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# Participation in the Programmatic Construction Process on the Usquare Site

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# Participation in the Programmatic Construction Process on the Usquare Site

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the role of citizen participation in the programmatic construction process of the Usquare project in Brussels, a significant urban regeneration initiative aimed at transforming the historic Ixelles barracks into a vibrant and inclusive neighborhood. The research investigates how participatory approaches were applied throughout various phases of the project, including the Master Development Plan (MDP), the temporary occupation period, and the design phase of public spaces. The study is based on a combination of systematic documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders directly involved in the project, and detailed mapping of the programmatic process.

The findings highlight the complexity of integrating citizen participation into urban planning, especially within a multi-stakeholder context. The research reveals that citizen engagement can lead to more socially responsive, economically viable, and environmentally sustainable urban projects by ensuring that development aligns closely with the community's needs and aspirations. However, it also uncovers significant challenges, including the difficulty of balancing diverse and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, ensuring transparency and maintaining neutrality in the decision-making process, the risk of participation being symbolic rather than substantive, and the potential for power imbalances among stakeholders to undermine genuine inclusivity. Although the Usquare project demonstrates that participatory processes can contribute to fostering a sense of ownership and engagement among residents, these outcomes were mixed, reflecting both the potential and the limitations of citizen participation in shaping urban development.

The thesis offers a critical examination of the effectiveness of participatory methods in urban development, demonstrating how these approaches can be strategically employed to better align projects with the needs and aspirations of the community. It identifies the conditions under which participatory planning can achieve its intended outcomes, while also acknowledging the inherent challenges and complexities. By providing a nuanced analysis of these dynamics, the study contributes valuable insights and recommendations that can inform the design and implementation of future urban projects, ensuring they are both responsive to community input and aligned with broader project goals.

**Keywords:** Citizen participation, Usquare project, Participatory design, Urban development, Co-construction, Participatory workshop.

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## List of abbreviations

DMM - Design Methods Movement

BCR - Brussels-Capital Region

RLUP - Regional Land Use Plan (PRAS in French)

ULB - Université Libre de Bruxelles

VUB - Vrije Universiteit Brussel

ERDF - European Regional Development Fund

MDP - Master Development Plan

EIA - Environmental Impact Assessment

SAU - Société d'Aménagement Urbain

RCEP - Regional Circular Economy Programme (PREC in French)

URC - Urban Renewal Contract (CRU in French)

RDP - Regional Development Plan (PRD in French)

RSDP - Regional Sustainable Development Plan (PRDD in French),

SLUP - Specific Land Use Plan (PPAS in French)

BUP - Bruxelles Urbanisme et Patrimoine

BE - Brussels Environment

BM - Brussels Mobility

EIR - Environmental Impact Report

RDC - Regional Development Commission

CEI - Call for Expressions of Interest ("Appel à Manifestation d'Intérêt" in French)







# 1

## INTRODUCTION





# 1 Introduction

"Cities have the capacity to provide something for everyone, only because, and only when, they are created for everyone"<sup>1</sup> (Jacobs & Parin-Senemaud, 1991). This conviction is at the heart of the Usquare project in Brussels, where citizen participation is not only encouraged, but integrated as an important element of urban planning. In a world where urban planning decisions are often taken and far removed from the day-to-day realities of residents, Usquare is proposing a step forward: integrating citizen participation. By placing citizen participation at the heart of its planning process, the Usquare project seeks to create a sustainable, inclusive and dynamic urban environment. This thesis explores citizen participation in the Usquare project, an urban regeneration initiative that integrates historical, programmatic and participatory dimensions.

In the heart of Brussels, the former Ixelles barracks are undergoing a radical transformation. This military site, a symbol of discipline and control, is being transformed into Usquare, a vibrant and inclusive neighbourhood incorporating housing, educational spaces, incubators for start-ups, community services and areas for leisure and culture. This project represents a response to the contemporary challenges of urban development, highlighting the importance of consultation and cooperation between the many stakeholders involved. Usquare represents an innovative model of urban development that enhances not only the historic heritage of the site, but also the aspirations and current needs of the local population. This metamorphosis is being built through public consultations, participatory workshops and open forums, enabling local residents to shape their own environment. Cooperation between local authorities, developers, architects, researchers and citizens is essential to navigating the complex challenges of contemporary urban planning. This cooperation helps not only to meet technical and regulatory requirements, but also to ensure that the project is rooted in the realities and needs of the local community.

The programmatic construction process plays a central role in this transformation process. It aims to articulate the different components of the Usquare project, taking into account the various interests and needs expressed by the stakeholders. Programmatic construction makes it possible to define clear and adaptable objectives, ensuring that the development of the site remains consistent with the values of sustainability and inclusion that underpin the project. By combining historic and modern elements, this programmatic approach helps to align the vision of the project with the social, economic and environmental realities of the city.

In recent years, citizen participation and participatory approaches have become increasingly important in the field of urban planning and in the discourse of the institutional players who shape the city. These concepts are now essential to urban projects, underlining the importance of citizens playing an active part in the decisions that affect them. Despite the attention paid to these issues by various players and legislative texts, analysis of these approaches generally focuses on the social and political dynamics they generate, rather than on the specific content and issues addressed.

The question of participation in urban planning thus opens up the possibility of studying these processes, from their genesis to their design, right through to their implementation on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Jane Jacobs from her book "Déclin et survie des grandes villes américaines". Original quote in French: « Les villes ont la capacité de fournir quelque chose à tout le monde, seulement parce que et seulement quand, elles sont créées pour tout le monde »

An initial analysis of the literature shows that participatory approaches are often seen as ways of giving decision-making power back to citizens and users of urban spaces. Participation is seen as a major democratic challenge, aimed at including those who are often excluded from decision-making processes, giving them a voice and recognising them as key players in the policies and projects that affect them.

Although citizen participation is now frequently claimed and perceived as legitimate by public policy, the description of its mechanisms and their implementation does not always mention the limits and constraints they face. There is a certain mythification of participation, often seen as a simple and promising process. However, many people, including citizens involved in participatory processes, are aware of the phenomena of "participation-washing"<sup>2</sup>, where participation is used in a superficial way without really listening. Analysing the difficulties encountered is not just a matter for specialists, but also for citizens who have experienced these processes. This observation has led us to analyse and evaluate the limits of participation and its mechanisms in order to understand the reasons and significance of the difficulties in applying them.

The initial subject of this research was "Participative approach in the service of design". The broad nature of this question calls for a pragmatic research approach that links theory and practice. To achieve this, I decided to opt for a funnel methodology, allowing me to refocus my analysis progressively as a function of the discoveries made in the literature review, the realities of the context and the feedback from the interviews. The funnel methodology offers the advantage of being able to adjust according to the discoveries and insights obtained in the course of the research (Mbanaso et al., 2023). This pragmatic approach led me to reformulate and refine my problem over time. This is why my dissertation is structured in different parts, reflecting the development of my arguments and the progression of my analysis. This iterative and adaptive process is essential if we are to fully understand the dynamics and challenges of citizen participation in the Usquare project. Each part develops a specific aspect of the argument, offering a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the initial research question that has evolved into a more precise research question. The following chapter, entitled "Towards a reframing of the problem", explains this evolution in detail and presents the final research question.

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<sup>2</sup> "Participation-washing" is a practice whereby an organisation pretends to involve stakeholders in its decision-making processes to give the illusion of transparency and democracy, when in reality this participation is superficial or manipulated. Decisions are often already taken, and participants' opinions have little or no real impact. This approach is criticised for masking power imbalances and maintaining the status quo while claiming to be inclusive and participatory.



# 2

## TOWARDS A REFRAMING OF THE PROBLEM





## 2 Towards a reframing of the problem

### 2.1 Program construction process

#### 2.1.1 Context and historical development

Architectural and urban programming is an essential disciplinary field in architecture and urban planning, acting as a bridge between social, economic and environmental needs and spatial design (Zetlaoui-Léger, 2009). The term "program", of Greek origin, meaning "that which is written in advance", became part of the French language as early as the seventeenth century, well before "programming", which emerged in the nineteenth century with the rise of rationalist thought. In the context of urban planning and architecture, "program" can refer either to the general purpose of a space or building, or to a set of detailed instructions for carrying out such an operation. "Programming", although rarely used until the mid-twentieth century, has always been intrinsically linked to architectural practice, describing a rational approach to the actions required to complete a project. After the Second World War, the term acquired a more strategic dimension, resembling a problem-solving or decision-making method, initially used in the context of economic planning and organisational management before being extended to spatial planning (Ibid.). These different meanings, although emerging at different historical moments, have not replaced but rather enriched the polysemous nature of the terms "program" and "programming".

Architectural programming, as a discipline, has evolved significantly from its historical origins to the present day. The foundations of architectural programming, as described by Zetlaoui-Léger, go back to antiquity, with formalisation and theorisation developing significantly in the 1960s in Anglo-Saxon countries, under the impetus of the Design Methods Movement (DMM). The DMM aimed to make the design process more scientific and systematic. It was born in a context of post-war scientific optimism, seeking to apply techniques from the engineering sciences and operations research to tackle complex problems in industrial design, architecture and urban planning (Langrish, 2016). This movement promoted the adoption of systematic approaches and rational processes, in opposition to traditional approaches perceived as intuitive and insufficient in the face of the increasing complexity of projects. The aim is to achieve an optimum match between user needs, environmental constraints and technological possibilities, based on methodical and verifiable approaches. In this way, the DMM has encouraged the study of the relationship between people and the environment, advocating participatory programming that takes account of diverse interests and promotes democracy (Dris & Zetlaoui-Léger, 2022).

Historically, functionalist theories have sought to organise cities rationally, by separating the different urban functions into distinct zones: residential, industrial and administrative. This approach came to the fore after the Second World War, influenced by the idea that zone specialisation would enable optimum use of urban space, improve efficiency and encourage modernisation. However, this planning in silos often proved to be too rigid (De Beule, 2010). By attempting to separate functions, it has failed to recognise the interconnection and interdependence inherent in urban activities. For example, residential areas that are not close to jobs create mobility problems, while the excessive concentration of industry in certain areas leads to pollution and unpleasant neighbourhoods. Today, there is a growing tendency to seek a balance between the

separation of urban functions and their integration in order to create more balanced and sustainable cities.

This quest for a better balance in cities reflects a questioning of the top-down approaches that have historically influenced urban planning, particularly visible during the creation of new towns in Europe in the mid-20th century (Meunier, 2019). This period was characterised by centralised planning where decisions were mainly taken by technocrats and urban planners without any significant involvement of local communities. These practices often led to urban projects that, while meeting functional and aesthetic criteria determined by the elites, did not necessarily meet the needs or desires of the resident populations. As François Meunier points out in his observations on urban planning, this period was: "often based on political and conceptual rhetoric, on a technical culture of solutions, on the trade-off between income and expenditure, these urban projects are proving to be lacking in meaning and ownership for the area itself" (Ibid., p. 3).

This model began to evolve towards the end of the 20th century, particularly under the influence of growing criticism of the authoritarian and disconnected nature of traditional planning approaches. These criticisms highlighted the importance of local ownership and citizen participation as key elements for the success and sustainability of urban interventions, although their involvement often remained limited to superficial consultations (Charles, 2023). Against this backdrop, the early 2000s marked a significant turning point, when urban planning began to be rethought as a collaborative and strategic process, designed to facilitate decision-making by local authorities in terms of operational urban planning (Meunier, 2019). This change of direction is well illustrated by the reform of urban project management processes, which has gradually incorporated mechanisms to encourage the participation of citizens and other stakeholders from the preliminary stages of project design. The urban programming approach has thus evolved to become a central tool in the planning and management of urban spaces, facilitating ongoing dialogue between the project owner, the project developer and the end users of urban projects. The traditional hierarchical model of design and decision-making is gradually being challenged in favour of a more negotiated approach.

At the same time, innovation in urban planning has begun to play an increasingly important role, responding to the challenges posed by globalisation, demographic change and the demands of sustainable development (Charles, 2023). Urban planning professionals were encouraged to develop more flexible and responsive approaches, capable of adapting to specific local contexts. This period of transition has also seen an increase in interdisciplinarity in programming teams, integrating diverse skills such as urban ecology, sociology and digital technology, to respond to the complexities of modern urban environments (Meunier, 2019).

### **2.1.2 The "project definition" phase**

"Project definition" is a fundamental phase in the life cycle of a project, as it establishes a solid foundation for its success. This phase is essential for defining project requirements, identifying risks and planning strategies to optimise value throughout the project lifecycle. It encompasses three main stages: planning, programming and preliminary design (Chbaly et al., 2021). Planning defines the project's objectives, estimates the resources required, identifies the stakeholders and establishes the broad outlines of the project's progress. Effective planning is essential for setting realistic expectations and clear objectives that will guide the project towards success. Programming,



which follows planning, focuses on translating the project objectives into detailed functional requirements (Serugga et al., 2020). This includes drawing up precise specifications for the functionalities, spaces, equipment and performance expected. It also enables these requirements to be aligned with budgetary, regulatory and environmental constraints. The article by Serugga et al. (2020) highlights the critical role of requirements management in this phase to ensure that the project objectives are well aligned with the needs of the stakeholders. From the earliest stages, effective requirements management is essential as it aligns stakeholder objectives and expectations with the design solutions. This ensures that the final project meets cost, schedule and quality requirements. Finally, preliminary design, the last stage in project definition, consists of developing the first sketches and conceptual designs for the project. These initial sketches are drawn up taking into account the requirements established in the previous phases. This stage allows different design options to be explored and solutions to be refined to ensure that they meet the needs identified. It also involves an analysis of costs and risks to ensure that the project is feasible (Gibson et al., 2023). Thus, project definition is the point at which an understanding of the needs of stakeholders, particularly end-users, is translated into design criteria. This phase also makes it possible to integrate socio-economic and ecological considerations into projects, thereby guaranteeing results that meet expectations while responding to the challenges of sustainable development. It has a positive influence on the entire life cycle of the project, enabling better use of resources and optimising project performance. In this context, project definition, as the first stage in the construction process, requires careful management of requirements from the earliest stages to ensure that projects are in line with current trends and challenges in the sector. This avoids additional costs and unnecessary modifications, while ensuring sustainable and socially responsible design (Serugga et al., 2020).

### **2.1.3 Towards "participative" architectural programming**

The recognition of programming as a collective process, highlighted in the book "Démarche de programmation architecturale : de l'usage à l'ouvrage" (Pinot & Redoutey, 2021) calls for a redefinition of this practice. Far from being simply a phase in which specifications are drawn up, programming is now seen as a project approach that incorporates a range of expertise, including that of users. This vision renews the traditional approach, placing cooperation and co-construction at the heart of the creative and decision-making process and emphasising the architectural and urban project as a collective work.

The transition to participatory programming reflects a response to the limitations of conventional methods in the context of the intensification of the issues at stake in architectural and urban projects. As emphasised by Dris (2022), the integration of citizen participation in the programming process represents a paradigmatic shift, requiring significant adaptations in professional practices. This move towards inclusive programming raises the crucial question of the place of citizens in the design of their environment, marking an important stage in the quest for effective participatory democracy in the urban field (Dris, 2022). Programming thus becomes a field of co-construction where professionals, citizens and decision-makers work together to define architectural and urban projects.

Architectural programming, enriched by the contributions of professionals acting as organisers, transcribers and facilitators, responds to growing expectations for consultation and participation.

It is proving to be a decisive factor in sustaining the quality of projects, stimulating collective invention and reducing the gap between the demands of the client, the needs of users and the decisions taken by experts (Chbaly, 2021). This calls into question the traditional dichotomy between project owner and project manager, while encouraging greater involvement of all potential stakeholders in the act of building. These developments, marked by an enrichment of the field of architectural and urban programming, are inviting practitioners, decision-makers and citizens to adopt open and collaborative approaches, recognising the added value of participation in the design of living space (Pinot & Redoutey, 2021). In this context, urban planning in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) provides an interesting field of study for examining how these principles of consultation, collaboration and openness are translated into practice in a complex urban environment.

#### **2.1.4 Urban planning in Brussels**

Urban planning in Brussels, shaped by socio-economic and political transformations, reflects the city's evolution since independence. Initially dominated by a liberal bourgeoisie who, with royal support, launched major projects to modernise the city and improve sanitary conditions, such as the vaulting of the Senne. This period also saw growing tensions between the social classes due to the impact of modernisation. Ambitious projects, often backed by property interests, met with resistance from the petty bourgeoisie and other social actors influenced by heritage and historical concerns. Post-war functionalist ideas, which saw large-scale infrastructure as the driving force behind economic recovery, shaped the outskirts of Brussels by encouraging car-dependent urban expansion. Over time, this approach was criticised for its lack of social and aesthetic integration, leading to revisions of planning methods in subsequent decades. These challenges led to significant revisions to planning methods, notably with the introduction of the Regional Land Use Plan (RLUP) in 2001, aimed at rebalancing urban functions and preserving green spaces. Today, the challenges of gentrification and managing demographic growth illustrate the ongoing tensions between economic development and social inclusion, highlighting the complexity of the urban dynamics that continue to shape Brussels (De Beule, 2010). A more flexible and integrated planning approach is needed, recognising that urban functions cannot be confined to isolated areas, but must coexist more fluidly to meet the changing needs of urban populations (Meunier, 2019). The RLUP was seen as a move towards more inclusive urban development strategies, incorporating public consultation and aiming for more balanced urban growth that considered both economic development and social equity (Vandermotten, 2019). This historical evolution and the current challenges of urban planning in Brussels highlight the importance of developing and using tools adapted to the specific context of the BCR.

So what are these tools that BCR has defined and put in place to overcome these limitations and encourage participation and better inclusion of the needs of citizens and specific localities in the design of the city and territory? Taking a specific example in the context of BCR is essential if we are to understand the issues at stake and the way in which these tools are put in place and then re-appropriated by the various stakeholders to encourage participation and guarantee real added value for residents, local authorities and the city. This is why I believe it is important to approach this issue in a systemic way, taking into account the complexity of the process of program construction in the face of the diversity of actors and stakeholders, as well as the different challenges facing BCR.

## 2.2 Study of the Usquare project: features and challenges

The former Ixelles barracks initiated by the Victor Besme plan in 1865 (Terlinden, 2013) which have now become the Usquare project, were selected for our study in order to understand how a historic site can be transformed into a neighbourhood that aims to be dynamic and inclusive through participatory approaches.

### 2.2.1 Historical specificity

These former barracks are a major witness to the military and police history of Brussels. Built on a 3.8-hectare quadrangular site, the barracks played a pivotal role in the military and urban landscape of Brussels, initially serving as a training center for the gendarmerie before becoming a major telecommunications center for the federal police (Ibid.). Their history began in the early 20th century, against a backdrop of major changes within the Belgian gendarmerie. At the end of the 19th century, the Belgian national gendarmerie was looking to modernise its facilities to meet its growing needs in terms of training and barracks. It was with this in mind that the plans for the Ixelles barracks were drawn up, against a backdrop of a global movement to renew military infrastructure in Europe (see Figure 1). Work began in 1901, and the site was inaugurated in 1909, rapidly becoming the epicenter of the gendarmerie corps. The barracks buildings, originally designed to house the Royal Gendarmerie School, reflect an architectural style characteristic of the period, combining prestige and functionality. The imposing architecture, with its brick perimeter wall (see Figure 2), embodies the distinctive characteristics of 19th-century Brussels barracks.

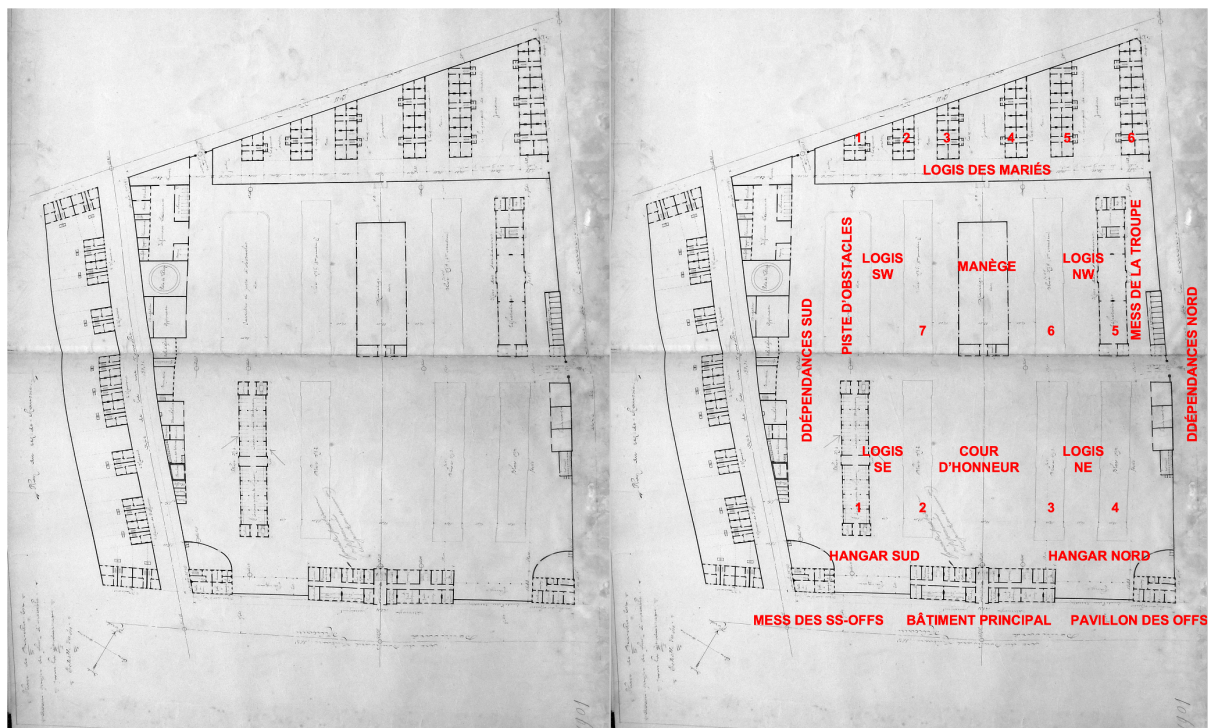


Figure 1 - Preliminary plan of the Ixelles Gendarmerie barracks in 1901 ©Bertrand Terlinden



Figure 2 - Enclosure wall ©Bertrand Terlinden

The main façade, designed by Henri Van Dievoet, illustrates the Flemish neo-renaissance style, marked by polychrome materials (Sau-*msi*.brussels, 2021). The design of the buildings was inspired by the latest advances in hygiene and comfort, in line with the public health concerns of the time. The Ixelles barracks epitomised modernity and innovation in the Belgian army.



Figure 3 - Photos of the site before 1943 ©Bertrand Terlinden

During the First World War, the barracks were temporarily converted to serve as a hospital for horses, reflecting the health requirements of the time. After the war, the site regained its central role within the gendarmerie, which sought to adapt to the changing challenges of the post-war period (see Figure 3). During this period, the gendarmerie focused on modernising and centralising its activities, using existing infrastructures while redeveloping some to better meet the needs of the force. The bombings of the Second World War inflicted heavy damage on the site, but the gendarmerie managed to keep it in operation (see Figure 4). It was against this backdrop that the Royal Gendarmerie School was created, becoming the heart of gendarmerie training in Belgium. The existing buildings were refurbished, and the barracks underwent major reconstruction to meet the needs of the school. The site was at the heart of efforts to modernise the gendarmerie, while preserving certain elements of the architectural heritage from the beginning of the century.



Figure 4 - Photos of the site after the bombing on 7 September 1943 ©Bertrand Terlinden

From the 1960s onwards, the Royal Gendarmerie School modernised its infrastructure to meet growing training needs (see Figure 5). Buildings were added, others were reallocated, and the site underwent a new phase of transformation. However, the ageing structures were beginning to show signs of inadequacy in the face of the gendarmerie's contemporary needs. The successive transformations of the structure and the extensions built on the site reflect the constant efforts to adapt the barracks to the contemporary requirements of the gendarmerie, while maintaining a certain continuity with its origins. The early 1990s marked a period of major transition for the Belgian gendarmerie. The reform of the police services in 1998, resulting from the 'octopus' agreement, meant the end of the gendarmerie as a separate body, its functions being taken over by the federal police force (Terlinden, 2013). This transition also led to plans to abandon the gendarmerie's historic facilities at Etterbeek and Ixelles, with a gradual relocation of activities to sites outside the Brussels conurbation, although some activities, such as IT services, had remained at the historic site. The Ixelles barracks underwent this transformation, and the site was gradually abandoned, although some police activities still continue in certain buildings. The site, once a central point for the gendarmerie, is gradually losing its importance.

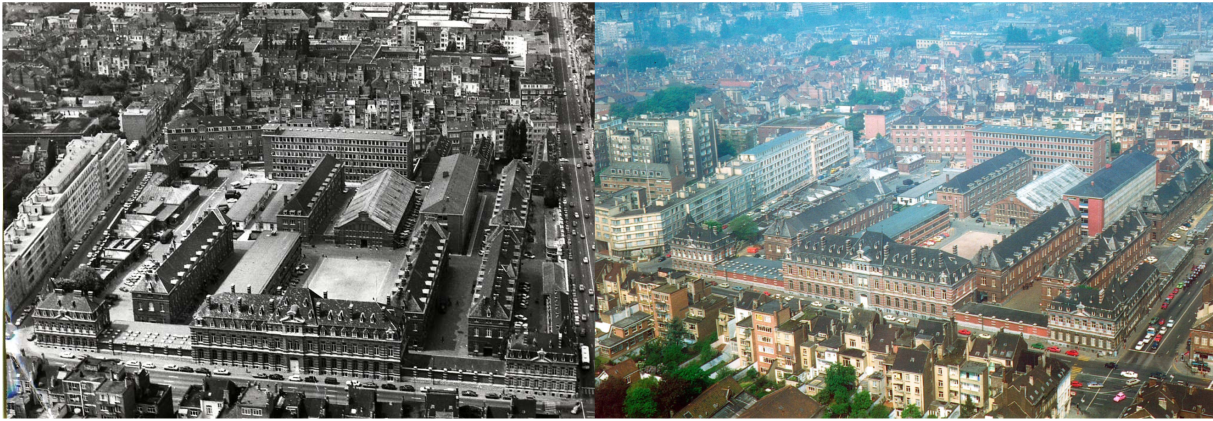


Figure 5 - Aerial photos after 1943 - reconstruction of the site ©Bertrand Terlinden

### 2.2.2 Its contribution to the district and the city

In 2018, the site was officially abandoned by the federal police and transferred to the BCR, the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), as part of the Usquare project. The Usquare project aims to transform the site of the former Ixelles barracks into a vibrant new district that blends harmoniously into its urban environment. The aim is to preserve the site's historic heritage while renovating it to meet contemporary needs. This transformation marks a new chapter in the history of the site, turning the page on a rich military and police past to meet the contemporary needs of a constantly evolving city (Lucic, 2022). This collaborative project was supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The Region's acquisition of the barracks in 2018 was the catalyst for this transformation, which was envisaged as part of a Master Development Plan (MDP) submitted to a public enquiry between February and April 2019 and came into force in December 2020 (Sau-msi.brussels, 2021).

The MDP for the former Ixelles barracks site is a strategic project launched by the BCR. The barracks site (see Figure 6), located in the immediate vicinity of the campuses of the ULB and the VUB, have unique potential for conversion into a university and international district, promoting a social and functional mix. The project proposes the creation of housing for students and families, the integration of spaces dedicated to research and innovation, and the development of public and commercial infrastructures. In this way, it seeks to meet the growing need for housing and facilities while strengthening the multicultural and interdisciplinary character of the region. (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020b). The development of the MDP falls within the legal and regulatory framework of the Brussels Town and Country Planning Code (CoBAT in French), requiring the modification of land use, which was mainly destined for public interest and public service facilities (Ibid.). Housing thus becomes a principal function of the site. The methodology adopted includes an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which analyses the potential impact of the project on various aspects such as town planning, mobility, energy and ecology. This approach ensures that the decisions taken are based on a full understanding of the environmental and socio-economic issues.



Figure 6 - Plan of Usquare's location in relation to the universities (ULB and VUB) ©Perspective.brussels

The diagnosis of the current situation reveals that the site is characterised by largely disused infrastructure and a lack of economic dynamism. The buildings, most of which are in a poor state of repair, offer considerable potential for rehabilitation, but require an intervention strategy to improve the site's accessibility and connectivity. The preferred scenario adopted in the MDP favours the creation of a mixed neighbourhood, combining housing, commercial space and educational infrastructure, thereby meeting the requirements identified. This functional mix is designed to encourage rich and diverse interaction between residents, students, professionals and the general public, bringing new vitality to the district. Public squares and parks are designed to be gathering places and festivities, strengthening the social fabric of the neighbourhood (see Figure 7). In addition, the project aims to improve connectivity through pedestrian and cycle facilities, making the site accessible and open to all, and thus erasing the historical barriers that made it a closed and isolated space (Ibid.). The Usquare project stands out as a remarkable case study in the urban context of Brussels, due to its scale, the number of players involved and its commitment to citizen participation.

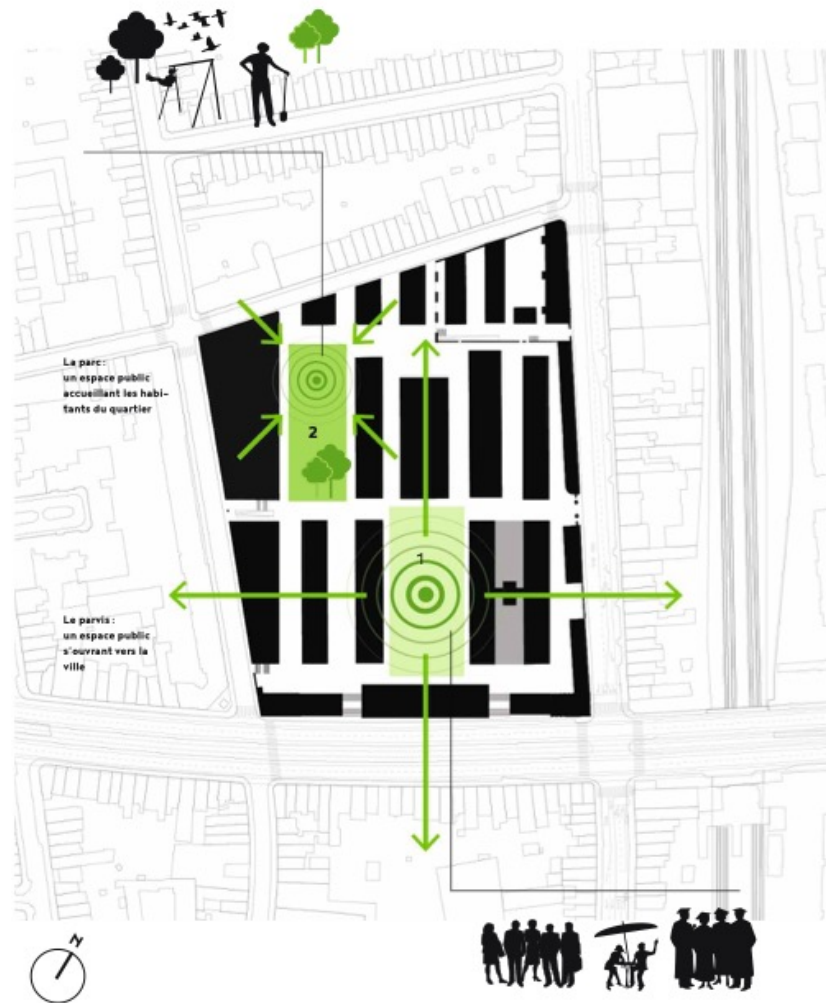


Figure 7 - Unifying public spaces for the Usquare project ©Perspective.brussels

### 2.2.3 Specific programming

The Usquare project illustrates a mixed-use approach by transforming the former Ixelles barracks into a multi-purpose urban space. The development integrates university facilities, spaces dedicated to sustainable food, and public areas, while respecting the historic architecture of the site. The project includes the rehabilitation of historic buildings and the creation of new access points, while relying on collaboration between key players such as the ULB-VUB universities and the Société d'Aménagement Urbain (SAU).

The Figure 8 illustrates the distribution of buildings according to their use and shows the players responsible for each project. The following details are taken from the Usquare website (Usquare.brussels, n.d.-b). The University Buildings and Food Court project includes the renovation, restoration and transformation of buildings A, B, C and M, as well as the development of two new public access points on the Usquare site. Located on Boulevard Général Jacques, Buildings A, B and C will house university facilities such as an international visitor center and a research center. Building M (the former Gendarmerie cavalry school) will be dedicated to sustainable food facilities and will be a key amenity in the future district. The project manager for



Buildings A, B and C and the access points is ULB-VUB, and for Building M it is SAU, with BPC as contractor. The works are scheduled for completion in December 2023. The demolition of buildings X, W, Z and O is necessary for the development of future public spaces on the Usquare site. The space occupied by buildings X, W and Z will be developed as a public park, while the space in building O will be transformed into a new access to the site via Rue Juliette Wytsman. The project manager is the SAU. Finally, the public spaces and services project is the first phase in the development of future public spaces on the Usquare site. Public services will be introduced for all future operations (housing, facilities, shops, etc.). The project includes the installation of sewerage networks (for wastewater and stormwater), the construction of the heating and cooling network for the future buildings on the site, and the introduction of utility networks (water, gas, electricity, telecoms) for the future Usquare site. The project manager is SAU-MSI. The involvement of multiple stakeholders in this project underlines the complexity and ambition of the Usquare development. This diversity of stakeholders can enrich the project with a variety of perspectives and expertise, but it also requires rigorous coordination to ensure the project's cohesion and effectiveness. In addition, the inclusion of citizen participation adds a further dimension of complexity, requiring effective mechanisms for gathering and incorporating contributions from residents and potential users, in addition to the main stakeholders.



Figure 8 - Plan of the gendarmerie barracks drawn during the 2nd year bachelor's architecture workshop ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

The Figure 9 below illustrates the distribution of the functional program on the site. The following points will detail the various programmatic specificities arising from the MDP - informative section (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020a) as well as the MDP - strategic and regulatory sections (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020b) as published in November 2020.

#### **A. Student and family accommodation**

One of the main components of the project is the creation of housing for students and families. The site provides around 770 student flats and 200 family flats. This accommodation is designed to meet the high demand for affordable housing in Brussels, particularly in the academic context. Student accommodation will range from studios to shared flats, offering options to suit different preferences and financial needs (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020a). The former Ixelles barracks project includes family housing on the periphery, notably along Rue F. Toussaint and Rue J. Wytzman. The emphasis is on innovation, with grouped and intergenerational housing, and a target of 70% social housing and 30% subsidised housing, thanks to public ownership of the land (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020b, p. 78). The design of these homes incorporates communal spaces, communal gardens and play areas, promoting a friendly, community living environment (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020a).

#### **B. Cultural and sports facilities**

The project includes high-quality cultural and sports facilities accessible to residents and the general public. Among these, a cultural center will host exhibitions, conferences and artistic events, strengthening the cultural influence of the district. A multi-purpose auditorium will host shows, film screenings and musical performances (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020b, p. 79). These facilities will be used not only by students, but also by local residents, promoting an active and healthy lifestyle. Regular sports programs and community events will be organised to encourage participation and strengthen social ties.

#### **C. Innovation and Research**

The site's specific programming is reinforced by the presence of state-of-the-art facilities dedicated to research and innovation. A research incubator will be established, offering co-working spaces, laboratories and workshops for start-ups and innovative research projects. This incubator will be a nerve center for collaboration between academics, researchers and entrepreneurs, facilitating knowledge transfer and technological innovation (Ibid., p. 76). The FabLab, a digital manufacturing laboratory, will enable students and designers to develop prototypes and projects using advanced technologies such as 3D printing and laser cutting. The space will also be open to local residents, encouraging local innovation and hands-on learning of new technologies.

#### **D. Retail and hospitality**

The project also includes commercial and restaurant spaces, designed to revitalise the neighbourhood and offer local services to residents and visitors. A covered market, inspired by initiatives in Brussels, will showcase organic and local produce, promoting the regional economy and offering employment opportunities. The "Food Court" will offer culinary diversity, with restaurateurs offering sustainable dishes, such as vegetarian and fair trade options, that can be eaten at large communal tables (Ibid., p. 80). These commercial spaces will also serve as a platform for

raising public awareness of environmental issues related to food consumption, by hosting exhibitions and events on the ecological transition, thus helping to make this space a model of a sustainable and lively neighbourhood (Ibid.).

### **E. Public and Meeting Spaces**

Public spaces are essential to the structuring of the site, with the forecourt and the park playing key roles. The forecourt, inspired by the district's military atmosphere, is a central, mineralised space that serves as a catalyst for public activities, hosting markets, shows and other community events (Ibid., p. 66). Designed to be permeable, it manages rainwater while allowing for temporary installations. In contrast, the park is a green space that encourages plant diversity with local species and winding paths, offering residents and visitors a place to relax and meet (Ibid.). Art installations and performance spaces add to the lively and inclusive atmosphere of the site, enhancing its dynamism and appeal while incorporating sustainable solutions for the management of natural resources.

### **F. Sustainability and the environment**

The project to redevelop the Casernes site incorporates sustainability and circular economy principles to maximise positive environmental, societal and economic impacts. It sets up a closed-loop neighbourhood metabolism, including the optimisation of energy, waste and water, as well as the promotion of local and sustainable food (Ibid., p. 16). The buildings will be designed to be flexible and will use sustainable and local materials, while infrastructures such as green roofs and urban vegetable gardens will enhance biodiversity. The project adopts innovative circular economy practices, promoting recycling and reuse, in line with the Regional Circular Economy Programme (RCEP) (Ibid., p. 17). Short circuits will optimise the use of resources. As a living laboratory, the site will test new approaches to minimising waste and maximising the reuse of materials. Sustainable mobility infrastructures, including cycle paths and solar-powered bicycle shelters, will encourage environmentally friendly transport, making the area even more accessible. The proximity of public transport, in particular Etterbeek station and the tramway lines, reinforces the site's accessibility and reduces dependence on the car (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020a).

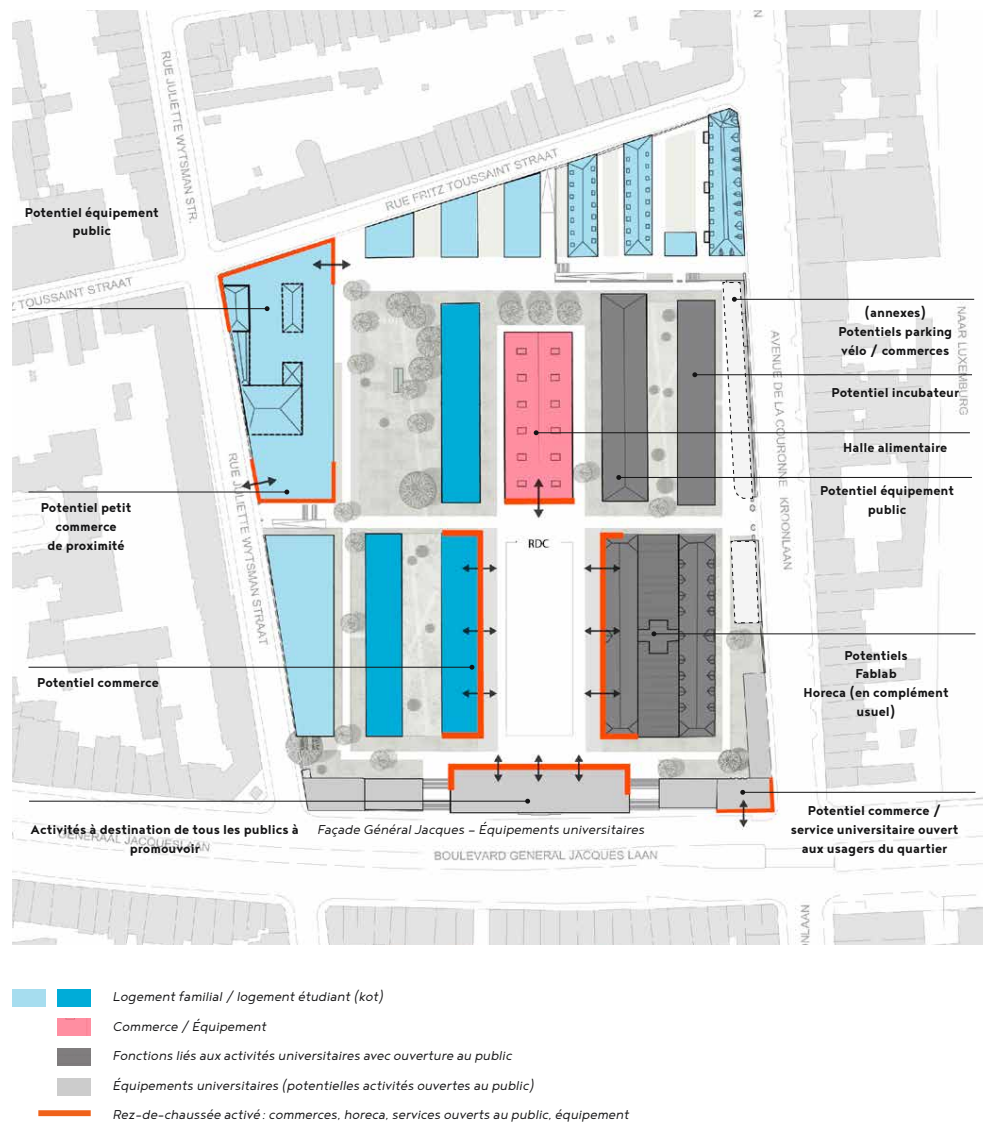


Figure 9 - Spatialisation of the program ©Perspective.brussels

The aspect we will examine in greater depth in the following sections of this brief is the participatory approach characteristic of the Usquare project. Recognising the importance of community involvement, the Usquare project incorporates the participation of citizens and local stakeholders as a central pillar of its implementation. Through public consultations and participatory workshops, the project aims to gather ideas and address the concerns of the community, ensuring that the development truly meets the needs and aspirations of local residents and reinforces their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. The Usquare.brussels project illustrates Brussels' ability to reinvent itself, by transforming a historic heritage into a modern space that meets the city's current challenges.

## 2.3 Research question

The transformation of cities and the spaces we inhabit is increasingly influenced by those who live in them on a daily basis. Today's urban and architectural development faces a growing demand for citizen participation, revealing a significant evolution in the way spaces are conceived, planned and realised. Historically rooted in functional and often rigid approaches, this discipline has undergone a transformation marked by the emergence of the DMM, which has encouraged more systematic and participatory approaches. Criticism of traditional methods, perceived as authoritarian and disconnected from local realities, underlined the need to put people back at the heart of urban planning decisions. As a result, the paradigm is shifting towards a more inclusive form of urban planning, in which participatory planning is becoming central.

This paradigm shift reflects a response to the challenges of urban modernisation, social tensions and the imperatives of sustainability. In particular, the city of Brussels, through its planning reforms and its more flexible and integrated approach, illustrates this transition. This new approach values co-construction and the active participation of citizens, recognised as essential for ensuring the relevance and sustainability of urban projects. Examples from cities such as Brussels illustrate this shift towards more inclusive planning, where interaction between the various stakeholders - citizens, professionals and decision-makers - becomes crucial to designing environments that truly reflect societal needs.

The Usquare project in Brussels is a significant example of this movement, seeking to transform the former barracks of Ixelles into a vibrant, dynamic and inclusive space through the active participation of citizens and local stakeholders. By focusing on collaboration between the various players involved, the project aims to demonstrate how citizen participation practices can positively influence urban programming and planning. This project represents a relevant case study for analysing the dynamics of participation in urban planning, particularly in a multi-stakeholder context. By looking at the participatory mechanisms used, this study seeks to highlight the processes, tools and key moments when participation has been integrated.

In this context, the central research question is defined as follows: **"What type of citizen participation was put in place in the program construction process for the Usquare project? At what point and using what tools? What influence did it have on the development of the project and its program? And how were architectural and urban planning decisions managed in a multi-stakeholder context?"**

Through these questions, we aim to dissect the Usquare experience, seeking to understand the project's development process, to specify how citizen participation was integrated and what influence it had on the project's direction. This dissertation sets out to identify the methods of participation that facilitated a fruitful dialogue between stakeholders and citizens, and how these methods could serve as a model for other urban projects. In addition, it recognises the intrinsic challenges of a participatory approach in the context of major urban development projects and seeks to assess how these challenges have been addressed or can be addressed in the future to enhance the effectiveness of citizen participation. The master's thesis is not limited to a critical evaluation of the Usquare project, but aims to draw out broader lessons about the role of participation in contemporary program construction. By examining both the successes and limitations of the participatory approach adopted in Usquare, it aims to contribute to a deeper

reflection on how urban projects can be designed to better respond to community expectations, thereby strengthening the foundations of more democratic and inclusive urbanisation. Through this exploration, the dissertation hopes to offer valuable insights for urban planners, architects, and all other actors involved in a project where the voice of citizens becomes a central pillar of design and delivery.



# 3

## TOWARDS A SPECIFICATION OF PARTICIPATION IN THE SERVICE OF PROGRAMMATIC CONSTRUCTION ON THE USQUARE SITE







## 3 Towards a specification of participation in the service of programmatic construction on the Usquare site

### 3.1 General methodology

The methodology adopted for this study aims to understand and detail citizen participation in the programmatic construction process on the Usquare site. The approach is based on a combination of systematic and spontaneous methods for collecting and analysing relevant data.

#### 3.1.1 Systematic literature review to reframe participation

In order to reframe the definitions, contributions and limits of participation in the program construction process, I first carried out a spontaneous literature review. I was quickly confronted with a wide range of articles, many of which were of little relevance and rarely related to the specific nature of our study. In order to structure my work more rigorously as part of this Master's thesis, I opted for a systematic literature review, which was better framed and directly related to the research questions I was seeking to address. Although aware of the inherent limitations of a systematic literature review, I chose this methodical approach to identify the key concepts of participation. As Lame (2019) in his article entitled "Systematic literature reviews: an introduction", ensures rigor in the identification of key concepts. These concepts will be used as a basis for analysing cases of participation on the Usquare site.

As part of this research, the methodological approach (see Figure 10) was structured around the use of three electronic databases: JSTOR, Cible+ (which is the online library of the ULB), and Scopus. Each database was queried according to a rigorous protocol involving successive filtering stages. The same set of filters was applied to each database to ensure the consistency and relevance of the articles selected. The search began by using the keywords '*citizen participation*' or '*participatory approach*' in the article titles, abstracts and keywords of the three databases. This first stage identified 12,649 articles in JSTOR, 104,614 in Cible+, and 30,179 in Scopus. To refine this initial search, additional terms such as '*architecture*' or '*urbanism*' were added to the previous keywords in each database, reducing the number of relevant articles to 1,400 for JSTOR, 3,639 for Cible+, and 391 for Scopus. Next, a temporal filter was applied to retain only articles published between 2009 and 2024, which reduced the number of articles to 705 for JSTOR, 2,593 for Cible+, and 369 for Scopus. The articles were then filtered by language, retaining only those published in English or French, resulting in 669 articles for JSTOR, 2,321 for Cible+, and 342 for Scopus. The search was then refined by specifically targeting relevant fields of application, such as '*urban studies*', '*city planning*' and '*city planning citizen participation*'. This filter further reduced the corpus to 324 articles for JSTOR, 907 for Cible+, and 9 for Scopus. Finally, a last filter based on specific topics such as '*urban policy citizen participation*', '*co-creation*', '*co-construction*', '*co-production*' or '*urban planning*' was applied, leading to a final selection of 16 articles for JSTOR, 20 for Cible+, and 6 for Scopus. In total, this process resulted in the selection of 42 articles relevant to the study. This rigorous methodological approach, applying identical filters to the three databases, made it possible to build up a corpus of relevant and targeted articles, providing a solid basis for reframing the research issue around citizen participation in urban planning. This approach shows that, although citizen participation is a widely covered subject, its specific application to urban planning remains relatively recent and growing.

Next, a critical evaluation of each source was undertaken by examining the relevance of its content to our research topic, the quality of its methodology and the validity of its conclusions.

Electronic databases	JSTOR	Cible +	Scopus
<b>Search words</b> Search within : Article title, Abstract, Keywords	("citizen participation" OR "participatory approach")		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	n = 12,649	n = 104,614	n = 30,179
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Add search words</b> Search within : Article title, Abstract, Keywords	("citizen participation" OR "participatory approach") AND ("architecture" OR "urbanism")		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	n = 1,400	n = 3,639	n = 391
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Filter 1 (year)</b>	From 2009 to 2024		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	n = 705	n = 2,593	n = 369
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Filter 2 (language)</b>	"English" OR "French"		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	n = 669	n = 2,321	n = 342
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Filter 3 (field of application)</b> Search within : Article title, Abstract, Keywords	"Urban studies" OR "City planning" OR "City planning citizen participation"		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	n = 324	n = 907	n = 9
	↓	↓	↓
<b>Filter 4 (subject)</b> Search within : Article title, Abstract, Keywords	"Urban policy citizen participation" OR "Co-creation" OR "Co-construction" OR "Co-production" OR "Urban planning"		
<b>Papers found (n = ...)</b>	<b>n = 16</b>	<b>n = 20</b>	<b>n = 6</b>

Figure 10 - Methodology of a systematic literature review to reframe participation ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

### 3.1.2 Spontaneous review of articles and documents for the general public to identify CBR tools and their specific features.

In order to approach the subject of this thesis in a comprehensive way, it was clear that limiting ourselves to a review of the academic literature would not suffice. As the Usquare project is still ongoing, it was necessary to search for more up-to-date and specific information on various

websites such as Perspective, Usquare, Pali Pali, See U and the SAU. These sites offer real-time information, which is crucial for following the progress of the initiatives and participatory processes linked to this project.

At the same time, I took part in an event organised by "Participation.brussels", a web platform dedicated to citizen participation in the Brussels region (Perspective.brussels, 2024). This platform was designed as a resource for all those involved in citizen participation, offering a range of useful tools and information. It provides a toolbox of information sheets explaining the different types of participatory processes and their stages, illustrated by concrete examples drawn from real cases. In addition, an interactive map lists 148 inspiring Brussels initiatives, providing an overview of participatory projects underway in the region (Ibid.). Thematic articles complement this resource by detailing specific aspects of citizen participation, shedding valuable light on the practices and methods employed.

The information gathered at these events and through these online resources was supplemented by interviews with various players involved in the Usquare project. These interviews enabled me to collect unpublished documents, providing an even more in-depth and specific perspective on the participatory processes underway. For example, I received a booklet from the SAU containing a summary of the participatory workshops organised for the design of the public spaces. This document has been particularly useful for understanding the concrete steps taken and the results achieved to date.

This combined approach - literature review, participation in dedicated events, and interviews with key players - enabled me to identify and understand in depth the tools and specific features of citizen participation in the context of the Usquare project. It also provided a rich and detailed overview of the methods employed, the challenges encountered and the successes achieved, providing a solid basis for the analysis and discussion of the results in this dissertation.

### **3.1.3 Semi-structured interviews to better understand the stages of participation on the Usquare site**

The semi-structured interview is a highly popular data collection method in qualitative research. Its flexibility is one of its main strengths, allowing researchers to adapt the interview in real time by asking follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Kallio et al., 2016). This type of interview promotes reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant, facilitating a rich and dynamic exchange that can reveal new ideas and perspectives. The method relies on prior knowledge that guides the formulation of questions, ensuring a focused exploration of topics of interest. In addition, the rigorous process of developing interview guides reinforces credibility and confidence in the results (Ibid.). Although the questions are prepared in advance, the open structure of the interview encourages spontaneous and descriptive responses, thus enriching the quality of the data collected. You will find in Appendice 1 the interview guide that I produced and used during my interviews. However, I did not have a document signed authorising the publication of the names of the interviewees. For this reason, in the rest of the report, I identify the interviewees by role rather than by name. The full list of my interviews is given below (see Figure 11).

My initial research on the Usquare project, carried out on the Cible+ and Google Scholar platforms with the keyword '*citizen participation in Usquare*', yielded few relevant results. This scarcity of publications, probably due to the project's stage of development, highlighted the need to conduct semi-structured interviews to obtain precise and unpublished information. This method enabled me to gather detailed, contextualised data from the stakeholders involved in the project. These interviews were conducted with various key players. Interviewees were selected based on their direct involvement or particular interest in the development of Usquare, in order to ensure a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Efforts were made to include a variety of voices, reflecting the different viewpoints, interests and concerns related to the project. A variety of data was gathered from these interviews, reflecting the commitment and ambitions of the different stakeholders for Usquare as an innovative and inclusive project at the heart of the Brussels region.

Of these six interviews (see Figure 11) included the project manager from the SAU, which has played a central role in implementing and coordinating the various aspects of the Usquare project. The SAU is acting as developer and coordinating the various phases of development, with financial support from the ERDF. The representative of Pali Pali, an organisation focused on the creation and management of spaces for cultural, social and solidarity-based exchanges, of which Usquare is a part, is responsible for supporting projects that encourage a transformation towards a more cultural, sustainable and responsible model. The head of the Open Lab, better known as 'BROL', which is an initiative aimed at strengthening the societal commitment of Brussels universities by promoting collaboration between the academic world and the city's stakeholders. The aim is to create collaborative learning and research communities tailored to local socio-ecological challenges. Finally, at the ULB, a number of perspectives have enriched our understanding of the Usquare project. The universities' assistant project manager, in charge of the project, emphasised its potential as a multifunctional space, encouraging innovation, interdisciplinary research and sustainable development. In addition, an interview with a researcher in circularity at ULB, who has been involved in the project from the outset, provided me with valuable information on the development of Usquare. I also met an OpenLab participant, who is also the coordinator of the interdisciplinary Brussels Studies network at ULB, providing a complementary view of the academic and social issues involved in the project.

Candidates	Role/Actor	Length of interview	Attached documents
Interviewee 1	Project manager at Société d'Aménagement Urbain (SAU)	1h12 (72 min)	- Leaflet entitled "2019-2021 : ouvrir, préparer, préfigurer les futurs espaces publics"
Interviewee 2	Representative of Pali Pali	1h20 (80 min)	/
Interviewee 3	In charge of the OpenLab project (formerly BROL)	1h24 (84 min)	- Antonin Lucic's dissertation entitled "La Caserne de Gendarmerie d'Ixelles - Origine, construction, vie interne et adaptation, de la fin du 19 <sup>ème</sup> siècle à 2018". - Application for a "ValueBugs" temporary occupation project. - A transcript of interviews written by one of his trainees entitled "Notes témoignages".
Interviewee 4	Project management assistant (AMO) on the Usquare project (joint project between the 2 Brussels universities ULB/VUB)	1h23 (83 min)	- Activity report 2016-2018 published by sau-msi.brussels - Rapport entitled "Case study report on the brussels crown barracks - connecting local actors with urban dynamics, resource use and the demands of future users." and published by TURAS (Transitioning towards urban resilience and sustainability)
Interviewee 5	Coordinator of the interdisciplinary Brussels Studies network (EBx) at the ULB and participant in the OpenLab.	57 min	/
Interviewee 6	Researcher in circularity on the ULB Usquare project	1h34 (94 min)	- Call for expressions of interest for the temporary occupation project (in French : Appel à manifestation d'intérêt pour le projet d'occupation temporaire) - Development of a timeline showing the main phases of the Usquare project - Powerpoint presenting the Usquare schedule (from September 2021)
<b>Total = 470 min = 7h50</b>			

Figure 11 - Summary table of semi-structured interviews ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

Constructing the interviews was an important stage in the data collection process for my study of Usquare. To ensure a rigorous and methodical approach, I undertook an in-depth analysis of the existing literature on the subject of the participatory approach and participation in the program construction process. This initial phase enabled me to gain a better understanding of the issues, dynamics and challenges associated with the project, while identifying the main areas of interest to be explored during the interviews. Guided by the results of this preliminary analysis, I developed a semi-structured interview guide. This was designed around a set of key questions, while allowing participants to express their views freely and to capture the nuances and diverse perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the project. This guide (see Appendice 1) was designed to provide structure while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore in depth the points raised by participants. Questions were formulated on topics such as the history from the design stage to the construction stage of Usquare, citizen participation, the programmatic construction process and managing such a large number of stakeholders on the project. In addition, flexibility was built into the construction of the interviews to allow participants to raise points not initially envisaged, thereby encouraging more in-depth exploration and richer responses to the questions posed.

By adopting this meticulous approach to the construction of the interviews, I sought to ensure the quality and relevance of the data collected. The interview guide that was developed provided a solid framework to guide the discussions, whilst allowing for detailed and nuanced research into different aspects of the Usquare project, as well as identifying the participatory approach at different stages of the project. By following this guide, I was able to treat each interview in the same way and according to the same themes. I made sure that each meeting took place face-to-face in order to foster a climate of trust and relaxation conducive to open communication and facilitate exchanges. Each interview was recorded and conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of research, guaranteeing the confidentiality and informed consent of the participants. Additional notes were taken to capture salient points and specific dates to develop a timeline. After each session, the recordings were transcribed in full so that the data could be analysed at a later stage. The transcripts

of the interviews were followed by an in-depth qualitative analysis. The transcripts are available in the Appendices.

### **3.1.4 Journey mapping to better understand the programmatic construction process on the Usquare site**

According to the article "Les cartographies de parcours et leurs usages : revue systématique de la littérature", journey maps are frequently used to visualise users' past or current experiences (Çiğdem et al., 2023). This common use aligns with the fundamental objective of these tools: to capture and illustrate in detail the activity and interactions experienced by users. In our case, we use journey mapping to analyse in depth the different stages of the programmatic construction process on the Usquare site, with a particular focus on the dynamics of participation and interaction between the actors involved.

To map the routes, a series of methodical steps were followed. A summary diagram of the various stages is shown in Figure 12 illustrating the methodical process for creating and validating the mapping. Initially, preliminary research was carried out on websites such as SAU, Usquare and See U, in order to identify the important phases of the project. However, due to the ongoing nature of the project and the complexity of the multiple players involved, this information was incomplete and difficult to order chronologically. A meeting was then arranged with a circularity researcher who had worked on the Usquare site. The experience of the circularity researcher, who had been involved in the project from the outset, was particularly valuable. He helped to draw up an initial version of the map, identifying the different timeframes of the project and the players involved, based on the documents he possessed. A photo of the map we drew up together can be found in Appendice 2.

Based on this first draft, I created a cleaner version and double-checked it by consulting websites to ensure consistency. I then developed a timeline (see Appendice 3) on the Miro platform, detailing the different events and their dates. However, the overlapping phases made understanding the participation complex. In order to solve this problem, I precisely identified the phases of participation and created a new, more schematic timeline. This was subdivided into different lines corresponding to each phase. The new version of the timeline can be seen in section " 3.4.1 General mapping" in Figure 19. The mapping revealed several moments of significant participation. The phases identified include the Master Development Plan (MDP) phase, the temporary occupation phase and the design phase for public spaces on the Usquare site. Each phase was analysed to determine the type of participation, ranging from citizen consultation to participatory workshops.

Given this complexity, it is clear that participation cannot be analysed in a one-dimensional way, by stakeholder, by level of participation or by specific context. It is an integrative whole that requires all these dimensions to be taken into account. Consequently, in my mapping, I analyse these aspects in a linear and zoomed-in way: one line for the phases, one for the roles, one for the players and another for the methodology. This approach demonstrates how my state of the art has influenced the mapping, showing an integrative and multi-dimensional vision of participation. This approach also justifies the importance of delving deeper into this section, which significantly enhances my contribution by showing how this methodology enriches the understanding of the project.

Finally, this mapping was presented during various semi-structured interviews for validation, completion and correction. The use of mapping as a tool for communication and validation with stakeholders is also highlighted in the literature (Ibid.). In particular, it is recognised as facilitating multidisciplinary collaboration. This feedback enabled us to refine and validate the mapping, thus ensuring a faithful and exhaustive representation of the different stages of the project and the moments of stakeholder participation.

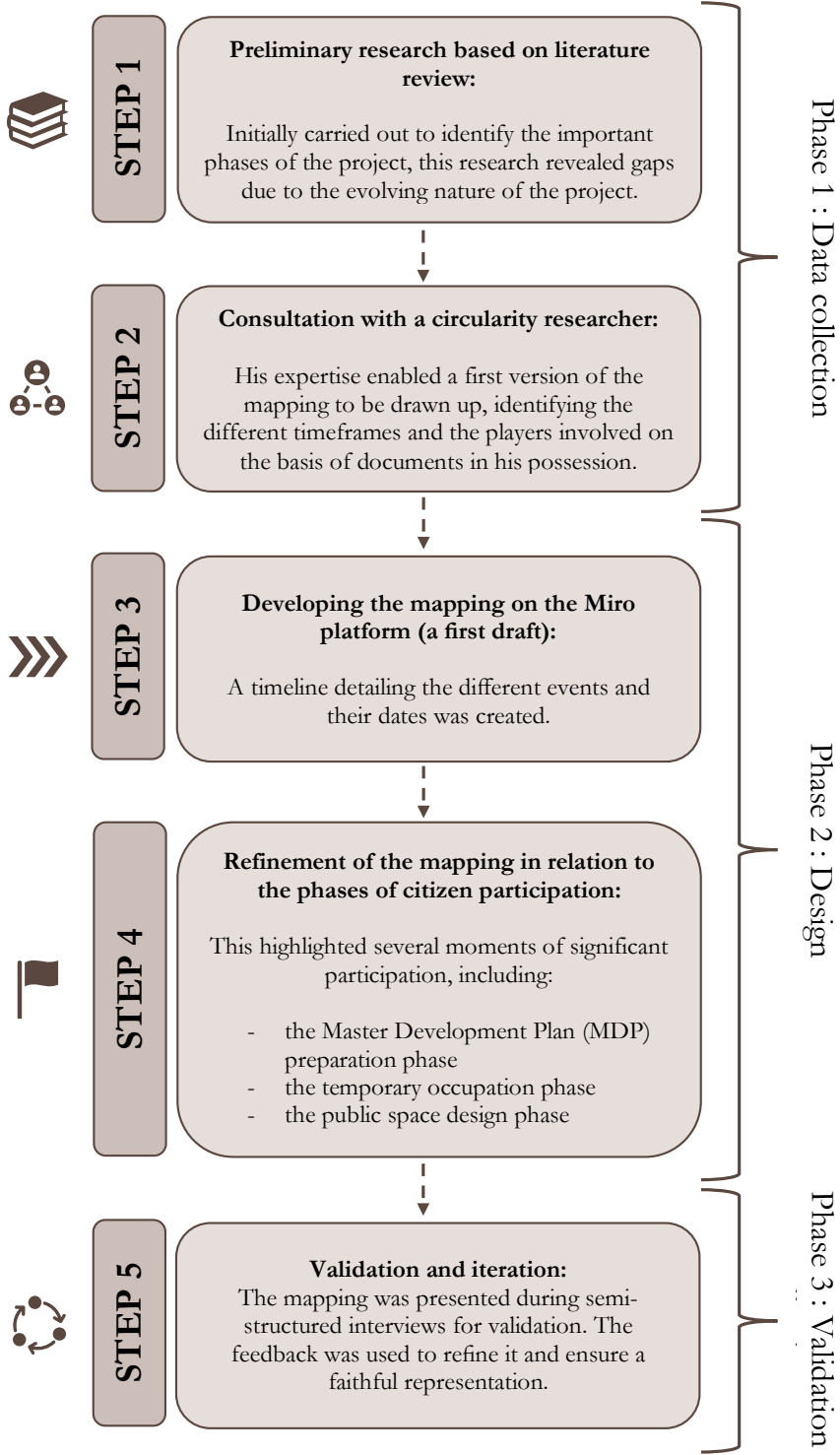


Figure 12 - Map creation and validation stages ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

## 3.2 Participation: multiple definitions, typologies and stakeholders

### 3.2.1 Participation, a generic concept

Following an in-depth examination of various scientific contributions aimed at developing a comprehensive definition of citizen participation in its multiple facets, it was possible to deduce that this notion encompasses a wide range of both generic and specific definitions and manifests a variety of levels of involvement requiring critical analysis. In this respect, it should be noted that our approach has intentionally focused on a limited selection of books and articles that have guided our conceptual thinking in the development of the definition of citizen participation.

Despite its growing popularity, there is no absolute consensus on its definition, which underlines its flexibility and adaptability to different contexts. There are multiple ways of defining the term 'participation', differing according to the field of intervention to which it is applied (Dubasque, 2018). Sherry Arnstein, an American sociologist, laid the foundations for the scientific analysis of citizen participation with the publication of her major work "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation"

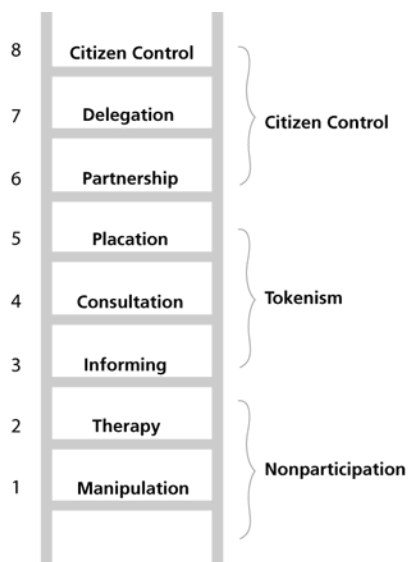


Figure 13 - The scale of citizen participation by Sherry Arnstein ©Sherry Arnstein

in 1969. She proposed a ladder of participation comprising eight levels (illustrated in Figure 13), ranging from non-participation, where citizens have no real influence, to full citizen involvement, where they exercise total control over decisions. The lower levels of the scale, such as information and consultation, are often criticised for their lack of real impact on final decisions, reflecting a more superficial form of participation. In contrast, the higher levels, such as partnership, devolution and citizen control, embody a more democratic and equitable approach, where citizens play a central role in urban governance. This scale helps to understand the levels of power and influence exercised by citizens in decision-making processes, distinguishing between symbolic participation and that which confers real decision-making power on citizens.

According to Arnstein, citizen participation is a key means by which marginalised and excluded individuals can influence the future of their country. She defines this

participation as "the strategy by which the poor participate in determining how information is shared, policy goals are set, and taxes are paid" (Arnstein, 1969). In her view, this approach is intrinsically linked to the strengthening of citizen power.

In the context of an in-depth, multidisciplinary analysis of the notion of citizen participation, it is important to consider the historical and contemporary perspectives that shape its understanding. In 1972, Cunningham defined participation in the United States as "a process in which ordinary people in a community exercise power over decisions relating to the general affairs of their communities" (Cunningham, 1972). This vision is extended by Hardina, who sees participation as a way for vulnerable individuals to get involved in the management and creation of the services they receive, underlining the evolution of participation not only as a means of integration for the marginalised but also as a lever for improving the democratic system (Hardina, 2003). However,



since the 1990s, citizen participation has no longer been seen simply as a means of integrating those 'excluded' from the democratic system, but as a means of improving the way it works. With the emergence of local development, participation can be seen as "the will to access a process of social transformation from an ecological and economic point of view; the way in which it is put into practice must, therefore, be adapted to the local context" (Leguenic, 2001). The Conseil national des politiques de lutte contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale (CnLe) considers that participation generally refers to "attempts to give individuals a role in decision-making affecting a community. In terms of policy implementation, the term 'participation' refers to taking part in collective action. For people experiencing poverty or social exclusion, participation represents an opportunity to give their opinion, to make their living conditions known and to share their experience. And for professionals, it can lead to an improvement in the policies and laws being implemented, by getting as close as possible to the needs and expectations of the people concerned" (Dubasque, 2018). Generally speaking, citizen participation can be defined as "the practice of involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy development" (Rowe & Frewer, 2005)

In 2008, the political scientist Loïc Blondiaux observed a growing trend towards integrating and highlighting the concepts of "participation" and "citizens' debates" in political discourse, with the aim of materialising the principle of participatory engagement (Rodet, 2008). He proposes to approach this notion from a bifocal perspective in order to decipher the notion of citizen participation, thereby facilitating an in-depth understanding of its essence. In the 1960s, the notion of participation was conceptualised as a vehicle for popular contestation against the established political order, through urban struggle movements (bottom-up orientation), while the 1990s marked the emergence of participation as a tool for public administration to incorporate citizens' views into policy-making (top-down orientation).

Christine Partoune, a researcher specialising in environmental education, provides a complementary perspective by distinguishing between types of participatory initiative. For her, "spontaneous participation" stems from an autonomous impulse on the part of citizens, unlike "institutionalised participation", which is the result of a formal process orchestrated by government bodies. This dichotomy reveals that spontaneous participation is characterised by a civic commitment to the public interest, manifested through various forms of demands or resistance to specific projects, while institutionalised participation can be defined by different levels of "power sharing" (Partoune, 2010).

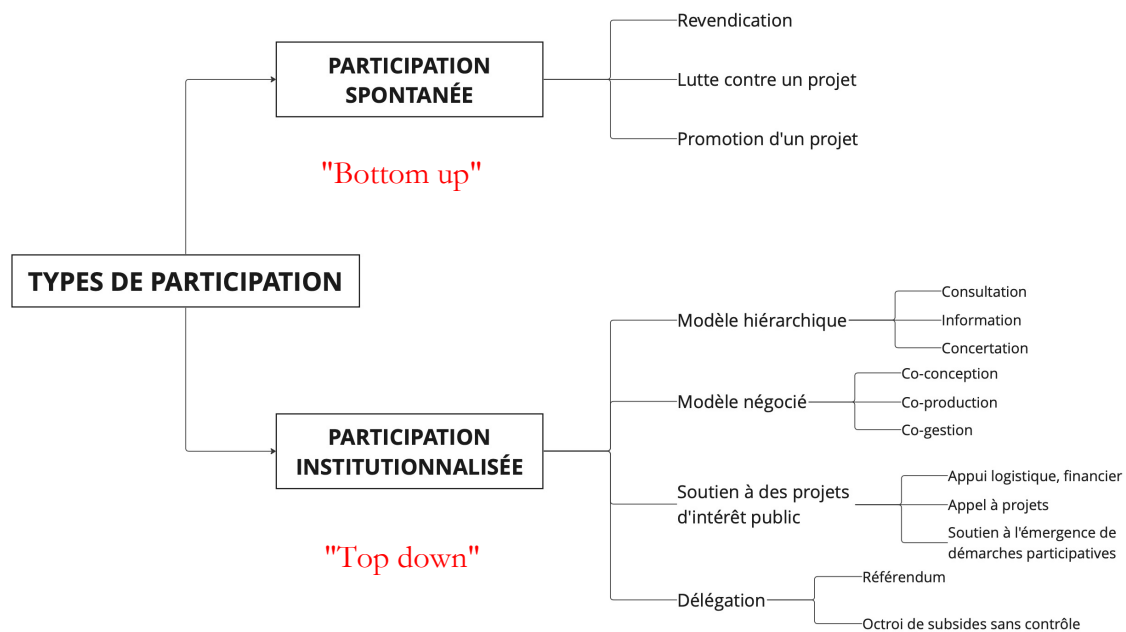


Figure 14 - Types of participation ©Chritine Partoune

It is widely recognised that citizen participation is an essential component of the political sphere, playing a decisive role in decision-making and the development of public policies. It is also essential to the formulation of territorial strategies and the implementation of development projects, affirming its fundamental importance in democratic governance.



Citizen participation is a complex concept, encompassing a variety of definitions and levels of involvement. Despite its growing importance, there is no absolute consensus on its definition, highlighting its flexibility and adaptability to different contexts. A pioneer in this field, Sherry Arnstein conceptualised participation as a means for marginalised individuals to influence policy. Historically, participation has evolved from a vehicle for contestation to a tool for improving the democratic system. It includes both spontaneous and institutionalised initiatives, playing an essential role in public decision-making and democratic governance.

### 3.2.2 The different forms of participation

Citizen participation in urban planning represents a continuum of involvement, ranging from simply receiving information to becoming deeply involved in the co-construction and co-management of projects. The Arnstein scale, illustrated above in Figure 13 has been used to understand these dynamics, but the modernisation of citizen participation in urban planning transcends this scale by seeking to integrate more dynamic and inclusive forms of engagement. At the heart of the participatory approach, information and consultation are the first steps towards citizen involvement (Environnement.brussels, 2021). By providing residents with details of planned developments and gathering their feedback, these initial stages play a crucial role in guiding projects. However, the scope of these methods is often perceived as limited, not allowing citizens to exert a tangible influence on final decisions (Ibid.). Despite this, they serve as an essential foundation for

more substantial forms of engagement, paving the way for richer and more meaningful interaction between all stakeholders. The move towards more interactive forms of engagement, such as participatory workshops and public forums, marks a desire to facilitate deeper dialogue (Crambes et al., 2016). These spaces provide a platform for the co-creation of solutions, where ideas can be shared and debated collaboratively. This dynamic not only encourages creativity but also ensures that emerging solutions are tailored to specific urban contexts and challenges, reflecting a shared understanding of community needs. Citizen engagement reaches its full expression in co-construction and co-management, where citizens are actively involved at every stage of the process, from programming to design to delivery to management and occupation. This approach, which recognises the wealth of local knowledge and skills, highlights the potential of citizens to make a significant contribution to improving their urban environments. By allowing residents not only to express themselves but also to take action, co-construction and co-management embody an ideal of participation that values the expertise of citizens as much as that of professionals (Ibid.). The expansion of digital technologies has also opened up new avenues for citizen participation, facilitating wider interaction through digital democracy platforms. These tools enable more effective collection and analysis of feedback from citizens, making participation more accessible and engaging for a larger proportion of the population (Ibid.).

To enrich our understanding of citizen participation, it is worth referring to an additional source that offers a detailed perspective on the subject. The methodological document entitled "La participation citoyenne: réussir la planification et l'aménagement durables" (2016) produced by the Agence De l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie (ADEME), the Laboratoire Espace Travail (LET), and the Agence Attitudes Urbaines, suggests an approach based on levels of intensity of participation and examines several determining factors for its characterisation, such as: the target audience, the way in which citizens participate (either through a bottom-up or top-down approach), the existence of dialogue between stakeholders, the timing of interventions, how residents' opinions are incorporated, the subjects of intervention, and the level of commitment of the authorities.

Termes	Habitants, usagers <sup>3</sup>	Production	Dynamique de l'implication	Processus délibératif	Prise de décision
<b>Autogestion Autopromotion</b>	<b>Groupe de volontaires</b>	<b>Stratégie, contenu et gestion du projet</b>	<b>Ascendante</b>	<b>Débats</b>	<b>Habitants</b>
<b>Participation <i>Codécision</i></b>	<b>Groupes choisis et volontaires</b>	<b>Contribution directe à la décision</b>	<b>Descendante ou ascendante</b>	<b>Débats</b>	<b>Autorité compétente/ Habitants</b>
<b>Participation <i>Coproduction / co-construction</i></b>	<b>Groupes choisis et volontaires</b>	<b>Co-fabrication du projet</b>	<b>Descendante ou ascendante</b>	<b>Débats</b>	<b>Autorité compétente</b>
<b>Concertation</b>	<b>Groupes définis par l'autorité compétente</b>	<b>Propositions</b>	<b>Descendante</b>	<b>Débats</b>	<b>Autorité compétente</b>
<b>Consultation / "Concertation réglementaire"</b>	<b>Ensemble de la population</b>	<b>Avis</b>	<b>Descendante ou ascendante</b>	<b>Pas toujours de débats</b>	<b>Autorité compétente</b>
<b>Information</b>	<b>Ensemble de la population</b>	<b>Aucune</b>	<b>Descendante ou ascendante</b>	<b>Pas de débats</b>	<b>Autorité compétente</b>

Figure 15 - Different levels of participation ©Attitudes Urbaines / LET

ADEME considers consultation to be an approach which, although potentially less focused on a joint decision, remains essential in urban planning decision-making processes. It is often perceived as more hierarchical, with the authority in place retaining the last word. However, consultation is seen as a "process of collective discussion" aimed at defining the actions to be taken, using various means such as urban walks, informal or organised meetings, stands at local events, etc. Jean-Marc Dziedzicki, an expert in urban planning and development, argues that participation should be part of a wider consultation framework. He argues that concertation, unlike simple consultation, involves the active engagement of stakeholders and is an essential practical aspect of the principle of participation. In his analysis, "Quelles réponses aux conflits d'aménagement? De la participation publique à la concertation", Dziedzicki highlights the need to review concertation as a genuine participatory act (Dziedzicki, 2016). He stresses that consultation must be an inclusive process, in which citizens do not simply express their opinions, but actively participate in defining and developing urban policies and projects. Dziedzicki (2016) differentiates consultation from more traditional approaches such as co-production or co-decision by insisting on the continuous and interactive nature of consultation. It is not limited to a one-off event, but is part of a long-term commitment process, enabling citizens' concerns to be better integrated and projects to be adjusted in line with participants' feedback. It proposes that consultation should serve as a framework for transforming citizens' expectations into concrete action, thereby ensuring that their involvement has a tangible impact on the final decisions. This thinking encourages us to look at the levels of participation in a new way, recognising consultation as the entry point to a truly "participatory" process, which strengthens the legitimacy of decisions and trust between citizens and authorities, while allowing citizens to take greater ownership of projects (Ibid.).

Although the public information and consultation stages are often seen as the least engaging in terms of participation, because they take place after the project has been developed, we are opening up the debate on the place of consultation, which is in the middle of the scale and can be seen, depending on the approach adopted, as a genuine participatory process or simply as a means of communicating with the public. The benefits of these processes in the field of planning are to make projects more viable, to prevent the resistance that emerges when projects are presented as faits accomplis, to make it easier for citizens to take ownership of projects, to recognise legitimate local expertise in the public arena, to rebuild trust between citizens, elected representatives and technicians, and to prevent conflict by taking account of citizens' concerns.



Citizen participation in urban planning ranges from the simple reception of information to active involvement in the co-management of projects. Although Arnstein's ladder of participation model (1969) remains a reference for distinguishing levels of involvement, contemporary practices go beyond this conceptualisation by integrating forms of engagement that promote more dynamic and inclusive interactions. Modern forms of participation include participatory workshops, public forums and digital technologies. Consultation, as a collective dialogue, is crucial to genuine participation. These practices improve the viability of projects, facilitate their appropriation by citizens, recognise local expertise and strengthen trust between citizens and authorities.

### 3.2.3 The various stakeholders

In the context of citizen participation in urban planning and development, the "who" involves a variety of actors, commonly referred to as "stakeholders". The latter encompass a variety of individuals, groups and organisations with an interest in or affected by urban planning projects, whether they are in the pipeline or already underway (ISO, 2010). These projects, whether aimed at revitalising derelict areas or rehabilitating zones already integrated into economic, leisure or residential life, call on a wide range of stakeholders that go well beyond the simple categorisation of '**inhabitants**'. Citizen participation, often associated with the residents of a given area, in reality requires an understanding that is both broad and precise, recognising the impact of a development on all those who interact with the site concerned, whether they are local residents, professionals, visitors or others. Inhabitants, in this constellation, therefore represent all the people impacted by or involved in a development project, linked to the space in question by interactions, practices or symbolic attachments, whether they actually live in the area concerned or not (Crambes et al., 2016). This definition encompasses those who intervene on an individual or collective basis, underlining the importance of each voice in the co-construction of urban space.

The adoption of an ecosystemic perspective is essential in the face of growing environmental challenges in urban planning, recognising the impact of human activities on the environment. To live in a space is also to identify with it, to attribute to it a meaning that goes beyond the simple fact of residing there. Civic participation therefore embraces symbolic and emotional dimensions, recognising the richness of the links that individuals forge with their environment. The notion of inhabitant is thus becoming more complex, including a variety of socio-demographic and geographical profiles, each with distinct concerns and interests. The implementation of participatory approaches must therefore take account of this diversity, seeking to give everyone an active role in the co-construction of urban space. This approach is part of a framework of shared eco-responsibility, in which the rights of expression and the duties of managing local affairs are combined in the service of sustainable urban development. Participation is therefore aimed not only at residents in the traditional sense of the term, but also extends to users and users of the area, encompassing a range of players such as political and economic players, landowners, operators, managers, project leaders, developers, technical experts, residents, local residents, working people, shopkeepers, associations, and those responsible for facilities, etc. (Ibid.). Each, through their specific interaction with the area, enriches the participatory process, underlining the importance of consultation and collaboration in the creation of urban planning projects that meet diverse expectations and promote the harmonious and sustainable development of the city.

At the heart of this participatory ecosystem, '**civil society**' stands out for its central role in mobilising citizens and raising awareness of environmental and urban issues. Made up of entities that operate beyond state and commercial frameworks, it embodies the lifeblood of associations, collectives and other non-governmental organisations, facilitating constructive dialogue between citizens and decision-makers (Fraisie, 2017). This sphere has a profound influence on decision-making processes, enriching urban planning with diverse perspectives and shared concerns. On the other hand, '**users**' and '**users**' occupy distinct but complementary roles. Users, who interact with infrastructure, public spaces and services on a daily basis, are the direct witnesses of the impact of developments on their living environment (Crambes et al., 2016). Their experience provides an essential perspective on the needs and possible improvements of the urban environment. On the

other hand, users, encompassing both service providers in public or private facilities, are the operational backbone of these spaces, ensuring the availability and quality of vital services (Ibid.). In this way, the synergy between users and users enriches the urban dynamic, facilitating a thoughtful and inclusive transformation of the changing urban fabric towards more sustainable and participatory development.

Architects and urban planners are essential in translating and shaping urban spaces that truly reflect citizens' aspirations and local needs into concrete, viable projects. This collaboration ensures that urban development projects not only build physical spaces, but also promote social cohesion, environmental sustainability and economic viability. Architects' and planners' expertise in sustainable design, historical context, regulatory compliance and spatial dynamics enables them to guide communities in making informed decisions that lead to more liveable and resilient urban environments.

Each of these stakeholders makes a unique contribution to the process of citizen participation in urban projects, reflecting a diversity of interests, skills and perspectives. The interaction between these different stakeholders is crucial to the implementation of effective participatory processes. The success of these initiatives therefore depends on the ability to effectively engage all these players in constructive dialogue and close collaboration.



Citizen participation in urban planning involves a variety of stakeholders, from residents and professionals to visitors and associations. An ecosystem approach is essential, recognising the diversity of profiles and interactions with the area. Key players include residents, users, economic players, technical experts, associations and civil society, each bringing a unique perspective. Architects and urban planners play a crucial role in transforming citizens' aspirations into sustainable projects. The success of projects depends on the commitment of all these stakeholders to constructive dialogue and collaboration.

### **3.2.4 Limits and challenges of the participatory approach**

Citizen participation, the keystone of participatory or deliberative democracy, comes up against various obstacles and difficulties, exacerbated depending on the context and the territory. This approach, which seeks effective inclusion and greater legitimacy for political and urban decisions, navigates between democratic aspirations and practical constraints. The research identifies general limitations inherent in participation itself, which highlights the complexity of its effective implementation.

The effectiveness of a participation mechanism depends fundamentally on its ability to involve a broad spectrum of social groups, particularly those on the margins of society, to ensure representative socio-cultural diversity. This inclusiveness is fundamental, conditioning the ability of a participatory initiative to achieve its objectives of consolidating social ties, attenuating political and social cleavages, and awakening a collective consciousness. However, despite the emphasis placed on the importance of inclusion in participation schemes, it regularly appears that these initiatives lack the effective involvement of the entire citizenry, sometimes revealing a glaring lack

of inclusiveness. Often, those who take part in consultations and workshops are individuals who are already politically active or from more privileged backgrounds, leaving marginalised voices on the margins of discussions (Fung, 2015). This biased selection can lead to decisions that fail to take into account the real needs of the community as a whole, widening the gap between the inclusive intentions of participation and its sometimes exclusionary outcomes. In addition, in-depth research has shown that many participatory mechanisms, both in the political sphere and in the context of urban projects, struggle to fully incorporate the different strata of the population (Birck, 2011). Jean-Nicolas Birck highlights a deeper problem within these systems, identifying the emergence of asymmetrical dynamics between participants. These dynamics contribute to "the origin of a distinction between them (participants), or even the beginnings of a more or less formalised hierarchy of citizens" (Ibid.). Birck's observation highlights a significant obstacle: the lack of inclusion. It potentially transforms participatory initiatives into platforms where certain individuals can use the process to their advantage, or even into springboards for the emergence of a new citizen elite. These observations reveal a worrying trend whereby, instead of serving as genuine forums for inclusion and democratic reflection, participatory mechanisms could become spaces dominated by the interests of a few, thereby departing from their mission of universal inclusiveness and reducing participation to a symbolic process rather than an effective mechanism for shared governance.

A notable challenge in the dialogue between citizens and experts lies in the complexity of the specialist language, sometimes making communication ineffective for an uninitiated audience (Giraud, 2017). This language barrier can hinder mutual understanding and the effective participation of citizens in public debates. For example, the intrinsic complexity of urban issues poses a major challenge. The topics addressed in urban planning often require specific technical expertise, making it difficult for ordinary citizens to contribute effectively without a prior level of knowledge or awareness. This barrier can not only discourage participation but also call into question the validity and relevance of citizens' contributions in highly specialised areas. In addition, the question of the neutrality of information arises, because the way in which information is presented by experts can influence, voluntarily or not, the perception and decisions of citizens (Crambes et al., 2016, p. 161).

Another challenge is the risk of polarisation that citizen participation can generate, especially around controversial subjects (Vermeulen & Hardy, 2016). Instead of facilitating conflict resolution, the direct confrontation of divergent opinions in an open space can sometimes accentuate divisions within the community. If the process is not adequately facilitated to promote constructive dialogue and consensus-building, participation can end up dividing more than it unites. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is an effective way of easing tensions and reaching creative and stable compromises (Ibid.). By encouraging constructive dialogue between all stakeholders, these methods often make it possible to find mutually advantageous solutions, thus avoiding costly and time-consuming recourse to legal proceedings.

Citizen participation also comes up against significant constraints linked to economic and time resources. Implementing participatory mechanisms often requires considerable financial resources to organise workshops and public consultations, and to provide dedicated digital platforms. These costs can act as a brake on local authorities, particularly those with limited budgets, thus compromising the scope and effectiveness of citizen engagement (Nguyen et al., 2018). In addition, the time needed to actively participate in decision-making processes represents another major

challenge (Katzef et al., 2022). For many citizens, especially those juggling work and family responsibilities, the lack of time available to engage meaningfully in participatory processes is a significant barrier. This lack of time is often exacerbated by meeting times that do not take into account the constraints of potential participants, thus limiting the accessibility of these initiatives. As a result, citizen participation can become a privilege reserved for those with sufficient free time, widening the gap between committed citizens and those who, despite their desire, are unable to take part. What's more, the willingness and support needed to overcome these constraints varies according to whether top-down or bottom-up approaches are adopted. In top-down approaches, institutional support plays a crucial role in allocating resources and structuring participatory processes (Fung, 2015). However, these initiatives can lack responsiveness to citizens' needs if they are not sufficiently flexible. By contrast, bottom-up approaches rely heavily on the will and commitment of citizens themselves, but they can suffer from a lack of institutional support and funding (Ibid.). To overcome these limitations, it is important to design more flexible participatory mechanisms that can be adapted to citizens' time constraints, and to explore innovative funding models that can support these initiatives.

In the face of these obstacles and challenges, it becomes clear that the participatory approach requires meticulous design and facilitation to realise its potential as an effective and equitable urban planning tool. Tackling these challenges with targeted strategies and a willingness to continually adapt is essential to ensure that citizen participation makes a real contribution to more inclusive and democratic urban governance.



Citizen participation in urban planning faces a number of obstacles. Initiatives tend to attract mainly politically active or privileged individuals, often excluding marginalised voices, which limits inclusiveness. In addition, the technical jargon used by experts makes participation difficult for ordinary citizens, creating a barrier to genuine involvement. Debates on controversial subjects can accentuate community divisions rather than resolve them. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) can help to ease tensions and find stable compromises. Finally, economic and time constraints restrict access to participatory processes, which often require significant financial resources and time that many citizens do not have. To be effective, citizen participation requires well-designed processes that are adapted on an ongoing basis.

### **3.2.5 Impacts and benefits of the participative approach**

In today's era of urban development and governance, citizen participation is an essential cornerstone of a vibrant and dynamic democracy. Contrary to a simplistic view that might see it as a constraint or a mere formal exercise, citizen participation offers a range of benefits, not only for decision-makers but also for the community as a whole. Implementing the participatory approach brings a multitude of benefits, but requires careful design and management to realise its full potential. This section of the thesis explores the multiple dimensions through which citizen participation enriches the democratic process and contributes to the development of innovative solutions adapted to contemporary challenges.



Citizen participation implies a two-way interaction between citizens and authorities, enabling a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities (Schelings, 2021). Building trust between citizens and decision-makers is not only seen as an immediate social benefit; it also acts as a catalyst for more fruitful collaboration in the longer term. By providing channels for transparent communication and ongoing dialogue, citizen participation demystifies decision-making processes and brings citizens closer to administrative and political realities (Ibid.). This openness helps to dispel misunderstandings and build a solid foundation for joint initiatives.

One of the fundamental strengths of citizen participation lies in the integration of user expertise into the decision-making and design processes. Contrary to criticisms of a lack of technical knowledge or insufficient familiarity with professional jargon, citizen participation highlights the irreplaceable value of lived experience. Through their daily interaction with their environment, citizens provide valuable contextual knowledge, making it possible to reveal problems that are invisible on a macro scale and to propose local solutions that benefit the whole community (Thomas et al., 2016). Citizen participation therefore makes it possible to integrate local concerns and micro perspectives into the decision-making process, thereby enhancing the unique usage expertise of citizens. This expertise in use, in synergy with the technical knowledge of professionals, leads to more innovative and relevant solutions, thereby enhancing the quality and sustainability of the projects developed.

Citizen participation is proving to be a driving force for innovation and creativity, paving the way for original solutions tailored to the specific needs of communities (Schelings, 2021). By encouraging constructive dialogue between citizens, decision-makers and professionals, it helps to break down barriers between knowledge and explore innovative avenues that are often overlooked in more conventional approaches. By drawing on a diversity of perspectives, this participatory approach maximises the potential for innovation and for adapting projects to local realities. It is also a tool for transforming society, promoting the values of solidarity and shared responsibility, and encouraging active and informed citizenship. Coline Rande (2015) in her thesis "La participation citoyenne au regard des nouveaux praticiens des territoires", highlights the role of "new territorial practitioners", such as citizens' associations and collectives, who bring fresh and alternative perspectives to the "making of the city", demonstrating the importance of these contributions to more dynamic and adaptable urbanisation (Rande, 2015).

As well as improving the quality of projects, citizen participation has a profound impact on social cohesion within communities (Fung, 2015). It is a powerful vector for strengthening the sense of belonging and solidarity between residents, contributing to an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect. In this way, the participatory approach also encourages interaction between different social groups, which contributes to building a strong and resilient community. The active participation of communities in the implementation phases of projects generates tangible support for the local economy and a strong sense of pride and ownership among the members of the communities involved.

However, it is important to recognise that the benefits of citizen participation are not automatic and depend heavily on the quality of the implementation of participatory processes. Participation that is ill-conceived or perceived as superficial can lead to frustration and mistrust of the authorities. Moreover, ensuring that participation is inclusive, so that all strata of the population are fairly

represented, remains a major challenge. Participatory processes require substantial resources, in terms of time, expertise and funding, if they are to be carried out effectively (Ibid.).



Citizen participation in urban planning brings many benefits. It improves understanding of the needs of local communities and builds trust between citizens and authorities, fostering fruitful long-term collaboration. The integration of citizens' user expertise enriches decision-making processes, revealing local problems that are invisible on a large scale and proposing appropriate solutions. This two-way interaction encourages innovation and creativity, maximising the adaptation of projects to local realities. Participation also strengthens social cohesion and a sense of belonging, contributing to a more cohesive and resilient community. However, these benefits depend on the quality of the implementation of participatory processes, requiring adequate resources and an inclusive design to avoid frustration and mistrust.

### 3.2.6 Evaluation of participation

"To assess a participatory approach or mechanism from the point of view of its conduct (procedural approach), its effects or its scope (substantive approach) on an action of spatial transformation. Evaluation may be a critical or fundamental research activity, or it may have more directly instrumental aims associated with the implementation of a policy or project" (Casillo et al., 2022). Casillo et al. (2022) describe how a participatory approach can be evaluated from two main angles. Firstly, through its **procedural approach**, which focuses on the way in which the participatory process is conducted: the methods used, the organisation and management of interactions with participants. Secondly, through its **substantive approach**, which evaluates the concrete effects of this approach on the spatial transformation project, i.e. the real impact that participation has had on the final decisions and results. This evaluation can be carried out as part of academic research or for more practical purposes, such as improving the implementation of a specific policy or project. In short, the evaluation of a participatory approach examines both the process itself and the results obtained.

Evaluating citizen participation goes beyond simply measuring the number of participants. It aims to analyse the quality of the participatory processes put in place to build collective decisions. These processes include citizens, associations, elected politicians and experts working together to improve or change situations in various contexts. Citizen participation has become a central element in modern democratic governance. It involves including citizens in decision-making processes, enabling them to contribute actively to the design and implementation of public policies. However, for these participatory processes to be truly effective and representative, it is essential that they be evaluated on an ongoing and rigorous basis. Evaluation makes it possible not only to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the actions undertaken, but also to ensure that the initial objectives are achieved and that the means used are adequate (Periferia, 2014).

Shared, multi-stakeholder evaluation, a concept developed by Periferia (2013) is presented in detail in their article entitled "L'évaluation partagée donne du sens !". It is based on the idea that all the players involved in a participatory process should be able to contribute to the evaluation of that

process. By integrating the varied perspectives of citizens, associations, elected politicians and experts, evaluation becomes a more inclusive and democratic process. Evaluation should not be seen as an isolated stage, but as a continuous cycle comprising several distinct but interconnected phases. The first phase is "a priori (ex-ante) evaluation", which takes place before the start of a project to establish the initial situation. This stage defines the foundations on which the project will be developed, by identifying the problems, needs and available resources. This is followed by an "interim evaluation" to analyse and adjust the actions underway. Based on regular monitoring, this phase ensures that the project remains aligned with its initial objectives and enables corrections to be made if necessary. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on the progress made and to re-engage participants along the way. Finally, "post-evaluation" takes place after the end of the project. This phase is used to check progress against the initial situation and assess the long-term impact. By analysing the final results, it becomes possible to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the actions undertaken, as well as their relevance to the development objectives initially set. Post-evaluation also provides valuable lessons for future projects, contributing to the continuous improvement of participatory practices. In short, the shared, multi-actor evaluation approach proposed by Periferia offers a comprehensive, iterative framework for evaluating participatory processes. By integrating all the phases of a continuous evaluation cycle, it ensures an in-depth and nuanced analysis, capable of adapting and responding to the needs of the different stakeholders involved (Periferia, 2013).

Following an in-depth analysis of the literature, the participation assessment table proposed below (Figure 16) has been developed to examine citizen participation at each stage of a project, from planning to final evaluation. The table is based on several references, such as: "Les méthodes participatives – un guide pour l'utilisateur" published by the King Baudouin Foundation (Slocum et al., 2006), "L'évaluation partagée donne du sens !" by Periferia (Periferia, 2013) and "Mener une évaluation de démarches de participation : les dimensions à questionner quand on cherche à avoir une influence sur la décision" published by Periferia (Periferia, 2014). The City of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu's "Guide de la participation citoyenne", published in 2021 (Ville de Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, 2021) as well as the interviews I conducted with various stakeholders, also enriched the development of this evaluation framework.

The table below (see Figure 16) is an evaluation tool designed to analyse citizen participation throughout the different phases of a project. The table is structured in several sections corresponding to the main stages of the participatory process: identification of objectives, stakeholder engagement, planning and design, project implementation, data collection and feedback, adjustments and improvements, and the final evaluation. For each stage, open evaluation questions are asked to guide the analysis of the quality and effectiveness of the participatory process. These questions ensure that every aspect of the project is well covered, from the clarity of the objectives, the inclusion of stakeholders, the appropriateness of the methods used, to the impact of the actions implemented. These questions are associated with specific evaluation criteria, such as clarity, fairness, inclusion, accessibility and many others, which serve as benchmarks for measuring the success or shortcomings of the participatory process. The table also suggests a series of data collection methods or tools for gathering the information needed to answer these evaluation questions. For example, surveys, interviews, focus groups, participatory workshops or documentary analysis can be used to measure the commitment of participants, the effectiveness of

actions or the overall impact of the project. In addition, it includes a section where you can assess the relevance of each criterion to the specific case studied, as well as a comments column for adding observations or adjustments specific to the context.

This table provides a methodological framework not only for assessing the final result, but also for ensuring ongoing monitoring throughout the project. It allows each phase of the participatory process to be evaluated, from initial planning to implementation and final evaluation. This ensures that the evaluation takes into account the adjustments and improvements made over time, and not just the final results. This approach ensures that many of the important dimensions of participation are integrated and evaluated in an iterative way, while offering the flexibility to adapt the evaluation to the specificities of each project. In the remainder of my master's thesis, this table will be applied to my case study (see section 4.2.4 Assessment and discussion ) to make a detailed and systematic assessment of citizen participation in the project I am analysing. This application will make it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the participatory process, and will serve as an example for future analyses or for projects wishing to integrate citizen participation to a greater extent.

Sages	Evaluation questions	Evaluation criteria / Indicators	Methods of collection / Tools	Relevant to your case?	Comments
<b>Identification of objectives</b>	What are the objectives of the participatory process?	Clarity	Surveys, Interviews, Focus groups, Online polls, Interactive whiteboards, Shared documents	Yes / No	
	How do the objectives take into account the needs of stakeholders?	Relevance, Alignment with stakeholders' needs		Yes / No	
<b>Stakeholder engagement</b>	Who are the stakeholders identified and how have they been included?	Inclusion	Stakeholder mapping, Surveys, Project management platforms	Yes / No	
	How have the diversity and representativeness of stakeholders been ensured?	Diversity		Yes / No	
	Is the participatory process open to anyone who wants to take part?	Equity, Justice, Inclusion		Yes / No	
	Is the methodology used for the participatory process appropriate for encouraging the participation of a large number of people?	Accessibility		Yes / No	
	Have the co-creation workshops helped to incorporate the ideas of citizens?	Collaboration, Active participation, Inclusion		Yes / No	
<b>Planning and conception</b>	Has a detailed action plan been developed with input from the participants?	Appropriateness, Transparency	Documentary analysis, Focus groups, Participatory workshops, Brainstorming tools	Yes / No	
	Were facilitators specifically mandated to lead the participation process?	Expertise, Communication		Yes / No	
	What obstacles were encountered in implementing the project, and to what extent were the objectives achieved?	Effectiveness, Conformity, Adaptability, Impact		Yes / No	
<b>Project implementation</b>	In what ways are stakeholders involved throughout the project?	Continuous engagement, Communication	Activity reports, Direct observations, Project timetable	Yes / No	
	Are qualitative and quantitative data collected on a regular basis?	Reliability		Yes / No	
<b>Data collection, feedback, and reporting</b>	What means are used to gather feedback?	Effectiveness, Transparency, Consideration	Online feedback, Documentary analysis, Broadcasting on platforms, Broadcasting by conference, Social networks, Facebook or WhatsApp groups, All boxes, Online survey, Surveys, Project website, E-mails	Yes / No	
	How are participants informed of the results?	Communication		Yes / No	
	Are adjustments or improvements proposed and implemented in response to evaluations carried out during the project?	Impact, Reactivity, Consideration		Satisfaction surveys, Review meetings, Monitoring reports, Project management platforms	
<b>Adjustments and improvements</b>	Are the lessons learned and good practices disseminated to inspire other initiatives?	Diffusion of knowledge, Recommendations	Conferences, Evaluation meetings, Surveys, Online survey, Final report	Yes / No	
	How satisfied are stakeholders with the final results of the project?	Evaluation of results, Correspondence to expectations		Yes / No	
<b>Final evaluation</b>	Are the evaluation results documented and shared with a wider audience?	Documentation, Accessibility, Transparency		Yes / No	

Figure 16 - Method for assessing citizen participation in a project ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

### **3.3 Possible contributions and limitations of the Brussels-Capital Region's tools for participation**

#### **3.3.1 Urban planning reforms in Brussels: the impact and controversy of public consultation**

The Brussels Region's urban planning landscape has undergone significant upheaval as a result of the reforms introduced by the Brussels government since 2014. These reforms aimed to simplify, streamline and modernise town planning procedures in order to respond effectively to the growing needs of an ever-increasing population. However, they have raised concerns about their impact on participatory democracy and the quality of town planning.

One of the key aspects of these reforms was the modification of the public consultation process, which is essential for guaranteeing citizen participation in urban planning decisions. Public consultation has a long history in Brussels, beginning in 1972 with the establishment of a draft Sector Plan (Inter-Environnement Bruxelles, 2024). At the time, urban planning decisions were often taken by the State or the municipalities without adequate consultation of local residents, which favoured projects driven by private interests. The initial Sector Plan aimed to structure urban development, but its functionalist approach (based on the Athens Charter, which advocated the separation of urban functions) met with strong opposition from citizens and associations, leading to the creation of neighbourhood committees and residents' associations. In 1976, a new version of the Plan was proposed by the Minister for Brussels Affairs, Vanden Boeynants, and submitted to a public enquiry, generating 11,000 reactions (Ibid.). This initiative made it possible to establish the public consultation procedure, which aims to control derogations and make derogation projects public for local residents. Although this procedure has improved transparency, questions have persisted about the participation of residents' associations in consultation committees. The associations chose to remain outside the committees in order to preserve their autonomy to contest. Over the years, changes have been made to improve public consultation, by broadening the composition of the committees and increasing the transparency of documents. However, a number of recent reforms have undermined these achievements, notably the removal of Brussels-Mobility from the commissions and the elimination of public enquiries into environmental impact studies for major projects. These changes have often been perceived as favouring the acceleration of procedures to the detriment of citizen participation.

The 2014 reforms, which sought to simplify and speed up procedures, sometimes compromised the effectiveness of public consultation. The organisation of pre-project consultations, limiting subsequent consultation to a written procedure, has made citizen participation more difficult. Project meetings between the master architect, regional authorities and property developers, held behind closed doors, have rendered the consultation process largely symbolic. This transformation of public consultation into an administrative formality led to growing frustration and a loss of confidence in the institutions (Ibid.). If public consultation is to continue to serve urban democracy, it must enable an inclusive, transparent and open public debate in which divergent positions can be expressed without fear. Without these conditions, the weakening of public consultation could lead to the deregulation of urban planning in Brussels, compromising urban democracy.

### 3.3.2 Perspective.brussels' new tool: the Participation.brussels platform

In response to persistent challenges and criticisms of existing participation processes, Perspective.brussels decided to set up a new area of work focusing specifically on citizen participation. This led to the creation of a new participation platform, participation.brussels, launched in April 2024. The aim of this platform is to provide a space dedicated to consultation and citizen involvement in urban development projects in the BCR. The platform aims to centralise information on current projects and make it more accessible, while facilitating the active participation of residents through a range of interactive tools.

At the launch event for the participatory platform, which took place on 23 April 2024, several maps were presented to quantify and visualise the various projects incorporating participatory initiatives (Perspective.brussels, 2024). Perspective.brussels sought to map these projects according to different levels of participation, including the following: information, consultation, co-construction, co-decision and delegation. However, the adoption of this system of scale gives rise to a criticism on my part. I think that this notion of scale or levels creates the illusion that the higher a level is reached, such as "delegation" in Sherry Arnstein's scale (cf. Figure 13), the more meaningful the participation. However, it is crucial to understand that participation must be linked to underlying needs rather than to a level of maturity or application. We must not focus on the level of participation achieved, because participation is only a **means** and not an end in itself. It is therefore necessary to move away from this model of levels and scales still used by Perspective.brussels. Criticism of this method must lead to the adoption of a new approach, centered on the real need for participation. Why are we asking citizens to get involved? What are we trying to achieve through citizen participation? It is important to be explicit about this with all the players involved. Rather than declaring the level of participation achieved, it is more honest to communicate the precise need for collaboration in order to avoid any disappointment or feelings of instrumentalisation. One of the main problems with participation, often mentioned in the articles, is the loss of confidence among citizens due to a feeling of instrumentalisation and a lack of appreciation of their contribution. By focusing on the need and being transparent about the objectives of participation, it is possible to build trust and genuinely value the contribution of citizens to the urban planning decision-making process.

As this is a very recent initiative, it is difficult to assess the impact of this new platform on urban design to date. The launch of the platform was made official at an event I attended. The success of the participation.brussels platform will depend on its adoption by Brussels residents. Without widespread adoption, there is a risk that the tool will remain underused. At present, it is too early to judge the impact of participation.brussels on urban design. It will be necessary to observe how citizens' contributions via the platform are integrated into urban projects. Although the platform has been officially launched, it is crucial to continue promoting it to ensure that it is widely distributed and visible to the public. It is important to monitor its development in order to understand its real contribution to citizen participation and its appropriation by the various players.

### 3.3.3 Contributions, limits and criticisms of urban planning tools in Brussels

The BCR has also sought to implement a series of tools to orchestrate its urban development in an inclusive and sustainable way. These instruments, ranging from the Master Development Plan (MDP) to the Urban Renewal Contract (URC), and extending to the Regional Development Plan

(RDP) and the Regional Sustainable Development Plan (RSDP), reflect a deep commitment to participatory planning that respects social, economic and environmental issues, but they are not without controversy. They are anchored in specific decrees and legal frameworks. One of the main planning tools, the RSDP, is a strategic document that sets out territorial development guidelines for Brussels. However, its late adoption in 2018, after major reforms, has been criticised for ratifying decisions already taken without sufficient public debate (Scohier & Charlier, 2019). The Regional Land Use Plan (RLUP), which defines land use zones and provides a framework for urban development, has been the subject of reforms extending the zones authorising the mixing of economic and residential functions. However, this approach has been criticised for not sufficiently protecting green spaces and social housing (Ibid.).

The reform of the Brussels Town and Country Planning Code (CoBAT in French) has led to changes in the institutional structure of Brussels town planning. Two new public interest organisations have been created: Perspective.Brussels, which replaces the Agence de Développement Territorial and brings together urban planning, statistics and the master architect, and the SAU, the region's property arm, with the capacity to acquire land for development projects (Ibid.). In 2018, as part of the CoBAT reform, the MDP was introduced as a recent urban planning tool in the Brussels Region (Perspective.brussels, n.d.-b). The aim of this new instrument is to simplify and rationalise urban planning procedures, making it possible to respond to demographic growth and the resulting need for housing. However, the MDP is controversial because of its ability to circumvent certain planning standards and because of its democratic deficit (Scohier & Marsin, 2020). This was the subject of an article entitled "Plans d'aménagement directeur: fuite hors cadre de l'urbanisme bruxellois" (2020) written by Claire Scohier and Maud Marsin in *Inter-Environnement Bruxelles*. According to this article, these master development plans have enabled the Brussels authorities to circumvent certain regulations in force, highlighting practices that have been contested by local associations. The MDP is a hybrid tool that replaces the Master Plan (Schéma Directeur in French). Unlike the Master Plan, which required the support of a Specific Land Use Plan (SLUP) to define the regulatory aspects, the MDP defines both the strategic and regulatory aspects. As a regional tool, it can cover inter-municipal areas and urbanise any part of Brussels. It thus offers greater flexibility, capable of departing from traditional planning standards, including the RLUP. The MDP has the capacity to bypass traditional legislative procedures, which raises concerns about its impact on democracy and transparency (Ibid.). The MDP is also criticised for the speed of its adoption, leaving insufficient time for proper public consultation (Ibid.). The MDP multiplied rapidly, with thirteen projects launched simultaneously after its introduction. The public enquiries for these projects were conducted at a frenetic pace, making it difficult for citizens to participate in a meaningful way. Critics point to a lack of consideration for issues relating to mobility, heritage and the environment.

The fast-track implementation of the MDP, despite criticism of its limited public consultation and impact on various issues, contrasts with the UCRs, which take a more targeted and collaborative approach to revitalising neighbourhoods. UCRs, which replace the former neighbourhood contracts, focus on priority areas for regeneration. They aim to coordinate investment in infrastructure, housing and public facilities. The UCR targets urban regeneration on a regional scale, concentrating resources and initiatives on specific areas to improve the quality of life, the environment and the local economy. Through close collaboration between public administrations



and consultation with citizens, the UCR is forging urban spaces that reflect the aspirations of local communities (Perspective.brussels, n.d.-a).

The Figure 17 summarises the contributions and limitations of four main urban planning tools in the Brussels-Capital Region: the MDP, the UCR, the RSDP and the RLUP. The Participation.brussels platform, being a very recent tool, has also been added to this table to complete the analysis. Each of these tools aims to improve urban planning, but they present challenges in terms of public consultation, transparency and equity in the representation of citizens. These planning tools are not isolated but interconnected, forming a coherent system that aims to transform Brussels into a sustainable, inclusive and dynamic metropolis. However, while the reforms aim to make procedures more efficient, they have also weakened planning frameworks and reduced environmental and democratic safeguards. The frequent use of MDPs to facilitate major building projects and derogations from existing rules are seen as threats to heritage, the environment and social housing. Although these reforms aim to meet urban development needs, the planning tools introduced pose challenges in terms of transparency and citizen inclusion. Better consultation with citizens and greater attention to social and environmental needs are needed to ensure balanced and inclusive urban development. The BCR, through its various urban planning instruments, is demonstrating a strong commitment to development that is not only sustainable and strategically thought through, but also deeply rooted in the principles of participation and inclusion, even if this meets with much criticism (Scohier & Charlier, 2019). The aim of this approach is to ensure that the urban fabric of Brussels evolves in a way that enriches the quality of life of all its inhabitants, while facing up to the contemporary challenges of urbanisation. How do these principles play out in a large-scale urban regeneration project such as Usquare?

Tools	Contributions	Limitations + Criticisms	Sources
<b>Master Development Plan (PAD in French)</b> In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simplifies and rationalises town planning procedures</li> <li>- Enables more strategic, intermunicipal planning</li> <li>- Flexibility to depart from traditional planning standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Democratic deficit</li> <li>- Can bypass certain town-planning standards</li> </ul>	(Scohier & Marsin, 2020)
<b>Master Development Plan (PAD in French)</b> With regard to participation	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rapid adoption limiting public consultation</li> <li>- Difficult public consultation</li> </ul>	
<b>Urban Renewal Contract (CRU in French)</b> In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinating investment in priority areas</li> <li>- Aims to improve quality of life, the environment and the local economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited to priority areas, which can lead to inequality of investment between neighbourhoods</li> </ul>	Website: Perspective.brussels
<b>Urban Renewal Contract (CRU in French)</b> With regard to participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Close collaboration between public authorities and citizens</li> <li>- Targeted and collaborative approach</li> </ul>	/	
<b>Regional Sustainable Development Plan (PRDD in French)</b> In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sets out guidelines for territorial development</li> <li>- Strategic framework for sustainable urban development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Late adoption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Website: Perspective.brussels</li> <li>- (Vanderotten, 2019)</li> </ul>
<b>Regional Sustainable Development Plan (PRDD in French)</b> With regard to participation	/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criticised for ratifying decisions without prior public debate</li> </ul>	
<b>Regional Land Use Plan (PRAS in French)</b> In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Definition of land-use zones</li> <li>- Controlling urban development</li> <li>- Encourages a mix of economic and residential functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criticised for failing to protect green spaces and social housing sufficiently</li> </ul>	(Scohier & Charlier, 2019)
<b>Participation.brussels</b> In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Centralising information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recent, so there is no hindsight on its real contribution to the city</li> <li>- Not yet appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Website: Participation.brussels</li> <li>- Event to launch the participatory platform (23 April 2024)</li> </ul>
<b>Participation.brussels</b> With regard to participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitating citizen participation</li> <li>- Transparency and inclusiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling of instrumentalisation</li> </ul>	

Figure 17 - Summary table presenting the contributions, limits and criticisms of each urban planning tool in Brussels in a general context and in relation to citizen participation ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

## 3.4 Towards a mapping of the Usquare project development process

### 3.4.1 General mapping

Mapping the development process of the Usquare project is proving to be an indispensable tool for understanding the different stages and chronology of this ambitious project. The timeline I've drawn up highlights the key phases that have marked out this project, from its inception in 2017 to its completion over the coming years.

The first phase, entitled the **"MDP development phase"**, began at the end of 2017 and will run until the end of 2020. This MDP, approved by the Brussels Government in November 2020, laid the foundations for the transformation of this historic site into a dynamic, sustainable and inclusive neighbourhood. Led by perspective.brussels, the MDP's ambition was to redevelop the 3.9 hectares of the former gendarmerie school into a multifunctional space integrating university facilities, housing and open public spaces. This initial stage laid the foundations for the project by defining the main directions and objectives to be achieved. It was during this period that the main guidelines for the project were established, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent stages. The Usquare program was structured around four major operations (Sau-msi.brussels, 2018). Firstly, the 'equipment' operation (identified in brown in Figure 18) provides for the installation of university infrastructures as well as shared spaces such as food corners and small shops. These facilities, financed by the ERDF program, will be set up in existing buildings through conversion projects, covering a surface area of around 8,500 m<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the "entrepreneurship and innovation" operation (identified in blue in Figure 18) aims to create a joint incubator for ULB and VUB, a FabLab and a StartLab occupying approximately 6,000 m<sup>2</sup>, through both conversion and new construction. In addition, the "student accommodation" operation (identified in orange in Figure 18) aims to provide around 600 kots, spread over an area of 18,000 m<sup>2</sup>, through conversion, demolition and reconstruction projects. Finally, the 'family housing' scheme (identified in green in Figure 18) provides for the creation of 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> of new housing on the western and northern fringes of the site, through demolition and reconstruction projects. These projects illustrate an integrated approach combining heritage preservation, academic innovation and residential development.



Figure 18 - Nomenclature of the various buildings on the site  
©sau-msi.brussels

Then, at the same time as the MDP was being drawn up, the permit applications were launched in mid-2019, and it took a year to obtain them. This phase made it possible to obtain all the permits needed to move forward with the project. This stage has enabled the plans drawn up

to be officially validated and their compliance with current regulations to be guaranteed. From the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2022, the **"temporary occupation phase"** allowed for the temporary use of the spaces. This gradual transition to the definitive use of the premises made it easier for stakeholders and future users to adapt to the new environment, while preparing the ground for future works. At the same time, the **"public space design phase"**, which runs from the end of 2019 to the end of 2021, has been dedicated to the planning and design of the public spaces. This stage has been essential to ensure that these spaces meet the needs of users and contribute to the attractiveness and functionality of the site. This phase was the subject of participatory workshops, which will be described in more detail later in this section. The first phase of the project, which ran from late 2021 to early 2024, was then devoted to the construction of the "equipment" buildings (shown in brown on Figure 18 above). During this period, efforts were concentrated on building the essential infrastructure to accommodate the academic establishments. Finally, from 2028 onwards, the phase entitled "continuation of the works" covers the continuation and completion of the works. It is during this period that the project will reach its full potential, with the completion of all the planned constructions and the full opening of the spaces to the public.

The Figure 19 shows the evolution of the Usquare project and provides a clearer picture of the efforts and stages required to bring it to fruition. Thanks to this mapping, it was possible to determine the phases in which there was or was not participation, in order to identify the precise moments that needed to be addressed. This methodical approach ensures a clear and detailed understanding of the dynamics of the project.

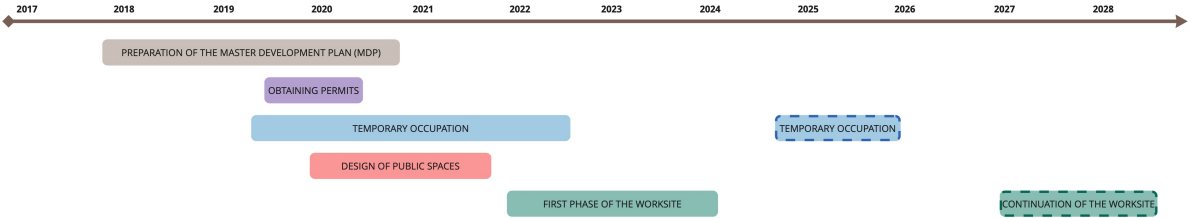


Figure 19 - Map showing the different stages and chronology of the Usquare project ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard

Given the complexity of the project, it is clear that participation cannot be analysed in a one-dimensional way, either by stakeholder, by level of participation or by specific context. It is a global process that requires all these dimensions to be taken into account. For this reason, in my mapping, I have adopted a linear approach. This method reflects how my preliminary research influenced the mapping, by putting forward an integrative and multidimensional vision of participation. This approach justifies and prepares for the next section on "Confrontation by phase". In this analysis, I begin by detailing the actors involved in each phase, specifying their roles and contributions. I then examine the methodologies used to organise and structure their participation, before analysing the results obtained, assessing the impact of these interactions on the project. This structure provides a full understanding of the dynamics at play and a nuanced perspective on the Usquare project.

### 3.4.2 Confrontation by phase

#### A. MDP development phase

The MDP for the Usquare project in Brussels is a particularly interesting case study in citizen participation in urban planning. The MDP demonstrates the importance of citizen participation and the challenges associated with integrating it into urban planning. The variety of players involved underlines the effort to create a participatory process. Perspective.brussels, project manager for the MDP, coordinated the entire process, working with Bruxelles Urbanisme et Patrimoine (BUP) to oversee its implementation, and the SAU for operational implementation. Brussels Environment (BE) and Brussels Mobility (BM) monitored the development of the MDP, while the ULB and the VUB contributed to the detailed programming. The BUUR - IDEA Consult consortium, responsible for drawing up the MDP and carrying out the environmental impact study, played a key role in the urban project management, while Aries handled the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the plan. Final validation of the MDP was approved by the Government of the BCR. The local authorities, including the Communes of Ixelles and Etterbeek, monitored the process and organised the public enquiries, and the Regional Development Commission (RDC) provided a framework for consultation. How did the methodology deployed seek to effectively coordinate the involvement of these multiple stakeholders and ensure citizen participation throughout the process, despite the challenges encountered?

The methodology used involved several stages designed to guarantee clear information and effective participation throughout the process. The information below comes from the document published by Perspective.brussels entitled "Rapport de synthèse de la procédure d'information et participation - PAD Casernes d'Ixelles" (Perspective.brussels, 2019). The first step was to put a website dedicated to the project ([www.usquare.brussels](http://www.usquare.brussels)) online in December 2017. This centralised all information relating to the project and provided a reference point for interested parties. In parallel, on 13 December 2017, a public information meeting was held, attended by around 100 people. The meeting was advertised through various channels, including the distribution of flyers to letterboxes, the publication of announcements on the Perspective, Ixelles Commune and Usquare websites, aiming to attract as wide an audience as possible. Then, on 17 May 2018, a full page of information was published in several local newspapers to inform citizens of the organisation of information and participation meetings. The following day, the municipalities concerned received an e-mail inviting them to publish the information on their respective valves and websites. The aim of this action was to ensure that the information was widely disseminated to reach all residents likely to be affected by the project. In addition, an online form was also set up to allow citizens to share their remarks, observations and suggestions about the project. On 2 June 2018, an advertisement in local newspapers informed citizens of the availability of a set of documents detailing the broad outlines of the project. This included the Minister-President's instruction to Perspective.brussels to proceed with the preparation of a MDP, a document summarising the main objectives and issues, and contact details for the point of contact for any questions or requests for further information. The aim of this approach was to ensure transparency by making as much information as possible available in an accessible way. To further raise awareness, from 24 May 2018, 4,000 postcards were distributed in the neighbourhood around Usquare, inviting citizens to information and participation meetings and informing them of ways

to get involved. This was complemented by drop-in sessions organised to answer residents' questions and concerns.

The results of the participatory methodology used to draw up the Usquare project's MDP reveal contrasting perceptions among the stakeholders, highlighting the challenges of a participatory approach. Citizen participation, although sought from the outset of the project, has encountered obstacles in its implementation. The MDP was criticised for being implemented too quickly, leaving insufficient time for proper public consultation (Scohier & Marsin, 2020). Thirteen projects were launched simultaneously as soon as it was adopted, resulting in public enquiries being conducted at a frenetic pace. Many citizens therefore expressed doubts as to whether their participation had any real influence on the final project. In addition, a number of local residents have voiced their frustration at the lack of transparency in the way their opinions and suggestions are taken into account, calling into question the authorities' degree of commitment to a truly participatory approach (Perspective.brussels, 2019). The feeling of being excluded from the decision-making process persists, indicating that the consultation mechanisms put in place have not fully achieved their objective (Ibid.).

Despite efforts to inform and engage the public through the project's dedicated website, including press announcements, public meetings and public enquiries, the perception of a lack of transparency remains.

*« Il est important de noter que, bien qu'il y ait eu des consultations citoyennes formelles lors de l'enquête publique sur le PAD, l'efficacité de ces consultations peut être questionnée. Le texte urbanistique du PAD, il a été soumis à l'enquête publique et donc, tout le monde a le droit de réagir. Toutefois, la complexité et la technicité des documents, qui peuvent faire plusieurs centaines de pages, rendent difficile pour les citoyens de participer efficacement. Le citoyen n'est pas outillé pour réagir dans ce processus-là... c'est toutes des notions d'urbanisme et d'architecture pour lesquelles le citoyen a très peu de connaissances. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

This criticism is in line with the historical trend towards decision-making that is far removed from citizens, as Meunier (2019) has described in top-down planning approaches. In addition, some citizens have expressed concerns about the lack of access to more detailed information about the project, fuelling fears of a 'closed room' process. The provision of information alone is not enough to reassure citizens if the feeling of exclusion persists. One of the most critical aspects raised by citizens concerns the perception of a possible conflict of interest in the presentation of public meetings (Perspective.brussels, 2019). The fact that these moderators came from Perspective, the institution responsible for drawing up the MDP, raised concerns about their neutrality. Citizens expressed the wish that the moderators of the information sessions should be independent and have no direct links with the authorities responsible for the project, in order to avoid conflicts of interest and reinforce trust and neutrality in the participatory process. The presence of town planners or institutional representatives directly involved in project planning may be perceived as a potential conflict of interest. To address this concern, facilitators should be trained and independent, with recognised expertise in communication and the management of citizen participation processes (Boesten, 2021). Their role should be to facilitate open and fair dialogue between stakeholders, ensuring that all voices are heard (Ibid.).

However, it should be noted that the MDP has been amended from its initial version, indicating that the authorities have been receptive to comments. Overall, the MDP is viewed positively for its contribution to the revitalisation of the site. The ability to adapt and revise the project demonstrates the flexibility of the authorities involved and their willingness to respond to the concerns of stakeholders. Although the project has shown a degree of flexibility in adapting to the comments received, in line with the suggestions made by Pinot and Redoutey (2021) this adaptation must remain in line with the strategic planning objectives. The challenge lies in striking a balance between listening to and incorporating citizens' comments while maintaining a clear direction for urban development. This demonstrates the need to create more inclusive participatory frameworks, capable of combining the overall strategic objectives with the specific concerns and needs expressed by citizens.

During an interview with the project management assistant for the universities (see Appendice 7) for the Usquare project, it was pointed out that the MDP did not give enough space to citizen participation.

*« Tout ça n'a pas été fait avec de la consultation citoyenne, c'est vraiment des ingénieurs, des architectes... qui ont étudié des propositions, et tout ça est passé par le gouvernement et a été validé par le gouvernement. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

This statement clearly shows that decisions have been taken mainly by technical experts and validated by government bodies, without any real consultation of local residents. A concrete example is that of active ground floors. In the MDP, these spaces are described as being intended to "enliven the public space and create a link between the outside and the inside" (Perspective.brussels et al., 2020b, p. 56). The idea behind this formulation is to leave room for manoeuvre to adapt the future uses of these spaces according to the needs of citizens, thanks to their consultation. However, in practice, these decisions have been taken without the involvement of citizens, as the interview indicates. This lack of citizen consultation is a cause for concern, as it deprives the project of the wealth of ideas and needs expressed by the future users of the spaces. What's more, the institutional priorities of the universities have often taken precedence over initiatives for citizen participation.

*« Le principal acteur, c'est quand même les universités... leur priorité n'est pas de faire de la participation citoyenne, leur priorité c'est de faire de l'enseignement et de la recherche. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

This situation has led to an imbalance, where the needs and ideas of citizens have not been fully integrated into the project planning and implementation process.

The coherence of the urban planning process has also been called into question. The link between the MDP, the RLUP, the RSDP and the Good Move mobility plan, although crucial to regional planning, has not been sufficiently clear to citizens. This confusion highlights the need to clarify the links between these different planning instruments and to clearly communicate their respective roles, in order to ensure an overall understanding on the part of citizens. In addition, residents have expressed scepticism about the new MDP tool, fearing that it will be used to circumvent planning

regulations more easily, particularly the RLUP. This scepticism highlights the need to ensure consistency and complementarity between the various urban planning instruments, so that the MDP is not perceived as a tool that facilitates inappropriate derogations from existing regulations. The request for the MDP to be aligned with the RSDP and the Good Move mobility plan also highlights the need for strategic coordination. Citizens want to ensure that the objectives of the Usquare project are in line with wider regional guidelines to ensure coherent and sustainable urban development. As Dris (2022) and Pinot and Redoutey (2021) citizens must have access to clear information in order to participate effectively.

The citizens put forward a number of suggestions for improving the participatory methodology of the Usquare MDP. These included providing a synoptic map of the project for better understanding, establishing a clearer timetable for the work, incorporating elements of the Nature Plan to promote sustainability, and training independent and impartial facilitators (Perspective.brussels, 2019). These suggestions reflect citizens' desire for a more transparent, better organised process and a truly inclusive and democratic environment for citizen participation.

The Figure 20 shows the additions made to the initial table entitled "Summary table presenting the contributions, limits and criticisms of each urban planning tool in Brussels in a general context and in relation to citizen participation" (see Figure 17). These additions, shown in red, enrich the table by providing perspectives arising from the discussions during the interviews, thus enabling a better understanding of the contributions and limitations of the MDP in the specific context of Usquare. It is essential to stress that, in the context of the Usquare project, we are operating specifically under the aegis of the MDP. This plan does not concern the other three urban planning tools, which are applied more on a regional scale. This is an important point to make, because our focus on Usquare is limited to the dynamics specific to the MDP, without including the other regional tools.

Tools	Contributions	Limitations + Criticisms	Sources
<b>Master Development Plan (PAD in French)</b>  In general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simplifies and rationalises town planning procedures</li> <li>- Enables more strategic, inter-municipal planning</li> <li>- Flexibility to depart from traditional planning standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Democratic deficit</li> <li>- Can bypass certain town-planning standards</li> <li>- Criticism of the complexity and technical nature of documents</li> </ul>	- (Schohier & Marsin, 2020) - Interviews
<b>Master Development Plan (PAD in French)</b>  With regard to participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greater transparency thanks to the availability of documents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rapid adoption limiting public consultation</li> <li>- Public consultation difficult</li> <li>- Concerns about the neutrality of facilitators at public meetings</li> <li>- Institutional priorities often favoured over public consultation</li> </ul>	

Figure 20 - Summary table presenting the contributions, limitations and criticisms of the Usquare MDP in a general context and in relation to citizen participation ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard



## B. Temporary occupation phase

The Usquare project manager at the SAU (see Appendice 4 for the transcript of the interview) highlighted the strategy adopted following the Region's acquisition of the former Ixelles barracks in 2018. Aware of the usual delays between the approval of a master development plan by Perspective.brussels and the actual start of work, the SAU team seized the opportunity to engage the Brussels community by opening the site to the public during this transitional period.

*« Donc le processus, souvent, entre le moment où on dit : OK, on va faire ça, et vraiment le démarrage effectif des travaux, c'est grosso modo trois ans. Et donc en 2018, on s'est dit : on sait de toute façon que quoi qu'il arrive, on va avoir du temps, ces bâtiments vont rester inoccupés. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

The importance of this early opening was emphasised, which would allow the public to take ownership of the site and become familiar with it before the major transformations took shape, thus anticipating a period of inactivity of around three years before the start of the works (Interviewee1, 2024).

*« Et donc nous, on a pris la responsabilité, la SAU, de faire ce qu'on appelle un gros projet d'occupation temporaire... On a fait tout un processus qui était assez intensif de travaux de remise en état des bâtiments, d'obtenir toutes les autorisations aux pompiers, les conformités électriques, la relance des chaudières, etc. En vue d'accueillir les projets. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

This proactive approach was designed to keep the site dynamic and accessible, despite the constraints associated with the construction schedule.

At the time, the site had a peaceful atmosphere, with vast outdoor spaces and buildings with a unique charm. The SAU therefore took on the responsibility of running a temporary occupation project, refurbishing the buildings and obtaining all the necessary approvals, from the fire brigade to electrical compliance and the re-commissioning of the boilers, to accommodate the projects. To tackle the complexity of the project, the SAU team developed a strategy to test several approaches. Comprising around twenty people, the team also set up a coordination team, responsible for managing the site, coordinating the players involved and ensuring dynamic occupation of the site.

*« Nous voulions que le site rayonne, pas seulement pour les occupants et le quartier, mais pour tous les Bruxellois. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

The aim was twofold: on the one hand, to facilitate the development of non-profit or economically fragile projects and, on the other, to open up the site to local residents while offering the people of Brussels an emblematic and open space (Ibid.). Coordinating the project involved managing access, traffic and interaction with the occupants, the universities and the municipal authorities, as well as activating the site to make it a lively and recognised place (Ibid.).

The temporary occupation project, more commonly known as 'See U', began in 2019 with an initial target of two years, but See U was extended for a further year or so until September 2022. Subsequently, asbestos removal and decontamination work interrupted the temporary occupation. Despite this work, he explains that the team has maintained a small perimeter of temporary occupation, even though it no longer has the influence that See U had at the time (Ibid.). Two buildings continue to host around thirty projects.

*« On a quand même réussi à maintenir un tout petit périmètre d'occupation temporaire, mais les gens le connaissent beaucoup moins que See U. Il y a deux bâtiments qui tournent encore aujourd'hui en occupation temporaire avec une trentaine de projets au total. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

He concludes:

*« Nous sommes fiers d'avoir maintenu ce processus d'occupation temporaire tout en continuant à accueillir le public, même en pleine construction. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

The temporary occupation that has taken place on the Usquare site relies on a strong and diverse governance structure to ensure effective management (SeeU, 2019). At the heart of this structure is the Steering Committee, the main governance body, which brings together several key entities. The SAU plays a central role as the property arm of the BCR, overseeing land acquisition and project coordination. It works closely with the Creatis consortium, D-Side Group and Troisième Pôle, an alliance of companies providing expertise in project management and event programming. The City of Ixelles acts as a bridge between regional policies and the needs of the local community. In addition, the Regional Buildings Authority ("Régie Régionale des Bâtiments" in French) is responsible for ensuring that public buildings comply with construction and safety standards, while the ULB and VUB universities contribute their academic expertise in research and training. Together, this steering committee guides strategic decisions and all practical issues relating to site management, programming options and the integration of new projects.

In addition to these key players, this temporary occupation also involved other important participants, notably the See Users, who temporarily occupied the spaces during the temporary occupation phase. Their role is essential in providing feedback on potential uses for the site. I was able to conduct an interview (see Appendice 6) with the person who contributed to the development and operational coordination of OpenLab Brussels as part of the CIVIS University Alliance (Interviewee3, 2024). I was able to hear his opinion on the question of citizen participation in the See U project. I've taken an extract from this interview and I've noticed that by interviewing players who have held different positions in the Usquare project, their perspectives or feelings can be very different (Ibid.).

*« Il faut que je retrouve l'appel à manifestation d'intérêt pour devenir occupant temporaire. Il y avait un volet vraiment assez fort marqué « travailler avec le territoire ». Je ne sais plus si ils ont utilisé le mot communautaire, mais c'était un peu l'idée qu'il y avait derrière. De mon expérience et de retours de gens qui sont restés plus longtemps que nous, ça n'a pas très bien marché, parce que c'est resté quand même quelque chose de très orienté événementiel. ... La dernière année de l'occupation temporaire, ils ont créé un*

*outil qui s'appelait Meet U, qui existe toujours. L'idée de Meet U : comment est-ce que tu engages déjà le quartier, les habitants, les usagers, les environs dans une dynamique participative et collective à Usquare.*

*Mais pour moi, c'est quelque chose qui s'est rajouté. Cela montre un aveu d'échec. Après trois ans d'occupation temporaire : l'activation de la participation et du volet co-créatif a été mal gérée. Certaines organisations savent vraiment comment faire ce genre de choses, mais je pense que le parti pris d'une approche événementielle, qui attire des gens de loin mais qui n'est pas adaptée à la vie de quartier, a été problématique. Il y avait notamment un projet dans les projets d'occupation temporaire qui était une école des devoirs, mais je crois qu'elle ne s'est jamais installée. Donc, dans le genre participatif pour le quartier, c'est vachement bien, mais ça ne s'est jamais fait. Il y avait d'autres initiatives comme le CPAS auraient pu se faire, mais cela n'a pas non plus abouti.»*

*(Person in charge of the OpenLab project)*

The Meet U collective, made up of local residents, was also involved via several groups. The following information is taken from "Rapport d'activités 4 – 2021-2022" published by See U (SeeU, 2022). The first group, called "core 1", is made up of active members aged between 30 and 45, comprising 10 members (3 men and 7 women) living between 20 meters and 1 km from the site. The second group, called "core 2", uses WhatsApp to coordinate regular activities. Its members, aged between 27 and 65, live in Ixelles and Etterbeek. Finally, "core 3" is a larger Facebook group, with 265 members aged between 25 and 65, reflecting a more diverse population. These participants played a key role in the success of the temporary occupation of the Usquare project. With their diverse perspectives, they have helped shape the future of the site by providing valuable information and innovative ideas for the project.

The Usquare project has adopted a comprehensive methodology to effectively engage participants during the temporary occupation phase. In May 2018, SAU launched a Call for Expressions of Interest (CEI) to attract See Users. This CEI states:

*"The transitional management phase will also enable the site to be activated, managed and maintained, as well as fostering its appropriation by local residents, future users and the people of Brussels in general. ... Activating the site will make it possible to ensure social control as well as maintenance and management of the site in a responsible manner. Temporary occupancy will also be a way for the SAU, the universities and the municipality to raise the profile of the site and, above all, of its ambitious conversion project". (Sau-msi.brussels, 2018, p. 2)*

A number of tools were put in place to ensure transparency and efficiency in the selection process. Among them, the Bible, a detailed photographic report of the 35,000 m<sup>2</sup> available, enabled participants to visit the spaces remotely and take stock of the situation (SeeU, 2022). In addition, the Matrix, a complex Excel spreadsheet, was created to receive, qualify and evaluate CEI requests using eight predefined criteria (Ibid.). In addition, administrative materials including agreements, by-laws and welcome kits were prepared, supported by a team dedicated to See Users projects. The selected projects were then integrated into nine different groups, or clusters, according to their themes, to facilitate the creation of synergies.

Several tools were used to involve users and neighbours, as described in See U's "Rapport d'activité 4" (SeeU, 2022). These tools included door-to-door visits to present the project and the team, as well as surveys to understand users' needs and expectations. Flyers presented See Users, the Meet U project and the services available on the site. Information stands at events enabled the team to

answer questions and create links. Guided tours were organised to help people get to grips with the site, and meeting and working days helped to create the Meet U neighbourhood collective. The Meet U collective was instrumental in integrating neighbours into the Usquare project, organising a variety of projects to breathe new life into the neighbourhood. These initiatives included the launch of groups on social networks, meetings and workshops to define participants' desires, and fortnightly meetings to strengthen links between members of the collective. In terms of communication, various channels were used: social networks such as Facebook and Instagram were used to inform and mobilise, and a dedicated WhatsApp group brought together around forty people. A Meet U Facebook page and group were also used to disseminate information, in addition to distributing flyers in letterboxes and announcing events via the Hoplr neighbourhood app and word of mouth. The 2018-2019 and subsequent activity reports show that communication was based on various physical media such as posters, notice boards and the site's boundary walls. Online communication took the form of a presentation of the project, a monthly newsletter, an online diary, site maps and relays on social networks. Press relations were handled by BeCulture, which published a press review available on request. This comprehensive methodology enabled the Usquare project to actively engage See Users, users, neighbours and other stakeholders, ensuring active participation and transparent monitoring throughout the project.

The temporary occupation carried out by the See U project in Usquare is a perfect example of how underused urban spaces can be transformed into dynamic platforms for social innovation and community development. See U was more than just an ephemeral initiative. Feedback from users, neighbours and general observations reveal that See U has gone beyond the status of a temporary initiative to become a transformative experience, impacting many aspects of urban life in Brussels. SAU launched the CEI in 2018, attracting a total of 74 projects from which 41 were initially selected. Word of mouth and the CEI helped to significantly increase the number of projects, reaching 108 by the end of the first summer. Over the three years of this temporary occupation, 208 projects have emerged on the See U site. Some projects have grown and expanded beyond See U, while others have developed on site, illustrating See U's ability to generate an environment conducive to innovation. What makes this initiative particularly valuable is its ability to provide a low-risk testing environment for any enterprising individual.

*« C'était de se dire, ces gens qui ont envie de tester un changement de vie, une nouvelle occupation, un nouveau métier, ils peuvent le faire en ayant un risque économique très limité. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

This approach has enabled many projects to come to fruition without overwhelming financial pressure. The rents offered by See U were extremely low, covering only fixed maintenance costs. This has enabled many entrepreneurs to launch their projects without incurring heavy debts (Interviewee4, 2024).

*« ... Et puis, surtout, économiquement, ces acteurs qui étaient ici en occupation temporaire payaient des loyers extrêmement réduits qui ne couvraient que les charges d'entretien du site. Il y avait deux niveaux de loyers : un pour les activités non commerciales, à 30 euros du mètre carré par an, et un pour les activités commerciales, à 60 euros du mètre carré.. ... mais le coût d'un commerce à Bruxelles, en fonctions des quartiers, tu es plutôt entre 180 et 250 euros. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

However, despite this favourable environment, some projects did not work out, highlighting the challenges inherent in ongoing experiments. For example, during an interview with a Pali-Pali representative, she suggested that we meet in a restaurant called "Place aux Plantes" (Interviewee2, 2024). This restaurant and herbalist project had started on the Usquare site during the temporary occupation. Today, the restaurant continues to operate, but the herb shop has not survived due to insufficient income. This is a good example of a project tested on Usquare that had to adapt to survive beyond the temporary occupation phase. This demonstrates the value of temporary occupancy as a testing ground, allowing entrepreneurs to try out ideas without taking excessive economic risks (Interviewee4, 2024).

Over time, See U's programming has become more inclusive and collaborative with the surrounding neighbourhoods, highlighting a dual movement. A concentric movement, from the whole of the BCR to the nearest neighbouring districts, and an external movement of attraction, drawing a varied public to the site to discover and activate the space. This strategy has enabled See U to expand geographically while attracting new audiences, creating a dynamic network of activities and interactions. In addition, the emphasis on inclusion and co-creation with the neighbourhood reflects a sensitivity to local needs and a commitment to community engagement. The varied programming on the See U site attracted a wide range of visitors, mainly aged between 25 and 40, although the weekend activities did appeal to a more family-oriented audience. The majority of visitors came from Brussels and the surrounding area, but the diversity of the activities on offer also attracted people of other nationalities. This diversity illustrates the importance of inclusive planning, capable of creating a sense of belonging among a variety of audiences. Theories of participatory urban planning often emphasise the importance of community involvement, and See U illustrated how programming tailored to diverse groups can foster the emergence of a dynamic and interconnected community, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries.

The Meet U collective has played a crucial role in forging links between the See U site and its neighbours, implementing a number of initiatives that have helped to integrate the neighbourhood into the temporary occupation project. The Meet U collective sought to understand and respond to the needs of local residents by organising surveys and meetings. These exchanges enabled us to gather ideas directly from local residents, which were then incorporated into the activities offered on the site. For example, pet walks and the creation of local services such as an organic market, a second-hand shop and a bicycle repair workshop have strengthened the links between the site and the neighbourhood. Meet U's proactive communication has also helped to keep neighbours informed of ongoing activities on the site. Obtaining the "Quartier Durable et Citoyen" label in September 2021 has led to a number of projects being proposed, as indicated in the 2021-2022 activity report (SeeU, 2022). These projects included a new communal kitchen garden to introduce local residents to growing their own fruit and vegetables and steer them towards urban self-sufficiency. A mobile intergenerational play area provided entertainment. A mobile shared kitchen created convivial moments for the neighbourhood, where residents could cook together the harvests from the vegetable garden. An outdoor covered space provided a protected area, and zero-waste training courses explained how to make eco-responsible household products. All these projects demonstrated See U's commitment to the neighbourhood.

Meet U also set up a neighbourhood committee, which held regular meetings to ensure that projects on the site were in line with neighbours' expectations. As the Pali Pali representative mentioned during our interview (see Appendix 5 for the transcript) (Interviewee2, 2024).

*"On a même mis en place une grille d'évaluation pour les projets, demandant aux occupants quelle était leur proposition pour le quartier, et s'ils avaient créé des liens avec d'autres projets."*

*(Pali Pali representative)*

However, the early days of temporary occupation were not without their challenges, particularly in terms of noise pollution. The Pali Pali representative explains that the three main axes of the project were supposed to be implemented in a precise order: firstly, to establish contact with the neighbourhood, secondly to create synergy between the projects, and thirdly to ensure See U's influence in Brussels (Ibid.). However, this order was not respected:

*"Nous avons fait tout à l'envers. La première année, nous avons tapé très fort avec les gros DJ sets en 2019, qui ont attiré 5000 personnes. Cela a énormément brassé le quartier, mais aussi généré beaucoup de plaintes parce que c'était trop bruyant, les gens n'avaient plus de places de parking, et c'était sale dans les rues."*

*(Pali Pali representative)*

To address these concerns, Meet U implemented several corrective measures. They limited the times during which noisy activities could take place and increased security to control the flow of participants. She adds:

*"C'est une chose qu'Edouard Meyer a très bien mise en place et suivie. Son numéro de téléphone était disponible pour les voisins. Nous étions énormément à l'écoute des riverains. Ce n'était pas une concertation publique formelle, mais dès qu'il y avait des plaintes sur notre Facebook, Instagram ou par email, nous étions très réceptifs. Notre mission était de temporiser avec le quartier."*

*(Pali Pali representative)*

By establishing this proactive communication and responding to complaints from local residents, Meet U has not only succeeded in effectively managing noise pollution, but has also strengthened the ties between See U and its neighbours, demonstrating the importance of proactive and inclusive management in temporary occupation projects.

In addition to its social commitment, the See U project has also had a significant economic impact on the region. The 40 direct jobs created, plus numerous indirect jobs, demonstrate the capacity of a temporary occupation project to boost the local economy. If each project on the site generated, on average, two jobs, then more than 400 jobs would have been created thanks to See U (Ibid., p. 32). This ability to generate employment is testament to the project's success as a catalyst for social innovation, underlining that temporary occupation and participatory approaches can have a significant impact on economic regeneration.

Finally, the 'See U' spirit that the Usquare project intends to perpetuate is based on the lessons learned from this experience. This includes supporting multi-use and sharing of spaces, strengthening collaboration between universities and the need to maintain a close link with the

neighbourhood. It also means paying particular attention to noise pollution, which has given rise to complaints in the past. The temporary occupation of the See U site demonstrates how the strategic activation of an urban space can transform an area into a place of creativity, inclusion and economic vitality. It also illustrates how the lessons learned from this experience can inform future urban planning practice, highlighting the importance of collaboration, adaptability and a strong connection with the local community. The impressive footfall and activity figures at See U are testament to its success as a dynamic and attractive location.

The Usquare project manager at the SAU says that despite the difficulties encountered, they have managed to complete the necessary work (Interviewee1, 2024). The most complex projects, such as the heating network and energy supply, are now almost complete, but the building projects are not yet ready to go ahead. This paves the way for a new temporary occupation project in certain buildings (Ibid.). He stresses the importance of clear communication on the subject, pointing out that See U did not close for pleasure, but because of asbestos removal work and other imperatives. The universities inaugurated the Avenue Général Jacques buildings on 15 February 2024, which leaves room for SAU to launch a new temporary occupancy project in order to maintain life on the site. He also said that they hoped to relaunch the project in the summer of 2024, since the next major works, apart from a few small areas that could be isolated with barriers, would not begin until early 2027 (Ibid.). He concludes:

*« Cela nous offre une fenêtre de deux ans et demi pour relancer cette dynamique, ce qui satisfait autant les universités que nous. »*

*(Usquare project manager at SAU)*

The completion of these works means that a new period of transitional management can be envisaged for the Usquare.brussels site. This project will be developed in six buildings, totalling approximately 8,000 m<sup>2</sup>, located in the heart of the former barracks and its external areas, and will coexist with the new ULB and VUB academic activities center, totalling approximately 8,500 m<sup>2</sup>, and the ULB and VUB Fablabs, totalling 6,500 m<sup>2</sup>. The SAU is currently in the process of appointing a coordination team responsible for managing and activating the project as a whole. This coordinator will be present during the installation of the projects selected as part of this CEI and will also have space in two buildings enabling it to complete the program of activities and/or offer common services to the occupants, students and the neighbourhood. The next major projects on the site will not see the light of day until early 2027. So, in consultation with the universities and the commune of Ixelles, the SAU was keen to take advantage of the new configuration of the site to develop an ambitious new transitional management project, in which the spaces will be available to occupants until the end of 2026 (Sau-msi.brussels, 2024).

The previous temporary occupancy, See U, welcomed a number of project initiators, as well as diversified activities open to a wide public. This first transitional period was also an opportunity to host projects active in the fields of three major ambitions of the Usquare.brussels project, namely sustainable and local food, the circular economy and alternative mobility. The aim of the SAU is that this new transitional management should also be in line with these major ambitions and that the projects and activities should complement each other, covering the social, environmental, cultural and economic dimensions. Projects should add value to the neighbourhood and the university community. Activities should cause as little nuisance to the neighbourhood as possible.

What's more, this new transitional management aims to be a win-win situation for everyone: future users, the promoters of projects and activities with a positive impact, the university community and the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods (Ibid.).

### **C. Design phase for public spaces on the USquare site**

Once the MDP had been approved by all parties, including the government, the latter mandated the SAU with its operational implementation. The SAU, a public company owned by the region, is responsible for the operational development of Brussels' strategic zones, of which the former Ixelles barracks form part. The SAU acts either as coordinator, ensuring that project developers comply with the MDP, or as project manager, appointing architects, hiring contractors and supervising worksites. The roles have been divided between the various parties: in some cases, the project sponsors manage the operations themselves, preparing the specifications, selecting the architects and financing the work. For example, the universities are responsible for developing the academic and innovation hubs, including the incubator and Fab Lab. For other projects, the SAU assumes these responsibilities. For its part, the SAU acts as project manager for the development of student and family housing, public spaces and technical infrastructure, such as the heating network and rainwater management (Interviewee1, 2024).

The project to redevelop the public space of the Usquare.brussels site focused on transforming interstitial spaces into real public places (see Figure 21) (Anyoji Beltrando, 2019). During the temporary occupation, the site had many buildings, some of which are no longer there today. The SAU therefore drew up an overview of the project for the long term, based on the guidelines of the MDP, which called for certain areas to be de-densified. The SAU formed a multidisciplinary consortium to design and monitor the future public spaces of the Usquare.brussels project. The consortium is made up of five members, three of whom are French: Anyoji Beltrando, the consortium leader responsible for coordination and the development concept, OLM paysagistes, responsible for the design of the green spaces, and Studio ON, responsible for the night-time lighting strategy. Two Belgian members complete the team: Studiebureau Jouret, in charge of drainage and rainwater management, and MK engineering, in charge of utilities and energy management.





Figure 21 - Before/after of an interstitial space of the site in public places ©Sau-psi.brussels (Anyoji Beltrando) (2019)

The design of these public spaces was an ambitious project that had to meet a number of specific challenges, including the reuse of existing paving stones to preserve the site's heritage and minimise waste. Extensive de-watering of the ground was planned to provide a cooler environment. The street furniture has been designed to be experimental and reversible, encouraging user-friendliness and flexibility of use. In addition, the Place d'Armes and the former riding school have been converted into multi-use spaces for everyday activities and major festive events. The project also included the creation of a public garden offering an abundance of nature along entirely pedestrian walkways, while the surrounding wall has been preserved and enhanced with climbing plants. Rainwater management was also an essential element of the project, with an integrated approach to managing the most intense rainfall, ensuring the resilience of the built environment.

The Anyoji Beltrando team of architects and town planners, selected through a competition (see Figure 22 ), was inspired by the See U dynamic to design the long-term redevelopment (Ibid.). Their vision was appreciated by the jury, which included the universities and other partners. Initial work on the preliminary designs began in 2021, and it soon became apparent that See U needed to be integrated into the final project to take advantage of their day-to-day knowledge of the site. Together with the See U management team and Anyoji Beltrando, the first version of the project was tested by submitting it to See U users. Despite the challenges posed by the Covid crisis, the teams persevered by focusing on the players already present, in particular the ULB and VUB universities, the occupants of the site and local residents, who were beginning to take ownership of the area. So the idea of developing these public spaces through a participatory process became obvious, actively involving these different players (Interviewee1, 2024).



Figure 22 - Preliminary plan (left) and axonometry (right) of Usquare's public spaces ©Anyoji Beltrando (2019)

The following information is based on the interview with the assistant to the project manager on the university side, as transcribed in Appendice 7 (Interviewee4, 2024). The participation of the ULB and VUB universities in the public space development project was very important, as they are key players in the development of the site. However, getting students and university staff involved proved to be a challenge, mainly because of their timetable constraints. Academic timetables, holidays, exams and blockades considerably limit the periods when universities can actively engage in external projects. Despite the efforts of the project manager's assistant on the part of the universities, but more particularly for ULB, it was difficult to gather a representative sample of students, researchers and professors. The administrative staff showed some interest, but did not reflect the university public as a whole. However, a great opportunity arose thanks to a professor from Saint-Luc who was organising architecture and design workshops with his students on the site. Although these students did not belong to the universities initially targeted, their participation provided valuable ideas and perspectives, demonstrating that engagement can be achieved by broadening the search for participants. On the other hand, the See U coordination team was proactive in mobilising See Users and local residents, who responded enthusiastically. They helped to compensate for the lack of commitment from the universities by offering suggestions and comments on the design of the public spaces. To get local residents more involved, various approaches were tried out, including using social networks, sending emails and distributing leaflets. Despite the difficulties encountered, each group attracted between 25 and 60 participants per workshop. These numbers were deemed sufficient to maintain a productive dynamic and achieve concrete results.

It was against this backdrop that SAU, in partnership with the Anyoji Beltrando team of architects and town planners, organised these participatory workshops. It all began with the distribution of a Google Form survey to participants, aimed at gathering their expectations, desires and fears regarding the project. This set the scene for five separate participatory workshops. Each of these workshops brought together around sixty participants, representing three types of audience: local residents, Saint-Luc students and See Users, the project developers integrated into See U. The aim

was to involve these stakeholders from the planning stage onwards, in order to design the 18,000 m<sup>2</sup> of public spaces before the legal consultation phases. The first workshop, "On partage, on discute," was held in two sessions, in December 2020 for See Users and in January 2021 for local residents. During these workshops, Anyoji Beltrando presented a preliminary design for the public spaces, followed by a question-and-answer session to gather initial reactions. The second workshop, "On imagine, on programme," took place in February 2021. Participants were divided into six round tables to imagine possible developments to be tested in the spring and summer. Inspired by the images proposed by Anyoji Beltrando, they worked in four stages: inspiration, imagination, selection and positioning. The following information is based on an interview with the Usquare project manager at the SAU, which can be found in Appendice 4 (Interviewee1, 2024). Anyoji Beltrando's team prepared a series of images to inspire participants, showing them various ideas not directly related to the barracks site. For example, the images showed activities such as playing ball or sitting in a park. The aim was to offer a wide range of proposals, encouraging participants to come up with a variety of activities. Each round table was made up of a team of six people, who used the images to suggest ideas. They then placed post-its on specific areas of the site plan to represent their proposals. For example, someone might suggest adding more benches around the main courtyard, or a children's hut near the Café Poussette. After this individual phase, a group session allowed those who had made suggestions to explain their logic. The groups then discussed and reached a consensus on the best way to spatialise the proposals, taking into account the constraints of the site. At the end of this workshop, the team analysed the 70 proposals that had been collected, 17 of which were duplications and 13 were either out of scope or not feasible, for example the idea of a zip line was deemed unrealistic due to the time or budget available (Sau-[msi.brussels](https://www.usquare.brussels) et al., 2022). Of the remaining 40, 18 were already under development and 22 were selected for the See Users. At the third workshop, "On choisit," in March 2021, participants were able to choose which proposals to implement by dividing a theoretical budget between their preferred projects. With a budget of €32,000, the SAU selected around fifteen test developments, which were implemented by the See U team and the See Users (see Figure 23) ([Usquare.brussels](https://www.usquare.brussels), n.d.-a). The facilities included huts, collaborative vegetable gardens, ping-pong and picnic tables, a climbing wall, benches made from recycled materials, and an esplanade for activities such as dance and sport. At the fourth workshop, "Les constructeurs présentent, on inaugure," in May 2021, the participants discovered the year's achievements and were able to test them throughout the summer of 2021, giving Anyoji Beltrando's architects the opportunity to adjust the development project according to observations of use. Finally, the fifth workshop, "On évalue, on amende, on pérennise," in October 2021, enabled participants from the previous workshops and other volunteers to collectively evaluate the facilities and activities proposed during the summer.

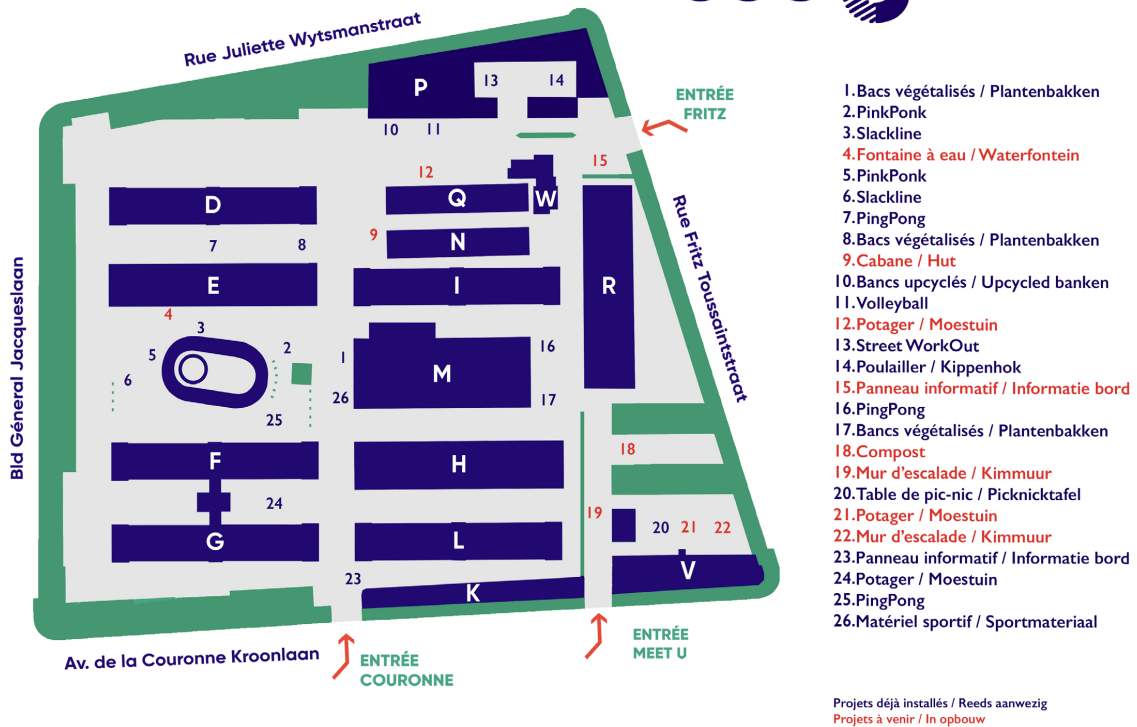


Figure 23 - Map showing the distribution of test facilities resulting from the participatory workshops ©SeeU (2021)

Architect and urban planner Yannick Beltrando, SAU's contractor for the design of the future Usquare.brussels public spaces, explains that "Le travail en ateliers et sa concrétisation au printemps 2021 ont plusieurs rôles : enrichir la programmation annuelle de See U ; fédérer et échanger sur le projet d'espace public à terme ; et tester des usages qui pourraient l'enrichir"<sup>3</sup> (Ibid.).

### 3.4.3 Summary and discussion

Analysis of citizen participation in the Usquare project reveals complex and nuanced aspects. This section discusses these aspects by comparing the results of the different phases with the elements of the literature review on participation, the contributions and limits of the tools of the BCR, and the specific features of the Usquare project. This discussion will clearly demonstrate our contribution to understanding citizen participation in complex urban projects. One of the most striking aspects of this project is the attempt to integrate citizen participation at several levels of the development process. However, this participation, although present, has often been perceived as insufficient, which raises questions about the real objectives of participation in this context, which will be developed in this chapter.

Citizen participation should not be seen solely as a progression through levels, as described by Arnstein (1969) but rather as a dynamic and flexible '**means**' of responding to the specific needs of citizens in the context of complex urban projects. Arnstein's scale, while useful for categorising degrees of involvement, tends to reduce participation to a simple hierarchical progression. In the

<sup>3</sup> In English : "The workshops and their implementation in spring 2021 have several roles: to enrich See U's annual programming; to bring people together and discuss the eventual public space project; and to test uses that could enrich it".

Usquare project, it is clear that participation cannot be reduced to a target to be reached on a scale. On the contrary, it must be seen as a continuous and interactive process, in which citizens are not simply passive observers to be informed or consulted, but active partners in the co-construction of the project. In this sense, participation becomes an essential means of adjusting urban projects to the social, cultural and political realities of the local context. This dynamic approach makes it possible to value the contributions of citizens at every stage of the process, recognising their central role in creating appropriate and sustainable solutions. So instead of aiming for a symbolic peak on a scale of participation, the aim is to ensure that every interaction with citizens enriches the project and strengthens their commitment to urban transformation.

However, it is important to recognise that this ideal vision of participation as a means has not always been achieved in every phase of the project. For example, the development of the MDP shows a participatory approach which, although existing, remained limited. The Usquare MDP incorporated various mechanisms for citizen participation, such as public meetings, online consultations and the dissemination of information. Nevertheless, this phase raises important questions about the real effectiveness of this participation: did it lead to genuine ownership by citizens, or was it still a formal exercise designed to legitimise decisions taken upstream? In reality, this phase remains largely aligned with what Arnstein describes as the lower levels of participation, namely information and consultation. Although citizens were given the opportunity to express their views, their influence on the final decisions remained limited. The methodology adopted seemed to be more geared towards formal consultation, aimed at reinforcing choices already largely established by experts and validated by the authorities, rather than towards genuine co-construction with local residents. This reflects a top-down approach to planning, which considerably limits the influence of local residents. As Meunier (2019) in the context of major urban projects, the complexity of the issues and the technical nature of the documents tend to discourage genuine and meaningful citizen participation. Thus, despite apparent efforts to include participation, it has failed to engage residents in any significant way, confirming that in this phase of the project, participation has served more as an instrument of legitimisation than as a genuine lever for citizen ownership.

In contrast, the See U temporary occupation phase demonstrated a more inclusive and experimental approach to participation, which was more aligned with the idea of participation as a means rather than a level. This phase showed how participation, when properly integrated, can have a significant impact on urban and social transformation. By providing a framework where citizens and local stakeholders could take ownership of the space and test a variety of projects in a low-risk environment, See U created a much stronger sense of ownership than during the MDP phase. The governance structure put in place, with a steering committee involving various stakeholders, fostered an environment where community initiatives could flourish, and aim to transform the space into a vibrant and dynamic place that met the real needs of local residents. This phase also helped to strengthen the link between citizens and their urban environment, by creating a space where the community could express itself and become actively involved. However, it is important to note that, despite this relative success, certain limitations have emerged. For example, the involvement of residents from neighbouring districts was uneven, and some projects failed to take root over the long term. This shows that even in a more successful participatory framework, practical obstacles can hinder full ownership by the whole community. Nevertheless, See U has had a positive impact by revitalising an area in transition. This project has shown that

participation can be a catalyst for change, but it needs to be continually adapted and strengthened if it is really to transform the social and political dynamics within the city.

The design phase for the public spaces in the Usquare project represents an ambitious attempt to deepen citizen involvement through participatory workshops designed to co-construct future developments. The aim of these workshops was to strike a balance between the aspirations of users and the technical and organisational constraints inherent in a project of this scale. From a methodological point of view, these workshops made it possible to involve various stakeholders, in particular See Users and some local residents, but suffered from limited participation by students and university staff, which reduced the diversity of perspectives. On the one hand, the workshops made it possible to test ideas directly related to the needs of users, which contributed to a degree of ownership of the space by the participants. On the other hand, the process revealed the difficulties inherent in mobilising a large part of the population, particularly due to institutional constraints such as academic calendars, which hampered active participation. To overcome these limitations, I believe it is necessary to rethink the participatory mechanisms by making them more flexible and accessible. For example, integrating more digital tools could capture a greater diversity of voices. It should also be stressed that it is difficult to measure the real effectiveness of these participatory workshops, because the public spaces have not yet been created. Only once they have been implemented will it be possible to assess whether the ideas developed during the workshops have actually been incorporated, although some facilities were tested during the summer of 2021.

To fully understand these challenges, it is useful to examine the participatory tools put in place by the BCR. These tools have certainly enabled urban processes to be more inclusive and dynamic, but with mixed results. On the one hand, they have encouraged a degree of integration of citizens in the decision-making processes, as demonstrated by the public consultations and participatory workshops. However, their implementation has often been limited by resource constraints and logistical problems, which has restricted their effectiveness. A concrete example is the public consultations organised as part of the development of the MDP. Although these consultations aimed to include citizens in the decision-making process, they were often limited by the complexity of the documents presented, making informed participation difficult. In addition, public meetings were sometimes ill-suited in terms of timing and location, which limited the participation of certain sections of the population. These obstacles show that, despite good intentions, BCR participatory tools face logistical and communication challenges that can compromise their effectiveness.

However, this participation, although present, has often been perceived as insufficient, which raises questions about the real objectives underlying this approach. It is essential to recognise that the objectives of participation in this project are twofold: on the one hand, to encourage the development of non-profit or economically vulnerable projects, and on the other hand, to design an emblematic and open space, accessible both to the residents of the district and to the people of Brussels as a whole. This project is therefore not limited to the simple design or programming of a space, but is part of a wider political desire to transform a historic site into an emblematic place for Brussels. Participation is therefore not just a legitimisation mechanism or a planning tool, but a means of crystallising this vision. It enables citizens and local stakeholders to be involved not only in the physical design of the site, but also in defining its future uses and symbolic values.

In conclusion, the Usquare project offers a rich and nuanced case study that illustrates both the potential and the limits of citizen participation in urban transformation. Although it values participation, Usquare seems to have focused on specific moments rather than on an ongoing process that is deeply rooted in citizens' practices. This highlights a significant gap between the participatory ideal advocated in the literature and the reality observed in Usquare, where participation sometimes remains fragmented and ad hoc, thus limiting its transformative impact. The discussion here highlights that for participation to reach its full potential, it must be seen not only as a means, but also as an evolving practice, capable of adapting to the needs and realities of citizens. Usquare stands out for its ambition to involve citizens from the very first phases of its development. However, reality has shown that this integration has been most effective during the design phase of public spaces, rather than throughout the entire programming process. It is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to open a specific chapter, dedicated to a more detailed analysis of the case of the design of Usquare's public spaces. In this next chapter, I will take an in-depth look at the specific features and mechanisms of participation, focusing on the real needs of participation, particularly in terms of the actors involved and the dynamics of collaboration. It is in this particular phase of the Usquare project that real citizen participation takes place, with concrete issues at stake and more engaging processes.







# 4

## ANALYSIS OF A SPECIFIC CASE: USQUARE'S PUBLIC SPACES





## 4 Analysis of a specific case: Usquare's public spaces

### 4.1 Methodology

A structured and rigorous methodology has been put in place to study citizen participation in the public spaces of the Usquare project. This methodology comprises several key stages aimed at obtaining a detailed and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of participation and their impact on the project. After conducting several initial interviews on the Usquare project, I identified the need to collect more specific data on citizen participation. These preliminary interviews provided me with a general overview of the project and helped to identify the phases where citizen participation might have had a significant impact. At this stage, it appeared that the design phase of the public spaces was particularly relevant for an in-depth analysis of citizen participation.

In order to ask more targeted and relevant questions, I contacted some of the players involved again for a second interview, in particular the head of the Usquare project at the SAU and the assistant to the project manager on the university side. Thanks to the better knowledge of the subject acquired during the first interviews, I was able to formulate specific questions focusing on citizen participation in the specific context of Usquare's public spaces. During the interview with the SAU project manager, I obtained a booklet entitled "2019 – 2021 : ouvrir, préparer, et préfigurer les futurs espaces publics". This document provided a detailed summary of the participatory workshops, describing how they were conducted and what their outcomes were for the development of Usquare's public spaces. This booklet was crucial for understanding the methods used and the types of citizen participation observed during these workshops. I also received a brochure entitled "Rapport d'activités 2016-2018" from the SAU, which brings together various projects underway in the city of Brussels.

The analysis of these specific documents, combined with the in-depth interviews, provided a clear understanding of the dynamics of participation in this specific case. I was able to identify three main phases in which citizen participation was potentially present: the development of the MDP, temporary occupation and the design of public spaces. However, it was the phase of designing the public spaces that proved to be the most significant in terms of citizen participation, showing a genuine co-creation between the various players.

### 4.2 Results

Participatory workshops have become a key element in the contemporary approach to designing public spaces. They provide a space where citizens, professionals and decision-makers can work together to imagine and co-create urban environments. The Usquare project, with its participatory workshops, is a perfect illustration of this dynamic. By directly involving residents, students and other local stakeholders in planning and design, these workshops have harnessed the potential of citizen participation to transform public spaces into environments adapted to the needs of the community. However, the citizen participation process presents challenges. This discussion seeks to critically examine how participatory workshops have influenced the design of public spaces in Usquare, while highlighting the benefits and challenges inherent in this type of collaborative approach.

The design of Usquare's public spaces is part of the "preliminary design" phase of the project life cycle, as described by Chbaly et al. (2021). This phase is essential for transforming the needs and expectations of stakeholders into concrete sketches and conceptual schemes. For Usquare, preliminary design allows design options to be explored and refined, ensuring that they meet the functional, aesthetic and environmental requirements of the project. To ensure that the design solutions are aligned with the end-users' expectations, participatory workshops have been organised. These workshops, directly linked to the preliminary design phase, enable stakeholders to be actively involved in the decision-making process, in line with the principles of Serugga et al. (Serugga et al., 2020). By bringing together residents, experts and other stakeholders, these workshops facilitate the exchange of ideas and the gathering of valuable feedback, ensuring that the solutions envisaged meet the needs of the community.

The Figure 15 which illustrates the different levels of participation, places participatory workshops in the "co-production / co-construction" category, reflecting a high degree of involvement. In these forms of participation, selected volunteer groups are significantly involved in the design of projects, contributing their expertise to directly shape the solutions. This involvement can be bottom-up, led by citizens, or top-down, initiated by the authorities. In the case of Usquare, this dynamic was mainly top-down, since the participatory workshops were initiated by the SAU, accompanied by Anyoji Beltrando. Partoune (2010) also highlights the distinction between institutionalised participation and spontaneous participation. The participatory workshops mainly practised institutionalised participation, orchestrated by the project bodies, which, although valuable, can limit the spontaneity and autonomy of the participants. However, this approach to participation recognises the value of citizens' contributions, encouraging active debate in order to reach informed decisions. The participatory workshops for the Usquare project enabled See Users, local residents and Saint-Luc students to bring their real-life experience of the site to contribute to the co-creation of the project. This is in line with the co-construction approach, in which citizens actively participate in the development of public spaces, sharing their ideas, taking part in debates and influencing final decisions.

Adopting an ecosystem perspective, as described by Crambes et al. (2016) is essential in urban projects such as Usquare, as it emphasises that the relationship between people and their environment goes beyond the physical. The participatory workshops in this project sought to capture this relationship by involving local residents, students and See Users, each of whom brought their own emotional and symbolic connection with their environment. This ecosystemic perspective shows that each individual, through his or her relationship with the space, enriches the collective understanding of the urban environment. The participatory workshops reflect this commitment by encouraging a diversity of contributions, enabling people from different socio-demographic backgrounds to share their concerns and ideas for urban design. It is this variety of perspectives that gives participatory projects their strength, taking into account the diverse needs of residents and users. They also stress the importance of collaboration between the various stakeholders, including architects, urban planners, landowners and residents, in translating citizens' aspirations into concrete solutions (Crambes et al., 2016). Participatory workshops enable this dialogue by bringing these stakeholders together to build resilient and sustainable urban environments.

### 4.2.1 The challenges of participatory workshops

Although the participatory workshops were a valuable initiative for the Usquare project, they faced challenges in terms of mobilisation, representativeness and managing participants' expectations. Let's confront these challenges with theory for further discussion.

Engaging participants, particularly students and university staff, proved difficult. According to civic engagement theory, meaningful participation requires a deliberate effort to create conditions conducive to stakeholder involvement. However, the calendar constraints of students and university staff limited their engagement. Academic timetables, holidays, exams and blockades severely limit the periods when universities can actively engage in external projects. Usquare's project management assistant on the university side states:

*« Il a été difficile de rassembler un échantillon représentatif d'étudiants, de chercheurs et de professeurs. Le personnel administratif a montré un certain intérêt, mais n'a pas reflété l'ensemble du public universitaire. »*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

The complexity of civic engagement means understanding the specific constraints of each target group, which underlines the importance of adapting engagement strategies accordingly. For example, the workshops could have benefited from coordination with academic calendars to maximise university participation, although this is often easier said than done and therefore remains anecdotal. Other theories also stress the importance of incentives to encourage participation. Workshops could have included concrete incentives or rewards to further engage participants.

A major challenge of the participatory approach lies in the diversity and inclusion of participants. Involving a wide range of groups enabled a variety of contributions to be made, but the difficulty in mobilising certain groups highlights the need for a more inclusive approach. In this case study, the involvement of the ULB and VUB universities was important, but their effective mobilisation was difficult, as explained above. This situation illustrates the observations of Fung (2015) and Birck (2011) according to which participatory initiatives often have difficulty effectively involving all strata of the population. However, a great opportunity arose thanks to a professor from Saint-Luc who organised architecture and design workshops with his students on the site. Although these students did not belong to the universities initially targeted, their participation provided valuable ideas and perspectives, demonstrating that engagement can be achieved by broadening the search for participants. In addition, a considerable effort was made to involve a variety of groups, including See Users, Saint-Luc students and local residents.

The process of filtering proposals during the participatory workshops highlighted the importance of managing participants' expectations, aligning expectations with technical and budgetary realities. According to stakeholder management theories, it is essential to establish clear feasibility criteria from the outset and to communicate regularly on the project's progress. Transparency and clear communication of the selection criteria are crucial if the participants are to understand the decisions. However, finding a consensus proved difficult due to differences of opinion, with some proposals being ruled out due to technical and budgetary constraints. This situation meant that difficult compromises had to be made to balance the expectations of the participants with the realities of the project, and that the proposed solutions had to be adapted in the light of feedback

from the various stakeholders. Participatory planning researchers suggest that establishing feasibility criteria at the outset and communicating regularly about the project's progress can help manage participants' expectations.

The complexity of urban discussions represents another challenge, often alienating non-specialist citizens as Giraud points out (2017). The Usquare project has attempted to overcome this barrier by offering workshops with accessible discussions and inspiring visual aids. However, the intrinsic complexity of these projects remains a barrier to effective participation. Temporary installations have enabled ideas to be tested before they are finally implemented, but the transition to permanent solutions remains difficult. Ensuring the sustainability of the solutions is a major challenge for this type of project, because of the need to get all the stakeholders involved to accept the ideas.

- **Difficult to mobilise:** limited participation by students and university staff due to scheduling constraints.
- **Incomplete representativeness:** Difficulty in effectively involving all strata of the target population.
- **Managing expectations:** Aligning participants' expectations with technical and budgetary realities.
- **Complexity of discussions:** Difficulty for non-specialist citizens to fully engage in complex urban discussions.

#### 4.2.2 The benefits of participatory workshops

As part of the Usquare project, the participatory workshops demonstrated the different benefits of citizen participation for urban development. This method not only strengthened local democracy through the direct involvement of citizens, but also facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities. The collaboration between See Users, students, local residents and professionals has generated a rich and constructive dynamic, crucial to the development of innovative solutions that are well suited to the contemporary challenges of urban planning.

Incorporating the experiences of the residents, but particularly those of the See Users who had already experienced the site during the temporary occupation, added inestimable value to the project. The assistant to the project manager on the university side mentioned this aspect during our interview, emphasising:

*« L'importance d'une phase d'occupation temporaire, destinée à familiariser la population locale avec le site et à générer un sentiment d'appartenance avant même le début des aménagements permanents ».*

*(Assistant to the project manager on the university side)*

Their active participation revealed practical aspects and potential improvements that might have been overlooked if only the voices of local residents had been taken into account. This kind of practical involvement ensured that the proposed developments were not limited to architectural theories or aesthetic plans, but actually met the day-to-day needs of users. The importance of participatory workshops was fully demonstrated at the fourth workshop, entitled "Les

constructeurs présentent, on inaugure," in May 2021. Following this workshop, participants had the opportunity to test the year's projects throughout the summer, providing valuable feedback. This direct interaction enabled Anyoji Beltrando's architects to make targeted adjustments to the design project, highlighting the added value of an iteration process guided by the end users. The temporary facilities served as a living laboratory, where ongoing evaluation of the proposals reinforced their relevance and effectiveness before final adoption. The fifth workshop, "On évalue, on amende, on pérennise," which took place in October 2021, consolidated this approach. By bringing together participants from previous workshops as well as new volunteers, this session facilitated a collective evaluation of the facilities and activities tried out over the summer. This collaborative approach not only validated the improvements to be incorporated but also enabled the facilities to be finalised with the assurance that they corresponded to the needs and wishes of the community. This final stage was therefore crucial in anchoring the results of the workshops in the final project, demonstrating that participatory workshops are an indispensable tool for transforming urban spaces in a thoughtful and inclusive way, by closely aligning development projects with the aspirations of citizens.

At the same time, citizen participation has catalysed unbridled creativity, paving the way for original designs that reflect the community's identities and values. The constant interaction between citizens and professionals has decompartmentalised knowledge, enabling the emergence of adaptive solutions that take account of local specificities. For example, the reuse of existing cobblestones and the desilting of the ground not only preserved the heritage, but also addressed ecological concerns, illustrating how suggestions from the workshops can lead to sustainable, environmentally-friendly solutions. This approach has also encouraged the emergence of a new social dynamic, in which the values of solidarity and shared responsibility are given concrete expression in urban space.

As urban planning tools, participatory workshops play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion within communities. This type of active participation does more than simply collect opinions; it builds a space for dialogue that strengthens social ties and creates a shared sense of belonging among participants. In the context of the Usquare project, this aspect was particularly significant. By bringing together residents, students, professionals and other local stakeholders, the workshops provided a platform for all voices to be heard. This inclusion helped to break down the traditional barriers between 'experts' and citizens, allowing each group to share their knowledge and experiences. This sharing of information and personal experiences not only enriched the planning process, but also strengthened the sense of community. Participants were able to see how their contributions directly influenced the final decisions, strengthening their bond with the project and with each other. For example, during the workshops, local residents were able to express specific concerns about the safety and accessibility of the redeveloped spaces, while students contributed new ideas about innovative green spaces and sustainability solutions. This synergy between different age groups and social backgrounds contributed to a more robust and inclusive plan, reflecting a wide range of needs and desires. In addition, the introduction of pilot projects, such as the temporary facilities tested over the summer, enabled participants to see the impact of their ideas in real time. This approach not only validated the co-creation process, but also generated a sense of pride and ownership among the participants. Seeing their ideas come to fruition strengthened their commitment to the project and encouraged continued participation.

This rewarding experience shows that when people feel involved and respected in the planning process, they become key players in creating an urban environment that truly reflects the values and needs of its population. However, it is essential to recognise that the success of citizen participation depends heavily on the quality of its implementation. Challenges such as the management of expectations, the accessibility of discussions and the transparency of processes must be carefully addressed to avoid frustration and mistrust of the authorities. Meticulous planning and effective resource management are essential to maximise the benefits of this approach. In short, the participatory workshops in the Usquare.brussels project have demonstrated that well-orchestrated citizen participation can significantly transform the design of public spaces. It enriches the democratic process, fosters innovation, and helps to build a more cohesive and resilient community.

- **Strengthening local democracy:** Direct involvement of citizens.
- **Understanding local needs:** Input from residents and users of the site.
- **Creativity and innovative solutions:** Original, sustainable ideas adapted to local conditions.
- **Promoting social cohesion:** Dialogue and collaboration between citizens and professionals.
- **Sense of belonging:** visible contributions and real impact of participants.

### 4.2.3 The disadvantages of participatory workshops

Although participatory workshops offer benefits, they also have certain disadvantages that can limit their impact and effectiveness. In the Usquare project, a number of disadvantages were identified, particularly in terms of the costs associated with the time and resources required, the potential for conflict and the difficulties in guaranteeing the sustainability of the results obtained.

Organising participatory workshops requires a considerable investment in terms of time and human and financial resources. Preparing, running and monitoring these sessions requires meticulous planning and a significant allocation of resources. The SAU and the Anyoji Beltrando team had to devote considerable effort to orchestrating these sessions. These efforts included not only the planning of the workshops themselves, but also all the logistics required for them to run smoothly: booking rooms, preparing teaching materials, and setting up the equipment needed for the workshops. In addition to these logistical efforts, a significant investment of time was required for communication before and after the events, in order to ensure a high level of participation and to gather constructive feedback from participants. This communication included sending multiple emails, publishing announcements on social networks, and creating visual aids to facilitate understanding of the projects discussed. These preparatory and follow-up activities had a direct impact on the project budget. This is in line with the notion that participatory processes require substantial resources, as Fung pointed out in 2015. Hiring staff and monitoring the various stages requires careful planning and an adequate budget to ensure success. For example, the production of teaching materials adapted to the various workshop sessions and the costs associated with mobilising the staff needed to carry out these tasks represented significant expenditure. In addition, the time spent by the architects and planners at these workshops, particularly in preparing and adjusting their presentations based on the feedback received, added another layer of indirect costs. These concrete examples show how the resources allocated to participatory workshops can weigh



heavily on urban project budgets, especially when funds are limited. They underline the need for careful planning of these initiatives to maximise results without compromising other important aspects of urban development.

The participation of a wide range of stakeholders also means that there are differences of opinion on the proposals and divergent expectations. For example, at the second workshop, "On imagine, on programme", the varied proposals from participants revealed very different expectations for the use of public spaces. Some wanted extensive green areas for rest and relaxation, while others advocated more active facilities such as sports areas or spaces for community events. For example, the idea of turning part of the space into a children's play area was controversial. Although popular with local families, the idea was opposed by other groups concerned about potential noise pollution and the reduction in available green space. In addition, some ideas had to be abandoned or significantly modified due to budgetary and technical constraints. For example, the proposal to install a green roof over certain buildings to improve the insulation and aesthetics of the site came up against major technical challenges and higher than expected costs, which led to its rejection (Interviewee4, 2024). This decision was difficult to communicate to participants who had strongly supported the idea, creating frustrations and disagreements that required additional efforts to maintain stakeholder engagement. These concrete examples show how managing conflict and differing expectations was an important and sometimes problematic component of Usquare's participatory workshops. They illustrate well the challenges identified by Arnstein and Blondiaux regarding participatory processes, underlining the importance of negotiation and compromise in achieving realistic solutions that are widely accepted by all stakeholders.

- **High costs:** time-consuming, with significant human and financial resources.
- **Potential conflicts:** Differences of opinion and varying expectations among participants.
- **Sustainability difficulties:** Frustration due to the necessary concessions and difficulties in maintaining commitment.

#### 4.2.4 Assessment and discussion

As part of my dissertation, I developed an evaluation tool (see Figure 16) based on the literature for analysing citizen participation in participatory projects. Although I am fully aware that this tool is not yet fully developed, its application to the case study of the Usquare public spaces has enabled me to examine in depth the way in which participation has been put in place, to identify the strengths of the process, and to highlight the aspects requiring improvement. Designed specifically for this dissertation, this evaluation tool nevertheless has the potential to be applied to other case studies or re-used by other researchers, as long as we stay within the theme of citizen participation. Citizen participation, often evoked as an ideal in discourses on participatory democracy, takes on a concrete form here. My ambition, in applying this rigorous evaluation framework, was to go beyond the simple description of participatory mechanisms and delve into the heart of their real effectiveness, their impact on the ground, and the way in which they transform not only the public arena, but also the social dynamics that drive it. The following discussion, based on the table below (see

Figure 24), will be a critical analysis of the results obtained, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects.

Right from the outset, the Usquare project demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusion and diversity. This was intended not only to guide the project, but also to create a framework in which every stakeholder, whatever their perspective or role, could recognise themselves and contribute in a meaningful way. However, despite this desire for inclusion, a question needs to be asked: to what extent did these objectives truly capture and integrate the diversity of needs and expectations of the different communities involved? While the intention to involve a variety of groups - including young people, for example - was clear, the reality of their active participation and influence on the definition of the objectives remains to be assessed. The methodology used, although effective in involving around sixty participants in each workshop, has shown its limitations in terms of wider mobilisation. It did not fully succeed in overcoming the practical obstacles and significantly including the groups that were supposed to be at the heart of the project. This raises important questions about the appropriateness of the tools and approaches used to ensure truly inclusive participation. The diversity of participants is certainly a laudable objective, but it must be supported by means that ensure that each voice is not only heard, but also influential. This point raises important considerations about the depth of inclusion, beyond good intentions, and about the real capacity of a participatory process to meet the requirements of representation and equity in a modern democracy.

A fundamental aspect that deserves particular attention in the assessment of the Usquare project concerns the issue of transparency and objectivity, particularly with regard to the preliminary design. This preliminary design for the development of public spaces was drawn up by the Anyoji Beltrando architectural firm, which was appointed by the SAU at the end of 2019. This situation poses a major challenge: how can we ensure that the participatory process is perceived as genuine and detached from the decisions taken upstream? And how can we ensure that the participants' contributions are not simply a formal validation of a project that is already well defined? When the same architectural firm is involved both in drawing up the preliminary project and in facilitating the subsequent stages of the participatory process, it is crucial to maintain a critical distance. This distance not only preserves the integrity of the process, but also ensures that participants feel that their voices have a real impact and are not merely consultative. Transparency on this point is essential: participants must be informed of the state of progress of the project, the decisions already taken, and the room for manoeuvre they have to influence the final project. This issue of detachment becomes even more relevant when we consider that the architectural practice, having already invested in the pre-project phase, may naturally have a specific vision that it wants to see come to fruition. To avoid any unconscious bias or perceived manipulation of the process, it is essential to establish clear protocols from the outset. For example, the separation of roles between those who developed the preliminary design and those who facilitate the participatory process could be more pronounced. For example, even if the architectural firm retains a central role in the technical implementation of the project, other neutral players or moderators could be involved in facilitating discussions and participatory workshops.

A final point I would like to emphasise is the absence of final evaluation documents, which is a major grey area. Although it is mentioned in an SAU booklet that a survey would have been shared, the absence of documented results and feedback considerably complicates any attempt to measure

the real impact of citizen participation. This shortcoming highlights a fundamental issue in any participatory process: without ongoing evaluation and transparent sharing of the results obtained, it becomes virtually impossible to determine whether the objectives of participation have been achieved. The final evaluation is not simply an administrative formality; it is essential for drawing concrete lessons and for guiding future practices. One of the strengths of a participatory process lies precisely in the feedback loop, which must be continuous and two-way in order to maintain a solid commitment.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the Usquare project in the table below reveals an overall positive assessment, but with some notable reservations. If we count the responses to the various criteria, we observe 11 "yes" answers (shown in green in the table below), which testify to the many successful aspects of the project, particularly in terms of clarity of objectives, effectiveness in mobilising certain groups, and integration of citizen participation at various stages of the process. However, the 5 "no" ratings (shown in orange) point to significant weaknesses, such as shortcomings in the final evaluation and difficulties in fully including certain key groups. Finally, the 2 "partially" (shown in yellow) indicate areas where the project has made commendable efforts, but where there is still room for improvement to achieve the optimum level of inclusion and effectiveness. These results show that, despite the efforts made, certain areas require particular attention in order to strengthen the coherence and impact of the participatory process in future similar projects.

Stages	Evaluation questions	Answers to questions	Evaluation criteria / Indicators	Methods of collection / Tools	Relevant to your case?	Comments
Identification of objectives	What are the objectives of the participatory process?	The aim of the workshops was to bring together local stakeholders to define their needs in terms of outdoor design.	Clarity	Surveys, Interviews, Focus groups, Online public consultation, Stakeholder engagement	Yes	/
	How do the objectives take into account the needs of stakeholders?	The objectives were designed to integrate the needs of local residents, students, staff and future users through participatory workshops and tests of temporary layouts.	Relevance, Alignment with stakeholders' needs	Send email to subscribers to see if new letter and deliver 6,000 copies to local residents, students, staff and future users about the project and the participatory process.	Yes	
Stakeholder engagement	Who are the stakeholders identified and how have they been included?	Stakeholders included local residents, Saint-Luc students, See Users and staff from ULB and VUB universities. They were included via participatory workshops and collaborative video-conference discussions.	Inclusion	Stakeholder engagement, Surveys, Focus groups, Participatory workshops	Yes	The participation of ULB and VUB students (future users of this site) was limited due to academic calendar constraints.
	How have the diversity and representativeness of stakeholders been ensured?	Diversity was sought, but ULB/VUB students were not fully represented.	Diversity	Send email to subscribers, See Users and staff from ULB and VUB universities. They were included via participatory workshops and collaborative video-conference discussions.	Partially	
	Is the participatory process open to anyone who wants to take part?	The process was open, but limited by the practical arrangement (video-conferencing and time constraints).	Equity, Justice, Inclusion		Partially	
	Is the methodology used for the participatory process appropriate for encouraging the participation of a large number of people?	The methodology made it possible to involve around sixty participants in each workshop, but showed limitations in terms of mobilising students.	Accessibility		Yes	
Planning and conception	Have the co-creation workshops helped to incorporate the ideas of citizens?	Results: the workshops produced 70 design proposals, 26 of which were accepted.	Collaboration, Active participation, Inclusion		Yes	
	Has a detailed action plan been developed with input from the participants?	A preliminary design for the public spaces was presented by Anyop Belandier, approved by the SAU at the end of 2019. It was refined to show the concrete and suggestions made by participants during the participatory workshops conducted with the SAU and See U.	Appropriateness, Transparency	Participatory workshops, Focus groups, Participatory workshops, Brainstorming tools	No	The preliminary design for the public spaces presented by Anyop Belandier did not incorporate the participants' suggestions. The participatory workshops were conducted into account after the presentation of the project, once the workshops had been launched.
Project implementation	Were facilities specifically made to lead the participatory process?	Anyop Belandier's team, in collaboration with the SAU and See U, was commissioned to run the workshops and coordinate the participatory process.	Expertise, Communication		Yes	
	What obstacles were encountered in implementing the project, and to what extent were the objectives achieved?	Obstacles included the difficult mobilisation of students, managing expectations and the need to make discussions accessible to all.	Effectiveness, Conformity, Adaptability, Impact	Activity reports, Direct observations, Project timetable	Yes	
Data collection, feedback, and reporting	In what ways are stakeholders involved throughout the process?	Stakeholders were regularly involved through successive participatory workshops (temporary field) and ten participatory layouts (temporary installations).	Communication		Yes	
	Are qualitative and quantitative data collected on a regular basis?	Data was collected through proposals made by participants during the workshops, votes cast at workshop 3, and observations of the test facilities.	Reliability	Online surveys, Focus groups, Interviews, Project website, Interviews, Participatory workshops	Yes	
	What means are used to gather feedback?	Feedback was collected during the participatory workshops, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and online surveys. In addition, during Workshop 3, a voting system was used to rank the layout proposals, enabling participants' preferences to be taken into account in the final decisions.	Effectiveness, Transparency, Consideration	Online surveys, Focus groups, Interviews, Project website, Interviews, Participatory workshops	Yes	
	How are participants informed of the results?	The results were shared in Workshops 3 and 4, and Workshop 5 was dedicated to evaluate the test layouts in autumn 2021.	Communication		Yes	
Adjustments and improvements	Are adjustments or improvements proposed and implemented in response to decisions carried out during the project?	The test layouts from workshop 4 build on present work "in progress" were evaluated in the autumn, during workshop 5 "we evaluate, we amend and we perpetuate", to refine the final project.	Impact, Reactivity, Consideration	Surveys, Interviews, Focus groups, Interviews, Project website, Interviews, Participatory workshops	No	Given the lack of feedback on workshop 5 "we evaluate, we amend, we perpetuate", it is difficult to know whether adjustments or improvements will be taken into account in the final project.
	Are the lessons learned and good practices disseminated to inspire other initiatives?	/	Diffusion of knowledges, Recommendations		No	I did not find any documents detailing the results or the lessons learned. During my interview, I was only provided with a brochure from the SAU describing the participatory process. The participatory process was limited to participatory workshops and participatory projects during the temporary occupation, but it does not give a clear idea of how the process was implemented. The participatory process is currently under construction, and no document has been published on what will be retained or abandoned. The only document available is a plan on Anyop Belandier's site, which details the participatory process and the results of the participatory workshops in the 'new' section of their site.
Final evaluation	How satisfied are stakeholders with the final results of the project?	/	Realisation of results, Transparency, Recommendations		No	
	Are the evaluation results documented and shared with a wider audience?	/	Documentation, Accessibility, Transparency		No	

Figure 24 - Evaluation method for citizen participation applied to the specific case of the design of Usquare's public spaces ©Hannah-Belle Gelbard



5

CONCLUSION





## 5 Conclusion

The Usquare project, in the heart of the Brussels-Capital Region, stands out for its ambition to transform an emblematic urban space while integrating citizen participation processes at different stages of its development. Through a detailed analysis of the phases involved in drawing up the MDP, temporary occupation and the design of public spaces, this Master's thesis explored the complexities, challenges and benefits inherent in integrating citizens into urban planning. One of the main contributions of this research is the demonstration of the transformative potential of citizen participation, not as a simple validation exercise, but as a genuine lever for guiding urban decisions towards solutions that are both innovative and deeply rooted in local realities.

The development of citizen participation in the Usquare project is far from being a simple consultative tool. Participation was envisaged as a dynamic and iterative process, capable of shaping not only urban spaces, but also social relationships and residents' sense of belonging. Participatory workshops, particularly in the design phase of the public spaces, have played a central role in this dynamic, enabling co-construction that has enriched the project with diverse perspectives and practical innovations.

Initially, this master's thesis, entitled "Participation in the programmatic construction process on the Usquare site", focused on the integration of citizens in urban programming. However, the analysis revealed that the Usquare project is not limited to a classic programmatic approach. As well as meeting programmatic needs, Usquare aims to create an emblematic and inclusive space, accessible to all Brussels residents. Each phase of the project, although centered on citizen participation, is part of a broader vision of urban planning, in which urban space becomes a dynamic place to live, reflecting the city's political and social ambitions. This dissertation shows that citizen participation is an essential lever for achieving urban objectives that go beyond mere design, helping to shape a city that is more open and connected to its residents.

This master's thesis also emphasised the fact that citizen participation should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means of responding to the real needs of citizens. By moving away from Arnstein's scale, which tends to hierarchise the levels of participation, this thesis proposes to conceive participation as a continuous and dynamic process, capable of integrating citizens in a more meaningful and inclusive way. It is no longer just a matter of informing or consulting, but of genuinely co-constructing solutions with local residents, recognising the value of their experience and local knowledge.

Analysis of the specific case study on the design of public spaces for the Usquare project revealed both the benefits and the limits of citizen participation in the context of a complex urban transformation. Thanks to a rigorous methodology involving targeted interviews and the examination of specific documents, it emerged that the design phase of the public spaces was particularly marked by co-creation between citizens, professionals and local authorities. In a multi-stakeholder context, the participatory workshops made it possible to integrate the needs and expectations of the various stakeholders, and it seems that the participants were generally satisfied at the time. However, the absence of a documented final evaluation poses a major limitation: it remains uncertain whether the proposals and ideas discussed during the workshops will actually be implemented in the long term. This lack of ongoing evaluation makes it difficult to assess the real impact of citizen participation on the final project.

One of the major lessons of this research is that, to be truly effective, citizen participation requires not only a sincere commitment on the part of all stakeholders, but also continuous effort and flexibility in approach. Power dynamics, differences of opinion, and technical and budgetary constraints are all challenges that need to be carefully addressed if participatory processes are to have a real impact on final decisions.

To go further, it is essential to continue exploring participatory practices through the evaluation of a larger number of urban projects, ensuring that these evaluations are made accessible to the public. This would enable concrete lessons to be learned, not only to improve participatory processes, but also to strengthen transparency and public confidence in the decisions taken. Publishing these evaluations would provide a valuable knowledge base for planners, decision-makers and communities, enabling them to identify what works, what needs to be adjusted, and how these practices can be adapted to different urban contexts.

In conclusion, this dissertation has shown that citizen participation, when properly orchestrated, enriches the quality of urban projects, strengthens local democracy and promotes social cohesion. The Usquare project illustrates the extent to which the integration of citizens can be both a challenge and an opportunity, and why it is vital to develop participatory practices that are both inclusive and effective. This research paves the way for more democratic and sustainable urbanisation, where citizen participation is not just one tool among many, but a fundamental means of creating urban spaces that truly reflect the aspirations and values of all their inhabitants. By pursuing this approach, we can hope to build cities that are fairer, more resilient and more in tune with the expectations of those who live in them.



## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

During the preparation of this work, the author, Hannah-Belle Gelbard, used ChatGPT in order to better rewrite and formulate her ideas. After using this tool, the author, Hannah-Belle Gelbard, reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.





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# 7

## APPENDICES



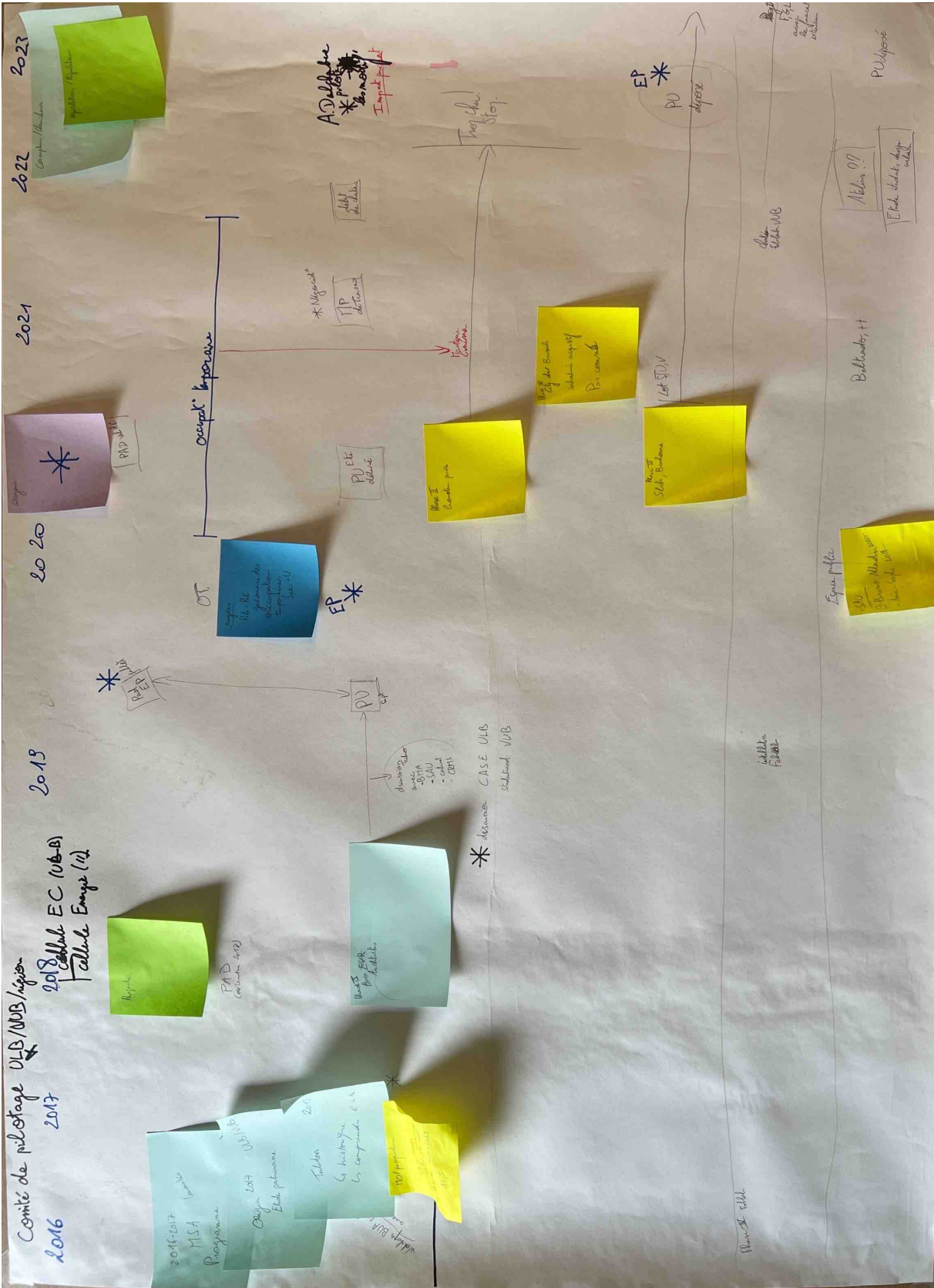


## 8 Appendices

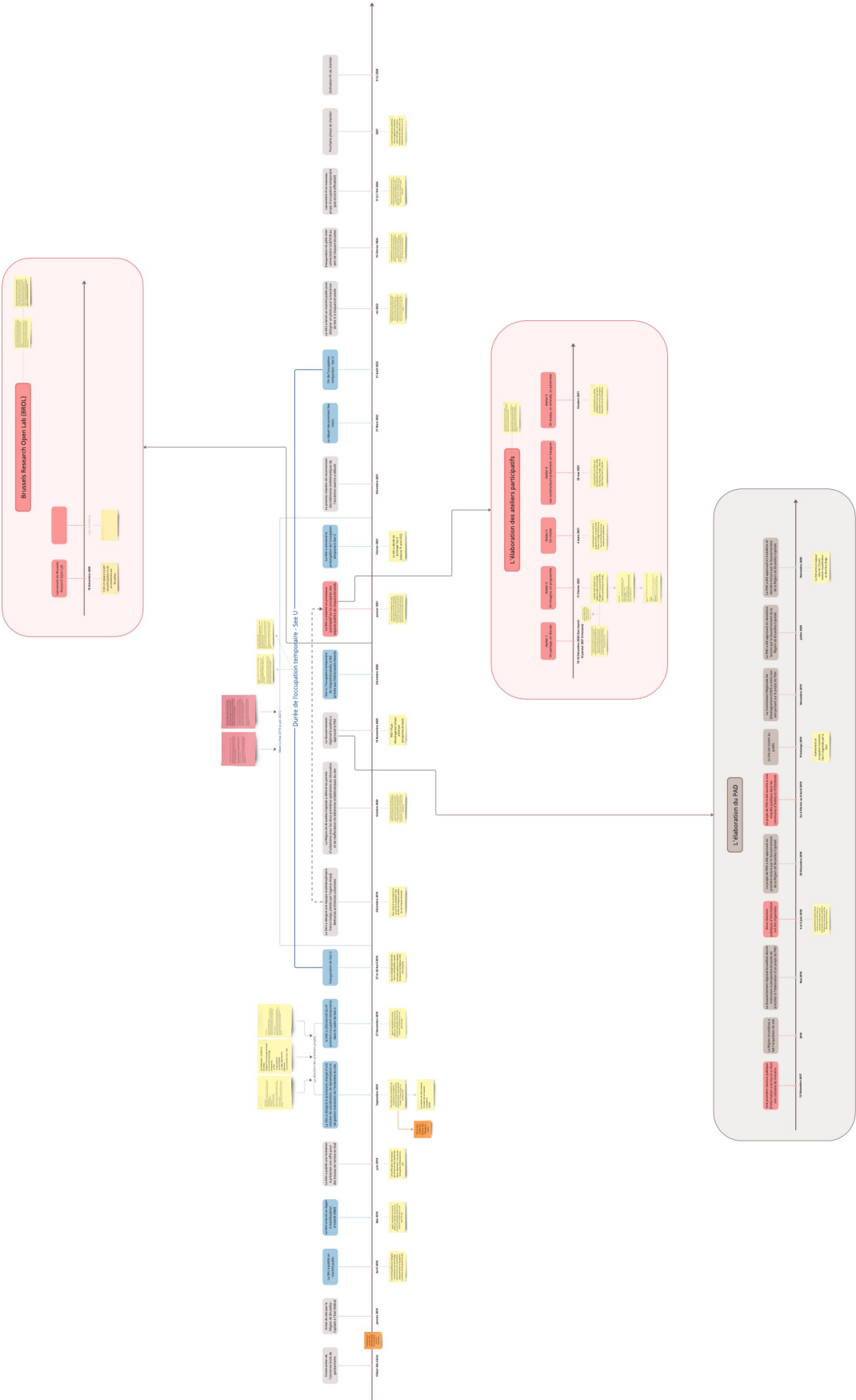
### Appendice 1 - Semi-structured interview guide

Thèmes	Objectifs	Questions	Temps
Introduction	Présenter ma recherche	Bonjour, je suis Hannah-Belle Gelbard, actuellement en deuxième année de master en ingénieur civil architecte à l'ULB. Je suis ravie d'être ici aujourd'hui pour échanger au sujet de ma thèse de master, qui se focalise sur l'approche participative, avec Usquare comme cas d'étude. Je suis entrain de faire un premier entretien pour pouvoir identifier les acteurs et les phases qui me permettront de mieux cadrer la suite de ma recherche. Je vous remercie de prendre le temps de discuter de ces sujets aujourd'hui.  - Serait-il possible d'enregistrer cette interview?	3 min
Echauffement	Contextualiser + insitiation aux réponses de type long	J'aimerais d'abord qu'on parle du PAD puis du projet (pour qu'il comprenne la structure) - Pour commencer, pourriez-vous vous présenter et expliquer comment votre parcours ou votre expérience vous a conduit à être impliqué(e) dans le projet Usquare? - En quoi consiste votre rôle spécifique dans le projet?	4 min
L'approche participative dans le PAD des casernes d'Ixelles - Usquare	Définir les acteurs clés dans le processus de participation	- Dans le processus de conception du Plan d'Aménagement Directeur (PAD), l'approche participative a-t-elle été prise en compte? - Si oui, quelles parties prenantes ont été impliquées et de quelle manière?  - Comment est ce que les données et les besoins recueillis, lors de cette participation, ont-ils été effectivement intégrés dans le développement du projet?	10 min
Moyens mis en place pour la participation citoyenne	Établir les mécanismes nécessaires pour concrétiser une approche participative efficace	J'aimerais qu'on parle maintenant du projet - Comment les citoyens ont-ils été impliqués dans l'élaboration du projet Usquare? - Quels moyens ont été mis en place pour recueillir leurs opinions et idées? (Ateliers, événements, questionnaires en ligne, ...) Y-a-t-il eu des étapes définies (temporalité)? Quelles formes ont pris ces étapes (outils)? Quel citoyen a été associé à chaque étape? - En ce qui concerne l'occupation temporaire, quels sont les moyens spécifiques qui ont été déployés pour encourager la contribution des citoyens?	15 min
Intégration de la participation citoyenne	Assurer que les besoins des citoyens sont pleinement intégrés dans les décisions finales du projet	- De quelle manière les besoins et les suggestions des citoyens ont été pris en compte dans les étapes finales du projet Usquare (s'ils l'ont été)? - Comment peut-on reconnaître que ces idées ont été intégrées grâce à l'approche participative? - Existe-t-il des exemples concrets où des modifications ont été apportées au projet en réponse aux commentaires des citoyens?	15 min
Evaluation de la participation citoyenne	Evaluer la réussite ou l'échec de la participation	- Comment le succès ou l'échec de la participation citoyenne à Usquare a-t-il été mesuré et évalué? - Quelles améliorations suggèreriez-vous pour renforcer la participation citoyenne dans le futur?	10 min
Cloture de l'interview		- Avez-vous quelque chose à rajouter en plus de ce qu'on vient de discuter?	3 min

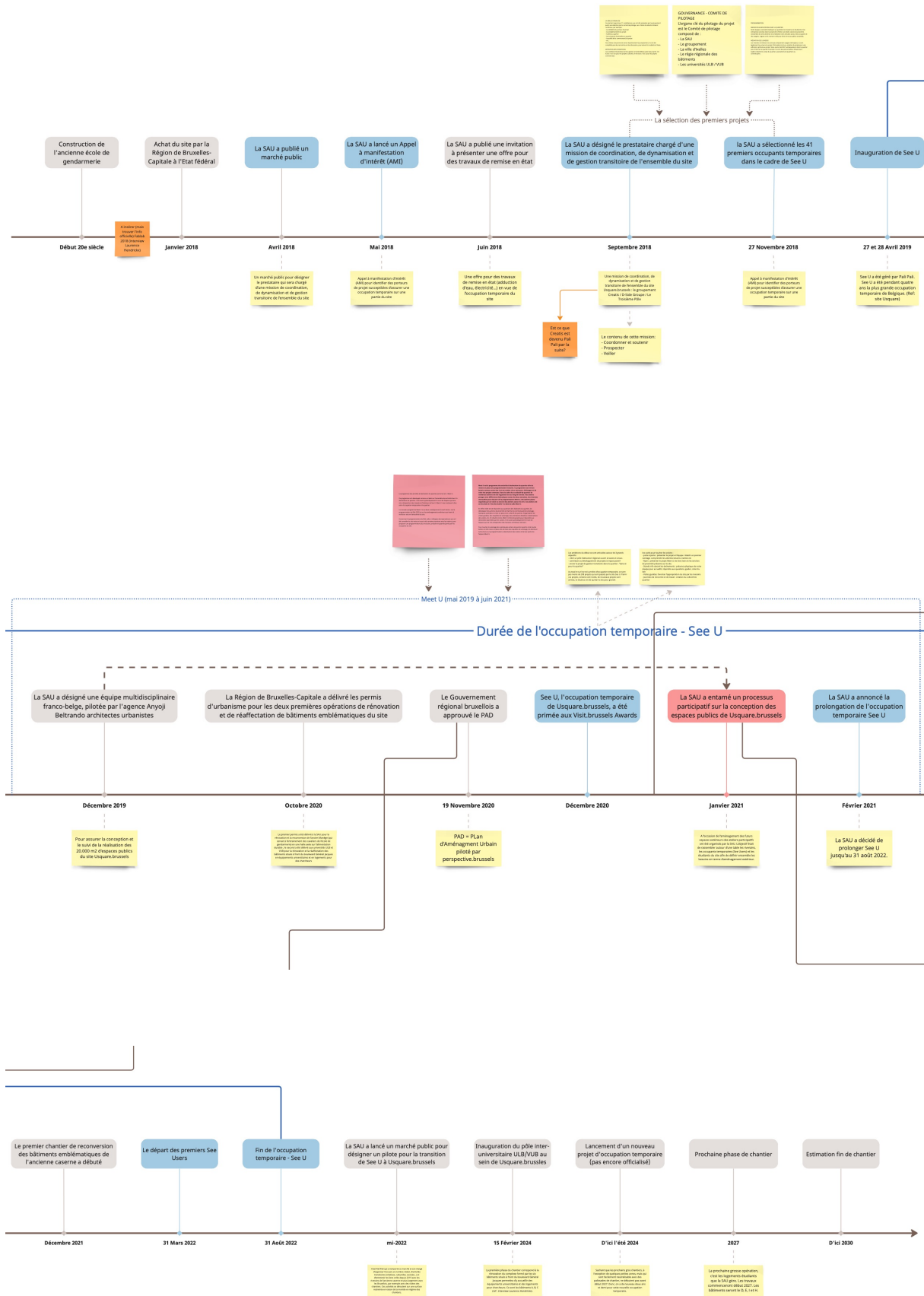
# Appendice 2 - Mapping the different phases of the Usquare project during the interview with a ULB circularity researcher



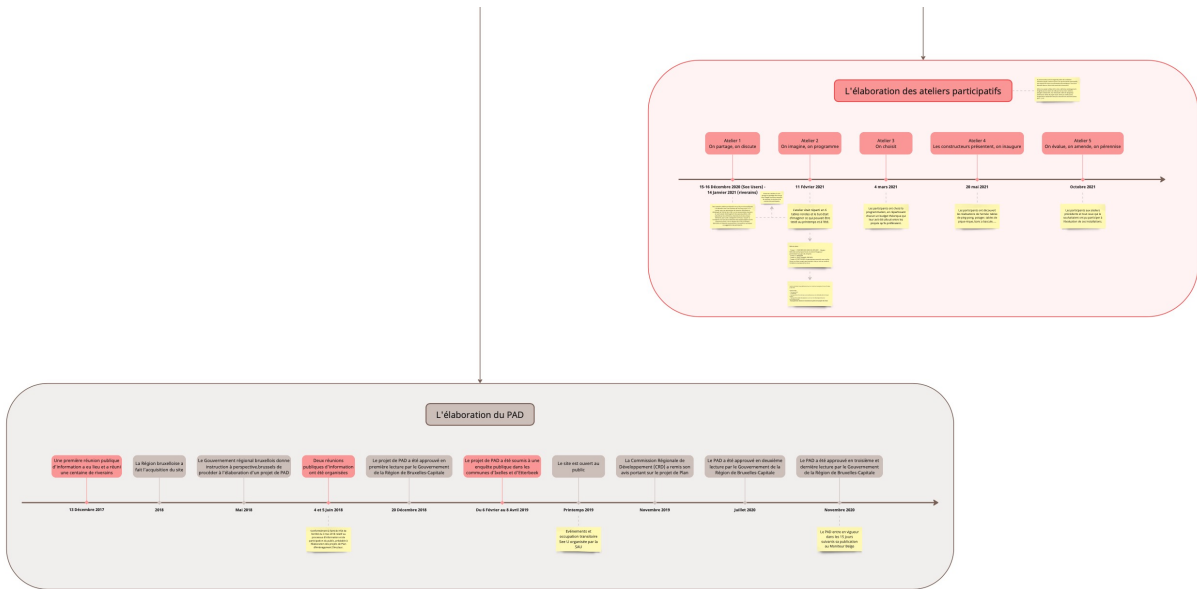
# Appendice 3 - First draft of the Usquare phasing timeline



# Zoom of the timeline







**Appendice 4 - Interview with the Usquare project manager at the SAU**

**Appendice 5 - Interview with the Pali-Pali representative**

**Appendice 6 - Interview with the person in charge of the OpenLab project**

**Appendice 7 - Interview with the assistant to the project manager on the university side**

**Appendice 8 - Interview with an OpenLab participant and coordinator of the interdisciplinary Brussels Studies network (EBxl)**

You can find all the Appendices (Appendice 4, Appendice 5, Appendice 6, Appendice 7, Appendice 8) relating to the transcript of the interviews via a OneDrive link: [Appendices - Transcripts of interviews.](#)

As a precaution, I've also attached a second pdf entitled "2024\_Archi\_Gelbard\_Appendice \_Transcript of interviews" containing all the same Appendices (one after the other), in case the link doesn't work.