

### **'Last Green in Town' Kloosterziel\_4584740\_UrbanArchitecture\_Research Plan**

The theme of this year's graduation studio is 'Last Green in Town', and it focusses on the Friche Josaphat, a twenty-four hectare piece of wasteland in the North-east of Brussels. The Friche used to be a marshalling yard, but is now a field of wild nature and great biodiversity. The railroad tracks that cut the site in half are still in operation, connecting the east and west of Brussels. It is very closed off to its surroundings by borders of trees, fences, and the railway, so accessing is difficult. This has caused residents that live close to the Friche to know little about it. However, the Friche is not at all empty and lifeless. As said, a great biodiversity has emerged on the Friche through time. But also some human activities are happening on the Friche, initiated by Josaph'Aire, the name under which various initiatives on the site, such as Commons Josaphat, FORUM, Recup'Kitchen and the Jardin Latinis have gathered.

Commons Josaphat believes that the Friche can become a place responding to environmental, economic and social challenges. They see the Friche as a neighborhood that could say yes to cooperation, collaboration and local economy; a neighbourhood that creates solidarity, intercultural and intergenerational dynamics, a neighbourhood that emphasises quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

### **Co-living in Brussels**

The way that Commons Josaphat looks at the Friche is something I want to connect to by looking into co-living in Brussels. According to Commons Josaphat, the Friche could be a space where cooperation and collaboration could take place. This fits perfectly to a co-living project, as co-living buildings often are provided with communal gardens. Think about Westhof in Zürich and Wohngenossenschaft Zimmerfrei in Basel for example. The plans of Commons Josaphat could be strengthened by a co-living project that offers space for inhabitants who are like-minded and who would use, contribute to, and respect a place such as Commons Josaphat is proposing.

Several European countries have a fascinating long history of co-living, and to this day keep creating more and more co-living and community projects. The thought behind creating co-living in such great quantity has been proven to work very well throughout the years, and offers a great solution in providing affordable housing for many people. This has been done since the early twentieth century in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Great Britain, and Switzerland, where **housing cooperatives** took it upon themselves to provide affordable and high-quality accommodation for the working classes.<sup>2</sup>

Although co-living does exist in Brussels too, this is structurally different than the way it has been done since the early twentieth century in the countries as mentioned above. In Brussels, companies such as Cohabs, Share Home Brussels, Ikoab, Colive, and Colochousing run the co-living business. Co-living here is seen as a **good business model**, where the motto seems to be '**divide more to earn**

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<sup>1</sup> "Toekomstwijk op Josaphat? | Bral vzw," July 11, 2001, <https://bral.brussels/nl/artikel/toekomstwijk-op-josaphat>.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Avermaete and Janina Gosseye, *Urban Design in the 20th Century: A History*, 2022.

**more'**, and the inhabitants are seen as the **target clientele**.<sup>3</sup> It is based on the creation of new residential products designed in order **for investors to easily inject their capital**.<sup>4</sup> Co-living in Belgium means renting an advertised all-inclusive room with high rent in a building that has some collective spaces. Leases are set up to be short term, to attract young expatriates. In the main communication outlets of the co-living companies, they insist on the concepts of "community" and "convenience". However, these two 'co's' are radically different from the 'co's' of co-living and co-housing.<sup>5</sup>

These companies have also found a smart way to get around the difficulties put on by the government of dividing houses into several living units, by turning single family houses into co-living, with as many rooms as possible and high rents. As a result, coliving **companies contribute to increased competition between buyers and tenants, driving prices upwards**.<sup>6</sup> Looking at recent numbers about Brussels' housing crisis, over 55.000 families were on a waiting list for social housing, which is about 10 percent of the population of families in the city.<sup>7</sup> This raises the question why we do not see the way of co-living in Brussels, as done in the other European countries as mentioned before. So I want to answer the questions of why we mainly see co-living companies that are out to make profit? And why is it that the same system of co-living as in these other countries, is not to be found in Brussels?

Something that inevitably could have to do with this, is the fact that the focus in Belgium has always been on having property, as in Switzerland for example the standard has always been renting and sharing a place to lower living costs. The countries mentioned before proposed a community-based way of life that was founded on mutual solidarity. But, although the mindset about having or sharing property is traditionally different in Brussels, it seems almost unimaginable that nowadays no one would be open for a more collaborative and community oriented way of living. There must be cases of co-living and communities already existing in Brussels that we can take a look at, learn from, and try to develop into a more known and attractive way of living. Think about student housing for example, or multi-generation homes when it comes to living, but also the previously mentioned ideas of Commons Josaphat.

### ***Approach towards the Friche and design location***

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<sup>3</sup> Casier, "Coliving, or the Financialisation of Houses in Brussels."

<sup>4</sup> Casier, "The Coliving Market as an Emergent Financialized Niche Real Estate Sector: A View from Brussels."

<sup>5</sup> Coricelli, "The Co-'s of Co-Living: How the Advertisement of Living Is Taking over Housing Realities."

<sup>6</sup> Casier, "Coliving, or the Financialisation of Houses in Brussels."

<sup>7</sup> Méabh Mc Mahon, "High Rent and Prejudice Pushes People onto the Streets in Brussels," Euronews, July 13, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/07/12/high-rent-and-prejudice-pushes-people-onto-the-streets-in-brussels>.

As previously mentioned, I think the Friche can offer space for communal gardens or communal activities as proposed by Commons Josaphat, complementary to a co-living project. In addition, I have to see if the area around the site offers space to create a design where I can combine the positives about co-living as it is now in Brussels, and best practices from case studies, into one project.

When walking through Terdelt, the garden city next to the Friche, I noticed several social housing buildings that were in very bad shape (figure 1), in the seemingly well organized neighborhood. This immediately drew my attention. I found out that most of these buildings are part of the big renovation projects scheduled by the social housing company Foyer Schaerbeekois (FSH), which owns the buildings and has the lead in these renovations. They have proposed the renovation of these social housing units starting either 2023 or 2024 to 2027 (attachment 1). I think a selection of these projects on the junction of Rue J. Hoste and Rue A. De Craene, or on Avenue R. Foucart (figure 2) could be the perfect spots to transform into the design I previously described: a design where the positives about co-living in Brussels as it is now are taken into a design together with best practices from case studies, that complements on the ideas of Commons Josaphat by creating a community, and that offers affordable housing, as an alternative of the current co-living system ruled by companies.

### ***Methodology***

My aim now is to first find out why we mainly see co-living companies that are out to make profit, instead of the same system of co-living as in the other countries as mentioned before. Why are these not to be found in Brussels?

Secondly, I want to discover how other forms of community- and collaborative-living cases nowadays are present in Brussels, to find out in what ways people do live together, but also how these ways of co-living are constructed and functioning. In addition I want to find out why people live like this, out of necessity or voluntarily? I want to gather information and stories about the people in Brussels that use these ways of co-living and what their motives are for doing so.

I then want to visualise the ways of co-living as it is done in Brussels through drawing and graphic novels, to tell the stories that I find there and show the positives and negatives of the current systems I find.

While doing these studies, a design location needs to be determined based on what I find out that is needed for improving co-living in Brussels.

As seen in the research structure below, doing literature research, history research, and case studies will help finding answers the questions above. I will decide on a design location by site research and forming a position towards the Friche.

By starting the research on an urban scale I hope to gather as much information as needed to form a clear view of the problem and needs and solutions to the problem. By then focussing on the design location and on the more architectural scale, a specific answer and solution will be designed. After that, details will be added on the material scale, that make the project complete.