

CHAPTER 2

THE ACTIVIST COMMONS AND HOW IT CHANGES THE CITY (CASES FROM BRUSSELS)

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The commons is the new kid in town, introducing a third agency in the classic choreography filled with actors that steer urban developments by defending their public or private self-interest. The commons is about the loose relationship of different actors pulling together in the defence of common resources available in the city and aiming to enrich the future of the city through common action (De Angelis, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012; Petrescu, 2005). This chapter describes the use and disadvantage of practices of commoning in the urban context of Brussels, trying to understand how they relate to the powers that be and in what way they change the identity of the city. In the first analysis we show how the classic tale on the contradiction of the urban commons and real estate developments misses out on the fact that the two agencies often complement each other. Call it the practices of advanced commoning, such as temporary use, in which the real estate market not only parasites on the creative activities but also instigates them. A problematic feature in these practices of commoning is that it might present itself as a third agent but still strongly depends on the permission of the big boys in the city. The second analysis deals with practices of commoning in terms of urban gardening, part of the occupation of vacant sites and aiming at the preservation of open land, against real estate developments. The big dream of urban gardening is to initiate settings where people can experiment with self-management and thus contribute to the city's resilience facing the big urgencies of our times. Although the opposition against joint public private forces doesn't make it easy for alternatives to flourish, still the commons qua urban gardening run the danger of self-imposed irrelevance. Finally, in the third analysis, we shift focus onto the role of citizen movements for the production of the commons in an urban context, thus introducing the spirit of activism. Citizen movements can be understood as commoning in so far as their spontaneous interventions cross through vested interests and defend the existing natural and cultural resources of the city. Citizen movements show how urban developments can be successfully impacted by building up a symbolical power that only exists in the loose relationship of people sharing the same needs and desires.

THE STRANGE CASE OF ADVANCED COMMONING

The commons is often identified with practices of temporary use in which creative individuals and/or different non-profit organisations take residence in abandoned buildings and their lively activities introduce a vibrant dynamic to the sleepy neighbourhood. Interestingly, the initial enthusiasm about the dynamics of the commons generated within a certain urban context is usually accompanied by lamentations about possible negative side effects. Start talking about the commons and immediately you will hear (self-)critical reflections about its perverse function as a lubricant for real estate developments that cause gentrification and consolidate the needs of the middle-class. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2009: 153-159) point to the parasitic role of the real estate market and the imminent danger of hollowing out the commons, turning the initial dynamic into what they call the 'specter of the commons'. Real estate operators tap into the surplus value generated through the activities of the commons by using it as an externality for top end housing commodities and thus introduce a new type of resident. The newly introduced class however cannot live up to the lively atmosphere, at least not on their own, while the commoners cannot afford anymore to live in the neighbourhood and are forced to move on. The process therefore results in the phantom like existence of the commons, a product one can buy into, an experience to consume, an identity to foster but certainly not a lived reality. The initial commoners now forced into a nomadic existence search for an area that can provide affordable living conditions and thus allow them to re-establish what Hardt and Negri (2009: 154) have described as a circular process. Commoning is a circle of three moments that feed upon each other: the commons is not only inspired by the commons; it also enriches the commons and the added value is then offered back to the commons. Hardt and Negri's fear for the circle breakdown is not unjustified but leaves the question unanswered as to what extent the commoners are engaged in the process of gentrification and speculation. The classic tale of the commons neglects the entanglement of practices of commoning and real estate developments said to put a fetter on the joyful activities of the commoners.

Temporary use should be labelled as advanced commoning, i.e., practices in which the real estate market could well be the parasite, tapping into the surplus value but not without acting at the same time as a sponsor, facilitator and even instigator of the process of commoning. The best example is perhaps the temporary use of abandoned buildings by non-profit organisations and individual artists, upon invitation, by real estate operators. The idea is to create a win-win, in bridging the period of vacancy and doing something useful for a change. In Brussels, for example, this concerns Allee du Kaai, a multi-year programme run by the socio-cultural non-profit organisation, occupying abandoned warehouses at the canal of Brussels and organising sociocultural activities for youngsters (Toestand, 2018). There is no question about the good intentions of Toestand and certainly not a single moment of doubt about the need for infrastructure providing a place for youngsters in Brussels. Toestand and its twin

brother Communa joined forces in setting up the project on the enormous amount of vacant spaces in Brussels: St-Vide-Leegbeek, the 20th Municipality of Brussels and claim it to become common good (Van den Panhuyzen, 2019). And yet, at the same time, the activities of Toestand are a central feature in the development plan for the Canal Zone with high stakes for the property developers active in the area. The same complex figure can be found in other agencies in the city of Brussels, such as the temporary use at the abandoned WTC towers at Brussels North Station. Artists had been using the 25th floor for years, upon invitation from the project developer Befimmo, after it acquired the high-rise tower complex and was awaiting definitive plans for its renovation (Boie, 2019). In the period between September 2018 until January 2020 the temporary use was enlarged with the stay of architectural offices Architecture Workroom Brussels and 51N4E, also the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture and other young independent architects and creatives. All these parties were invited by Befimmo to engage in a wonderful period of commoning the abandoned WTC tower floors and thus demonstrate the place making of an area that is known as the epitome of a monofunctional business location in Brussels. For years the WTC towers stood as a symbol to the urbicide wrought on the North Quarter by project developers in the 1970s: a popular neighbourhood was simply erased, to permit the construction of the so-called Manhattan plan. In recent years the WTC towers also became a symbol for the transmigrant issue, after illegal refugees set up informal tent settlements in the adjacent Maximillian Park. The unique mixture of festive activities and intellectual programmes, such as architecture exhibitions part of the International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam (an interesting programme on the future of cities facing climate urgencies) and university programmes, were meant to turn the non-place into the place-to-be. No wonder the formula of temporary use has by now been commercialised by companies like Entrakt, who temporarily hosted 'Level 5' in the former Actiris office building at the central Beursplein in Brussels, bringing architects, artists and creatives together, while contractually not publicly discussing the specific conditions of the temporary stay (Vanrenterghem & Grumiau, 2019).

In these cases, the real estate market has been operating as parasite and life-line at the same time, providing cheap work space and a platform for creative activities that allow them to tap into the dynamics generated in the supposedly self-organising activity. It allows us to redefine the idea of a spectre of the commons insofar as the authentic process of self-organised commoning is co-organised by the real estate party. While the real estate party is well aware of its own limitations in generating an urban dynamic and the need to support independent creative actors, at least temporarily, the participating actors keep up the appearance of being a self-organising and autonomous force of urban change. Moreover, the case of the temporary use of the WTC tower in Brussels has shown a second reason why the parasitic relationship was less one-dimensional and binary than Hardt and Negri suggest (Boie, 2019: 161-184). Most temporary occupants were provided with a rental contract, beneficial but still paying for the essential costs of electricity, elevators, insurance, water, toilets, etc. Other actors, such as 51N4E

(architect office collaborating in the redesign of the tower) and AWB (curating the 'You are Here' exhibition as part of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam) were presented with an advantageous service contract, with free rent in exchange for services, primarily to attract people to the area. The point is that the real estate operator cannot organise the dynamics of place-making by itself, as an eventual invitation to the public would immediately be considered in the context of consumer relations. It is a world of difference to be invited in the context of an architecture biennial (that deals with the many challenges the climate regime poses to future urban development), while enjoying time with your friends at a rooftop party. Crucial to the whole setting is that somehow everyone is a parasite feeding upon each other: the real estate market may well act as a parasite on the activities of the temporary users, the point is the temporary users were equally parasitic to each other.

THE DANGER OF SELF-ENCLOSURE

Another manifestation of commons in an urban context is the occupation of vacant land and having the site open for urban farming and urban gardening, welcoming people from the neighbourhood to enjoy green space, fight against its urbanisation and contributing to local organic food production. The practices work in the great tradition of the Green Guerrilla's activist actions in the 1970s and community gardens in New York City in the 1980s (Petrescu, 2005). "The actions started with illegal planting, continued with the occupation of land, and then grew into community protest actions to preserve the created gardens against private or public expansionist policies of development," writes Doina Petrescu (2005). "Gardening became a tactic for both occupying and preserving spaces, resisting pressure for development and experimenting with methods of urban management that allow a more democratic access to decision-making, creation and use." Of course, Agrocité, part of the R-urban initiative by Doina Petrescu's Atelier d'Architecture Autogerée in the Parisian suburb of Colombes, is the best example of how this tradition is translated into the discourse of the commons (Petrescu, Petcou & Awan, 2011: 136-171). At the same time Agrocité also shows the weakness of these practices of commoning, as the heroic stance against urban development easily leads to political antagonisms that leave no space for compromises and makes the commons vulnerable to revenge (Boie, 2017). In effect, R-Urban was forced to close down in Colombes after the local council decided to turn the land into a car park, an appeal in court was made to no avail, and finally the project had to be moved to the neighbouring commune of Gennevilliers. On the positive side: in the move, Agrocité showed itself to be a Deleuzian plateau, a common ground for action by the collective subject whose enthusiasm and resilience could easily be transmitted elsewhere, somehow proving its rhizomatic nature. The struggle for Agrocité embodies less a struggle for a specific location and more the powerful claiming of the right to organise a productive residential and urban space in self-management.

Radical opposition however, is not always helpful in promoting the commons, especially when it lacks the flexibility of moving elsewhere and stubbornly sticks to the location, even if the political constellation turns against it. The process of commoning may be authentic and full of good intentions, but the local community lacks interest, it finds no political impact, it has zero gentrifying effect and real estate parties are not even willing to tap into the dynamic.. In Brussels, the Commons Josaphat initiative was launched around 2008 under the promising slogan ‘In case of emergency, make your own city!’ (Candry, 2014; De Cauter, 2018; Van Reusel, 2019). On the abandoned railway yard, the regional development agency had planned a large-scale project development, designed by MSA. The future plans were nonetheless kept on-hold as there was also speculation about using the railway yard as a possible expansion area for the offices to be used by the European Commission. The unclear destination ensured that the building development was only a pipe dream and the site was left abandoned for decades, only featuring as a storage area for the remains of a circus. Commons Josaphat explicitly beckoned to Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin to claim the great potential for temporary use at the abandoned railway yard. Now 13 years and many name changes later – first Commons Josaphat, later Josaph’aire, now Sauvons la Friche – no city of its own has been created. The government was never really keen on the spontaneous use of the site by the group of commoners, referring to its use as storage for an abandoned circus, the danger of the unprotected railway track and the works that would start anytime soon. The presence of the commoners on the site was nonetheless tolerated and they organised a tiny vegetable garden and held some activities in the barracks but never managed to disclose the site fully. The slogan ‘to make your own city’ was just a speculative dream by the commoners, just as much as the shiny urban development plans in the hands of the real estate market. The tiny vegetable garden with barracks thus easily figure as ‘specter of the commons’ in its own right, the spectre emerging from the movement itself, symbol for the utopia of the commons that never became real or concrete.

The real tragedy of the commons is the self-imposed irrelevance. Commons Josaphat was limited not because of its all too political profile (issuing statements on making your own city) but rather due to not being political enough (not able to embed their alternative dream in the future policy plans.) At least one internal reason for failure was present from the beginning: the commoners entertained an antagonistic relationship with the regional government, not believing that anything good could come from the government’s side. Other group members were strategic as they were active in the Community Land Trust Brussels, a non-profit organisation that had just received subsidies, so logically they wanted to maintain a good relationship with the government. Later the biodiversity on the site provided the narrative for the enclosure of the site, after the Sauvons la Friche movement took over its control, this time imposed by the commoners, presenting its eventual use as a potential danger for the fauna and flora (Van Garsse, 2021). The message of Sauvons la Friche is certainly admirable in these days of climate heating but at the same time cynical: the biodiversity

on the railway site is the surrealist result of the standstill. Years of apathy on the part of the regional authorities mirrors the incapacity of the commoners to disclose the site and the Commons Josaphat community somehow folding back in upon itself. Saving biodiversity therefore became the poetic embrace of one's own incapacity. Finally, the urban development company SAU, owned by the regional government, took over the language of temporary use and advertised the site for temporary use under the banner of 'Josaphat Summer'. Again, the initiatives of the Brussels development company were rejected by the people of *Sauvons la Friche*, dismissing it as opportunist greenwashing and not even willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Another case of urban farming in Brussels shows how a more pragmatic relationship with the government allowed the realisation of the dream of making your own city and opening up industrial wastelands through a process of commoning: Parckfarm, located in the multicultural commune of Laeken. Although Parckfarm was first set up on the former railway infrastructure as a site for the 2014 Parckdesign Biennial organised by the Brussels Institute for the Environment, it was later made permanent as a park. Parckfarm was curated by Petra Pferdmenges (*Alive Architecture*) and Thierry Kandjee (Taktyk) and involved installations by several other architects, artists, students and inhabitants (Pferdmenges, 2018). As the park combines ecological awareness, short chains, a local meeting place for residents around food, ideally mixing different classes and cultures, it functions as a node for ecological resilience in the threefold meaning of Félix Guattari – ecology standing for organic, short-chain, local agriculture in an urban context as well as new forms of community building and individual empowerment (Guattari, 1989/2008). The opening up of new common spaces confronts the difficult questions of how to maintain openness in the city, as it bypasses the usual demarcations between public and private and thus challenges the legal responsibilities of ownership that come with it. This is especially the case in a city like Brussels, which is built on the closed block model, with its easily identifiable thresholds between public terrain and the private defensible space. Therefore, disclosure is a fundamental gesture of the urban commons, as Lieven De Cauter (2021: 84-91) has argued: it forces communities to get together and negotiate how the common space or land will be managed. Part of the management of the commons is not just the very practical reproduction – keeping the site clean and safe – but also about finding the permissions and financial means to turn the initial temporal modality into a permanent one (De Cauter, 2021; Petrescu, 2005; Pferdmenges, 2018). A huge success, Parckfarm became permanent and was integrated into the new public park at Thurn & Taxis, part of the new fancy real estate developments in public-private partnership at the site of the age-old postal industries. In this sense Parckfarm was rightly labelled by Lieven De Cauter (2014) as a 'concrete utopia', not only realising small-size the dream of making your own city, but also marking life-size the difference between the commons and the real estate market logics it wanted to criticise. The architectures of commoning equally transform the discipline of the architect from the (masculine) architect-author into what Doina Petrescu (2005; 2011) has called the (feminine) architect-curator – or, perhaps better, architect-mediator.

THE ACTIVIST CORE OF THE COMMONS

In discussing how the commons change the identity of cities we should also include the tradition of citizen movements in Brussels, engaging with urban development through direct interventions. The activist perspective allows us to understand why David Harvey (2012: 133 & 138) connects the commons with the right to the city and next stresses how it should be considered “not as a right that already exists, but as a right to redraw and recreate the city in a completely different image”. Clearly David Harvey (2012: 138) has the movements in mind that operated under the slogan of ‘reclaim the city’ and thus directly links the appearance of the commons with moments of democracy. The commons thus mark the moments in which those who are not recognised among the usual suspects of urban development, those who are not entitled as shareholder or stakeholder, manage to have their voice heard and redefine the future plans (Rancière, 1995/1999; BAVO, 2007). Moreover, citizen movements have the commons as their object as they defend the common resources, such as green space or clean air, but also cultural commons such as road safety and child friendly spaces. On top of that the modes of commoning by citizen movements tap into the vast resources of cultural activism, now introducing it into the everyday politics of the street (BAVO, 2010). Even more it seems as if the citizen movements are engaged in what Boris Groys (2007) called the struggle for ‘equal aesthetics right’ over the design of the city, far more than any artist is prepared to do. The resources and tactics applied by citizen movements simply don’t fit the typical choreography of urban development, filled with parties that use property to defend all sorts of public or private interests and politics trying to find compromises between the conflicting interests. In terms of agency, the citizen movements act as the “unstable and malleable social relationship” Harvey (2012: 37) is hinting at, call it a different third modus of an impersonal and loose relation (it is certainly not a closed community or identity) that is all the more committed to fight the good cause or simply do the right thing.

Different citizen movements in Brussels have managed to fundamentally redraw the layout and identity of the city through the commoning of perhaps the most common space of all: the street. The ownership of street is state monopoly, no doubt but still it is generally considered common in the meaning that we all use it and nobody takes care of it, resulting in the pejorative meanings of the street as ‘mean’ space (De Cauter, 2018). In contrast it is a sort of novelty nowadays that different citizen movements in Brussels started to ‘common’ the streets for different reasons, taking the street not just as a platform for action but also as an object of desire (Butler, 2015: 66-98). Talking about the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011, Judith Butler (2015) argues that the roundabout did not just function as a platform for political action but also started to become the object of the action. Although Butler clearly discusses the revolutionary upheaval in the Arab Spring, we see the same process in the rather peaceful actions of civil disobedience by citizen movements in Brussels. In the context of Brussels, the first example is Pic Nic the Streets, the movement of young people in 2012 that answered the

call of philosopher Philippe Van Parijs (2012) to occupy the central avenues of Brussels until they are made car-free. The idea of Pic Nic the Streets was to give a final push to the long-awaited makeover of the Place de la Bourse and Place de Brouckère – two squares that were at that time cut by the main artery (4/5 lanes and 2 parking lanes) running from North to South and leading an endless traffic stream right through the heart of the City (Boie, 2017). An important strategic element in Pic Nic the Streets was the festive, family friendly atmosphere, the traditional protest attributes such as slogans and posters were not allowed, which made it possible for all sort of people to join in the movement. The use of the festive street blockades, on a few consecutive Sunday mornings throughout the summer, have proven to be a powerful tool to fight for the redistribution of public space in the car-dominated city of Brussels. The actions presented the authorities with what Roger Hallam (2019) called a response dilemma, present already in the very moment of the first announcement at social media: the local government could negate the activists or support them, but in either case they could not win. After people started to massively confirm their presence using the Facebook event page, the sniffy rejection by the Former Mayor Freddy Thielemans (PS) went viral. He claimed the City was working hard on the makeover of the city centre and suggested there were better locations to find for having a picnic. In no time thousands of people confirmed their presence through Facebook. The picnic's continued until the new mayor Yvan Mayeur gave in and promised to do exactly what the festive protestors were demanding: making the Central Boulevards of Brussels car free without further delay (Nijs, 2018). Eventually this led to the biggest pedestrian zone in Europe.

The picnic's brought the classic strategy of occupation to the next level, not so much self-organising an abandoned building or vacant site but pitching a certain issue on the political agenda by disrupting the distribution channels of the city, even in short moments. Although the Pic Nic the Streets movement was abandoned soon after success, the picnic's were spreading as a joyful weapon for urban activism, for instance in the demand to limit the property development at Port de Ninove and turn the junk space into a park. Years later citizen movements in Brussels have used similar operational tactics in dealing with urgencies within the city, acting as a force that's free from the traditional civil society and gathering people from diverse backgrounds. We think of the school gate protest movement Filter Café Filtré, started by concerned parents of primary school children from the Maria Boodschap primary school in the heart of Brussels. After an alarming study about air quality in school environments, featuring Maria Boodschap as a case study, the engaged parents started to block the streets at the entrance of the primary school every Friday morning. The spontaneous school gate protest started to circulate in the media and soon the movement spread to other primary schools in Brussels and other cities in Belgium (Vermeersch & Desloover, 2018). The main political demand was to reduce car traffic in cities, starting with car-free streets around schools at peak hour. Car dominated streets are not only a source of daily traffic congestion in living areas but also cause social disruption and ecological contamination. The Friday morning school gate protests lasted for months and reached

their peak in national manifestations, such as several bicycle rides on the A12 highway from Antwerp to Brussels, the march on Saintelette Square at the Brussels small ring and the blockade at the main artery Boulevard Charles Quint in Brussels. Filter Café Filtré smartly linked the issue of urban activism with political activism as the movement had the explicit ambition to put the issue of mobility and air quality on the agenda of political parties in the wake of the local elections (2018) and regional/federal elections (2019).

Around the same time the citizen movement 1030/0 – referring to the zip code of Schaarbeek (Brussels) added with the ambition of 0 traffic casualties – started to common the streets. After a deadly car accident at Chaussee d’Haecht in Schaarbeek the citizen movement called upon the local government to implement a general zone 30 km/ph speed limit and blocked the main artery to highlight the urgency. The demand was swiftly followed by the local council. The movement started answering every new car accident with unannounced street blockades, e.g., at the mid-ring road Boulevard Lambermont (a dangerous motorway with three lanes in each direction cutting through residential areas), Chaussee d’Helmet, Avenue Rogier and other arteries. The idea was to create political pressure by flooding the newspapers with mediagenic actions. The battle of images has always been a vital part of political activism, the best historical reference is perhaps the famous sit-in’s organised by the Civil Right Movements in the sixties at local lunch bars (King, 1967). These were highly staged acts, well prepared, and disciplined, performed in order to obtain the visual documentation of the everyday abuse and insult Afro-American’s had to endure in those days, and have it published in the leading papers. In the same mediagenic fashion, the spontaneous refusal to go with the flow in the streets of Brussels, even though it is a short intervention, creates an immediate crisis for the urban system, causing huge traffic jams and chain effects on public transport. The guts needed to block a street – first with human chains, later by lying



IMAGE 1 Action by 1030/0 at Van Vollenhovenlaan, Schaarbeek, Brussels (Image by Sien Verstraeten).

down on the asphalt or having a dance on a crossing – has immense appeal to the popular imagination. The movement therefore urged the regional government to use its political power for an active policy on road safety, not just organising campaigns but also actively intervening in road infrastructure, increasing police control, pressuring the automobile industry, etc. Local government were demanded to immediately close streets, for instance after an action in which parking places at Avenue Van Vollenhoven, running

straight through the Josaphat park, were repainted as a hopscotch, running track and maze and making plain that playground games should not be mistaken for car parking (Boie, 2020). Again, the inclusive and still extremely loose character of the movement, having no formal structure and using only social media as its organising tool, can be seen as part of its success. As 1030/o had no links to any political party nor traditional civil society, people easily identified with the cause of traffic safety and often passers-by spontaneously started to join the street actions. The movement spread over Brussels region, creating local chapters in other communes (1082/o, 1210/o, 1080/o, ...) and the creation of a supporting association Heroes for Zero Brussels.

CONCLUSION

Temporary use has been helpful to reintroduce the notion of the commons in urban development, especially when it comes to accommodating creatives industries and yet they tend to repress other traditions of commoning from the scene. Lamenting the corruption of the commons is in that case somehow redundant, in so far as it deliberately operates in the context of the real estate market and even draws on its support. No wonder the process of commoning is overdetermined by the land owner who facilitates the process, aims to defend interests and arrives to harvest it at the right moment. The corruption of the commons by real estate thus urges us to recognise, with David Harvey (2012: 77), that the process of commoning is fundamentally marked by a “continuous process of production and enclosure”. Therefore, the discussion should focus not so much on the ‘natural’ tendency to hollow out the commons as it nurtures the illusion of pure commons but rather discuss the constant and renewed disclosure of the commons. In weighing the commons with real estate, the fundamental question is how to make the commons permanent and available for the enjoyment of all. Practices of urban gardening continue upon another strong tradition of the commons in cities, offering the possibility for people to get together in an experimental setting for self-management. In these cases, the problematic is not so much collaboration but rather the opposite: the commons are endangered by the tendency of self-enclosure as a result of the unwillingness to engage with the public government and/or real estate interests. And still the oppositional modus unwittingly draws on the magic moment that the regional development company and their private real estate partners magically withdraw and the site is generously handed over to the commoners who start to make their own city. Against this sort of hocus-pocus scenario – as if the real estate market melts into thin air – the challenge lies in finding ways to embed the commons in the official plans for urban development and make it a permanent part of the urban landscape.

Talking about the commons in the terms of spontaneous citizen movements helps to return heavyweight claims back to the level of everyday experience and also provides direct relevance for urban politics. After all it is quite easy to dream about occupations of empty buildings before first asking the land owner for permission. Equally it is quite

easy to dream about remaking the city while sitting in an abandoned brownfield. The real struggle of the commons happens when people fight – symbolically – for every square inch of road infrastructure passing their front door, trying to keep it safe, healthy and convivial. In this perspective the activist commons is not so much about countering urban developments nor offering alternatives but to hold the public powers accountable and have them respect their own policies – call it moments of hyper idealist overidentification (BAVO, 2007b). Even though the redistribution of public space is part of most political programmes and policy plans, this is not something that will happen naturally, it needs common action to turn it into reality. The activist commons pays off, that is what the above examples show. No wonder we saw different variations of the reclaim slogan appearing in Brussels, even under the corona lockdown, such as the ‘Reclaim the Park’ in relation to the Bois de la Cambre. Although part of the Forêt des Soignes and functioning as an immense green urban lung, the Bois de la Cambre was de facto functioning as an urban highway used as a shortcut for cars entering Brussels from the south. During the pandemic the ‘Reclaim the Park’ movement successfully demanded the immediate closure of the park for cars and opening of the streets for leisure and play. The case is not closed and currently contested before court, decisions made were partially turned back on later, still the actions should be considered successful in cutting through the ideological fundamentals supporting the predominance of cars in the design of public space. The cases show how the street appears as perhaps the best anchorage point for the right to the city, as it allows people to rethink the public space that starts at their front door and therefore make the long-awaited redistribution of public space a living reality, if only for a moment. In that light the street is the real locus of the battle for the commons, building up momentum for urban change in the joyful activity of blocking the city traffic with neighbours and other strangers.

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