

Ulster University Northern Ireland
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The new university town Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) a potential case of consequence to the Ulster University Expanding Magee Campus

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Founding Partner, Groupe Urbanisme-Architecture (R. Lemaire, J.-P. Blondel, P. Laconte),
in charge of the masterplan and architectural coordination of the new university town of
Louvain-la-Neuve

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I. The past

The Leuven City Hall

Leuven/Louvain university was founded in 1425, just a few years after St-Andrews in Scotland.

Its students and staff spoke either Flemish, a Germanic language, or French, a Latin language, within mutual respect.

Attracting students, staff in residence, career opportunities, families, scientific conferences, cultural activities and more- the Flemish city of Leuven did all that, mixing functions, instead of separating them.



Ill. 1. The Leuven City Hall.
(Credit: sedmak iStock by Getty Images)



The period following the end of World War II brought a wave of nationalism in prosperous Flanders, which soon required its language autonomy and the departure of the French speaking university. Demonstrations occurred.

Ill. 2. View of demonstrations.

A law was passed in 1958, making illegal any teaching in French, obliging the French-speaking University either to disappear or to relocate in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of the country, with a compensation for relocation costs.

No municipality in Wallonia however showed interest in hosting the French-speaking university, except the small railway town of Ottignies (3.800 inhabitants), sometimes called the "Clapham Junction of Belgium". Its Mayor saw his municipality as "a City with a university future", along the model of medieval Leuven/Louvain, to be called LOUVAIN-la-NEUVE, and to be located at the edge of the municipality.

II. Creating the town

Finding a location

The General Administrator of the French-speaking University Michel Woitrin (equivalent to a Vice-Chancellor) bought about 900 hectare of uninhabited farmland that included a 200-hectare forest.



Ill. 3 and 4. The land chosen for the new University town.
(Credit: Archives de l'UCLouvain)

The map of the university-owned land shows the anchoring of the new town on the only existing infrastructure, i.e. the road linking Brussels to Luxemburg.

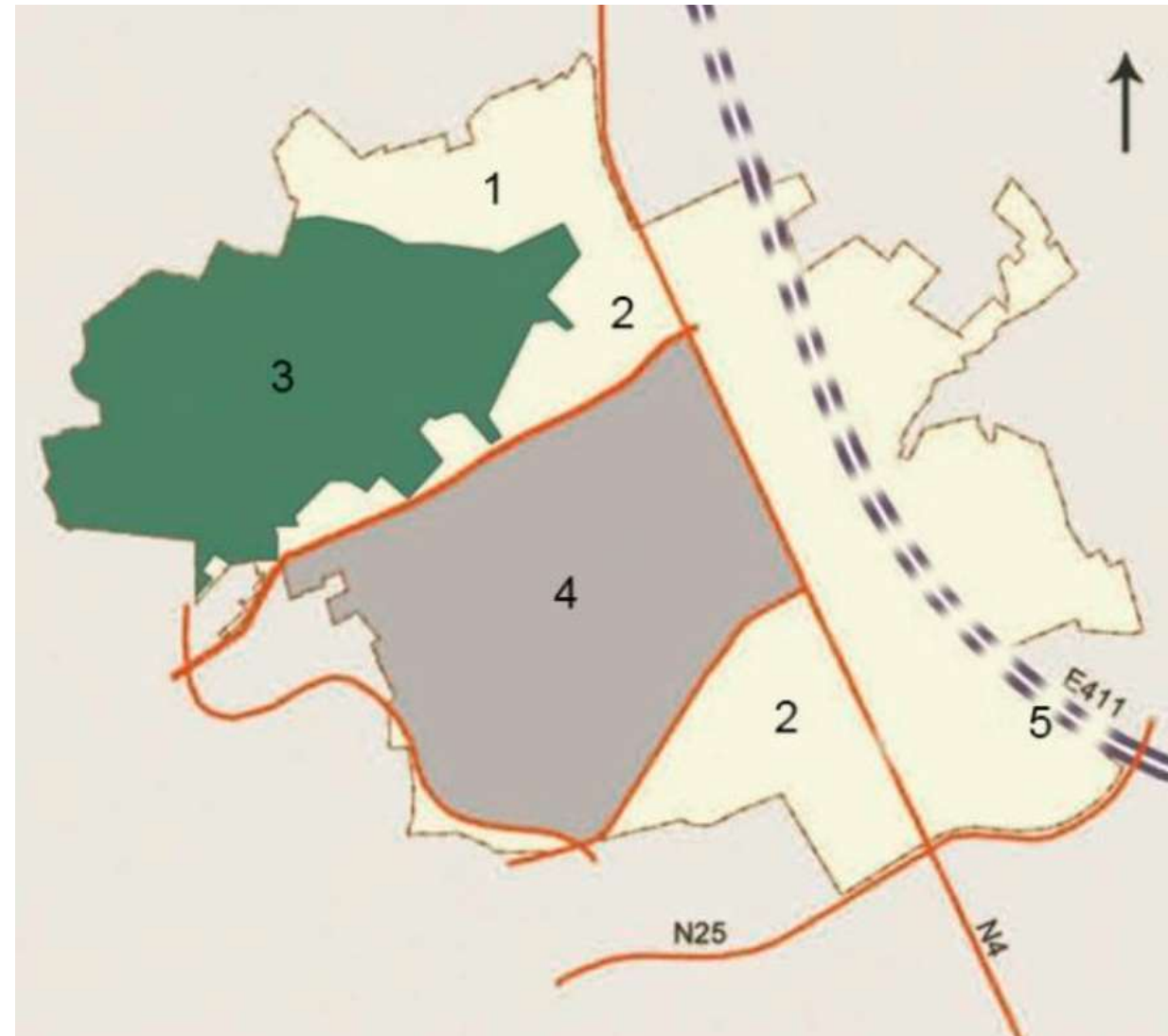
The motorway did not exist at that time and is shown by dotted lines.

A mixed-use urban development (“Aire Urbaine”) to be built on the central 400 hectare of the site was seen as the equivalent of the historic university towns (4).

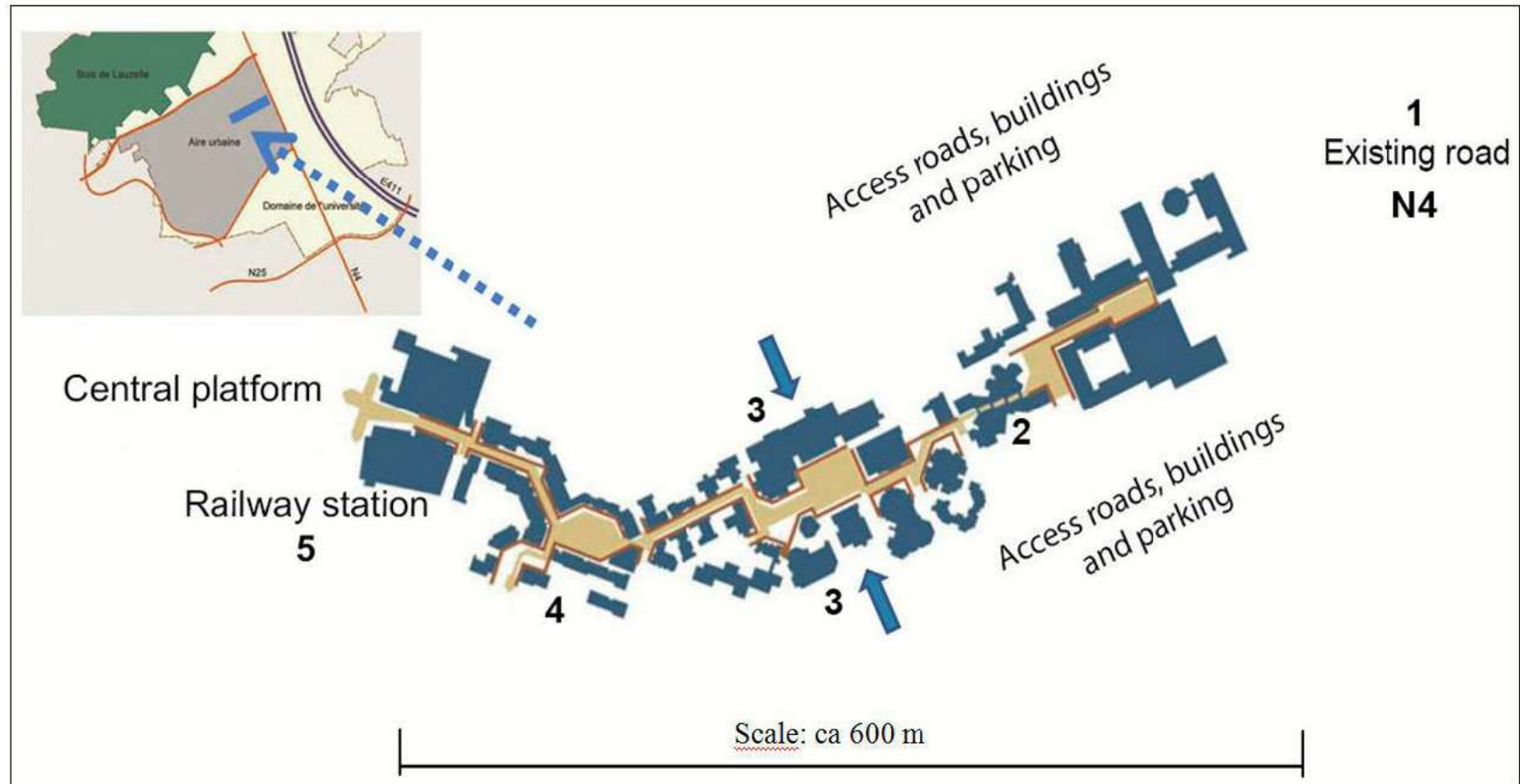
The northern area in green (“Bois de Lauzelle”) was reserved as ecologic forest reserve (3).

The areas east of it south of the dense urban development, and east of the road, were to become a research and development area (2).

The area north of the forest was to be developed as a golf course (1).



Ill. 4. The university-owned land main intended uses.



III. 5. The Spine concept.

The land bought by the university had only one road access (see box).

It became the starting point of the first phase, A linear pedestrian spine.

The eastern starting point is thus the existing N4 road (1), followed by a string of public spaces and passages through buildings, indicated by dashes (2).

The diagram shows the location of access roads and car parks. The arrows indicate the vehicle underpass and parking below the “Place des Sciences” (3). The public spaces have various shapes, and the alignment of their street access is either perpendicular or tangential to that of the spine (4). The sub-surface railway station (5) marks the beginning of the subterranean zone.

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III. The planning team

Michel Woitrin had arranged for the University Board to appoint three of his colleagues, entrusted with the task of designing and planning a new university town, inspired by the those he admired in the UK, and of course by the city of Leuven/Louvain.

General management of the new town development plan

UCL
Université
catholique
de Louvain



General administrator
reporting to the University
board: Michel Woitrin.



Groupe Urbanisme Architecture (UA), in charge of the development plan and architectural coordination:

Raymond Lemaire (historian, founder of ICOMOS), Jean-Pierre Blondel (Faculté d'Architecture, ULB) & Pierre Laconte, jurist & economist.



IV. Planning Process

The planning principles of the new Louvain were:

1. Thrift

i.e. being as thrifty as possible with concrete, built land and energy, remembering the Schumacher's classic book SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL.

2. Linear growth

i.e. adopting a linear growth form of planning, avoiding the risk of confusion between works in progress and creating infrastructure only when it is needed, not before. The central spine extends at present over 1.5 km.

3. Mixed use

From the very first phase, which started in 1970, immediately after approval of the plan, the central spine has served a mix of academic, commercial and residential functions, clustered together in such a way that it would continue to operate even if no later phase was to materialise.

4. Multiplicity of architects

The Planning team chose as architects for the individual buildings' architects well known in the Profession.

5. Respect of the Human scale and nature

The central spine is totally reserved for pedestrians, but all buildings are accessible both from the main spine and from side alleys and parking areas.

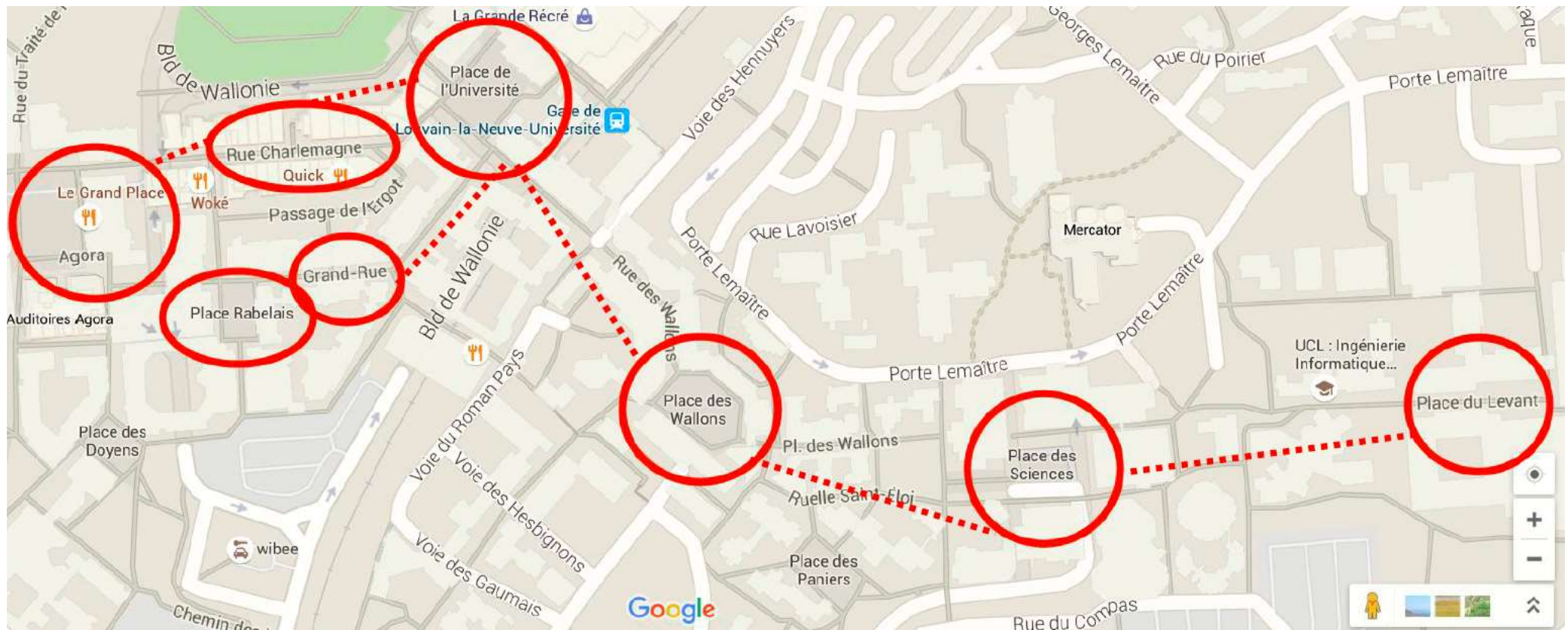
Ill. 7.
Car park at the School of architecture (Vinci Building).

The trees are of different species and provide a haven for a variety of bird life.

Photo: Pierre Laconte.



6. Interspersing the street space with piazzas and meeting places



Ill. 8. Public space comes first, building afterwards. (Credit: Google Maps and P. Laconte)

The red dots indicate the sequence of pedestrian streets and public spaces reflecting the schematic land use map. It started in the east from the existing road, continuing through the Place des Sciences, the Place des Wallons, the new subterranean railway station and the Place de l'Université towards the west.

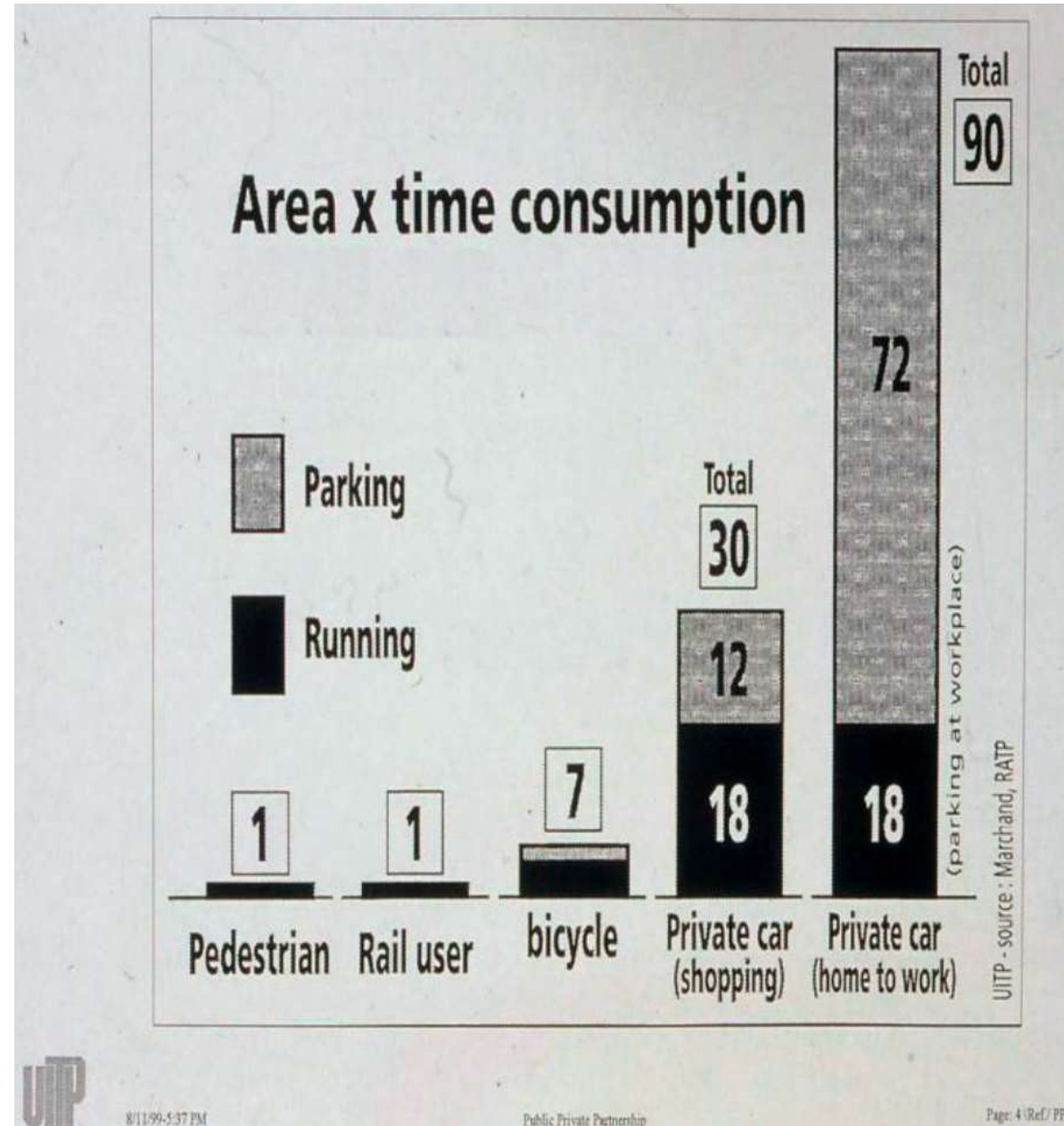
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7. Planning for land saving

The pedestrian option allowed to save land and front transport infrastructure investment.

III. 9. The diagram shows the multiplier effect of land consumption generated by each mode of transport and related parking.

(Source: RATP, Paris)



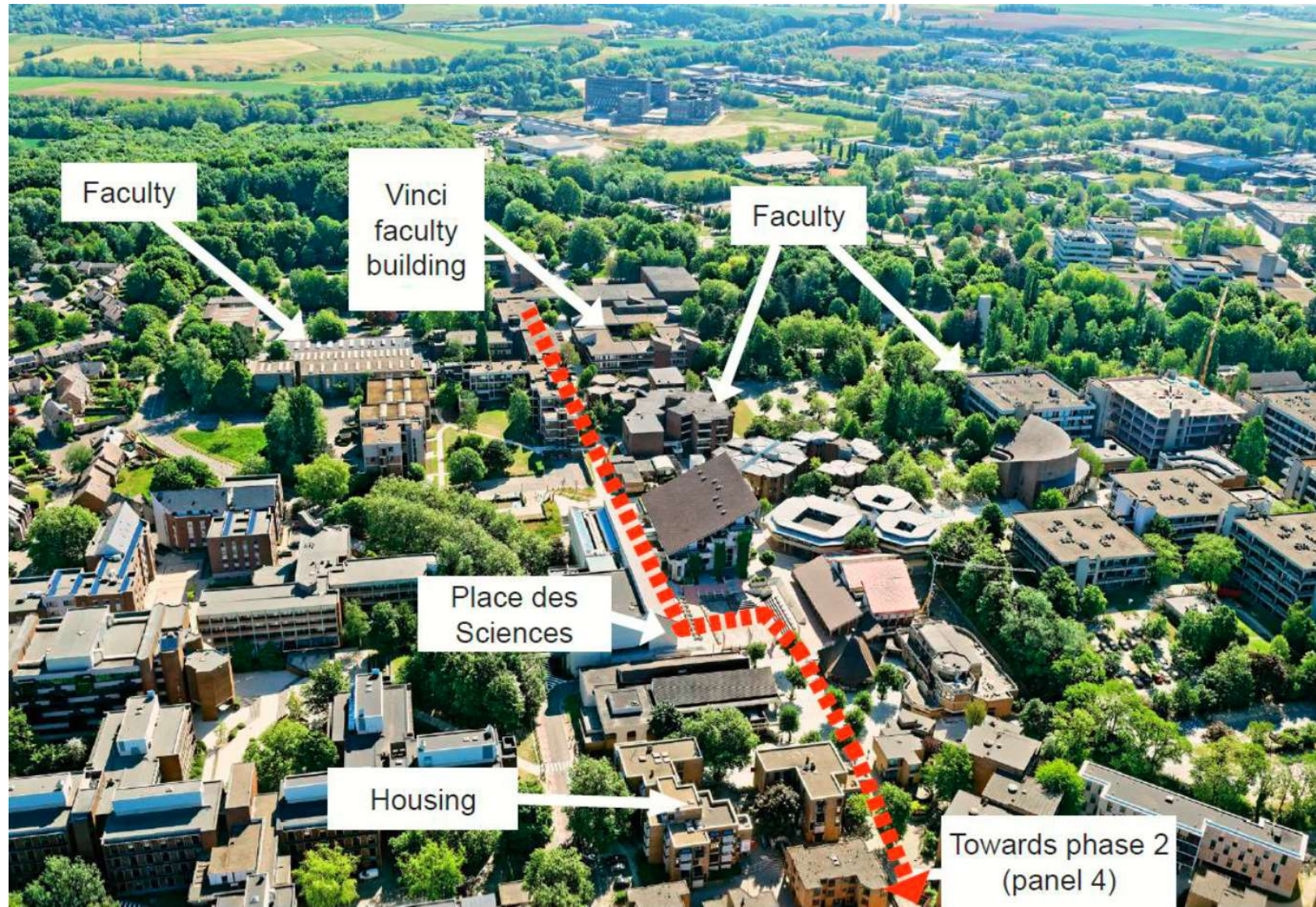
8. Citizen participation

From the very first phase (1972), the inhabitants, belonging to the University or not, formed a Residents Council requiring to be consulted on all decisions affecting them. After more than 50 years of various social activities it remains an influential body, independent from both the University and the Municipality of Ottignies, and occasionally in conflict with them.

V. Implementation and phasing

FIRST PHASE (1970-1972) - Science Faculties and
Science Library

Ill. 10. Aerial view of first phase (1970-72).



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(© Goblaview, Simon Schmitt)



Ill. 11. First Phase (1970-722) - Science Library and Place des Sciences. (Photo: Koen Raeymakers)

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> SECOND PHASE (1973-1975) - RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ill. 12. View of Place Galilée.

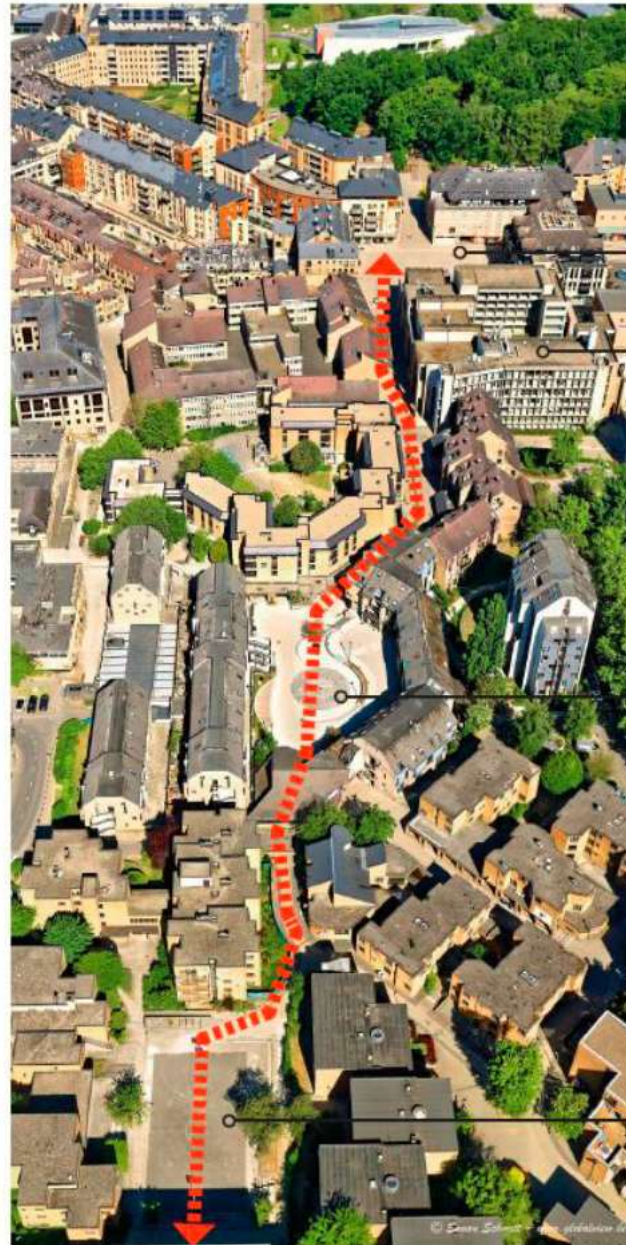
Place Galilée, lined with transplanted plane trees, adjoins the Place des Sciences and provides a green counterpoint to it. (Photo: Pierre Laconte)



West

Ill. 12bis. Aerial view of second phase: residential / commercial Development.

(© Goblaview, Simon Schmitt)



Place de l'Université

Railway Station and
University administration

Place des Wallons

Place des Sciences area

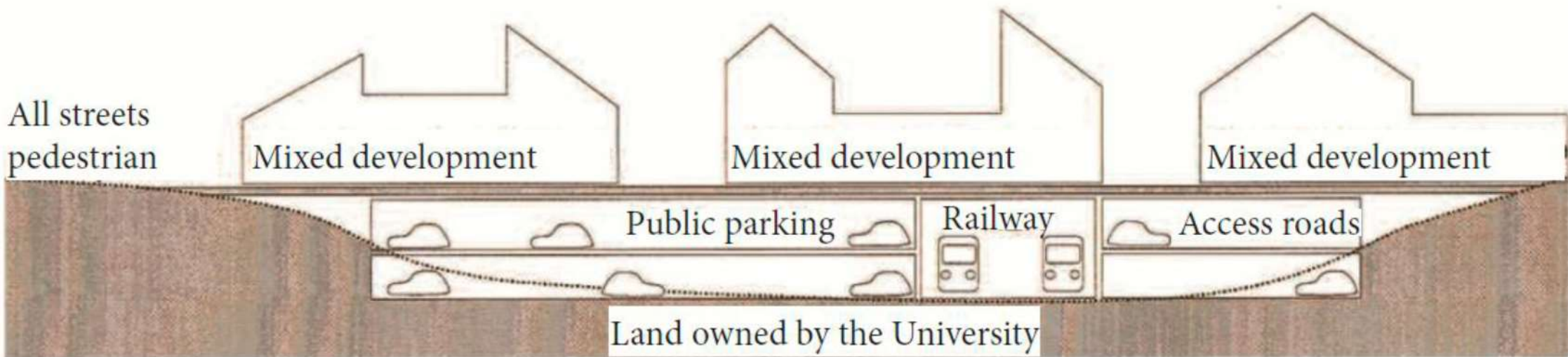
East

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Ill. 13. The Grand-Place. This is the largest public space on the concrete platform. It is planted with trees and sidewalk cafés. (Photo: Pierre Laconte)

THIRD PHASE (1975-1976). THE CENTRE OF THE NEW TOWN - LINKING THE FIRST CLUSTERS WITH THE OLD CENTRE OF THE MUNICIPALITY AND ITS RAIL STATION



Ill. 14. Land-use diagram of the railway station, access roads, and mixed development on long term lease from the university. Credit: Groupe Urbanisme Architecture.

The station building includes the railway platforms, the ticket hall, the UCLouvain headquarters and a shopping arcade. It initiated the development of the entire city centre, using earth movements generated by the railway tunnel linking Ottignies station and Louvain-la-Neuve.

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Ill.15. Underground railway station, and university headquarters. Place de l'Université.
Photo: Pierre Laconte.



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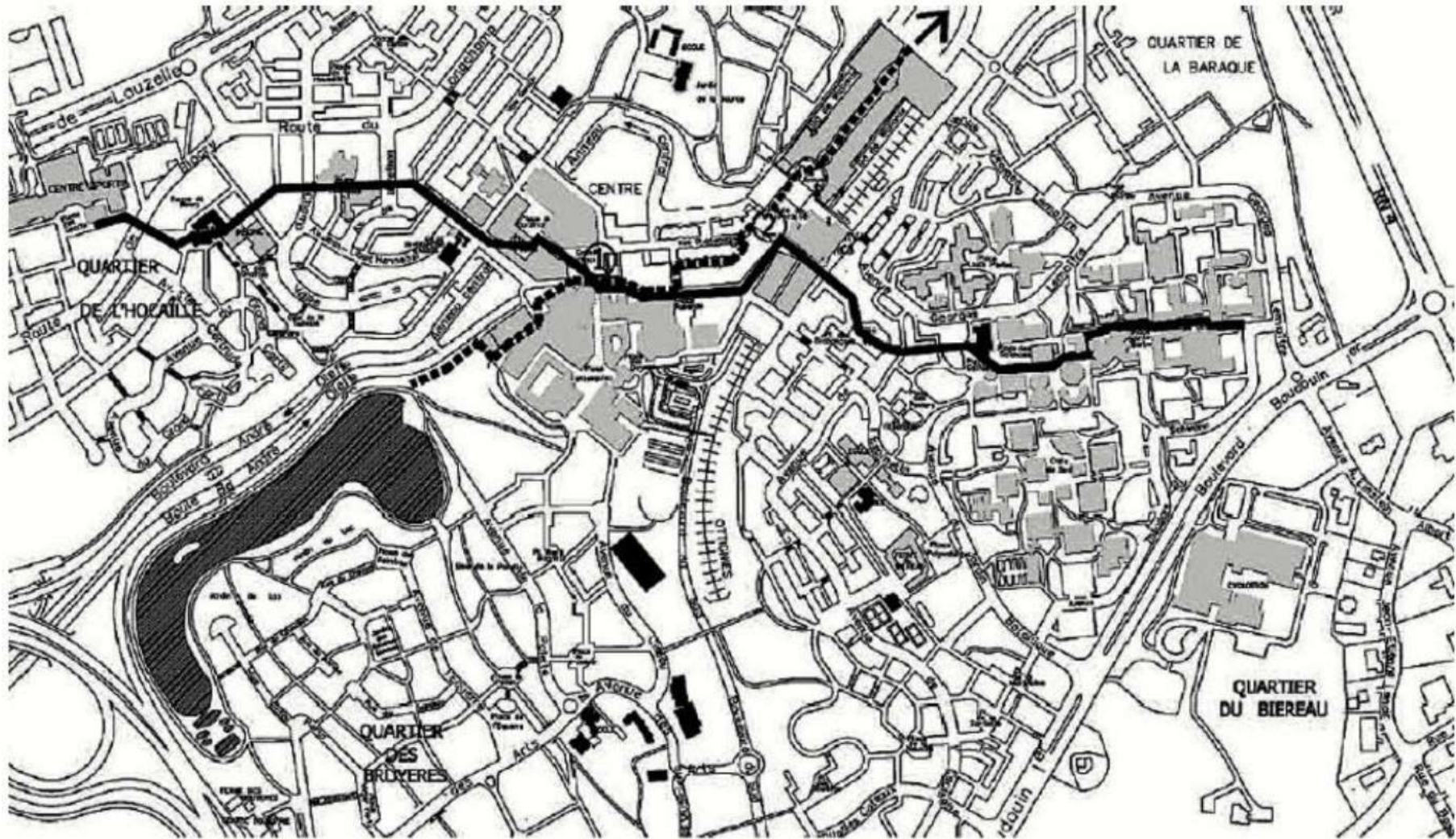
Ill. 16. Place de l'Université. (Photo: Pierre Laconte)

Ill. 17. Place Rabelais.
Example of trees planted on the parking slab in
1976, using a 50centimeter earthen space are
still growing and generating a dense canopy.

(Photo: Pierre Laconte)



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Ill. 18. Linear plan of the east-west route, stretching 1,500 metres. The main pedestrian route is shown as a bold, highlighted line. Junctions are indicated by a bold, dotted line, notably towards the reservoir treated as a lake and the “L’Esplanade” shopping centre, opened in 2005. (Illustration: Jean Remy)

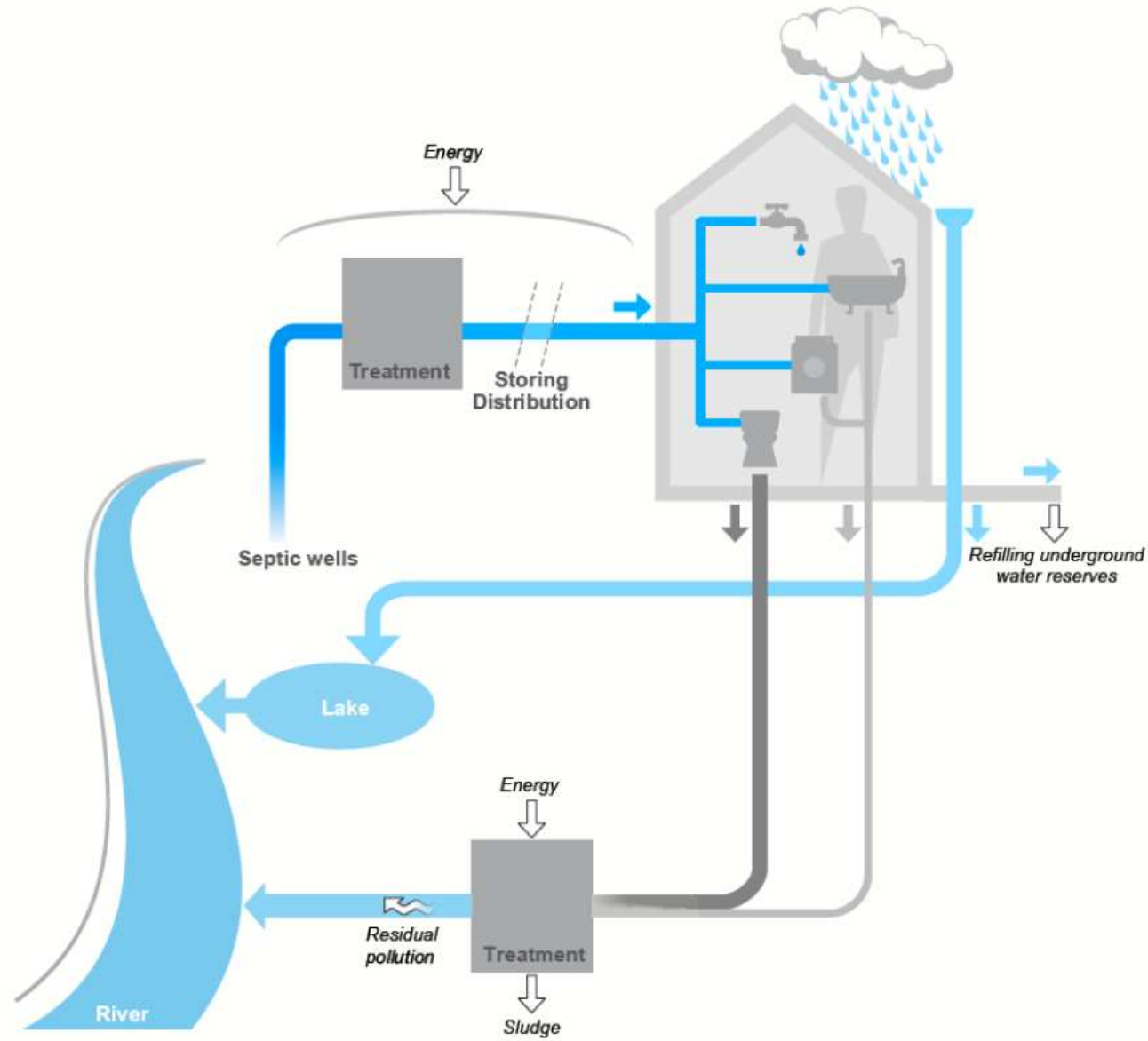
Ill. 19. Water Management.

With a view to saving on drainage costs, the planning team situated most of the 'industrial park of national interest' at the highest point of the university site, which meant that the park's water infrastructure could be placed within the responsibility of the well-funded Ministry of Economic Affairs, for the benefit of the entire site.

By collecting rainwater and stormwater - which is highly variable - into a reservoir, treated as a lake with variable depth, it was possible to significantly reduce the diameter of the sewer compared with a traditional mixed mains drainage system. By the same token, a lake was created that served several purposes, notably air cooling, landscaping and recreation.

(Source: LOCI/UCL Energy-Climate)

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Ill. 19. The lake.

The lake is intended as a tool for saving water reserves, a tool for saving water management cost (it collects rain and storm water, only used water being treated) and as a landscaping amenity attracting residential investments.

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III. 20. Aerial view of the city centre and the 400-hectare urban area.

(© GoblaView, Simon Schmitt)

CONCLUSIONS

- The Louvain-la-Neuve (LLN) urban development project was implemented in accordance with the master plan drawn up by the UCL Urban Planning and Architecture Group. It now has a 50.000 day-population, 10,000 permanent inhabitants and 9.000 jobs (2025).
- The project is at a crossroads. The LLN site has become a desirable location, and planning decisions must now be made to select the highest and best uses of the still unbuilt parts of the 400-hectare urban area, including the provision of land for affordable housing.
- The fringe of the central urban area is presently the subject of a development plan focusing on space for urban agriculture.
- Outside the central urban area, the development of the 230-hectare university science park meets sustained demand (ca 300 firms).
- The Louvain-la-Neuve new university town is on its way into becoming the centre of a larger growth pole south of Brussels, experience of potential interest elsewhere.