940. The façade has an off-centre composition, flanked by an imposing bell-and-clock tower. The walls reinterpret traditional forms of transparency, replacing the rose window found in Gothic cathedrals with a geometric screen-like opening with concrete tracery. The nave is illuminated by a subtle interplay of colours from the abstract designs of the stained-glass windows, while in the evening the Philips-designed electric lighting creates a sense of wonder. Aside from its architecture, the cathedral features work by numerous artists and craftspeople, making it a fine example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art).



The current Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church, c. 1932. (© MoMuse)

## 38 SAINT-JEAN-BAPTISTE: AN AVANT-GARDE CHURCH

When the church designed by Louis Spaak in 1834 was no longer big enough, the municipal council decided to replace it. However, the initial design was too expensive for the municipal finances and an alternative approach was pursued. Jef Mennekens, a municipal secretary, writer and poet, lived in the *Withuis* (White House) in Jette, designed by the architect Joseph Diongre. He suggested contacting Diongre, who was able to produce a less costly design by using concrete. Brussels' first concrete church, Sainte Suzanne in Schaerbeek, had opened in 1928. It was designed by Paul Combaz, who had been inspired by the work of the French architect Auguste Perret on the Notre-Dame Church in Le Raincy, near Paris. Diongre already had a track record as an architect in Molenbeek, having designed the garden city that bears his name in 1922 and the Cour Saint-Lazare housing complex in 1926 – the latter also a concrete structure with a very modern look.

He completed the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church in just 15 months on a tight budget. The new church was built behind the old one, so as not to

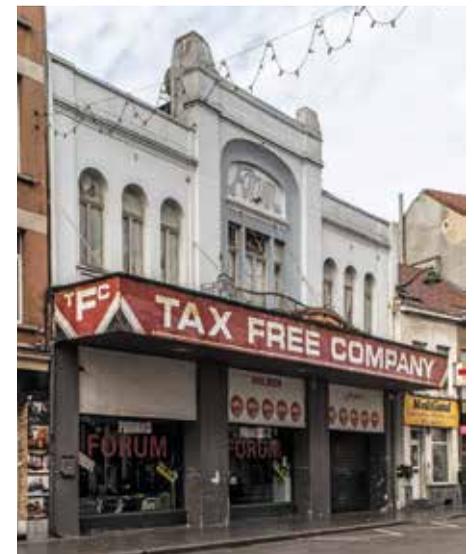


The current Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church and adjoining square, postcard. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)

## SHOWS, THEATRES AND CINEMAS

The early 20th century also saw an influx of entertainment venues. Crowds were drawn to central Molenbeek by lively, popular entertainment that reflected society within the municipality and provided much-needed escapism for its many working-class residents. To give some idea of the density, there were no fewer than 11 cinemas within a one-kilometre radius of the *Prado*. The programming catered to local audiences – informal, accessible and relevant to people's everyday lives.

*Rue du Cerf* (Deer Street), named after a local tavern, was renamed *Rue du Cinéma* by the municipal authorities. It was also a stone's throw from Place Communale that the big screen made its debut in the municipality. In 1907, Pathé opened a cinema in Rue du Prado, in what had previously been the *Prado* hall. This cinema later became the *Kinox*. It was modernised in 1942 by René Ajoux, who designed the *Mirano* and *Century* cinemas in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and the *Rio* in Laeken. Also in 1907, Pathé Frères set up the film distribution company *La Belge Cinéma*

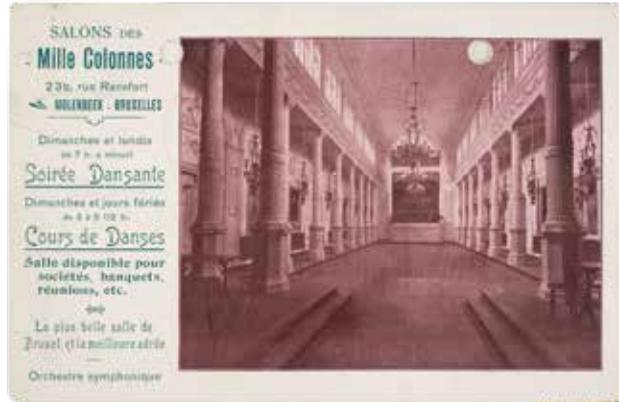


The former *Le Forum* cinema building as it is today, Chaussée de Gand. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)

further west in Molenbeek, in the buildings of the Karreveld velodrome. This was the first film studio in Belgium, established 12 years after the Lumière brothers patented their cinematograph.

The *Forum* and *Crystal* on Chaussée de Gand exemplified the enormous popularity of the new form of entertainment: the two neighbouring cinemas, located at nos. 42–46 and 62, had a combined capacity of 2,800 seats, split between the stalls and a balcony. There is a dearth of documentary evidence about the origin and activities of these cinemas, but the *Forum* was built in 1921 and underwent a redesign in the 1950s by the architect E. Poupko. Its preserved façade still proudly proclaims the building's original function and the fashionable style of the interwar period. The *Crystal* is believed to date from 1933 and was overhauled in 1956 by the architect Paul Mignot, who designed a number of cinemas in Brussels.

At no. 23 Rue Ransfort, the *Salons des Mille Colonnes* (Thousand-Column Salons) covered a huge area in the interior of the block. The auditorium was lit by large crystal chandeliers and over the years was used for theatrical performances, political meetings and then as a



Salons des Mille Colonnes, 1912, postcard. (Coll. Belfius Banque-Académie royale de Belgique © ARB – urban.brussels)

reception hall and dance hall. After 1945, it became the Cinéma des Colonies and later a cinema called the *Idéal*. By the late 1960s, the neighbourhood still boasted the highest concentration of cinemas in Brussels. They all closed their doors during the 1970s, victims, as everywhere, of the widespread adoption of television, and of the increase in and expansion of leisure activities. The *Crystal*, *Forum* and *Kinox* closed down one after another in 1972, 1973 and 1975.

## A historic centre in the making (1970-2020)

In the 1970s, the municipality saw the return of major infrastructural work with the building of the metro. While comparable in scale to construction of the canal, its route eviscerated Rue Sainte-Marie and created a huge gash in the urban fabric. There then arose the issue of reconstruction, but with almost 150 buildings destroyed (and 2,000 people displaced), this posed a challenge that the authorities struggled to meet. Civil society, neighbourhood committees, associations and architecture schools were all keen to put forward their own ideas and plans. The arrival of the metro radically altered the centre of Molenbeek, while also

conferring the benefit of a new connection to the metropolis. The aim of these proposals was to re-establish a logical urban layout by closing up blocks and creating public squares and an urban landscape consistent with the size and scale of existing structures. Research into the neighbourhood and a growing recognition of the value of industrial heritage provided a basis for rethinking the future. The character of industrial architecture was, at long last, seen as an asset and the monumental quality of some buildings earmarked them as opportunities to create facilities and focal points for collective memory.



Construction of the metro turned much of central Molenbeek into a giant building site for years. (© <http://Bruciel.brussels>, 1977)

From the mid-1990s, the municipality worked hard to upgrade public spaces and the built environment, making use of the various urban regeneration tools developed by the new Brussels-Capital Region, such as neighbourhood contracts and public-housing creation schemes. *Rive Gauche* (Left Bank) was one of the first large-scale projects in Brussels to redesign public space according to rules

aimed at balancing contemporary buildings with the old city and was therefore in keeping with the spirit of the citizens' proposals. A raft of innovative projects were implemented, bringing together public actors, collectives and cultural organisations: Parc Bonnevie and its children's playground, created in partnership with local residents; Parc de la Fonderie, developed on the former site of the Cail & Halot factory; *La Fonderie* and its on-site museum in Rue Ransfort; the *Maison des Cultures* cultural centre; renovation projects on industrial buildings such as former flour mill *La Minoterie* and *Cheval Noir* (an old brewery); as well as innovative housing projects such as those in Rue Fin, which were developed in collaboration with the future occupants.

The same desire to revitalise urban practices was the driving force behind the transformation of Place Communale. This square – the symbolic heart of the municipality for more than 150 years – had become a glorified car park before being converted into a large,



L'Espoir (Hope): new housing in Rue Fin. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2022 © urban.brussels)



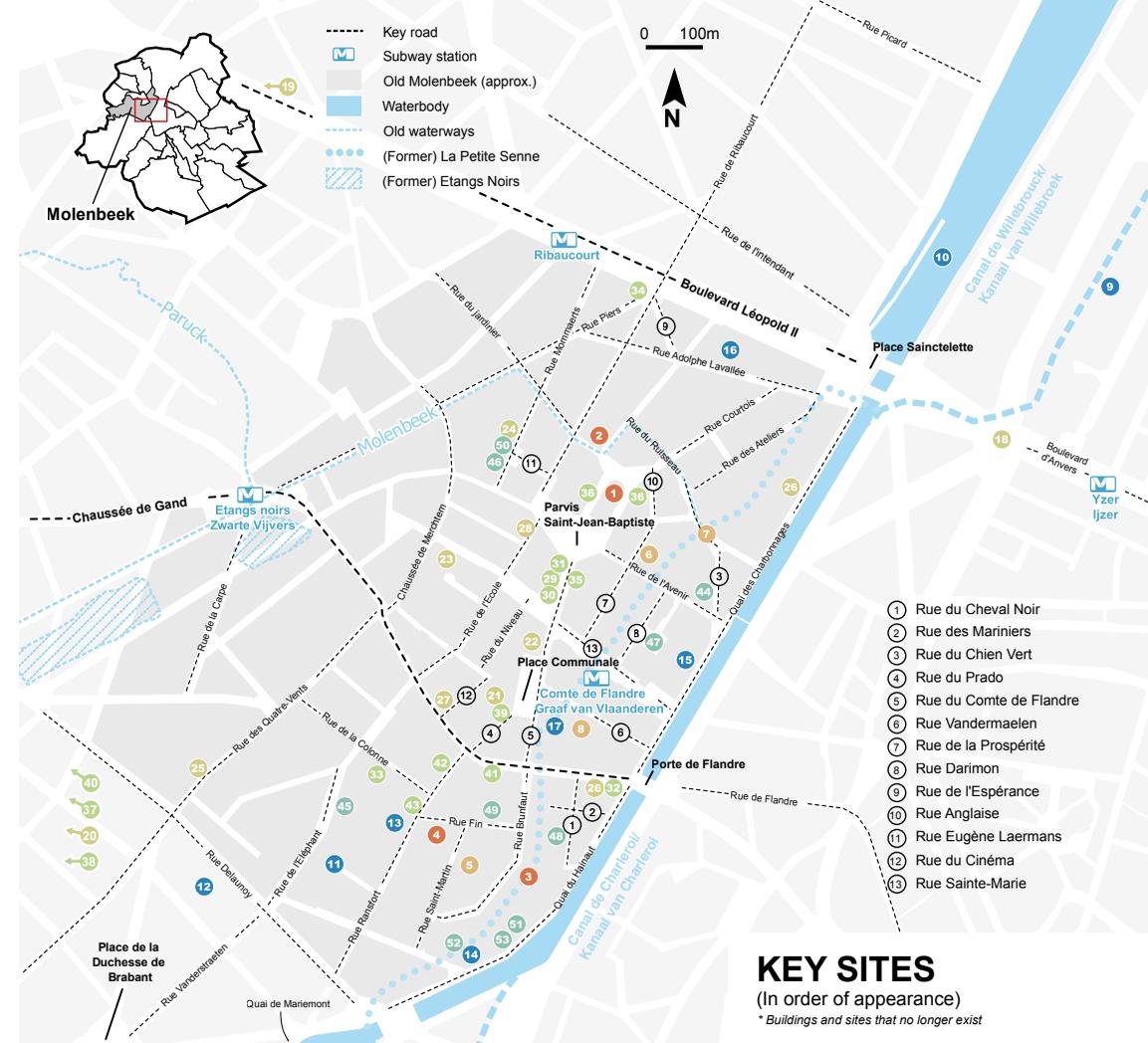
The redeveloped former Belle-Vue Brewery site includes a hotel, restaurant, museum (MIMA) and other amenities. (A. de Ville de Goyet, 2019 © urban.brussels)

shared space in 2014. In the wake of this redesign, the municipal council has adopted zoned planning regulations aimed at preserving the façades of the main groups of buildings in the area. Its goal is to promote and enhance the neighbourhood as an urban hub and contribute to a "visible renewal" of the centre.

Two museums (MoMuse and MIMA) and two major hotels (Belvue and MEININGER) have moved into the historic centre of Molenbeek in recent years. What can account for this influx? It is undoubtedly a consequence of projects and schemes marking a turning point in perceptions of industry, away from a negative association with economic decline towards industrial heritage as a resource for the future. The two museums, though born out of different initiatives, formed part of the same impetus to create vibrant cultural hubs. Each set up in one of the historic *faubourgs* bounded by Chaussée de Gand.

MoMuse, the Molenbeek History Museum, is primarily a centre for documentation,

exchange and dialogue. It occupies the first floor of the stately Academy of Drawing and Visual Arts building, alongside *the Maison des Cultures et de la Cohésion Sociale* (House of Cultures and Social Cohesion), whose ethos of rigour and creativity it shares. MIMA, the Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art, opened in the former Belle-Vue Brewery building, which had been bought by the public authorities in 2009. It rehabilitated this spectacular industrial site after the last brewing operations moved out, making the most of the voluminous spaces, which are ideally suited to its collections. The museum showcases 'culture 2.0' – the version of culture that dawned with the internet age – across a range of disciplines.



**A VILLAGE ON BRUSSELS' DOORSTEP (12th - late 18th c.)**

- 1 Saint-Jean-Baptiste church
- 2 De Motte\*
- 3 Groot Eiland (Vegetable garden)
- 4 Jardin Urbain

**SHIFTING SUBURBS (1800-1830)**

- 5 Faubourg Saint-Martin
- 6 Faubourg de Flandre
- 7 Pont du diable\*
- 8 Établissement Géographique de Bruxelles\*

**AN INDUSTRIAL DESTINY (1832-1880)**

- 9 Railway station at Allée Verte\*
- 10 Port of Brussels
- 11 Cail & Halot factory\*
- 12 Factory and cité Pauwels
- 13 Compagnie des Bronzes\* / La Fonderie
- 14 Belle-Vue brewery
- 15 Farcy Flour Mill
- 16 De Waele factory\*
- 17 AJJA Warehouse

**DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN NEIGHBOURHOOD (1860-late 19th c.)**

- 18 Porte du Rivage\*
- 19 Place Eugène Simonis
- 20 Bruxelles-Ouest railway station
- 21 Prado theatre and garden\*
- 22 Town Hall
- 23 Parc Bonnevie
- 24 School of drawing and modelling
- 25 Municipal school
- 26 Maison du Peuple bakery\*
- 27 Maison du Peuple\*
- 28 Vaartkapeen

**A NEW CENTURY: A LIVELY AND INNOVATIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD (1900-1960)**

- 29 Shop Aux 100.000 chemises\*
- 30 Mady grocery store
- 31 De Smedt stationery shop\*
- 32 Photography firm Verhassel\*
- 33 Café of the ASBL La Rue
- 34 Café Léopoldville\*

**KEY SITES**

(In order of appearance)

\* Buildings and sites that no longer exist

- 35 Eclectic apartment building
- 36 Art Deco apartment building
- 37 Diongre garden city
- 38 Cour Saint-Lazare
- 39 Kinox cinema\*
- 40 Karreveld velodrome\*
- 41 Le Forum cinema\*
- 42 Le Crystal cinema\*
- 43 Salons des Mille Colonnes\*
- A HISTORIC CENTRE IN THE MAKING (1970-2020)**
- 44 Rive Gauche Project
- 45 Parc de la Fonderie
- 46 Maison des Cultures
- 47 Place de la Minoterie
- 48 Industrial building Cheval Noir
- 49 L'Espoir Housing project Rue Fin
- 50 MoMuse
- 51 MIMA
- 52 Belvue Hotel
- 53 Meininger hotel

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4. LE QUARTIER DU BÉGUINAGE (FR - NL)
5. LE HEYSEL (FR - NL - ESP - GB)
6. L'AVENUE LOUIS BERTRAND ET LE PARC JOSAPHAT (FR - NL)
7. TROIS VISAGES DE PASSAGES AU XIX<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE GALERIES SAINT-HUBERT - GALERIE BORTIER - PASSAGE DU NORD (FR - NL - ESP - GB)
8. ANDERLECHT LA COLLÉGIALE - LE BÉGUINAGE - LA MAISON D'ÉRASME (FR - NL)
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55. TOUR ET TAXIS (FR - NL)
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In the *Brussels, City of Art and History* series, Urban aims to foster public curiosity about the city's historical heritage while raising awareness of the need to protect its many treasures. This is part of a wider remit to promote the rich and varied heritage of the Brussels-Capital Region.

Molenbeek-Saint-Jean has undergone a spectacular transformation since the end of the 18th century. Once a rural hamlet on the outskirts of Brussels, it became fertile ground for the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Its favourable location in the Senne valley, combined with the political, economic and scientific ambitions of the young Belgian nation, quickly transformed Molenbeek into a lively and innovative area of the capital. But the challenges posed by the burgeoning metropolis soon made themselves felt. While its landscape has been radically altered over the years, this 'old' Molenbeek can still be read in many places, from its plot boundaries, street plan and industrial and residential heritage to the town hall and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church. Today, this rich past is a source of inspiration for a neighbourhood that is constantly reinventing itself.

Bety Waknine,  
General Manager

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