

THE EPISCOPAL SPORTS CENTER: AN OPPORTUNITY TO REUSE THE EXISTING GREEN PLACE AND TO RESTORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIÈGE AND ITS MEUSE RIVER

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Abstract

This contribution elaborates on the preservation and reuse of a modernist sports complex, part of the episcopal seminar in Liège (BE). The sports complex, designed by EGAU group in the 1960s, comprises three pavilions - a swimming pool, a sports hall, and a central volume of two stories that houses the entrance hall, changing rooms, offices and a small library - is located on a 'roundabout' enclosed by busy roads and parking spaces at the bank of the Meuse river. First constructed for the seminarians, the site was surrounded by trees and connected to the main seminar complex through an underground tunnel, to allow them some privacy. Later, it opened to the public. Nevertheless, the exterior was never used as a public place. Following the non-respect of safety standards and heating problem, the sports center became abandoned. To densify the site, trees are planned to be felled, buildings to be demolished and replaced by a new tower. This decision, however, generated strong critiques by the local community and conservation authorities.

As an alternative for the planned demolition, a project for the conservation and reuse of the site has been developed. The proposed plan does not only save a significant piece of modernist heritage, but also uses the intimate and green character of the site as a public space. Moreover, the project also investigates the potential impact of the proposed reuse on the urban context; by reorganizing the traffic flows around the site, the project could be an opportunity to (re)connect this area of Liège with its water front. The paper includes (1) a description of the site and the controversy around the planned demolition, (2) an analysis of its qualities and potentials in relation with the city, (3) two design scenario's for regeneration of the site and its surrounding.

Keywords

Green public space, Waterfront development, Adaptive Reuse.

1. Introduction

Context

All across the world, we can see the expansion of new buildings, new architectural projects, with new technical developments and more new ambitions. We can also notice the restoration and rehabilitation of some buildings. Furthermore, there is a growth of architectural projects from contemporary architects that relate to the adaptive reuse concept. However, the practice of destroying the existing to build new projects is still incredibly common.

Hidden, forgotten, unknown or rejected, sometimes places catch our attention by their current state. A negative connotation can create the desire of changing things: proving or improving things.

The episcopal sports center in Liège is a hidden place along the Meuse river, with architectural, urban and historical qualities but endangered.

The site is a green spot surrounded by main roads, as an enclosed fairy tale next to the Meuse river. It is also close to the center and nearby pedestrian streets. The place is remarkable by its serenity mostly due to its delicate vegetation that asserts itself in the middle of the city. The building is one of the most interesting modernist projects in the city.

However, what makes this specific subject intriguing is that it is ambiguous and topical as a new construction project that includes the demolition of the building and some of the old trees is supposed to begin soon. Following two processes that happened simultaneously - one to list the building and the second to destroy it - the public opinion implies a controversy apparent by some debates, articles and petitions from conservation associations, architects, students, etc.

Problem statement

An important element that influences the project is the Meuse river, which defines Liège, and its connection with the city. Nevertheless, the relationship between the water and the city is not as strong as it could be.

The sports complex discussed in this essay has been chosen as an example of the mistreated opportunities that can emerge in the city in terms of urban developments.

In this paper, we elaborate on the adaptive reuse potential of the sports complex building and its surrounding, as an alternative for demolition.

Methodology

This work is divided in three points. The first one to establish the context of the project with a description of the site, the surroundings and the controversy about it. The second point is more critical: it includes an analysis of the city of Liège and some of its recent urban developments to start the design of the sports complex building and its surroundings. The qualities of the site are pointed out too. In the third and last point, two urban scenario's are presented along with a proposal for the adaptive reuse of the building itself.

1. Description of the site

Situated on a parcel in front of the main entrance of the episcopal seminary, the sports complex is a work of the post-war, modern architecture. It is an emblematic building in Liège that has been created in the beginning of the 1960s by EGAU, a group of three architects: Charles Carlier (1916-1993) and Hyacinthe Lhoest (1913-1983) who gathered in 1940, and Jules Mozin (1914-1995) who completed the team in 1944. Following the demand of the bishopric, this place was first made to offer more facilities to the seminarians. Three volumes constitute the project: one for the swimming pool, one for the sports hall and the middle one, which has two stories, welcomes different spaces such as the reception, cloakrooms, offices, a « game area » and a little library. Later, the complex opened to the public.¹

¹ Cohen, M. (2015, February - March). Destinés à disparaître? In *A+: Architecture en Belgique*, n° 252. (p. 18-20). Bruxelles: A+ magazine.



Fig. 1: Photo of the episcopal seminary and its sports complex from the Kennedy tour, made by G. Bissot.²



Fig. 2: Photo of the building, made by F. Niffle.⁴



Fig. 3: Photo of the sports hall, made by F. Niffle.⁵

The establishment of this low building on an empty plot considers the existing large trees, the orientation and the access of the place. Additional trees were added to visually detach the building from the surrounding streets and give more privacy to the seminarians. The sports complex is connected to the episcopal seminary with an underground passage which already existed, but was redesigned for the project.³ After this first step, the architects worked on the scenography for the entry of the building. There is a continuity between the steel structure that shelters the opening of the private tunnel and the structure of the covered path that goes to the entrance. A water pond and some new

trees enhance the direction towards the building.⁶

At the exterior, a steel gate with brick pillars encircling the plot strengthens the impression of inaccessibility.⁷

Other factors which the architects had to take into consideration were time and money. The choice for a sober structure results from those needs and is in line with the historical context of this project: the reconstruction logic of the post-war time. The steel structure made of beams and columns that works as porticos each three to four meters, gives an industrial characteristic to the

² Delville, J.-P. (1992). *Le Grand Séminaire de Liège 1592-1992*. Liège. p.8.

³ *Le centre sportif du Grand Séminaire de Liège*. (1966, November). In *La Maison*, n°11. (p. 366-368).

⁴ *Le centre sportif du Grand Séminaire de Liège*. (1966, November). In *La Maison*, n°11. (p. 366-368).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ancion, S., & Thonon, J. (2014, 25 December). *Requiem pour la piscine de l'évêché*. Retrieved from https://lechainonmanquant.be/en-ville/piscine_eveche.html.

⁷ Ibid.

building.⁸

The facades result from the balance between the presence of the structure's light feeling, the powerful expression of the brick infill and the creative distribution of the openings depending on the orientation, which creates a strict rhythm.⁹

For the sports complex, EGAU group used the same approach than for other projects and paid attention to work on details. They designed, for example, the backboard for the basketball hoop. They also worked in association with an artist during the design process. Inside the building, a piece of art made by Paquot is the effect brought by the natural and respectful collaboration between the architects and the artist. This sculpture is highlighted in the swimming pool space while it hides some technics on the wall.¹⁰

In 2005, the swimming pool closed due to the non-respect of safety standards, although it was still used by some educational institutions in Liège. The sports hall served a few sports associations for courses or traineeships until 2014, when it closed due to heating problem.¹¹

1.1 The episcopal seminary

The episcopal seminary was founded in 1592. It was first intended for education of priests of the Catholic Church of the diocese of Liège. The sports complex was added in 1962. Today, the number of seminarians has strongly decreased and parts of the building are used for other functions: an institution for catechesis and pastoral training, a bookshop and library for religious books and multimedia; several spaces can be rent for other activities such as reunions, meetings, conferences or courses and a few students rooms are available on the upper floors of the principal building.¹²

If the seminary is still alive in general, thanks to

different activities, it is not the case of every part of the complex. Indeed, the church of the seminary welcomes only some events: exhibitions, the book flea market which happens twice a year and one religious celebration per year. During the rest of the time, the church is unused and closed for the public.¹³

1.2 The direct surroundings

The sports center is located in a strategic place in Liège. Despite the vegetation and the Meuse river that are two powerful features, the activities around the area give another qualitative aspect to the



place.

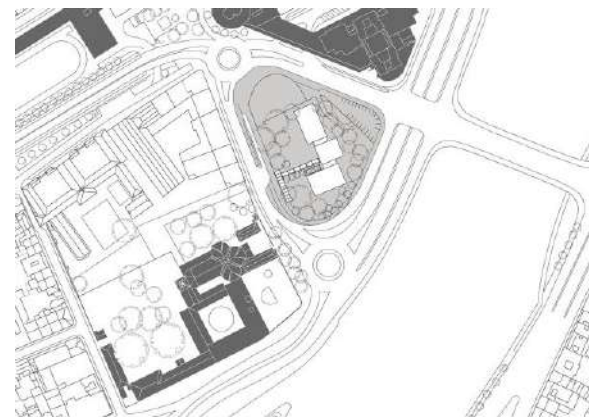


Fig. 4: Areal photo of the site, COGEPHOTO.¹⁴

Fig. 5: Plan of the site and the direct surroundings.¹⁵

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Le centre sportif du Grand Séminaire de Liège. (1966, November). In *La Maison*, n°11. (p. 366-368).

¹⁰ Ancion, S., & Thonon, J. (2014, 25 December). *Requiem pour la piscine de l'évêché*. Retrieved from https://lechainonmanquant.be/en-ville/piscine_eveche.html.

¹¹ Wagener, A., Wuidar, P., & Fernandez, J-A. (2015, 25 January). *Quel projet immobilier pour la piscine de l'Evêché ?* RTC Télé Liège. Retrieved from <https://www.rtc.be/video/sport/video/info/quel-projet-immobilier-pour-la-piscine-de-l-eveche-1476567-325.html>.

¹² Séminaire épiscopal. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.evechedeliège.be/seminaire-episcopal/>.

¹³ Fréson, T., & Université de Liège. (2017-2018). *Dimension urbaine de la réutilisation adaptative et application au site du Grand Séminaire de Liège*. Retrieved from <https://matheo.uliege.be/handle/2268.2/4510>.

¹⁴ Cohen, M. (2015, February - March). Destinés à disparaître? In *A+: Architecture en Belgique*, n° 252. (p. 18-20). Bruxelles: A+ magazine.

¹⁵ Drawing made by author 1.

Although the building was the first construction present on the site, a gas pump, a little shop, a car wash and an underground parking were added later and strongly define the present character of the plot; those equipments do not have any architectural quality but nevertheless serve the citizens.

Next to this plot, there is also Les Chiroux : a cultural center with a public library. The Kennedy tour residence adjoining Les Chiroux marks the area as the verticality of this tower strongly contrasts with the horizontally conceived sports complex. This tower's characteristic is used as a deciding factor to create a new housing tour instead of EGAU's work by the people engaged in the demolition of the site.

Close to the entrance of the cultural center, the Place des Carmes is a square with bars and restaurants. Positioned at the end of an old, lively street and nearby a secondary school, this commercial area is now under renovation.

1.3 Controversy

After the bishopric revealed their intention of selling the sports complex, different construction projects were suggested since 2008 but none of those have been achieved.¹⁶

A controversy about the site begun the 29th May 2017, when a new « Plan communal d'aménagement » (Municipal planning plan) n°44/6 has been voted by the city of Liège. This new plan includes the destruction of the sports complex of the episcopal seminary, and most of the existing trees to make place for a housing complex: a project attributed to constructors - promoters.¹⁷ One of the purposes of this project is to densify the site and to exploit it 'better' to create more new houses and some offices.

What makes this situation more complicated is that a listing process for the sports complex has been introduced the 11th Octobre 2016. Indeed, the Commission Royale des Monuments et Sites did took measures to protect the building before the

city voted the new municipal plan.¹⁸ We can then interpret this action from the city as inconsiderate for the measures that have been taken by responsible authorities to save this piece of modernist heritage.

Under this threat, UrbAgora ASBL, DOCOMOMO Belgium, SOS Mémoire de Liège and Le Vieux Liège ASBL created a petition online, now closed. In 2014, UrbAgora did already talk about this subject with an article they published online: *Requiem pour la piscine de l'Évêché*, here used as a main source. Websites were created to discuss about the sports complex case. A councilor from a political party in Liège participates in this debate too. We can read some of his publications on his website, including one, directly addressed to the mayor of Liège, where he asks: if the city will support the protection of the sports complex and the listing process for the building and its surrounding, if the college could introduce a file to renovate the swimming pool and what measures do they intend to take to ensure the preservation of the site.¹⁹

Today, we know that the new housing project will start soon. Unfortunately, it seems like the city and the bishopric did not take all of those interventions into account.

2. Analysis: the site as a public place

Throughout its history, the city of Liège had an ambiguous relationship with the Meuse river: using it but at the same time also rejected it. During the Middle Ages, the river boarded the outside city's wall and hence served as a means of defense. On the other hand, the river also caused hygienic issues which was one of the main problem for the citizens.²⁰

Today, the urban context has radically changed as the city expended far beyond its medieval city wall and now occupies both banks of the river. Therefore, the Meuse river is still, or maybe even more, an emblematic characteristic of the city. Nevertheless, the morphological relation between

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Schreuer, F. (2016, 24 October). *Avenir du site des Prémontrés*. Retrieved from <https://www.schreuer.org/conseil/interpellations/avenir-du-site-des-premontres.html>.

²⁰ Binet, V., Degives, V., Dubuisson, E., Modolo, M. & Putzeys, V. (2013, December). *La Meuse UN LONG FLEUVE PAS SI TRANQUILLE...* Retrieved from https://www.wallonie.be/sites/wallonie/files/dossier_vlw2_2.pdf.

¹⁶ Cohen, M. (2015, February - March). *Destinés à disparaître?* In *A+ Architecture en Belgique*, n° 252. (p. 18-20). Bruxelles: A+ magazine.

¹⁷ Cardoen, M. (2017, 19 October). *Non à la destruction de la piscine de l'évêché*. Retrieved from <http://www.maximecardoen.com/blog/piscine-eveche>.

the city and the water is not strongly developed: it is restricted to the buildings along the waterway that face the river and one park which is connected to the water.

2.1 Urban developments in Liège

In 2009, the Guillemins train station, also designed by EGAU group, has been replaced by a new building of Santiago Calatrava. The renewal of the station was accompanied with an ambitious urban revitalization of the area. A new urban axis from the train station, situated in the north of the city center, to the mall Médiacité, has been created. This new connection passes by a new esplanade; the new highest tower of Liège: La tour des Finances; the river with a part of its refreshed banks; the new footbridge Passerelle La Belle Liégeoise; and the Parc de la Boverie, where you can find the musée des Beaux-Arts de Liège: the old « Palais des Beaux-Arts », constructed for the universal exhibition in 1905 and restored and rehabilitated by p.HD Office and the architect Rudy Ricciotti.²¹

The city redesigned one part of the left bank, from the new footbridge until the episcopal seminary but this water front redevelopment comes to a brutal stop just next to the sports complex site.

The Place des Carmes, positioned in a strategic area for the redevelopment of the site, reinforces the following proposals.

The place is situated between the secondary school Athénée Royale Liège 1 and the cultural center Les Chiroux, nearby the sports complex plot. It is also an important commercial pole. Presently, the Place des Carmes is under restoration works as the city wants to redevelop this square, which is an essential entry of the pedestrian area in the center of Liège, by enlarging it, in order to provide a feeling of security and comfortability to the pedestrians.²²

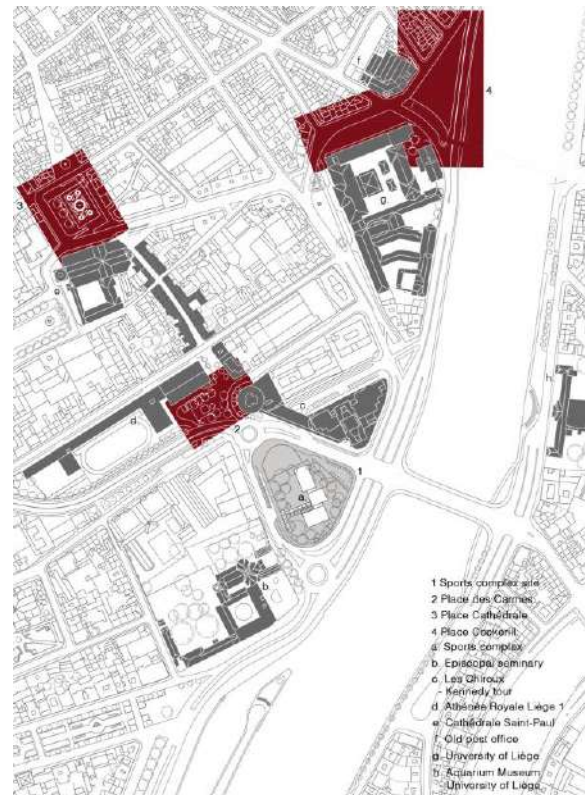


Fig. 6: Plan of the site and the surroundings.²³

Another interesting feature is that the city would like to give a natural aspect to this access that goes towards the center, by changing some old and sick trees and adding other tree species.²⁴

The Place Cockerill is an example of the mistreated places in Liège that have a real potential. The 'square' is essentially characterized by traffic, car parking and wide lanes while it is mostly occupied by students. There are bars and restaurants, a well-known library, the old post office and above all, the main building of the University of Liège. There is almost no place left for cyclists and pedestrians, although the footbridge is a privileged place for pedestrians by its direct relationship between Outre-Meuse district and the city center. This place could also have a connection with the water alongside it. Despite urban projects that have

²¹ Ville de Liège. (n.d.). *L'esplanade des Guillemins et le Périmètre de remembrement urbain*. Retrieved from <https://www.liege.be/fr/vie-communale/projet-de-ville/grands-projets/realisations/lesplanade-des-guillemins-et-le-perimetre-de-remembrement-urbain>.

²² Ortmans, E., & Włodarczyk, J.-L. (2018, 18 February). *Le lifting de la place des Carmes*. RTC Télé Liège. Retrieved from https://www.rtc.be/video/info/amyve-nagement-du-territoire/le-lifting-de-la-place-des-carmes_1497672_325.html.

²³ Drawing made by author 1.

²⁴ Ville de Liège. (n.d.). *La Place des Carmes bientôt réaménagée*. Retrieved from <https://www.liege.be/fr/vie-communale/services-communaux/travaux/actualites/la-place-des-carmes-bientot-reamenagee>.

been suggested, these have not been implemented.

2.2 Qualities and potential of the site

We believe that the reuse of the sports complex could play a key-role in the regeneration of the area as it became a symbol of the fight between the conservation and the destruction, memory versus forgetfulness.

Indeed, Liège is a city where those conservation protests are overly usual and ignored. Too many valuable sites in Liège have been demolished, such as the Guillemins train station that has been replaced irrespective of its architectural qualities and its good state. « La Dentisterie » (The Dentistry), a building with a Bauhaus style from the 1930s, which solicited loads of debates, petitions and even a hunger strike from an artist in Liège, has been demolished last year. The destruction of the old hospital Bavière, inaugurated in 1895²⁵ and located close to the site where used to be « La Dentisterie », has now begun.

3. Two design scenario's

The potential of the site of the episcopal sports centre was studied in the context of a master project in the Master of Interior Architecture Adaptive Reuse at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University. As a brief for this project, we investigated how the preservation and reuse of the sports complex could become a catalyst to better connect the city centre of Liège with its water front. Two scenario's have been developed: one that creates a connection between the site and the water front by means of a bridge, and another that connects by means of an underpassage. In what follows we elaborate on each of these scenario's.

To summarize, the work consists of an exercise to revitalize a part of the left bank in Liège and create a new relationship with its Meuse river, through the study of one public space: the abandoned but promising sports complex of the episcopal seminary area. This urban development, in addition with the adaptive reuse of the building, is an opportunity to attract people in this area and to enjoy the water front in the city.

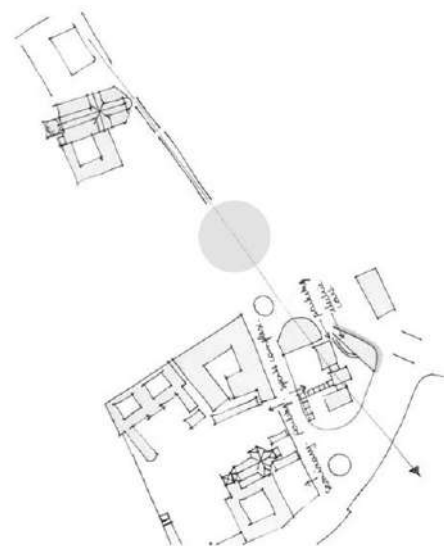
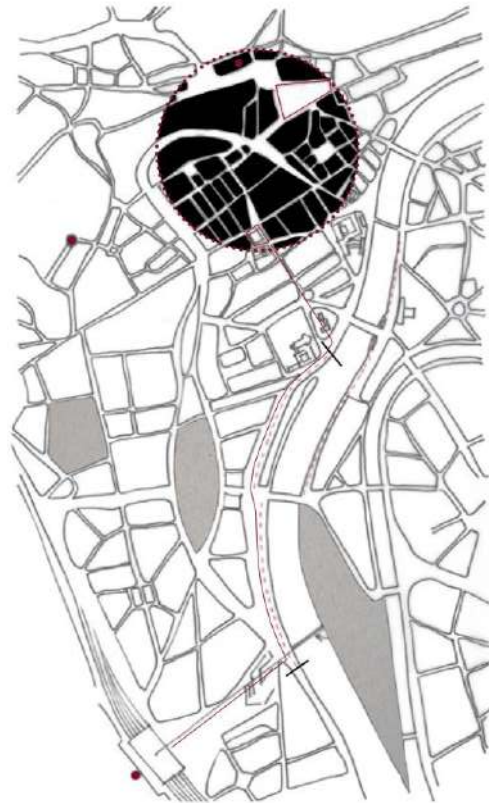


Fig. 7: Schematic drawings access Guillemins - center.²⁶

Fig. 8: Schematic drawings access Place Cathédrale - Meuse.²⁷

²⁵ Demeyer, W. (2018, 20 January). *Historique du site de Bavière*. Retrieved from <https://www.willydemeyer.be/billet/liege/2018-01-20/historique-du-site-de-baviere>.

²⁶ Drawing made by author 1.

²⁷ Ibid.

The concept of the design has a double orientation, depending on the scale we look at it. We can see the sports complex and its connection with the Meuse river as a link to bring the center of Liège in touch with the water, as much as we can say that the aim of this design, on a larger scale, is to offer a pleasant way to go from the main train station Guillemins to the city center, through the sports complex place.

The fundamental idea of this design is to preserve the sports complex area and the building presents on the site. In both scenarios presented, one part of the strategy is to slow down the circulation along the Meuse river.

3.1 Concept of the design

The purpose of this approach is to use the site of the sports complex to continue the gesture of the developments along the Meuse, made by the city, and to create a link with the center of Liège. The main idea resides in designing this smaller area with a different strategy from the Guillemins district, which has a bigger scale.

The intention is to offer a special green place which has a proximity with the water, intimate and peaceful, close to the chaotic center.

There are three different routes to go by foot from the Guillemins train station to the center of the city. Two of them are not very pleasant due to the crossing and noise of car traffic. The third alternative is to traverse the new square in front of the train station and to follow the Meuse river, but this more enjoyable pedestrian track along the river comes to a rather brutal end next to the episcopal seminary.

The transformation of the sports complex area into a green public space, hence would be an opportunity to become an extension of the bank developments, together with the Meuse river. It could evolve into a pleasant place to live.

An access to the site of the sports complex already exist from the Place Cathédrale, situated in the center of the city. On this axis, a lively space leads the way towards the potential public place.

An authentic, old and narrow street, composed by several small shops, guides us to the Place des Carmes before arriving to the sports complex area. This place is a focal point concerning the design

because it is situated on the access highlighted for the proposal : Place Cathédrale - sports complex plot. It strengthens the project of having a park in relation with the water to end the way towards the Meuse river and its renewed banks. Indeed, having a green space adjoining this restored square seems ideal. The Place des Carmes is turning into a larger public square, where vegetation will be present to attract pedestrians and create a safe and comfortable place that could become a transition between the pedestrian streets and the charming small park near the river.

3.2 Bridge Scenario

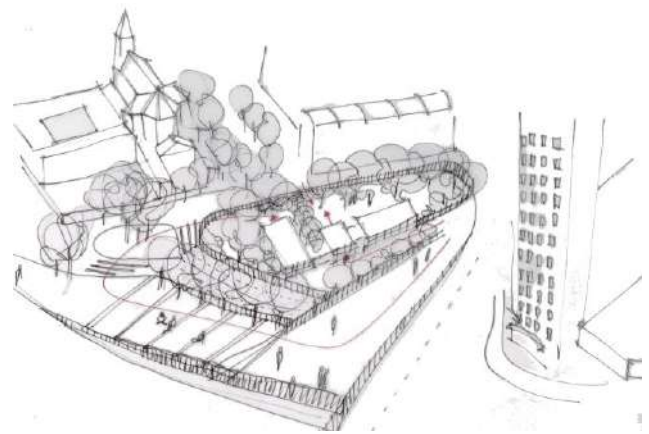


Fig. 9: Sketch first scenario.²⁸

The first scenario works with the different existing levels by extending the bridge and enlarging the bank to create a public space above the traffic. A slope along the Meuse river would link the distinct places of the site.

The suppression of the gas pump, the small shop and the car wash could open the plot. The underground parking could be kept and a new entrance for it could be created. The original gate that surrounds the plot could be restored. This element offers the coveted privacy.

Similar to EGAU's concept, this proposal implies the addition of new trees that strictly follows the trace of the old gas pump and the new enlargement to disconnect the site from the roads.

To offer an instinctive way to traverse the site,

²⁸ Drawing made by author 1.

two new entrances are created, the roundabouts are redesigned and become stepping stones.

3.3 Underpassage Scenario

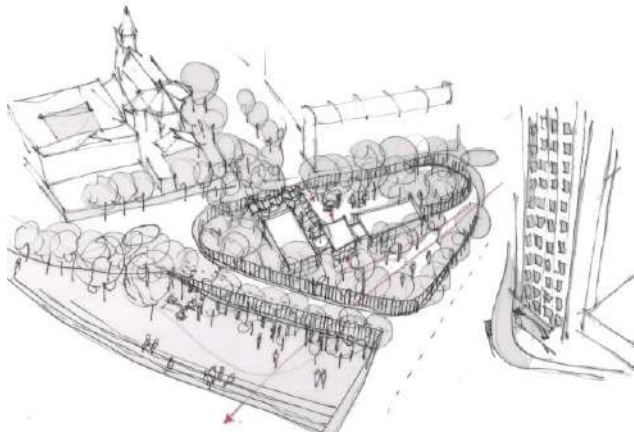


Fig. 10: Sketch second scenario.²⁹

The second possibility is to pass underneath the higher roads to have a direct physical connection with the river, imaginable with steps towards the water. This is an extension of the greenery towards the water. With this option, the vegetation would grow naturally, without any grid or structure.

In this case, the old structure of the gas pump could be reused as a signal, a 'door' to enter the site. The small shop and the car wash could be suppressed and the underground parking relocated. The gate could be kept and restored as well.

The design of the entrances and roundabouts is the same in this proposal.

3.4 Reconversion of the building

As we argue to redevelop the sports complex and surroundings as a public space that benefits from the water front of the city, the new use of the sports complex need to be a public function, that would serve the citizens of Liège but also that might appeal to tourists.

Therefore, we propose three new functions that generate slightly different atmospheres but are also complementary: a polyvalent space where small events, exhibitions and conferences would serve

young artists early in their career in the actual swimming pool space; a co-working space on the upper floor of the central volume for a more quiet and private ambiance; and a small art café with a powerful identity in the sports hall. Doing so, the ensemble becomes a cultural, artistic and inspiring place.

As in the whole concept of the urban development, the notion of circulation is a focal point on this project. The structure of this modernist building is also important: it gives an industrial aspect to the sports complex which leads us to the brutalism movement.

The idea is to reuse some elements of the building itself - such as the covered paths that guide the way towards the entry - to create one precise intervention.

The middle volume acts as a transition in order to distribute the functions and the spaces in the park. Two new entrances of the site correspond to the accesses towards the building. Therefore, a new entry of the building is created.

The addition of a new steel structure based on the rhythm of the building permits to accompany people to the new entrance and to play with the east facade of the swimming pool volume - the facade that comprises the smallest openings - and to frame it. Moreover, it offers an indoor/outdoor circulation to the building which can be used during events such as a fashion show, an exhibition, etc.

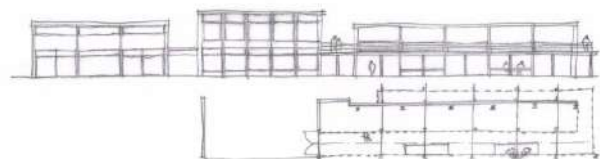
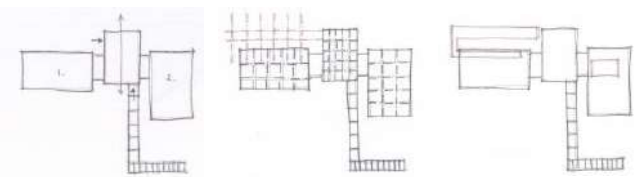


Fig. 11: Intervention on the building.³⁰

²⁹ Drawing made by author 1.

³⁰ Drawings and model made by author 1.

4. Conclusion

This paper illustrates the adaptive reuse potential of a modernist sports complex in the centre of Liège to become a green place for social gathering and cultural hub. Moreover, the conservation and reuse of the site is also an opportunity to redevelop the surrounding square and streets and (re)connect the city to its waterfront.

As many cities are becoming increasingly densified, the need for green, public spaces in the city is growing while the possibilities to create such places are diminishing. Abandoned heritage places - like this sports complex in Liège but also former industrial sites, religious buildings, etc – may be an excellent opportunity to create such places combining public interiors with green open space. As such, conservation and adaptive reuse of heritage becomes a chance to change something in the city and to contribute to the quality of life of its inhabitants.

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