

**ECOLOGIC MUTATIONS IN THE PRECARIOUS CITY.  
THE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST IN BRUSSELS AS A FORM OF A RESILIENT ATTITUDE.**

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**Abstract**

Brussels is the fastest growing region of Belgium. Despite the current economic downturn and the ineluctable decline of the industrial activities, the city continues to attract substantial migrational waves as a consequence of its world city economy. Precarity and increasing socio-spatial segregation, poverty, young unemployment, housing shortage are some of the main urgencies exacerbated by the demographic evolution in course. In order to maintain its performativity, in between static and dynamic efficiency, the city will necessarily have to elaborate some critical, structural changes.

The Community Land Trust Brussels<sup>i</sup> projects are based on a property formula which prevents speculation. They are framed as prototypes of an urban mutation which performs emerging values of use, in tension between the crisis of the welfare and the bio-cultural changes in course. Still at an embryonic state, operating at the scale of the neighbourhood and of the block, these projects suggest alternative models of wellbeing and support social mobility, by operating at the level of the most elementary dimensions of cohabitation. Their contribution to the resilient attitude of the city has thus to be questioned, in consideration of the socio-spatial dynamics and the patterns of development in which they are embedded.

**Keywords:** wellbeing, resilience, mutation, precarious city.

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<sup>i</sup> Community Land Trust Brussels or CLTB, established in 2013 in Brussels. CLT will be used to refer to the general formula of the Community Land Trust.

## 1. BRUSSELS AS A WORLD CITY.

The Manhattan Plan was presented in 1967 as "a renovation which will create a piece of the XXI century city in Brussels"<sup>ii</sup>. As a business district inspired to New York downtown, it required an area of 53 hectares liberated thanks to the eviction of numerous families and the destruction of a strategically neglected and dilapidated neighborhood. The protests and the mobilization of the inhabitants, supported by intellectuals and local organizations were vain: "the activities and social categories provided with financial power have a privileged position in the processes of spatial reclamation and management, these being based on the capacity to pay" (Remy, 1974). The project was part of an urban transformation which responded in modernistic terms to the plans of economic restructuring of the city implemented after the second world war and which led to the world exhibition of 1958 as a moment of high internationalization of the city.

Although the city never developed an explicit marketing strategy in this direction, by the end of the 1950s the deindustrialization of Brussels intensified as the result of a political support to the path dependent, progressive tertiarization and concentration of European institutions, investors and foreign companies - especially American. The realization of the European headquarters, by disrupting Quartier des Squares and Leopold has been a clear expression of the role played by different administrative authorities in modeling the city according to political and speculative interests (Elmhorn 2001).

Through the years, the combination of the territorial assets, strategic urban projects and ad hoc policies installed the conditions for the development of a different economic apparatus: in less than half a century Brussels was transformed from one of the most successful manufacturing centers of Belgium to an international financial and administrative node.

Today Brussels is included in the category of world cities (Elmhorn 2001, Vandermotten 2004), introduced into the scientific debate at the beginning of the 1980s to describe the characteristics and the pivotal role that a few cities acquired in the definition of global territorialities and economies. (Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Sassen, 1988; Castells, 1989). In particular, the specific transnational production complex of Brussels is the European agglomeration economy (Elmhorn, 2001) with this expression meaning the progressive intensification of the activities and services gravitating around the consolidation and expansion of the European Union domain.

To frame Brussels as a world city is an essential premise in order to seize some characters and driving dynamics of its metabolism<sup>iii</sup>, with a main purpose: to address the identification of the technologies and of the systems of resilience which could support the forthcoming changes of the capital of Europe. The reach of this purpose is obviously too wide to be covered by an isolated research: the intersection of different perspectives would be needed, engendering what has been defined as a metalogue (Pickett et al., 2013) among different disciplines as the only possible approach to capture the complexity of urban systems. Therefore, the case study here

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<sup>ii</sup> 'Rénovation des abords de la gare du Nord et prolongement du boulevard Emile Jacqmain', 1967 - signed " Monsch"

<sup>iii</sup> cities are semi-artificial adaptive systems. As such, their evolution is determined by the interplay of different mechanisms of auto-organization and structural dynamics, limited or empowered by an environmental potential. Given the role of public policies in orchestrating these different components, the directions of change are finally strongly determined by politically and economically driven logics of development, not always based on the required knowledge and consideration of the resilient potential of an urban system. The positioning of Brussels as a world city aims to provide a frame to identify the challenges and to seize some possible forms of a resilient response.

presented on the one hand represents a symptom of what could be identified as a resilient attitude of the city: a self-produced, experimental answer to ongoing changes not yet metabolized at the level of institutional structures. On the other hand provides the pretext to test the narrative of resilience as a tool to amplify the potential of change embedded in marginal projects.

The socio-spatial dynamics of post-fordist economy in world cities are dramatized by the centrality of their role, as power nodes orchestrating flows of information and resources. Dense migrational networks responding to new productive, transnational geographies; an increasing socio-spatial polarization, basically determined by a dual labour market; a growing flexibility - spatial and organizational - required by the performativity of the enterprises<sup>iv</sup>; urban surgeries to enhance the attractiveness and the speculative occasions of the city: all these aspects characterize world cities more than other forms of the contemporary urbanization<sup>v</sup>. They are increasingly challenging the resilience of these urban systems by daily overwriting the ecological configurations and the biorhythms modelled on the modernistic, standardized sequences of production, reproduction, consumption.

After more than thirty years of deregulating policies - at least concerning the first and major world cities: this is the case of New York, but also of Brussels - the effects of an hegemonic productive logic have emerged, revealing the contradictions of the latest stage of capitalism. The installation of a regime of precarity is probably the most pervasive aspect, to which an heterogeneous landscape of urban synapses and lifestyles corresponds, a liquidity (Baumann) more and more difficult to be framed within universalistic wellbeing formulas.

A complete understanding of the spatial implications of flexibility and precarity has not been achieved yet, also because these cannot be considered as completely unfolded: exacerbated by the current economical downturn, on the one hand they show the unsustainability of the economic paradigm in force; on the other hand they oblige to rethink forms of productivity and the related ecologies. As an effect of precarity, episodes of socio-spatial mutations can be observed as manifestations of resistance, struggle, adaptation, transformation which test the resilience of the urban system as a whole: as a complex interaction of an environment and its agents. The voids created by the inefficiencies of the institutional welfare offer the opportunity to elaborate new forms of wellbeing: urban space plays a crucial role, by providing both the stage and the pretexts for these experimentations. Hence, this phase of brand new, intense socio-spatial elaboration defines an urgent realm of research, especially in consideration of the forthcoming consolidation of precarity (Gorz, 1989; Caillé, 1994; Krugman, 2011) as an inherent aspect of the contemporary urbanization (Marx and Engels 1845; Lefebvre 1972; Merrifield 2013).

The case study presented and the terms of the mutation it embodies could not be fully seized

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<sup>iv</sup> If automatism and repetitiveness were the key factors of Fordism, translated in the related socio-spatial patterns of production and reproduction, flexibility is the magic formula which gives the possibility to the enterprises to appear, disappear and continuously reorganize themselves to maximize efficiency, by externalizing work, diminishing costs of production, reducing welfare responsibilities.

<sup>v</sup> In particular Elmhorn has stressed the role of reflexivity as a factor determining the attractiveness of Brussels. "Economic reflexivity varies from place to place and is characterized by the specific knowledge contained in a certain place, which comes from place based conventions and relations. The forces of global capitalism look for these specificities."

without a brief overview of the concept of precarity and of some main socio-spatial related aspects.

## **2. (DE)STRUCTURING STATES OF PRECARITY.**

Flexibility is the paradigm on the basis of which the current productivity regime is centered. Similarly to what happened with the dominant values of Fordism, beyond the organization of work, flexibility necessarily has become a pervasive attitude, by reorganizing space and social relations: from flexible work to flexible lives. In this continuity lies not only one of the strategies of control of labour force (Tsianos, 2006), but also the relationship between flexibility and precarity, which more than synonyms can be considered almost as two sides of the same coin: precarity implies flexibility and flexibility can fuel precarity.

The evolution of the meaning attributed to the term confirms the progressive transformation of society under the effects of flexibility: according to a cross-national research (Barbier, 2002), for example in France, at the beginning of the 1970s the term precarity identified a state of poverty, but through the following decades it started to depict also states of unemployment and exclusion, as the overlapping and the interplay of these conditions was becoming more and more evident and acknowledged both by the political and by the scientific debates.

At present flexibility and precarity are deeply embedded in our society: according to Bourdieu precarity is everywhere and it is more the result of a political will than of a real economic inefficiency. It shapes values, lifestyles, socio-spatial patterns, but most importantly it jeopardizes the continuity of the biological and social building, it aggravates exclusion and segregation, especially when concerning low income conditions. The shift from proletariat to precariat<sup>vi</sup> has implied the extreme complication of the subjectivisation processes and the dramatic reduction of the reproductive capacities. Workers are dispossessed of their time which is atomized in manageable portions for the exclusive purposes of a leading elite (Berardi, 2005).

According to some scholars and radical thinkers (Gorz, 1989; Caillé, 1994) precarity provides an unprecedented opportunity if considered in terms of liberated time: the technological advancements would finally give the possibility to work less and to have more free time which people could use "to have access to skilled, complex, creative and responsible occupational activities which allow them continually to develop and grow" (Gorz, 1989). The political programs centered on this conceptualization of precarity aim at introducing a basic income policy and a reduced working time. This cultural leap would imply a revolution of the existing models of wellbeing, their spatialities and a redefinition of the policies of the welfare state.

Flexibility and precarity are supported by and in their turn affect the socio-spatial configurations of urban systems, paradoxically by increasing spatial dynamism and limiting the social mobility at the same time. In an initial phase flexibility determines an infrastructural and spatial reorganization able to sustain: the increased mobility of resources and of people, both at a local and global scale; the disruption of the space-time unit of productivity; the nomadic and uncertain lives of individuals. The phenomenology of the spatial transformations related to the new economic logic has been largely described (Friedmann and Wolff 1982, Castells 1989, Sassen 1991, Asher 1995), although more in relation to the macroscale of the territorial flows and of the

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<sup>vi</sup> "The semantic field of the notion of "precariat" embraces people affected by insecurity or fragility of their social position and beset with the fear of losing it (loss of job and/or possessions, bankruptcy, social demotion and rejection); such a definition applies to a fast-growing section of the so-called "middle-classes." Bauman, 2013.

changing structural physiology.

A closer observation, able to capture the differentiation of lifestyles and the schizophrenic uses of space in time would reveal the subtle difference and the close relationship between flexibility and precarity. It should reveal the many tactics people daily experiment in the attempt to survive, to pay a rent, to build subjectivities. It would render the ambiguous and powerful role of space, in some cases instigating solidarities and forms of resistance; in other cases simply reinforcing segregation.

In Brussels a state of growing poverty and precarity intersects a condition of socio-spatial segregation aggravated by an administrative fragmentation which drains the redistributive fluids out of the historical central neighborhoods, where poverty coagulates (Kesteloot, Loopmans 2009). Along the Senne valley, where the engine of industrial productivity had a primary relevance till the half of the 1950s, the poorest municipalities of the Region concentrate the highest percentages of immigrants and young unemployed. Their migrational balance confirm the state of paralysis of households obliged to accept cheap conditions of life in overcrowded neighborhoods, where the number of low skilled young individuals grows, unable to match the labour offer of an international city. Nevertheless, in the forthcoming years immigration will continue to increase the population of Brussels, as a typical condition of world cities, needing the workforce of both low skilled and highly skilled individuals.

After at least three decades under the regime of flexibility, the embodied experience of precarity is reaching in these days the apex of its unsustainability and it is finally mobilizing bottom-up redefinitions of the spatialities and modalities of productive and reproductive activities. Against precarity, "a truly life-oriented syndicalism (biosyndicalism)" (Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2009) is invoked: its values and goals are being elaborated by marginal, still experimental and highly demanding - in terms of social and personal commitment - new ecologies, emerging in the urban space of the everyday<sup>vii</sup>, despite the socio-spatial fragmentation and maybe thanks to a liberated time. The case of the Community Land Trust is one among many of these ecological mutations.

### 3. MUTANT ECOLOGIES

As in a mutation, an alteration of the known procedures for housing production triggered the process which led to the constitution of the Community Land Trust in Brussels. An alteration activated by the initiative of a few local actors and resulting from the combination of the ecological conditions and the needs of one of the poorest municipalities of Brussels, Molenbeek, once called the Petit Manchester because of the high concentration of factories. Despite some episodes of post-industrial gentrification, cheap prices and the presence of immigrant communities have defined the pattern for the concentration of poverty.

In a city where the logics of private market and social housing result in a reinforced socio-spatial segregation, the project Espoir (2010) was developed as an experiment to introduce a property formula addressing low income households. Promoted and developed by Maison de Quartier Bonnevie<sup>viii</sup>, the project was the result of the collaboration of institutional actors, citizens and

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<sup>vii</sup> The proximity between the micropolitical form and the embodied experience of precarity arises out of the common situatedness in the everyday. Both of them, the micropolitical form and the movements against precarity, start and work on the immanent terrain of everyday life (and here we should also not forget the Foucauldian idea of biopolitics which was equally important for both currents)." (Tsianos, Papadopoulos, 2009)

<sup>viii</sup> Maisons de Quartier are neighborhood based centers organizing activities and services to improve the quality of living and support fragile individuals.

local associations. It was a successful experience under many aspects: it introduced an alternative and accessible form of property; the structural engagement of the inhabitants resulted in a strong sense of community; it engendered socio-spatial dynamics of inclusion by operating at different urban scales. Most importantly, Espoir provided a prototype on the basis of which further researches oriented towards the model of the Community Land Trust, especially developed in United Kingdom and in the United States.

"A Community Land Trust is a no profit organization with the mission to acquire and to manage the land in ownership towards the improvement of the social, economical and environmental interests of a local community. The land and the built units are made available to realize and to provide affordable housing to low income households, both by selling or by renting them"<sup>ix</sup>.

In a Community Land Trust the property of land is steadily preserved as common and public, it cannot be sold and cannot be bought. It belongs to the Trust whose decisional power is expressed by a board composed by three equal parts: the dwellings owners, the neighborhood and the public power representatives. Only the built part of the dwelling unit is private property. By virtue of this system the speculation based on the variations of the land plus value is prevented and the accessibility to affordable housing is preserved in the long term<sup>x</sup> (Lenna, 2014).

The word participation mostly describing acts of a-posteriori consensus is not accurate to describe the form of engagement of the future inhabitants of the CLT projects. By acting as the commissioners of the project, they not only define the requirements of their future houses, but they also start to generate the very specific synergies and the *idiorrhythmie* (Barthes, 1976-77) of their future cohabitation. The design process is thus crucial to define the interplay of the different realms of daily activities. The articulation of private, common and public is framed by the ownership formula, but is made possible by a spatial configuration specifically defined by the concerned community, according to the characteristics of the site. For example in rue Verheyden, where the first project of the CLTB will be realized, an interior court will stage the different temporalities and uses of seven different dwelling units, a community garden, offices and a meeting space. A part from providing housing, the CLTB aims to contribute to the making of the city operating at the neighborhood scale, as a spatiotemporal unit where individual and social trajectories can build meaningful practices, always connecting to other parts of the urban system.

The projects of the CLTB are the expression of mutagenic environments, where differing/altering values (of use) intersect a critical mass of needs, spatial predispositions and social activation, triggering change. These values reveal new needs and forms of living generated in tension between the crisis of the welfare and the bio-cultural evolutions in course.

Against the social atomization and the individualism produced by precarity, the temporal continuity and spatial proximity are reaffirmed as conditions to empower subjectivisation

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<sup>ix</sup> "Un CLT est une organisation sans but lucratif destinée à acquérir et gérer du sol en propriété, dans le but d'améliorer les intérêts sociaux, économiques et environnementaux d'une communauté locale" , <http://communitylandtrust.wordpress.com/about/en-un-peu-plus-de-mots/>

<sup>x</sup> The range of families and individuals addressed corresponds to the low-middle income segment of the population of Brussels identified in between the values of R.I.S and the values defined by the Fonds du Logement to access loans for home ownership

processes and social interactions. The long term permanence made possible by the condition of ownership engenders a sense of belonging and promotes practices and attitudes of care, concerning not only the private spaces but also the common and the public realms. By daily engaging in the relation with "the other" the inhabitants actualize the sense of their citizenship: the shared activities are enjoyed beyond the practical advantages deriving from synergizing resources in times of growing precarity. The sense of community is thus asserted, defined by the expression of different forms of wellbeing, at the same time suggesting possible horizons of action for renewed welfare policies. As an overall result, social mobility is supported not only by virtue of the savings system installed: it is deeply rooted in the political feeling of making the city that characterizes both the design and the cohabitation processes (Lenna 2014).

Though part of the metabolism of the city - fueled by the large scale dynamics as well as by the specific microclimate of a neighborhood - these projects are still marginal and experimental under many aspects. Their value lies in the prefiguration of possible horizons of change. Questions necessarily arise concerning the conditions for their replicability. As the city is a semi artificial, adaptive system, a spontaneous, substantial reproduction and any evolutive articulation of the mutation are improbable scenarios: structural changes are normally required to operate radical urban transformations, necessarily defined at a political-institutional level (Calafati 2007).

The arguments in their favor need to be built within the framework of the specific resilience mechanisms of a city, Brussels in this case. Hence, the contribution to the resilient attitude of an urban system prefigured by experiments such as the CLT should be questioned, in consideration of the socio-spatial dynamics and the patterns of development in which they are embedded.

#### **4. RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING**

Concerning the growing urbanization of the world, the alarming issue is the fact that the sustainability is far from being reached: the creative destruction in course is accumulating unmanageable externalities. Among the main emergencies that will have to be tackled, mobility, environment and socio-spatial justice are identified at the centre of a new urban question (Secchi 2010).

"Resilience is a mechanism for sustainability... The concept of resilience exposes what is possible and what kinds of processes must be considered and measured in the attempt to make cities, neighbourhoods, or regions more sustainable. Sustainability is a process, and not an absolute end point. Indeed, because cities are heterotrophic systems that require energy and resources from beyond their borders, strict sustainability in the sense of a metabolically balanced budget is virtually impossible. However, cities can be moved more toward sustainability, and their adoption of resilient mechanisms promoted and monitored" (Pickett et al., 2013)

The definition of the mechanisms of resilience responds to specific and general terms (Wu and Wu, 2013) and cannot be separated from the question "resilient to what?" Which are the specific changes in course to which a city should adapt? To frame Brussels as a world city provides a necessary premise to identify the trajectories of development and the characteristics which could support the development of this urban system.

Specifically, in the next 20 years the population of Brussels is expected to increase of approximately 180.000 units, as a result of continuous migratory waves attracted by the world city economy, bringing both low skilled and highly skilled individuals. The current housing shortage is one of the emergencies that will thus have to be addressed, in particular concerning the weaker citizens and within a complicated scenario characterized by the peculiar traits of a

precarious society: an extreme differentiation of uses and social profiles, segregation and economic polarization.

Additionally, Brussels is also an increasingly poor city: compared with the surrounding metropolitan area and the rest of Belgium, it is a city where poverty concentrates, aggravated by the effects of its redistributive system. Related to the demographic evolution, a growing unemployment is the second emergency the city will have to deal with, in particular as the result of the mismatch between the young unemployment and a job offer mostly concerning highly skilled workers (Van Hamme et al., 2011). The lack of social mobility generated by unemployment and by the pervasive state of precarity, beyond being the symptom of weak democracy, would possibly increase the present condition of socio-spatial segregation, worsening the degradation of those areas of the city where weak and poor individuals coagulate, looking for reciprocal support.

As previously mentioned, the performativity of a world city requires the constant interplay of global and local dynamics, of extroverting strategies and introverted adaptations, of structural changes and spontaneous modifications: often a dynamic conciliation of the opposites. At the global scale the city attracts investors, redesigns political and economical geographies, mobilizes extremely differentiated migration waves required by the service economy. But it is at local level that all the different circuits collide, that contradictions are revealed by conflicting urban practices and rhythms, remodelling or intersecting the existing socio spatial configurations. The microclimate of an urban environment and its capacity to engender well-being are actually considered as an important factor at the moment to evaluate the performance of the city.

"More than production indicators, some direct indexes about wellbeing and its distribution seem necessary in order to express the performance of economical systems in general and of cities in particular. Actually, cities deeply differentiate in relation to their capacity to transform the social product in well-being". (Calafati, 2007)

The dialectics of dynamic and static efficiency (Calafati, 2012) expresses the capacity of an urban system to balance performances and well being, thus engendering the conditions for a resilient system. Gentrifying interventions along the Senne Canal or a new intermodal node will certainly increase the attractiveness of Brussels for the investors and the real estate values, but by themselves they will not increment resilience.

An urban microclimate characterised by social mobility and a just distribution of resources and opportunities should constitute the balancing factor: a margin of continuous adjustment, reinterpretation and democratic co-production of wellbeing. It is in this perspective that the contribution of the CLTB projects to the resilience of the city should be evaluated.

Both as processes and as socio-spatial configurations they define a biopolitical realm where new forms of wellbeing are expressed and alternative formulas of property are experimented.

More than a universal solution, they manifest contemporary uses of spaces and practices that urbanism should be ready to capture and able to translate in new protocols for the making of the city.

## **5. CONCLUSION.**

### **The destiny of urban mutations: from a paradigm shift to a structural change?**

"Fractalised work can also punctually rebel, but this does not set into motion any wave of struggle. The reason is easy to understand. In order for struggles to form a cycle there must be a spatial proximity of the bodies of labour and an existential temporal continuity. Without this

proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for the cellularised bodies to become community". (Berardi, 2005)

Beyond the spatialization of the struggle, the CLTB projects directly enact the biopolitical framework by some scholars deemed as the only possible form to contrast precarity (Tsianos, 2006). Still marginal as mutations are by definition, generated in one of the poorest municipalities of Brussels, in the forthcoming future they might be able to alter a few portions<sup>xi</sup> of the urban fabric with a sort of acupunctural effect. Most importantly, they could thus pragmatically show the possible ecological configurations of a still latent paradigm shift, waiting for socio-cultural (r)evolutions and structural changes.

To conclude:

- the paper framed the case study of the Community Land Trust projects as an urban mutation with two main purposes: on the one hand to highlight the experimental and marginal nature of these projects; on the other hand to define the urban metabolic conditions within which the replication of the mutations needs to be questioned.
- In this perspective, to frame Brussels as a world city is a relevant premise to focus on some main characteristics and trajectories of development of the forthcoming evolution of the city: the consolidation of a regime of precarity, as a destabilizing state but also as a mutagenic factor; the tension for an international performativity; the continuous growth of the population colliding with segregating socio-spatial structures; the need to engender a microclimate characterized by a diffused, accessible wellbeing and by social mobility as conditions for the political.
- On this background, the CLTB projects, by virtue of the non-speculative property formula reveal a set of values of use as the foundations of new forms of wellbeing, possibly orienting the elaboration of new forms of welfare. These values can mainly be identified as a reaction or counterpoint to the regime of precarity, as one of the most destabilizing, unjust and inherent characteristics of the contemporary urbanization process.

The CLTB projects reaffirm the value of community as part of the constellation of factors engendering wellbeing: a value previously rejected by the universalistic models of welfare simplified around the profile of an abstract, standardized individual. Hence the whole design process is centred on the specificities of a community of inhabitants, whose relational needs are important as much as the private sphere. Secondly, the ownership formula introduced by the CLT restores the sense of the temporal continuity and of the spatial permanence, on which subjectivities could be defined. Weak links and consequently strong links are thus reinforced (Donzelot 2004), at the origin of an increased self-confidence and explorative practices of the rest of the city, out of the comfort zone often provided by segregating neighbourhoods. The sense of citizenship is pragmatically expressed in the relationship with the community as well in a reinforced, political engagement in the dynamics of the city. Finally, the possibility of accumulating savings creates the material conditions for social mobility, specifically concerning those families which would be otherwise paralyzed by the inaccessibility of loans and by a continuous waste of money absorbed by rents.

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<sup>xi</sup> at present the CLTB is working on nine different sites of the city, although all the projects are at an embryonic state.

- The narrative and conceptual frame of resilience has been introduced in the final part of the paper to question the contribution that these projects could bring in consideration of the changes that a world city as Brussels will have to tackle. Besides providing a lens to seize the potential of these projects, the resilience narrative would give the possibility to motivate and to embed their relevance within the structural changes normally orchestrating more radical transformations of an urban system. "Norms introduce the values held in society, and the actions that result from them" ( Pickett et al., 2013).

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