

# Ninoofsepoort, an opportunity lost to capital?

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A view over Ninoofsepoort, taken at night from the terrace of the MIMA museum. From the foreground to the background, we see: the canal over the Petite Senne; an art project from Antoine Caramalli along the canal walls; an undeveloped, overgrown, fenced off plot of land; to its left, tram lines which delimit the Sint-Jans-Molenbeek commune from Brussels Capital commune; further behind, the Ninoofsepoort Park; and the very brightly lit Rue Heyvaert.

The photo is a view over Ninoofsepoort, or Ninoof's Door. The name of this triangular plot of land is symbolic. Located on the edge of the Brussels' canal, it was once a city gate that provided entry to the historical city centre of Brussels. Unused since the late 20th century, Ninoofsepoort today is at the same time a break in Brussels' urban fabric, and a fantastic opportunity for development. It represents an area of roughly 25.000  $m^2$ , only ten minutes walking distance from the Grand Place, in a dense city with limited space, and in a neighbourhood targeted as a zone for urban renovation (Guérin 2019). As such, Ninoofsepoort is high stakes for the city.

The photo itself was taken from the MIMA, a museum of contemporary art opened in 2016. One of the museum's aims was to give the neighbourhood of Molenbeek a new image, of culture and dynamism, intended to overrule the prevailing sentiment of insecurity and fear. The faces with 3D glasses visible on the canal walls are a satirical piece by artist Antoine Caramalli, entitled 'The Big Molenbeek Show'. The faces of Molenbeek are staring back in irony at those looking onto the neighbourhood, following the "giant media circus" (Caramalli 2016) after the 2016 Paris attacks carried out by terrorists from Molenbeek.

Caramalli (2016), an inhabitant of Molenbeek himself, perfectly summarises the neighbourhood as the "home of the poor, the artists, the immigrants and the tourists, fertile ground of mixity and culture". This poetic description conveys Ninoofsepoort's multi-faceted politicoeconomic, sociocultural position with many actors, including inhabitants, politicians, planners, and private investors.

Visible in the back of the photo is the Ninoofsepoort park, which was constructed in 2018. Though minimally furnished, the park is well used by a diversity of inhabitants and provides relief from a lack of green space in an otherwise highly dense neighbourhood. Adjacent to the park, visible by overgrown shrubs and surrounded by a graffiti-covered fence, sits an undeveloped private plot of land which is the centre of much debate. This raises the question: was the park planned for the inhabitants, or to raise the attractiveness of the land for private investors, in a location with unrealised potential?

In 2016, the government mandated perspective.brussels (hereinafter referred to as Perspective), an NGO, to evaluate the land and plan its development (perspective.brussels 2016). Perspective formulated a goal for Ninoofsepoort - to make it "a real place of **conviviality and attractiveness for all populations**" (perspective.brussels n.d.). Perspective had to work with the private real estate developer Besix RED, to whom the land has belonged for years. Their plan, since 2013, had been to create private housing. To this end, a PAD (Guiding Development Plan), a tool that has the power to overrule regulations, was put in place to facilitate the real estate development. Notably, it served to change the land use to allow private housing and to build at a height of 90 meters. ~~The reasons presented for the PAD are to anchor Ninoofsepoort within Brussels' small ring, already dotted with high-rise buildings; to give Ninoofsepoort an identity; and to improve the quality of the urban space.~~

### **Conviviality, Attractiveness, All populations?**

Given Molenbeek's socio-economic situation, it is not hard to be critical of the Ninoofsepoort PAD. Besix RED has planned three housing towers that will comprise of 270 private housing units, along with 240 parking spots. However, none of the units will be social housing, and the mere plan for so much parking implies who will move in - a population who needs a car on a regular basis to get to work - and confirms the ambitions of the real estate developer to attract a new class of residents to Ninoofsepoort.

These plans emphasise the importance of creating open, public space on the ground floor of the towers, with metropolitan infrastructure such as sports equipment and daycares. But, for whom is this space, and this equipment? In light of the fact that the current population is poor and working class, it will be a challenge to create public space within the private complex that truly accommodates diverse uses and populations. Perversely and contrary to intentions, this promotion for diversity, and the development of Ninoofsepoort park, encourage gentrification by attracting real estate developers like Besix RED and middle to upper classes able to buy the new housing units.

The location's extremely attractive potential makes it vulnerable to speculators. It isn't hard to understand why the city may think it favourable to sell or lease the land; it can then reap the benefits of taxation and income from wealthier residents. However these would not really be *benefits*. Trickle down effects have been disproven (Stiglitz 2016), and current inhabitants would likely be gone before they see any benefit.

Furthermore, this development is a stark contrast to the resident's demands for their neighbourhood when they were consulted in 2014. Their demands were for low-skilled employment opportunities, affordable and social housing, more green space, more security and more public services (perspective.brussels 2016). Molenbeek is one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Brussels, one of the densest in Europe, and in desperate need of green spaces, and public equipment (Benzaouia 2019). Considering the need for public investment, and that the privately developed towers won't have social housing, it is clear that the plan did not aim to include the population of Molenbeek, who could not afford the units. The argument of social mix, modernisation, and a supra-local vision prevailed.

Investing money in a disadvantaged neighbourhood tends to accelerate gentrification and displacement if there are no policies to reduce unemployment, and improve living conditions for existing residents (**required**). Moreover, Ninoofsepoort is being used as a strategic site to integrate a multitude of projects that are part of the Canal Plan. These plans, like the PAD Heyvaert, will further displace residents and especially local businesses important to the area, like the car dealerships in Rue Heyvaert. With Besix RED's towers, the vicious cycle of investment, gentrification, and displacement will perpetuate.

### **Hope for the Right to the City**

Given the above, it is clear that there is no intention to address the concerns of those who currently live in the area, but rather, to cater to the aspirations of wealthier classes. This photo encapsulates the failure of the city to meet the challenges of Molenbeek, but what it does not show is the impressive citizen mobilisation against property speculation of Ninoofsepoort that took place in 2020. As a result, the private developer supposedly plans to sell the land, and the authorities may exclude the private plot from the PAD, thus lowering the risk for speculation (iEB 2020).

Ninoofsepoort is an opportunity for the Brussels' government to show more ambition in the social housing developments, given the enormous demand and embarrassingly low supply. So far, it has fallen victim to "Bruxellisation", where the interests of private investors are prioritised over those of local inhabitants, justified by the necessity to modernise. It remains to be seen whether the interest of local residents will prevail.

## References

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