Degree Project in Urban and Regional Studies

Second cycle 30 credits

Situated Accounts from Within a Stigmatized Area

An Ethnographic Study on Local Views and Experiences Relating to Urban Developments in Molenbeek, Brussels

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Abstract

This study tried to counter the stigmatized narratives in Molenbeek and nuance the stigma by bringing to the forefront the experiences and views of the local inhabitants through storytelling and an ethnographic approach. I have interviewed both inhabitants of Molenbeek and a planner from the municipality of Molenbeek to understand both the discourse of the inhabitants and that of the planners at the municipal level about current urban development projects in and around Molenbeek. With the empirical tale, I was able to present both discourses as if they were discussing together to see where they differ or agree. I used the theory of territorial stigma of Wacquant et al. (2014) to analyze to what extent the situation in Molenbeek can be explained with the theory of territorial stigma. I found that territorial stigma seems to fit the current situation of Molenbeek and its stigmatized inhabitants to a certain extent but underestimates the feeling of community between inhabitants. This study has shown that the urban and social situation in Molenbeek is much more complex than the stigma and stereotypes narrated. Future research should look into the discourse of developers and their relation to territorial stigma. Finally, I hope this study will inspire urban planners to engage in storytelling and to be critical of their own story realm. By listening to other stories and including them in their planning process they will be able to create more inclusive and richer spaces, which should be the goal of every urban development project.

Keywords: Territorial stigma, Ethnographic study, Urban planning, Thick descriptions, Feminist theory, Molenbeek
Abstrakt


Nyckelord: Territoriell stigma, Etnografisk studie, Stadsplanering, Tjocka beskrivningar, Feministisk teori, Molenbeek
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Foreword

I was born and raised in Brussels until I was 18 and moved to the Netherlands. While my Belgian identity card had the word immigrant on it I have never felt discriminated as one. Probably because I looked like a stereotypical white European girl and spoke both French and Dutch. I was 16 when the terrorist attacks happened in Paris and in Brussels and remember it being a relatively weird time. The center of Brussels was full of military holding large weapons, which seemed to scare me more than the actual terrorist threat the news was talking about. I also remember Molenbeek being negatively discussed in international newspapers and locally and described as a dangerous place. The discussions around Islam as a religion became also more negative and heated. Later the news died down. More interesting things came up such as Donald Trump getting elected as president of the US. But unconsciously Molenbeek stayed a no-go zone in my mind. Until last summer’s Car-Free Sunday in Brussels when I went cycling with my family in and around Molenbeek. I realized that while I knew Molenbeek by name I did not know it as a place. As we cycled through the new buildings next to the canal and the lively activities on the Place communal, we all stopped to look around and said to each other surprised ‘It’s quite nice here actually!’.

But certain new buildings seemed out of place and while we were discussing whether we liked the architecture, I was wondering whether the inhabitants of Molenbeek were happy with the makeover or whether this was gentrification. Was Molenbeek being made more attractive for the eyes of a richer white middle class? I also wondered how urban planners were dealing with this situation. Was it planned and wanted? Or were they worried about the effects of gentrification as well? This was my entry point into Molenbeek and this study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAKT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial Stigma</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ethnographic Approach</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Organizations</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interviews</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dockside Tower Project</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISPOSITION</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2: THE CASE</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE URBAN CONTEXT OF MOLENBEEK</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Urban Situation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-Economic Profile</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELEVANT URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dockside Tower Project</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour &amp; Taxis</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunfaut Tower</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3: THE EMPIRICAL TALE ............................................................................................................. 40

THE NEED FOR GREEN .......................................................................................................................... 40
Sick and Tired ........................................................................................................................................ 44
THE DENSITY PROBLEM ......................................................................................................................... 46
AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE ....................................................................................................................... 49
The Consequences .................................................................................................................................. 51
The Role of the Municipality ................................................................................................................... 52
HOW DID WE GET HERE? ....................................................................................................................... 54
Exterior Forces ....................................................................................................................................... 56
THE FUTURE OF MOLENBEEK ................................................................................................................ 58

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS .............................................................................................................................. 61

THE INHABITANTS’ AND PLANNERS’ DISCOURSE ............................................................................... 61
APPLYING THE THEORY OF WACQUANT ............................................................................................... 62
Stigma Coping Strategies ....................................................................................................................... 63
‘They Don’t Listen’ ................................................................................................................................. 65
Re-Enforcing the Stigma? ......................................................................................................................... 66
The Solution is Gentrification ................................................................................................................ 68
CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................................... 70

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION .............................................................................................. 72

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH ............................................................................................. 72
CONCLUDING DISCUSSION ..................................................................................................................... 73

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................................... 75

APPENDICES .......................................................................................................................................... 83

APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND THEMES (FOR INHABITANTS) ...................................... 83
APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (FOR DEVELOPERS AND PLANNERS) ................................. 85
Chapter 1: Introduction

The years surrounding 2015 will stay probably in everyone’s mind in Western Europe as the years of terrorist attacks. In France alone, there were 231 deaths related to terrorist attacks between 2014 and 2016, with the Bataclan shooting in 2015 being the deadliest (National Counterterrorism Center, n.d.). Most of the terrorist attacks were committed by the terrorist group, “the Islamic State” (IS) or also called “the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) or “the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL). The goal of IS is to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria and in the end spread its ideology globally (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2021). It is important to note that while IS is notoriously known in Western countries for their deadly terrorist attacks in Spain, France, and Belgium, 97% of the attacks by IS have been committed in the Middle East and in North Africa. IS gained a lot of followers during the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, by having a strong social media presence. They were able to recruit relatively large numbers of followers coming from European countries with Belgium having the highest proportion as a share of its population. In total 270 Belgian citizens left for Syria to fight for the Islamic State (Mansoury, 2017). After the Bataclan shooting in Paris committed by IS, the French government was frantically searching for the culprits and trying to understand how this tragedy could have happened in the first place. They found links to Molenbeek.

Molenbeek, or Sint-Jans Molenbeek, is a municipality in the west of the capital of Belgium, Brussels. This is a relatively poor neighborhood with higher levels of unemployment (23.5%), higher need for financial aid (11%), and high school backlog (21.9%), compared to the average of Brussels (respectively 16.3%, 5.9%, 19.4%) (Brusselse Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, 2022). Molenbeek has a lower percentage of residents with foreign nationalities\(^1\) compared to

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\(^1\) When discussing foreign nationalities, I am referring to people with a foreign nationality without a Belgian nationality. Belgian citizens are allowed to have a double nationality however, people with a foreign nationality and a Belgian nationality are considered part of the Belgian nationals’ dataset and excluded from the foreign nationality dataset in this public study (BISA Perspective Brussels, n.d.).
the average of Brussels (28% in Molenbeek compared to 35% in the rest of Brussels). However, it has a relatively larger population of residents with North African nationalities, more specifically a large Moroccan community. The second and third largest communities are respectively of Romanian and Polish nationalities (Brussels Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse & Observatorium voor Gezondheid en Welzijn Brussel-Hoofstad, 2016).

During the aggressive recruitment of IS, out of the 194 Brussels residents that left for Syria to fight for the Islamic State, 49 came from Molenbeek (Mansoury, 2017). Additionally, one of the Bataclan suicide bombers, Brahim Abdeslam, grew up in Molenbeek, as did the mastermind behind the Paris attack, Abdelhamid Abaaoud (The Economist, 2015; Vandecandelaere, 2021; Vohra, 2022). Additionally, the terrorist attacks in Brussels in 2016 were committed by acquaintances and friends of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, and he himself went into hiding in Molenbeek after the Paris terrorist attack.

Therefore, after the Paris and Brussels attacks, Molenbeek became internationally ill-famed. Former American President Donald Trump called Brussels a “hell-hole” after the attacks, and Éric Zemmour, a French writer and politician, suggested that ‘instead of bombing Raqqa, France should bomb Molenbeek’ (Bilefsky & Barthelemy, 2016; RTL, 2015). The stigma around this neighborhood has stayed over the years and the socio-economic problems, such as the high rates of poverty, fewer educational opportunities, and high unemployment rate, while diminished over the years, have stayed as well. And those indicators were at the core of the radicalization of certain residents (Peltier, 2022; Vohra, 2022). This paper assumes that the reason why radicalization happened in Molenbeek is in part because of the socio-economic conditions and the quality of the infrastructure, which led to certain residents from Molenbeek not being able to integrate into Belgian society and turning to other forms of community, such as religion, criminality or extremism (Peltier, 2022; Recknagel, 2016; Vohra, 2022). However, the full reason as to why young people in Molenbeek fell into radicalization, more specifically
Muslim radicalization, is still quite unclear and the argumentation will often depend on the framing of the author. Figoureux and Van Gorp (2020) looked into the different ways newspapers in Belgium framed the debate on radicalization in Belgium. They found four problematizing frameworks (criminal career, virus, mutiny, clash of civilizations), which all frame the radicalization problem stemming from either criminal tendencies, spreading ideology, revenge, or a cultural clash. Additionally, they found eight alternative counter-frames, which were less commonly found than the four problematizing frames, ranging from puberty to penance and diversity. These counter-frames look more at individual choices, and at the positive challenges radicalization could offer Western society (Figoureux & Van Gorp, 2020). Thus, each narrative on the radicalization in Molenbeek is framed from a certain point of view, and so it is as well in this paper.

While only a few of the 97,697 inhabitants of Molenbeek were actually involved with IS, the whole municipality and its inhabitants were stereotyped as Muslim extremists by both Belgian and international media. This can be seen as a form of territorial stigma. Mead (2021) defines territorial stigma as ‘a phenomenon that both expresses and normalizes the othering and the negative construction, representation, and government of certain geographical communities and places.’. Inhabitants in Molenbeek have tried to fight against the stigma and negative portrayals of the neighborhood through community centers, art studios, and starting a tech hub among other things (Peltier, 2022; The Brussels Times, 2022). The website of the municipality of Molenbeek counts 74 social non-profit programs in the neighborhood for old or young, immigrant or Belgian, and homeowners or homeless people (Molenbeek 1080, n.d.-b). The local residents want to make sure that vulnerable people are well supported and get the help they need. However, inhabitants have also criticized the local government for not giving out enough resources to actually pull the neighborhood out of poverty (Peltier, 2022). Additionally, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in drug trafficking and
shootings among gangs in Molenbeek and in Brussels in general (Hendrickx, 2022; Peltier, 2022; Vohra, 2022). Thus, the living conditions in the neighborhood have not drastically changed for the better for the inhabitants of Molenbeek.

Nevertheless, a seemingly contradictory trend has been happening at the same time in the neighborhood. Due to the low rent prices and living costs, Molenbeek has attracted a Dutch-speaking middle-class, and private real-estate developers (Peltier, 2022). This has raised questions about gentrification and whether it is beneficial to the neighborhood (BRUZZ, 2019b). In 2010 the city of Brussels started a large-scale development plan surrounding the canal of Brussels called “Het Kanaalplan” or the Canal Plan in English (di Prima, 2021). This development plan includes Molenbeek as it stands along the canal. The Canal Plan is supposed to be a cohesive development plan mixing housing, industrial and economic opportunities, and opening public spaces near the canal. The government of Brussels wishes through this project to start a collaboration between public and private actors, which should, as they phrase it, bring a balance between urban ambitions and economic constraints (perspective.brussels, 2023).

Molenbeek is also part of multiple other relatively large development plans in collaboration with other municipalities such as Anderlecht, and Laken, which the Region of Brussels helps fund. Usually, these large projects happen in municipalities and neighborhoods in which there is little money and large socio-economic problems.

There are some benefits that come with large urban development projects organized by the Region of Brussels. Municipalities in which it is happening can enjoy the benefits of renovated neighborhoods, better public spaces, and new architecture without having to pay for it themselves. This not only leads to a greater quality of life for their inhabitants but also attracts newer and sometimes richer inhabitants, and subsequently more income for the municipalities. Though nor the municipality nor the developers do explicitly mention the goal to attract a richer population, it is reflected in the number of loft projects built by luxury real estate developers
over the years in former industrial areas of Brussels (Van Criekingen & Leyden, 2006). Consequently, the cost of living and rent in these neighborhoods increase and poorer inhabitants have to move away (Van Criekingen & Leyden, 2006). In other words, a process of gentrification is underway in Molenbeek and other poorer neighborhoods of Brussels. Van Criekingen and Leyden (2006) define gentrification as follows: ‘the sum of various developments whereby working-class areas are (re-)appropriated by groups that are socio-economically more advantaged than their prior residents or users.’. This study will use this definition to explain the current situation in Molenbeek. According to Slater (2006), there has been movement both in academics and popular discourse that romanticizes gentrification and argues that it may be ‘not so bad after all’. Sometimes even presenting it as the only solution to urban poverty and decay (Slater, 2006). However, by not discussing the displacement of poor people in gentrified neighborhoods, it not only portrays a false and uncritical image of the gentrification process, but it also erases the voice of the poor and the working class that have been displaced, from both their homes and in policy decision-making (Staub, 2018). Therefore, this study will present the process of gentrification in Molenbeek in a negative and critical sense.

Inhabitants and organizations in Molenbeek have been vocal about their needs and have protested against the development projects that they do not agree with, however, there is a feeling that such projects will stay come to be. This shows that there is a gap between the needs and wants of the local inhabitants, the people creating the development projects and the people deciding whether these projects can come to light. This gap is nonetheless invisible to the outsider since the voice of the local inhabitants is not as heard of or organized as the one of a developer or an administration. In addition, inhabitants of Molenbeek are being stigmatized and stereotyped, framed as in need ‘of a large cleanup’, (the title of an article on the website of Vlaams Belang, a right-wing party) making it more difficult to be actually heard (Vlaams
Belang, 2022). This makes this study relevant and important for both the inhabitants of Molenbeek and for the people deciding on urban development projects and making urban policies. This will be further discussed in the next section.

**Aim and Research Questions**

Most metropolises have to deal with modern urban problems such as gentrification, segregation, and territorial stigmatization. Therefore, it is relevant as a society to realize where these problems stem from and to what extent they are influenced by the urban development process. Understanding and hearing the discourse of the inhabitants of Molenbeek is also relevant for both the local residents, as they have been stereotyped and silenced, and Belgian society, as they have unconsciously or consciously stigmatized a whole neighborhood.

Additionally, I would argue that this study is relevant to planners. According to Sandercock (2003), the narrative we build, as urban planners, around a city becomes constitutive of the urban reality and it affects the decision-making process. This brings forward the centrality of storytelling in the urban planning practice, not only as a way to justify the status quo but also as a tool to change narratives. By listening to local stories from inhabitants and including them in the planning process we will be able to create inclusive and multi-cultural cities. Sandercock (2003) urges us, the urban planners, to be critical of our own narratives that we project on certain spatial areas while showing us the power we have with a tool such as storytelling to change these same narratives if we only listen.

The aim of this study will be to try to highlight local views and experiences relating to certain specific urban development projects in Molenbeek in order to attempt to nuance the stigma placed upon the area and its inhabitants by presenting a counter-narrative. Hence, this research hopes to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the aim and vision of current urban planning developments in Molenbeek?
II. How is the current process of urban development in Molenbeek viewed and experienced by local residents and engaged actors?

Through these research questions, I hope to contribute by highlighting and thereby perhaps counteract the territorial stigma currently imposed on the inhabitants of Molenbeek. This will be done by presenting a more nuanced account where also local viewpoints and experiences of inhabitants and social organizations in Molenbeek are represented.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this part of the study, I will give an overview of the theory of territorial stigma as it is discussed currently and explain how this study will make use of the theory to interpret and understand the discourses of both local citizens and planners in Molenbeek.

**Territorial Stigma**

Territorial stigma is a concept first described by the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant when comparing the hyper ghettos of Chicago and the banlieue of Paris (Wacquant et al., 2014). The concept emerged from mixing the notion of stigma defined by the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, defined as ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting and that reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’, and the French sociologist Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power, defined as the socio-political power that makes visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, making social groups, and hence influencing the social structures of our societies (Bourdieu, 1989; Link & Phelan, 2001; Wacquant et al., 2014). Wacquant adds a spatial aspect to these two concepts. According to him, stigma does not only affect a group of people but also a geographic space. Even more so, the stigma surrounding a geographic space can rub off its tainted perception onto the inhabitants of the space and vice versa. Therefore, stigmatized people become more stigmatized through their association with
the stigmatized space (Horgan, 2018; Wacquant et al., 2014). Inhabitants of stigmatized spaces become outcasts in their own city and the process of territorial stigma slowly removes their individual identities and merges it with the stigma the space is subject to (Larsen & Delica, 2019). However, Wacquant stresses that how inhabitants experience and interact with the territorial stigma placed on them differs per individual and their socio-economic status (Larsen & Delica, 2019; Wacquant et al., 2014).

While there have been throughout history often spaces in cities that were designated for the poorer social classes or that had a bad reputation such as the bas-fonds in France or the slums of London, Wacquant et al. (2014) argue that the phenomenon of territorial stigma, which started at the end of the 20th century, is different from the mid-19th century slums in five ways. Firstly, territorial stigma has been partially freed from the blemish of poverty, broken-down buildings, immorality, and street violence. Instead, these neighborhoods have been labeled in most developed countries, such as the banlieue-ghetto in France or Krottenwijk in the Netherlands, to designate them as threats to society as a whole. Secondly, territorial stigma has become a normalized phenomenon. Every country has a few neighborhoods that are infamously known and discussed in journalism, politics, and academics, as well as during ordinary discussions among citizens, as places of self-inflicted and constant, poverty and social degradation. Unlike the slums in 19th-century cities, the stigmatized neighborhood is not only discussed as a social hell among members of the elite social class but among society at large, including the inhabitants of the neighborhood themselves. Thirdly, 19th-century bas-fonds were often seen as an organized and powerful counter-society. On the other hand, current stigmatized neighborhoods are seen as ‘vortexes and vectors of social disintegration, fundamentally dissolute and irretrievably disorganized’ (Wacquant et al., 2014). Fourthly, stigmatized territories are racialized by selectively accentuating certain negative aspects or through ‘fictive projection’. Wacquant et al. (2014) explain it this way:

Wacquant et al. (2014) explain it this way:
‘The populations in these disparaged districts are nearly always painted in darker and more exotic hues than their demography warrants. Their cultural differences are exaggerated and turned into divergence if not hostility to dominant national norms – with religion often serving as the surreptitious agent of sedition - while their vulnerable class position is downplayed or ignored altogether. Incidents of deviance or violence in and around these areas are routinely fit to brand them as outcasts. Such symbolic buckling can quickly turn any neighborhood sporting a small and stable minority of black or immigrant residents, a low crime rate and drab but adequate housing into the specter of a hostile racial ghetto ready to erupt in mayhem any minute’

Finally, due to the feelings and reactions of fear, repulsion, and criticism toward the stigmatized area, there is a public understanding that there is a need for greater policing and order in the area, penalizing the inhabitants of the stigmatized neighborhood even further (Wacquant et al., 2014). While the slums of London had their regular visits from political and social elites, to act out on certain sexual fantasies or witness and gape at scenes of moral depravity, current stigmatized neighborhoods most often only receive visits from right-wing politicians demanding more police control and less welfare (Wacquant et al., 2014).

Some people might argue that this phenomenon is the natural way of our organized society. A problematic neighborhood gets more police assigned to it because it needs to contain the problems in said neighborhood. Action and reaction. However, Wacquant et al. (2014) saw that territorial stigma affects all levels of society from the inhabitants and neighbors of the stigmatized area to the decision-making and narrative of local bureaucrats, journalists, and state officials. It affects how people think, act, and feel until it materializes into the social and spatial structures of the city like a perverse trickle-down effect. Multiple research articles have been published surrounding the topic of territorial stigma and how journalists, urban planners, or politicians influence, and reinforce territorial stigma. An example of how media influences territorial stigma is the study of Schwarze (2022). This study looked at how newspapers exert
territorial stigma in Chicago’s South Side by looking at the discursive practices they used. The study found that journalism produced territorial stigma through practices such as naming (calling the stigmatized areas ‘war-zones’ or ‘plagued by violence’), and hyperboles that either amplify the violence happening in the community or downplaying it, as if it is commonplace in the community (Schwarze, 2022). While the information reported on the violence happening in Chicago’s South Side is not untrue, it disinsforms the reader as it is written more as a spectacle with a simplified story rather than to inform about the underlying reasons behind street violence such as systemic racism, or economic deprivation among others. Additionally, Schwarze (2022) found that news articles about shootings often first reported on the territorial details instead of the circumstances surrounding the shooting such as the motive. Newspapers also usually published multiple articles and reports on one shooting specifically without necessarily adding more circumstantial details to the story. Therefore, giving the false idea to the reader that the area in which the shooting happened is more dangerous than it is in reality, reinforcing the stigma surrounding the area (Schwarze, 2022). This study will look at how the built environment, urban development processes and planners or developers contribute to territorial stigma and potentially find ways to counter-act it.

Nevertheless, how territorial stigma is produced is not always clear and usually depends from case to case. Larsen & Delica (2019), conducted an inductive analysis of 119 peer-reviewed studies on territorial stigma in order to give an overview of how territorial stigma is produced. While they found six areas of research on the production of territorial stigma and within these 16 modalities through which territorial stigmatization is produced, researchers argue that these modalities most often operate at the same time with varying intensities depending as well on the urban and socio-economic context of each case. Therefore, when trying to solve territorial stigma without a full understanding of its complexity, activists or policymakers might only solve a few modalities and possibly exacerbate other modalities
In addition, the researchers found that territorial stigma does not seem to be ‘an unforeseen consequence of a society trying to deal with a wicked problem’, instead it is an integral part of our current neoliberal governance of social insecurity, meaning a type of governance focusing on creating punitive welfare reforms in order to control poverty populations (Larsen & Delica, 2019; Schram, 2010). This neoliberal governance argues that ‘demolition and (re)-privatization are the only economically and culturally viable solutions for dealing with spatialized consequences of contemporary urban and advanced marginality, at the cost of social need and social justice.’ (Larsen & Delica, 2019). While this study does not have such a strong opinion on the matter, it is true that neoliberal policies that aim at reducing welfare programs letting free market incentives control urban development projects exacerbate urban issues such as territorial stigma. Whether this is intentional or not is difficult to prove I believe.

This brings us to the relationship between territorial stigma and gentrification. Gentrification and territorial stigma are sometimes seen as two sides of the same coin, in which territorial stigma leads the way to and justifies gentrification (Horgan, 2018; Kallin & Slater, 2014). The symbolic defamation around the area gives the needed political justification for removing stigmatized populations through the demolition of certain buildings, or the construction of housing designed for people from high socio-economic status. The government has a crucial role in both the formation of stigma surrounding certain areas, and in facilitating gentrification through planning and creating urban policies in favor of private developers (Kallin & Slater, 2014). This shows that urban planners have a decisive role in bettering or worsening territorial stigma in stigmatized neighborhoods, an assumption this study also makes.

Horgan (2018) looked at both the process of stigmatization and destigmatization in Toronto. According to them, if the discourse around the stigmatized area is framed as caused by the inhabitants, then in order to destigmatize the area there are two options: either by changing the narrative surrounding inhabitants, also called symbolic re-inscription, of the area or by
removing them (Horgan, 2018). They argue that often the latter part is done through symbolic strategies such as ‘legal removal, physical renovations, and discursive erasure’, which are strategies that complement and strengthen each other (Horgan, 2018). Therefore, if stigmatized populations facing gentrification want to destigmatize their neighborhood they have to resist all three symbolic strategies at the same time. The article discusses three strategies to have a process of symbolic re-inscription without the displacement of stigmatized populations: physical intransigence, legal entrepreneurialism, and discursive emplacement (Horgan, 2018).

In the case discussed in the article, local stigmatized inhabitants were able to procure a building (legal entrepreneurialism), renovated it, and created housing for specifically the stigmatized group (physical intransigence). Finally, during the renovation of the building, future residents would come in contact with neighbors often to discuss the renovation in order to get in contact with and change the discourse surrounding the stigmatized group (discursive emplacement). This process of destigmatization led to the inhabitants slowly removing the stigma posed on them while staying in their neighborhood. Nevertheless, the study adds that the process of destigmatization is still ongoing and that in other cases symbolic processes are not always aligned with economic and political powers. Making the destigmatization process more difficult (Horgan, 2018).

Additionally, one could ask why stigmatized areas undergoing gentrification processes do not resist and protest more often against it. Inhabitants in stigmatized areas are most often overexposed to the media and public negative discourse while at the same time being made invisible in the decision-making process of their neighborhood (Meade, 2021). This makes it difficult for stigmatized inhabitants to bring forward issues in the neighborhood in for example the participation process in planning as they are often not listened to or included. According to Sakizlioglu & Uitermark (2014) the state and developers ‘draw a line between worthy and unworthy residents, allowing authorities to ‘divide and rule.’, again showing the role planners
have. Their study looked at how stigmatized residents responded to gentrification in Amsterdam and Istanbul. They found that promotors had further divided the residents depending on their class or ethnicity, excluding residents they did not deem worthy of including in the process (Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014). The study also found in both Amsterdam and Istanbul that the higher the socio-economic class of the resident was, the more assertive they were, while poorer residents mostly stayed silent. Finally, the study found that a strategy of developers to reduce the likelihood of protests from stigmatized inhabitants is to control the timing of urban developments. First, create a long period of decay in which the urban development project seems to be slow. During this time social cohesion erodes and troublesome residents, ones that may start an opposition movement, slowly leave the neighborhood. Afterward, the developers aggressively push out the remaining anxiously waiting residents, giving them the impression that they have no other choice but to leave (Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014).

According to Wacquant et al (2014), inhabitants in stigmatized territories are impacted by the stigma surrounding their environment ‘by corroding their sense of self, warping social relations, and undercutting their capacity for collective action, as it sparks strategies of coping that tend to validate, amplify, and proliferate the discredit at its core, even as some strive to disregard or to resist the spatial stigma’. They nuance this statement by saying that the degree to which the inhabitant is affected and how negatively they respond to the stigma depends on their social class, age, housing tenure, ethnicity, and seniority in the neighborhood. Older and richer inhabitants might put more effort into dissociating themselves from the rest of the stigmatized inhabitants and try to move from the neighborhood if possible, while younger inhabitants, who have limited options for leaving, will try to counter the stigma by defending their neighborhood or even positively acclaiming it (Wacquant et al., 2014). These are both strategies for internalizing the stigma placed upon them (see image 1 below).
However, multiple researchers have found that in the field these are not always the dominant strategy of inhabitants (Slater, 2015). Instead of being resigned to the stigma placed upon them, inhabitants often had an ambivalent view of their own neighborhood and were happy to live there. They also found that inhabitants felt a sense of belonging to the neighborhood and even pride for being part of a diverse community (Slater, 2015). Therefore, researchers warn future studies to exert caution in order to not draw overly negative conclusions on the impact territorial stigma has on inhabitants’ sense of self. Instead, there is a need for nuanced discussions about the ambivalence in domination and resistance in stigmatized places (Slater, 2015). Furthermore, they argue that future research should look into what are the contextual conditions under which residents choose to adopt certain strategies over others when faced with territorial stigma.

**Methods**

This study was inspired by the work of other researchers in the field of feminist theory and the concept of situated knowledge as described by Donna Haraway (1988). The feminist theory falls under critical theory, which looks at systems of oppression and power, and how to destabilize them (Arinder, n.d.). The feminist theory is more specific than critical theory in the sense that it looks at the lived experiences of individuals in systems of oppression. Contrary to common belief, feminist theory does not only look at women but any individual that is being discriminated against or oppressed because of their gender, race, or ability among others,
because of certain structures of power or systems of oppression. A core goal of feminist theory is to acknowledge and disrupt these oppressive systems through knowledge and action. This in turn would lead to a movement of understanding and change. Feminist theory hopes to create spaces in which diverse groups of people can speak for themselves (Arinder, n.d.).

Situated knowledge is also born from the feminist movement and feminist theory (Haraway, 1988). In her article ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, Haraway (1988) criticizes how scientists and researchers idolize the concept of objectivity while not noticing, not only their own biases but also what they deem as actual objective knowledge. She asks, who does this knowledge or ‘objectivity’ truly help? Which type of worldview is sustained through this ‘objectivity’? Haraway (1988) argues that it aims at sustaining a male-dominated, heterosexual, binary, and racist worldview. Additionally, this ‘objectivity’ claims to be all-knowing and to be unbiased and equal in its positioning, which is impossible according to Haraway (1988). Claiming that one’s objectivity is unbiased and equal in its position would mean ignoring the importance of time and place, and the power relations related to those.

In opposition to this ‘objectivity’ she argues in favor of situated knowledge, the feminist objectivity (Haraway, 1988). This is ‘a doctrine and practice of subjectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing.’ (Haraway, 1988, p.585). Situated knowledge is trying to understand a perspective we might have never heard of while critically positioning ourselves, our privilege, and our background, in order to take responsibility for our claims. It is situated because instead of trying to make a universal claim, feminist objectivity tries to look at the multidimensionality of knowledge, looking at networks of knowledge and power, location, and individual experiences. The world is not a still resource waiting for science to map or appropriate it, according to Haraway (1988), instead, it is an active subject, which
interacts and reacts to the ethics and politics that, openly or not, tell us what is objectivity in science.

The feminist notion of situated knowledge has inspired this study in choosing a qualitative method with a focus on situated storytelling. Therefore, I chose the ethnographic approach as a method.

**The Ethnographic Approach**

This study was conducted in Molenbeek and uses Molenbeek as a case study. I explore the concept of territorial stigma in Molenbeek through the use of a mixed-method approach, more specifically qualitative interviews (Ethnographic Research | Research, n.d.). I decided to use the ethnographic approach for this study because it seemed the best method to explore the discourse of local inhabitants and portray it in a storytelling manner in order to bring a new perspective and hopefully a productive counter-narrative for the inhabitants and the area. The writing style in this study, more precisely when presenting the discourses, is influenced by the concept of the empirical tale as described by Doucet et al. (2018), and the concept of thick descriptions as explained by Gibson-Graham (2014). The empirical tale refers to the practice of putting the stories of people at the center of academic conversations, letting them speak instead of speaking for them (Doucet et al., 2018). Thick descriptions are descriptions of social actions that also tell the context of the action as understood by the actor of said action. This makes decisions made in complex social situations more understandable to outsiders (Gibson-Graham, 2014).

In addition, in order to explore the professional discourse and the media discourse I also used a document study approach. The interviews had as aim to give an inside view into both the local inhabitants’ discourse and the professionals’ discourse. It was most important for the
local inhabitant’s discourse as it is the one about which there is the least information. The document study was to support and add to the interviews I did with the planner.

Data Collection

In total, I interviewed ten people, seven in person and three online through Teams and on the phone. There was equal participation of men and women in the interviews and the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. I spoke to five current and former inhabitants of Molenbeek and three participants lived close to Molenbeek (less than a ten-minute walk) and worked there. They represent the local discourse in this study. I spoke to one urban planner working for the planning department at the municipality of Molenbeek. He represents the planners’ discourse. I also interviewed two developers working for CityDev, the urban development department of the Region of Brussels, however, due to a lack of time I did not include this interview in the professional discourse. Additionally, I tried to interview planners working for the Region of Brussels but they only had time for an interview after the deadline of this research. Therefore, the total of participants in this study is eight, and the professional discourse only consists of one participant.

I reached out to potential participants for interviews through email first. For the local discourse, I chose mostly local organizations focused on social sustainability such as teaching unemployed people new skills, helping children after school, or teaching immigrants French or Dutch, such as Foyer, and Les Uns et les Autres. I received relatively little response through this method, so I decided to go to these organizations physically to ask them if they had time for an interview. This took some time, but it was more successful and I was able to interview seven people in Molenbeek. In general, people were very open to talking and discussing but had little time. For the planners’ discourse, I only contacted them via email which was relatively successful. I was able to interview the planner in person for over two hours. I decided
that one interview for the planners’ discourse was enough due to a lack of time. Additionally, there is a lot of information online on their views and goals compared to the local discourse of the inhabitants of Molenbeek.

*The Social Organizations*

**Image 2.** Map of the social organizations I interviewed and the planning department of Molenbeek.

As mentioned above I talked with inhabitants that were part of social organizations in Molenbeek. Since these organizations are an important context to understand these inhabitants’ opinions and experiences, I believe it is important to introduce them. Foyer is a large non-profit organization founded in 1969 in Molenbeek with as motto “Building an Intercultural Society” (Foyer, n.d.). In addition, Foyer has multiple sister organizations ranging from a women’s center called Dar Al Amal to sports and youth organizations (Wikipedia, 2021). Bruxelles Inter-Environnement (IEB) is a federation of neighborhood committees, which follows urban
projects relating to the environment, mobility, and land development in Brussels. They act like an activist group, publishing news articles related to urban development projects in Brussels and reports on certain topics related to urban development. Finally, Les Uns et Les Autres is a social restaurant providing cheap three-course meals for lunch while employing and training young unemployed people in different positions in the kitchen or in the restaurant.

**The Interviews**

The interviews were open-ended and either in Dutch or in French. I had prepared a list of questions before the interviews for both the local discourse and the planners’ discourse (see Appendix), however, not all questions were always discussed in every interview as certain people wanted to talk more about certain topics leaving little time for other questions. Certain questions were also not relevant to the lived experience of the interviewee and were therefore not of interest to them. At the start of the interview, I always let the interviewee choose the urban development project they wanted to discuss first and later on asked about specific urban development projects that were discussed in the media or that I knew of through past interviews.

**Data Analysis**

After the interviews I transcribed the parts of the interview I felt were relevant to my research topic. Following this step, I separated the data into different themes and tried to make a coherent storyline. I was able to form a narrative for the planner based on their interview and additional material from planning documents. The narrative of the local inhabitants that will be presented in the Empirical Tale chapter is solely based on the interviews. In order to make each interviewee anonymous I went to the website Behind the Name which is a random name generator. The generator allows for multiple types of name options such as Arabic or French names, female or male, and whether they should avoid rare names or not. For example, for a
female inhabitant with North African origins, I chose the options female, Arabic, and avoid rare. For Belgian inhabitants, I choose both the options French and Dutch since there was no Belgian name option. I used first names for all participants no matter their age or social status.

The Dockside Tower Project

During the interviews, different development projects were often discussed. However, certain projects were discussed more than others. One of these was the Sainctelette or Dockside Tower. I will be using this project to structure the presentation of the local and professional discourse. Both the local and the planners’ discourses will be intertwined in the themes, agreeing and disagreeing with each other like in a conversation, which is sadly not happening much in real life. By presenting a more nuanced narrative in which local points of view and experiences of inhabitants and social organizations in Molenbeek are represented, I hope to counteract the territorial stigma the inhabitants in Molenbeek face. I chose this development project in particular since it was talked about from many different points of view, such as an economic endeavor, an undemocratic project, a social project, a natural disaster, etc. The building does not yet exist but the project is very real to all levels of society in Molenbeek, local and municipal, social and political. People seem to be fervently reacting to this project because it feels like a project that goes against their own interests however if they do not fight it might still happen. I believe this project sets the scene for hundreds of other urban projects that are underway in Molenbeek and even in Brussels. If this development project is accepted by the Region of Brussels it might give a message to other real-estate developers that Brussels is a free market when it comes to urban development. This would to the detriment of the inhabitants of not only Molenbeek but all of Brussels.
Disposition

The first chapter introduces the topic of this thesis and gives an image of the situation in Molenbeek. The theoretical framework, in which the concept of territorial stigma is discussed, and the methods are also presented in this chapter. The second chapter of this study will discuss the background of the case study by giving an overall view of the urban context of Molenbeek and an introduction to the relevant urban development projects for this study. These projects are of importance to this study as they are often discussed in the interviews. In the third chapter, the empirical tale will be told. It is divided into multiple subthemes which should foster a greater understanding of the tale. In the fourth chapter, the ethnographic material will be analyzed through the lens of theory of territorial stigma and will answer the research questions. Finally, in the fifth chapter, the limitations of the study and future research will be discussed and a concluding discussion will be told in which the role of the planner will be discussed in relation with constructing and deconstructing narratives surrounding territorial stigma.
Chapter 2: The Case

This chapter will focus on the urban context of this study’s case, the municipality of Sint-Jans Molenbeek or Molenbeek. The map below shows the location of the municipality within Brussels, the capital of Belgium. It lies in the northwest of Brussels, with five neighboring municipalities. One of the neighboring municipalities is the municipality of Brussels, not to be confused with the Region of Brussels, which includes all of the 19 municipalities. Molenbeek is geographically close to the city center of Brussels and well-connected.

Image 3. Geographical location of the municipality of Molenbeek in the Region of Brussels.

Image 4. Map of Molenbeek with its neighboring municipalities and the location of the city center of Brussels
The Urban Context of Molenbeek

**Historical Background**

Molenbeek started as a small municipality outside of Brussels, consisting of mostly farmland. The municipality supplied most of the food it produced to Brussels. During the industrial revolution, Molenbeek slowly moved away from agriculture and towards factory work. The industrial activities grew until the municipality was known as ‘small Belgian Manchester’ and became part of Brussels. In the 1970s, industrial activities slowed down as the oil crisis became a worldwide problem. A lot of industrial buildings next to the canal were left abandoned and the neighborhood became a lot poorer (Molenbeek 1080, n.d.-a).

![Image 5. Map showing High and Low-Molenbeek.](image)

**Current Urban Situation**

Molenbeek is separated in two by the West Station and its railways (see image 5). East of the railway, next to the canal, is the historical part of Molenbeek also called lower-Molenbeek.
This part of Molenbeek is older and more densely built than the west of West Station. The population density in Historical-Molenbeek is one of the highest in Brussels with 26,810 inhabitants per km\(^2\) (Zoom Op de Gemeenten: Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, 2016). The East part is called high-Molenbeek and was mostly developed after the Second World War. High-Molenbeek has more and larger parks than Historical-Molenbeek and consists of mostly high-rise apartment buildings and some relatively old garden cities that have been renovated. Most urban development projects organized by the municipality are situated in historical-Molenbeek. Since 1993, thirteen Neighborhood Contracts were launched in the lower part of Molenbeek. In addition, Molenbeek has also a relatively higher amount of social housing, with nine social lodging out of 100 private lodgings compared to seven out of 100 on average in Brussels (Zoom Op de Gemeenten: Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, 2016).

**Socio-Economic Profile**

The municipality of Molenbeek is one of the poorest in Brussels. In 2014 almost one person out of ten between the age of 18 and 64 was dependent on financial aid, and one out of five between the age of 18 and 24. These are higher statistics than that of the average of Brussels. However, there are some differences within Molenbeek. In general, the average income in Historical-Molenbeek is lower than in Higher-Molenbeek. While low-Molenbeek inhabits mostly people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, high-Molenbeek inhabits mostly people coming from the middle class. The municipality of Molenbeek is often in deficit due to the lack of tax revenues (Zoom Op de Gemeenten: Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, 2016).

**Demographics**

In 2022 Molenbeek had a population of 97,697 inhabitants. Its population is relatively young with 28.5% being below 18 years old compared to 22.4% on average in Brussels.
Additionally, while Molenbeek has a lower percentage of foreign residents (28%) than the average in Brussels (35.9%), the majority of foreign inhabitants in Molenbeek live in the historical part of Molenbeek (BISA, n.d.).

**Relevant Urban Development Projects**

Certain urban development projects were often discussed and mentioned in the interviews. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, a short introduction to each project will be given to give some context to the arguments, concerns, and opinions given by the interviewees. See below on the map of Molenbeek where each project is situated.

*Image 6. The location of relevant urban development projects.*
The urban development project that was most often discussed in the interviews was the Dockside Tower, also called the Sainctelette Tower after the square it would be built on near the Canal. The plot of land near Sainctelette Square is owned by two development companies Urbicoon and Kumpen Real Estate and used to be a furniture store. In 2017 Urbicoon and Kumpen Real Estate and the chief government architect organized an architecture competition for this parcel of land, and the Dockside project won the contest, which is a mix of designs from V+; TRANS, and MSA (Gatzios, 2017). According to the website of TRANS, ‘The project wants to set an example when it comes to offering innovative collective space that enlivens the individual living environment and strengthens social contact.’ (TRANS architectuur | stedenbouw, n.d.). The ‘blocky’ building is supposed to have 14 floors of which the ground floor, the first floor, the fourteenth floor, and the 360 degrees roof garden will be public spaces. The inside of the building will be hollow with a glass roof so as to bring light into the normally dark corridor rooms. The project has also a large focus on cyclists with corridors large enough to park bicycles and industrial elevators large enough to bring them to the upper floors (TRANS architectuur | stedenbouw, n.d.).
The Dockside project came into certain obstacles and therefore construction has not yet started. In September 2021, the municipality of Molenbeek argued that the building was too high and that there were too many one-room apartments, which does not fit with the needs of the inhabitants. In addition, the firefighters note the risk of flooding of the plot of land (BRUZZ, 2023). The architects made the building slightly smaller and thinner, reducing it from 14 floors to 13, and increased the number of larger apartments. Still, the municipality of Molenbeek was not convinced adding that it would increase the density of the area (Van Renterghem, 2022).
After three public inquiries in which the municipality still felt that the building was too high and the living spaces inadequate for the inhabitants of Molenbeek, the developers went to the College of Urban Planning. This public body decided that the Region of Brussels will have to make the final decision. However, while the Region of Brussels is known to be in favor of the project, the developers have yet to receive the building permit from the city of Brussels. Additionally, in February of 2023, the College of environmental affairs also formed negative advice about the project as they believed the architects had not done enough to consider the potential risk of flooding. In response to this, the developers decided to reduce the number of underground parking spots. This led to another negative response from the municipality arguing that there was already a lack of parking spots for the number of inhabitants in the building (BRUZZ, 2023). Since then the project has been seemingly stuck (see image 9).
Tour & Taxis

Tour & Taxis is a historic industrial site of about 37 hectares in the municipality of Laken (Tour et Taxis – Inventaire Du Patrimoine Architectural, 2016). Built at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, it was a central node for the transit of goods across Europe. It consisted of two zones that had different functions, one being at the east for customs, and the west was the railway area. Tour & Taxis was of huge importance to the Belgian economy as it connected to water, railroad, and roads. Goods arrived, were stored, and departed from this site all across Europe and internationally. Additionally, the Belgian government received customs taxes. The site had railroads and many buildings such as the maritime station, hangars, and offices for both private companies and the customs department. When the European Union is founded and the economic borders between member states are lifted, the activities in Tour & Taxis started to slow down. In the end, most buildings on the site were abandoned. In 2001 the site was sold to real-estate developers, Leasinvest and Robelco, and they founded the project T&T. Since then multiple warehouses have been renovated into offices, and new buildings were built on the site. The developers also removed most of the railway and made a park instead (Tour et Taxis – Inventaire Du Patrimoine Architectural, 2016).
Today Tour & Taxis has become a national success story. The real-estate developers have renovated large industrial buildings to their glory days while giving them new modern activities. For example, the old Maritime station was fully renovated while taking care of details such as the old steel windows while making sure it would become a sustainable building. The maritime station creates its own energy through solar panels and geothermal energy \((\text{Gare Maritime, n.d.})\). The activities have changed as well as the station does not transport any goods anymore it has made room for open public spaces, offices, events, and retail spaces. The park has also received many positive responses as it brings some openness and green space inside a relatively dense neighborhood.


Some criticism the project has received is related to the new housing it has built and the plans for building more. In 2017, the municipality of Laken designed a Bijzondere Bestemmingsplan (BBP) for the Tour & Taxis site. A BBP is a specific development plan for a site or neighborhood, which tells developers and public real-estate developers what type of function they can build for (housing, schools, social housing, etc.), where and in which dimensions (how large and tall a building can be in a specific place). The social organization BRAL has argued that the Tour & Taxis BBP gives permission to developers to densify the site at an outrageous rate while not providing housing or services for the socio-economic class of the inhabitants around the site (Foukalne et al., 2017). The BBP gives permission to build
50% of the area for housing (185,000 m²), with no obligation to build social housing. Additionally, space for collective activities should make up 5% of the area, economic activities, and hotels should make up 18%, and offices 39% of the area (Foukalne et al., 2017). Certain buildings could go as high as 150m high, which is unusually high in Brussels. Most of the apartment buildings next to the maritime station, called Parklane I, have already been built and the masterplan for the park and the buildings on the other side, called Lake Side, also came out this year (MVRDV, 2023). The masterplan of Lake Side is currently going through the process of being approved by the Region of Brussels and the municipality of Laken. The developers expect to be done with the construction of the neighborhood in 2031.

**Brunfaut Tower**

**Image 14.** Brunfaut tower under renovation. Found on https://archiweek.urban.brussels/nl/event/brunfauttoren

The Brunfaut Tower was built in 1964 by Maxime and Fernand Brunfaut in historical Molenbeek as temporary housing to reduce the pressure of the housing crisis in the 60s in Brussels (BRUZZ, 2019c). Since then it has been used as social housing under Logement Molenbeekois. Due to its notoriously cardboard-thin walls, the building was also called the cardboard block or tower. Additionally, it was voted the ugliest residential tower in Brussels (BRUZZ, 2019a). With little to no maintenance over 50 years, the building kept deteriorating until it was too dangerous for inhabitants to keep living in the tower. The Region of Brussels had already started talking about renovations in 2011 however due to, among other things, legal proceedings from a contractor, the date kept being pushed back (BRUZZ, 2018).
In 2019 the municipality started the renovation of the Brunfaut Tower. It had stood empty for three years before the renovations finally started. The residential tower will not only become a passive building but also larger to create larger social housing with more rooms for larger families. The 17-floor building will get five extra floors and become three meters wider (BRUZZ, 2019c). Nevertheless, the renovation will only add one more apartment to the currently 97 housing units. The renovation will also add public spaces to the building in which inhabitants can have meetings or events and a roof terrace.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the socioeconomic context of Molenbeek and an overview of the different urban development projects discussed during the interviews in this study. The following chapter will present the discourses of the inhabitants and the planners around different themes and will freely refer back to the above-mentioned projects.
Chapter 3: The Empirical Tale

In this chapter, I will tell the discourse of both planners and inhabitants as an empirical tale using thick descriptions (Doucet et al., 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2014).

The Need for Green

Image 15. Map of Molenbeek with a focus on green spaces.

In June 2019, inhabitants around Sainctelette Square gathered to protest against the building of the Sainctelette Tower (BRUZZ, 2019b). According to the article, instead of densifying the already extremely dense and polluted area of Molenbeek, they wanted a park. I found similar concerns in the interviews I conducted. Inhabitants I interviewed often pleaded for more greenery in Molenbeek, more specifically in Historical Molenbeek near the canal (see image 15). Instead of building the many new residential towers that are underway or being planned, they ask for a park instead. This is for multiple reasons.
Rawiya is a 56-year-old woman who was born in Molenbeek to a Belgian mom and a Moroccan dad. She still lives there and has been happily working for the Dutch-speaking library of Molenbeek as a cleaning lady for the past 15 years. She is known among the library staff for being a warm and very talkative lady. When I asked her what she thinks Molenbeek needs she said:

‘What would be better for Molenbeek? More greenery! The people need that. For example, where I used to live there was a sort of park where people from the area sat, mostly old people. There they could speak to each other and be outside for a bit. But they have been working on the building for almost 7 years and so people do not go outside anymore. Maybe to walk around a bit but not to sit down and have a chat. […] I also hear from elderly people that they do not go outside anymore because there is nothing for them.’

She sees a park, not even a large one, a tree, and a few benches, as very important for the social dynamic of a neighborhood. ‘To breath’ she said. She continued by saying:

‘But even young people would like to have more greenery. During covid, you could see that people could not go outside and if there would have been a park during that time it would have been easier, and now as well. Maybe we would have even less criminality.’

Another inhabitant of Molenbeek, Francisco, had a similar opinion. Francisco is a talkative man in his forties and works for a social restaurant, Les Uns et les Autres, meaning each other. It offers cheap nutritious lunch meals while training unemployed people into catering jobs. He has lived 10 years in Molenbeek, in High Molenbeek. It seemed he actually liked living in Molenbeek but he was very critical of the municipality. Francisco also told me he wished that they would stop building buildings and instead create more green spaces in Molenbeek. ‘It keeps diminishing [the green spaces] over the years […] as they give more importance to population growth and money. It’s more like a business, which makes it really bad for living here.’.
I talked with an urban planner working for the municipality called Philip about the need for green spaces, and it seemed that the municipality also saw that the lack of greenery in Low-Molenbeek was a problem. Philip explained that making new green spaces is part of the vision of the municipality. More specifically, open ground green spaces with plants that can collect rainwater. ‘We need to put green spaces back in [Molenbeek].’. The municipality actively tries to make this vision come true through “neighborhood contracts”. A neighborhood contract is a development plan that is limited in its time and spatial size. It is an initiative of the Region of Brussels in which they put money aside for two neighborhood contracts a year in different municipalities and propose local projects as candidates according to a theme such as unemployment or social infrastructure. The Region then decides which project will receive funding and the project will go on for five or six years. The particularity of neighborhood contracts is that they have a focus on citizen participation, and is seen as a development project built between the municipality, the Region of Brussels, and the inhabitants of the municipality. According to Philip Molenbeek is a real champion in neighborhood contracts and has multiple going on at the moment. The neighborhood contracts are beneficial to municipalities like Molenbeek who have little money and socio-economic problems that benefit from localized specified development projects. In addition, the municipality hopes to be able to create new green spaces within city blocks by buying unused houses, demolishing them, and turning them into gardens or public parks. However, it is not always successful.
The Zennetuin is a park built by the municipality (see image 16). It is inside the building block with only one entrance. It had to be closed multiple times after it opened due to drug trafficking and vandalism. ‘Something we learned is that a park with only one entrance becomes problematic.’ says Philip. They had problems with groups of people that were monopolizing the park and hindering others from using the space so the municipality had to pay someone to work as a park watchman. Until the municipality could not afford it anymore. ‘But needing a park watchman is not a good sign in the first place’ admitted Philip. He added:

‘The municipality was so stupid, instead of keeping the entrance open, they build a building that hangs partially over the entrance so you have to walk into a dark hallway to get inside the park and that did not work well. And during the new year,
the entrance was set on fire so the bottom part of this building has fire damage but has never been repaired so they closed the park.’

And that was the end of the Zennetuin.

I also talked to the head of the NGO Foyer, called Olaf, who has a part of his organization sitting next to the Zennetuin. Olaf is a well-dressed man in his seventies and comes from a small Flemish village. He has been working in Molenbeek for Foyer since 1981. Olaf is a type of local celebrity and he was often interviewed in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris. When we discussed the need for greenery in Molenbeek, he quickly jumped on the topic of the Zennetuin and said this whole situation could have been avoided. ‘With even a rudimentary social analysis we would have seen that this would not have worked’. Olaf started his career as a professor of anthropology and later went into politics so this might explain his position. Although he seemed to speak as the head of a local social organization when he said: ‘This is what lacks in Molenbeek, a civil service that wants to talk with people from organizations and local people.’

*Sick and Tired*

Another reason why inhabitants seemed to be against the Dockside Tower and other projects that are similar to it, is because of the pollution it brings, and more precisely its effect on the health of the inhabitants of Molenbeek. The connection between new development projects, and therefore higher density, and pollution is one that was often brought up in the interviews. While inhabitants could often not explain the scientific reason for this connection, people often talked about newcomers bringing their cars, people being on top of each other and not having the space to breathe. Therefore, I believe inhabitants thought that newcomers and more density in Molenbeek would add more pollution to the area while green spaces would
give a place to breathe clean air. Olaf said that one of the core reasons why he was fighting against the Dockside Tower was the effect the pollution has on his health.

‘I have chronic bronchitis every year. My general practitioner told me ‘You should not stay where you live!’ […] It’s because of the smog, the quality of the cars. The hidden flaw [of Molenbeek] is pollution. It motivates me to fight against this Tower case. Not another one like that around here, right?’

And Olaf is not the only person I talked to with health problems caused by pollution. The head of the social restaurant Les Uns et Les Autres, Mamun, also called Boss, has a constant blocked nose and needs to cough quite often. He says it is because of all of the pollution he has been breathing in, in Molenbeek for the past 35 years. Francisco, his talkative colleague, added that he could not even open the windows in his house because it will dirty the inside of the house. ‘You can feel it [the pollution] on the furniture when you go over it with your fingers.’

Bruxelles Inter-Environnement (IEB) is a federation of neighborhood committees, which follows urban projects relating to the environment, mobility, and land development in Brussels. Hasim has been working for the last fourteen years for IEB. He lives close to Molenbeek, just across the canal, but he follows all the urban development projects in Historical Molenbeek for IEB from Porte de Ninove to the Tour & Taxis area. For the last four years, he has been mobilizing efforts to stop the Sainctelette Tower and finally succeeded at blocking the project. But according to him, it was ‘four years of fighting, really hardcore’. To him ‘This project has no reason for existing,’ and it is a bad idea to build there.

‘This large intersection is one of the most polluted of the Region of Brussels. They have done surveys and this neighborhood is one of the worst when you look at air quality. And there are studies that show that there is a higher rate of respiratory problems among newborns. And all this the administrative powers know. It is them that paid for those studies. They have results and know this reality. I do not understand how one can give permits to projects that are this harmful. […] When
you are aware of all these parameters, you are not going to aggravate the situation. You are going to alleviate it a little. That’s the role of elected officials!’

There seems to be an idea among the inhabitants that I talked to that the reason the Sainctelette Tower is being built instead of a park is because of money and business. Rawiya said to me: ‘They build and build but then there is also less and less green. They want money but they should also see that health is also important!’.

The Density Problem

Another issue that new urban development projects such as the Sainctelette Tower bring to Molenbeek is increased density. Currently, Molenbeek is already relatively dense, with 16,241 inhabitants per square kilometer, more than twice the average of Brussels with 7,528 inhabitants per square kilometer (Brusselse Instituut voor Statistiek en Analyse, 2022). Now the density of the neighborhoods in Low-Molenbeek near the canal is more than three times the average of Brussels with 24,909 inhabitants per square kilometer (IMMO Brussels, 2021). Inhabitants feel this density and even the municipality admits that Molenbeek has no need for more densification. When discussing the vision of the municipality Philip, the planner, told me:

‘We see that Molenbeek is the second most dense municipality in Belgium. Even more so in lower Molenbeek. So the vision of the municipality is that we should not increase the density where it already is very densely populated. […] There are not enough green spaces, not enough open spaces, not enough schools and daycare centers. So actually, the priority should not be to build more residences. The priority should be to fill the shortage in the infrastructure. And when a balance has been found then we can look at densifying. But it is actually not relevant today for the municipality to want to densify.’
This statement seems quite different from the reality the inhabitants see in Molenbeek. If the Dockside Tower would be built it will add 149 apartments to the already dense square. Mostly studios or one-bedroom apartments. ‘Why is there a need to have this many studios in this project when the demand in and around Molenbeek is not for studios but for apartments for families with more than two kids?’ asks Olaf the head of Foyer. This means that not only does the Dockside Tower not fit with the vision of the municipality and densifies an area already extremely dense, but it also does not benefit the inhabitants of the area since it is not built for their needs.

The Sainctelette Tower is not the only urban development project that is densifying Molenbeek. In 2019 the municipality started the renovation of the Brunfaut Tower, also called the Cardboard Tower because of its notoriously cardboard-thin walls. This should come as good news as it would help larger families that are on the waiting list for social housing. However, to Rawiya who lives just next to the building, this project seems concerning.

‘It’s already difficult for the people that are already there to find a place to park their car without this building. It’s maybe not very ecological but people have cars and they need to be able to park them somewhere. The new apartments will be for large families […] so I don’t know how that is going to work. They [the municipality] have not thought about this, at least that’s what I think.’

This might seem like a relatively unpopular argument to most of us in our current eco-friendly day and age, but for people coming back from long working days, trying to find a parking spot might be one of the most frustrating ways to end the day. When I talk to her about other projects that she might not know about she reacts exhausted and frustrated. ‘Another building?’ she asks. ‘and we’re already on top of each other already! Another building? No, there are enough buildings. […] They really shouldn’t add anything or it has to be a green space or something for social activities but not another building.’.
Rawiya is also scared of the consequences of densifying her neighborhood even more. While looking at a map of Molenbeek that I provided, Rawiya comments: ‘When you actually look, you see that there are a lot of people living close together. And then it’s normal in a municipality in which a lot of people live closely together that it sometimes goes sideways. And that’s normal, not everyone can always get along.’ What would it mean to have even more people in the neighborhood? Not only the impact on the available parking spots but the impact on the social cohesion of the community. Whether the newcomers are richer or poorer, when it comes to floods of new people like with these large residential towers the community will need to adapt. Olaf also expressed his concerns: ‘In a neighborhood like this, bringing in housing is socially dangerous I believe. I have been long enough in these types of neighborhoods to say ‘do not do this’. It will be the beginning of misery.’

I would often hear during the interviews ‘Why not renovate empty buildings instead of building new big ones?’ Nasira is a lady in her mid-thirties that immigrated to Belgium from Morocco eight years ago. She decided to live in Molenbeek because it was close to her job at the Museum of Migration. Nasira seemed to have a fascination for history and old architecture. She told me about the industrial history of Molenbeek and thought it was very important to keep this aspect. That is why she was wondering why the municipality was not focusing on restoring old buildings and renting them out as social housing or even selling them to local inhabitants, instead of building new apartment buildings and densifying Low-Molenbeek. I did not get an answer from the municipality about this question but I can make an educated guess that it probably has to do with the fact that these battered houses are privately owned and that the municipality lacks the funds to both buy them and renovate them.
An Unstoppable Force

The social organization Foyer, of which Olaf is the chair, is just next to where the Sainctelette Tower is supposed to be built. When I met with Olaf for the interview he immediately told me the story of how it all started for him. During the year ’89, he was contacted by a developer, from a company called De Waal, and a speculator, Sir De Put, who was from the Netherlands. They wanted to buy a building from Foyer. That was the start for Olaf of the process of gentrification of Molenbeek. He noticed for the first time that they were on a crucial spot, near the center of Brussels, and that it would become a zone in which a lot of renovations would be happening. ‘I came under pressure to sell. The pressure was there but we held on. And we will keep on holding on.’.

The initial project was to buy a part of the Foyer and buy other buildings near the canal. The developers wanted to build a large administrative building. This was quite popular in the ’90s. Just next to Foyer stands the building of the Communauté Française or the French-speaking community of Belgium, one of the three constituent constitutional linguistic communities. The large administrative building was built around the same time. The developers speaking with Olaf had hoped to do the same. They were able to buy one plot of land just in front of the canal. However, instead of building something, speculation started. Since the end of the ’80s, the price of this plot of land has been increasing consistently. This was the reason, for Olaf, why they do not want to make a park, even though, the neighborhood demands it. ‘Why else would they need to build fourteen floors and why do they need so many studios?’ He ended by saying:

‘We will fight until the end. Would it [the Sainctelette Tower] make the neighborhood look nicer? No, I do not think so. Is this area a heat island? Yes. Is this an area with a lot of problems? Yes. Will it help finance the municipality because it needs funds? No, it will not. Maybe it will help the Region of Brussels but not the municipality. […] Will it solve the problems the inhabitants of Molenbeek have when looking for a house? On the contrary, it drives the prices up.’
It is not the only housing project that does not seem to be catered to the inhabitants of Molenbeek but seemingly towards a richer outsider population. The Tour and Taxis site used to be an abandoned industrial site and was renovated by the real-estate development company, Nextensa. Since this site is not in Molenbeek but just at its border, the municipality had little to say about this development. However, the neighborhood is still influenced by its presence.

The opinions on the Tour and Taxis site were usually relatively mixed during my interviews. People were happy with the renovation of the old buildings since it was well done and had kept the industrial style. It also felt safer to walk past it compared to when it was abandoned since it is now a social hotspot full of people and events. When I asked whether they thought it was beneficial to Molenbeek I received mixed answers. Nasira told me that she heard that a lot of families with small children from Molenbeek went to Tour & Taxis because of the park and the playground for children. Since there are not that many options in Low-Molenbeek it is nice that they could enjoy the benefits of Tour & Taxis. However, some people were a bit more critical of the project. When I asked the question to Fransisco he looked at me and asked back, ‘How many people from Molenbeek do you think work at Tour & Taxis? If it is not a place where local people can make money how could it be helpful, in the way that Molenbeek needs right now?’.

The housing built on the site was another point of discussion. In general, people were not outraged or mad just sad and disappointed but not surprised. Nasira said matter-of-factly ‘Tour and Taxis apartments are expensive so not really for the people from here.’. Rawiya said something similar about the apartments in Tour & Taxis:

‘It’s too bad that the apartments there are too expensive. It’s again building, building but for a certain category of people. For example, I won’t be looking for an apartment there because I know I do not make enough money. It’s very beautiful but you can immediately see you won’t be able to live there. It’s not built for you but for a different type of person. It is not a cleaning lady that will live there. […]’
People that live around there [Low-Molenbeek] will maybe go to Tour & Taxis for the activities but not to see whether they can move there. And that’s too bad.’

The Consequences

Projects like Dockside Tower and the housing in Tour & Taxis are part of the gentrification process happening in Molenbeek. The impact of this process of gentrification can already be felt by the local inhabitants. Nasira has long wished to buy an apartment in Molenbeek but she simply cannot afford it, while having a stable income. She said that if she had to give one negative opinion on Molenbeek it would be that the housing and renters market had become more expensive while people needed more housing. ‘Renting an apartment in Molenbeek today is 800€ a month but there’s also a high chance it will be in a bad condition while in Antwerp you would find an apartment at the same price but in better condition. For a family with just one salary, it is not easy to pay the rent.’ She said. Nasira also talks with first-generation immigrants that came from North Africa to Belgium after the second world war. They were able to buy something when they arrived in Brussels but it was in a very bad state apparently. Some houses did not have running water, showers, or toilets while back in Morocco at that time houses did have running water with showers and toilets. So they had to do large renovations in their new houses. While they were at it, they added certain Moroccan touches to their new Belgian houses. Certain houses have Moroccan living rooms, or the façade of the house has some Moroccan tiles, zellige, as decoration. They brought a part of Morocco with them. While the houses today in Molenbeek have running water and working showers, the prices have gone up so much that Nasira does not think she will be able to buy something in Molenbeek.
The Role of the Municipality

When I discussed gentrification with Philip, the urban planner of the municipality of Molenbeek, he seemed to be against it but also talked about it as if it was an unstoppable force that the municipality could only limit.

‘The idea should still be to improve the living qualities of inhabitants. […] Nevertheless, the municipality is conscious of the fact that gentrification is happening. Actually, the whole zone of low-Molenbeek is being gentrified since already ten or fifteen years. De municipality does ask itself the question of what it could do to stop it. That’s not going to work. But we do try to slow it down. For example, the municipality has banned changing older ateliers into lofts. That is the most important intervention the municipality has done against gentrification. It was initially for other reasons but it does also slow down gentrification. But you cannot stop gentrification anyways. Where lies the line between creating a park and generating gentrification? The park will probably contribute to gentrification but not doing anything is not an alternative.’

He later added:

‘We try to keep the people that live in Molenbeek here. If other people want to join, we cannot be against that really. But we have to make sure that vulnerable populations in Molenbeek do not have to move because the housing market has become too expensive for them. The municipality does this by going against lofts because they attract a certain type of people which could lead to increasing housing prices. And by keep looking for places for social housing so you keep people there. You have to keep the social diversity.’

So, while the municipality has little power to stop gentrification, it does try to stop it to keep a socially diverse community. But what about ethnic diversity? Is that also appreciated? Both the municipality and certain interviewees appeared to have contradictory feelings during the interviews. While they said they were against gentrification they did not mind newcomers,
even more so newcomers that were not North African were even more appreciated. Philip, the planners said about this topic the following.

‘Molenbeek has actually very uniform inhabitants, certainly in low-Molenbeek. I would not mind if that would change. When there is too much of one community, here the Moroccan community, it’s better for the neighborhood it becomes less I think. It’s already changing but it’s still quite uniform. For the people themselves and for young people it’s better to be more in contact with or see other people and not just people from their own community. But I’m no sociologist.’

Hasim said that the reason the municipality is actually in favor of gentrification is because of certain unsaid things.

‘The main argument is for diversity’s sake. This is very untrue. Those neighborhoods [in Low-Molenbeek] are very diverse. Neighborhoods with no social diversity are the richer neighborhoods. Uccle for example is not mixed but Molenbeek is very mixed. There is everything. The second argument that comes back is that historical Molenbeek is a relatively popular neighborhood, which is true, so the politicians talk about the tax base. The municipality does not have a lot of income because a large part of the population does not contribute, does not work, and is unemployed. A lot of children that are born here have difficulty finding a job. For multiple reasons like racism at the hiring level. These are real phenomena that are hindrances for people with immigrant backgrounds. So the whole argument of the tax base is that you need to attract a new population that will contribute. One that works, pays its taxes so that money flows into the funds of the municipality.’

The interview of Philip and Hasim shows us that the professional discourse and the local discourse contradict each other. While the municipality claims to want to protect its inhabitants and slow down the gentrification process it is not felt by the inhabitants, and the efforts of the municipality have been seemingly minimal. Simultaneously, local inhabitants see that there is an incentive for the municipality to promote gentrification as it would increase the amount of tax the municipality would receive. Finally, local inhabitants such as Nasira have noticed that
the price of real estate has gone up while the quality of the housing has not. We can with almost certainty blame the expensive new apartment buildings such as the Dockside Tower that have spread along the canal.

**How did we get here?**

But if everyone disagrees with the Dockside Tower project and gentrification, why is it still happening? When asked what they think went wrong, respondents would often respond that there was a lack of communication between them and the municipality. None of the inhabitants I spoke to felt heard by the planners or their representatives or felt that their opinion and wants were considered when developing a project in their municipality. When I asked Francisco and Mamun what they thought about the council of Molenbeek or the public meetings organized by the municipality, they laughed and said ‘there is a difference between what is said there, and what is actually done. […] The aldermen [the elected members of the Molenbeek council] do not listen. They do not respond.’ Meaning they had little trust in what officials or planners discussed during these meetings, as it would likely be different in reality. Additionally, if they had any concerns or demands they do not believe they would be heard. Olaf also assumed that planners did not actually want the input of inhabitants, just some recommendations. When talking about neighborhood contracts he said:

‘It’s better that they are there, than they are not. […] I do not go anymore to the discussions about neighborhood contracts. They are more about informing us about what they want to do and maybe about certain things they could change. But it’s not an actual discussion. It’s actually a finished plan and they want to talk about whether to add benches or not.’

In addition, Olaf thought that in the case of private developers, public meetings in which urban development projects are explained and the opinion of the inhabitants is asked, were a strategy to win time.
‘If you explain a lot of things to people, in a sense you invest a lot of time but at the same time you also win time. You get less resistance later on. They will try to lower your guard with promises that will not be fully respected later on.’

Rawiya also said she did not go to public meetings about development projects because the son of her friend told her it was no use.

‘He said that they listen without listening. It is as if you talk to a wall. They make notes but they do not do anything with them afterward. They come up with a plan and they say they want the opinions of people but the problem is that they do not actually listen to the opinions or include them in the project. So it stays the same project the planners had talked about at the start.’

However, according to the municipality, there are certain processes in place to increase citizen participation in the planning process in Molenbeek. Philip, the urban planner working for the municipality, was for example very enthusiastic about the neighborhood contracts as they are smaller projects that have a focus on citizen participation.

‘So there is participation. It could always be better but I would say that neighborhood contracts do this quite well. Better than larger development projects. Because they are smaller, more concrete, and easier to understand. Often the project is shown to inhabitants at different moments in the process as well. There is a neighborhood committee and they come together to discuss with people to see whether they agree or not with the project.’

However, he also mentioned that the municipality knew how difficult it was to have inhabitants of Molenbeek participate in the planning procedure, and argued that this was one of the reasons Molenbeek had so many social organizations and committees.

‘There are a lot of committees, movements, groups, […], that involve people. Because it is also a population that does not find its way easily on its own. The associations bring people up to date about things like this [urban development projects]. That is one of the riches of Molenbeek, I think, especially in Low-Molenbeek.’
This shows that while there is an apparent genuine effort to include inhabitants in development projects, at least smaller ones, the municipality depends a lot on social organizations to do part of the job for them. Because is it not the job of the municipality to involve their inhabitants or to keep them informed about development projects that could affect them?

**Exterior Forces**

So one possible reason why projects such as the Dockside Tower were so close to receiving a building permit is the lack of citizen participation in the urban planning process. Another could be because of another force with which the municipality needs to work, the Region of Brussels. When I asked Philip why the Dockside Tower building permit was almost given when the municipality disagreed with the project he said:

‘Large building permits are usually delivered by the Region. The municipality is part of the negotiations but if the Region insists, then yes it will come to be. That’s a bit of the problem with which Molenbeek has to deal. Laying between [the interests of] the Region and the municipality.’

According to Philip, the Region is laxer with development projects than the municipality of Molenbeek because they do not see the possible negative local effects of such projects or the needs of the inhabitants. They see that Brussels and Molenbeek are in need more housing so they see development projects such as Dockside Tower as a solution to the housing problem. Moreover, the municipality of Molenbeek has little money and therefore depends on the Region of Brussels for funding other projects. However, when discussing this point of view with Olaf he laughed.

‘Classic positioning of the municipality. ‘The Region told us so we have to do it.’ […] What they should also tell you is that legally if the municipality continues to oppose, the project cannot go on. But if the municipality does not agree then the
Region could also start to become difficult. So there is political pressure from the Region. So the municipality could really stop this project [the Dockside Tower] but they will have to bring a judge etcetera. And it could have an impact on other files. [...] It’s a political game. [...] But the municipality cannot always blame the Region. If they tell something with as argument: ‘Well yeah the Region wants this’, then that is not enough and not completely true.’

Additionally, Hasim, who is working for IEB, argued that the political parties at the regional level and the municipal level are the same and coordinate these types of decisions together. According to him it is a conscious agreement to want to change the population in neighborhoods like Molenbeek. Hasim also thinks the Region could interfere with the Dockside Tower and stop it but decides not to.

‘It’s their capitalist logic and the desire to promote real-estate development. Without a building permit, the land does not have a lot of value. With the permit, the higher they go in floors, the more they make money. [...] Who decides this? It’s the politics. Come on who gives the permit? If you do not give the permit he’s stuck and he needs to sell at a reasonable price. And the Region could interfere, buy the land and build either something for the collective interest […], or a small garden. Or something normal-sized. They [the developers] are allowed to build but the rule, according to the urban planning laws, is that it should be the same size as the building next to it, which is a sports hall. But they don’t agree. They want to build double the size. And they want to create a parking and this land is marshy and so they will have to dig and pump the water out. On all ecological levels, this project is a disaster. Not acceptable. And Bruxelles Environnement [the environmental agency of the Region of Brussels] did not say anything! They closed their eyes. Isn’t that weird?’

Hasim is not the only one that felt something fishy was going on. While none of the inhabitants had proof, many thought that certain things were not revealed to them about the decision-making behind the Dockside Tower. ‘I will not be able to prove it, I do not know how much, but that something has been given under the table I have no doubts.’ Said Olaf.
‘If it [the Dockside Tower] is built, it will mean for me that the real-estate developers and speculators around the canal, the deciding factor are not the politicians. The politicians are involved and someone probably received some crumbs to sell, but this was not done in the interest of the citizens. The interest of inhabitants in Molenbeek is not to have a high residential tower with studios and one-bedroom apartments. That is not in the interest of the citizens. It is in the interest of the developer.’

**The Future of Molenbeek**

The current situation in Molenbeek is a complex one. While the gentrification process seems to be in full motion, there is still hope that the municipality or the Region might stop it or at least try. But not everyone is staying to see how it will end. There are inhabitants such as Nasira that still hope they might be able to buy an apartment in Molenbeek and stay there for a long time, but half of the inhabitants I spoke to were planning on leaving Molenbeek when the opportunity arises. The reasoning behind leaving Molenbeek differed from person to person. Mamun wants to live in the countryside away from the pollution in Molenbeek after his retirement. So he will finally be able to breathe some fresh air. He told me that his retirement had been pushed by two years but that otherwise he would already have been gone this year. Rawiya also wanted to retire to a calmer neighborhood outside of Brussels, even though she had lived all her life in Molenbeek. ‘I like Molenbeek but if tomorrow they tell me you get a little house outside of Brussels, I will leave Brussels. No, I won’t stay in Molenbeek, that’s for sure. Once I’m retired I will be gone, I won’t stay. I want to rest easy.’

However, some inhabitants seem to be leaving not because they want to but because they have to. Hasim explained it this way:

‘The weakest are the renters because they are fragile. So what happens is that the land value goes up, the rent goes up and there is an explosion in rent prices, so people leave. First, they will look in other neighborhoods in Brussels where it will still be affordable for their salary. And otherwise, they will leave Brussels. […] You
find people from Molenbeek that have left a bit everywhere. You meet them again at the Thursday market because they come back for that. It’s violent to have to leave your home where you have spent 20 or 30 years. It’s an uprooting.’

Francisco was also quite negative about the future of Molenbeek. ‘The more they built, the less viable it is for people from Molenbeek. They build for rich people or Dutch speakers. You will see in 20 years there will be no foreigners in Molenbeek’. For him, no more foreigners meant no more inhabitants from Morocco or with Moroccan origins. They were already seeing it. People leaving, young people that were born in Molenbeek leaving whenever they can. Mamun added that he only saw children below ten years old when he was walking in Molenbeek. From my perspective, there seemed to be two types of exodus, one because of the quality of life in Molenbeek, for example the pollution, which is voluntary to a certain extent, and another type pushed by the gentrification process, which is involuntary.

However, according to Hasim, it does not need to be involuntary movements. If the Region of Brussels would have some system of control on the rent prices, it would already protect the inhabitants that are most vulnerable to gentrification, the renters. It is not unusual to set in place some type of rent control. Multiple countries and cities around the world with housing issues have employed different types of rent regulation to protect their renters.

‘You have to build the city for its inhabitants, not for real estate developers. Stop selling the city. We have to put in place a real protective net which should start with real control of rent prices to limit them or even diminish them. From that moment on we can start developing the public spaces. […] Brussels is a city which produces a lot of richness but also a lot of the poorest people. Half of Brussels’ population is meeting the requirements to demand social housing and not everyone actually demands it. […] There is a political response needed. And it’s not with private housing that we will solve this issue. On the contrary, current private developments push the rent prices up. I would even say that it is criminal to leave the market pushing the rent prices up. Because the social consequences are enormous.’
When I asked Mamun and Fransisco what they wished to see happen in Molenbeek in their lifetime, Fransisco immediately said ‘a well-organized municipality without corruption. A municipality that thinks before acting and thinks its projects through.’. He said he would like the municipality to become one where it is “bon de vivre”, meaning good to live. Mamun agreed with him. A municipality in which you can imagine yourself growing old.
Chapter 4: Analysis

In this chapter, I will first discuss the discourses of the planners and that of the inhabitants of Molenbeek as we have seen in the empirical tale described above to answer the research questions. Thereafter, I will apply the theoretical framework of ‘territorial stigma’ by Loïc Wacquant to my empirical data and see to what extent it fits or might differ from the theory. Finally, I will finish the chapter with a conclusion.

The Inhabitants’ and Planners’ Discourse

In general, inhabitants and planners agreed on multiple subjects. Both agreed on the need for greenery, to lower the density or to keep it as it is instead of increasing it, and to focus on infrastructure such as schools and kindergartens. The municipality also seemed to want to prioritize the interests of the inhabitants of Molenbeek but the outside pressures from the Region of Brussels and private developers added to the lack of funds and therefore lack of leverage could explain why certain development projects such as Dockside Tower are still likely to receive building permits. In addition, the municipality also seems to try to include citizen participation in the urban planning practice with the neighborhood contracts, but the inhabitants did not seem convinced.

None of the inhabitants I interviewed felt heard by the municipality or developers nor included in the urban development process. This could be because inhabitants do not participate in the urban development process, because they do not feel heard, or because the citizen participation process is exclusionary or inefficient. Additionally, both the municipality and inhabitants felt that there was a process of gentrification happening in Low-Molenbeek. Although the municipality claimed to want to protect its most vulnerable inhabitants, their efforts seem minimal. Except for limiting the number of old ateliers that could be turned into lofts, the municipality seems to have done little to protect its renters or poorer populations from
the consequences of gentrification. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a somewhat positive reaction among certain inhabitants, usually of higher social class, and the municipality towards gentrification. They speculated that gentrification could solve certain problems in Molenbeek, such as the lack of social mobilization. There also seemed to be a general lack of trust coming from the inhabitants I interviewed toward the municipality and the Region of Brussels, with many having personal suspicions that something fraudulent was happening, more precisely with the Dockside Tower project. Finally, the opinions about the quality of life in Molenbeek differed and while some people thought there was a real community feeling in Molenbeek that was difficult to find in any other municipality, others thought the pollution and the density were too much to handle and were hoping to leave the neighborhood one day.

Applying the Theory of Wacquant

In this section, I will discuss to what extent the theory of territorial stigma of Wacquant fits the discourses shown in this study. Firstly, we need to discuss in what way the urban context of Molenbeek is quite different from the usual neighborhoods with which researchers analyze territorial stigma. Molenbeek is not like the Parisian banlieue in which Wacquant et al. (2014) theorized the concept of territorial stigma. The municipality of Molenbeek is part of the Region of Brussels and is next to the city center of Brussels. From the canal to the heart of the city center of Brussels it would take you a 15 min walk and with the metro less than five. Thus, Molenbeek is not segregated physically from the rest of the city like in the Parisian banlieue, which is on the periphery and on the margins of society (Pinkster et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it did become a type of no-go zone after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, and its inhabitants were stigmatized as radicalized Muslims or jihadist sympathizers due to the media and politicians re-enforcing anti-Muslim sentiment (Figoureux & Van Gorp, 2020). Wacquant et al. (2014) discuss that often with territorial stigma a whole neighborhood is placed upon one
image no matter where one lives in the neighborhood or their social status. This is also seen in Molenbeek as within the municipality there are strong socio-economic and spatial differences between High and Low-Molenbeek for example. This was also often discussed in the interviews with inhabitants. This shows that the stigma and stereotypes posed upon Molenbeek as a whole only show a homogeneous, and simplified version of the local reality. Instead, the local situation proves to be a lot more complex and diverse. This observation, therefore, follows the theory of territorial stigma, in which poorer neighborhoods with a small or stable minority are painted as more dangerous and exotic than their actual situation or demography warrants (Wacquant et al., 2014).

Therefore, I would argue that even though Molenbeek has a different spatial context than the Parisian banlieue, Molenbeeks’ situation fits the concept of territorial stigma to a certain extent. To which extent the theory fits the situation in Molenbeek will be shown in the following sub-sections.

**Stigma Coping Strategies**

Wacquant et al. (2014) argue that inhabitants in stigmatized areas develop different strategies to cope with territorial stigma. Although the strategy used depends on different socio-economic characteristics such as social class, age, and housing tenure among others, they argued stigmatized inhabitants will either yield to the stigma and reproduce the stigmatized discourse, or want to go against the stigma and rebel (Wacquant et al., 2014). Interestingly is that according to Wacquant both strategies will lead to deepening the stigma in the neighborhood and eventually a lack of community development as inhabitants start to avoid and mistrust each other (Meade, 2021).

As with many studies before this one, the data in this study does not show such an extremely negative situation regarding community feeling or development (Meade, 2021;
Slater, 2015). When asked to describe Molenbeek in three words people often responded with the feeling of solidarity among the inhabitants, the diversity, or ‘the human warmth’ in the neighborhood. In addition, Molenbeek has many social organizations that are very active and not only interact with inhabitants and foster community feeling but also try to improve the socio-economic conditions in which people live. The social organization I interviewed, Les Uns et Les Autres, is a great example of this as they provide cheap three-course lunches for the community, bringing people together, and they train unemployed people therefore also bringing jobs and education to Molenbeek. Even inhabitants that have a relatively negative view of their neighborhood usually ended their complaints with a comment that diffuses the stigma instead of keeping it concentrated on Molenbeek like saying not everybody in Molenbeek was like this, or that this sort of thing happened in every big city. Therefore, we can say that in this study inhabitants most often defended their neighborhood as a stigma-coping strategy.

However, many inhabitants often spoke about planning to leave Molenbeek or seeing people leave the neighborhood. According to Wacquant et al. (2014) “exit” is also a stigma-coping strategy, meaning former inhabitants try to physically distance themselves from the space which placed the stigma upon them. This often reinforces stigma as inhabitants that can afford it leave the neighborhood, leaving mostly inhabitants from lower socio-economic status in the stigmatized neighborhood. I saw two types of exodus in Molenbeek, one that is more or less voluntary and related to the quality of life in Molenbeek such as the air pollution levels, and one that is involuntary pushed by the gentrification process. However, it is unclear in this study whether these two types of exodus perpetrate territorial stigma due to a lack of more information, and therefore fit into the stigma-coping strategy.

Nevertheless, this study showed that people that had left Molenbeek sometimes came back for the Thursday market or for certain specific shops you could only find in Molenbeek. Often
it was for African goods such as African spices or Moroccan bread since in most other municipalities in Brussels there are no African shops. Thus, even when leaving the neighborhood, they come back regularly for certain things they can only find in Molenbeek. Although saying some people come back to Molenbeek for groceries weekly does not de facto mean there is a strong community feeling or no stigma placed upon the neighborhood and its people, it does show that in this study ex-inhabitants or people that know Molenbeek do not want to completely distance themselves from the neighborhood. Additionally, it shows that the stigma surrounding the space is not enough to dissuade them from coming back from time to time. This does not fully fit the theory of territorial stigma, as Wacquant et al. (2014) see the ‘exit’ stigma-coping strategy as a way to flee the neighborhood and the stigma surrounding the neighborhood.

‘They Don’t Listen’

None of the inhabitants I spoke to felt heard by the planners or their representatives or felt that their opinion and wants were considered when developing a project in their municipality. This could be a consequence of the territorial stigma experienced by the inhabitants, which leads to them being overexposed in the media but invisible in local decision-making (Meade, 2021; Wacquant et al., 2014). Other research has found this too. Power et al. (2018) looked at how inhabitants viewed safety in two public housing estates in the poorest neighborhoods in Ireland while undergoing regeneration. While first the regeneration process was focused on rebuilding, many residents had to be relocated in the end. Power et al. (2018) found that not only inhabitants felt more scared and insecure during the regeneration program, but they also felt ‘invisible’ and not listened to in the public sphere. This in turn led them to participate less and less in society. While the article does not mention a direct explanatory link with Wacquant’s theory on territorial stigma, they did argue the reactions of the inhabitants
interviewed were similar to what Wacquant was describing on how stigmatized inhabitants were affected by territorial stigma (Power et al., 2018).

This could be the start of a vicious cycle in which vulnerable inhabitants that were not heard decide to not participate anymore in order to not waste time anymore. According to Turok et al. (1999), not involving poorer communities in the planning process may exacerbate the social exclusion these communities already face. The article explains social exclusion as a multi-dimensional problem that is linked to unemployment, poverty, social inequality, and powerlessness. Excluded communities are more difficult to reach than other inhabitants because they are not as well networked, thus the information does not reach them, or they might be disillusioned by the planning process (Turok et al., 1999). The article stresses the ability of the urban planning process to both worsen the current socio-economic conditions and better them. By including excluded communities, the planning process can make changes that are relevant to the requirements of local inhabitants.

In conclusion, there was a strong sentiment found in this study of distrust and unwillingness to participate in the citizen participative process of the urban development process. Whether this sentiment is because of the territorial stigma placed upon Molenbeek is unclear but a strong possibility as Wacquant et al. (2014) and others have found that excluded communities are often ‘invisible’ in participative processes in urban planning and therefore urban development projects can exacerbate social exclusion and consequently stigmatization.

**Re-Enforcing the Stigma?**

According to Wacquant et al. (2014), state officials can reinforce territorial stigma by producing public policies that worsen living conditions for stigmatized populations through disinvestment. Inversely, state officials could work together with private developers to invest in the stigmatized area, which usually results in gentrification (Horgan, 2018; Kallin & Slater,
2014; Slater, 2015; Wacquant et al., 2014). This is not because there is an evil deep state in each urban planning department in each city, but more often because of implicit biases of planners and state officials and in some cases institutional racism (Redden et al., 2022). These biases are influenced by the discourses surrounding stigmatized areas and therefore they influence the urban policies that will affect these neighborhoods. This in turn can reinforce the stigma placed upon the neighborhood as it becomes justified (Redden et al., 2022).

During the interview with the municipality, I did not get the feeling that Philip, the planner I spoke with, was xenophobic or Islamophobic or trying to perpetuate the stigma placed upon Molenbeek. Philip seemed genuinely concerned about local problems in Molenbeek and thought they were interesting to solve. However, I did not notice that in certain instances certain discourses related to the stigma surrounding Molenbeek had influenced his own discourse.

For example, Philip argued that the current Moroccan community in lower-Molenbeek was relatively homogenous and that it could benefit from more diversity. However, Hasim argued that Molenbeek was already relatively diverse in its population, more than affluent neighborhoods such as Uccle, which nobody is trying to diversify or socially mix. According to Risager (2022), racialization can also be a reason for gentrification and is often an important part of the territorial stigma of a neighborhood. In their study in Denmark, they saw that racialization and stigmatization justified commodification efforts and that even if these efforts fail, they reinforced and justified even further the racialization and stigmatization placed upon people (Risager, 2022). Thus, showing that racialization has an important effect on how governments make decisions about stigmatized areas and how they justify them. It is also important to note that previous research has also shown that the economic and social benefits attributed to a ‘social mix’ for local inhabitants are limited as usually newcomers and local inhabitants do not interact much more, and the social mix usually leads to tenant displacement in the end (Slater, 2006).
Finally, this study cannot say whether racialization or stigma placed upon the inhabitants of Molenbeek influences the decisions Philip makes when developing a neighborhood and therefore perpetuating territorial stigma, but it does show that it does influence at least his discourse and could therefore influence others in the planning department or other state officials.

The Solution is Gentrification

As mentioned above, territorial stigma often leads the way and justifies gentrification in a stigmatized area (Horgan, 2018; Kallin & Slater, 2014). Many studies have found that there is a close link between the role of the government and gentrification in urban renewal projects (Kallin & Slater, 2014; Meade, 2021; Redden et al., 2022; Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014). In this study, we have found that Molenbeek is a stigmatized area and that part of it is undergoing the gentrification process but whether this is caused by territorial stigma is not certain. In addition, this study has found that there is a tendency in the discourse of the municipality and certain inhabitants from higher socio-economic status to try to seemingly defend the gentrification process by looking at the positive sides of gentrification. I will argue in this section that the tendency to speak positively about gentrification in Molenbeek is indirectly defending the way of seeing gentrification as a solution against territorial stigma. This section might have a less direct relation with Wacquants’ theory but it was an important dynamic in Molenbeek and therefore it seems important to discuss in this study.

According to Slater (2006), there has been movement both in academics and popular discourse that romanticizes gentrification and argues that it may be ‘not so bad after all’. The literature surrounding the concept of gentrification has been focusing more and more on the discourse of the gentrifying groups, and while Slater (2006) admits that it is important to study gentrifying groups instead of vilifying them, current literature, both academic and popular,
seems to focus on showing the ‘good sides’ of gentrification. Sometimes even presenting it as the only solution to urban poverty and decay (Slater, 2006). In addition, Staub (2018) argues that not discussing the displacement of poor people in gentrified neighborhoods, not only portrays a false and uncritical image of the gentrification process but also erases the voice of the poor and the working class that have been displaced, from both their homes and in policy decision-making (Staub, 2018).

When discussing the issue of gentrification, the municipality seemed concerned about its impact but also spoke about gentrification as an unstoppable wave and that urban planners had very limited powers. From their point of view an urban planner had two options: either develop an area and contribute to gentrification, or develop a site without hoping to better it. This is however a false choice since the definition for gentrification, used in this study, is ‘The sum of various developments whereby working-class areas are (re-) appropriated by groups that are socio-economically more advantaged than their prior residents or users.’ (Van Criekingen & Leyden, 2006). A beautifully designed public square, roadside green spaces, or a hipster cafe for local middle-class inhabitants are not signs of a successful gentrification process. Meaning that if the urban development does not aim to replace current inhabitants with richer newcomers, and sets mechanisms in place to protect current inhabitants from moving away, it does not further gentrification.

While the municipality does try to limit the number of lofts built in historical-Molenbeek and is demanding new housing to be for larger families, it does not seem to be doing more to protect its most vulnerable inhabitants from being displaced. This is also seen on site since the Dockside Tower, which is a development project that furthers gentrification and does not meet the needs of Molenbeeks’ inhabitants, was only blocked thanks to public dismay and local activist groups like Foyer and Bruxelles Inter-Environnement, and not the municipality itself.
Slater (2006) ends his article by saying that we should stop communicating as if the two only options for low-income neighborhoods are constant disinvestment and urban decay or reinvestment and displacement since it is a false choice. Literature should return to seeing gentrification as a problem and not as a quick fix to complex urban poverty problems. I would argue that planners and developers should do the same.

**Conclusion**

Molenbeek has long been stigmatized in Belgium and internationally after the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks. In addition, Molenbeek has been going through a gentrification process in which many housing projects are built but not catered to the needs of the inhabitants and instead increase living costs. This study tried to counter this narrative and nuance the stigma by bringing to the forefront the experiences and views of the stigmatized inhabitants. I have interviewed both inhabitants of Molenbeek and a planner from the municipality of Molenbeek to understand both the discourse of the inhabitants and that of the planners at the municipal level about current urban development projects in and around Molenbeek. With the empirical tale, I was able to present both discourses as if they were discussing together, which they sadly do not do often, to see where they differ or agree.

I used the theory of territorial stigma of Wacquant et al. (2014) to analyze to what extent the situation in Molenbeek can be explained with the theory of territorial stigma. I found that territorial stigma seems to fit the current situation of Molenbeek and its stigmatized inhabitants to a certain extent. Inhabitants use certain stigma coping strategies as theorized by Wacquant et al. (2014) such as “exit” or defending their neighborhood. However, I also found that, like other studies before mine, Molenbeek was not devoid of community feeling and that instead even ex-inhabitants came back regularly to Molenbeek, which is not explained by the theory. This could mean that the taint of the place or the need to distance themselves from the
stigmatized area is not as great as to stop them from coming back regularly or that the community feeling is stronger than theorized. The theory does seem to explain the lack of citizen participation in the urban development process although it is not clear in this study whether inhabitants in Molenbeek are excluded on purpose or because of the lack of trust the inhabitants have in the planning process. Finally, the theory could also explain why the municipality of Molenbeek is simultaneously caring for its inhabitants while not being completely against gentrification since Wacquant et al. (2014) theorize that state officials and local bureaucrats sometimes reinforce territorial stigma condition even while trying to lessen it.

I hope with this study to have shown that the urban and social situation in Molenbeek is much more complex than the stigma and stereotypes narrated. Additionally, I believe I have added to the literature in providing counter-narratives for inhabitants in Molenbeek struggling with territorial stigma.
Chapter 5: Concluding discussion

In this chapter, I will first go over the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research. Finally, the chapter will end with a concluding discussion on the role of the planner relating to Wacquant’s theory on territorial stigma and the situation in Molenbeek.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations that come naturally with the field of ethnographic research, such as my own interpretation of the data and my own biases as a researcher. I hope to have made my personal framing and background clear at the start of this paper. I have never faced racism or gentrification personally therefore I can only sympathize and hope to have accurately portrayed the feelings and opinions of the people I have interviewed. Additionally, since the interviews were conducted in Dutch or French, I had to translate the parts of the interviews that I wanted to quote. Translating word for word was not always possible due to the use of sayings or certain syntax typical in Dutch or French. Therefore, I had to phrase certain sentences in more direct words in English, thus interpreting the meaning behind their sayings. Another limitation of this study is that I only spoke with seven inhabitants of Molenbeek, of which only four people currently live in Molenbeek. This makes my study less generalizable for the rest of the inhabitants of Molenbeek, and my data set might not be representative of the population of Molenbeek since I did not interview children or young adults. In addition, on two occasions I was not able to record an interview and could only fully write it out a week after the interview therefore the notes on those interviews could be less reliable. Finally, I did not include the private developers’ perspective in this study because of a lack of time. This is regrettable since they have also a central part in the discussion on stigmatization and gentrification, and could answer the question of why projects such as Dockside Tower could be beneficial to Molenbeek according to them.
Therefore, I recommend future research to look into the discourse of private developers and regional-level planners to further understand their role in either producing or re-enforcing territorial stigma in Molenbeek. Additionally, future research into Molenbeek and territorial stigma should be on a greater scale than this study with a study group that is representative of the actual inhabitants of Molenbeek. This would give a more accurate view of the general opinions of the inhabitants of Molenbeek and their needs, which could be of great help to current planners and politicians in Molenbeek and Brussels.

Concluding Discussion

“As with myths of other cultures, our planning and academic stories function as sanction and justification for the current order, but also as launching pads for counter-versions.” Sandercock (2003, p.22)

This quote brings forward the centrality of storytelling in the urban planning practice. It urges us, the urban planners, to be critical of our own narratives that we project on certain spatial areas while showing us the power that we have with a tool such as storytelling to change these same narratives. In the case of stigmatized neighborhoods such as Molenbeek, I would argue that territorial stigmatization is a form of storytelling that has become the status quo. Deconstructing and criticizing this narrative, as a planner, is therefore crucial in order to be able to plan efficiently and accordingly. However, in order to plan efficiently and accordingly planners should turn towards its inhabitants and listen to their stories and needs. Local participative action has been part of the urban planning process for a while now, but as the example of Molenbeek shows, and it is not the only one, participative action is not always successful in including everyone in the community or even sometimes skips part of the local population.
So, how should a planner working for a poor municipality with distrusting inhabitants and who is pressured by outside powers, such as Molenbeek, listen to the stories of its inhabitants? Firstly, I would argue there is a need to re-establish trust between local inhabitants and urban planning practitioners. Showing a type of large peace-offering gesture would be an interesting way to regain trust. An example could be having a referendum on whether the Dockside Tower project should be built or not. Another option could be to have as standard procedure a citizens’ jury, which is randomly chosen, for each large urban development project. This would make sure that the whole community is included in co-producing knowledge for the planning process through active participation and storytelling. Additionally, urban planners and developers should be completely transparent in their decision-making and show how they included local stories or opinions in the project (Urtagh, 1999). It should be part of the job description of urban planners to make space for stories to be heard.

The issue of exterior powers and pressures on the urban planning process are difficult to tackle and will probably always exist. However, while compromise will probably always be part of the process, the interest of local inhabitants should be the first priority in an urban development project. Too often current development projects only have profit in mind and do not look at local needs such as the Dockside Tower project. Such projects have in my opinion no reason to exist, except for making a profit, which only works to a certain extent in neighborhoods like Molenbeek. Storytelling can also be useful in this scenario as we become critical of the stories private developers tell.

Finally, I want to end this thesis by urging urban planners to engage in storytelling and to look outside of their own story realm. By listening to other stories and including them in their planning process they will be able to create more inclusive and richer spaces, which should be the goal of every urban development project.
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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview questions and themes (for inhabitants)

1. Background
   a. How long have you lived here?
   b. Age?
   c. The reason why you have come here?
   d. Do you want to stay here longer or move away eventually?

2. Molenbeek NOW
   a. What do you like the most or least about your neighborhood?
   b. Which are the places you hang out in the most? (can you show me on the map?)
   c. What is lacking in the area?
   d. How would you describe Molenbeek in 3 words?
   e. How do you view Molenbeek?
   f. How do you think it is viewed by the rest of Brussels?

3. Molenbeek in TRANSITION
   a. Do you think a lot has changed in the last 10 or 5 years in Molenbeek?
   b. How does this make you feel?
   c. What would you like to see changed in your lifetime?

4. Specific urban development
   a. Do you recognize any of these new buildings (pictures of new urban development)
b. Which one is your most and least favorite and why?

c. How do you view this development?

d. Do you think it makes the area better?

e. Do you think the new urban development fits the neighborhood?
Appendix B – Interview Questions (for developers and planners)

1. How do you view Molenbeek?
   a. Potentials, and strengths, in the area

2. What is the goal of developers in neighborhoods like Molenbeek according to you?

3. What do you think of gentrification?
   a. Does your company have any policy or process to go against it or limit it?

4. What are development projects you are proud of or excited about?
   a. How well do you think you have succeeded?
   b. What was the aim of the project?

5. What is the greatest challenge for developers today?

6. What is the vision of your company?
   a. Own agenda or political agenda

7. What are the political directives you get?

8. What are the tools you are using, and strategies?