UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON - BARTLETT SHOOL OF PLANNING - 16 January 2013

FROM NOTHING TO A MAJOR URBAN CENTRE IN 40 YEARS: AN INCREMENTAL APPROACH TO INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT – THE CASE OF THE LOUVAIN NEW UNIVERSITY TOWN

Pierre LACONTE
President, Foundation for the Urban Environment

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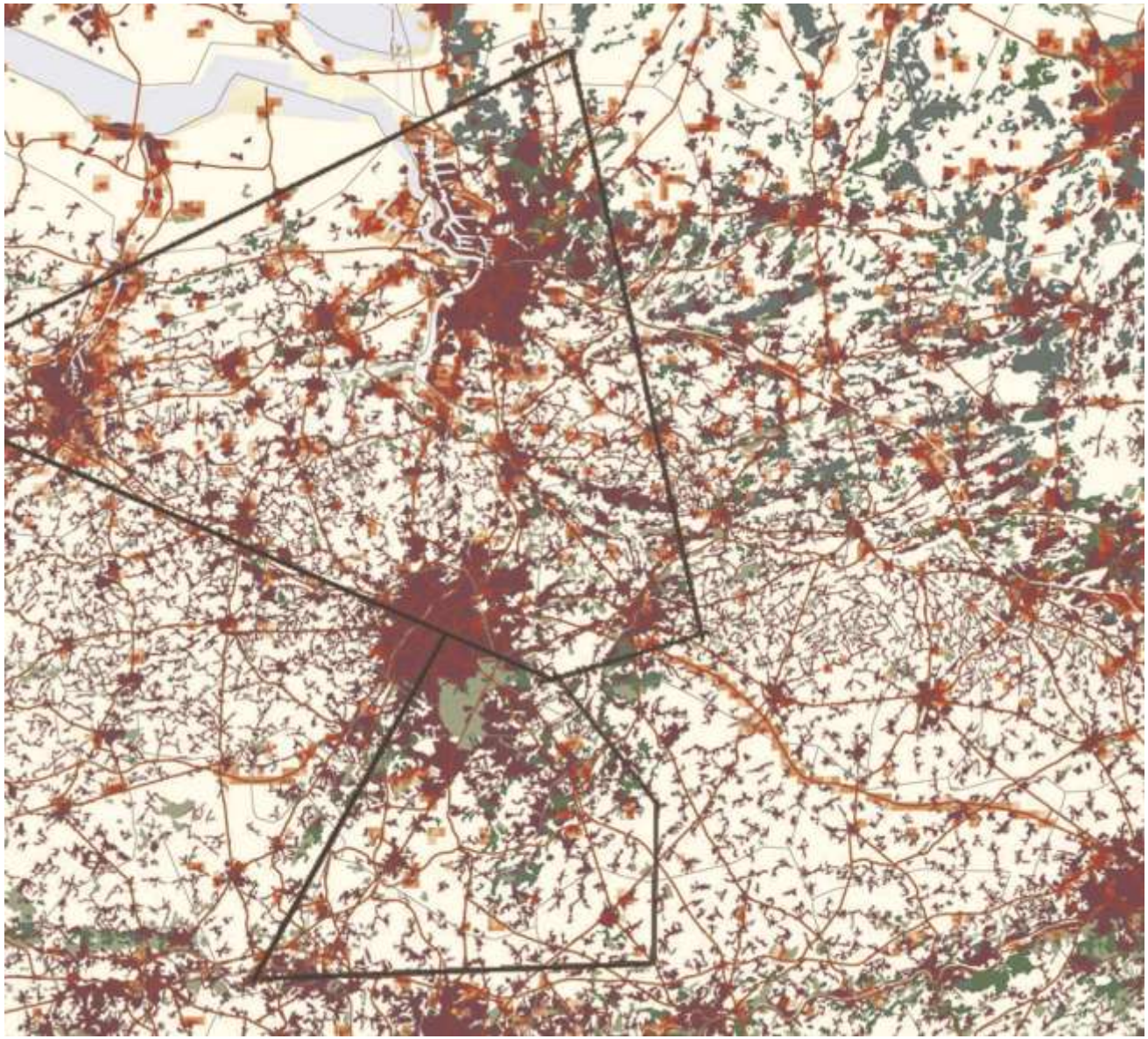
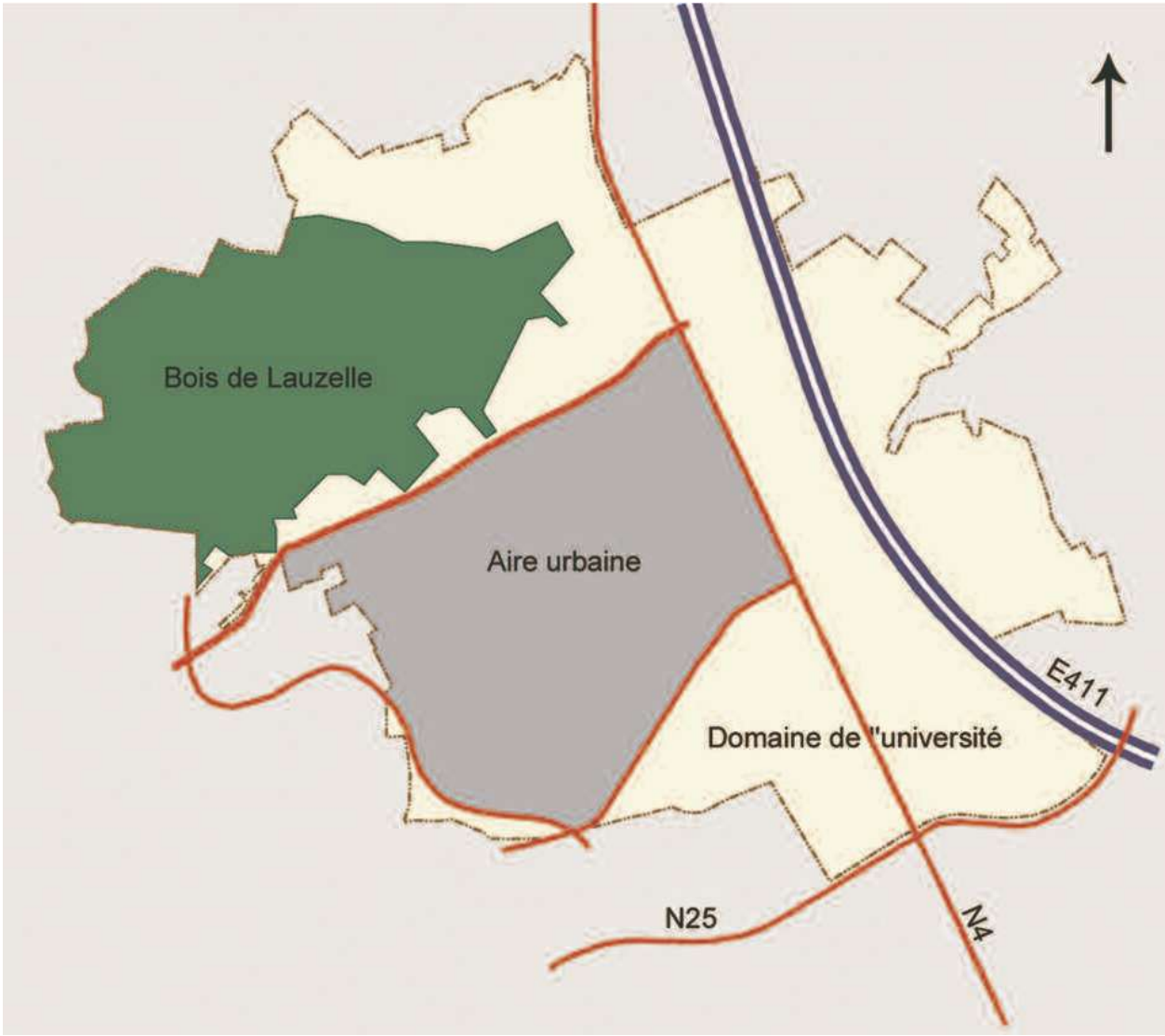
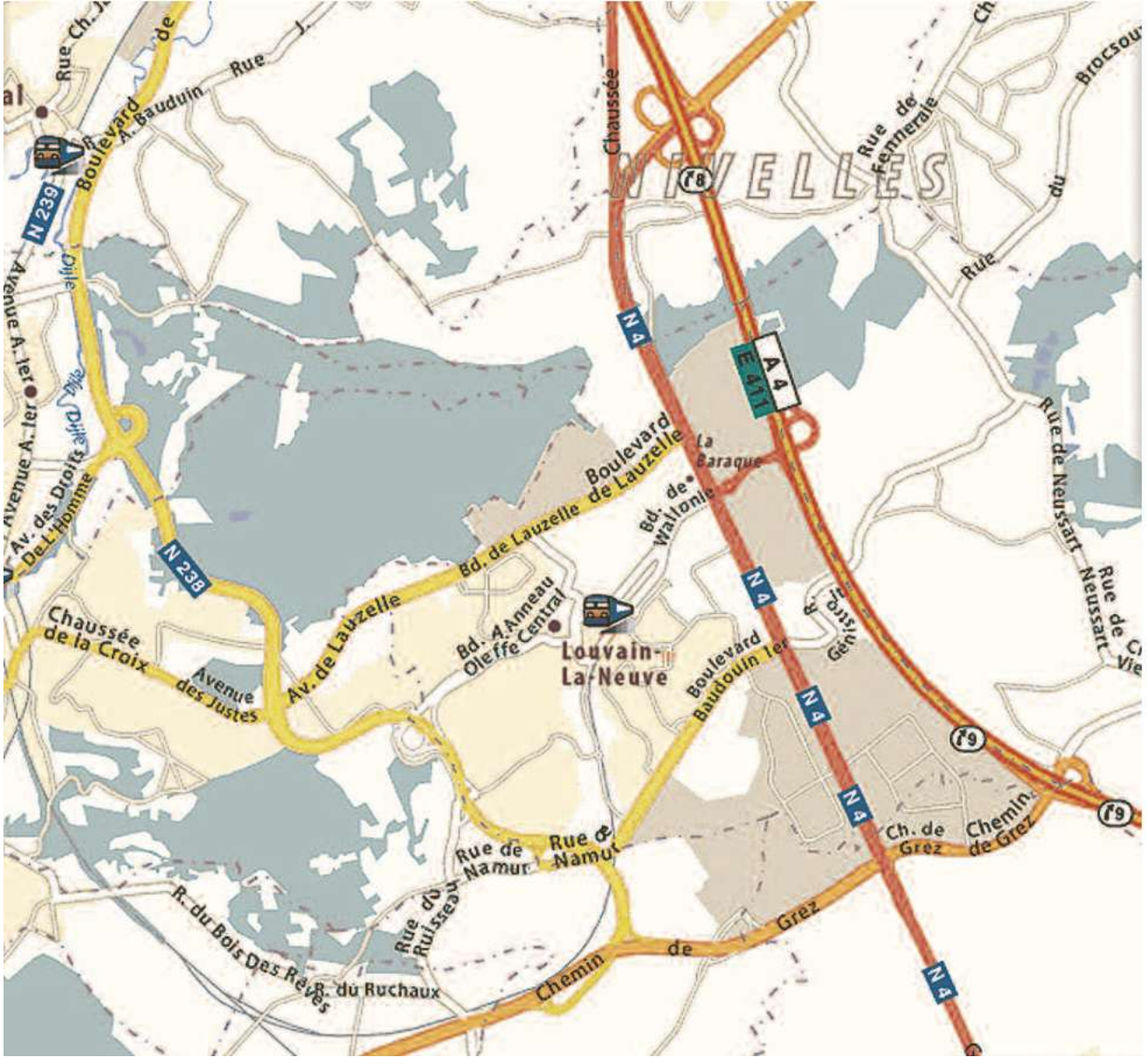
The historical university city of Louvain, seat of the university since 1425, with teaching in Latin and later in French and Dutch. The suppression of the French-speaking section of the University in 1968 was the tipping point that led to the creation of a new University town replicating the urban environment of Louvain.



Map showing the metropolitan pattern of Central Belgium. The cities of Antwerp, Ghent Bruges and Louvain, North of Brussels, loosely suggest a diamond (losange). The cities of Charleroi, Nivelles, Ottignies and Wavre, South of Brussels loosely suggest a triangle All of them are commuting distance from each other (maximum 60 km).

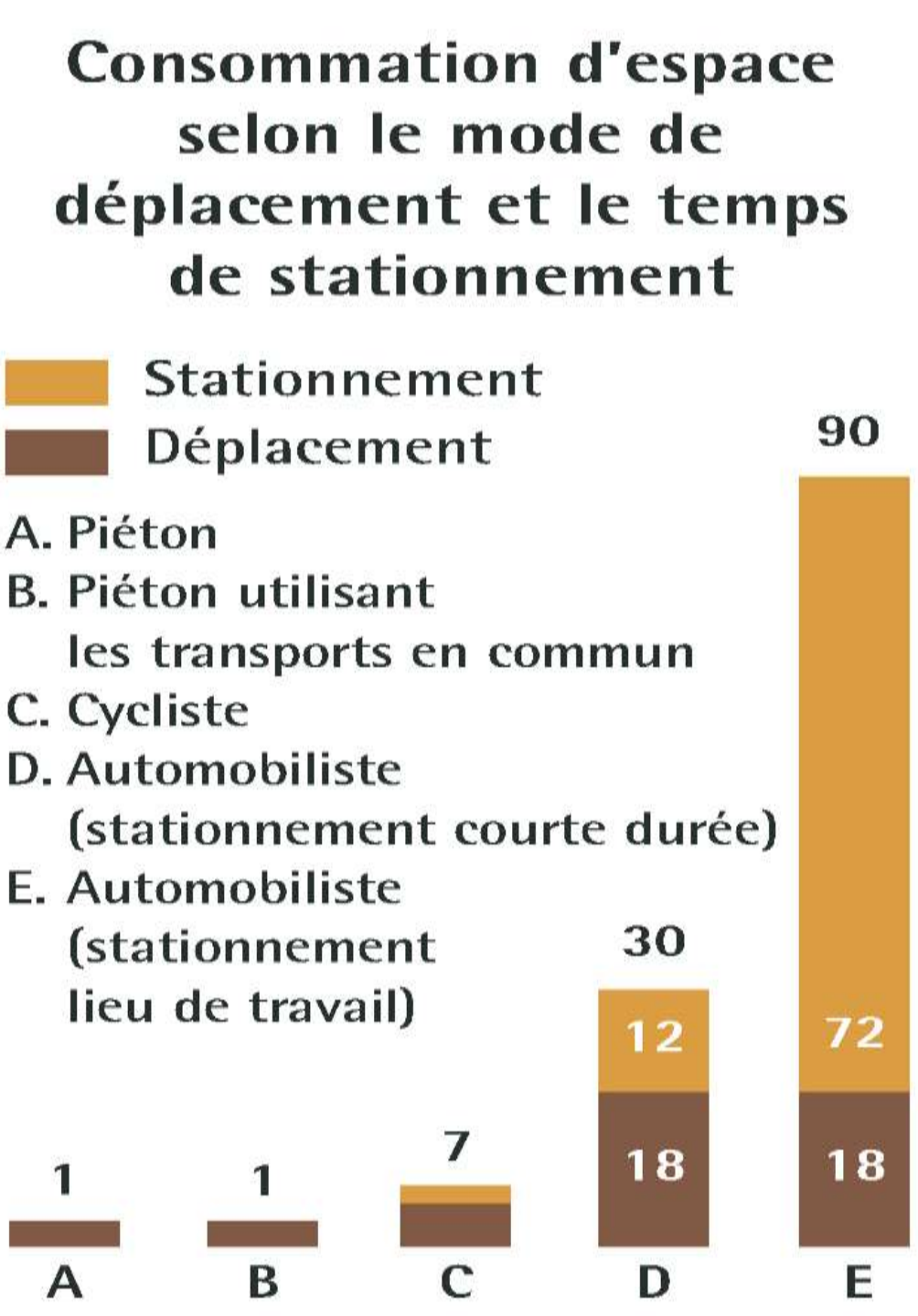
The university bought ca 1000 ha of agricultural and forest land in a rural area close to Brussels Namur road (N4): the central part was set aside for urban development; forest land in the North was preserved. The overall master plan and architectural coordination was entrusted to the Groupe Urbanisme-architecture (R. Lemaire, J-P. Blondel and P. Laconte).





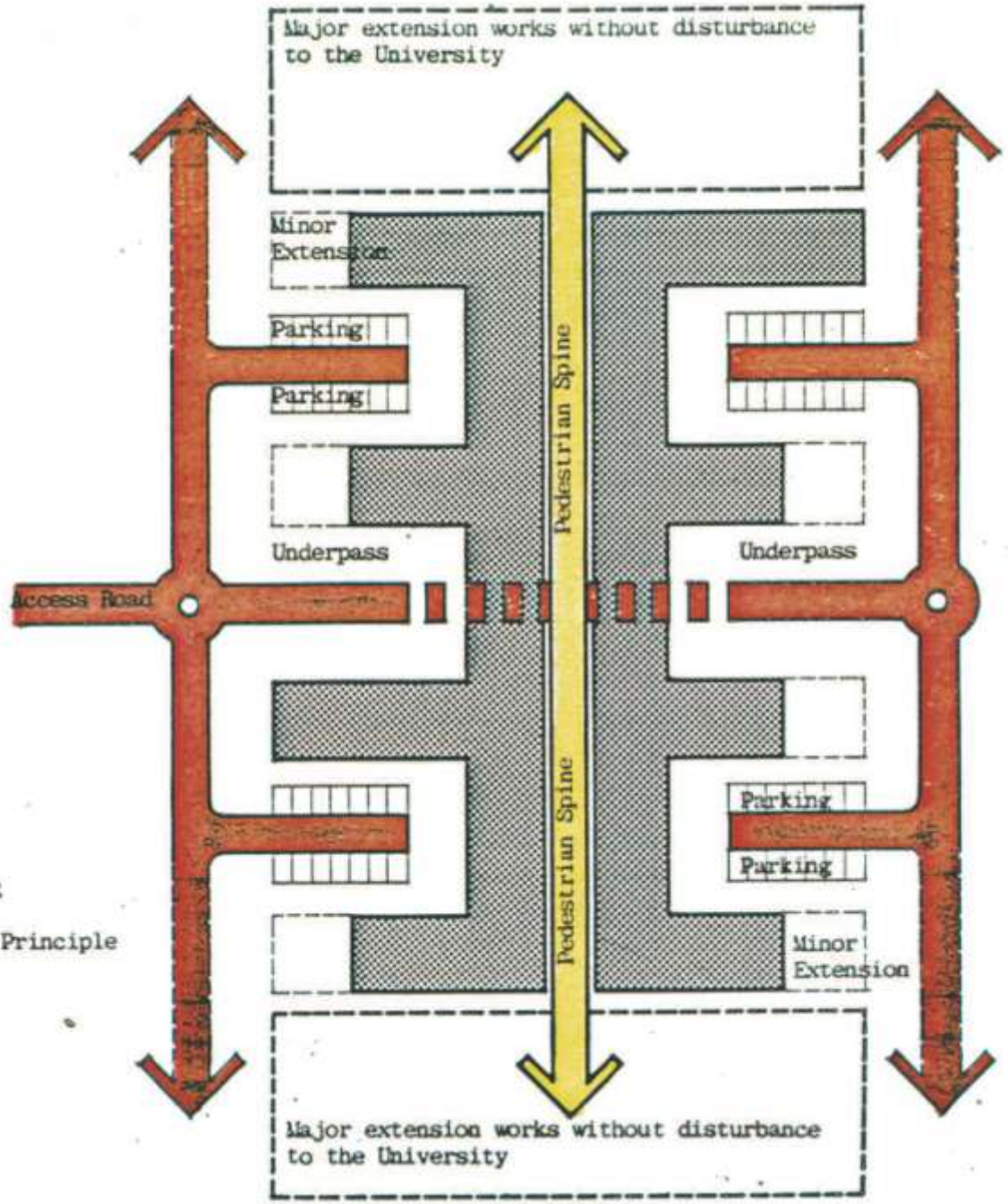
The first phase of the linear development started in 1972, from the existing road (N4). From 1976 an underground railway station was brought into service. The street and road network was developed by phases, as justified by the planned development of urban activities.

Planning for pedestrians.
The pedestrian option was taken to save land and advance transport infrastructure investment. The diagram shows the multiplier of land consumption generated by automobile transport and related parking.



Planning for uncertainty.

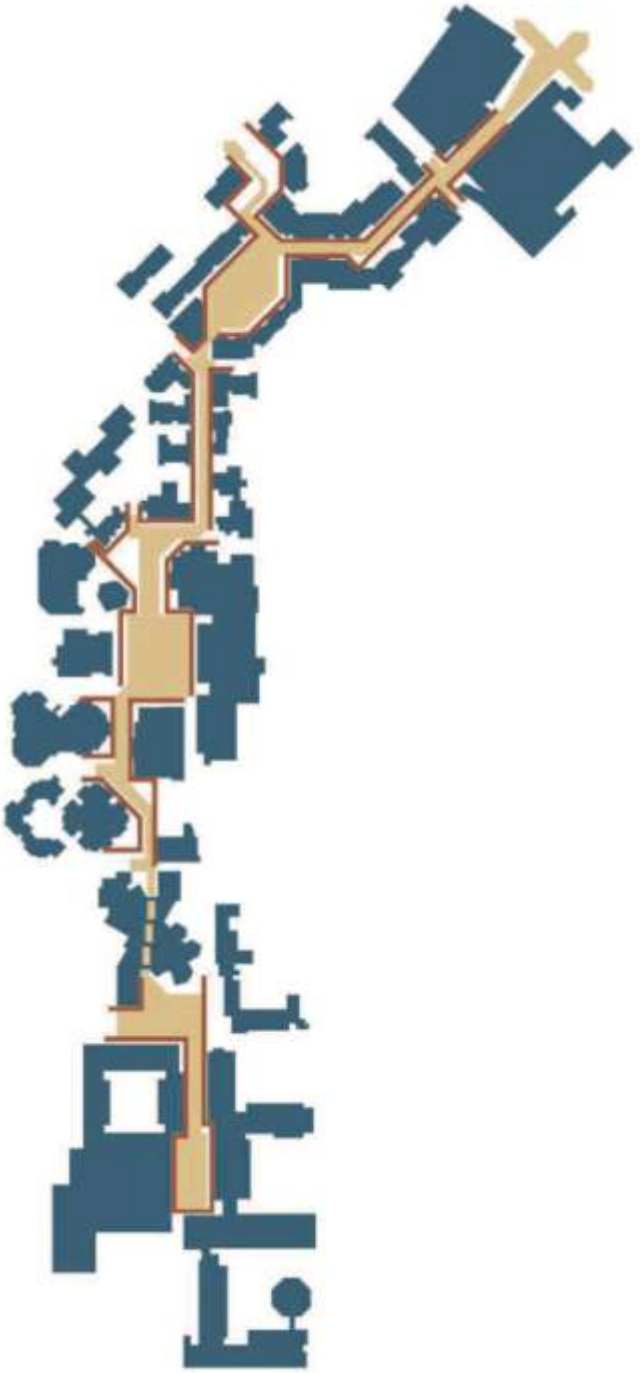
A linear pedestrian central spine – in this case the University of Lancaster - allows a step by step mixed urban development, automobile access to buildings and parking being placed outside of the spine, with occasional underpasses.



UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

Diagram of Development Principle

The application of this principle is shown in the main pedestrian street of the first phase, starting from the existing N4 road, East of the site, in 1972 (lower part of the picture), later extended to the railway station opened in 1976 (upper part), the centre of the city and the extension towards the western part of the site.



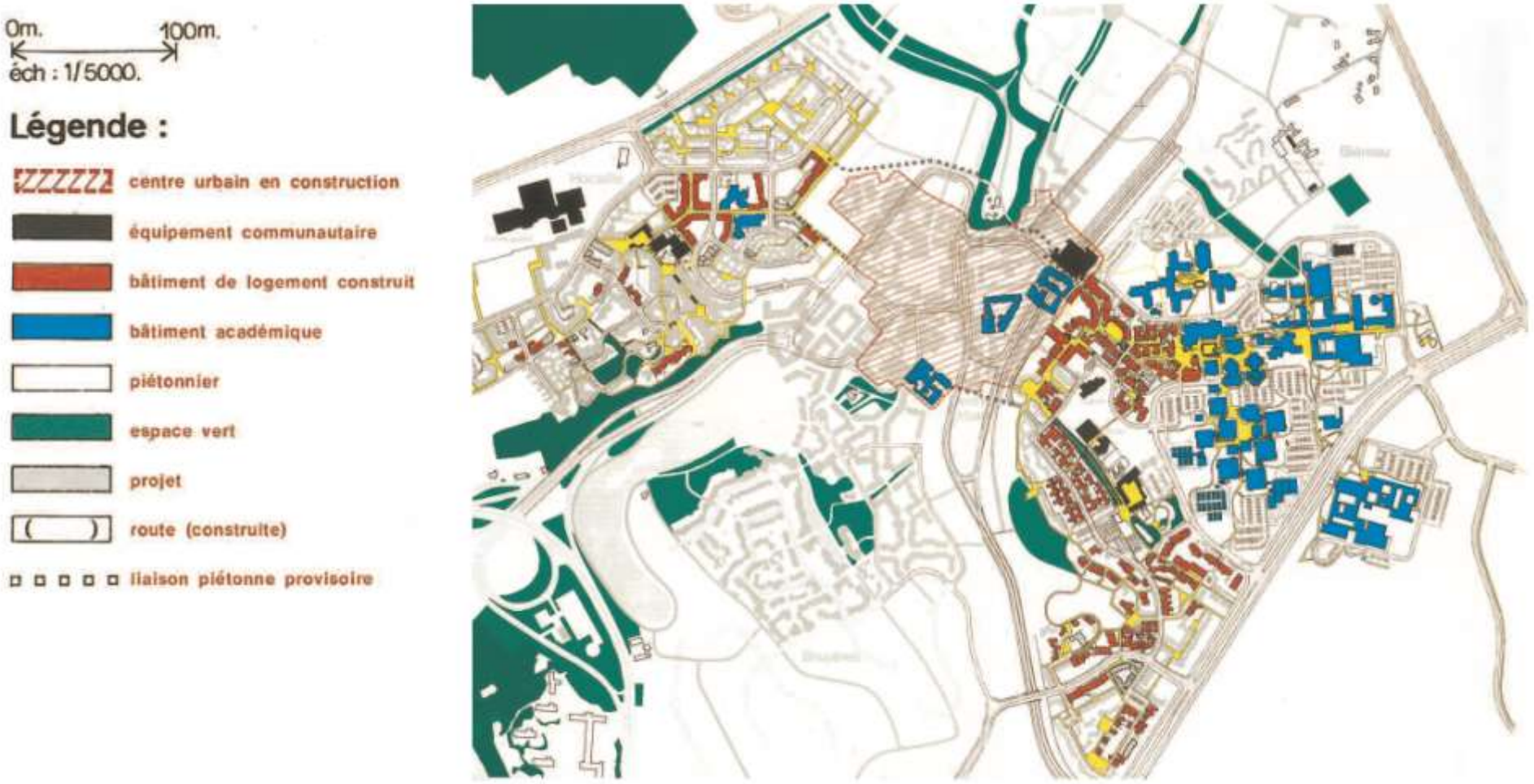
The centre of the first phase was the Science Library, a huge concrete building seen as the cathedral of a university town with its plaza (parvis), above an automobile underpass. It is a social gathering place with university buildings, shops and restaurants (arch. A. Jacqmain).

Trees are planted on the space next to it, by contrast to the concrete and wood library plaza.

Some trees are planted along the main pedestrian spine. Design vocabulary includes brick and concrete (arch. G. Epstein).

Parking. All parking spaces are planted with different tree species in order to attract different kinds of birds. They have become an ornithological reserve.

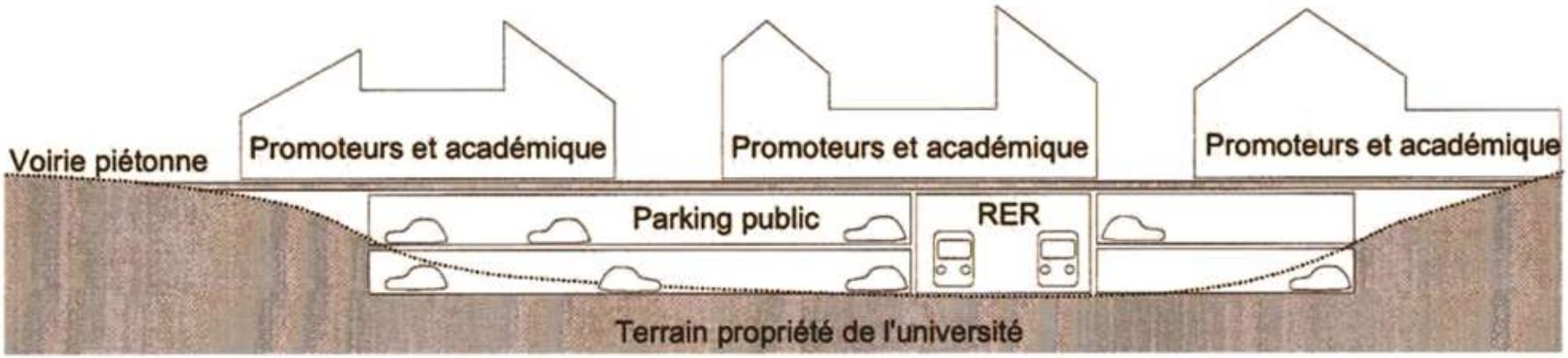
The new station (1976). It is entirely underground, in view of being covered at a later stage.



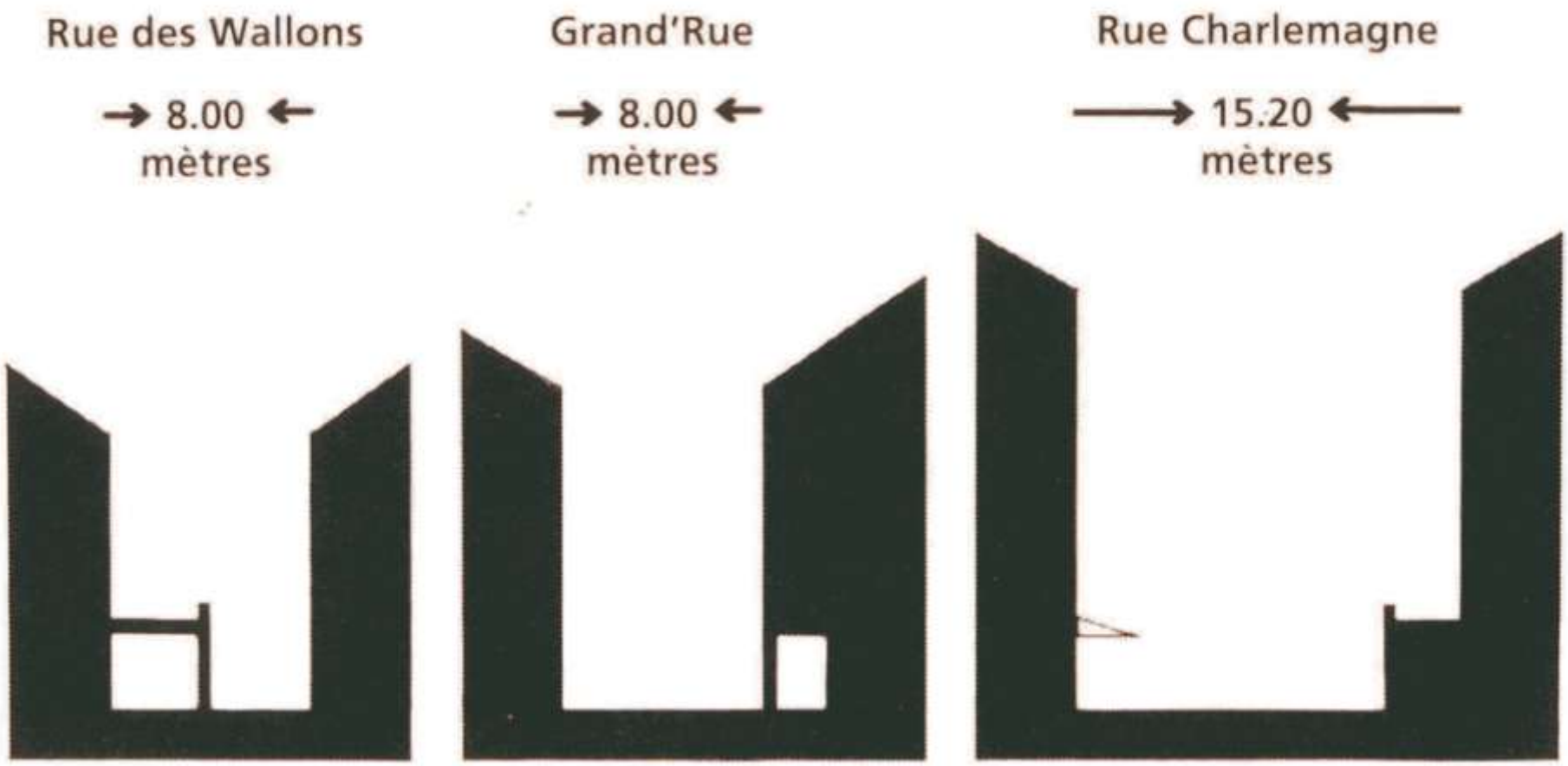
The full development of the East-West spine. It includes a slab on the lower part of the site, hosting the services, the parking and their underground access, in addition to the rail tracks.

The slab is built up by offices and apartments, with shops on the ground floor, surrounding a market place (“architectura minor”, by contrast to the iconic library, “architectura major”).

The Station. The arcaded entrance of the station (arch. Y. Lepere) on the pedestrian spine is the place where the slab starts.

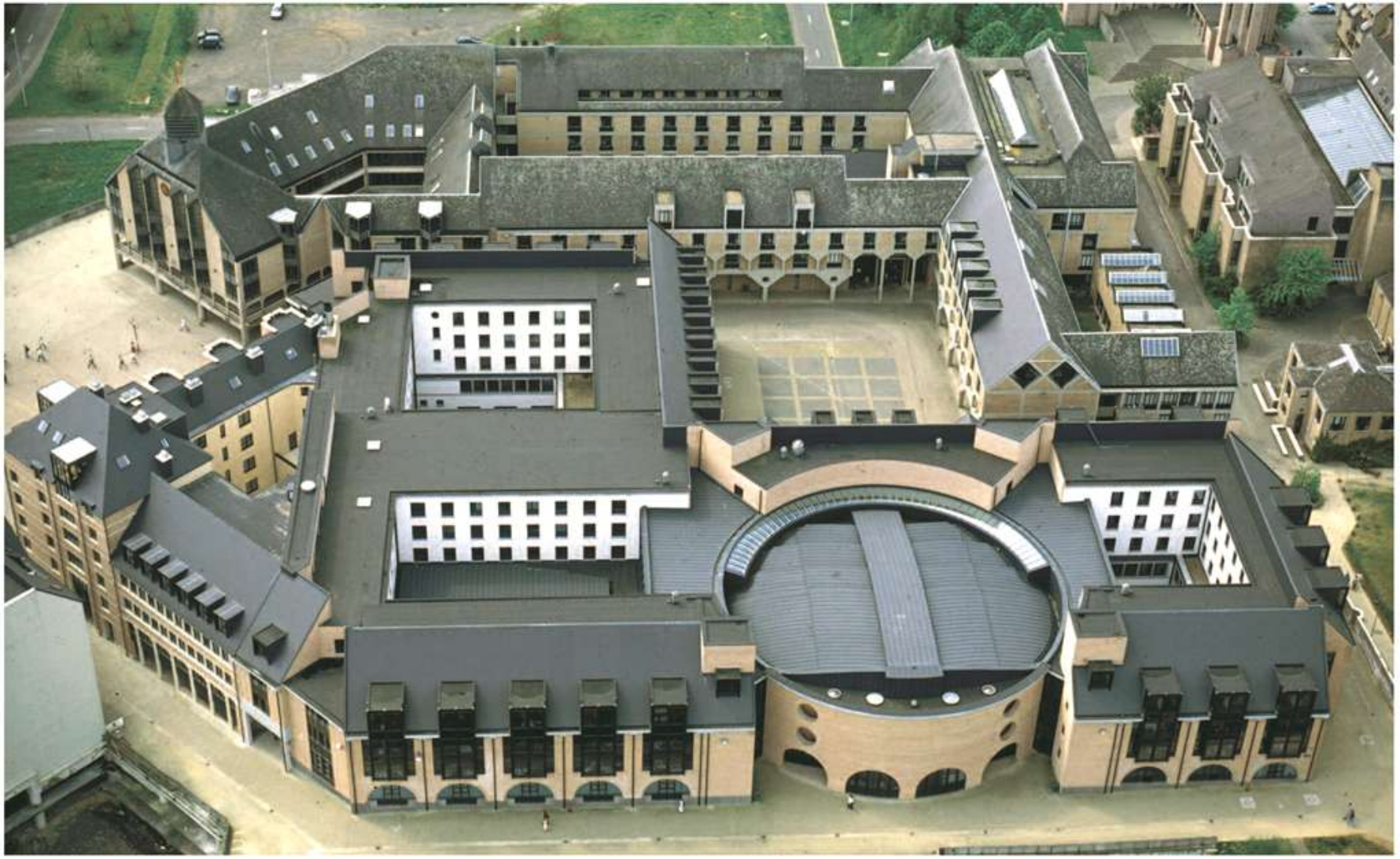


The functioning of the slab. The diagram shows how the underground remains property of the university while the infrastructure and buildings are leased (leases of up to 99 years) to public and private investors.



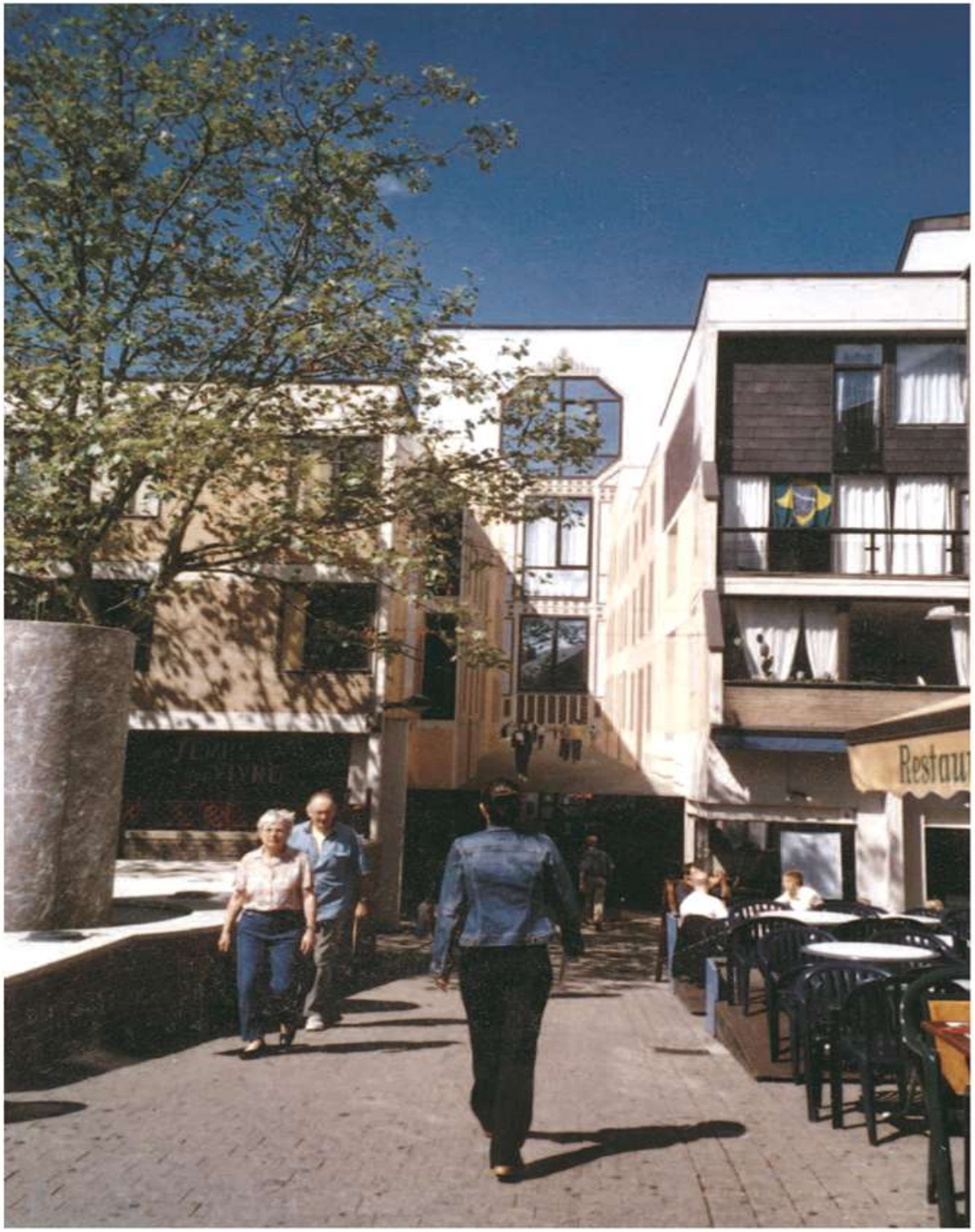
Streets are narrow and generally canopied to save space and reduce infrastructure costs, as well as to protect pedestrians from rain and sun. Plots are whenever possible kept small to allow architectural diversity and to open access to small contractors.

Courtyards are open passages whenever justified for access to university buildings.



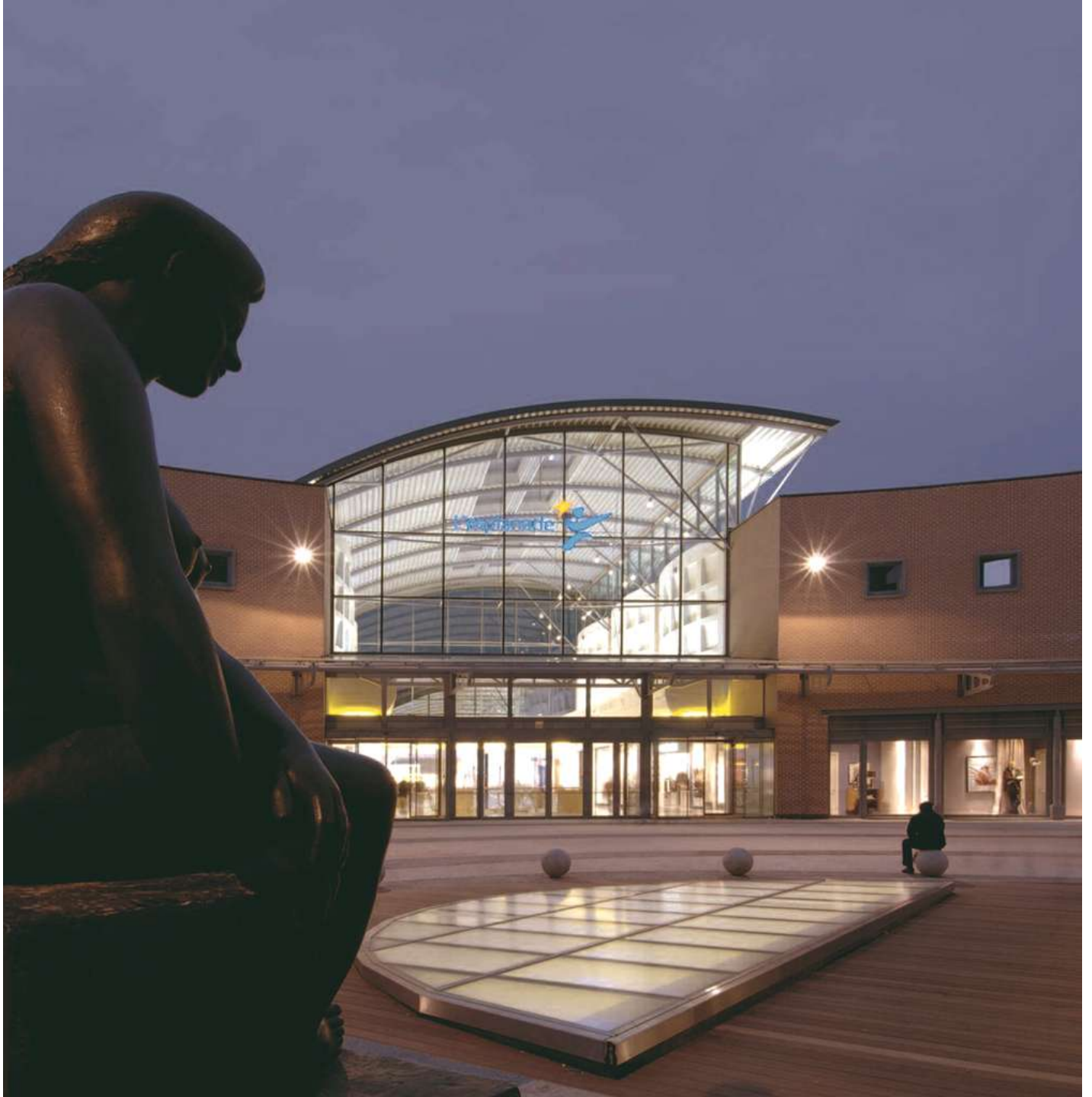
High-density low-rise buildings with interlocking courts and piazzas replicate the university colleges of traditional university towns (arch. E. Verhaegen).

The slab hosts numerous small public spaces planted with trees and sidewalk cafés.



Cafés and restaurants are occupying pedestrian spaces while automobile access uses the underground parking.

“L’Esplanade”. In 2005 a large shopping centre was opened, next to the station, together with a new residential street, on the slab. It was an immediate success (8 million visitors per year) and is to be extended above the rail tracks.



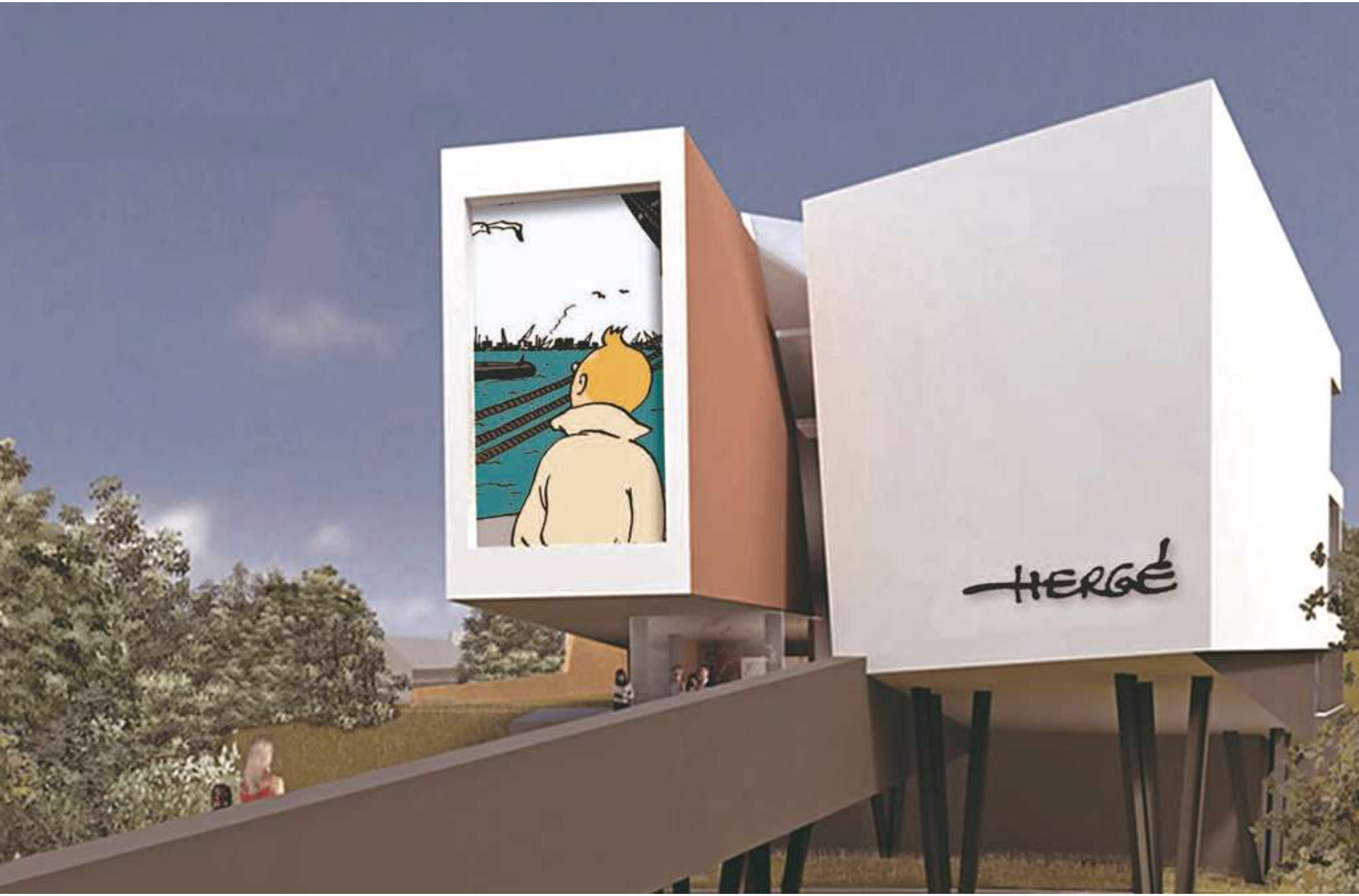
All storm water is collected to an artificial lake that serves as reservoir and amenity.

A pre-monitoring of entering water and oxygen provision allow to check the fishing water quality of the lake.

An aerial view of the city taken in 2003 shows the overall high-density low-rise development and the potential for further extensions close to the lake.

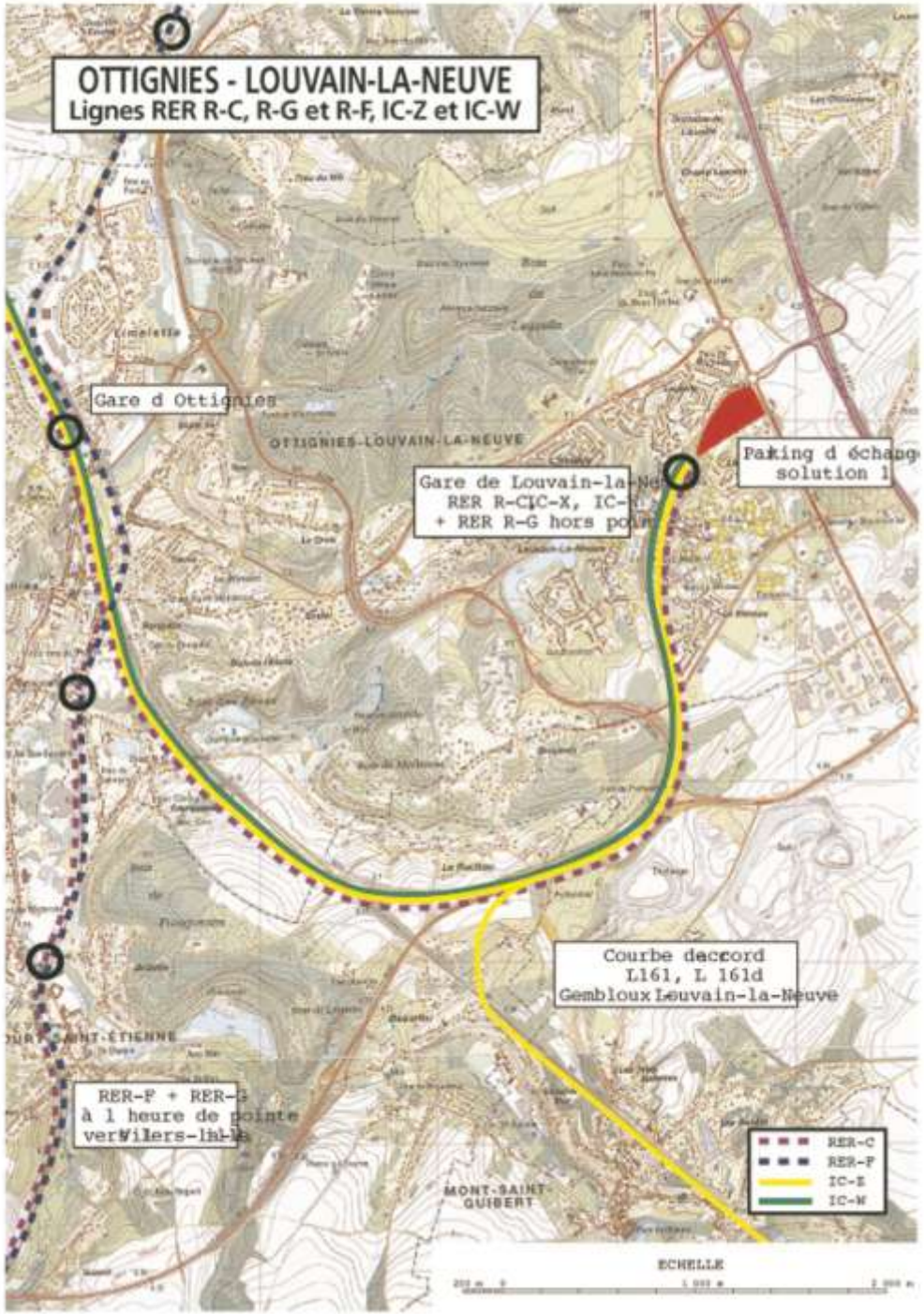
Future threats are illustrated by the fate of Cumbernauld, the new town built near Glasgow. The centre was built as an icon in the middle of the site, surrounded by cars rather than walkways. It is today nearly empty, and vandalised.

Lateral extension of the linear spine include high density low-rise mixed developments interspersed with open green space. Here the private Hergé Museum when it was under construction (2008).



The private Hergé museum was located in connection to the main spine (architect de Portzamparc).

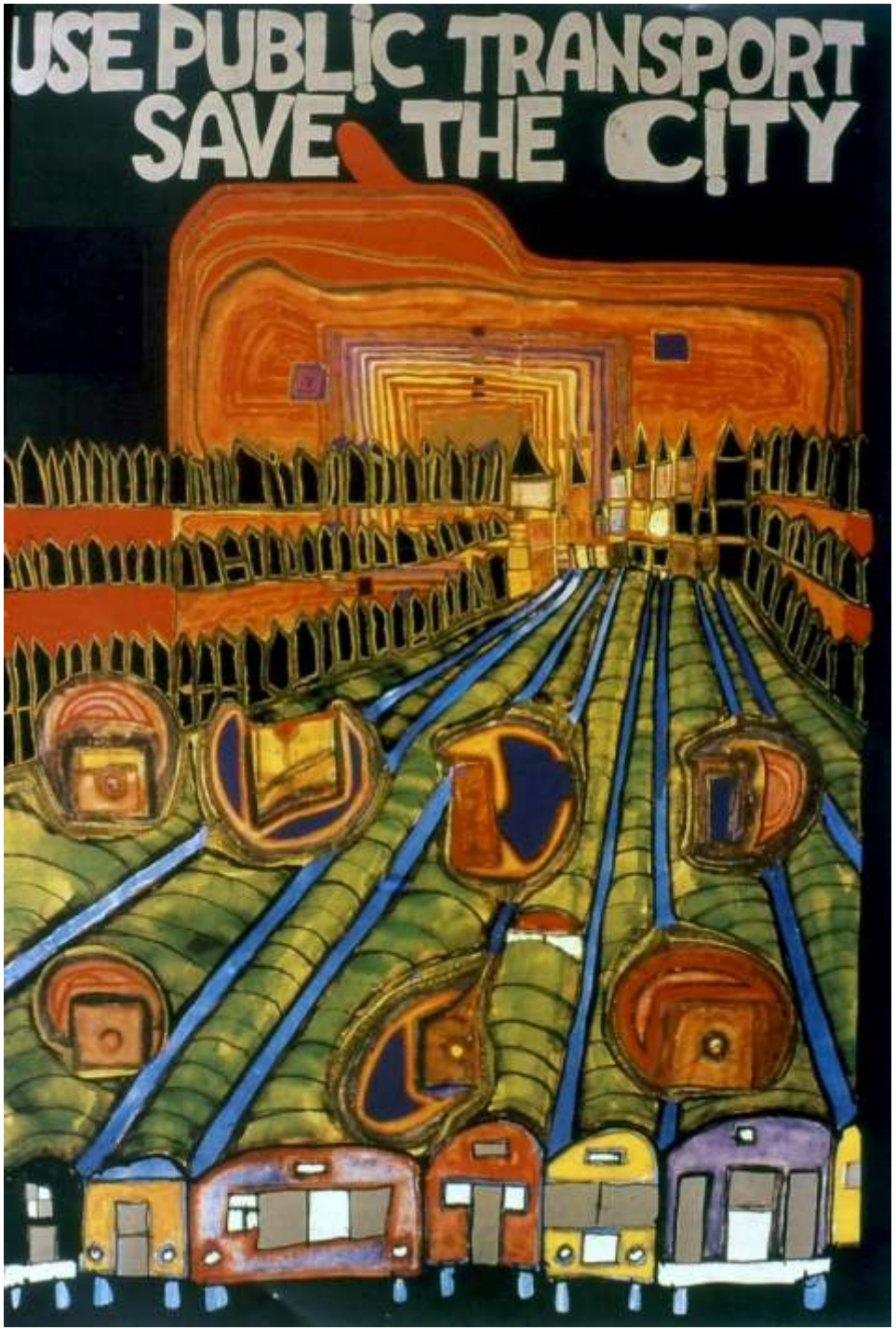
The development of the rail station as head of one of the Brussels S-Bahn lines is generating a challenge: combining transit pedestrian movements, park & ride and local residential development.



View showing the Shopping Centre, its future extensions above the Station and the future parking spaces combined with apartments. The challenge is the change of scale of projects, and of developers.

Cover page of the book published in 2009 at Certu (Lyon).

3 posters by Hundertwasser illustrate the planning spirit of a sustainable city: high-density compactness, transport corridors served by public transport and amenities making the city enjoyable.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