

Metrolab series

Le territoire sous l'angle des ressources locales

Metrolab Logbook



Valérie Biot
Corentin Sanchez-Trenado
Mathieu Strale
(éds.)

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Le cas de Cureghem

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Urban metabolism: a situated approach

The metabolism of a poor inner-city neighbourhood: the case of the Anderlecht Abattoirs and Marketplace¹

Andrea Bortolotti

A situated approach

The aim of this article is to discuss urban metabolism from a situated approach perspective. Studies on the metabolism of cities have mostly been divided into two approaches: a) the assessment of material and energy consumption in cities and b) Marxian-inspired critiques of the uneven appropriation and redistribution of natural resources. However, these two binaries, taken separately, are deemed to fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding of urban metabolism (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015; Heynen, 2014; Newell & Cousins, 2015).

To supersede theoretical a priori gaps (e.g., inherited categories such as the opposition of the city vs. the countryside) and single disciplinary gaps, recent literature in the field has stressed the need for more interdisciplinary approaches and different authors have acknowledged that better contextualisation would greatly improve our understanding of the correlation between metabolic flows and their localised substantiation (Barles, 2010; Broto et al., 2012; Dijst et al., 2018; Wachsmuth, 2012). This could be achieved through an empirically situated urban metabolism and by situating agents in their social, economic and political contexts (Demaria & Schindler, 2016; Lawhon et al., 2014). This call for a situated approach to urban metabolism, which would be more attentive to the materiality (the contingencies, ecologies and politics) of urban flows, is open to cross-fertilisation with post-structuralism (e.g., the Actor-Network Theory) and post-colonial theories. This short essay provides a snapshot on the socio-metabolism of the Anderlecht Abattoirs and marketplace and the Cureghem neighbourhood

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in Brussels. It does so first by retracing human and material flows and their entanglements in socio-economic and spatial processes that are specific to this urban neighbourhood and second by discussing how these entanglements set the conditions for any future transformation. The goal is to show how a situated approach to urban metabolism can help to inform a more thorough urban theory and contribute to the debate on local urban development. This narrative is based on fieldwork conducted as part of the Metrolab project (Bortolotti, 2019).

The Anderlecht Abattoirs case: slaughterhouse and marketplace

The Anderlecht Abattoirs is a slaughterhouse that has been continuously in operation since 1890, despite its changing fortunes. It is also a market and until very recently (2007) was the place where livestock was transported to the city (originally by rail and by truck since the 1950s) to be sold underneath a monumental market hall to wholesalers and butcheries, and where one of the largest weekly city marketplaces is held to this day. Due to its activity and size (10.5 ha), the Anderlecht Abattoirs has always played and still plays an important economic role in the neighbourhood of Cureghem, an urban enclave covering two square kilometres between the South train station, the perimeter of the historic centre and the Brussels-Charleroi Canal (Kinnaer & Sénéchal, 2015).

Today, Cureghem is one of the denser and more multi-ethnic neighbourhoods of Brussels, inhabited by 26,000 people, with more than a hundred different nationalities. In the past, a whole district of butcheries, soap factories and tanneries has sprung up in the area, followed by the leather clothing and textile industry (IBSA, 2018).

In the 1960s, due to suburbanisation and the relocation of industry to the city outskirts, Cureghem suffered an economic and demographic decline. Since then, the neighbourhood has received different waves of immigration (initially Italians and Spaniards, then Moroccans, Lebanese, Romanians and more recently Syrians). Newcomers settled there because of the low rental costs for housing, which was made available by the middle class as it moved to the periphery (Kesteloot & Loopmans, 2009; Mistiaen et al., 1995). Like other inner-city neighbourhoods, Cureghem was marginally involved in the radical transformation of Brussels into the Capital of Europe (and the transfiguration of the central urban neighbourhoods in business districts). In the years that followed, access to real estate property increased and helped to stabilise parts of the immigrant population. However, it also reproduced forms of socio-spatial segregation of the poorer segments of the population of Brussels, which resulted in little investment in building renovation (Vandermotten, 2014).

Diversity of flows

Since the crisis of the 1970s, in order to escape unemployment, ethnic enterprises have developed into independent activities (e.g., restaurants, groceries, butcheries, etc.) based on family and ethnic networks. Due to little public support, informal, charity and social aid networks have flourished to meet the local demand for primary goods and second-hand products. The second-hand car trade, based on import and export towards African and East European countries, has flourished since the 1980s in garages that once hosted wholesale activities along Rue Heyvaert and Chaussée de Mons (Van Crielingen & Rosenfeld, 2015). At the time of the research (2018), although downscaled and opposed by the regional administration, some 150 garages were still active in the business.

Similarly, a general market has begun to be organised underneath and around the Anderlecht Abattoirs' 19th-century market hall. The marketplace currently attracts up to 100,000 customers every weekend and is attended by up to 500 daily stall holders selling all sorts of goods, including fresh produce, groceries, clothing and housewares, both new and used. Customers and merchants come from all around the Brussels metropolitan area, but most of them come from poor inner-city neighbourhoods and have immigrant backgrounds. The marketplace is a resource for this part of the population, as it supplies inexpensive consumer goods, provides employment to non-skilled workers and offers a way for immigrants and newcomers to enter the labour market.



Figure 1. The Abattoirs square on a sunny market day

The private company Abattoir SA and future strategies

More recently, market activity has grown. The private company (Abattoir SA) that holds a long-lease contract to exploit this publicly owned land opened a new covered market building (with fish and grocery stores) in 2007, then further expanded in 2015 with FOODMET, a project partly financed by European and Regional funds. Along with this project, the company released a master plan for the general transformation of the site. Early FOODMET and master plan versions were designed by a renowned Belgian architecture firm (ORG) and have had a wide impact, including exhibition in two different architectural biennales (Venice and Rotterdam 2016) and entry in regional and urban planning documents (e.g., Plan Canal, PRDD, etc.) in a relatively short time. The master plan foresees the demolition and reconstruction of the existing slaughterhouses within new *urban warehouses* conceived as flexible multi-storey, mixed-use and green-roofed buildings adapted to house, new small and medium enterprises (SMEs) related to the food sector, as well as new residential apartments to attract new users, customers and investments. Connecting to regional plans and programmes, Abattoir SA leveraged “sustainable” and “circular economy” discourses to promote its renovation programmes, such as the creation of short distribution and consumption chains.

Yet until now, few companies have shown interest in the area and no real estate has rushed to partner with Abattoirs SA to create new apartment blocks. On the contrary, market vendors still complain about the same single clientele interested exclusively in buying the cheapest option possible, which leads to lower prices and poorer quality of products. Except for meat products that are largely supplied by the nearby slaughterhouse, most fresh food products sold in the marketplace are supplied by the global food distribution chain (the Brussels' wholesale centre, but also the ones in Paris and Barcelona). On the other hand, since 2012, due to the presence of disadvantaged groups of people that used to glean the market's food leftovers, a food recovery project has been launched by a non-profit association with the aim to support local charity networks, tightening the existing relation between the market and its urban neighbourhood even more.

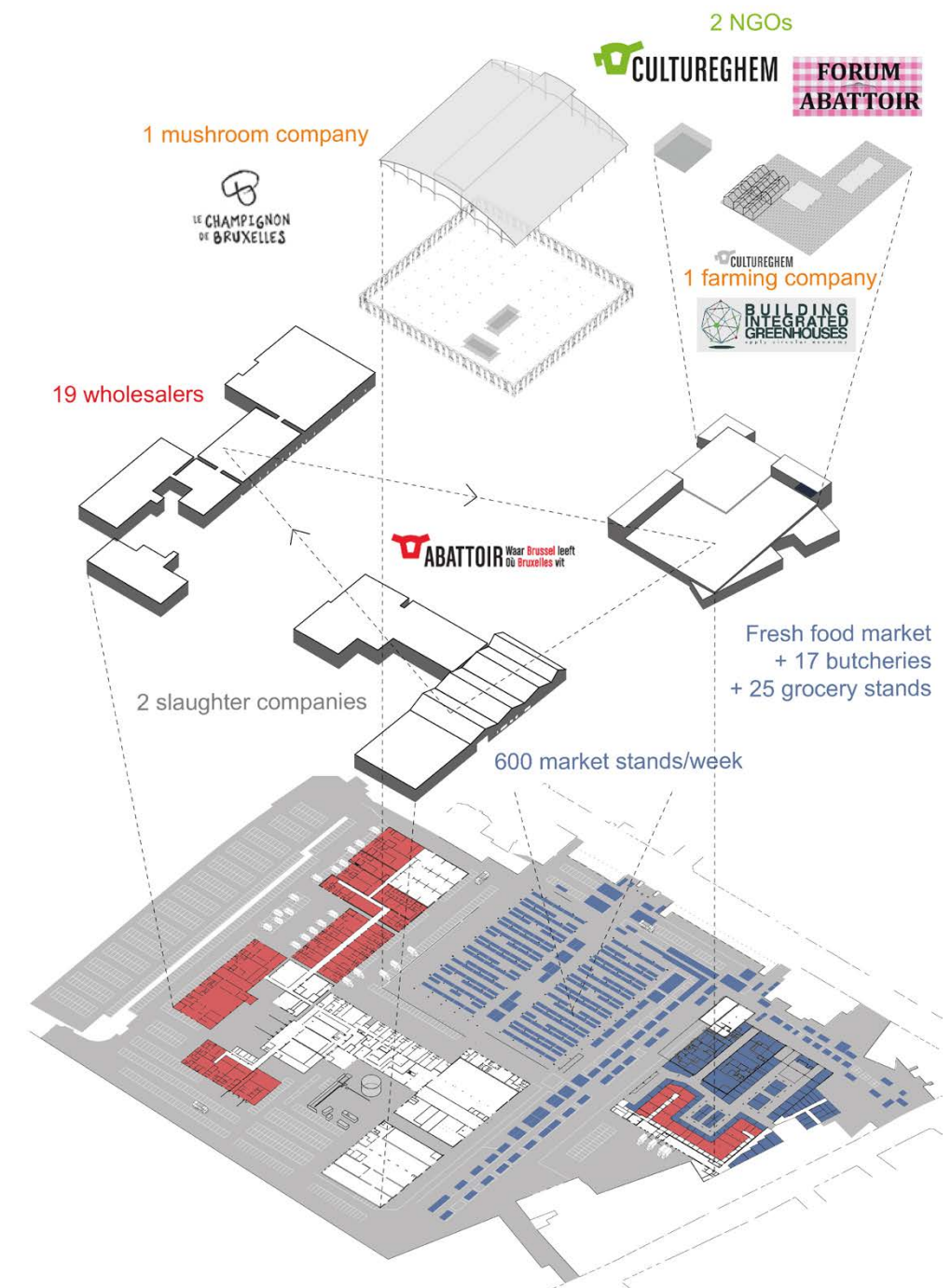


Figure 2. (Dis)assembled Abattoir: exploded axonometry of the Abattoir site, buildings and actors (image by the author)

A situated approach to urban metabolism, highlighting the vision: locks in and missed opportunities

A situated approach to urban metabolism, in this case an empirically situated account of the socio-metabolism of the Anderlecht Abattoirs, highlights the gap between the project's vision and the material reality of its context. This gap reveals the lack of the project's vision to break up conventional urban renewal imaginaries (e.g., attract new users and clientele), while not fully accounting for the rich neighbourhood human resources and economy, even if they are hard to evaluate. A more comprehensive understanding of the metabolism of Cureghem and the Anderlecht Abattoirs as a whole, and of the current renewal project as fully part of it, rather than the product of superimposed and separately managed flows (of products) and interventions, might greatly help to include a more thorough social perspective in the current sustainable and circular development agenda. Nevertheless, the present and future of the Abattoirs remain closely intertwined with those of Cureghem. This is proven by the difficulty in finding real estate and large food distribution companies interested in investing in such an enclave of poverty. Due to this and the presence of so many different actors, the renovation programme for the Anderlecht Abattoirs cannot include the creation of new middle-class apartments, as is the norm in Brussels today.

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