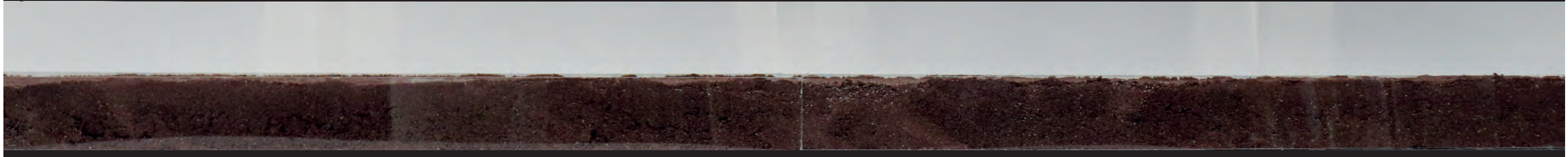




Re-cording of a ground



*To re-cord is to pick up one line of life's big tapestry and pull it through to the present*

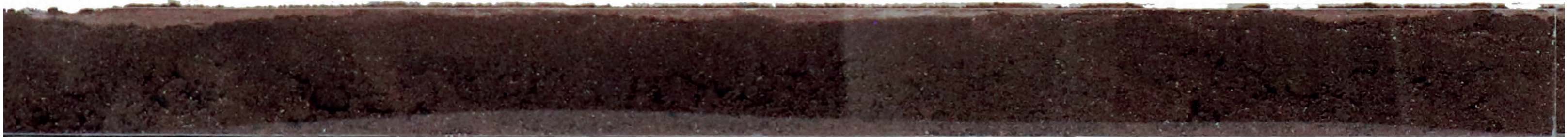
(Ingold, 2013)

This research is an ecological reading of the (recent) history of what we today call Friche Josaphat, Bruxelles.

A place? A site?

A “thing” composed of ground and inorganic material, living organisms and manufacts, all of which in becoming.

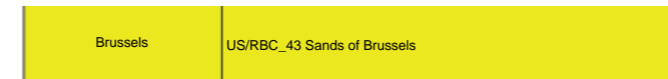
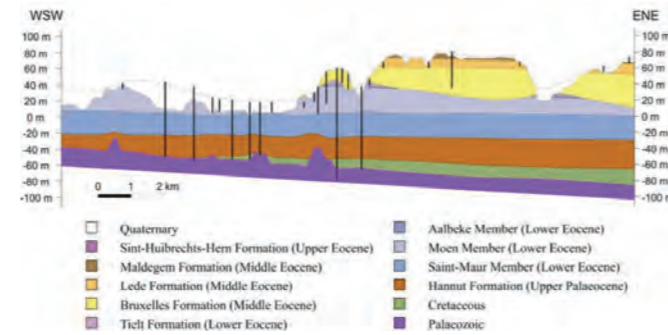
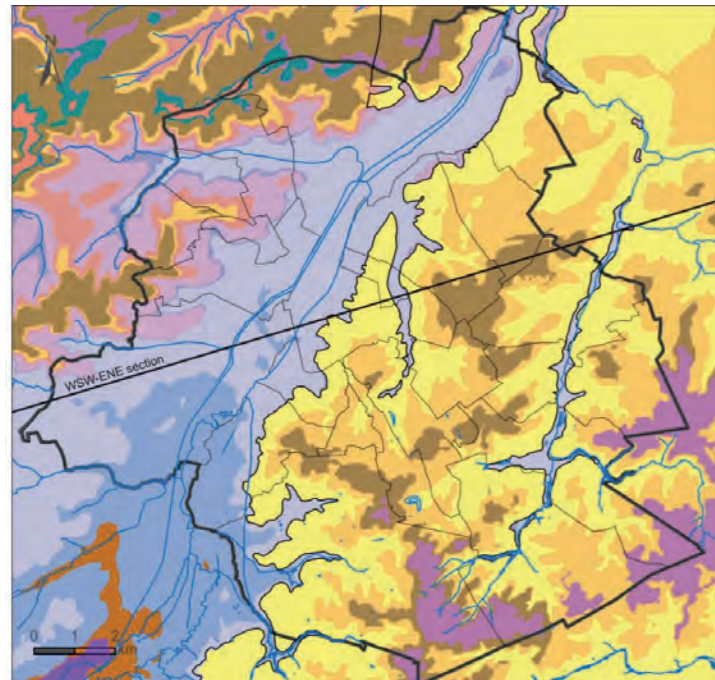
This chronological account tries to visualise the processes and occurrences of this history, with a special attention to the ground itself. In doing so, it challenges the site as a static, permanent, “as found” condition; and it challenges the division between natural and cultural.



## How far back can we re-member?

As a human, as a 21st century urban citizen, it is very difficult for me to imagine this piece of land, that we now call the “Friche”, before any cultural definition, before human culture. Hard to imagine its components, inhabitants, processes of transformation.

The best we are able to do is to conduct geological studies to eventually conclude: this very ground was formed ~50 million years ago and we will call it the Bruxelles formation.



Quartz sands, fine to coarse, heterogeneous and very weakly glauconious, characterized by the presence of hard banks (sandy limestone banks "Gobertange facies" - banks of carbonate sandstone, sometimes silicified) and/or by sandstone nodules of very capricious shapes. When the sediment is calcareous, the presence of *Nummulites laevigatus* is typical. Given the erosive channel structure at the base, the thickness is very variable and can reach more than 70 m in a channel.

## Natural or artificial?

The impossibility to reconcile the earliest topographic map (1868) with today's site boundaries (in red) was an enormous surprise for me.

This was the first evidence that the site is not a pre-existent, static, permanent layer. Not even the very ground of the site would be at all recognisable 150 years ago. It made me question: where does the line between nature and culture lie? Where do we differentiate between what is part of the Earth and what is on top of it?

It sparked my desire to pull a string through history and to imagine this place through time.

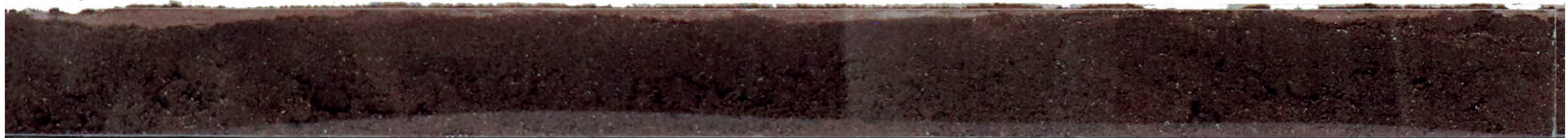


1868



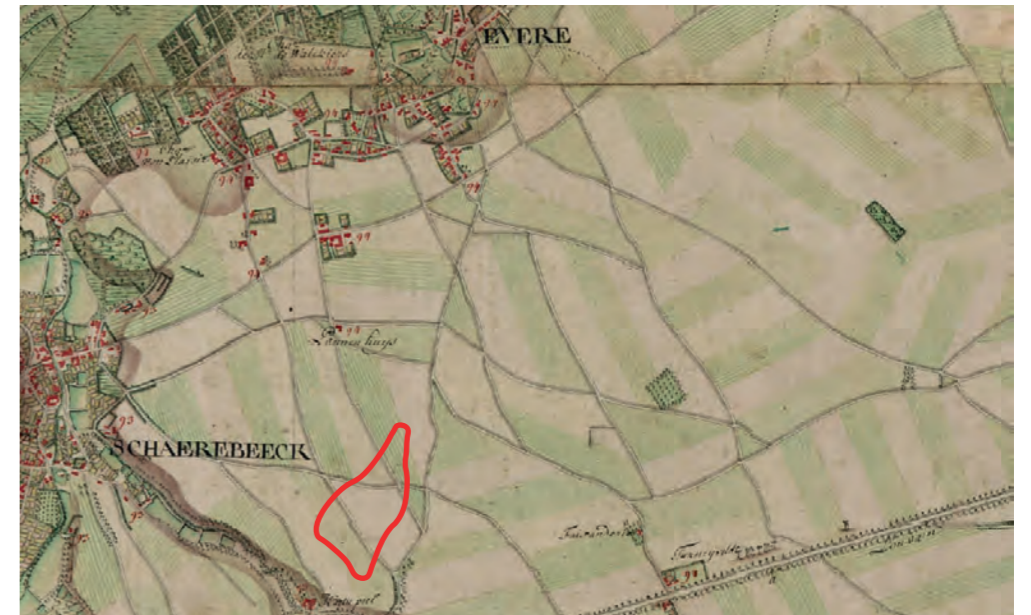
Before the first known nomads (~300 b.C.), and the first stable occupation during the Roman empire, this piece of land belonged to a vast grassland, yet to be called the Dieghem plein. This place was not yet culturally identifiable as a “site” distinct from its surroundings. However, we shouldn’t imagine it as a static object, waiting for human activity to give it a form and a function.

It has always been in transformation, although we have little re-cordings of it. For instance, since the 1830s, ornithological observations describe the richness of species that reproduce and migrate to these plains. Until today, biologists are the richest source of recorded history of the Friche.

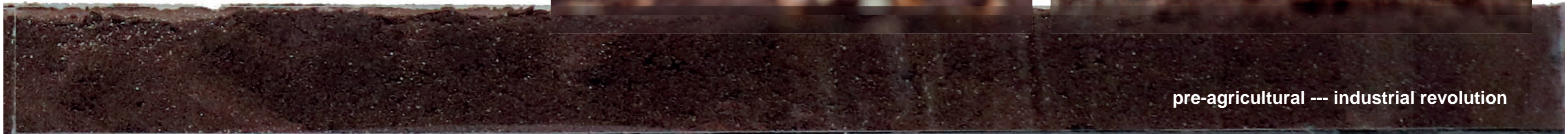
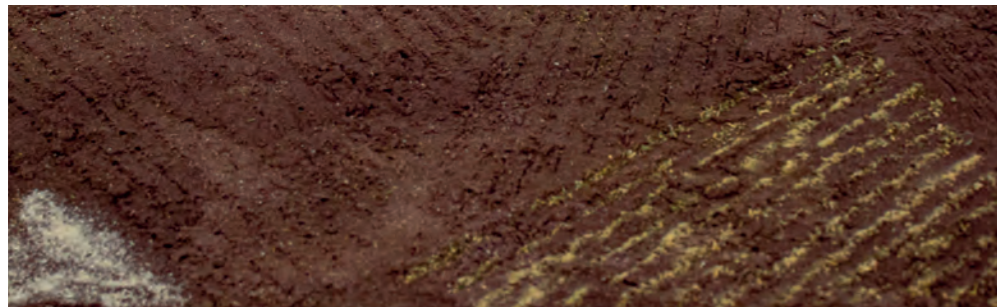


Since humans settled and until WWI, the land of Evere was dedicated to agriculture. Imagine small parcels growing cereals, carrots, turnips. Giving then place to larger plots of potato cultivations. Replaced by witlof: Evere's main produce until very recently.

Is an agricultural field natural or artificial? While it owes more to human labour than the grassland does, the 19th century agricultural activity did not dominate over other simultaneous non-human processes.



Ferraris, 1770-8



pre-agricultural --- industrial revolution

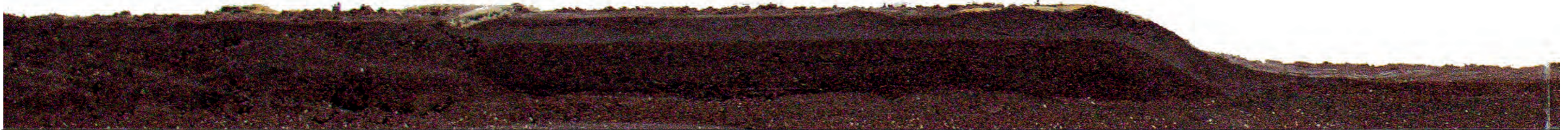


### 3.000.000 tons of ground

Belgium entered on full steam the industrial revolution. Between 1894 and 1930, a titanic infrastructural enterprise is conducted to create railway line 26, to transport goods from Schaerbeek (Bruxelles) to Muizen (Mechelen). As the railway line was on a lower level, 25 hectares were excavated 8m deep to form space for a marshalling yard. The new ground-level is sloped to allow the manouvre of carriages through gravity.

The mystery remains, where did 3.000.000 tons of ground end up?

As the Merode-Josaphat and other tunnels were excavated, the quantity of ground that was relocated in those years might be difficult to quantify. In any case, lower to the amounts relocated nowadays. For example, Paris displaces 25 million tons of excavated earth yearly.

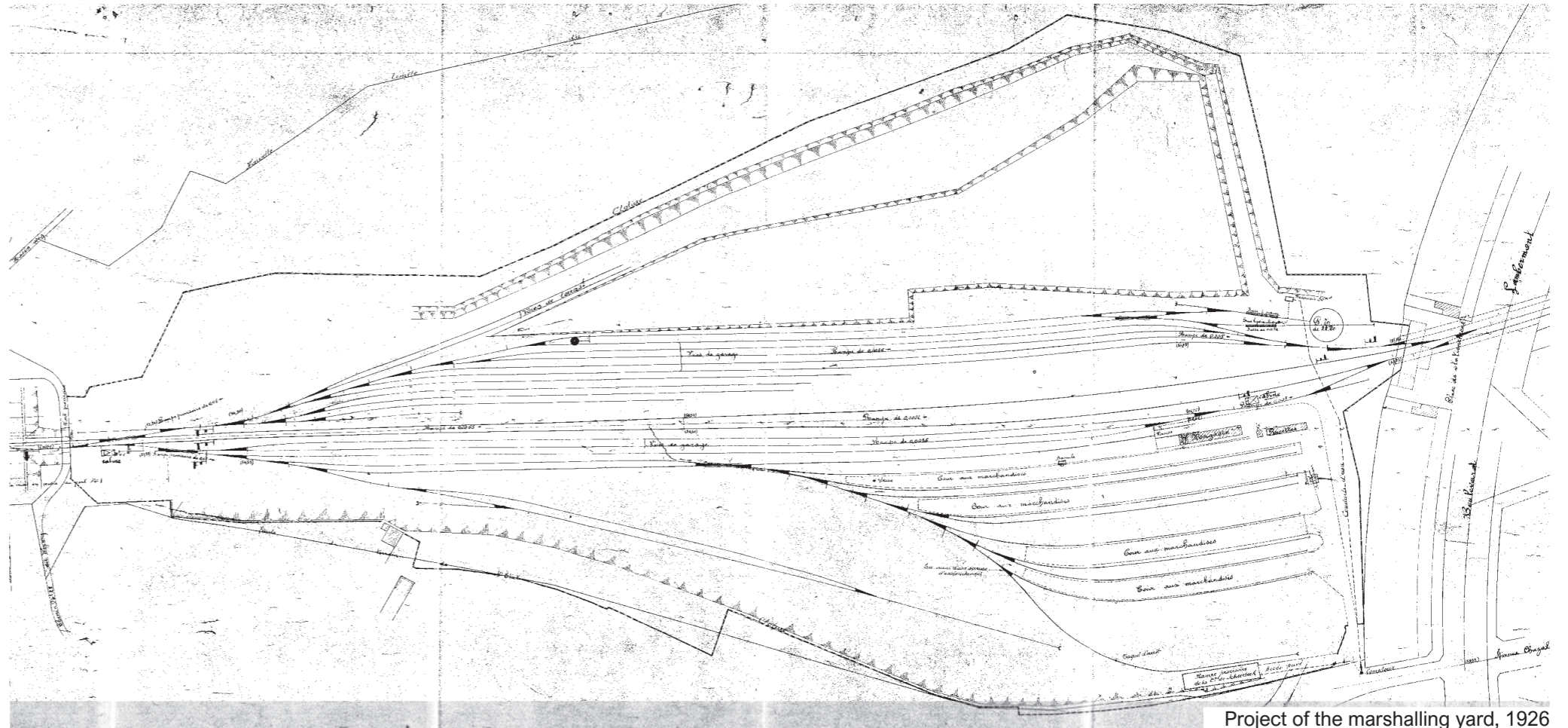


This is the moment in which this landscape transitions from an evolutionarily open state shaped by agrarian practices, to a static elements rooted in architecture.

For the first time in this chronology, if I were to find myself in this space-time, I would be able to say: "This is the Friche".

This 30-year long colossal operation, which we must not mistake for an instantaneous and process-less point in time, constructed an urban form which is still recognisable today. This plan from 1926 shows its planning.

The six tracks of the station began to operate in 1914, only to be closed one month later due to the German invasion (1914-1918).



Project of the marshalling yard, 1926

Parallely, the surrounding territories continued to be agricultural land.



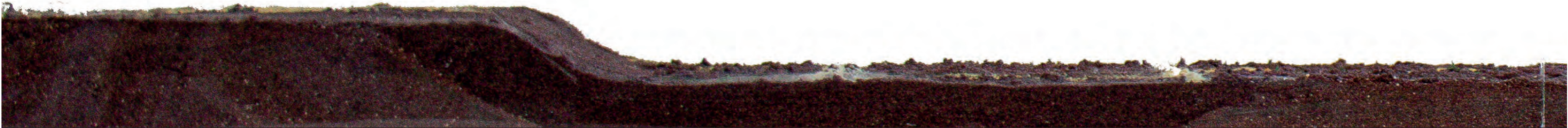
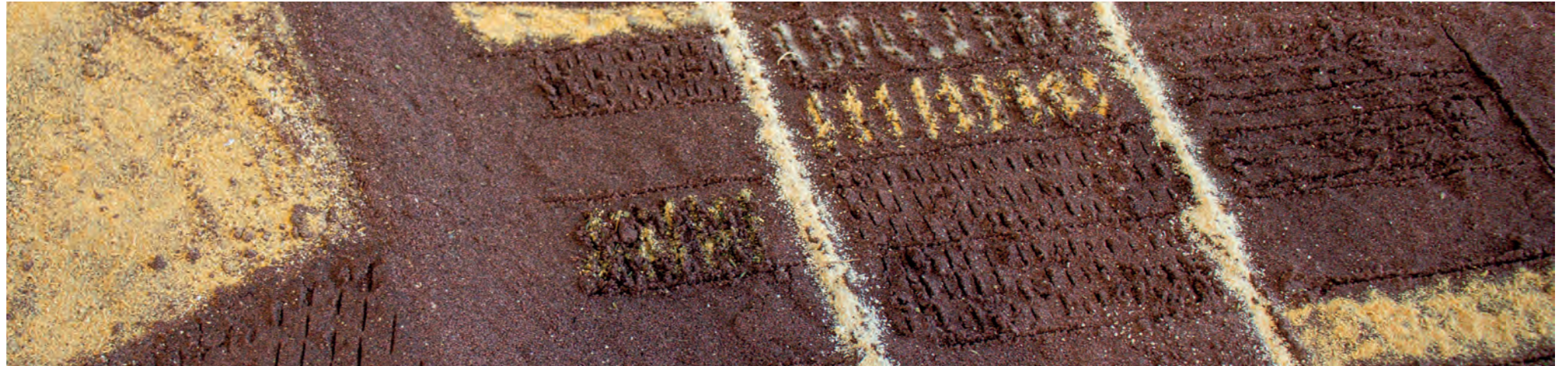
1894 --- 1930



1930-35

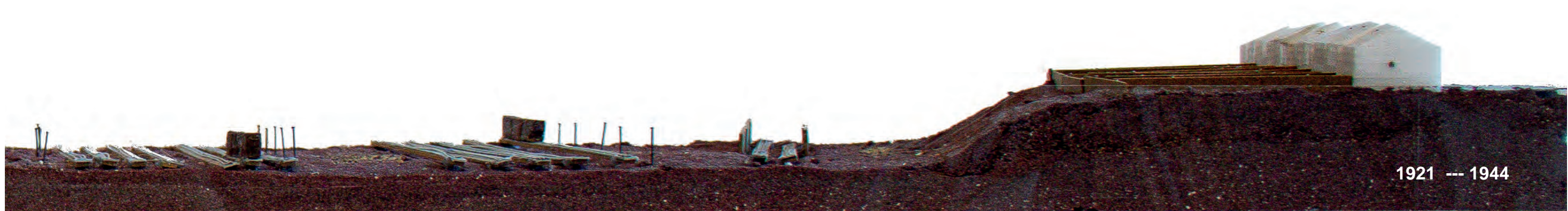
As the need for transport of goods grows, more ground is excavated and displaced.

Following the German invasion (1940-44) the industrial activity slowed down. Agriculture returned on this land, in the desperate need to feed the hungry mouths of Bruxelles.

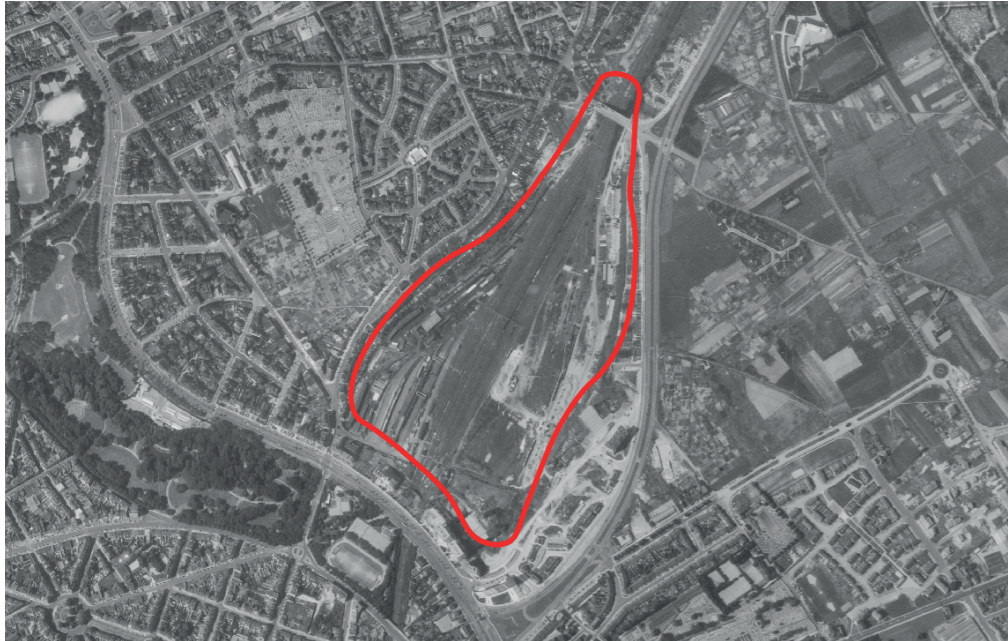




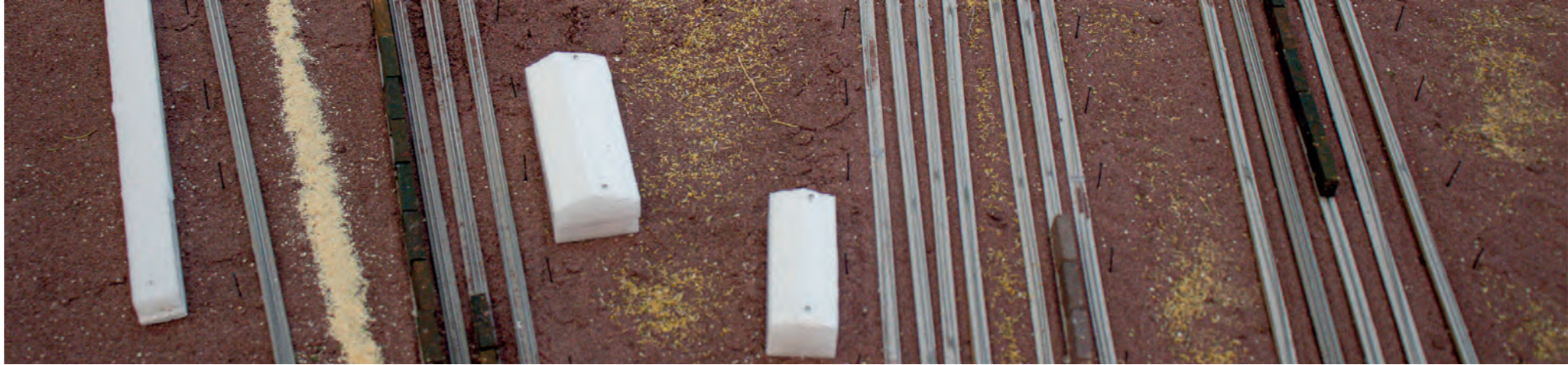
The urban fabric reached the Friche: the Terdelt Garden City is built between 1921 and 1931. Although separated by a clear boundary, the ecology of the Friche has been very influenced by the presence of human gardens.



1921 --- 1944



1961



Since 1935, the Avenue Leopold III and the neighbourhood West of the site were developed. By 1960, Bruxelles reached the peak of its steaming growth.





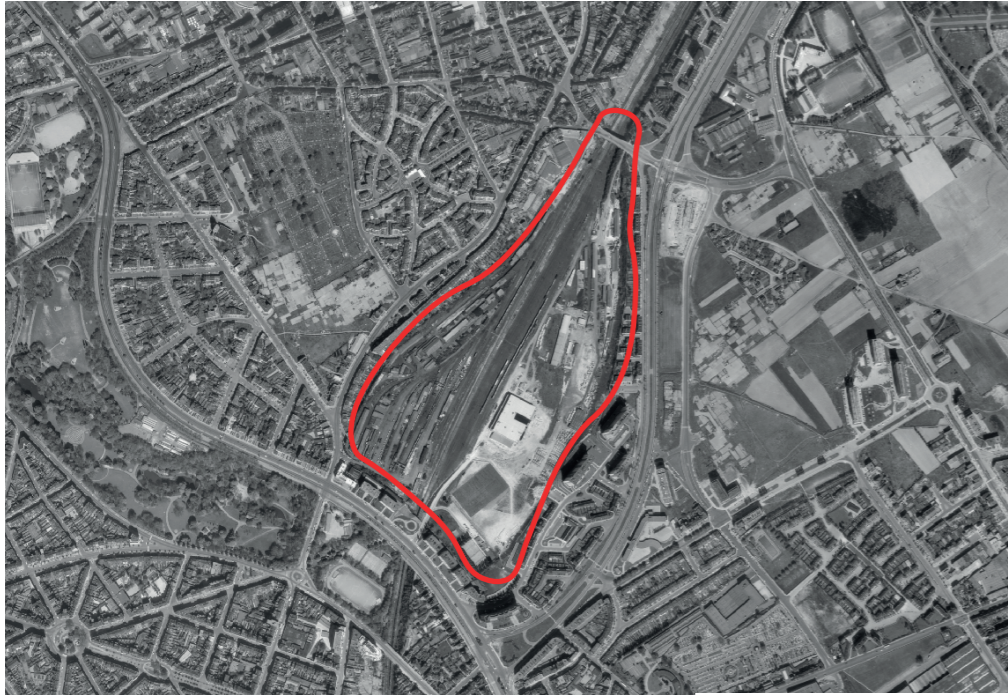
The marshalling yard was one of the hearts of the industrial development, manifested in the expansion of the railway (10 quaysides and 15 siding lanes). For decades, all sorts of goods (coal, military equipment, vegetables, etc.) transited through here, and have been a central, although ephemeral, material presence on this land.



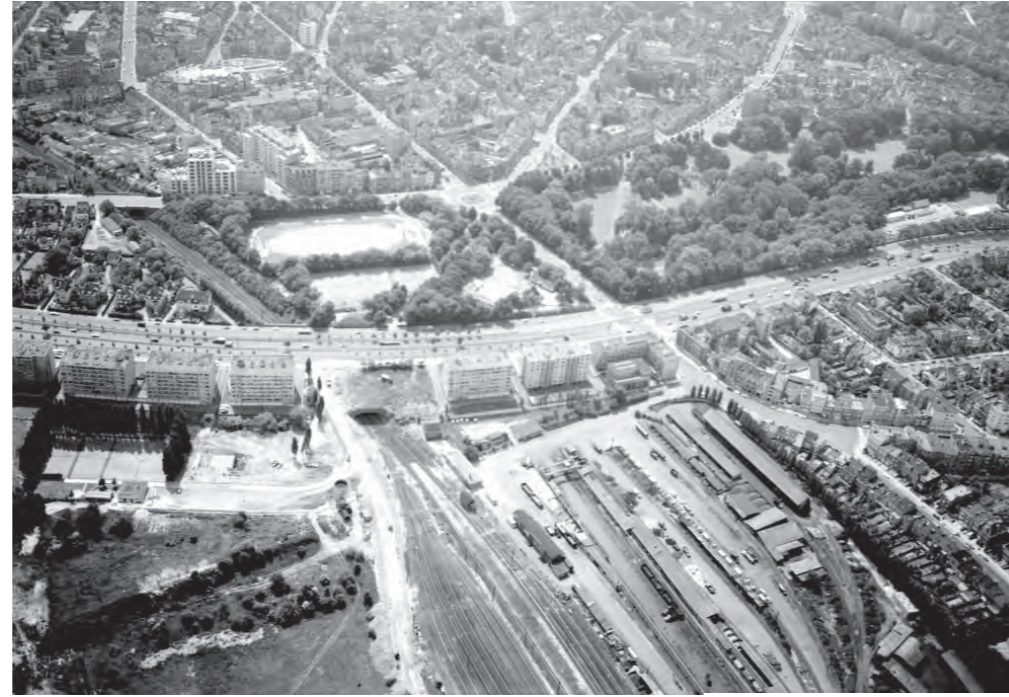
Parallely, trees and larger species developed in proximity of, and stemming from, the garden city.



1944 --- 1960



1971



1969



1969

At the peak of the economic boom, the marshalling yard kept evolving. Rail tracks, docks, storages, industrial facilities were built and unbuilt in fast cycles.





A material yard occupied the site. Mounds of sand, coal, soil, stones, were piled up. Through here, materials and artifacts from all over Europe were displaced to Bruxelles, and vice-versa.

Travelling carriages also transported seeds and small animals: the railway becomes a corridor for species connecting ecological stepping stones in the landscape.



1960 --- 1977



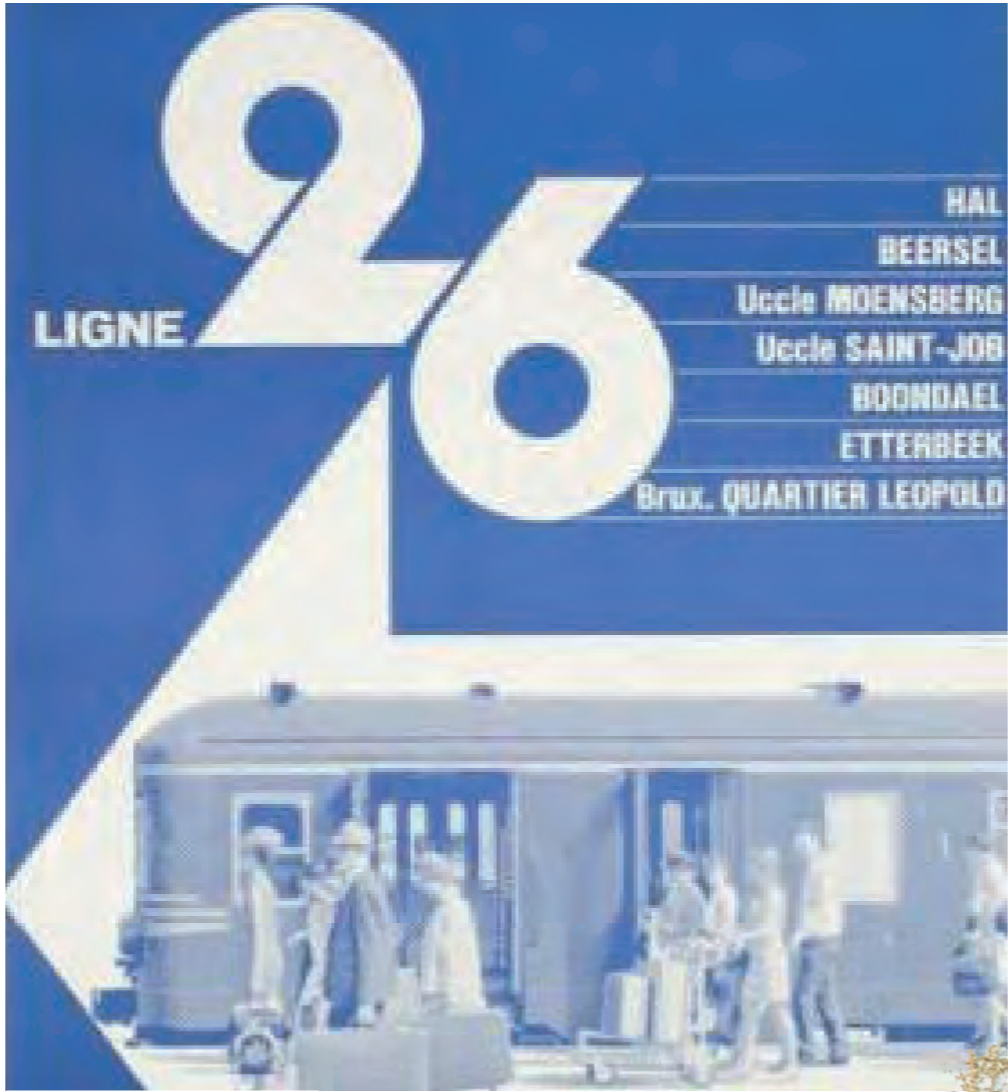
1977



The marshalling yard started its decline, leaving more space for non-human species to grow



As goods slowed down, the movement of people became important, with the opening of the Evere passenger station in 1975.



SNCB, 1975



1977 --- 1987



1987



The Eastern side keeps industrialising, while the marshalling yard was dismissed and its Western part abandoned by humans.

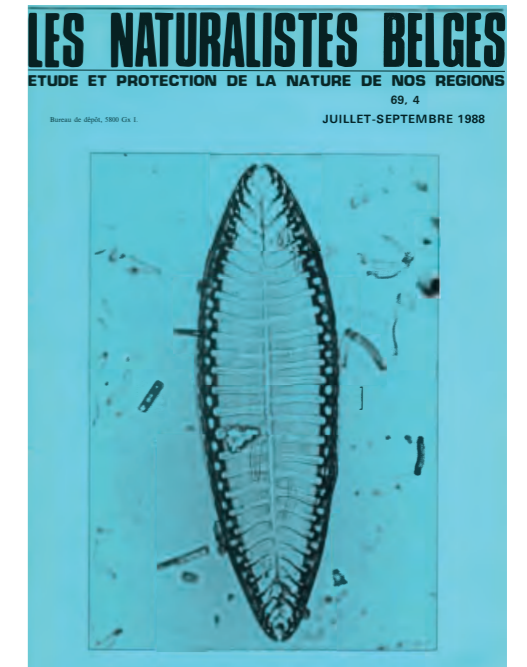




The soil, debris, mounds, ashes, ponds, bricks, concrete, became a rich and diverse habitat for flora and fauna to flourish.

“Like in a train station where travellers from different continents meet, it is a cosmopolitan flora that grows here. Alongside native plants, there are species from America, Asia and even Africa.”  
(Saintenoy-Simon, 1984)

Saintenoy-Simon, 1988



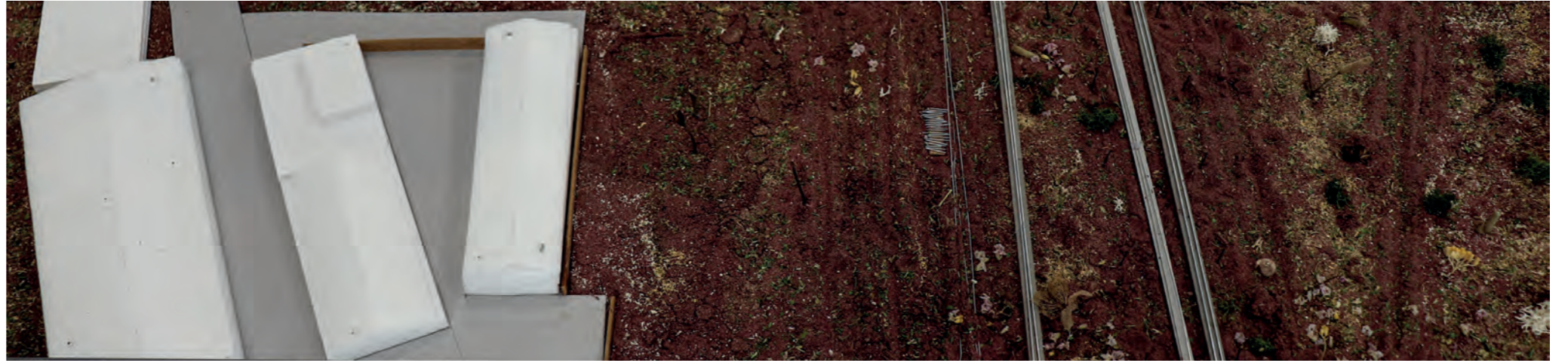
“In wastelands, but also near railway tracks, in rubble and on embankments, several *Verbascum* grow: *V. densiflorum*, a spectacular plant which can reach three meters in height.” (Saintenoy-Simon, 1984)



1987 --- 1994



2004



The rail tracks and buildings of the marshalling yard were removed.





Saintenoy-Simon, 2006



1994 --- 2009



2012





In a few years, the whole soil of the Friche was completely transformed by human activity in order to make space for future development.

The top layer of the soil was removed, as considered polluted from heavy metals.

A layer of sand was added, on top of which a stratum of fertile soil is added and sown.

Saintenoy-Simon, 2012



2009 – 2014



2022

As economic, social and ecological interests are debated, no human is allowed to enter the Friche.

From the tabula rasa, vegetation slowly spurs back and animals return to inhabit this land, whether travelling by train or expanding from the garden city.





Despite the harsh boundary, flora its place also in the cracks of the industrial neighbourhood.



2014 --- 2024

With the understanding that the earth is not the solid, pre-existing substrate that the architect takes it to be, this project consists in a manipulation of the ground

### **A building and a mound**

A building is a series of elements laid in equilibrium, resting upon foundations on top of the ground.

A mound can be called the “anti-building”: it has no foundations, it is never complete, it is not separate from the ground, and it keeps growing and changing







2024 --- 2050

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**Research on the Friche Josaphat, Bruxelles**

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June 2024**