

Press Conference

Brussels, 23 June 2011



neo

The Heyzel plateau : a strategic hub in the
international development of Brussels



www.neobruussels.com





I. Introduction: visionary and realistic town planning

Charles Picqué, Minister-President of the Brussels-Capital Region, Benoît Cerexhe, Brussels Minister of Economics and Employment, Freddy Thielemans, Mayor of the City of Brussels, Christian Ceux, Councillor for Town Planning, and Philippe Close, Councillor for Tourism, have the pleasure today of presenting to you another key stage of the NEO project.

The basic urban plan is crucial in determining the future of the Heyzel Plateau. We are not presenting a work of architecture. What is on display is, in a sense, the pieces of a picture-less jigsaw puzzle (or a “white jigsaw”): the right activities need to be fitted into the right place, depending on their specific shapes, their characteristics and those of the site. This is a vision of town planning that transforms an incoherent site (inelegant buildings, open-air car parks, derelict land, unplanned road system, etc.) into a harmonious district that is in keeping with its immediate environment (Brussels Expo, Atomium, local residents, etc.).

For the sake of its future, Brussels needs to develop its international standing. It cannot project itself without international-style development.

That is why, by means of the Brussels International Development Plan, and in consultation with the City, the Region sought to establish at the Heyzel the future International Congress Centre, the large-scale concert/entertainment hall and the shopping facilities that are lacking in northern Brussels.

Owing to its international appeal and prominence, the Heyzel Plateau stands for ambition and is a flagship project for Brussels.

This project, known as NEO, is therefore a unique opportunity for Brussels and its inhabitants, with huge potential for a new economic and tourist boom, as well as for job creation. Well-being, sustainable development, mobility and an activity mix are concepts underpinning the entire project.

Eight months ago, following a rigorous competition, the Rotterdam-based firm of architects and town planners KCAP was selected by a jury composed of political representatives but above all of national and international experts. After eight months of team work, the originators of the project are truly delighted with the collaboration and the progress achieved to date. KCAP's attitude has been relevant and flexible; it has a good grasp of what is at stake and all of its work has been thorough and ambitious, as befits the project. These partners have incorporated into their approach not only the large open spaces that can benefit the site but also the



stipulated guidelines and quality criteria (sustainable development, mobility, good governance, local residents, etc.).

KCAP is clearly maximising the specific features of the site and its landscape (the Atomium, the park, the gradient of the land, etc.). It is adapting its concepts to the urban fabric while scrupulously taking into account the interests of local residents. It is appropriately incorporating the site's work-related operations with the presence of both Brussels Expo and the leisure facilities.

It was a bold challenge, and is so now more than ever. The good will and enthusiasm of all the partners is worth emphasising: they deserve our thanks.

From the very outset, NEO represented ambition and a method. With this new stage, the project - the blueprint for a new future for the capital city - is taking shape.



II. The competition

For the record, the NEO project started up just over two years ago with the establishment of the international competition, a guarantee of credibility and modern, objective governance.

- The international competition was launched in March 2009. Its aim was to select a Chief Town Planner with an international reputation and experience to be entrusted with studying, designing and coordinating the NEO project.

The competition rules and procedure were drawn up with total commitment to full objectivity, transparency, rigour and efficiency.

Candidates were required to design a certain range of infrastructure, but the rules allowed them a good deal of room for manoeuvre in determining functions useful for the site's development, where to locate them and how to interconnect them.

The competition jury is still assisting the originators of the project as part of a Quality Council, made up of Belgian and foreign experts. The Council has met to examine and clarify the basic urban plan proposed by KCAP.

- Assessment criteria for the selection of candidates were laid down in the competition rules. These criteria, quite logically, also represented the bare bones around which the regeneration plan was designed.

The main elements were:

1. Optimising and installation of uses and functions

- consistency of geographical distribution across the site;
- complementary functions;
- upgrading and creation of public areas and green spaces;
- quality of the proposal in terms of housing.

2. Town planning and aesthetic quality of the project and creativeness

- town-planning aspect – originality of the concept;
- landscaping.

3. Sustainable development and mobility

- policy for travel to and within the site;
- encouraging green methods of transport within the site;
- rationalising on-site parking spaces;
- proposals to allow energy-saving.

4. Financial realism of the project in the construction and operation phases

- making the various uses complementary in economic terms;
- projection of financial balance for the completed project.

5. Quality of phasing proposed for the project

- minimising the development risk;
- minimising disruption to the neighbouring area.

September 2010: KCAP was appointed Chief Town Planner, having distinguished itself in several ways, over and above the criteria set out in the specifications.

1. The methodology is particularly practical. The transposition of ideas into deeds and the share-out of tasks is well considered and efficient, testifying to a clear, creditable vision. KCAP effectively demonstrates its mastery of the practical implementation of complex projects like this one. There is a genuine guarantee that the job in hand will successfully accomplished.
2. KCAP's proposed improvements to the Chief Town Planner agreement are pragmatic and detailed. This can be seen especially in the additional proposals for a human and structural dimension to the works, and for the establishment and fostering of relations with all the authorities involved.
3. The financial strategy is also highly pragmatic and goes beyond a mere theoretical description of the Chief Town Planner's role on this point.
4. The drawing up of a properly coordinated programme ensures better integration of the design work in the planning phase.
5. KCAP's experience with this type of master-plan is recognised internationally (cf. the port of Hamburg).



III. A new hub of economic, tourist, leisure, cultural and convivial development: ambition and coherence.

KCAP's design for the regeneration of the site focuses activity around the western part of the Heyzel plateau. The goal of this town planning scheme is to consolidate the interaction and create harmony between the various activities. What is more, the grouping together and diversification of these activities represents an opportunity to carry out an environmentally ambitious project.

1. Why build a congress centre?

The Brussels International Development Plan identified a number of infrastructure shortcomings that detract from the status of Brussels as an international capital. This is especially regrettable, given the city's desire to reinforce this status and offer as many facilities as it can to the institutions it accommodates.

For this reason, the building of an international-scale (UN standard) congress centre was deemed essential.

Business tourism is already a major aspect of economic activity in the Brussels Region. This asset must be built on!

The building of a congress centre with a minimum capacity of 3,500 seats therefore represents a confident gesture to boost the dynamism of Brussels in respect of business tourism. The proximity of Brussels Expo, and the development of a tourist, shopping and leisure hub nearby, are perfectly complementary and increase the added value of the various facilities.

The presence of this congress centre on the Heyzel Plateau will doubtless be advantageous in establishing an urban hub in northern Brussels.



2. Why build a shopping mall?

The northern part of Brussels is sadly lacking in supermarkets compared with the Belgian average, and even more so compared with the European average.

The commercial development scheme commissioned by Regional Minister-President Charles Picqué in 2006 already revealed the area's shortcomings in this respect and recommended the building of one or more shopping malls. Professeur Grimaud (urban geography/sociology, Université Libre de Bruxelles) is of the view that Brussels would need 233,000 m² of extra commercial space merely to reach the average for major Belgian cities.

We believe that the shopping mall, as planned, is entirely in keeping with this logic and will constitute a further asset in terms of regenerating the site. Thus the scale and reach of the Heyzel shopping mall will extend beyond the region, yet without forming a monolithic bloc as did the shopping centres of old. It will be a matter of achieving a critical size: not competing with smaller regional shopping areas, while providing an attractive commercial dimension that complements the other uses of the site.

In addition, the location of the Heyzel site is ideal for the new shopping mall from a mobility point of view. The existing infrastructure – to be enhanced – combined with new mobility schemes will mean that the shopping mall can be reached both by public transport and by car, unlike what would happen for projects situated outside of Brussels, far away from public transport and less well served by the motorway network.

A significant proportion of the future shopping mall's customers will be able to reach it via sustainable forms of transport, whereas 100% of the customers of shopping centres in outlying areas have to travel there by car, in that there is no public transport linking them to the capital.

The Heyzel site also enjoys an exceptional advantage, in that it already attracts a significant number of visitors owing to the activities already taking place there nowadays. The Atomium, Brussels Expo, Trade Mart and the tourist attractions draw more than 1,500,000 people to the Heyzel site every year.

The shopping mall will have a unique asset compared with other similar large-scale establishments: it is located in a tourist area, which is, moreover, one of the most-visited in Belgium.



3. Why build a new economic dynamic?

The strength of the NEO project lies, *inter alia*, in the fact that the Heyzel Plateau site already attracts more than 1,500,000 visitors per year.

The Atomium, Brussels Expo, Trade Mart and the cinema are all assets that we intend to bolster.

The stated desire of the authorities is both to establish new attractions (congress centre, shopping mall, housing, green spaces, etc.) and to support existing facilities.

The NEO project entails developing new facilities but will do everything possible to ensure that the economic pillars already in place are optimised. This applies in particular to Brussels Expo and Trade Mart.

For instance, a new exhibition hall will be built, in a modern style, at the intersection of Avenue de Madrid and Avenue de Miramar. This new structure will enable Brussels Expo to offer its clients a more up-to-date space, providing all the hi-tech facilities needed when organising cutting-edge exhibitions.

Similarly, with a view to supporting the work of Trade Mart, the existing town planning regulations will be modified in such a way that exhibitors and their clients alike will be offered even better service than today.

At least 500 hotel rooms are envisaged to complete this economic regeneration. They will improve hospitality for visitors to the congress centre, but also for visitors to Brussels Expo.

Finally, restaurant and café services will likewise be stepped up, both near the shopping mall and opposite the Atomium, the full length of the housing development alongside the new park.

We estimate that 2,300 direct jobs will come on stream for the shopping mall alone. The entire project – its design, execution and implementation – will lead to the creation of several thousand jobs. Nor has commerce in the city centre been overlooked: a plan to make it more appealing will be unveiled by the end of this year.

Furthermore, the project adds to the larger dynamic of a touristic development on a regional scale as the first vector of new-employment in Brussels. Recent research estimates a new-employment potential for Brussels of 45.000 direct and indirect jobs in this sector during the next ten years.



4. Why build more housing?

We aim to build at least 750 homes. They are certainly needed! Especially as there is currently no accommodation at all at the site.

Firstly, in our view, this element will dovetail completely with the rest of the project. The regeneration of the Heyzel Plateau must obviously be used to create a truly multi-functional new area with a variety of activities, but also with inhabitants who will make this new space their own.

Secondly, this housing will contribute to the economic dynamism of both the Heyzel Plateau and Brussels. Given the quality of the site, and the proximity of parks, shops and all the new attractions on offer, the accommodation will promote the social mix in this new part of the city.

5. Why offer more leisure pursuits?

It is equally important to make the site more user-friendly, so that it becomes even more of a “day-trip” destination for families, tourists and people with enquiring minds.

Of course, the Atomium already represents a major attraction for the Heyzel Plateau. But we would still like to give the site even more appeal, specifically by adding a large concert hall and a large museum.

The concert hall, with a capacity of 15,000 seats, should enable Brussels to host cultural and sporting events that it cannot accommodate at present. A major museum, such as the Museum of Modern Art, will add a cultural dimension to the area. In this way, the Heyzel Plateau site will be even more likely to be chosen for a “day out”. It would be very important if the Brussels Capital Region could host a Modern Art Museum on its territory. Therefore the potential establishment of this museum should be examined in consultation with the Federal State.

The development of green spaces and the incorporation of sports facilities form another part of this transformation. We shall return to this point below.



6. Why create more green spaces?

Ever since the outset, the NEO project has sought to adopt best practice in terms of sustainable development. This commitment has naturally led to a desire to extend the green spaces at the site.

Avenue de Madrid and Avenue Houba de Strooper will be joined by a major “green link”. This will enable us to considerably increase the area devoted to walking, sport and relaxation.

Sports grounds (tennis, athletics, rugby, football, etc.) will be incorporated into the new green spaces.

This new green lung, a place for walking, relaxation and sport, will obviously contribute to the overall dynamic of the Heysel Plateau make-over.

It goes without saying that, over and above the new departures in terms of green spaces, future changes to the site – more specifically any architectural projects and community facilities – will comply with the undertakings made by the NEO project developers, namely the very strict requirements for sustainable development.

7. How will mobility be improved?

In direct connection with our concern about sustainable development, we set out to improve mobility at and around the site.

We examined both green modes of transport, public transport and the private car.

In order to do away with the overwhelming numbers of vehicles parked at the roadside, and to provide a welcoming space for pedestrians and cyclists, it was decided that on-road parking would quite simply be eliminated and the space freed up for broad pedestrian avenues and cycle-ways.

As concerns public transport, cooperation with the STIB (Brussels public transport operator) has been excellent. A new tram depot will be established at the site.

Tram lines 4, 23, 51 and 94 will be extended to a shared terminus on Chaussée Romaine, level with Car Park C, which will be offered the option of conversion into a park-and-ride facility.



By these means, thanks to the fantastic provision of public transport and improvements to present-day vehicular access to the site, the Heyzel Plateau – its leisure areas but also its shops – will offer ease of access that will never be matched by any other location around Brussels.

Access to the new underground car park at the site from the A12 motorway will be upgraded.

By the same token, discussions are under way with the Flemish Region with a view to determining jointly ways of facilitating access from the ring road.

Owing to a judicious mixed-use system (e.g. shops/housing), the number of underground car parking spaces envisaged by the NEO project is much lower than might have been imagined, given the density of new uses planned for the site.

In this respect, NEO is complying fully with good practice regarding the creation of parking places.

Clearly, the project guarantees total convenience in reaching the site for customers of the future shopping mall, visitors to Brussels Expo and the leisure facilities, and the new inhabitants.

8. Le stade

The NEO project has successfully risen to the difficult challenge of putting forward a regeneration plan for the Heyzel Plateau which sites all the new functions around the King Baudouin Stadium, thereby ensuring that the existing stadium can be used until such time as a major national stadium has been completed in the Brussels Region, in partnership with the Federal Government.



IV. Basic regeneration plan (KCAP)

1. NEO Brussels, a meeting place for Europe!

The Heyzel site is one of the most noteworthy locations in the Brussels metropolitan area. It is both an urban entity and a functional complex. It plays an important social, cultural and economic role for the whole of Belgium and well beyond our borders. After the city centre, the Heyzel is the main draw of the conurbation, owing to the presence of key operations such as Brussels Expo, the Stadium, the Atomium and other tourist attractions.

The Heyzel has been an arena of historical events throughout the past nine decades. The site has hosted many major international events and programmes, which has led to a never-ending process of construction and demolition, additions and removals. The result is a site showing signs of growth as well as decline.

Now, at the start of the 21st century, it is high time to consider a better-defined and more sustainable future for the site. For the first time since the Universal Exposition of 1958, the Heyzel is the subject of a master-plan predicated on a clear vision bringing together Brussels, Belgium and Europe on a single site.

The aim of the vision underpinning NEO is to lay the necessary foundations to strengthen the role of the Heyzel, revitalise it and give it a framework for sustainable development.

2. A disparate, fragmented site



The history of the Heyzel combines the general interest with leisure pursuits. National icons such as the Atomium, Brussels Expo and the King Baudouin Stadium can be found there.

At present, however, the site is very fragmented and poorly embedded in its surroundings. There is neither a visible link with the ring road nor easy access from the east and west. The plateau itself is dominated by enormous parking spaces that have destroyed the park-like nature of the public space.

The tram and metro for their part bar access to the heart of the site. The link between the park and Avenue Houba de Strooper and its environs likewise leaves much to be desired. Consequently, the potential of the Houba-Brugmann and Roi Baudouin metro stations has not been fully tapped. The existing layout consists largely of a disparate, fragmented built environment, lacking any functional harmony.



3. The ambition of NEO



NEO sets out to redevelop the entire site in several ways. It needs to bolster the site's international appeal and create a meeting place for people from Brussels, Belgium, Europe and the rest of the world. NEO is a new gateway to Brussels, a “cross-over point” for public transport and vehicular traffic, equipped with a central urban infrastructure.

The site makes it possible to create a diverse, well-balanced urban centre: a mixed-use urban environment with international congresses, national events, activities, housing, shops, recreational facilities and culture. Ideally, therefore, the existing facilities and their built structures will need to be (re-) adjusted.

NEO is a park, a flourishing green space, that serves as a link between visitors and local residents and is accessible to all. For both the city and the neighbouring area, the Heyzel must become an integral part of the green lungs which run from the canal area to the parks of Laeken and Osseghem before heading north. This principal green strip provides opportunities for sport, cycling and walking.

NEO is, above all else, a “major project”, and its layout is fully in keeping with the richness of its history. The architecture and the public space must reflect the optimism of the universal exhibitions and their openness to the future.



4. Sustainable development

The project incorporates a robust sustainable development strategy, be it in respect of mobility, energy or water. The overall approach to these issues is reducing demand, a better and more sustainable influx, as well as ensuring a more efficient use of the remaining demand.

The entire site will become greener thanks to water-absorbent surfaces. The new buildings will comply with the most recent low-emissions standards, and a shrewd re-use strategy will be introduced.

5. A unified scheme

The master-plan consists of a unified town planning scheme comprising six strands:

1. “CompactXL”: the development of two compact urban clusters to the left and right of the Boulevard du Centenaire, linked to Brussels Expo. These two clusters, around the Stadium and Trade Mart, combine a mixed town planning scheme with highly pleasing architecture. They form a well-defined outer limit, their profile extending towards the park bordered by the wedge-shaped building.
2. “Green-blue framework”: a solid, eco-friendly structure for the green and blue networks of the local area and the city. A new parkland area to the west of the site links the existing parks (of Osseghem and Laeken). An overall waterway scheme provides a link between the Molenbeek and the canal area.
3. “Wide avenue; slow traffic”: optimum access to the recreational facilities thanks to slow traffic. The existing cycleways will be redesigned to run the length and breadth of the site. The ‘Grande Verte’ route will be extended within the park by the ‘Petite Verte’. And the connection between Car Park C and the site will be upgraded, perhaps by reinstalling a cable-car and placing a tram stop on Chaussée Romaine, near the back entrance to Brussels Expo.
4. “A top-quality public transport terminus”: the possibility and convenience of arriving by public transport will be greatly improved by integrating and uniting the metro and tram, in combination with car parks.
5. “Ease of access by car”: connections with the R0 7bis and the A12 will be upgraded. The new underground car parks of the western cluster will lead directly to these exits, thereby reducing the pressure on exit no. 8 while relieving the junction between Avenue des Magnolias and Avenue Houba de Strooper. The car parks and parking spaces lining the roadways will disappear, and the plan provides for some of them to be relocated underground.



6. “Harmonised planning”: the realisation of an internationally appealing mixed-used urban plan, complementary to Brussels city centre and to the current operations at the site. NEO reinforces the site’s position as an international tourist draw and a regional centre for recreation and commerce.

6. The plan

Apart from the green parkland and the areas allocated for sport and recreational pursuits, NEO Brussels encompasses the following elements in a high-quality network of public spaces:

- An international congress centre with a minimum of 3,500 seats, situated above the existing Heyzel metro station and linked to Brussels Expo by a footbridge. The congress centre will be flanked by one or two new hotels designed to accommodate both the international conference participants and tourists.
- A museum or similar metropolitan cultural attraction: this cultural centre will be located in a striking spot, beside the congress centre and with a view over the park and the Atomium.
- A hall with a capacity of around 15,000 visitors, devoted to special events and replacing the exhibition hall currently located furthest to the west. This change will go hand in hand with the upgrading of the “spine” linking Car Park C, Brussels Expo and the new developments.
- An open-air theme park, situated in the southern part of the western cluster. This theme park could be connected with the new axis going from the Stadium to the Atomium.
- A complex of cinemas, cafés, restaurants and night life, located in a strategic position overlooking the southern part of the western cluster. This complex will link the shopping mall in the west with the congress and museum area in the east.
- A shopping mall with appeal beyond the region, situated in the western part of the cluster, between Avenue Houba de Strooper and the Stadium. The shopping mall will have good transport links with the surrounding area and car parks beneath the shops as well as functional plinths, both on Avenue Houba de Strooper and along the internal shopping streets. There will also be restaurants and bars, concentrated around the new market square.
- A support service area, located above and beside the shopping mall. This area is designed to house offices, shops, sports clubs and other local services.



- An indoor leisure and amusement park, possibly with leisure /swimming pool and wellness centre. This complex should also be situated in the southern part of the western cluster to create synergy with the sports park
- Homes overlooking the park, the Atomium and the Brussels skyline: apartments with active plinths onto the public space will be placed at the corners of the accommodation blocks. This district will house between 500 and 750 apartments.
- Apart from the car parks, there will be parking along the ring road, especially underground, for the sake of the park.

The plan is geared to ensuring synergy and harmony between the new operations and the existing ones such as Mini-Europe, the cinemas, the Océade water park, the planetarium, the Atomium and the other attractions.

7. Phasing

The scheme allows for a phased approach to the construction work, the public areas and the infrastructure. The phasing of the plan entails 5 or 6 stages, with sub-phases possible. This approach takes account of the concessions already granted in the area and the possibility of redeveloping or rehabilitating the existing operations.

As the various stages progress, car parking will gradually be transferred from the public areas into new underground car parks. The parkland and other public spaces will be redesigned bit by bit. Redevelopment of the Stadium will be a long-term initiative. The plan provides for the King Baudouin Stadium to be maintained provisionally, while at the same time envisaging a new role for the site once the Stadium disappears: this will help avoid interdependence and any developmental delays.

As concerns the Trade Mart site, the master-plan envisages its intensification, although no development is scheduled in the short term. On the other hand, travel to the city via the A12 could be facilitated in the short term if so desired. The front and rear facades of Brussels Expo could likewise be developed sooner rather than later.

Examples of potential developments



Estimated surfaces and dimensions : congress center 3.500 seats – event hall 15.000 pers. – leisure 16.000 m² - 750 homes – shops approx. 60.000 to 70.000 m² - horeca approx. 9.000 m² - cinema 5.000 seats.





V. Conclusion

The NEO project has reached an important stage.

We would point out that the favourable assessment and the presentation of the basic scheme, which constitutes a fully-fledged master-plan, is occurring several months ahead of what was agreed when the contract between the City of Brussels and KCAP was signed.

Work on the next stages has already begun. Consultations are progressing well with a view to putting forward the specifications for the initial phases (the shopping mall and congress centre) in the next few months.

On the regulatory side, in parallel with the drawing up of these specifications, the process of revising the PRAS (regional land use plan) is running its course. A good deal of progress has been achieved since it was decided to embark on the revision procedure, so much so that the new draft PRAS will be adopted before the end of the year; accordingly, final adoption of the revised PRAS is scheduled for half way through 2012.

The simplified mechanism laid down by the COBAT will mean that permit applications can be lodged as of then.

In short, all the direct participants in the NEO project have gone all-out to ensure its rapid advancement, with a very clear, highly pragmatic vision and in compliance with the demanding criteria set out at the very outset.

The new-found appeal of Brussels and the fresh ambition for the capital city and its inhabitants are now well on the way to becoming reality.
