

Research Article

Brussels Unveiled: Culture, Community, and Governance - A Building Program

Christian Ilcus*

Gociu Consult, Copenhagen, EU

Abstract

This research examines the transformation of Brussels as the political capital of the European Union, analyzing the intricate interplay between spatial production, strategic planning, and governance. The primary aim is to develop a comprehensive framework that integrates theoretical dimensions of urban transformation to provide a holistic understanding of how political authority is inscribed into urban space. The study poses key research questions including: What challenges does Brussels face in its transformation into the definitive capital of Europe? How does community engagement shape urban planning processes and cultural vibrancy? What role do sustainable architectural innovations play in enhancing the city's identity and livability? The findings underscore that Brussels' urban development embodies a complex negotiation of local and supranational interests, where strategic initiatives have fostered both socio-cultural integration and ecological sustainability. Notably, the research reveals that key projects serve not just functional purposes but also act as instruments of symbolic representation, reinforcing Brussels' identity as a global political hub. Overall, the study concludes that addressing sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural vibrancy is crucial for solidifying Brussels' role as a dynamic center of European governance. Furthermore, it highlights the need for an integrated analytical framework that combines spatial, governance, and symbolic dimensions, thus providing actionable insights for policymakers and urban planners not only in Brussels but also in similarly positioned cities worldwide. The recommendations provided are intended to guide policymakers and urban planners in creating a more inclusive, dynamic urban environment that reflects both local identity and global significance.

Keywords

Brussels-capital Region, Metropolitan Governance, European Union Institutions, International City, Urban Diversity, Multicultural Population, Global City Functions, Political-administrative Hub

1. Introduction

Brussels occupies a unique position in Europe as the de facto political capital of the European Union, hosting the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. This concentration of transnational governance has transformed the city into a distinctive urban

laboratory, where global political authority intersects with local social, cultural, and economic dynamics. Despite its international prominence, Brussels' urban and architectural evolution has received comparatively limited systematic analysis, particularly in terms of how the city's built

*Correspondence: Christian Ilcus (Director@ilcus.eu)

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environment both shapes and reflects its political functions.

Existing studies have largely focused either on the city's historical development or on its institutional architecture, leaving a gap in understanding the interplay between governance, urban form, and socio-spatial dynamics. This study addresses that gap by examining how Brussels' urban transformation responds to the dual pressures of global political significance and local urban life, highlighting the ways in which architecture, public space, and planning practices materialize power, identity, and collective experience.

EU cities face major housing affordability and supply crises, with shortages of affordable and social housing threatening social cohesion. Many cities also struggle with limited financial resources and budget pressure, making it difficult to maintain services and invest in infrastructure. Urban areas are on the frontline of climate change, dealing with energy transition costs, air pollution, and the need to adapt to heatwaves and extreme weather. Social inequalities are especially visible in cities, where rising living costs, segregation, and demographic change deepen divides. Renew Europe stresses empowering cities through innovation, direct access to EU funding, and pragmatic housing and mobility solutions that support competitiveness. The European People's Party focuses on economic growth, efficient infrastructure, sustainable transport, and fiscal responsibility, while favouring local autonomy in how EU funds are used. The Socialists and Democrats emphasise housing as a social right, reducing inequality, protecting workers, and increasing public investment in affordable housing and social services. Right-wing groups in the European Parliament tend to frame urban challenges around migration control, security, national sovereignty, and opposition to strong EU-level intervention. Across all groups, there is ongoing debate about how EU funds should be distributed and whether cities should receive money directly or via national governments. Overall, while most parties agree that cities are key drivers of Europe's future, they differ sharply on the balance between EU involvement, national control, and social versus market-based solutions.

The objective of this research is to provide an integrated framework for analyzing Brussels' urban and architectural evolution, situating the city as both a locus of European governance and a living urban community. By tracing the intersections of history, institutional expansion, and contemporary urban development, the study offers insights into the broader question of how political authority is inscribed into urban space, and how cities adapt to the competing demands of international function and local identity.

Understanding Brussels in this way is not only of scholarly interest but also of practical significance, informing urban planning, heritage preservation, and the design of spaces that mediate between global politics and everyday urban life. By linking material form, governance structures, and symbolic meaning, this research contributes to the growing field of

strategic urbanism and offers a model for studying other politically significant cities worldwide.

Following World War II, Brussels underwent a significant urban transformation, characterized by large-scale demolition and reconstruction. This period, often referred to as 'Brusselization,' involved the replacement of historic neighborhoods with high-rise buildings and expansive road networks, throwing part in disgust part out of a sense of humiliation drastic measures at its inhabitants used to walking on the cobbled streets of mid-town Bruxelles surrounded by harmonious city planning and quiet historical charm in an age when art and architecture still tuned-in with each other, as Camillo Sitte would put it. The lack of comprehensive planning led to criticisms of haphazard development and a loss of urban identity.

In response to the shortcomings of previous urban strategies, the Brussels-Capital Region introduced the 'master plan' concept in the early 2000s. This approach aimed to provide a more coordinated and participatory framework for urban development. The master plans were designed to guide the development of key areas, such as Tour et Taxis and the European Quarter, integrating public and private stakeholders in the planning process.

Most people will agree that you are here for the European institutions and the international crowd – the urban experience that is BRU is not that *great*. To think big, you need to live in a small town, the logic appears to be.

The Brussels-Capital Region functions as a medium-sized European metropolis, distinguished not by its population size alone, but by its strategic political and economic significance. With roughly 1.26 million residents in the city proper and a metropolitan area encompassing over 2.5 million, Brussels ranks below major European hubs like Paris, London, or Berlin in population, yet surpasses many peers in institutional density and international influence.

Its role as the administrative heart of the European Union and host to numerous international organizations positions Brussels uniquely: the city's functional reach extends far beyond its local demographic footprint, connecting it to transnational networks of governance, diplomacy, and business. Compared with other metropolitan regions, Brussels exhibits a highly internationalized population, with over one-third of residents holding foreign nationality, a figure significantly above the European average for cities of similar size. Brussels serves as the political heart of Europe, hosting a substantial number of EU and international institutions. Employment figures as of 2023 include 41,177 European Institution staff, 3,257 international institution staff, 7,111 diplomatic personnel, and 611 employees in European Schools, totaling 52,156 individuals working within the international and institutional sector. Belgian nationals and southern Europeans are in the majority among Eurocrats, and UVL even has a private quarter in the Berlaymont building. The power has gone. What is left is the aristocracy, eros and the magic, as a French saying has it.

Urbanly, Brussels displays the characteristic duality of many mid-tier metropolises: the coexistence of historic neighborhoods, residential districts, and a globally oriented administrative core. This dual structure is comparable to other politically-centered capitals such as Vienna or Copenhagen, where governance and institutional functions define the city's metropolitan identity alongside vibrant local urban life.

From EPSON's work we are informed Bruxelles need better metropolitan & functional urban area governance managing coordination across municipalities and neighboring regions, aligning planning, zoning, transport, land use. Spatial planning at metropolitan scale needs to balance growth, density, infrastructure, and preserving quality of life. Affordable housing is needed to ensure inclusion, environment, connectivity¹. A recent OECD report similarly call for turning limitations into opportunities in relation to governance and financing, to ensure better planning and use of land and notes BRU struggles to keep pace with increased mobility and housing needs.² OECD has coined the term the 'Brussels paradox': high economic performance alongside persistent social inequalities and spatial segregation. This paradox reflects postcolonial urban dynamics where global city functions coexist with marginalized populations from former colonies. If Bruxelles can not solve its problems, how is the EU Commission supposed to govern the evolving Urban Agenda? By acting out? By go on a biking trip in the Ardennes mountains?

Next, we will have to look into the Bruxelles Region Metropolitaine and the suburbia of Bruxelles City, and how to make the region a more well-rounded, dynamic and harmoniously developed area and explain why it is in everyone's interest to start from the core, comparable with the need to strengthen the political center of the European Union given the unprecedented challenges of our age and of uniting Europe, a first in European history requiring a non-hegemonic initiative.

The Building Program, if not a minor undertaking, could slip almost imperceptibly into the fabric of Bruxelles Vision 2030—and, dare one hope, even beyond—turning lofty principles into streets, squares, and corners that breathe. Each project, neither fleeting nor frivolous, bears the quiet weight of sustainability, inclusivity, heritage, and smart technology, shaping neighborhoods that bend but do not break. In concert with government, communities, and the private sector, developments answer citizen needs with a fidelity that is rarely seen. Performance monitoring, though never overbearing, keeps one eye on Vision 2030 while leaving room for the unforeseen. In brief, the Building Program does more than suggest the future: it whispers it into every stone, every street, every pulse of Brussels' evolving cityscape.³

Where a plan commissariat is rational and technocratic, an executive is symbolic exuding authority. The Commissariat functions like infrastructure arranged in grids and hierarchies. Its architecture is systemic, modular, predictable. The Executive functions like the façade of the building.

Architecturally it is centralized, vertical and elevated and provides unity and coherence of the otherwise diffuse machinery of administration.

Anchoring Brussels in this metropolitan spectrum highlights its hybrid character: it is both a political–institutional hub of continental significance and a culturally diverse, locally rooted metropolis. Its comparative advantage lies in the intersection of international influence, civic diversity, and European connectivity rather than sheer demographic or economic scale.

Architecture in BRU has always tried to serve both civic pride and practical needs:

The Grand Place projected wealth and identity.

Art Nouveau residences expressed individuality and innovat Architecture in Brussels has long balanced the dual imperatives of *civic pride* and *functional necessity*. The *Grand Place* stands as a majestic emblem of the city's historical wealth and collective identity, its intricate facades narrating centuries of cultural and economic vitality. The elegant *Art Nouveau residences* embody a spirit of *individuality and artistic innovation*, reflecting the city's embrace of creativity and modernity at the turn of the 20th century. In contrast, the sleek *Modernist towers* emerged from a drive toward *efficiency and global relevance*, signaling Brussels' aspirations as an international hub. Brussels' architectural landscape benefits from a philosophy that harmonizes *modern design with historical context*, prioritizing *clarity, simplicity, and cultural sensitivity*. Like the best examples of thoughtful architecture, new interventions in Brussels should embrace *modernity without overshadowing its rich heritage*.

The city's iconic *Grand Place*, *Art Nouveau residences*, and *Modernist towers* each reflect different layers of Brussels' identity, history, and ambitions. Applying these principles suggests that contemporary structures should aim for *geometric clarity and minimal visual intrusion*, allowing new buildings to *dialogue respectfully with historic surroundings* rather than dominate them.

Moreover, architecture in Brussels can serve as a powerful medium to express and reinforce the city's diverse cultural fabric. Through *innovative design, inclusive public spaces, and symbolic gestures*, buildings can nurture local pride while projecting Brussels' role as a European and global capital.

This approach fosters *timeless architecture*—balancing *functionality, aesthetic innovation, and historical continuity*—to create spaces rooted in the city's past yet dynamically engaged with its future.

Today, the imposing structures of the *European institutions* represent ideals of *unity and supranational cooperation*. Yet, their scale and style can sometimes feel at odds with the city's rich local texture, highlighting an ongoing tension between global ambitions and intimate urban identity.

Modernist towers sought efficiency and international stature.

Today, European institutions symbolize unity but sometimes feel disconnected from local texture.

It lacks refinement and top international class. And the reason for this is very much in urban planning and administrative disarray into which the European institutions mirror themselves. If not a dose of fresh air is inducted into the place, perhaps an arson will do. These structures are typified by their *standardized, transparent facades*—often expansive glass walls that convey an image of openness and modernity but simultaneously foster a sense of *sterility and impersonality*. Designed primarily for *functionality and efficiency*, they tend to prioritize *uniformity over uniqueness*, resulting in buildings that can feel *detached from their urban context* and local cultural identity.

Their *boxy, repetitive forms* often lack distinctive architectural character or human scale, which can create an environment perceived as *cold, bureaucratic, and alienating* for both occupants and passersby. The transparency of glass, while symbolizing accountability and accessibility, can ironically underscore the *invisibility of human presence* within, as interior activity often feels regimented and impersonal.

Such buildings reflect a *modernist and technocratic ethos*, emphasizing *rationality and order* but risking the loss of warmth, diversity, and connection to place. In cityscapes, they can contribute to a *homogenized skyline* that contrasts sharply with more historic or culturally expressive architecture, raising questions about the relationship between governance, power, and the urban environment.

While Brussels boasts a rich architectural heritage and historical landmarks, its true vibrancy today stems largely from its role as a hub for international institutions and the diverse global community they attract. The *international crowd*—comprising diplomats, EU officials, multinational professionals, and expatriates—infuses the city with a cosmopolitan energy that often eclipses the traditional urban experience.

This global population brings with it a dynamic cultural mix, fostering multilingualism, diverse cuisines, and international events that shape Brussels' social fabric in ways that transcend local traditions. The city's attractiveness, therefore, is less about pedestrian-friendly streets or cohesive urban design and more about the *opportunities, networks, and cosmopolitan lifestyle* that arise from being a center of global governance and diplomacy.

In many ways, Brussels' urban environment reflects this dynamic: the prevalence of glass bureaucratic offices, conference centers, and international organizations creates a cityscape geared towards institutional function rather than intimate public spaces. The urban experience can feel fragmented, with neighborhoods catering to different nationalities or professional groups rather than a unified local identity.

Consequently, Brussels draws people not primarily for its urban charm or cohesive city life, but for the *professional, political, and cultural opportunities* that its international presence provides. This raises questions about how the city might better integrate its global role with enhancing local

urban vitality—creating spaces and experiences that serve both its international residents and the broader public.

Brussels' architecture is a mosaic of times layered on top of each other, a place at once intimate and global, and a built environment whose purpose often oscillates between civic expression and bureaucratic necessity. The challenge is to bring coherence – without erasing history – through clarity of form, respect for context, and a vision that serves both citizens and Europe.

The Genius Loci of Brussels: Beyond Faded Grandeur and EU Architecture

Brussels' *genius loci* is complex, layered, and evolving. While its *faded grandeur*—manifest in the ornate façades of the Grand Place, Art Nouveau gems, and historic neighborhoods—speaks to a rich cultural and political past, it no longer fully defines the city's contemporary identity. The arrival of imposing, often sterile, *EU bureaucratic buildings* has both transformed and challenged this historic spirit, creating a sometimes disjointed urban experience.

Beyond these juxtapositions, Brussels' true genius loci lies in its role as a crossroads of cultures and ideas. It is a city of *dialogue and diversity*, where multiple languages, traditions, and worldviews converge. This multicultural vitality infuses Brussels with an openness and cosmopolitanism that is rare in European capitals.

The city's *hidden courtyards, vibrant markets, eclectic neighborhoods, and street art scenes* reveal a living, grassroots culture that thrives beneath the surface of formal grandeur and institutional power. Neighborhoods like Marolles and Ixelles pulse with local energy, offering conviviality, creativity, and social cohesion that counterbalance the more formal EU districts.

Brussels also embodies a *spirit of resilience and reinvention*. Its genius loci includes a capacity to absorb and transform influences—from medieval guilds to Art Nouveau, from post-war modernism to the European project—into a unique urban tapestry.

Looking forward, Brussels' genius loci could be reimaged as a *hybrid space that embraces both its historic soul and its global role*. This means fostering:

- 1) *Human-scaled public spaces* that encourage interaction between locals and internationals.
- 2) *Inclusive cultural programming* that bridges communities and celebrates diversity.
- 3) *Architectural innovation* that respects context while projecting contemporary values of sustainability, transparency, and openness.
- 4) A renewed focus on *civic engagement and urban vitality* that integrates the everyday lives of residents with the city's international functions.

In essence, Brussels' genius loci is not fixed in its past or solely defined by the EU presence—it is a *living, dynamic spirit shaped by history, diversity, and the possibilities of connection*. Cultivating this spirit could help the city move beyond fragmented identities towards a more cohesive,

vibrant, and authentic urban future.

Whose fault is it if we didn't dare dream big in such a small city as a contrast but instead insisted on something more congenial to the spirit of the place by letting in light, space, transparency, geometry & polarity, purpose, values and objectives of the EU combined with decorative artistry and the craftsmanship worthy of a great power's political capital?

1.1. Argument

We argue Brussels stands at a pivotal moment in its evolution toward becoming a genuinely sustainable and inclusive urban capital for Europe. To navigate the complexities of this transformation effectively, the city must prioritize community engagement, cultural identity, and innovative governance. These dimensions are essential not only for addressing systemic challenges but also for ensuring that development reflects the diverse needs of its residents.

The importance of community involvement is increasingly recognized in urban policy discourse. Recommendations advocating for public consultations and participatory initiatives point to the value of engaging citizens directly in the decision-making process. Such engagement fosters legitimacy, enhances local ownership of urban projects, and ensures that development efforts are attuned to the lived realities of Brussels' heterogeneous population.

In parallel, the need to strengthen cultural identity has been underscored by the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor, which highlights gaps in Brussels' cultural infrastructure and calls for strategic investment in grassroots culture. Enhancing cultural vibrancy requires more than flagship institutions; it demands support for local creative communities, inclusive cultural programming, and spatial equity in access to cultural resources. These strategies are not merely aesthetic or symbolic but are fundamental to cultivating a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

Sustainability in urban planning must also be understood as a multidimensional goal. Brussels has begun integrating green infrastructure and energy-efficient practices into its urban design, aligning itself with global climate and sustainability targets. Concepts such as the "10-minute city"—which emphasize accessibility, walkability, and proximity to essential services—offer a framework for improving quality of life while reducing environmental impact. These interventions contribute to a more connected, equitable, and resilient urban environment.

Collectively, these elements demonstrate that sustainable urban development in Brussels is not solely a matter of physical or environmental infrastructure. Rather, it is a deeply social and cultural undertaking—one that requires cultivating a shared identity and a sense of ownership among residents. Prioritizing community voices and cultural narratives is thus essential to the success and legitimacy of the city's transformation.

Critics may argue that large-scale redevelopment, even

when sustainability-oriented, risks accelerating gentrification and displacing vulnerable populations. While these concerns are valid, they do not preclude more equitable alternatives. Championing the adaptive reuse of existing buildings, ensuring protections for affordable housing, and embedding anti-displacement mechanisms into planning frameworks can mitigate such risks. In doing so, Brussels can pursue renewal without erasing the social and historical textures that make the city unique.

To truly become Europe's political capital, Brussels must evolve beyond its role as a seat of institutions and embrace a more integrated urban identity—one that reflects not only administrative functionality but also cultural depth, social inclusivity, and civic participation. The servants of a great power, the visitors it draws, and the inhabitants who call Brussels home must not only be well governed, but must also see governance descend meaningfully from the metaphorical ivory tower. Brussels should stand not merely as a distant administrative extension of a shell-shocked Belgian nation, but as a vibrant contrast to it—embodying resilience, inclusion, and democratic vitality at the heart of Europe. This will require an approach that goes beyond technocratic solutions and engages with the cultural, political, and social dimensions of urban life. By embracing community participation, reinforcing cultural identity, and pursuing governance that is both inclusive and innovative, Brussels can position itself not only as the administrative heart of Europe but as a city that embodies the values of sustainability, equity, and shared urban citizenship.

1.2. Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to transform Brussels into the definitive capital of Europe, promoting the city as a dynamic center of European governance, vibrant cultural exchange, and a strong European identity. Specific objectives include:

First, Brussels, *the* beating heart and quiet conductor of European politics, must attract institutions, embassies, and organizations while humming with accessible infrastructure.

Second, its streets and squares, a living allegory of Europe, celebrate heritage through festivals, exhibitions, and events that echo, resonate, and reverberate, inviting intercultural dialogue. Communities are not spectators but choruses in the city's symphony, shaping urban spaces through civic engagement, each voice distinct yet harmonized.

Third, to investigate the active involvement of local communities in shaping the urban landscape, facilitating civic engagement through structured platforms—recognizing that participation is not merely attendance but a chorus of voices, a rhythmic dialogue between citizen and city, each note distinct, yet harmonized into a coherent urban symphony.

Fourth, to explore sustainable urban planning practices, including the integration of green spaces, energy-efficient buildings, and enhanced public transport systems.

Sustainability whispers through green spaces, energy-smart buildings, and flowing transit, a paradox where growth and preservation dance together, swish, hum, rustle—life in motion.

Fifth, to identify strategies to position Brussels as a *symbol of European integration and unity*, marketing the city as a hub for international conferences, exhibitions, and collaborative dialogues—a living allegory of continental cohesion, where ideas, ambitions, and policies *intertwine, clash, and coalesce* in a dynamic dance of cooperation.

Sixth, to assess the embrace of *architectural innovations* that balance historical preservation with contemporary design, revitalizing public spaces into *palimpsests of memory and modernity*—a paradoxical landscape where centuries-old façades whisper the past even as glass and steel shout the present, forging a cityscape that embodies Brussels' identity as a modern European capital.

1.3. Scope

This research will focus exclusively on urban development within Brussels, examining recent architectural projects and urban planning initiatives that contribute to the city's vision as a vibrant European capital. The geographical scope is confined to the Brussels region, and the temporal range encompasses developments over the past decade, enabling a contemporary analysis of these efforts. The study will evaluate existing policy frameworks, community involvement, and technological advancements that support sustainable architecture and urban governance.

1.4. Research Questions

The research will be guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the primary challenges Brussels faces in its transformation into the definitive capital of Europe and how can these be addressed?
- 2) How does community engagement influence decision-making processes in urban planning and contribute to fostering a vibrant cultural environment within Brussels?
- 3) In what ways can sustainable architectural innovations enhance the city's identity, livability, and overall attractiveness as a hub of European governance and culture?

This research has significant implications for urban development in Brussels by addressing the pressing need for sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural vibrancy in this pivotal city within the European political landscape. Findings are expected to inform policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders about effective practices and strategies that will not only enhance Brussels' role as the capital of Europe but also serve as a model for other cities facing similar challenges. By integrating insights from urban studies, sustainability science, and architecture, this research aims to

contribute to a deeper understanding of how to create a dynamic and inclusive urban environment that embodies the spirit of Europe as a whole.

The study aims to make a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature by integrating insights from urban studies, sustainability science, and architecture. It provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the intersection of community engagement and architectural innovation in urban development contexts. Additionally, the research seeks to fill critical gaps in the understanding of effective practices and policies relevant to Brussels, offering insights that may also apply to other cities facing similar sustainability challenges.

1.5. Literature Review

The study of Brussels' European Quarter intersects multiple scholarly domains, including urban transformation, governance, spatial production, and symbolic urbanism. The literature can be grouped into four overlapping analytical strands: urban transformation and planning, governance and multilevel dynamics, urban identity and symbolic capital, **and** policy and strategic interventions.

Scholars examining Brussels' urban transformation highlight the interplay between material redevelopment and strategic city planning. Romańczyk (2015) critically assesses neighbourhood contracts and urban redevelopment, demonstrating how coordinated construction initiatives reshape local socio-spatial dynamics. Denoo (2019) situates post-war urban planning within an environment of uncertainty, highlighting the iterative nature of Brussels' spatial production. Mikelsone (2021) adds a sustainability and economic development perspective, stressing that urban transformation must balance functional, symbolic, and economic imperatives. Collectively, these studies underscore the need to understand urban transformation not merely as architectural change but as a process shaped by governance, strategy, and economic positioning. However, much of the literature remains descriptive, often cataloguing projects without systematically linking them to broader theoretical dimensions of spatial production or political symbolism.

The complex governance structure of Brussels, encompassing municipal, regional, national, and supranational actors, is a recurring theme. Trobbiani (2015) examines how European regions mobilise functional interest representation in Brussels, highlighting the negotiation of authority across multiple scales. Baclijsa Brajnik (2024) critiques the depoliticisation of governance in large municipalities, illustrating how formal structures often mask underlying power dynamics. While these contributions illuminate the negotiation processes central to multi-level governance, they tend to focus on administrative structures and institutional politics, leaving underexplored the material and spatial dimensions of these negotiations in shaping the urban fabric.

Brussels' European Quarter functions as a symbolic

landscape representing European integration. Pijoan (2025) explores how urban spaces are valorised and managed to convey prestige and legitimacy, a theme echoed by Bradford (2020), who situates Brussels within global regulatory influence. These studies highlight the interplay between symbolic authority and urban form, demonstrating that buildings like Berlaymont or Justus Lipsius are not merely functional but operate as instruments of political messaging. However, existing research often lacks a systematic framework to evaluate how projects simultaneously enact spatial, governance, and symbolic functions, leaving a gap for integrative analytical approaches.

Recent work considers Brussels' European Quarter as a site of strategic intervention, where planning, investment, and governance converge. De Frantz (2022) [9] situates urban agendas within collaborative planning and transnational governance, while Maulidi (2023) emphasises technological disruption and its influence on spatial reconfiguration. Commissioner Brussels (2025) provides a practical overview of recent initiatives, highlighting redevelopment priorities and policy mechanisms. These contributions offer insight into strategic urban programming but often treat projects as isolated interventions rather than components of an integrated urban strategy.

Despite the breadth of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, few studies systematically link *spatial, governance, and symbolic dimensions* to provide an integrated analytical framework for assessing Brussels' transformation. Second, most accounts are descriptive or sectoral, cataloguing projects or policy interventions without operationalising theoretical lenses such as Lefebvre's spatial production, Healey's strategic planning, or Sassen's global city framework. Third, there is limited attention to the *comparative analytical evaluation of projects*, making it difficult to distinguish which interventions are most central to the city's political and symbolic role. Finally, the literature rarely addresses *the curated selection of projects based on multi-dimensional engagement*, leaving the evolution of the European Quarter as a mosaic of case studies rather than a coherent, analytically justified narrative.

1.6. Key Terms and Definitions

Building Program

In this study, a building program refers to a coordinated series of construction projects within a defined urban area, undertaken with specific functional, symbolic, or strategic objectives. In the context of Brussels' European Quarter, the building program encompasses both administrative headquarters of EU institutions and complementary infrastructure projects, which together materialise political authority and strategic urban transformation.

Grand d'Oeuvre

Derived from urban planning discourse, a grand d'Oeuvre denotes a large-scale, high-visibility project with both

functional and symbolic significance. These projects serve as focal points in the urban landscape, often intended to signal institutional authority, political identity, or city branding.

European Quarter

The European Quarter is the area in central Brussels where key EU institutions, administrative offices, and associated infrastructures are concentrated. It functions as both a practical workspace for supranational governance and a symbolic urban manifestation of European integration.

Table 1. Glossary of Key Terms.

Term	Definition
Building Program	A coordinated series of construction projects within a defined urban area, undertaken with functional, symbolic, or strategic objectives.
Grand d'Oeuvre	Large-scale, high-visibility projects with both functional and symbolic significance, serving as focal points in the urban landscape.
European Quarter	The area in central Brussels where key EU institutions and associated infrastructures are concentrated.
Operationalisation	Translating abstract theoretical dimensions into measurable criteria; projects are scored 0–3 on each dimension.
Analytical Dimensions	Lefebvre, Healey, Marks & Hooghe, Sassen, Harvey.
Core Project	Projects scoring $\geq 9/15$ and engaging ≥ 3 dimensions.
Contextual Project	Projects below the inclusion threshold, providing background context.
Symbolic Capital	Prestige or legitimacy embedded in urban form, communicating governance authority and European identity.
Urban Transformation	Significant changes to the spatial, functional, and symbolic structure of a city.

Analytical Dimensions

The study's analytical dimensions are the specific theoretical lenses used to evaluate and interpret projects:

- 1) Spatial Production (Lefebvre): the way urban space embodies social, political, and economic relations.
- 2) Strategic Planning (Healey): the role of collaborative planning and long-term visioning in shaping urban development.

- 3) Multi-Level Governance (Marks & Hooghe): the negotiation of authority across local, regional, national, and supranational scales.
- 4) Global Political City (Sassen): the positioning of Brussels within transnational governance networks.
- 5) Urban Entrepreneurialism (Harvey): the use of urban development projects to brand the city, attract investment, and symbolically assert competitiveness.

Design Brief

A design brief is a structured document that outlines the key requirements, goals, constraints and expectations for a design project. It serves as a road-map between a client and architect and the design team, ensuring that everyone understands the purpose, target audience, scope and desired outcomes before the work begins. A design brief encompass project overview, objectives, target audience, scope of work, brand guidelines, budget and timeline, constraints and requirements as well as success criteria. In short, a design brief is both an intention and project, idea and outline, and when associated with form (Plato), it became a platform for the flourishing of architecture, sculpture and painting during the Renaissance. This doubled-boundedness is preserved in today's usage of design brief as an agreement and content of what is to be delivered by the designer to the customer.

Operationalisation

Operationalisation refers to the process of translating abstract theoretical dimensions into measurable or observable criteria. In this study, the five theoretical dimensions—spatial production, strategic planning, multi-level governance, global political city, and urban entrepreneurialism—are operationalised by assigning scores to each project based on evidence from planning documents, institutional histories, and architectural analysis. We develop certain criteria for evaluation of fitness of BRU in order to assess the realism of our building project.

1.7. Scholarly Contribution

Building upon insights from the provided documents, this research aligns with themes of strategic planning and governance in urban transformation. The findings will reflect on the need for a coherent analytical framework that encompasses spatial production, governance negotiations, and symbolic representation, similar to how existing literature critiques the fragmented understanding of Brussels' European Quarter. Emphasizing the dynamic interplay of spatial, political, and economic forces, the research will also consider the implications of large-scale urban development projects within the context of entrepreneurial urbanism, as discussed in previous studies. This integrated approach ensures that the objectives and findings remain relevant and contribute to the broader academic discourse on urban transformation in strategic European cities like Brussels.

In the context of urban development research focused on Brussels, this study provides a significant scholarly

contribution that advances knowledge in multiple dimensions. Firstly, it introduces an original perspective on urban transformation by examining the intricate interplay of spatial production, strategic planning, and governance within the European Quarter of Brussels. In doing so, it identifies critical gaps in the existing literature, particularly the need for integrated theoretical frameworks, including Lefebvre's spatial production and Harvey's urban entrepreneurialism.

The theoretical contributions are noteworthy as this investigation extends and refines existing theories related to urban governance and symbolic capital. It elucidates how Brussels operates as both a local municipality and a significant player within transnational political networks, thereby challenging the fragmented nature of prior accounts. By offering a cohesive framework for understanding urban transformation through a multi-dimensional lens, the research enriches theoretical discourse in the field.

Moreover, the practical implications of this study are profound, providing valuable insights for policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders. It addresses the pressing need for sustainable urban development strategies that prioritize civic engagement and cultural diversity, thereby contributing to actionable solutions that uplift the livability and resilience of Brussels as a dynamic European capital.

The interdisciplinary connections made within this research further enhance its scholarly impact, integrating insights from urban studies, sustainability science, and architectural design. This melding of disciplines promotes a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges and opportunities present in Brussels' urban landscape.

Finally, the identification of key research gaps—such as the need for longitudinal studies and multi-dimensional evaluations—serves to lay the groundwork for future inquiries. This study not only contributes to the existing body of literature on urban development in Brussels but also encourages ongoing exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of urban transformation, governance, culture, and architecture, thereby reinforcing its value as a resource for further academic discourse and research initiatives.

1.8. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative insights from urban studies with quantitative evaluations of architectural projects to comprehensively analyze the urban transformation of Brussels.

The selection of projects followed a targeted sampling strategy, informed by a piece in pre-print where only those that achieved a score of at least 9 out of 20 points on the scoring matrix—and engaged with a minimum of three theoretical dimensions—were included as core case studies for in-depth analysis. A systematic analysis was conducted utilizing a scoring matrix that evaluated each selected project against five critical theoretical dimensions: spatial production,

strategic planning, multi-level governance, global political city, and urban entrepreneurialism, facilitating a comparative assessment of urban transformation efforts.

The research emphasizes ethical considerations by incorporating community engagement strategies, ensuring that local voices and perspectives are represented in the decision-making processes relevant to urban development and planning. This study acknowledges its limitations, including a confined geographical scope to the Brussels region and a focus on developments from the past decade, which may influence the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts or historical periods.

1.9. Structure

This article is structured around four interconnected dimensions of Brussels' urban development. The first section presents the *urban strategic framework*, outlining the planning principles, governance structures, and multi-level coordination mechanisms that shape the city's transformation. The second section examines *Belgian government motivations*, exploring how political, economic, and symbolic objectives influence policy choices and urban interventions. The third section focuses on *my building program*, encompassing architectural history and identity, modern urban development, cultural institutions, and the integration of sustainability and urban planning practices. Finally, the article concludes by synthesizing these elements, highlighting the interplay between strategy, governance, culture, and design, and reflecting on the lessons for the city's ongoing evolution and metropolitan identity.

2. Strategic Urban Planning Framework

The Quito Papers under the aegis of Sassia Sasken emerge from efforts surrounding Habitat III (Quito, 2016), and represent a deliberate attempt to rechart the guiding principles of urban planning and policy for the twenty-first century. The document rejects the legacy of the early twentieth-century planning orthodoxy embodied in the Charter of Athens, which treated the city as a machine — a functionalist compartmentalization of zones for living, working, transport and leisure⁴. This modernist prescription, much criticized for producing spatial segregation, auto-centric design, and dehumanized urban environments, continues to shape many cities worldwide. The Quito Papers instead propose a paradigm grounded in openness, flexibility, and pluralism.

Rather than offering a reductive “manifesto” of slogans or universal recipes, the work acknowledges the complexity, fragility, and context-specificity of contemporary urbanization. The authors do not pretend to offer a one-size-fits-all urban model but encourage plural approaches, sensitive to cultural, environmental, social, and political differences.

Thus, cities are not neutral backdrops: they are active agents in social, economic, and political transformation. Their spatial

form, design, governance and culture shape — and are shaped by — global forces and local demands.

The Quito Papers advance a normative vision of the “open city,” one that channels the complexity of contemporary urban life into ethical, design and governance choices. Key elements of this vision include:

1. Emphasis on porosity and mixed-use: avoiding rigid separation of functions (residential, commercial, industrial, leisure), and instead encouraging overlapping uses, flexibility, and adaptability. This counters the sterile functionalism of earlier modernist planning. (Metropolis)
2. Recognition of incremental, emergent urbanism: acknowledging that cities evolve unpredictably in time and space, shaped by demographic shifts, migration, informal economies, evolving social practices, global capital flows — and therefore design and planning should allow for “looseness,” experiment and adaptation rather than totalizing master plans. (LSE Research Online)
3. Prioritization of public space, inclusivity, and social justice: arguing that urban space must remain accessible to all, and that planning must guard against privatization, displacement, and exclusion. The city — its public squares, streets, shared infrastructure — should be spaces of encounter, belonging, and possibility. (SpringerLink)
4. Valuing diversity, informality, and multiple temporalities: rather than erasing informal settlements or non-standard practices, the open city must recognise the legitimacy of informal economies, cultural diversity, and varied forms of urban life, as part of what makes cities alive, resilient, and democratic. (e-flux.com)

In this sense, the open city is not only a spatial design ideal but a normative project — one that places equity, multiplicity, social rights, and participatory governance at its core. Above all, a city is a place for self-realisation, to be less poor than Rusticus, to live across ages in harmony with your ancestors, to enjoy green spaces, to be a stranger among like-minded and to be fed. This is hardly the reason why the Cap budget fill so much of the EU budget but it does say something about the solidarity extended to a city-based civilization that now has to move on. This can only be undertaken in cooperation with the Bruxelles region, whereas the enclave around Rue de la Loi can derive strength from strengthened urban governance, since cities are a unique source of identity that the EU can draw on.

The repositioning of cities by Sassen and the Quito Papers carries important analytic and policy implications. First, it reframes urbanization not as a burden or problem to be solved, but as the central arena in which global transformations — economic, ecological, migratory, cultural — play out. This invites scholars and policymakers to shift attention from nation-states or national economies toward city-level processes, local politics, and urban governance.

Second, it challenges technocratic and top-down models of urban planning inherited from modernism. Instead, it calls for governance models that are flexible, participatory, aware of social inequality, and open to informality and bottom-up innovation. It suggests that sustainable and just urban futures require aligning planning, design, public policy, and social mobilization.

Finally, by locating power and possibility in urban space, this approach reconceptualizes citizenship, belonging, and political agency — not just in national/legal terms, but in spatial, cultural and social terms. The city becomes a site where “presence” matters, where marginalized actors can assert claims, build solidarities, and participate in the shaping of collective life.

The transformation of Brussels into the political capital of Europe can be most effectively analyzed through a theoretical framework that draws on spatial theory, strategic planning, governance studies, and urban political economy. Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *The Production of Space* (1991) [20] provides a starting point by showing how urban space is not merely a physical container but the product of political, economic, and social relations. The construction projects associated with the European Quarter in Brussels thus materialize the political authority of the European Union, translating abstract supranational decision-making into tangible architectural and urban form.

Building on this spatial perspective, the literature on strategic spatial planning is crucial for understanding how such projects are envisioned, negotiated, and implemented. Patsy Healey’s analysis of collaborative and strategic planning (1997; 2006) demonstrates how planning practices shape urban transformation through dialogue among institutions, technical expertise, and collective visions of the future. When applied to Brussels, this perspective highlights the ways in which large-scale projects—such as the redevelopment of Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat or the construction of the Justus Lipsius building—were embedded in broader strategies to position the city within Europe.

At the same time, any study of Brussels must reckon with the complexity of governance operating across multiple scales. Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe’s theory of multi-level governance (2001) is especially relevant here, since Brussels simultaneously functions as a municipal entity, a regional capital, a national capital, and the symbolic seat of European integration. The negotiation of new projects reveals compromises and contestations between local authorities, the Belgian state, and EU institutions, producing an urban fabric that embodies political as well as architectural compromise.

Yet Brussels cannot be understood solely through its local and national context. Saskia Sassen’s theory of the global city (2001) provides a useful lens for situating Brussels within transnational urban hierarchies. Unlike financial hubs such as London or New York, Brussels has developed into what might be called a “political global city,” where the concentration of supranational decision-making, rather than capital flows,

drives its global significance. The clustering of EU institutions and related infrastructures thus anchors Brussels in global networks of governance.

Finally, David Harvey’s account of the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in urban governance (1989) [14] helps to illuminate the political economy underpinning Brussels’ development. Large-scale projects in the European Quarter can be interpreted not only as functional spaces for administration but also as symbolic strategies to brand the city as the “capital of Europe.” This perspective resonates with Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez’s (2002) [33] critique of neoliberal urbanization, which argues that major development projects often serve as vehicles for entrepreneurial urban policies.

The combination of these theoretical perspectives—Lefebvre’s spatial production, Healey’s strategic planning, Marks and Hooghe’s multi-level governance, Sassen’s global city framework, and Harvey’s analysis of urban entrepreneurialism—provides a rich conceptual apparatus for analyzing how Brussels has been transformed. Through this framework, individual construction projects can be read simultaneously as spatial artefacts, as outcomes of negotiated planning, as expressions of multi-level governance, as nodes in global political networks, and as instruments of symbolic and entrepreneurial positioning. In this sense, the built environment of Brussels’ European Quarter encapsulates the interplay between spatial theory, governance structures, and global urban dynamics, making it a paradigmatic case for the study of political urbanism.

2.1. Operationalisation of Analytical Framework

To systematically analyse the transformation of Brussels into the political capital of Europe, the study operationalises its analytical framework by translating the five theoretical dimensions—spatial production (Lefebvre), strategic planning (Healey), multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe), global political city (Sassen), and urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey)—into concrete evaluative criteria. Each major project in the European Quarter was assessed on the extent to which it embodies these dimensions. A scoring scale from 0 to 20 was applied to each dimension for every project, based on the saliency of their societal, strategic as well as delivery scores. The societal dimension covers engagement and accessibility that focuses on how well the architectural project involves people and makes itself reachable or usable. The second dimension covers policy influence and sustainability and assesses how the work aligns with broader policy objectives and its long-term viability. The third dimension covers quality and creativity and looks at the standard of execution and the originality of the approach.

Projects were thus evaluated according to their capacity to materialise political authority and European identity (spatial production), their grounding in coordinated long-term

planning (strategic planning), their negotiation across local, national, and EU levels of authority (multi-level governance), their role in embedding Brussels within transnational political networks (global political city), and their contribution to branding Brussels as a symbolic capital and competitive node (urban entrepreneurialism).

To ensure analytical focus, only projects scoring at least 9 out of 20 points and engaging a minimum of three of the five dimensions were retained as core case studies. Evaluation

criteria are related to societal, strategic and delivery: (1) societal covers Engagement + Accessibility, strategic concerns Policy Influence + Sustainability, and delivery Quality & Creativity. Building Projects with lower composite scores are referenced only as contextual background. This approach ensures that selected projects are not merely prominent or large in scale, but meaningfully embody the intertwined spatial, political, and economic dynamics theorised in the framework.

Table 2. Core Analytical Dimensions and Indicators.

Dimension (Theoretical Lens)	Conceptual Meaning	Operational Indicators (Questions to Ask per Project)	Evaluation Criteria of societal, strategic and delivery
Spatial Production (Lefebvre)	Built space as crystallised social-political relations	- Does this project spatialise EU authority or European identity? - Does it materially reorganise urban space (not just add buildings)? - Does it reshape symbolic geographies?	0-20
Strategic Planning (Healey)	Collaborative, vision-led urban transformation	- Is it part of an explicit planning vision/strategy? - Did multiple actors negotiate its design and purpose? - Is it linked to long-term spatial plans for Brussels?	0-20
Multi-Level Governance (Marks & Hooghe)	Interactions across local, regional, national, EU scales	- Were different scales of government involved in decision-making? - Are there inter-institutional conflicts or compromises visible in its development?	0-20
Global Political City (Sassen)	Role in transnational political and governance networks	- Does it anchor Brussels in global EU governance networks? - Does it host or attract transnational actors, delegations, NGOs, media, think tanks?	0-20
Urban Entrepreneurialism (Harvey)	Branding, symbolic capital, competitive positioning of city	- Does it contribute to branding Brussels as the EU capital? - Is it designed to attract investment, talent, or tourism? - Is it presented as a flagship project?	0-20

This matrix provides a *transparent, systematic, and replicable method* for selecting and comparing projects, ensuring that the analysis focuses on developments that meaningfully illustrate the intertwined spatial, political, and economic dynamics theorised in the study.

Building on the operationalised framework, projects were grouped according to the dominant theoretical dimensions they embody. This yielded five analytical categories that structure the analysis. *Spatial monuments of EU integration* capture projects that materialise European political authority and symbolic identity, combining Lefebvre's notion of spatial

production with Harvey's emphasis on urban entrepreneurialism. *Strategic urban restructurings* refer to projects driven by coordinated, vision-led planning processes, reflecting Healey's perspective on strategic and collaborative planning. *Governance arenas* encompass sites shaped by negotiation and contestation between local, regional, national, and supranational actors, exemplifying Marks and Hooghe's theory of multi-level governance. *Global political infrastructure* highlights projects that anchor Brussels in transnational networks of decision-making, resonating with Sassen's global city framework. Finally, *entrepreneurial*

branding icons are flagship developments that seek to position Brussels symbolically and competitively as the political capital of Europe, in line with Harvey's analysis of urban entrepreneurialism.

This typology allows the study to move beyond a descriptive inventory of individual buildings, instead interpreting them as distinct manifestations of the spatial, political, and economic dynamics that have reshaped Brussels.

2.2. Summary

Derived from this strategic urban development framework, we expect a dynamic interplay of spatial, political, and economic forces, to be woven into the fabric of the Bruxelles. Landmarks such as Berlaymont and Justus Lipsius stand as vivid expressions of the convergence between urban design, governance negotiation, and strategic planning, while smaller developments provide the nuanced details that give the Quarter its character and depth. By framing the future development of architectonic projects through five analytical dimensions—spatial monuments, strategic restructuring, governance arenas, global political infrastructure, and entrepreneurial branding—we uncover the distinct yet intertwined contributions that together elevate Brussels as

Europe's political capital. This framework offers a rigorous and replicable lens for understanding urban transformations where symbolism, administration, and strategy intersect combined with urban interventions in relation to a more livable, sustainable and human-centered political capital of the European Union.

And now, we turn to the art of bringing Europe to Brussels—and, in doing so, shaping Brussels itself into the vibrant, unmistakable heart of the European Union.

3. The Belgian Government's Motivations

From the outset, the Belgian government saw strategic advantage in anchoring European institutions in Brussels. Politically, hosting the Commission and other supranational bodies enhanced Belgium's international profile, granting the state disproportionate symbolic influence relative to its modest size. This prestige factor was not incidental: by placing Brussels at the institutional heart of integration, Belgium positioned itself as a broker in European affairs and insulated the city from being overshadowed by larger powers such as France or Germany (Van Wynsberghe, 2013) [35].



Figure 1. *Bruxelles' City Map.*

Economically, the arrival of thousands of European civil servants promised long-term benefits in the form of

employment, real estate demand, and consumption, which in turn stimulated construction and service industries. As

Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez (2002) [33] note, large-scale institutional development projects often function as urban growth machines, producing not only office complexes but also entire secondary economies of housing, retail, and cultural life. The Belgian state and municipal authorities thus welcomed the “Eurocrats” as a stable and prestigious form of urban growth.

Indeed, the Belgium government recently published a strategy to this effect after consulting the Bruxelles regional government and the EU institutions to harvest the full benefits from hosting European institutions: In the strategy, it is stated: Brussels is Europe, and Europe is Brussels. We will spare no effort to strengthen our position as European capital. Brussels will welcome and guide its international residents even better, and we will accelerate the transformation of the European Quarter into a vibrant urban district.” “The Brussels government is very well aware that the presence of the European and international institutions is significant for Brussels and includes certain challenges. Therefore, it has conducted a structured, frequent dialogue with European institutions since 2015. The Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations plays a central role in this dynamic, which is paying off. The host region policy interacts with very different competence areas (such as welcoming workers, European Quarter development, mobility, education, tourism, and so on). Thus, close cooperation is required between all Belgian authorities. I therefore warmly welcome this joint initiative with the Prime Minister, which means the federal government is committed to following up all files of common interest related to our international status in coordination with the Region.”

At the urban scale, however, the manifestation of these preferences was uneven. The Commission buildings — from the Berlaymont headquarters to the expansion along Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat — indeed reflect Belgian preferences in terms of maintaining Brussels as the seat of integration, but they were also shaped by European functional requirements and architectural internationalism. Belgian authorities sought to keep the institutions concentrated within a designated “European Quarter,” partly to contain disruption but also to symbolically anchor Europe in a particular district of the city [7].

Yet this spatial strategy profoundly reshaped the urban experience of Brussels. Entire neighborhoods, particularly around the Schuman roundabout, were transformed into zones of office complexes and administrative buildings, often at the expense of residential communities. This reflected not simply Belgian preference but also a broader supranational logic of efficiency and visibility. The result was a dual city: on one side, a political quarter projecting European power, and on the other, local urban life fragmented by displacement and speculative redevelopment (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Van Wynsberghe, 2013) [33, 35].

Thus, while the Belgian government’s decision to host the institutions was motivated by prestige and economic

pragmatism, the physical form of the Commission buildings embodies a hybrid logic: partially Belgian (anchoring Europe in Brussels, containing it spatially), partially European (symbolizing supranational authority), and deeply urban (altering the lived experience of Brussels residents in both positive and disruptive ways).

4. The EU’s New Urban Agenda

The EU’s evolving urban policy framework—shaped by the Pact of Amsterdam⁵, the New Leipzig Charter⁶ and now the new EU Urban Agenda for Cities⁷—can be understood as a genuinely strategic undertaking.

The Pact of Amsterdam (2016) established the EU Urban Agenda and strengthened the role of cities in EU policymaking. It aims to improve EU legislation, funding access, and knowledge exchange for urban areas. The Pact introduced thematic partnerships bringing together cities, Member States, EU institutions, and stakeholders. Its focus is on multi-level governance and making EU policies more responsive to urban needs. The New Leipzig Charter (2020) provides a strategic framework for sustainable urban development in Europe. It promotes an integrated approach that combines social, economic, and environmental policies.

The Charter envisions cities as just, green, and productive. It emphasizes social inclusion, climate neutrality, and economic innovation. Citizen participation and place-based governance are central principles. Overall, the Charter guides long-term, sustainable, and resilient urban development across Europe. The New Urban Agenda is a global framework adopted by the United Nations to guide sustainable, inclusive urban development. The European Union did not create it but has adopted and adapted it within its own policy landscape. In doing so, the European Commission has added EU-specific priorities to the global agenda. These include stronger emphasis on climate neutrality, digital transformation, and urban resilience. The EU has renewed voluntary commitments to implement the agenda both within Europe and internationally. It has linked the New Urban Agenda to concrete initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. The Commission has also promoted the New European Bauhaus to integrate culture, design, and sustainability into urban policy. Unlike the UN framework, the EU approach includes operational tools, governance mechanisms, and access to funding for cities. This translation turns broad global principles into actionable policies within EU law and programmes. As a result, the New Urban Agenda becomes not just a vision, but a structured instrument shaping how European cities are planned and governed.

It reaches beyond symbolic declarations and aspires to create a coherent if legally non binding system through which cities, member states and EU institutions jointly shape the future of Europe’s urban spaces. Its strategic quality lies in the way it promotes integrated, place-sensitive approaches, aligns

local priorities with EU funding instruments, and for the first time gives cities a structured voice in shaping EU regulation that affects them so directly.

The cities are getting organized in the Eu, and so are the Eu Commission. There are voluntary commitments⁸, urban dimension of cohesion policy⁹ and multi level governance¹⁰ and even an Eu portal to minimize the need for Galoppinis among offices in the Eu¹¹.

Whether it will have lasting impact depends on how boldly the Union moves from aspirational principles to operational

delivery. When the Agenda works well, it removes legal obstacles that hinder urban innovation, channels investment toward locally designed strategies rather than one-size-fits-all programmes, and spreads successful models across the continent through shared learning. If these mechanisms are strengthened rather than allowed to fade into bureaucratic routine, the Agenda can leave a visible imprint on housing, mobility, climate adaptation and social cohesion across European cities.

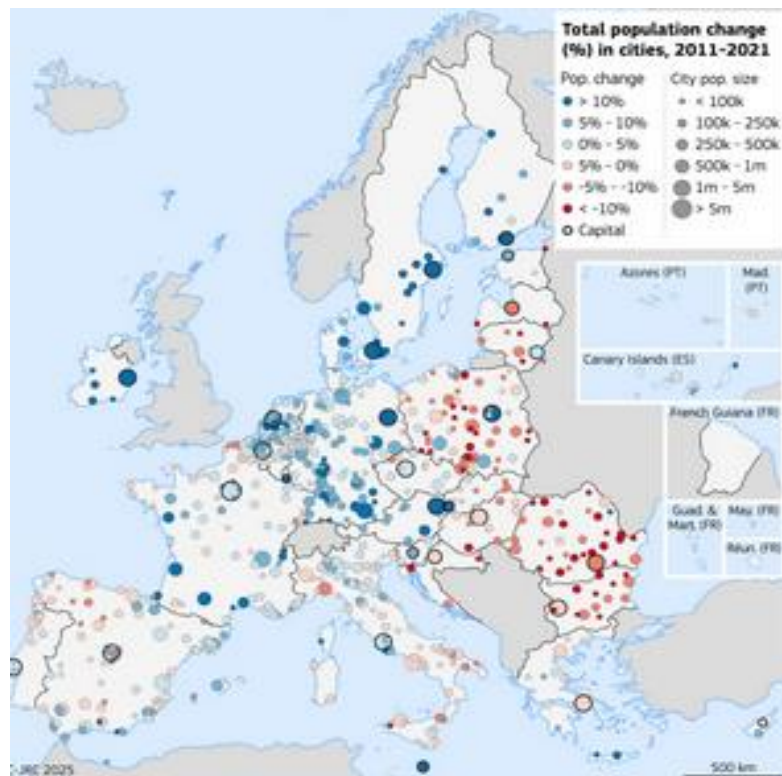


Figure 2. Population dynamics in the EU.

Source: https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/growth-housing-employment-what-data-says-about-life-eu-cities-2025-12-03_en

Its weaknesses, however, stem from its softness: commitments remain largely voluntary, practices uneven across member states, and monitoring often too gentle to create real pressure for follow-through. As long as participation depends on goodwill and enthusiasm rather than incentives and accountability, the transformative potential remains only partially unlocked.

The New Urban Agenda is a global framework adopted by the United Nations to guide sustainable, inclusive urban development. The European Union did not create it but has adopted and adapted it within its own policy landscape.

In doing so, the European Commission has added EU-specific priorities to the global agenda. These include stronger emphasis on climate neutrality, digital transformation, and urban resilience.

EU funding for the New Urban Agenda primarily flows through Cohesion Policy (ERDF), directing over €100 billion towards cities, with specific instruments like the European Urban Initiative (EUI) and URBACT focusing on capacity building, innovation, and knowledge sharing for sustainable urban development, aiming to better integrate urban needs into broader EU policies. While the Agenda doesn't create new massive funds but rather optimizes existing streams (like ERDF, EIB loans), The EU has renewed voluntary commitments to implement the agenda both within Europe and internationally. It has linked the New Urban Agenda to concrete initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. The Commission has also promoted the New European Bauhaus to integrate culture, design, and sustainability into urban

policy. Unlike the UN framework, the EU approach includes operational tools, governance mechanisms, and access to funding for cities. This translation turns broad global principles into actionable policies within EU law and programmes. As a result, the New Urban Agenda becomes not just a vision, but a structured instrument shaping how European cities are planned and governed. To strengthen the Agenda, the EU must give it firmer instruments. A modest but dedicated urban delivery fund would ensure that strategic objectives are matched by resources. Minimal binding requirements—such as submitting integrated urban strategies as a condition for accessing certain EU programmes—would anchor the Agenda in everyday policymaking. Above all, a shared European Urban Observatory, associated with the EU Center of Excellence in Urban Governance, with clear indicators and transparent reporting, would give cities and citizens alike a common compass for judging progress.

Concerns about unhealthy rivalry among cities, far from being a reason for caution, can be transformed into a source of constructive momentum. Competition guided by shared standards and transparent data becomes less a race to the bottom and more a collective ascent toward higher quality of life. When cities are encouraged to collaborate in cross-border or regional alliances, when larger municipalities mentor smaller ones, and when EU awards and investment calls reward cooperation rather than exclusivity, rivalry evolves into a healthy stimulus for joint innovation rather than fragmentation.

Indeed, well-designed transparency mechanisms can turn inter-city comparison into a lever for deeper democratic accountability. Public dashboards that reveal how decisions are made, how funds are allocated and how projects progress invite scrutiny not only of local authorities but also of EU institutions themselves. When citizens can see why one city succeeded where another struggled, they press for clearer criteria, fairer procedures and more responsive governance. In this way, the Agenda becomes not simply an urban policy instrument, but a catalyst for a more open and trustworthy European decision-making process.

In sum, the EU's New Urban Agenda is strategic in ambition and promising in policy architecture. Its impact, however, will depend on whether the EU is willing to give it the resources, authority and transparency necessary to shift it from an inspiring vision to a transformative force—one capable of guiding European cities, not in isolation, but together, toward a more cohesive, accountable and sustainable future combined with a legislative initiative and a governance framework to provide for structured and disciplined approaches in place of the approach *a la Chinoise* with 6-8 different DG offices dealing with various aspects of urban policy.

Our hidden agenda is very much to increase accountability and transparency inside the EU decision-making system, something that is as certain as the recurrence of the formation of great powers in international relations.

5. Building Program

Architectural Heritage and Urban Identity

Brussels boasts a remarkably rich architectural heritage that reflects its complex historical trajectory, from medieval stronghold to modern European capital. The city's built environment embodies layers of history, with Gothic cathedrals, Baroque palaces, neoclassical public buildings, and innovative Art Nouveau structures coexisting across its neighborhoods. The Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, with its soaring Gothic spires and intricate stained glass, exemplifies the city's medieval roots and continues to anchor the historic urban core, serving both as a religious landmark and a symbol of Brussels' enduring civic identity.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought a wave of Art Nouveau architecture, most famously represented by the work of Victor Horta, whose Hôtel Tassel and Hôtel Solvay showcase flowing lines, ornate ironwork, and the integration of interior and exterior spaces. These buildings not only embody an aesthetic innovation but also signal Brussels' openness to modernity and international artistic currents. Beyond their visual impact, such heritage structures inform the city's spatial organization, guiding street layouts, public squares, and pedestrian pathways, and influencing contemporary urban interventions.



Figure 3. *The Anatomy Lesson by Rembrandt.*

Brussels' architectural diversity contributes profoundly to its urban identity, shaping both the lived experience of residents and the perception of the city by visitors and international actors. The coexistence of historic and modern structures produces a dialogue between past and present, embedding political and cultural symbolism into the urban fabric. This heritage also presents unique challenges for urban planning: maintaining historical integrity while accommodating institutional expansion, infrastructural development, and dense urban life requires careful balancing. Preservation policies, adaptive reuse, and strategic planning initiatives must therefore negotiate the tension between conservation and modernization, ensuring that Brussels' identity as a historic yet forward-looking European capital is retained.

In this sense, architectural heritage is not merely ornamental; it functions as a spatial and symbolic resource that anchors Brussels' identity. It informs the city's governance strategies, influences patterns of urban mobility and land use, and frames the perception of the city on both local and international scales. By integrating heritage into urban planning, Brussels negotiates the complex interplay of memory, power, and modernity, illustrating how architecture and urban design shape the political and cultural identity of a European capital.

Brussels presents a *layered urban experience*, where historic neighborhoods, bustling squares, and institutional districts intersect to create a city of contrasts and interactions. Walking through the city, one encounters the rhythm of everyday life—cafés, markets, and residential streets—juxtaposed against monumental avenues and glass-clad EU buildings, which signal administrative authority and European governance. This duality produces a spatial narrative in which the ordinary and the symbolic coexist: local urban life unfolds around structures that communicate power, legitimacy, and civic identity.

The concepts informing City Hall and municipal planning reflect this interplay of function, symbolism, and governance. Historically, City Hall (Hôtel de Ville) embodies the Gothic ideal of civic pride and communal authority, anchoring the Grand-Place both physically and socially. Its architectural language conveys legitimacy, hierarchy, and civic identity while structuring public gatherings and ceremonial events. Contemporary urban governance builds on these principles, integrating ideas of accessibility, visibility, and multifunctionality, ensuring that municipal spaces serve administrative, cultural, and social purposes simultaneously. In Brussels, then, City Hall is not only a historic landmark but also a conceptual touchstone: it exemplifies how urban design can mediate between power, identity, and lived experience, shaping both perception and practice in the city.

BRU could benefit from the application of the 15-minute city concept, a concept that according to Moreno is derived from Japanese *sei-katsu sha*. The influence of *sei-katsu sha* on the 15-minute city concept is neither incidental nor derivative; it is foundational in its philosophical orientation, explicitly acknowledged by Carlos Moreno with its emphasis on human-centered needs of nurture, work, leisure, community, and inner life, combined with Scandinavian bicyclism and sustainability and the needs of global city like Paris and its many communities organised in arrondissements (Moreno, 2024).

Emerging from Japanese urban theory, *sei-katsu sha* offers a human-centered ontology that foregrounds the lived experience of individuals as irreducible wholes. In contrast to the functionalist categories of commuter, consumer, or resident, *sei-katsu sha* insists on the indivisibility of work, nurture, leisure, and consumption as co-constitutive dimensions of everyday life. This holistic framing challenges the segmentation inherent in conventional urban planning and

instead demands a design logic attuned to the rhythms, aspirations, and relational textures of life as it is actually lived. The 15-minute city, as articulated by Carlos Moreno and others, shares this commitment to proximity, plurality, and temporal integration. It seeks to collapse spatial distances in order to align urban form with the temporal realities of daily life. In doing so, it operationalizes a core insight of *sei-katsu sha*: that spatial configuration must respond to the temporal and emotional contours of human existence. So much more if your conception of human nature (*menneskesyn*) is informed by the assumption about a good life of a human is made of 20% wealth, 20% great erotic life, 20% of friendship (*amicizia*), 20% of discovery of nature with the remainder reserved for desires such as the exercise of power being a political animal and appreciation of art and architecture.

The emphasis is otherwise as well on walkability, mixed-use neighborhoods, and localized services reflects a desire to embed urban infrastructure within the cadence of everyday routines, thereby enhancing autonomy, resonance, and well-being. Moreover, the 15-minute city's valorization of community, identity, and belonging—through the provision of parks, schools, cafés, and care centers—mirrors *sei-katsu sha*'s attention to nurture and interpersonal connection. It is not merely about access to amenities, but about cultivating spaces of emotional and social significance. This relational urbanism resists the abstraction of infrastructure and instead foregrounds the affective dimensions of place-making.

While *sei-katsu sha* is rarely cited in the literature on the 15-minute city, its philosophical DNA is unmistakable. It offers the ontological premise—the “who” of urban life—while the 15-minute city provides the spatial grammar—the “how” of proximity, integration, and care. Together, they constitute a compelling paradigm for just, resonant, and human-scaled urban futures, one that provides meaning to its inhabitants.

The Region Metropolitaine Bruxelles, in turn, demonstrates differential settlement patterns where affluent populations concentrate in peripheral suburbs, while central areas experience cycles of disinvestment and selective reinvestment, creating complex geographies of inclusion and exclusion. Similar to many cities in the EU, also Brussels creates patterns of spatial concentrations and forms of marginalization that echo colonial hierarchies in the city center. The city serves as a nexus where former colonial subjects from mainly Africa navigate citizenship, belonging, and spatial integration with the former metropolitan center. Is Brussels a post-colonial urban enterprise?

6. Modern Urban Development Challenges

Brussels faces a complex set of challenges in balancing *modern urban development* with the preservation of its rich historical and architectural heritage. The city's expansion as a

European political capital has sparked a surge of contemporary office towers, infrastructural overhauls, and high-density housing—buzzing with activity, humming with construction, vibrating with urban energy. Modern design concepts—gleaming glass façades, modular layouts, and sustainable technologies—clash and converge with centuries-old streets, historic squares, and timeworn rooftops. Balancing innovation and tradition, progress and preservation, dynamism and continuity, requires a delicate dance: one misstep threatens visual disruption, heritage loss, and fragmentation of the city's enduring identity. Every line of steel, every pane of glass, every polished surface must resonate with the rhythm of the city's past, while echoing the pulse of its present.

To address these tensions, planners increasingly rely on *public-private partnerships (PPPs)* that mobilize investment, technical expertise, and innovative design solutions while promoting accountability and responsiveness to local communities. For example, redevelopment projects in the European Quarter and the canal district often involve multi-stakeholder coordination, ensuring that new constructions respect heritage sightlines, pedestrian accessibility, and environmental sustainability. Alongside PPPs, civic engagement efforts—including participatory workshops, public consultations, and citizen advisory boards—help reconcile the priorities of international institutions, local residents, and heritage authorities, creating shared ownership of urban change.

These approaches illustrate a broader principle in Brussels' contemporary urbanism: *development need not come at the expense of history*. By integrating modern architectural innovation with heritage-sensitive planning, the city can accommodate institutional growth, enhance public spaces, and sustain cultural identity. The challenge lies not only in technical integration but also in fostering a collaborative urban culture where heritage and modernity are mutually reinforcing, ensuring that Brussels remains both a functional European capital and a city rooted in its historical and civic identity.

Cultural Institutions and Community Engagement

Cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, archives, theaters and heritage centers play a vital role in fostering cultural vibrancy, creativity and, cohesions, identity and dialogue. They are not only custodians of history and

creativity but also spaces where diverse groups can gather, share experience and build mutual understanding.

By offering accessible opportunities for learning, storytelling, and artistic expression that captivate and engage diverse audiences, cultural institutions play a vital role in strengthening cultural awareness and fostering inclusive environments where communities feel seen, represented, and valued.

A key dimension of their impact lies in *collaborative initiatives* with local communities. Partnerships with schools, grassroots organizations, artists, and civic bodies enable these institutions to move beyond mere preservation of heritage and toward *active co-creation*—empowering communities to shape and share their own cultural narratives.



Figure 4. *Stepping Forward.*

By engaging these collaborations, cultural institutions enhance trust, increase relevance and expand their reach. They become not just spaces to visit, but platforms to belong to, where culture is shaped collectively rather than imposed. Ultimately, these joint efforts reinforce cultural vitality, empower communities and contribute to sustainable development.

We now proceed to answering for each building project the question: What public purpose does the institution serve, and how does collaboration deepen its social embeddedness.

Table 3. *Civic & societal value.*

Institution	Role in promoting societal connection & engagement	Collaborative role with communities & stakeholders
CENTRALE for contemporary art	Acts as a cultural agora where diverse publics encounter contemporary artistic practices, stimulating dialogue and collective reflection.	Co-creates exhibitions with local artists and migrant collectives; runs participatory workshops linking residents, schools, and urban planners.
European Music Hall	Builds transnational cultural identity through shared performance experiences, reinforcing	Hosts community choirs, joint performances with youth and intercultural music groups; co-

Institution	Role in promoting societal connection & engagement	Collaborative role with communities & stakeholders
	collective belonging.	produces with city cultural councils.
European Foundation for Arts and Humanities	Provides an intellectual platform fostering cultural memory, ethics, and European values.	Works with universities, citizen scholars and NGOs to develop civic education programmes and travelling forums.
Africa Museum – Tervuren	Offers postcolonial dialogue and re-narration of heritage, fostering intercultural understanding and reconciliation between EU and Africa.	Co-designs exhibitions with diaspora groups and African scholars; facilitates local forums on colonial memory and contemporary diasporic life.
European House of Science	Builds transnational cultural identity through shared performance experiences, reinforcing collective belonging.	Hosts community choirs, joint performances with youth and intercultural music groups; co-produces with city cultural councils.
DG DEFENCE / EUMILINT	Provides an intellectual platform fostering cultural memory, ethics, and European values.	Works with universities, citizen scholars and NGOs to develop civic education programmes and travelling forums.
European Biogeographical Garden	Offers postcolonial dialogue and re-narration of heritage, fostering intercultural understanding and reconciliation.	Co-designs exhibitions with diaspora groups and African scholars; facilitates local forums on colonial memory and contemporary diasporic life.
Museum of European History	Creating shared European identity, facilitating dialogue & engagement, promoting intercultural connections, encouraging active EU citizenship and community and educational role.	The Museum of European History plays a collaborative role by connecting European-level institutions, cultural actors and local BRU stakeholders. It acts as both as a European hub and a local partner, fostering shared identity while supporting BRU as a vibrant, multicultural EU capital of Capitals.
SP Houses	Serve as Embassies and cultural centers of the EU's Strategic Partners: The US, Mexico, Brazil, China, South Korea, India, Japan, Russia and South Africa.	Coordinate community arts and cultural engagement projects bridging Global, Regional and local narratives.
EU Media House	Facilitates transparent media ecosystems, encouraging informed civic debate.	Co-develops public journalism workshops and citizen reporting projects with cultural institutions. By conditioning a cosmopolitan public sphere, it seeks to prevent the worse, promote citizen causes and replaces the somewhat worn International Press Center

In summary, institutions are civic hubs such museums, cultural centers and foundations act as public agoras that foster dialogue, reflection and collective identity through exhibitions, performances, and intellectual exchange. It is necessary to do something to promote transnational and intercultural identity. Several institutions for instance the European Music Hall, African Museum and European Biogeographical Garden emphasize shared performance experiences and intercultural dialogue to reinforce belonging across nations and communities. Partnerships with diverse stakeholders such as local artists, migrant collectives, schools, NGO's, scholars and diasporic communities are central to outreach. Institutions extend their influence beyond

exhibitions by creating educational programs, workshops and community-led initiatives. Institutions like the EU Foundation for Arts and Humanities and DG Defence serve as platforms for cultural memory, ethics and values, pride and identity contributing to civic education. The ten SP Houses and the EU Media House function on a geopolitical level, coordinating cross-cultural projects and facilitating transparent media ecosystems to enhance informed civic debate.

Thus, one must strengthen local co-creation, nurture collaboration, cultivate dialogue—each performance a fleeting flame, each exhibition a mirror of shared and renewable identity. Cultural performances become momentary experiences of belonging, pulses of intercultural

heartbeat, sparks of imagination that refuse to be contained. Expand academic alliances, civic partnerships, scholarly networks, community bonds—empower diasporic communities, lift voices often muted, voices that echo across streets, plazas, and forums. Promote transparency, foster informed debate, champion media literacy, fact-checking workshops, youth reporting initiatives—small instruments, yet formidable against the slow creep of misinformation. Enhance EU identity through storytelling, weaving past, present, and future into a tapestry of shared values, democratic citizenship, and collective memory. Strategic co-creation bridges cultures, links performance to participation, song to dialogue, art to understanding. It strengthens partnerships, elevates diasporic voices, cultivates civic education, and nurtures transparent, living discourse. Not merely an aspiration, not merely a vision, but a city alive with engagement, a capital that listens, responds, and grows. Each

project, each initiative, each workshop is a thread in Brussels' complex urban loom, weaving identity, knowledge, and democracy. In short, co-creation, performance, partnership, voice, and dialogue do not simply exist—they thrive, they resonate, they shape a European city in motion.

Each institution breathes life into Brussels with a passion that reshapes streets and squares, fusing reasoned strategy with the city's pulse. They orchestrate spatial patterns not by chance, but with deliberate intent, guiding flows of people, ideas, and culture. Governance emerges as both structure and dialogue, a reasoned framework animated by civic energy and bold imagination. Economically, their actions are grounded in rational logic yet ignite opportunity, transforming urban space into a living, breathing engine of possibility.

We now proceed to ask: “How does each institution activate spatial, strategic, governance and economic dynamics in the city?”

Table 4. *Strategic & theoretical lens.*

Institution	Spatial production (Lefebvre)	Strategic planning (Healey)	Multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe)	Global political city (Sassen)	Urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey)
<i>European Music Hall</i>	Creates shared urban soundscapes	Plans seasonal programmes with city	Links municipal and EU cultural councils	Stages high-profile EU cultural events	Generates creative tourism revenue
<i>European Foundation for Arts & Humanities</i>	Produces intellectual space for debate	Strategic foresight cycles	Mediates between academic, civic, EU policy levels	Attracts global thinkers, conferences	Positions Brussels as cultural knowledge hub
<i>African Museum – Tervuren</i>	Re-signifies colonial architecture	Decolonial curatorial planning	Involves African embassies, Belgian and EU cultural authorities	Builds transnational diaspora networks	Sparks cultural tourism and creative industries
<i>European House of Science</i>	Turns knowledge into civic space	Aligns projects with Horizon EU and school curricula	Bridges city, national and EU science policies	Hosts global science diplomacy events	Fosters innovation economy spillovers
<i>DG DEFENCE / EUMILINT/EUMIS</i>	Activates security–civic interface space	Plans resilience foresight labs	Embeds local–national–EU security actors	Connects Brussels to NATO/EU global security networks	Positions security as urban innovation field
<i>European Biogeographical Garden</i>	Materialises European nature in city	Long-term ecological master planning	Coordinates EU environmental agencies	Markets Brussels as climate capital	Generates eco-tourism and green jobs
<i>Museum of European History / Parliaments</i>	Creates symbolic European civic space	Educational planning aligned with EU democracy agenda	Links EU institutions with local publics	Flagship global political symbol	Attracts cultural tourism and EU branding
<i>SP Houses</i>	Produces social spaces at micro level	Plans local projects via participatory budgeting	Ties municipal welfare with EU social funds	Integrates migrant communities in EU city narrative	Supports social innovation and creative micro-economies

Institution	Spatial production (Lefebvre)	Strategic planning (Healey)	Multi-level governance (Marks & Hooghe)	Global political city (Sassen)	Urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey)
<i>International Press Center / EU Media House</i>	Creates media-public interface space	Agile communications strategies	Links EU Comms DGs with local journalists	Global media hub positioning Brussels	Catalyses media-tech clusters

First, the dynamic interplay between decision-making levels are *de rigueur* from informal grassroots initiatives to supranational frameworks. This underscores the need for BRU to cultivate vertical coherence: aligning local strategies with metropolitan, national and European agendas. You must ensure that local development plans in BRU explicitly reference and leverage high-level frameworks like the European Union Urban Agenda and EPSON findings.

Second, strategic dialogue is a bridging mechanism and functions as a connective tissue between institutional levels. For BRU, this implies that metropolitan planning must be both a recipient and a transmitter of strategic narratives. You must initiate or strengthen BRU's participation in national urban dialogues, positioning the city-region as a proactive contributor to national and EU-level urban policy debates.

Third, the inclusion of civil society actors are structural underrecognised and is a quiet provocation.. It suggests that grassroots and community-led planning are not peripheral but foundational. Actionable insight: Embed participatory mechanisms into Brussels' urban development strategies for instance co-design workshops, citizen assemblies or tactical urbanism pilots – to legitimize informal contributions within formal planning processes.

Fourth, spatial planning is not just technical – it is strategic. The tables juxtaposition of spatial planning with strategic development implies that maps and zoning are insufficient without narrative and purpose. Actionable insight: reframe BRU's spatial plans as strategic instruments, each map should tell a story about ecological resilience, social equity or economic transformation.

Fifth, international frameworks are not abstract – they are leverage points. Entities like UN-Habitat and the OECD are often seen as distant. But their inclusion here suggests they can be mobilized to validate and amplify local initiatives. Actionable Insight: Align BRU's metropolitan strategies with international benchmarks, and use that alignment to attract funding partnerships, and policy legitimacy.

7. Design Briefs

When designing buildings for a political capital like the European Union several factors come into play in relation to symbolism and identity, urban integration, functionality, sustainability and innovation, security and diplomacy, cultural

and civic role. Political capitals serve as symbolic meeting grounds for citizens and buildings should embody European values such as cooperation, democracy and sustainability. Some buildings require additional security features, whereas others are more occupied by fulfilling green building standards such as BREEM, LEED and EU Green Public Procurement. The interiors must be flexible and modular to host negotiations, briefings and negotiations and a good restaurant like in Charlemagne. Political buildings should fit into the existing urban fabric while allowing future growth. The infrastructure must be in place – the metro in Bruxelles cannot be said to be the foremost example of elegant, seamless and effective commuting let alone accessibility from the BRU Airport undertaken in trains model real old. Buildings should reflect unity and diversity, modernist but inclusive of European heritage.

To examine from a strategic perspective a design brief of our grands d'oeuvre, twenty in all, we will have to examine in more detail the different elements of a design brief to be agreed between the building master and the architect and his design team.

In strategic terms, Brussels transforms its historic and industrial spaces into vibrant cultural crucibles, where art fuses, boundaries blur, and local and migrant artists breathe life into forgotten walls. Here, governance does not sit in marble halls—it walks the streets, whispers in forums, and teaches citizens to claim their civic voice. Science and nature entwine with everyday life, where laboratories and gardens become classrooms, and evidence dances with imagination.

Media and communication do not merely inform; they illuminate, amplify, and ripple knowledge across Europe's conscience. Every gallery, every lab, every debate hall becomes a node in a living urban organism, pulsing with participation, curiosity, and vision. Cultural identity and global visibility are no longer aspirations—they are the architecture of the city itself, embodied in brick and melody. Participation is not invited; it is embedded, co-created, and inseparable from the city's pulse. Sustainability is not a checkbox; it is the breath of Brussels, green roofs and citizen trails rising as testimony. Here, knowledge does not sit idle in books—it leaps into streets, squares, and plazas, turning policy into practice, debate into decision. Brussels emerges, not just seen, but felt, as a participatory, visible, and inexorably living European capital.

DESIGN APPROACH: Strategic Cultural-Urban Programme Portfolio

This portfolio highlights key initiatives designed to enhance Brussels' cultural, scientific, governance, and media ecosystem. Each section emphasizes thematic dimensions, target audiences, civic roles, and strategic logic, providing a comprehensive overview of readiness and impact. For a full overview of a design brief, you will have to wait for the *Monsieur L'Architecte*.

7.1. Cultural Hubs

These projects activate Brussels' historic and industrial spaces as inclusive platforms for artistic expression, fusing multiple art forms, supporting local and migrant artists, and strengthening social cohesion. Cultural hubs act as both local catalysts and international showcases.

Table 5. Cultural Buildings.

Project	Purpose	Audience	Key Features	Civic Role	Readiness
Centrale	Contemporary art, opera & theatre hub	Local artists, youth, residents, migrants, tourists	Galleries, workshops, residencies	Builds identity & social ties; participatory programs	Full architectural brief, sustainable
European Music Hall	Flagship concert & performance	Public, youth, orchestras, tourists	Main & chamber halls, outdoor plaza, education programs	Shared cultural experiences; mass engagement	Architectural concept ready; sustainability included
African Museum / House of Africa	Post-colonial heritage & diaspora platform	Diaspora communities, schools, public, embassies	Exhibits, residencies, workshops, exchange	Supports reconciliation, co-curated programs	Concept exists; governance/funding needed

Beyond exhibition and performance, these hubs integrate workshops, residencies, and participatory programs to empower communities while attracting international audiences.

7.2. Science & Nature

Table 6. Science & Nature.

Project	Purpose	Audience	Key Features	Civic Role	Readiness
European House of Science	Civic-science hub	Schools, universities, citizens, researchers	Labs, exhibitions, citizen science	Promotes science literacy; engagement	Full building & sustainability plan; governance ready
European Biogeographical Garden	Urban park representing Europe's bioregions	Schools, NGOs, tourists	Biodiversity zones, trails, events	Environmental stewardship	Adaptive design; low-carbon landscaping

Projects in this dimension connect citizens, students, and researchers with science and ecology, promoting sustainability, evidence-based discourse, and environmental stewardship. They translate policy objectives into tangible urban experiences.

These spaces educate and inspire while creating interactive destinations that enhance civic pride, bridging research, public

engagement, and urban leisure.

7.3. Governance & Policy

Governance projects connect Brussels' EU policy presence with local urban life. They provide civic education, transparency, and participatory platforms, reinforcing the

city's political identity.

Table 7. Public Buildings.

Project	Purpose	Audience	Key features	Civic	Readiness
DG DEFENCE / EUMILINT / EUMIS HQ	EU defence campus	Agencies, policy-makers, NGOs, scholars	Secure offices, labs, monument	Limited public engagement; educates on resilience	Security design, sustainability, legal-clearance ready
Museum of European History / Parliament	Democracy & history complex	Citizens, schools, tourists, policy-makers	Museum, Parliamentarium, debate forums	Builds civic identity; participatory education	Curatorial brief advanced; strong delivery plan
The Ten SP Houses	Local community interface hubs	Residents, NGOs, youth, municipal reps	Forums, labs, training spaces	High grassroots engagement	Modular blueprint; funding & co-management needed

These projects balance security, transparency, and civic engagement through co-designed forums, educational programs, and participatory partnerships.

7.4. Media & Communication

Table 8. Arts & Media.

Project	Purpose	Audience	Key Features	Civic Role	Readiness
European Foundation for Arts & Humanities	Policy-intellectual platform	Cultural professionals, academics, policy-makers	Policy labs, conferences, residencies	Strengthens cultural literacy; public lectures	PPP governance drafted; operational plan pending
International Press Center nec plus ultra EU Media House	Public journalism & EU communications	Journalists, schools, civil society	Press facilities, labs, exhibitions	Fosters informed debate; media skills	Operational model & branding needed

Media and communication initiatives promote informed discourse, media literacy, and transparency in EU operations. They reinforce Brussels' role as a hub of critical knowledge production.

These hubs bridge institutions and citizens, supporting civic literacy, critical debate, and policy communication, while amplifying global visibility.

Across all dimensions, the portfolio emphasizes *participatory engagement, European strategic alignment, sustainability, and visibility*. Cultural expression, scientific inquiry, governance, and communication converge to create a dynamic urban ecosystem where citizens, policymakers, and

visitors interact meaningfully with Brussels' spatial, social, and symbolic capital.

7.5. Key Takeaways

First, a building form is not merely an architectural decision but a spatial expression of policy. A building in Brussels, may embody EU cohesion goals, national spatial directives, and local ecological imperatives simultaneously. You must embed policy translation into the design brief to ensure that architectural form reflects strategic priorities such as climate resilience, social inclusion or mobility integration.



Figure 5. See you in Brussels.

Second, design parameters must be polycentric. The presence of actors from civil society to international institutions suggests that design inputs should be pluralistic and negotiated. This challenges the notion of a singular design authority. Actionable insight: You must establish a participatory design protocol that includes metropolitan planners, local communities, and thematic experts eg in biodiversity, mobility and heritage to shape form and function collaboratively.

Third, typology is a strategic tool with emphasis on strategic dialogue and development strategies implying that building typologies whether mixed use, civic or residential should be selected not just for programmatic fit and to signal social and cultural ambitions but for strategic resonance. Actionable insight: In BRU, prioritize typologies that advance metropolitan goals eg hybrid hubs that combine public services, cultural programming and green infrastructure.

Fourth, given the dynamic interplay between formal and informal actors, building form must accommodate change. This includes spatial adaptability, modularity and openness to reprogramming. Actionable Insight: Design for temporal layers – buildings should evolve with shifting policy landscapes and community needs, especially in transitional

urban zones.

Fifth, the iconography and legibility matter—not only form but function, not merely presence but purpose. At international and national levels, buildings act as spatial emissaries, monumental yet intimate, silent yet speaking, a purposeful paradox in stone and steel. Their form communicates values: transparency and opacity, sustainability and impermanence, solidarity and individuality—contradictions that coexist, clarity within complexity. Actionable insight: leverage architectural language to signal Brussels’ metropolitan identity through material choices, through spatial openness, through integration with the public realm—space shaping perception, perception shaping experience, experience shaping civic life.

8. Evaluating Score Against Criteria

In a negotiation game, it is normal to develop criteria against which to assess the wins and losses based on the moves of the actors, how the game was defined and the process of asserting value and creating value. A variety of moves can be made such as.

Table 9. Individual Scoring.

Project / Institution	Societal Role → Engagement	Accessibility & Inclusion	Policy Influence	Sustainability & Legacy	Quality & Creativity	TOTAL /100	Qualitative rating
CENTRALE	17	16	15	16	18	82	Excellent

Project / Institution	Societal Role → Engagement	Accessibility & Inclusion	Policy Influence	Sustainability & Legacy	Quality & Creativity	TOTAL /100	Qualitative rating
<i>European Music Hall</i>	18	17	13	15	17	80	<i>Excellent</i>
<i>European Foundation for Arts & Humanities</i>	14	13	18	16	16	77	<i>Good</i>
<i>African Museum – Tervuren</i>	16	15	14	15	16	76	<i>Good</i>
<i>European House of Science</i>	15	16	17	17	16	81	<i>Excellent</i>
<i>DG DEFENCE / EUMIS</i>	10	8	19	15	14	66	<i>Good (high policy, low public)</i>
<i>European Biogeographical Garden</i>	15	15	14	18	14	76	<i>Good</i>
<i>Museum of European History</i>	17	16	16	15	17	81	<i>Excellent</i>
<i>SP Houses (Strategic Partnership Houses)</i>	19	18	16	15	16	84	<i>Excellent</i>
<i>International Press Center / EU Media House</i>	15	14	16	14		74	<i>Good</i>

Summary and Actionable Insights

Strong performers: Centrale (82), European Music Hall (8), Museum of European History (81) and the Ten SP Houses (84) all stand out with consistently high scores across most dimensions. Their success comes from balancing societal engagement, accessibility, policy influence, sustainability and creativity.

Solid but Uneven: European Foundation for Arts & Humanities (77), African Museum Tervuren (60), European Biogeographical Garden (76) and the EU Media House (74) perform reasonably well but show weaker scores in one or two categories. For example, Africa Museum scores lower on societal engagement and accessibility compared to others.

Mixed Profile: DG Defence/EUMIS (66) shows very strong policy influence (19) but weak societal engagement (10) and accessibility (8). This explains the qualitative note: Good (high policy, low public).

To sum-up, the EU should leverage the ten SP Houses and Centrale as benchmarks, since they combine engagement,

accessibility, and creativity with policy relevance and sustainability. Lessons learned: strong community involvement + clear policy alignment + innovative delivery.

Institutions like DG Defence and Africa Museum Tervuren need targeted improvements in public engagement and accessibility. Actions: Expand outreach programs, foster inclusivity and enhance digital and physical access. Strong Policy driven institutions must also engage wider audiences.

There is a need for focus on sustainability& legacy, so long as projects with mid-range sustainability scores (14-15) risk underperforming long-term. The EU Commission Building Service needs to encourage sustainability in strategy (funding models, environmental impact and institutional partnerships).

Finally, creativity is a differentiator. High creativity correlate strongly with excellent ratings. Action must be taken to foster innovative programming, design and delivery methods, as this drives overall excellence.

9. Sustainability and Future Planning

Brussels is undergoing a transformative shift in urban planning, guided by ambitious frameworks such as the BXL 2050 Municipal Plan for Sustainable Development, the Good Living Plan, and the Manual of Public Spaces. These initiatives collectively articulate a compelling blueprint for sustainable urban development, particularly at the intersection of squares, parks, and streetscapes. Central to this vision is the emphasis on integrated green infrastructure, wherein parks, squares, and streets are reconceptualized as interconnected ecological corridors. This approach not only fosters biodiversity but also enhances climate resilience by mitigating urban heat islands and improving stormwater management.

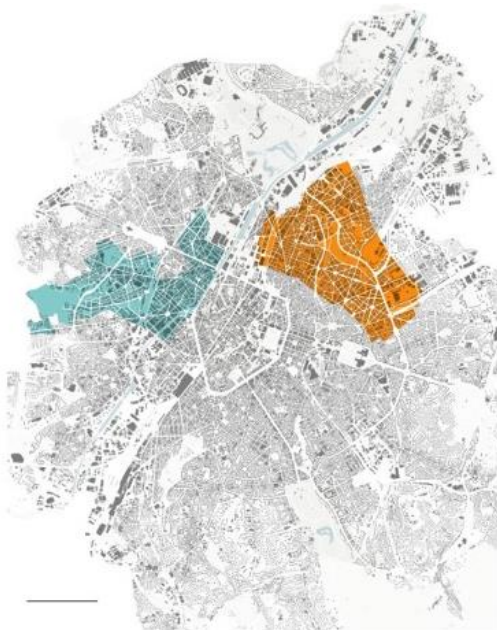


Figure 6. *Molenbeek and Scharbeek right under your nose.*

The city's planning philosophy prioritizes human-centered design, ensuring that public spaces are accessible, inclusive, and comfortable for all users. Streetscapes are being reconfigured to include wider sidewalks, shaded pathways, and pedestrian-priority zones, thereby promoting walkability and reducing vehicular dominance. Squares and parks are envisioned as multifunctional environments capable of hosting cultural events, leisure activities, and informal social interactions, which in turn strengthen civic engagement and social cohesion.

It needs to invest in research and development to boost innovation and business growth. Rudi also has to improve on sustainability by focusing on environmental initiatives to improve air quality and green spaces, and do more about affordable housing by developing policies to address housing affordability issues. These challenges are universal to EU cities, according to the latest Eurocities Pulse, the cities are

starting to get better organised. Under my leadership, an EU Center of Excellence in Metropolitan Governance will have to be established in Amsterdam, Barcelona or BRU.

In alignment with climate adaptation goals, Brussels integrates permeable surfaces, tree canopies, and water-sensitive landscaping into its public realm. These elements contribute to environmental sustainability while simultaneously enhancing the aesthetic and experiential quality of urban life. The city's commitment to the "10-minute city" concept further reinforces the importance of proximity and accessibility, ensuring that residents can reach essential services, green spaces, and cultural amenities within a short walking distance.

To strengthen and ameliorate these strategies in concrete terms, Brussels can pursue targeted physical interventions such as retrofitting streets with bioswales and permeable paving, expanding urban tree canopies, and converting underutilized spaces into pocket parks. Design enhancements may include the implementation of modular urban furniture, flexible programming of public spaces, and the integration of sensory landscapes that cater to diverse user needs. Governance mechanisms such as participatory design workshops, maintenance cooperatives, and green infrastructure grants can further institutionalize sustainability and foster community stewardship.

Through these multidimensional efforts, Brussels exemplifies a progressive model of urban development that harmonizes ecological integrity, social well-being, and spatial adaptability.

To strengthen and ameliorate sustainable urban development in Brussels—particularly at the intersection of squares, parks, and streetscapes—a series of concrete strategies can be implemented that align with the city's planning principles and enhance both ecological resilience and human well-being.

Physical interventions play a foundational role in this transformation. Green street retrofits involve replacing conventional asphalt with permeable paving, bioswales, and tree-lined corridors, which collectively improve stormwater management and reduce urban heat. Underutilized corners and residual spaces can be converted into pocket parks and micro-greened zones, featuring native vegetation, seating, and shade to foster neighborhood vitality. The installation of modular urban furniture—such as movable benches, planters, and play elements—allows for seasonal reconfiguration and supports diverse uses. Expanding the urban canopy by prioritizing the planting of large-canopy trees in squares and along streets contributes to shade provision, habitat creation, and carbon sequestration.

Design and planning enhancements further reinforce these efforts. Nature-based zoning can be employed to protect green corridors and incentivize the integration of green roofs, vertical gardens, and biodiversity-friendly facades. Public spaces should be designed with flexible programming in mind, enabling infrastructure to support temporary markets,

performances, and quiet reflection, all of which respond to the dynamic rhythms of urban life. Sensory landscapes, incorporating fragrant plants, textured surfaces, and water features, can stimulate well-being and promote inclusivity. The creation of quiet zones through strategic vegetation and soundscaping helps mitigate noise pollution and offers tranquil refuges within the urban fabric.

Governance and community engagement are essential to ensure the longevity and relevance of these interventions. Participatory design workshops empower residents to co-create public spaces, fostering cultural resonance and long-term stewardship. Maintenance cooperatives, composed of local teams, can be established to care for green spaces, reinforcing community pride and ensuring durability. Finally, green infrastructure grants may be offered to schools, businesses, and neighborhoods to support grassroots greening initiatives such as rain gardens and facade planting.

Together, these strategies form a cohesive and actionable framework for advancing Brussels' sustainable urban development goals, creating adaptable, inclusive, and nature-connected environments that serve both ecological and social imperatives.

Region Metropolitaine has a commissioner dedicated to service the EU and international organizations leading a Liaison Unit¹². In a BRU policy document Rudi Vervoort states:

Brussels is Europe, and Europe is Brussels. We will spare no effort to strengthen our position as European capital. Brussels will welcome and guide its international residents even better, and we will accelerate the transformation of the European Quarter into a vibrant urban district." "The Brussels government is very well aware that the presence of the European and international institutions is significant for Brussels and includes certain challenges. Therefore, it has conducted a structured, frequent dialogue with European institutions since 2015. The Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations plays a central role in this dynamic, which is paying off. The host region policy interacts with very different competence areas (such as welcoming workers, European Quarter development, mobility, education, tourism, and so on). Thus, close cooperation is required between all Belgian authorities. I therefore warmly welcome this joint initiative with the Prime Minister, which means the federal government is committed to following up all files of common interest related to our international status in coordination with the Region.

According to the home page of Brussels. be, the urban development department of the Region Bruxelles encompasses: (1) Planning, (2) Urbanism, (3) Urban renewal, (4) Cultural heritage, (5) large urban projects, (6) Spatial quality.. There is a Regional Sustainable Development Plan, which "envisages the establishment of a large renewal project for the benefit of all inhabitants of Brussels, with due respect for various developmental focus points. The main challenge facing the authorities are the need to reduce social and

territorial inequalities, strengthen social cohesion through the construction of housing and infrastructure, improve mobility and highlight the region's international assets".

This policy statement could be probed to test how practice matches practical policy. The tools are housing regulations, zoning laws and infrastructure investments. *Cui bono?*

We are now all looking forward to the Region rolling-out urban wall art and sculptures by European artists and that a joint sustained effort is made on shared urban concerns on-site in return for the governance framework for the special purpose vehicle administering the building program is put in place staffed by competent and effective public officials as advised by top architects to align people, organization and technology behind out purpose and vision. The estimated gearing of the BRU-SPV: €15-20bn. For BRU to improve from its current 30th in the RCI, it needs to increasing funding and support for Innovation & RDI, boost sectors with high productivity and Economic Growth, improve affordable housing, sustainability & Inclusion, simplify Governance, Regulation and Autonomy, work seriously on its image and branding, and improvement measurement, transparency and data collection to better track performance on indicators used by EU rankings on innovation, competitiveness and sustainability.

On the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor (CCCM) tracking the cultural vibrancy and creativity, the attractiveness, venues & facilities of a township¹³, it transpires Bruxelles might adopt to climb higher the following strategies: (1) Map and fill gaps in physical cultural infrastructure in your respective hoods (2) Lower thresholds for participation (3) Strengthen arts education and outreach (4) Nurture experimental and grassroots culture (5) Improve coordination among cultural actors & administrators (6) leverage digital tools for participation and promotion (7) Measure more & use data driven policies across municipalities, demographics to ensure feedback loops and use metrics to track what is working. (8) Bruxelles can also draw on the experiences of Ghent and Leuven, and strengthen its educational offerings on strategic urban planning and development out of ULB.

Adopting these policy recommendations will empower Brussels to effectively confront the challenges associated with sustainable urban development while reinforcing its identity as a vibrant and inclusive capital of Europe.

BRU can draw lessons from Ghent and Leuven, and is cordially invited to review its educational offerings in strategic sustainable urban planning out of ULB, even as it redoubles its engagement in Eurocities and the EU Center of Excellence in Metropolitan Governance: Who decides whose voice echoes through the corridors of the EEA? Who allows banners of polluting apparel to flutter above our streets? Who dares to plant the green trees that will one day shade Rue de la Loi?

Perhaps it is not a single vote, nor a single hand, that chooses—but the quiet negotiation of habit, policy, and imagination. And sometimes, the trees themselves decide where they wish to root.

The streets listen more than we speak, and the wind carries whispers of past decisions into every corner. Policies may guide, votes may count, but the life of a city—its shade, its breath, its quiet gestures—unfolds in ways we can only begin to notice.

Even the pavements remember footsteps long gone, and façades hum with intentions both declared and forgotten. The trees we plant are not mere symbols—they are small conspirators in patience, slowly reclaiming space between law and life.

Perhaps the EEA's voice is less a broadcast than a murmur, a conversation between concrete and leaf, between policy and possibility. And the green, when it arrives, does not ask permission; it simply grows, reshaping the geometry of Rue de la Loi, teaching us how softly influence can bend a city's spine.

Even the most carefully measured vote cannot predict where shade will fall, which corner will bloom, or which voice will linger in the quiet aftermath. It is in the unexpected pause, the unmarked gesture, where the city truly decides.

Perhaps Brussels has always been ready—not in announcements, not in grand ceremonies, but in its cobblestones, its squares, its quiet streets that hum beneath the official noise. It watches, it waits, it judges softly.

And yet... readiness is never absolute. The city is a dialogue, not a decree; it responds to curiosity, to care, to courage. If you arrive with intent, with attentiveness, with the willingness to move with its rhythms, then yes—Brussels is ready for you, in ways that even you may not fully anticipate.

But if you arrive with haste, with assumptions, with rigid plans... perhaps it is you who must catch up, and not the city.

Brussels is not merely a city of stone and steel; it is a living manuscript, written in façades, piazzas, and the measured cadence of human footsteps. Its streets speak in whispers and in shouts, in the hum of bureaucracy and the laughter of children, in the flutter of flags and the rustle of leaves.

Yet a city's greatness is not inherited—it is composed. The human spirit, the pulse of communities, the daring of citizens and visitors alike must rise in concert with the arches, the spires, and the glass towers that frame them. Each structure, each street, each square must not merely exist but sing in harmony with the lives that fill them.

Architecture is more than shelter; it is aspiration. A tower without eyes to greet the sky is hollow; a plaza without feet to feel its rhythm is mute. And the people, without spaces that reflect their hopes, their creativity, their dialogue, are strangers even in their own home.

If Brussels is to claim a place worthy of ambition, if it is to become a capital in the fullest sense, then city and citizen, human and stone, dream and design must ascend together. Not in isolation, not in competition, but in a choreography of purpose: a metropolis whose skyline reflects the audacity of imagination, whose streets carry the laughter of inclusion, whose very walls embody the courage of a collective will.

Only then will Brussels stand—not merely seen, not merely

visited, but felt, understood, and revered—as a capital worthy of the ambitions we dare to carry.

10. Ensuring Harmony Between the EU, the Member States and the Cities

Ensuring harmony between Europe, its member states, and cities is a complex but crucial challenge for the future of European governance. Cities, as the primary sites of urban life, hold a central role in shaping and implementing European policies, particularly in areas such as climate action, migration, and social inclusion.

According to Djikstra (2025) it is not all cities that deliver to the citizens and on growth. Eurocities has long advocated for cities to be more integrated into the decision-making processes of the EU, especially in shaping policies that have direct impacts on urban life, such as sustainable development, transportation, and social cohesion. The cities are getting better organized in the EU.

The role of cities in European governance is not just about implementation; it is about active participation in policy formulation. As the EU becomes increasingly focused on urban sustainability and resilience, the importance of cities as policy laboratories cannot be overstated. Cities such as Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Berlin have demonstrated that local solutions to global problems—such as climate change and social inequality—can provide valuable insights for the EU as a whole. This participatory model is supported by the work of scholars like Lewis (1999), who has argued for the importance of shared sovereignty in governance. Lewis's ideas suggest that while cities should retain their autonomy to address local concerns, they must do so within the context of broader EU objectives, ensuring alignment without undermining the cities' ability to act according to their specific needs.

Urban governance is distinct because it concentrates authority, resources, and social life within dense, interactive spaces. Cities are arenas where public, private, and civic actors negotiate, cooperate, and sometimes contest power. Unlike national governments, urban governance is polycentric, experimental, and responsive to immediate local pressures. Cities function as laboratories for innovation, testing policies in mobility, sustainability, and digital infrastructure. Governance is increasingly networked, linking cities across regions and continents through shared knowledge and coordinated action. Urban decision-making balances economic growth with social equity, cultural vibrancy, and environmental resilience. The immediacy of urban life demands governance that is flexible, participatory, and adaptive.

Europe, historically, is a civilization woven through its cities rather than through vast territorial empires. Medieval and early modern city-states fostered civic institutions, trade networks, and cultural innovation. Guilds, councils, and

universities embedded participatory practices and administrative sophistication into urban life. Cities concentrated knowledge, capital, and talent, generating the engines of economic and artistic flourishing. Dense urban networks linked trade, culture, and ideas, forming a continental urban web. Civic identity, citizenship, and cultural authority were often inseparable from city life itself. The urban form shaped the rhythms of European modernity, from Renaissance workshops to industrial centers. In Europe, governance and civilization co-evolve within cities, making urbanity both a method of rule and a defining civilizational trait.

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For cities to thrive within the EU framework, it is essential that they are not seen as merely implementing national or European policies but as active contributors to the policymaking process. As Loughlin (2004) notes, urban centers are often where the tensions between local, national, and EU-level governance are most visible. Therefore, fostering a shared vision of governance, where cities are empowered to participate meaningfully in EU decisions, is crucial to the long-term success of the European project.

Deyan Sudjic (2016) emphasizes the role of cities as a source of identity, something Bruxelles from time to time also needs a reminder about who we are not only who gets what, when and why, in particular he who is Mr Europe by best incarnating Europe, its spirit and what it stands for.

Barcelona pulses with Mediterranean creativity, blending architectural daring with civic activism, shaping cultural and innovation networks across Europe. Dublin channels knowledge and entrepreneurship, linking European research, tech, and financial flows while nurturing a cosmopolitan yet intimate urban life. Budapest bridges East and West, its historic boulevards and riverfront reflecting resilience, cultural plurality, and a hub for Central European cooperation. Milano drives design, fashion, and industry, a metropolitan engine connecting EU markets, innovation clusters, and global trade networks. Tallinn exemplifies digital governance, e-residency, and smart city experimentation, offering a model of efficiency and innovation to the wider European Union. Brussels functions as Europe's political heart, hosting EU

institutions and transnational diplomacy, shaping policy, cohesion, and continental agendas. Each city asserts a distinctive identity while embedding itself in transnational urban networks that advance EU cohesion, knowledge exchange, and competitiveness. Collectively, they illustrate how Europe's urban mosaic sustains the EU project, combining diversity, connectivity, and forward-looking civic innovation.

Paris' identity is deeply tied to cultural prestige, artistic innovation, and historical centrality, with boulevards, monuments, and museums reflecting both royal and revolutionary heritage. Its urban form balances historic grandeur with modern neighborhoods, creating a city that is both monumental and lived-in, where elegance, intellectual life, and social dynamism converge. Berlin's identity is shaped by modernity, division, and reinvention, reflecting its history as a Prussian capital, the site of the Cold War, and a contemporary hub of creativity and experimentation. Its urban landscape combines historic ruins, socialist-era planning, and cutting-edge architecture, producing a city of contrasts and adaptive resilience. Vienna embodies imperial grandeur and cultural refinement, with historic palaces, classical music heritage, and coffeehouse culture shaping a civic identity of elegance and ritualized sociability. Its urban form reflects order, ceremonial space, and continuity, linking past Habsburg authority to present cosmopolitan life. Paris emphasizes artistic prestige and centrality, Berlin embodies resilience, experimentation, and modern reinvention, and Vienna conveys imperial continuity and cultivated elegance. Together, these cities illustrate how European capitals negotiate history, modernity, and cultural symbolism to construct distinct urban identities.

Istanbul's identity is shaped by its strategic location straddling Europe and Asia, its Ottoman and Byzantine pasts, and the Bosphorus, producing a city of cultural hybridity and layered histories. Its urban fabric mixes historic mosques, palaces, and bazaars with modern commercial districts, reflecting a fusion of tradition and cosmopolitan modernity. Athens' identity is deeply tied to its classical heritage and democratic symbolism, with monuments like the Acropolis anchoring the city's narrative of intellectual and civic legacy. Its urban life balances ancient sites with modern neighborhoods, reflecting continuity, resilience, and everyday Athenian rhythms. Rome embodies a palimpsest of empire, religion, and civic authority, with ancient ruins, Renaissance palaces, and Vatican structures interwoven into modern life. Its identity emphasizes historical grandeur, artistic achievement, and centrality in Western civilization, while remaining a living, functional city. Istanbul is distinguished by its East-West hybridity and mercantile cosmopolitanism, Athens by classical memory and civic identity, and Rome by imperial depth and layered cultural authority. Together, these cities illustrate how history, geography, and politics shape urban identity in distinct yet overlapping ways across the Mediterranean.

Europe's sister civilization Islam, an Irano-Semitic construct, is also a city-based civilization that spread by both land-based agrarian empires and via the oceans to form the world's first global civilization. Baghdad's identity is rooted in its history as the Abbasid Caliphate's capital, giving it a legacy of intellectual, cultural, and artistic centrality in the Arab world. Its urban fabric, shaped by rivers, traditional markets, and historic districts, reflects centuries of trade, scholarship, and cosmopolitan life. Repeated conflict and political upheaval have produced a resilient yet fragmented city, where memory, loss, and reconstruction define much of its character. Cultural richness, including literature, music, and religious diversity, remains embedded in the city's streets and neighborhoods. Riyadh, in contrast, is a planned modern capital shaped by oil wealth and state-led development, with architecture reflecting centralized authority and national vision. Its urban identity emphasizes governance, economic growth, and modernization, with grand governmental complexes and orderly boulevards dominating the landscape. Cultural expression in Riyadh is more formalized, reflecting conservative social norms and a forward-looking national narrative. While Baghdad embodies historical depth, resilience, and human-scale complexity, Riyadh represents modernity, strategic planning, and state-centered identity, highlighting different approaches to urban and national projection.

TA has an identity rooted in modernist planning, European-influenced architecture, and a cosmopolitan, secular ethos, emphasizing innovation, experimentation, and a youthful, vibrant urban lifestyle. Its Bauhaus buildings, beaches, cafes, and tech hubs reflect a city designed as a laboratory of modern urban life, projecting openness and progressive values at the crucible of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Cairo, in contrast, is historically layered, with Pharaonic, Islamic, and Ottoman influences shaping a dense, complex urban fabric where past and present coexist visibly. Its identity is tied to the Nile, historic districts, bustling souks, and cultural dynamism, balancing resilience and continuity with rapid urbanization. Tel Aviv embodies a planned, forward-looking modernity, whereas Cairo reflects organic growth, deep historical memory, and social complexity. Both cities are national capitals, but Tel Aviv projects a symbolic cosmopolitanism, while Cairo projects a symbolic continuity of civilization and statehood. Spatially, Tel Aviv emphasizes functional order and human-scale leisure, whereas Cairo emphasizes layered streetscapes, mixed-use density, and everyday life rhythms. Together, they illustrate how urban identity emerges from planning, history, culture, and social adaptation, producing distinctive forms of modern Middle Eastern urbanity.

New York (New Amsterdam) thrives as a financial, cultural, and media powerhouse, shaping global flows of capital, ideas, and creativity. Los Angeles fuses entertainment, innovation, and migration, projecting soft power and technological trends across continents. Tokyo balances tradition and

hypermodernity, a dense hub of technology, design, and governance efficiency that influences Asia and the world. Hong Kong bridges East and West, a historic trading port and financial center, exemplifying adaptability amid global economic shifts. Rio de Janeiro pulses with vibrant culture, informal urbanism, and social creativity, offering lessons in resilience, tourism, and urban expression. Each city radiates a distinctive identity while connecting to transnational networks of trade, knowledge, and culture. Their urbanity mediates between local heritage and global ambition, transforming cities into laboratories of innovation, governance, and social experimentation. Collectively, they illustrate how global metropolises shape planetary flows, interlinking culture, economy, and governance in an increasingly networked world.

According to the UN's World Urbanism Prospects report 2025, cities now host more than 8.2 billion people more than double the share in 1950. Urbanisation will continue to accelerate through 2050 with two-thirds growth undertaken in conurbia by then, the majority in the non-cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Rural populations will decline everywhere except for sub-Saharan Africa. Jakarta, Dhaka, Tokyo, Shanghai, Chongqing, Sao Paulo and CDMX are all megacities. Urbanisation is now a defining force in climate policy highlighted in Belém, Brazil during the COP. Urban systems are becoming the primary area for economic growth, infrastructure investment and social transformation. Metropolitan governance models including cross-border regions, polycentric networks and coastal megaregions are increasingly central to global resilience strategies. Cities often feel globo-local, so long as they concentrate growth, are a habitat, a work place and place to get laid is a universal reason to become a city dweller. The implication could be we need to construct metropolitan governance systems aligned with actual functional population movements — ensuring institutions map onto lived urban-regional dynamics rather than legacy administrative borders. Above all, urban planning and development are in itself and for itself as scientific discipline and the question arises whether we should try and reinvent the European city of the future.

Thus, the elements for a harmonious and balanced relationship between the European Union (EU), its member states, and cities within the EU is based on multiple elements that foster cooperation, mutual understanding, and shared objectives, while respecting the distinct roles and responsibilities of each level of governance. This relationship is critical for achieving common goals in areas like sustainable development, economic growth, social cohesion, and urban transformation.

One key element in this relationship is multi-level governance (MLG). This refers to the interaction between different layers of government — the EU, national governments, regional governments, and local authorities (such as cities). The EU recognizes the need for cooperation across these levels to effectively address issues that affect citizens, like climate change, migration, urban development,

and economic growth. A smooth, cooperative system where the different levels of government collaborate ensures that policies are both effective and relevant, with no level of governance overstepping its authority.

Closely related to this is the subsidiarity principle, which ensures that decisions are made as close to the citizen as possible. This principle dictates that issues should be addressed at the local or regional level unless the issue is better managed at the EU level. This principle safeguards the autonomy of cities and member states, ensuring that local governments retain control over issues that directly affect their citizens, while the EU intervenes in matters that require broader, transnational solutions.

Another important aspect is the EU funding programs for cities. The EU provides financial support to cities through a variety of mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund, and Horizon Europe. These funds help cities address challenges like urban sustainability, infrastructure development, social inclusion, and innovation. By ensuring that cities have access to EU funding, the EU enables local authorities to invest in projects that align with both local needs and broader EU goals of cohesion and development.

The Urban Agenda for the EU is a strategic approach that fosters cooperation between the EU, member states, and cities on urban issues. The Urban Agenda focuses on addressing urban challenges like housing, transportation, climate action, and digitalization. It provides a platform for cities to work together with the EU and national governments to develop effective policies and solutions. This collaboration ensures that cities have a voice in EU policymaking and that EU policies reflect the specific needs of urban areas.

Equally important is participatory and inclusive decision-making. The EU actively encourages the involvement of local authorities and stakeholders in the policymaking process. Initiatives like the Covenant of Mayors or the EU Committee of the Regions allow cities to engage directly in shaping EU policies. This participatory approach ensures that local perspectives are considered in EU legislation, making it more responsive to the realities faced by cities and their citizens. It also promotes transparency and fosters a sense of ownership among local authorities and communities.

In the context of urban development, sustainable urban development plays a key role. The EU has committed to promoting sustainability through initiatives like the European Green Deal and Smart Cities projects, which focus on integrating green and digital technologies into urban environments. As cities are often responsible for a large proportion of carbon emissions, they play a central role in achieving the EU's environmental goals. The EU provides both policy guidance and financial support to cities to ensure that urban areas are at the forefront of sustainability efforts.

Another area of cooperation is migration and integration. While migration policies are largely shaped at the EU level, cities have a crucial role in the integration of migrants, as they

are often the first point of contact for newcomers. The EU supports cities by providing funding and resources for migrant integration, housing, education, and social services. This cooperation ensures that cities can address the needs of migrants effectively, while adhering to broader EU migration policies.

The rise of digital transformation and the development of smart cities is another area where the EU, member states, and cities work together. The EU supports cities in their digital transformation through funding and the development of digital infrastructure. Smart city initiatives, which integrate technologies to improve urban life, align with the EU's broader digital strategy, enhancing efficiency in areas like traffic management, energy use, and public services. The EU provides guidance and resources to help cities leverage these technologies, ensuring that urban areas remain competitive and sustainable in the global economy.

Equally important for the success of cities is intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. European cities are increasingly diverse, and the EU promotes social inclusion through funding and initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue between different cultural groups. The goal is to ensure that cities remain cohesive, peaceful, and inclusive. This contributes to maintaining social stability and combating discrimination, while promoting intercultural understanding and the shared European identity.

To maintain a well-functioning relationship, there must be regular political and administrative cooperation between the EU, member states, and cities. This ensures that policies align across different levels of governance, with local needs and concerns being considered in EU decision-making processes. Regular communication and collaboration also promote a cooperative political environment where cities can actively participate in shaping policies that affect them.

Importantly, the respect for local autonomy is a core principle in the relationship between the EU and its cities. The EU ensures that it does not interfere in areas where local or national governments have exclusive competence. This autonomy is essential for maintaining trust and allowing cities to manage their affairs in a way that best serves their citizens' needs. While the EU provides support, guidance, and funding, it respects the sovereignty of local governments to act according to their specific contexts.

Finally, the EU Combined Urban Index for Performance Statistics and Appropriate Interventions offers a valuable tool for assessing the performance of cities in key areas like sustainability, economic resilience, social inclusion, and governance. The index helps the EU and cities monitor progress and identify areas where targeted interventions are needed. By collecting and analyzing data on urban performance, the EU can better understand local challenges and ensure that its interventions are both appropriate and effective. This tool fosters evidence-based decision-making, enabling cities to track their progress and make informed choices about future developments.

Additionally, dialogue on growth-enhancing policies and measures plays an important role in creating synergies between the EU, member states, and cities. The EU fosters an environment in which cities and member states can engage in discussions about policies that encourage economic growth, innovation, and sustainable development. Key policies include fostering innovation ecosystems, promoting green and digital transitions, and investing in human capital. Cities, as engines of economic activity, benefit from policies that promote entrepreneurship, job creation, and social mobility. For instance, EU-backed initiatives like the EU Investment Plan and Digital Europe Programme are focused on enhancing infrastructure and skills that drive economic development in cities. Moreover, growth-enhancing policies often involve regulatory simplification, improving the ease of doing business, and increasing the accessibility of funding for local projects that have the potential to stimulate economic activity. These measures encourage cities to adopt innovative solutions that can boost their economic resilience and competitiveness, ensuring that urban centers continue to thrive while contributing to the broader EU agenda of economic cohesion and growth.

The concept of an EU Centre of Excellence in Urban Governance broached in my political platform for my failed bid for EPP2024 could be a key institution to bridge the gap between the EU, member states, and cities. Such a Centre would provide expertise, research, and best practices in urban governance, helping cities navigate the complexities of EU regulations while ensuring that their local policies align with European frameworks. This Centre could also facilitate capacity-building efforts in cities, particularly those in regions with fewer resources or less developed governance structures, ensuring that all cities—regardless of size or economic power—are able to contribute to and benefit from the EU's urban agenda. The Centre's role would not only be one of technical support but also of promoting democratic governance at the local level. In line with the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985), which emphasizes local autonomy and democratic participation, the Centre could work to ensure that local governments maintain their authority in decision-making, even as they collaborate with EU institutions. By focusing on transparency, inclusivity, and citizen engagement, the Centre could help cities build stronger democratic institutions that are capable of implementing EU policies effectively and equitably.

In summary, the harmonious relationship between the EU, member states, and cities is built on a foundation of cooperation, mutual respect, and shared goals. The EU provides support and resources, while cities and national governments retain the autonomy to address local issues. By working together, the EU and its cities can achieve sustainable, inclusive, and innovative urban development, contributing to the overall prosperity and cohesion of the European Union. The hidden agenda is very much to hold the policy makers accountable and ensure strong leadership and good

governance, where it matters the most.

11. European Cities and Global Urban Hubs: Comparative Perspectives on Urbanity, Modernity, and Resilience

In 2025, nearly half of the world's population lives in urban areas, reflecting a steady increase from 20 % in 1950. Urbanization continues to accelerate, with two-thirds of global population growth expected to occur in cities by 2050. The number of cities worldwide has more than doubled since 1975, with small and medium cities expanding rapidly, especially in Africa and Asia. Megacities, defined as urban areas with over 10 million inhabitants, have quadrupled since 1975, with Asia hosting the majority and some projected to exceed 50 million by mid-century. Jakarta has become the world's most populous urban agglomeration, surpassing Tokyo under the updated harmonized urban criteria. Urban growth is uneven, as some large cities stagnate or decline while smaller urban centers continue to expand. Rural areas and towns remain dominant settlement types in many countries, highlighting the persistence of non-metropolitan populations. The report introduces a harmonized *Degree of Urbanization* methodology, improving cross-country comparability of urban, peri-urban, and rural definitions. The findings emphasize the centrality of urbanization for sustainable development, infrastructure planning, and climate resilience, in line with SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda. Overall, the report highlights both the scale of urban growth and the diversity of urban experiences, stressing the need for context-specific, adaptive urban governance.



SOURCE: WESP 2025

Figure 7. Urbanization around the world.

The implications of the 2025 UN *World Urbanization Prospects* report for European cities are multi-layered and strategic:

European cities must prepare for continued urban population growth, even if more modest than in Asia or Africa,

by planning infrastructure, housing, and services that can accommodate demographic expansion without compromising livability. They need to balance densification with quality of life, learning from the rapid growth of megacities and small-to-medium cities elsewhere, ensuring mixed-use neighborhoods, social cohesion, and human-scale urbanity. The persistence of smaller cities and towns globally highlights the importance of regional networks, suggesting that European urban strategies should not focus solely on major capitals but also on strengthening medium-sized cities. Uneven urban growth patterns elsewhere signal that adaptive, flexible governance is critical to respond to stagnation or decline, demographic shifts, and migration pressures within European contexts. The rise of megacities and high-density urban forms offers lessons in infrastructure efficiency, transport systems, and smart city technologies that can be selectively integrated while preserving heritage and social intimacy. Harmonized methodologies, like the *Degree of Urbanization*, underline the need for data-driven urban planning, enabling better cross-city comparisons, monitoring, and forecasting for evidence-based policy. The urban expansion trajectory emphasizes the importance of sustainability, integrating climate-adaptive design, green infrastructure, and energy-efficient construction to meet environmental commitments. Global urbanization patterns reinforce the value of connectivity, both digital and physical, in maintaining Europe's economic competitiveness while safeguarding local identity. Rapid urbanization elsewhere highlights the risk of social and spatial inequalities, prompting European policymakers to design inclusive policies that prevent marginalization and promote equitable access to urban resources. Finally, the report stresses that adaptive governance and participatory planning are essential for resilience, allowing European cities to respond to migration, economic shifts, and climate change while maintaining historical continuity and social cohesion.

European cities of the future are likely to prioritize dense, mixed-use neighborhoods that foster social interaction, cultural exchange, and civic participation. Urban development will emphasize inclusivity, accessibility, and the preservation of heritage while accommodating evolving forms of social life. Public spaces will function as arenas for social experimentation, cultural expression, and informal economic activity, reflecting a human-centered approach to urbanity. By contrast, global hubs in Asia, North America, and the Middle East may prioritize vertical density, high-tech integration, and large-scale urban spectacles. Social interactions in these contexts are often mediated by planned infrastructures—such as commercial districts, mega-malls, and technologically enabled communal spaces—rather than emerging organically from public life. While global hubs excel in efficiency, innovation, and economic throughput, European cities are more likely to retain an emphasis on human-scale interactions and historical continuity.

Modernity: Technology, Infrastructure, and Governance

In Europe, the integration of smart technology, green infrastructure, and sustainable transport will shape urban modernity, but these transformations will be guided by principles of ethical governance, environmental responsibility, and citizen-centric policy-making. Structural modernization will feature energy-efficient buildings, decentralized energy grids, and climate-adaptive urban planning, with public engagement playing a central role in technological deployment. Global hubs, in contrast, often prioritize scale, automation, and rapid technological implementation. Cities such as Singapore, Shanghai, and Dubai exemplify high-tech urban management, leveraging AI-driven traffic systems, autonomous logistics, and vertical urbanism to optimize performance and global competitiveness. However, this focus on technological efficiency and global prominence can sometimes come at the expense of social intimacy, local identity, or heritage preservation.

Resilience and Adaptability

European cities are likely to emphasize incremental and flexible urbanism, enabling neighborhoods to adapt to demographic shifts, migration flows, and climate-related challenges. Informal economies and cultural experimentation are expected to be accommodated rather than displaced, fostering social dynamism and community cohesion. Conversely, global hubs often employ top-down, technologically mediated resilience strategies, including engineered flood defenses, climate-controlled mega-districts, and strictly managed urban expansion. While efficient, such approaches may limit grassroots participation and constrain the organic evolution of urban life.

Cultural Integration and Heritage

European urban landscapes will continue to negotiate modernity alongside centuries-old heritage, producing layered environments where historical memory intersects with innovation. Architecture, urban design, and public art will embody a dialogue between past and present, integrating continuity with contemporary social needs. Rapidly developing global hubs often favor iconic futurism, creating striking skylines and landmark buildings that project modernity but may lack connection to local history or social practices.

Global Connectivity and Local Identity

European cities are likely to balance global engagement with local rootedness, leveraging networks of finance, knowledge, and culture while preserving distinct urban identities. Cities thus function as nodes within international flows while remaining socially and spatially legible to residents. Global hubs, however, frequently prioritize hyper-connectivity and international visibility, sometimes subordinating local identity to urban branding, economic strategy, or geopolitical signaling.

Europe's Urban Position in the Global Context

Europe hosts a limited number of globally influential cities, particularly when measured by their impact in finance, culture, governance, and connectivity, as captured by indices such as

the GaWC Global Cities Index. Although relatively few European cities qualify as megacities by population, they exert disproportionate global influence. London serves as a leading hub of finance, culture, and international governance; Paris combines political and cultural prominence with leadership in arts, luxury goods, and diplomacy; Frankfurt functions as the EU's primary financial center; and Amsterdam and Berlin demonstrate strengths in innovation, logistics, creative industries, and political significance. Despite these advantages, European cities remain modest in population compared with global counterparts such as Tokyo, Shanghai, or Mumbai, which host tens of millions of inhabitants, highlighting the contrast between demographic scale and global reach.

Lessons from Global Urban Centers

Comparative analysis with cities on other continents provides several insights for European urban development. In Asia, cities such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Singapore, and Seoul combine extremely high population densities with efficient transport infrastructure, smart city management, and the rapid creation of new urban districts. North American cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto, integrate global economic influence with cultural production and international networks, albeit often characterized by urban sprawl and car-centric planning. Latin American cities such as São Paulo, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires demonstrate rapid urbanization under resource constraints, innovative informal economies, and resilience amid social inequalities. African cities, including Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, illustrate urban expansion driven by migration, cultural diversity, and informal economic activity, emphasizing the value of flexible governance and participatory planning. Middle Eastern cities, such as Dubai, Doha, and Riyadh, pursue hyper-modern, high-tech, and symbolically iconic urban forms aimed at enhancing global visibility.

From these global examples, several lessons emerge for European cities. Integrating high-technology districts without undermining heritage and social cohesion can enhance both competitiveness and livability. Strengthening global connectivity in logistics, finance, and culture should be balanced with preserving local identity. Adaptive governance structures are essential to accommodate demographic change, migration, and climate-related challenges. Innovation districts that blend work, living, and cultural functions can foster economic dynamism while maintaining social fabric. Finally, achieving a balance between urban density and livability remains a critical challenge for sustaining Europe's global urban influence.

Synthesis

The European city of tomorrow will be defined by human-centered urbanity embedded within technologically advanced and ecologically sustainable frameworks, balancing social richness, historical continuity, and environmental stewardship. Global hubs elsewhere often define urbanity and modernity through technological sophistication, scale, and efficiency,

achieving international prominence while sometimes sacrificing social intimacy or heritage continuity. European urbanity emphasizes ethical, social, and ecological dimensions, whereas global urbanism frequently foregrounds performance, spectacle, and connectivity. Future comparative research should examine how governance, culture, and economic strategy mediate the balance between lived urban experience and technological transformation, offering insights into the sustainable evolution of cities worldwide.

12. Conclusions

Brussels encounters significant challenges in its efforts to establish itself as the definitive capital of Europe. These challenges include political fragmentation, the tension between historical preservation and modern development, and the integration of diverse cultural identities. To effectively navigate these complexities, a coordinated governance approach that aligns local, regional, and European Union objectives is essential. Implementing a cohesive urban development strategy that prioritizes stakeholder collaboration and strategic resource allocation will be crucial to fostering a unified and functional urban landscape.

Community engagement emerges as a vital component in the decision-making processes of urban planning within Brussels. Actively involving residents and local stakeholders enhances the cultural vibrancy of the city while ensuring that urban developments resonate with the needs and aspirations of diverse communities. Strategies such as participatory design workshops and feedback mechanisms empower citizens, facilitating a sense of ownership and pride in public spaces. This engagement enriches the planning process and strengthens social ties, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic urban environment.

Sustainable architectural innovations present substantial potential to elevate Brussels' identity, livability, and attractiveness as a hub of European governance and culture. The integration of environmentally sustainable practices in urban design, including features such as green roofs, energy-efficient buildings, and accessible public spaces, aligns with global sustainability goals while enhancing the quality of life for residents. Such innovations serve not only as tangible representations of Brussels' commitment to modernity and ecological integrity but also reinforce the city's image as a forward-thinking capital that attracts international interest and investment.

Collectively, these conclusions underscore the critical importance of integrating governance, community engagement, and sustainable design in the urban transformation of Brussels. By addressing systemic challenges and fostering a collaborative approach, the city can effectively realize its aspirations as a vibrant and inclusive capital of Europe.

The sentiment of the European Quarter is that of an embattled enclave under constant repair, with its executives

jumping from fire to fire, while the locals speed-up heading for the Suburbia.

This cannot, should not, must not continue.

This has to be compared to the nature of the composition of the population of Bruxelles City, and that it needs to improve in accessibility and participatory governance, decentralisation of cultural offerings, diversity and inclusion, support for creative industries, sustainability and environmental integration.

Finally, an executive represents the polity and embodies an ethic of responsibility and can respond to nuance and embody collective aspirations, whereas a plan commissariat reduces arbitrariness and prevents favoritism. The former ensures horizontal rationalization, the latter vertical concentration of power and meaning. A polity without commissariat becomes unstable and chaotic, one without executive becomes faceless and mechanical. It is the 15-minute city that links-up decision-making levels and equivocate the EU in return for help on organisation and the general challenges of cities such as housing and unemployment. Bruxelles becomes more European, and the European Union climbs down from the Ivory Tower in Bruxelles, a national capital in Europe and the political capital of the European Union in need of more coherent and integrated governance to make meaningful progress in solving its problems in brisk steps.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this research are multifaceted and contribute significantly to the academic discourse surrounding urban transformation, governance, and sustainability. This study extends existing theories, particularly those related to spatial production, strategic planning, and multi-level governance, by illustrating how these elements intersect within the unique context of Brussels.

Firstly, the findings highlight the necessity for an integrated theoretical framework that combines insights from urban studies, political science, and architectural theory. By operationalizing Lefebvre's concept of spatial production alongside Harvey's analysis of urban entrepreneurialism, the research elucidates how urban spaces are not merely physical constructs but are deeply embedded with political and economic significance. This redefinition of urban space as a product of complex socio-political dynamics challenges traditional views and prompts a reevaluation of how urban transformation is conceptualized.

Secondly, the investigation into community engagement provides a valuable contribution to theories of participatory governance. It emphasizes that community involvement is not simply a procedural requirement but plays a critical role in shaping urban identity and culture. This perspective aligns with and enriches the discourse on democratic engagement in urban planning, underscoring the importance of inclusivity in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the study's focus on sustainable architectural innovations contributes to the emerging field of sustainable urbanism. It illustrates that sustainability transcends

environmental considerations; it also involves enhancing urban livability and cultural identity. This finding encourages scholars to explore the interplay between ecological integrity, urban aesthetics, and social dynamics, expanding the scope of sustainability discourse within urban studies.

Finally, the synthesis of these theoretical dimensions underscores the importance of a holistic approach to urban research, where spatial, governance, and symbolic dimensions are interlinked. This comprehensive perspective not only enriches the theoretical landscape but also informs practical applications for urban planners and policymakers, advocating for strategies that foster a more integrated urban development process.

In summary, the theoretical implications of this research challenge existing paradigms, advocate for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to urban planning, and contribute to a richer understanding of the urban transformation processes within a significant political context.

Further Research

Avenues for further research in the domain of urban development and governance could significantly benefit from comparative studies exploring how major capitals in Asia, the Americas, and Africa approach the construction and transformation of their urban environments. Such studies could shed light on varying methodologies, cultural influences, and governance structures that shape urban landscapes across different geopolitical contexts.

One potential avenue for further research is to investigate how Eastern and Western capitals differ in their urban planning strategies. Analyzing the approaches taken by cities like Beijing, Tokyo, or New Delhi in comparison to Washington D.C., Brasilia, or Ottawa could reveal insights into the influence of historical, cultural, and political factors on urban development. This comparative lens could deepen the understanding of how cities balance modernization with heritage preservation, public engagement, and sustainability.

Additionally, examining African capitals such as Nairobi, Accra, or Addis Ababa could provide valuable perspectives on developing nations' unique challenges and strategies in urban transformation. Research could focus on how these cities address issues of rapid urbanization, infrastructural deficits, and socio-economic disparities while fostering inclusive growth and cultural identity.

Furthermore, studies could explore the role of transnational influences and global networks in shaping urban development policies across different regions. Understanding how cities leverage international relations, foreign investments, and global governance frameworks to inform their urban agendas would contribute to the discourse on global city dynamics.

Finally, a longitudinal analysis of urban transformations within these capitals could offer a more nuanced understanding of how geopolitical factors, local governance models, community participation, and sustainability practices evolve over time. This research could generate a robust comparison of success stories and challenges faced by various

capitals, leading to the development of best practices and strategic recommendations applicable to cities worldwide.

In summary, a comparative approach that encompasses capitals from diverse global regions will not only fill existing gaps in the literature but will also foster richer theoretical frameworks and practical insights beneficial for urban planners, policymakers, and scholars alike.

Counter-arguments

When discussing the proposed building program and interventions for urban development in Brussels, it is important to consider counterarguments and alternatives to ensure a well-rounded discourse.

Counterarguments to the building program may include:

One significant counterargument is the potential for community displacement. Critics may argue that extensive construction projects often lead to gentrification, forcing long-standing residents out of their neighborhoods.

Another point of contention may focus on environmental sustainability. Opponents might highlight that certain construction methods or materials could negatively impact the ecological landscape, detracting from the overall sustainability goals of the urban development strategy.

Additionally, there could be concerns regarding the prioritization of large-scale projects over smaller community-driven initiatives. Critics may advocate for a focus on grassroots efforts that better address the immediate needs of local residents.

Moreover, the financial implications of the building program could be questioned. Critics might argue that investing significant resources in ambitious construction projects could divert funds from essential services such as education, healthcare, and public transportation.

Lastly, there may be apprehensions about the loss of cultural identity. Some may contend that modern construction projects could overshadow the historical architectural fabric of Brussels, diminishing the city's unique character and cultural heritage.

Alternatives to the proposed interventions could include:

Championing the adaptive reuse of existing buildings, rather than relentless new construction, resonates as both a practical and poetic choice. This approach preserves the past, prevents waste, and prudently protects precious resources—a triple echo of responsibility and respect for our urban heritage. Walls whisper stories, bricks breathe history, and every restored corner hums with continuity.

Embracing incremental, intimate development strategies, small-scale, community-led projects rise like seeds sprouting through cracks in the cityscape. By engaging residents in the design, decision, and dialogue, initiatives become tailored tapestries, woven from the voices of those who live, laugh, and labor in these neighborhoods. The result is a profound sense of ownership, inclusion, and belonging, a living pulse of civic vitality.

Green infrastructure blooms as both shield and sanctuary. Expanding parks, cultivating community gardens, and

adorning rooftops with verdant living walls do more than beautify—they breathe life, boost biodiversity, and bolster ecological health. Birds chirp, leaves rustle, and water trickles through newly designed landscapes, a symphony of urban nature reclaiming its rhythm.

Promoting mixed-use developments pulses at the heart of social equity. Affordable housing alongside vibrant commercial spaces bridges divides, balances communities, and breathes vitality into every street corner, mitigating gentrification while nurturing diversity. Commerce and community dance together, a duet of coexistence and continuity.

Finally, fostering partnerships with local stakeholders transforms projects into collective dreams. Collaboration amplifies knowledge, mobilizes resources, and molds interventions to reflect the nuances of the neighborhood. When local voices lead the way, urban interventions resonate, respond, and rise, creating cities that are not only built—but deeply belonged to.

By acknowledging these counterarguments and exploring alternative approaches, the discourse surrounding the building program can encompass a wider array of perspectives, ultimately leading to more equitable and sustainable urban development strategies in Brussels.

Policy Recommendations

To facilitate sustainable urban development in Brussels, it is essential to weave the governance framework like a living tapestry, enhancing cohesion across local, regional, national, and EU objectives. Such a framework becomes the city's spine, holding together disparate initiatives and lending them strength. The Regional Governor's Department, the heart of Brussels' administrative body, must embody this vision, functioning as an allegorical vessel steering the city through the currents of change. Thus, we recommend a reorganization encompassing a Performance Control Unit, Project Unit, Policy Coordination Unit, Communication Unit, and an External Relations Unit, each unit a cog in the great clockwork of governance, ticking not in hours but in outcomes. This structure ensures initiatives march with purpose, not merely following policies but dancing with the aspirations of the city itself.

Addressing socio-spatial inequalities must be prioritized, through the bloody mess of bureaucracy, through the grinding gears of neglect, through the endless maze of red tape. It is crucial to ensure that urban development projects cater to the diverse needs of communities, promote equitable access, and deliver justice—and yes, deliver opportunity, deliver dignity, deliver hope.

Strengthening environmental policies is imperative; robust regulations must safeguard air quality, regulate waste, protect green spaces, and defend the city from itself. The streets may fume, the rivers may choke, but the city must breathe, and the citizens must breathe, and the future must breathe.

Fostering community engagement is vital for successful urban planning—policymakers must institutionalize

participatory initiatives that involve citizens in decision-making, that involve them in governance, that involve them in the very shaping of their lives. Digital platforms can broaden participation, can collect feedback, can gather complaints, can even gather applause, making it easier for residents to speak, to act, to live.

The Brussels metro system, while functionally operational, exhibits significant deficiencies in design, cleanliness, and passenger experience, which undermine its role as a core component of the city's urban mobility network. Similarly, connections between Brussels Airport and the city center remain inadequate, limiting accessibility and overall transport efficiency. In light of these challenges, several policy measures are warranted.

The current metro stations demonstrate outdated architectural forms and monotonous visual environments. To enhance usability and perception, a comprehensive modernization program is required, encompassing the deployment of durable, visually appealing materials, the introduction of dynamic lighting systems, and the incorporation of public art or culturally reflective installations. These interventions aim to create environments that are not only functional but also socially and culturally engaging. Regularized maintenance and cleaning protocols should be instituted to ensure sanitary and safe conditions across all stations.

The existing transport links between Brussels Airport and the city center are insufficient in terms of frequency, speed, and convenience. Strategic interventions should include the establishment of direct, high-frequency transit lines, potentially in the form of express metro, light rail, or dedicated shuttle services. Integration of real-time digital ticketing and scheduling systems is essential to facilitate seamless travel. Moreover, multimodal connectivity must be prioritized, coordinating metro, bus, tram, and rail services to minimize travel times and enhance operational efficiency.

User comfort, accessibility, and security constitute critical dimensions of public transport quality. Policies should mandate the installation of ergonomic seating, climate control systems, and facilities accommodating individuals with reduced mobility. Security measures, including increased staff presence and surveillance infrastructure, are necessary to foster a perception of safety. Additionally, the strategic deployment of cultural and artistic elements within stations may transform routine travel into a more engaging and meaningful experience.

Effective reform requires inclusive planning processes that engage diverse stakeholders. Public consultations, design competitions, and collaborations with academic institutions, urban design experts, and cultural organizations can ensure that interventions reflect both community needs and local identity. Continuous evaluation through user satisfaction surveys and performance metrics will provide evidence-based guidance for iterative improvements.

All interventions should align with broader sustainability

objectives. This includes the adoption of energy-efficient rolling stock, renewable-powered station infrastructure, and the incorporation of urban green spaces. Facilitating multimodal access, such as cycling, pedestrian pathways, and bike-sharing, can reduce carbon emissions while promoting holistic urban mobility. Furthermore, investments in intermodal transport infrastructure are essential to improve connectivity both within the Brussels metropolitan area and to other European urban centers. Enhancing regional accessibility through rail, sustainable mobility systems, and digital infrastructure would strengthen the city's functional integration and its attractiveness to mobile talent and investment.

In sum, these recommendations advocate for a multi-dimensional approach that integrates infrastructural upgrades, aesthetic improvement, community participation, and sustainable mobility strategies. Addressing both the functional deficiencies and experiential shortcomings of the Brussels metro system, while strengthening airport-city connectivity, will enhance urban mobility, public satisfaction, and the city's broader socio-cultural identity.

In parallel to these push-ups done with, we envisage the Special Purpose Vehicle to become the operational arm of Brussels Vision2030 and beyond. The future of Brussels will not be built by towers alone, but by a city that listens, adapts, and acts. To translate Vision 2030 into reality, a Special Purpose Vehicle must serve as the city's operational heart, bridging strategy with execution. Its mandate must be clear, legally grounded, and flexible, capable of turning high-level aspirations into tangible initiatives. Governance should mirror the city's ethos: participatory, transparent, and inclusive of residents, civil society, and enterprise. Decision-making must embrace dialogue, not decree, reflecting the diversity and knowledge of those who live and work in Brussels. Each project undertaken must map to strategic goals: sustainability, social cohesion, mobility, and economic vitality. Urban mobility programs should reduce carbon and enhance accessibility, weaving streets into sustainable lifelines. Pedestrian and retail revitalization initiatives must strengthen both local economies and communal bonds. Cultural and creative projects should affirm Brussels' identity while engaging citizens in shared experiences. Smart city and digital initiatives must enhance operational efficiency and global competitiveness. Funding should be consolidated, blending EU, national, and local streams under the SPV's stewardship. Public-private partnerships must be leveraged to share risks and attract investment in strategic ventures. Performance-linked financing ensures that resources are deployed where they achieve measurable impact. Citizen participation is not optional; it is essential for co-creation, trust, and legitimacy. Tools such as participatory budgeting and digital feedback platforms allow residents to guide, monitor, and influence projects. Inclusive governance recognizes the city's diversity as a source of strength rather than a challenge. Project management offices within the SPV provide structure,

oversight, and accountability. Monitoring and evaluation systems must track outcomes, enable course corrections, and institutionalize learning.

Cross-sector coordination ensures that mobility, housing, environment, and economic projects reinforce rather than compete with one another. Alignment with EU programs amplifies impact, linking local initiatives to broader European agendas. The SPV should act as a city diplomat, attracting global partnerships, investment, and knowledge exchange. Strategic foresight ensures that the SPV anticipates challenges in climate, demographics, and technology. A modular portfolio allows projects to scale, pivot, or evolve as the city grows and changes. Beyond 2030, the SPV must remain agile, a continuous engine for renewal and resilience. In short, the SPV is not merely an administrative body; it is the pulse of Brussels, transforming vision into reality, weaving together people, policy, and purpose. We set a timeline of 10 years for the construction of the building program, besides the ten SP Houses would primarily on the foreign ministries of our union's ten strategic partners. This means there is budget to do more and other things than just building grands d'oeuvres in BRU. Who controls the purse determines what is built, who dominates Bruxelles controls the EU Commission. And Belgian federalism is unfit for continental rule. A stronger dialogue between Bruxelles Region and the EU is inevitable. This is not about liaising but of building a partnership by aligning people, organization and technology behind a shared purpose and objectives, without leaking through force or hoarding out of fear.

Green infrastructure is particularly relevant in Brussels (Bru) because of the city's high density, climate vulnerability, social inequality, and limited public space, making nature-based solutions essential for both environmental resilience and quality of life.

First, Brussels faces strong climate pressures, especially urban heat island effects and surface flooding. Dense neighbourhoods such as the Canal Zone, Schaerbeek, and Saint-Josse have little tree cover and large sealed surfaces. Expanding green infrastructure—through parks, green corridors, street trees, green roofs, and permeable surfaces—helps reduce heat stress, manage stormwater, and improve air quality. These benefits are increasingly important as heatwaves and extreme rainfall events become more frequent.

Second, green infrastructure is crucial for public health and social equity. Many of Brussels' lower-income and more densely populated areas have limited access to high-quality green space. Improving local parks, pocket gardens, and green streets supports physical and mental health, encourages everyday physical activity, and provides safe social spaces. In this sense, green infrastructure directly complements the 15-minute city by ensuring that nature and recreation are accessible within walking distance for all residents, not just those in wealthier municipalities.

Third, Brussels has significant potential to use green infrastructure to reconnect fragmented urban spaces. Linear

elements such as the canal, railway edges, and major roads can be transformed into green corridors that support walking, cycling, and biodiversity. Projects like canal-side greening or green tram corridors can link neighbourhoods while reducing car dominance and improving urban liveability.

Finally, green infrastructure supports Brussels' sustainability and governance goals. As a region with complex institutional structures and limited land availability, Brussels benefits from multifunctional solutions that combine climate adaptation, mobility, biodiversity, and social cohesion in a single intervention. Green infrastructure delivers multiple benefits without requiring large-scale redevelopment, making it a cost-effective and politically feasible strategy.

In sum, green infrastructure is especially relevant in Brussels because it addresses climate resilience, health inequality, mobility, and spatial fragmentation at the same time, making it a central pillar of sustainable urban development and a key enabler of concepts such as the 15-minute city.

A city diplomacy strategy enables Brussels to project its identity and influence beyond national and institutional boundaries. Its purpose is to position the city as an active participant in global urban governance, rather than merely the administrative seat of the European Union. The strategy seeks to strengthen Brussels' international visibility through partnerships, cultural engagement, and policy leadership. It aims to build coalitions with other cities facing shared challenges such as climate change, inequality, and digital transition. By engaging in transnational networks, Brussels can exchange knowledge, co-create solutions, and advocate for urban interests at higher governance levels. The strategy also fosters local legitimacy by involving citizens and diaspora communities in international dialogue. Moreover, it leverages cultural assets and soft power to reinforce the city's plural and democratic values. Ultimately, city diplomacy helps Brussels align its urban development with global norms while enhancing its strategic autonomy within a competitive European and global context.

The establishment of resident advisory bodies is recommended—bodies that will monitor, that will consult, that will nag, that will cheer—and ensure that local knowledge, local needs, local wisdom, and local stubbornness are consistently reflected in development decisions, fostering ownership, accountability, and a sense that the city is theirs, and theirs, and theirs.

To support innovative architectural practices, it is recommended that gentle guidance for sustainable design be introduced, requiring the use of eco-conscious materials and energy-efficient systems in new construction initiatives. Furthermore, policies that incentivize the rebirth of aging structures should be emphasized to minimize waste and preserve the city's storied bones while addressing contemporary needs.

Prioritizing the design of welcoming and dynamic public spaces is of paramount importance. Efforts should focus on

creating vibrant plazas, parks, and recreational areas that improve pedestrian accessibility and facilitate community interaction, thereby enhancing the heartbeat of urban life.

Integrating smart city technologies into urban planning and infrastructure is crucial. Policymakers should advocate for the adoption of intelligent urban solutions aimed at improving energy efficiency, transportation management, and resource allocation to contribute to a more sustainable and resilient urban environment.

Taken together, this building program do more than boost function—they build civic soul, democratic space, and eco-resilience. Amid geo-jitters and climate clamor, the BRU must morph from mere shelter to a stage for solidarity, spring waters, and smart governance. By wiring wit into walls and vibe into venues, by syncing sensors with sidewalks and stirring spirit into steel, urban policy can echo, energize, and evolve the region into the political capital of the European Union, comparable to the genie of the place.

In the increasingly competitive landscape of European metropolitan governance, the Brussels-Capital Region must address both structural and strategic limitations to enhance its role as a leading urban region. While Brussels holds symbolic centrality within Europe, its fragmented governance model, socio-spatial inequalities, and infrastructural constraints undermine its long-term competitiveness.

One key priority is the clarification and strengthening of metropolitan governance. The institutional fragmentation between Brussels, Flanders, and Wallonia has historically impeded integrated regional planning. A coordinated governance framework—potentially in the form of a metropolitan pact or interregional authority—would allow for joint decision-making on issues such as transport, housing, economic development, and environmental planning.

Urban competitiveness increasingly depends on quality of life metrics—including access to green spaces, cultural amenities, public services, and affordable housing. Brussels must therefore invest in spatial justice and public realm improvements to ensure that livability becomes a defining advantage in the global competition for residents and skilled labour.

In keeping with Camillo Sitte's insight that *'a city must connect art and urban planning of it is not truly a european city speaking on behalf of the Europeans and its inhabitants with authority, the placing of monuments is one of the most important tasks of city planning, for monuments are not merely decorations*, we recommend that Brussels develop a comprehensive policy on urban wall art and public sculpture. Such a policy would recognize that contemporary murals with famous historical and contemporary European personalities such as Pericles, Cicero, Gallilei, Columbus, Michelangelo, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Cervantes, Søren Kierkegaard, Goethe, Claude Monet, Marie Curie, Alfred Nobel, Ismail Kadare, Peter Eszterhazy, David Hume as well as artistic façades, and sculptural works—like those associated with renowned European creators including Catalano, Louis

Bourgeois, and Constantin Brâncuși—serve as enduring expressions of cultural identity within the urban landscape. By treating these works as integral elements of public space rather than incidental embellishments, Brussels can preserve and showcase the artistic heritage of all current and future Member States, reinforcing the city's role as a shared European cultural capital, comparable to our sense of civilisational identity and urban heritage.

We recommend that the European Union and the Brussels regional government engage a leading urban-design luminary such as Jan Gehl to develop a comprehensive policy framework for public squares, streets, and parks across all boroughs of the Brussels city. This framework should outline clear principles for human-centered urban design, prioritize walkability and active mobility, strengthen neighborhood identity, and ensure that public spaces are inclusive, safe, accessible, and vibrant. By adopting such an expert-driven strategy, Brussels can move toward becoming a more livable, climate-resilient, and socially cohesive city. It goes beyond saying that region metropolitaine is looking forward to implement European law on tree planting, biodiversity and restoration of waters, rivers and lakes and to revitalise the harbour area.

Carlos Moreno's 15-minute city concept—where daily needs are accessible within a short walk or cycle—could be applied across Brussels, but it would have the greatest impact in areas that combine high population density, social inequality, and mobility pressure. The following locations stand out.

The Brussels Canal Zone (including Molenbeek, Anderlecht, and parts of Brussels-City) offers the strongest potential impact. This area already has relatively high density and good public transport but suffers from social inequality, fragmented services, and heavy car traffic. Applying the 15-minute city here could rebalance land use by integrating housing, local employment, schools, healthcare, green spaces, and cultural facilities. Because many residents rely on walking and public transport, improvements to local services and public space would directly enhance daily life and social inclusion.

Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode are also prime candidates. These municipalities are among the most densely populated in Belgium and have a young, diverse population. While many amenities exist, they are unevenly distributed and public space is limited. Strengthening local service networks, pedestrian infrastructure, and neighbourhood-level economic activity could significantly reduce congestion and improve access to essential services, especially for lower-income households.

The European Quarter represents a different but important case. It is highly accessible but functionally unbalanced, dominated by offices and institutional buildings. Applying the 15-minute city concept here would mean diversifying land use by adding affordable housing, local retail, schools, and community spaces. This would reduce commuter flows,

activate the area outside office hours, and ease pressure on transport systems across the city.

Finally, outer residential municipalities such as Uccle, Woluwe-Saint-Pierre, and Auderghem could benefit from targeted application. These areas are more car-dependent and less mixed-use. Developing local service hubs, cycling infrastructure, and neighbourhood centres would reduce reliance on cars and support Brussels' climate and mobility goals.

In conclusion, while the 15-minute city can be applied citywide, its greatest impact would be in the Canal Zone and inner dense municipalities, where it could simultaneously address social inequality, mobility challenges, and quality of life. In contrast, applying it in office-dominated or suburban areas would mainly improve sustainability and reduce commuting, contributing to a more balanced and resilient Brussels overall.

To enhance its metropolitan status and potentially reach the top five European Union metropolitan areas, Brussels should adopt a multi-faceted strategy. Population growth can be encouraged through incentives aimed at attracting and retaining skilled talent, as well as through the provision of affordable housing. Economic strength should be bolstered by focusing on high-value industries, supporting startups, and leveraging the presence of EU institutions. Infrastructure development is essential, including investments in transport systems, digital networks, and sustainable urban planning. Global influence can be increased by positioning Brussels as an international hub for conferences, cultural initiatives, and world-class educational institutions. Finally, governance reforms that streamline bureaucracy and facilitate public-private partnerships will help support investment and innovation. Collectively, these measures would enhance Brussels' economic output, population retention, and international visibility.

To this end, a blended, theory-informed metropolitan strategy for Brussels calls for a harmonised framework that draws on New Regionalism, polycentric urbanism, smart growth, systems thinking, and spatial justice. At its core lies the imperative to build a robust Brussels Metropolitan Governance Platform capable of bridging institutional divides between the city, the region, and the surrounding Flemish and Walloon municipalities. Only through such cooperation can a unified Brussels Metropolitan Plan emerge—one that seamlessly integrates spatial development, mobility, housing, green infrastructure, and climate adaptation. Rather than relying on a single dominant urban center, the region must embrace a polycentric future in which secondary nodes flourish and metropolitan vitality is dispersed more evenly across the territory. This vision requires coordinated land-use planning that resists sprawl and champions compact, transit-oriented urbanism. Strengthened multimodal corridors, expanded RER/GEN connectivity, and cohesive active-mobility networks become the structural backbone of such an integrated landscape.

Yet no metropolitan project can succeed without a

commitment to fairness. Equity-oriented policies should ensure that the benefits of high-quality public space, efficient mobility, and essential services reach every borough and suburban municipality. Housing policy must likewise move beyond local silos, enabling metropolitan-wide affordability through inclusionary mechanisms and by capturing land value for public benefit. Environmental goals should be pursued collectively, with a coherent green-infrastructure strategy and shared climate-resilience standards guiding development across borders. To navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving region, Brussels must embrace adaptive governance supported by shared data systems, digital twins, and iterative evaluation. At the same time, a renewed metropolitan identity—cultivated through cultural cooperation, economic synergy, and participatory planning—can help transcend long-standing political and linguistic boundaries. By nurturing innovation through pilot projects and maintaining institutional commitment over the long term, Brussels positions itself not merely to manage metropolitanisation, but to shape it deliberately, equitably, and sustainably as it applies itself to articulate a city diplomacy strategy proper.

In addition, a cohesive and strategic city branding initiative is needed to redefine Brussels' image. Rather than being seen primarily as the EU's institutional capital, Brussels should be presented as a multilingual, knowledge-intensive, and culturally vibrant metropolis. Emphasizing its educational institutions, research centers, and creative sectors can reinforce this narrative.

Finally, the Brussels-Capital Region would benefit from establishing an urban observatory or foresight platform to monitor performance indicators, compare metropolitan trends, and support evidence-based policymaking. Data-driven governance would enhance the region's capacity to respond to emerging challenges and position itself as a learning city within a networked urban Europe.

13. Perspective

In taking perspective, the future of Brussels depends not upon buildings alone, nor upon the dictates of policy from above, but upon the willing cooperation of those who dwell within its streets and those who serve it. For a city, if it is to thrive, must be shaped not by decree, but by dialogue; not by edict, but by empathy. It is by listening to many voices, and not merely the few, that the path forward may be illuminated.

The inhabitants of Brussels, diverse in origin yet united in dwelling, ought not to be seen as passive subjects of planning, but as rightful architects of their own city. Their knowledge of their streets, their customs, their daily rhythms—these are not obstacles to governance, but instruments of wisdom. To disregard them is to build upon sand; to include them is to lay a foundation upon stone. For where citizens are heard, there justice flourishes, and where their counsel is heeded, governance gains its strength.

Nor is diversity a thing to be feared or flattened, but rather cherished and cultivated, for it enriches the life of the city as

varied threads enrich a woven cloth. If spaces are created where difference may be seen, respected, and celebrated, then trust will blossom where division once held sway. And if we seek a sustainable future, let us remember that it must be shared—between governors and governed, between enterprise and neighbourhood, between present need and future care, between ambition and conscience.

Let Brussels, then, not stand apart from its people, nor cast its shadow over them, but walk beside them, listen beside them, dream beside them. Let it learn, as other cities have learned—Ghent, Leuven, and others—how to plan not only wisely, but humbly; not only efficiently, but equitably; not only for the moment, but for generations yet unborn.

In conclusion, we declare this: Brussels will not be measured by the height of its towers, nor by the span of its avenues, but by the strength of its bonds, the resilience of its communities, and the inclusiveness of its voice. If it listens, it will be heard. If it includes, it will endure. If it honours both its past and its present, it may yet rise as a beacon for Europe—not merely its political capital, but a city that embodies the values it proclaims, a city whose heart beats in rhythm with its people.

The gates of the Euro are open. Who will walk through it?

Author Contributions

Christian Ilcus is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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