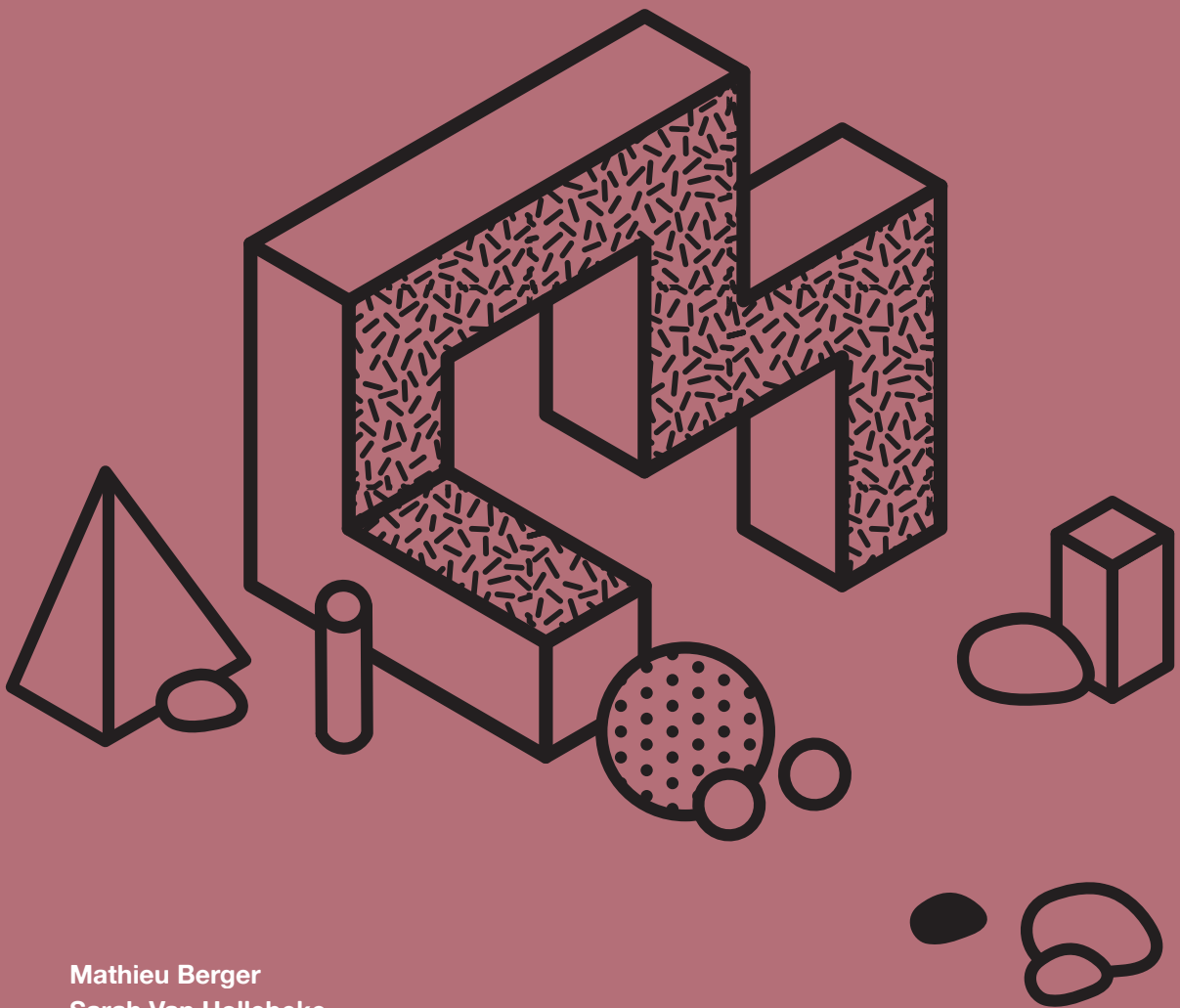


# Designing Transdisciplinarity in Urban Research

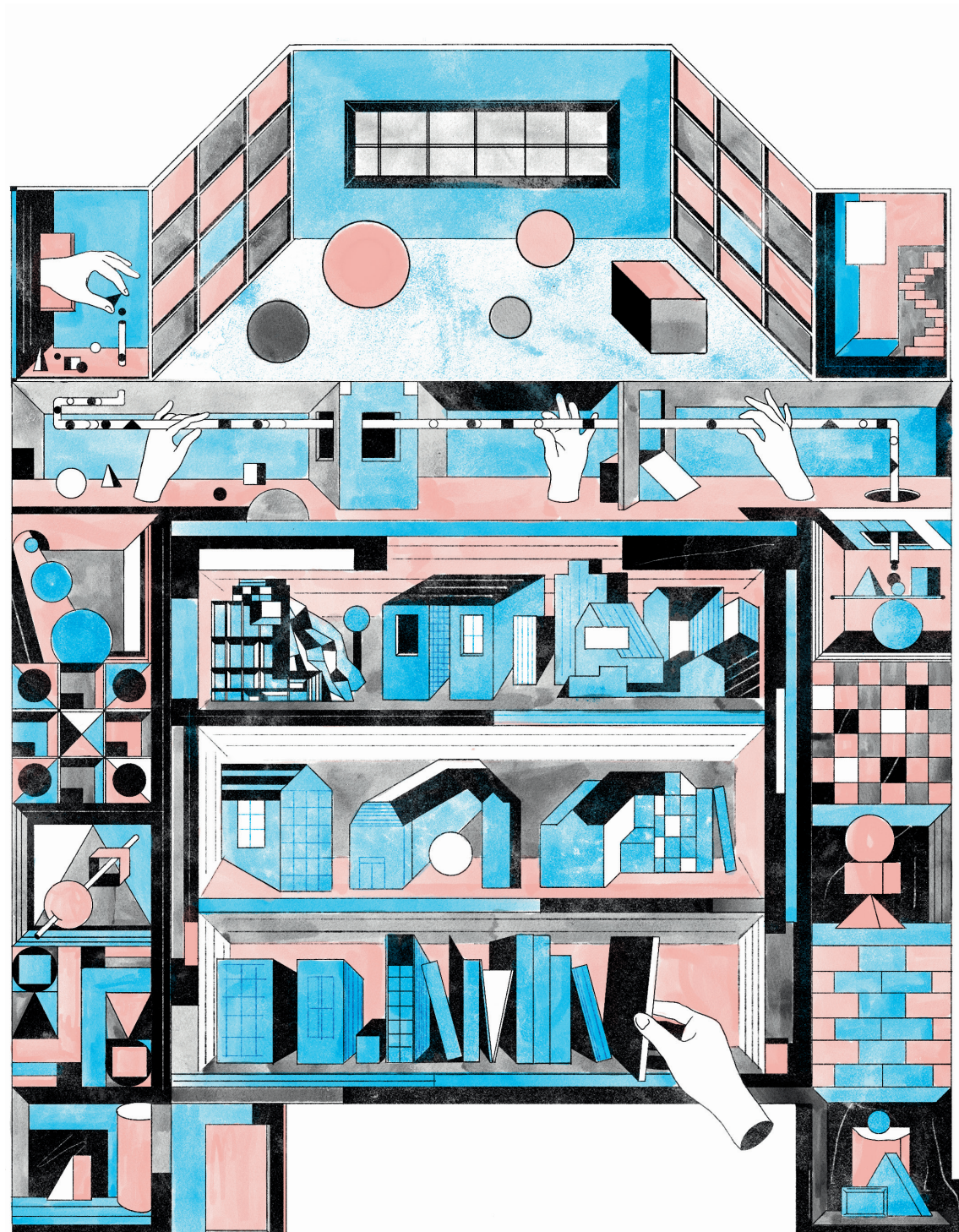
Metrolab Brussels (2015-2023)



Mathieu Berger  
Sarah Van Hollebeke  
(Eds.)

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## Towards a transversal approach to urban issues

Louise Carlier and Andrea Bortolotti

### Between social, economic and environmental thematic cycles

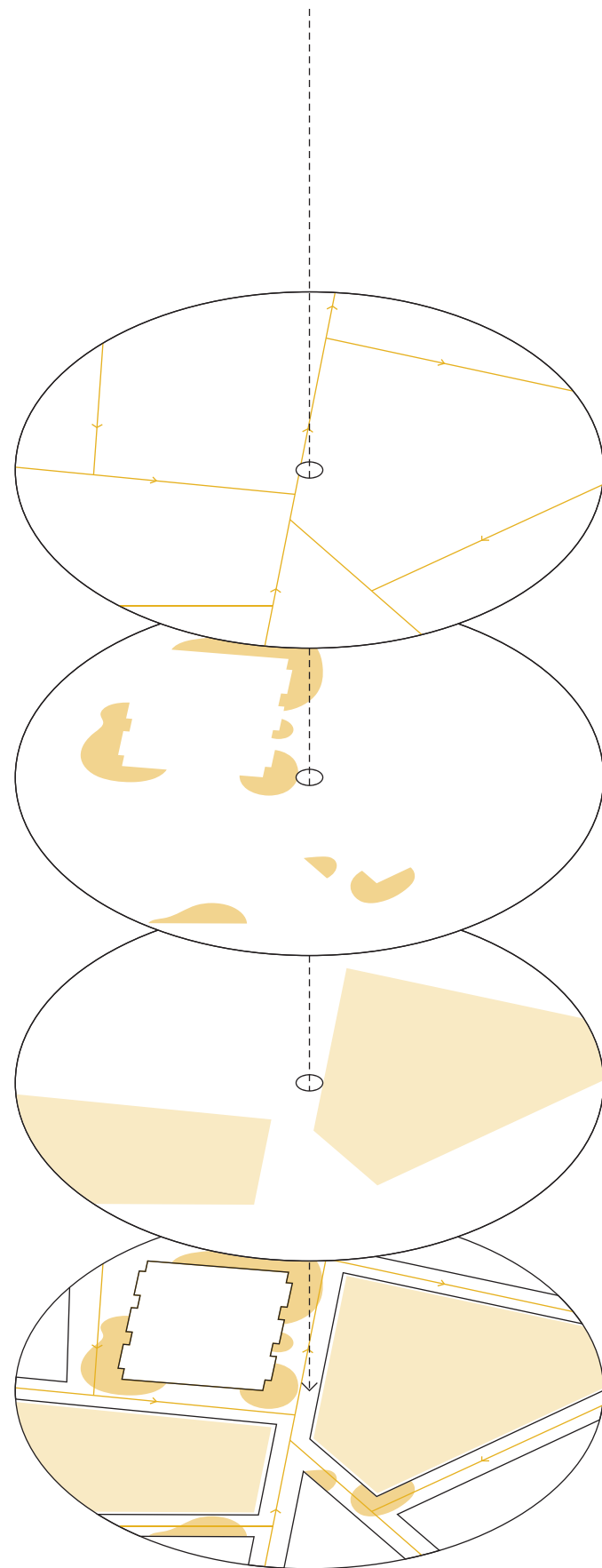
The Europe 2020 strategy, which is now coming to an end, aimed to promote 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth'. Referring to different areas of action (employment, innovation, green growth, education and poverty reduction), the objectives were pursued through various initiatives (specific and operational actions) that were linked in turn to national targets that each member state set for itself. While there are still few evaluations and public consultations about the strategy at the end of its implementation, it is important to understand how these ambitious objectives are integrated and articulated in projects financed by European structural funds.

Taking the projects funded as part of the 2014-2020 ERDF programme for the Brussels-Capital Region as an example, Metrolab offers an interesting opportunity to reflect in theoretical and operational terms on the cross-cutting nature of major European objectives in urban projects and policies.

Metrolab is an urban research laboratory that focuses on this European policy, and more particularly on the projects funded by the regional programme. It was decided from the outset that the laboratory's work would be aligned with the three main lines of the 2020 strategy. Three work cycles, including the development of individual and collective research and scientific activities, were thereby defined and have marked Metrolab's production. First was the *urban inclusion* cycle, which ran from 2016 to 2018 (Berger et al., 2018), followed by the *urban ecology* cycle, which covered the period from 2018 to 2020 (Declève et al., 2020), and finally the *urban production* cycle, which spanned from 2019 to 2021 (Carlier et al., 2021). Note that we kept the European semantics for some of these three themes, deviating from them in particular by moving from 'smart' to 'production' issues, a category that seemed more significant and encompassing.<sup>1</sup>

We wanted to work on the three well-known pillars of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) by taking each of these issues seriously. Each was the subject of a MasterClass and a specific publication. The research carried out individually or collectively by members of Metrolab also touched on one of these three themes.

<sup>1</sup> 'Smart' production issues represent only one form of economic activity in cities and therefore do not account for the entire economic pillar of sustainable development (Decroly, 2021).



At the end of this journey, we can see that the same working method was duplicated for each of these MasterClasses, though the method was not stated as such from the start. Each of these cycles began with a stage of reflection on the concepts themselves, carried out internally by a team of Metrolab researchers. First, from a multidisciplinary perspective, they had to outline and clarify contents associated with ideas of inclusion (Printz, 2018), ecology (Grulois et al., 2020) and production (Decroly, 2021). This conceptual reflection laid the groundwork for discussing the methodological aspects for conducting applied, critical and interdisciplinary research focused on these issues.

Once this theoretical and methodological framework had been clarified, the projects or situations taken as case studies during the MasterClass were selected. The preparatory fieldwork could then begin. This included observing and describing the projects, sites and situations taken as case studies; meeting with the stakeholders directly involved; organising workshops with these stakeholders to understand the major problems they had to face, as well as the project and the dynamics in progress; and organising seminars or talks that promoted deeper inquiry. The time then came for the MasterClass as such, conceived as a two-week intensive educational and practical experiment devoted to one of these three issues. Led by Metrolab members (academics, post-docs, PhD students and managers), the MasterClasses brought together students, researchers, professors, local actors and professionals from different fields to work and reflect together on issues of inclusion, ecology and production based on the selected empirical cases to provide possible ways to improve these situations. Finally, each cycle ended with a specific publication synthesising all the reflections and work carried out.

Metrolab's way of working has enabled it to refine and specify the issues associated with each of the different lines of the European strategy by considering them in a specific urban context—in other words, by moving from a global and general theme, defined on a European scale, to a concrete and situated issue, anchored in the Brussels area. With regard to urban inclusion issues, we therefore propose to work on the hospitality-related qualities of certain urban spaces and projects linked to different social goods (culture, health, etc.).

#### **Marginal transversality**

By paying specific attention to each of these issues, one of the limits of this working method was that it neglected their transversality or cross-cutting nature in some way. It is true that we paid increasing attention to how these issues intersected as the cycles progressed. While the first cycle, on urban inclusion, did not deal with ecological and economic issues, the second cycle, on ecology, did touch on the issue of social inclusion, albeit marginally, raising awareness among the lab's researchers. The publication closing this cycle specified that the objective of the MasterClass was to strengthen the interdependencies that promote 'the renewal of local resources, social inclusion and the transition of ecosystems' (Grulois et al., 2020, p.14). This attention to social inclusion issues can be seen in how the case study sites were analysed.

Informed by previous work cycles, the last one, devoted to *urban production*, did the most to grapple with related issues of social inclusion and ecological transition. The publication devoted to the subject bears witness to this: in the different types of productive activities considered, significant attention is paid to the circular economy (oriented towards a transitional perspective) and to the social economy (addressing inclusion issues). The projects proposed by the participants in the MasterClass deal for the most part with productive activities linked to the circular economy and question how developing these activities could meet the pressing needs for socio-economic inclusion in Brussels in the neighbourhoods studied. The conclusion of the book invites us to consider the economic organisation of the city and the place of productive activities from the point of view of social inclusion and ecological transition, rather than from the perspective of economic growth.

However, no study site was deliberately taken as a case in which to problematise how these three issues are articulated, work simultaneously on each and consider their intersections and tensions. Certainly, in the collective research carried out in the laboratory, outside of the MasterClasses, some working groups included researchers with interests in different issues. These groups could reflect on certain tensions and articulations. This is the case, for example, of the Abattoir of Anderlecht (ORG and Abattoir SA, 2013) market redevelopment project, which was the subject of much discussion and had included alternative proposals in its business plans to promote social inclusion since the first instalment of ERDF funding was received in 2007 (Kinnaer and Sénéchal, 2015). The Metrolab team was particularly interested in understanding the gap between the ambitions of 'greening' productive activities (through heat recovery, solar energy production, etc.) and the social issues arising in and around the marketplace, mainly related to demands to support ethnic entrepreneurship and its fragile customer base (Bortolotti et al., 2017).

The North Quarter, located in the canal zone, is a study site found in all three MasterClasses that has been taken as a common field of investigation by different researchers at different times. We therefore propose to return to the way in which inclusion, ecology and urban production issues have been considered, crossed-fertilised and articulated to outline the potential contributions of a cross-cutting approach that has only been sketched out thus far.

### **The Northern Quarter as a shared field of inquiry**

The Northern Quarter used to be an industrial, working-class neighbourhood. It was a hospitable area for undesirable activities (its factories and production caused various inconveniences) and for populations perceived as undesirable (newcomers who historically entered the neighbourhood as the first place to settle).

In the late 1970s, the neighbourhood underwent major transformation, notably linked to the deindustrialisation and expansion of the service sector in the Brussels Region as it internationalised and prepared for its new status as the capital of Europe (Aron, 1978). These transformations resulted in the urban 'Manhattan Plan' in the Northern Quarter, aimed at turning this precarious (and unhealthy) neighbourhood into a prestigious international business centre.

Disregarding the residents' needs and flouting the democratic requirements of public debate, this plan led to much expropriation and gradually transformed the area into a mainly administrative district (Martens et al., 1975; Aron, 1978). However, the plan was only partially carried out due to overestimation of the demand for office space, leaving the area a wasteland until the late 1990s.

Today, this site mainly hosts office buildings of public or privatised institutions (Van Crieelingen, 2010) with very few productive functions, as well as social housing buildings. Located in a socially and economically disadvantaged area with a high unemployment rate and many low-income households, the neighbourhood still has a high proportion of newcomers and is characterised by great ethno-cultural diversity and socio-economic conditions marked by poverty. The 'migratory crisis' of recent years has also had an impact on the social makeup of this neighbourhood, as some of its public spaces (mainly Maximilian Park) have become occupied by migrants.

This area, where a whole series of problems are intertwined, is being changed once again by a series of public and private projects. Various private residential projects aimed at more affluent people are gradually being developed, leading to different socio-economic groups living side by side. Various urban policies are also being implemented such as Neighbourhood Contracts, Urban Renewal Contracts, Master Development PLAN (e.g., MDP MAX) and others aimed at changing the area's spatial and social qualities and investing in its empty (built) or undetermined (open) spaces.

The Northern Quarter is an area where inclusion, ecology, production and other issues specific to urban environments are particularly acute. This is why it was chosen as a study site for Metrolab's work several times.

As part of the *urban inclusion* cycle, the Northern Quarter has emerged as a place to problematise inclusion and urban hospitality issues due to the humanitarian situation playing out there. The occupation of the neighbourhood by migrants is considered an 'episode' scarcely considered by urban planners and those engaged in defining local problems and development strategies. However, as a railway station district, the Northern Quarter has historically been a place of arrival and first settlement for newcomers in Brussels. The ARCH collective<sup>2</sup> was formed at Metrolab to address this issue and conduct action research to understand the current situation. It aims to improve the Northern Quarter's qualities of hospitality by developing reception areas (Lemaître d'Auchamp and Ranzato, 2019) such as 'inclusive enclaves' (Berger and Moritz, 2018) and 'social infrastructures' (Berger et al., 2021; Carlier et al., 2021), as well as public spaces that are hospitable to these vulnerable populations and meet their needs.

Next, the *urban ecology* MasterClass addressed (de)construction waste streams produced by the many ongoing and planned new construction sites. A renewed partnership between developers and public authorities is currently fuelling accelerated cycles to transform neighbourhood buildings. The developers aim to differentiate the available housing stock, integrating temporary uses and

<sup>2</sup> 'Action Research Collective for Hospitality' is an initiative launched to give continuity to Metrolab's work on urban inclusion. It also arose to deal with a lack of in-depth reflection on the social and humanitarian aspects of the Northern Quarter. For more information, see ARCH, 2019.

circular economy principles into their development visions. The public authorities support mixed functions and the recovery of (de)construction waste, which currently accounts for the largest regional-level waste streams (EcoRes et al., 2015). The MasterClass treated the Northern Quarter as a waste production ‘hotspot’ but also as a ‘lever’ for the circular economy by raising collective management of the selective dismantling of office towers, the creation of temporary construction material storage spaces and the development of new trades and knowledge related to circular construction.

Finally, the work carried out during the *urban production* MasterClass highlighted how undesirable productive activities were pushed out of the area while residential and commercial real estate projects were developed for privileged groups at the same time. The revaluation of the Northern Quarter is leading to gentrification, a dynamic of urban transformation that questions whether there is any room left for productive activities and the less affluent residents who have historically lived there and called it home. The work carried out during this MasterClass proposes the establishment of a circular economy space hosting different activities such as organic waste treatment, plant production and urban furniture maintenance, helping to manage and maintain the neighbourhood’s public green spaces that are planned to be regenerated. This space would train and employ disadvantaged people living in the area, thereby meeting the urban challenges of inclusion, ecology and production in an attempt to address them.

Therefore, the work carried out in these three cycles proposes the undefined or planned use and development of spaces in the Northern Quarter to address certain social, environmental and/or economic issues. While some of the approaches raised in the MasterClasses aim to address these issues, it must be recognised that space is exclusive in nature (Simmel, 1999, pp. 602-605): places occupied by one activity, one use, do not easily accommodate others. The same building can hardly be used to store materials, to receive migrants or for socio-professional training. Multiplying the targeted goods within a space can reduce the scope of each. Spatial organisation is more easily accommodated by distribution of goods, than by the entanglement of those goods.

How can we make room for different goods and different issues such as social inclusion, environmental transition and the maintenance and development of productive spaces in a non-extendable space without prioritising certain issues at the expense of others, as well as a city’s many inevitable needs? How can we consider their possible articulations and tensions and envisage a distribution of urban space that would take each of them into account?

### **Towards a transversal approach to urban issues**

To answer this question in detail, we believe that a cross-cutting or transversal approach to the problems and issues facing contemporary cities is essential. We think that this transversal approach can hardly be carried out by the actors involved in specific projects, which are usually focused on a particular good (such as the fight against exclusion or the development of a circular economy). The ERDF programme that we have taken as a subject of study at Metrolab is thereby divided into lines by issue, assuming a one-sided approach. The administrative and political actors themselves tend to work in a sector-based manner. However, this transversal approach must consider the unique qualities of urban environments at different levels: spatial, social, economic, urbanistic and others. What follows is a sketch of how we can understand the role of an urban research laboratory in crafting a transversal approach, meaning one that is transdisciplinary, critical and applied.

#### Research as mediation

The search for conceptual solutions to complex problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) with all their social and ecological interconnections, must necessarily be informed by a pluralistic and transdisciplinary perspective rooted in dialogue and negotiation (Wahl, 2019). At Metrolab, we organised workshops on different sites taken as case studies to grasp the different problems and issues; the laboratory thereby played a mediating role between the actors involved in delivering different social goods like social inclusion, environmental transition and sustainable development—actors who rarely meet in formal public action spaces. This type of mechanism helps to develop a dialogue between milieus that communicate little with each other (Berger, 2020). However, these workshops were set up to problematise one of the issues at the heart of our lines of work as finely as possible, and not to work directly on the relations, articulations and tensions between inclusion, ecology and production. More critical efforts are needed to reformulate the complex problems that urban actors face in a cross-cutting way.

#### Research as criticism

According to Foucault (Foucault, 1981), *critique* is a creative tool for transforming ways of thinking, seeing and acting. By questioning the theoretical assumption underlying our actions, critique opens up new avenues of reflection; hence the responsibility of an urban research laboratory to question the very foundations of urban policies and practices to put forward original theoretical approaches. At Metrolab, we have done so (often in an undisciplined way) by relying on theoretical perspectives that try to articulate social, environmental and economic issues, notably through the concept of ecology. Whether it is an ecology of mind (Bateson, 1973), a political ecology (Gorz, 1992) or a human ecology (Park, 1936), many authors have worked with this concept to think about how individuals or communities interact with the environment, considering the many different kinds of environments and their complexity. For André Gorz (1992, p. 68), ‘political ecology thus makes ecologically necessary changes in the way we produce and consume the lever for normatively desirable changes in the way we live and in social relations. Defence of the living environment in the ecological sense, and

the reconstitution of a life-world, condition and support one another'. From this perspective, which takes a critical approach to ecological issues, the transition should also allow people to reappropriate the capacity to act in their 'life milieu', to use the author's term.

#### Research as design

Between criticism and mediation, Metrolab's activity is aimed at stimulating debate, striking up dialogue between actors, objectifying knowledge and supporting decision-making. The cross-cutting nature of our approach was not only to carry out research by engaging public, private and associative actors, but to reflect on the potential uses of the accumulated knowledge to meet the objectives set out in the European strategy. In doing so, regardless of their training (in sociology, geography or urban planning), Metrolab's researchers were all confronted with a certain form of *design thinking*, meaning the search for particular solutions to problems situated in the complexity of the real world (Buchanan, 1992; Rowe, 1991). In this sense, the practice of urban and architectural projects can be a way to cross-fertilise and integrate knowledge and disciplines that do not otherwise enter into dialogue.

To conclude, we have tried to learn the lessons of the Metrolab project to highlight the methodological and theoretical aspects that we deem essential for developing a transversal approach to urban issues. Mediation, criticism and the posture of design could be particularly significant for grappling with the complexity and intricacy of these issues, as well as the constraining nature of any choice in terms of urban policy and transformation.

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# Colophon

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The ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) is a European regional policy tool that aims to create new opportunities for European citizens and to reduce the living standards gap between regions. Between 2007 and 2013, the ERDF programme, through the intervention of the Region and Europe, thus invested 108 million euros in 32 projects in the Brussels-Capital Region. These projects concern child care, re-employment measures, training programmes, but also sustainable development, support for economic activities, and reinforcing the infrastructure and the social cohesion in the canal area. The current programme (2014-2020) contains 58 projects pertaining to access to employment, research, circular economy, innovation and improving the living environment. Europe and the Region are investing € 200 million in this new programme. This publication and the related research activities have been made possible through the financial support of the Brussels European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programme (2014-2020).

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