

TOWARDS THE DECOLONISATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN THE BRUSSELS- CAPITAL REGION

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action plan
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Introduction

In line with the general policy statement 2019-2024 of the government of the Brussels-Capital Region, the resolution of the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region of 17 July 2020 and the request of the State Secretary for Urbanism and Heritage, a working group was created by urban.brussels at the end of 2020. This group consisted of 16 representatives from associations and the academic communities, and 4 representatives from the Brussels administrations directly involved with public space. The task of this working group was to initiate a reflection on symbols related to colonisation and the colonial period in public space. After several months of intensive discussions, the working group presented a report on 17 February 2022 with proposals to decolonise Brussels' public space.

This report has been on-line in French and Dutch on the urban.brussels website since that date. An English version has also been online since July 2022.

At the request of the State Secretary for Urbanism and Heritage, urban.brussels compiled a list of proposals for a decolonisation strategy of public spaces in the Brussels Region, mainly based on the recommendations of the aforementioned working group.

On 17 February 2022, the report was also submitted to the Brussels Parliament to collect recommendations that could be incorporated into the action plan.

Some recommendations are already being implemented within or guided by Urban. Others do not fall under the competence of urban.brussels, such as education, employment or housing, and are being implemented within the framework of the Regional Action Plan against Racism of the State Secretary for Equal Opportunities.

The action plan "Towards a decolonisation of public space in the Brussels-Capital Region", is characterised by an essential common thread, namely that the traces should not simply disappear. Colonial history should be incorporated and told from a pluralistic instead of a unilateral point of view.

"Not all colonial traces are equally visible and recognisable by everyone, nor are they all recognised as 'colonial symbols' due to a lack of historical knowledge and/or as a result of the evolution of perceptions.

This broader awareness of visible and less visible traces is important. After all, the decolonisation of the public space is not just about a critical revision of who or what is/remains honoured with commemorative signs or not. It is also about the way we use historical traces as triggers for more complex, multi-voiced decolonial historical discourses, including traces that point to, and tell, stories about the historical presence of Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians in Belgium. It is precisely this last group of people whose traces are unmarked today and neither are they recognised by the majority of Belgians." (from the report of the working group on decolonisation, February 2022)

This plan endorses a multiple approach to decolonisation. Depending on the situation and context, traces of colonisation can be contextualised, transformed or relocated. Working on decolonisation of public space means giving way to public space transformation through artistic interventions and making visible a greater diversity of views and memories.

The intersectional perspective is also important: it helps us formulate more complete solutions that take into account the various aspects that define our social position. Moreover, any intervention must involve awareness-raising and dialogue with the public, local residents and citizens in general, and any intervention must be documented and contextualised.

The action plan can contribute to achieving a more inclusive society, through public space transformation and dialogue with citizens. The point is to multiply spaces for exchange and dialogue on what we collectively want to value and express in the places where we live.

CHAPTER I: Action plan management

Action 1: Create a guidance committee

Description action

A committee will be created to monitor the action plan “Towards a decolonisation of public space in the Brussels-Capital Region”. This committee will consist of the authorities and policy makers involved, civil society representatives and academic experts. It will be guided by the decolonisation coordinator and will guarantee the high-quality implementation of this action plan for decolonisation.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Environment, Mobility and Public Works, Equal Opportunities, Science Policy

Coordinator: decolonisation coordinator (cf. action 2)

Members guidance committee: 1 representative of Bruxelles Environnement, 1 representative of Brussels Mobility, 1 representative of Equal.Brussels, 1 representative of Brulocalis, 1 representative of Bruxelles Pouvoir Locaux (Brussels Local Authorities), 1 representative of the Federal Buildings Authority, 1 representative of BELSPO, 1 representative of Unia, 1 representative of the Brussels Council Against Racism, 5 civil society representatives, 2 academic experts.

The academic and civil society representatives will be selected from the decolonisation working group through a call, to ensure continuity with the work already done. This selection will be carried out by Urban.brussels, which has done this before for the working group on decolonisation. If there is insufficient interest among the working group members, an external call will be launched.

Budget estimation

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Follow-up indicators

First meeting after action plan validation by the government of the BCR, and after appointment of the decolonisation coordinator.

Opvolgingsindicatoren

Reports of at least two meetings a year.

Explanation

From the report of the working group on decolonisation: “A critical review of (intentional) colonial memorials in public space should never be limited solely to considerations from historical-scientific or social-scientific perspectives. Indeed, the symbolic marking of public space is never merely a practice in memory. And a social evaluation of the desirability and appropriateness of these markers is never an

evaluation that can be made purely from the historical discipline, but is ultimately a political, social matter for contemporary society. This concerns governments and policymakers, and the broad 'civic society' including the work of associations of persons of Sub-Saharan African descent, other civil society organisations, activists, and intellectuals, including historians and artists.”

Action 2: Appoint a decolonisation coordinator

Description action

A decolonisation coordinator will be appointed for two years. The task of this coordinator will be to monitor the quality implementation of the action plan and to ensure that all actions are carried out within the set deadlines, in consultation with the various stakeholders. The decolonisation coordinator will be recruited within the non-profit association Patrimoine et Culture, by means of a grant that will be approved by Government decree.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage
Coordinators: asbl Patrimoine et Culture

Budget estimation

€140,000 within existing urban.brussels appropriations

Implementation periods

As soon as possible, for a two-year period

Follow-up indicators

Appointment of a decolonisation coordinator by asbl Patrimoine & Culture

Explanation

The present action plan is developed on the scale of the Brussels-Capital Region. It takes into account the distribution of colonial traces throughout the Region: some municipalities are more marked by different types of colonial traces than others. Only the Region can maintain a complete overview; in this context, it is appropriate to appoint a coordinator to guide the action plan implementation.

CHAPTER II: Knowledge and protection

Action 3: Complete inventories of movable, immovable and natural heritage related to colonisation

Description action

The aim of this action is to gradually complete the online inventories of movable, immovable and natural heritage. In addition, the aim is also to identify the objects,

sites, roads or stops belonging to the colonial heritage through a specific “tag” that will make them easier to find.

It will be explored what can be done to make the inventories accessible to people without access to the World Wide Web at home.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, the 19 municipalities, Mobility and Public Works, Environment

Coordinators: urban.brussels

Partners: Bruxelles Pouvoirs Locaux, Brulocalis, Brussels Mobility, Bruxelles Environnement

Budget estimation

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Implementation periods

2023

Follow-up indicators

Addition of tags to the various heritage inventories of urban.brussels

Explanation

Monument preservation by historians, archaeologists, art historians and conservation architects is structurally focused on preserving historical and artistic heritage, not on questioning it. Modern monument preservation is also mainly focused on “artistic and historical heritage” - its inventory, preservation, management and restoration - rather than on intentional memorials and the issues of their creation, renewal or removal or on the emotional attachment towards particular buildings, neighbourhoods, etc. Heritage inventories that give a place to monuments and sites from our colonial past will be an important foundation to start this thinking.

CHAPTER III: Urban planning guidelines

Action 4: Implement a methodology on planning permit applications on statues and traces of decolonisation

Description action

A methodology will be developed to analyse permit applications for colonial traces (buildings, public spaces, protected and unprotected parks). This methodology will include a hierarchy of possible interventions for disputed colonial traces, based on the methodology proposed by the WG (contextualisation, relocation, destruction, diversion, etc.).

It will be submitted to the government of the Brussels-Capital Region for information.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage

Coordinators: urban.brussels

Budget estimation

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Implementation periods

2023

Follow-up indicators

Development, validation and operationalisation of a methodology for the analysis of permit applications

CHAPTER IV: Remembrance and awareness-raising

Action 5: Conduct a feasibility study on the development of a decolonisation interpretation centre

Description action

Urban will commission a study to identify and evaluate the feasibility of creating a decolonisation interpretation centre in Brussels and to study its possible programming.

Urban will design and coordinate the study in consultation with the working group on decolonisation of public space and representatives of the state secretaries for heritage and equal opportunities.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Equal Opportunities

Coordinators: Urban.Brussels

Partners: Beliris (FPS Mobility and Transport), FWB, HE2B

Budget estimation

€ 200.000 (Beliris)

Implementation periods

2023

Follow-up indicators

Acceptance of the feasibility study

Explanation

The study will explore the feasibility of developing a centre for documentation, debate, animation and exhibitions related to the colonial question in Brussels and in Belgium, in an international context. The centre's programming should also be studied.

Action 6: Provide financial support to organisations working on remembrance education and awareness-raising on our colonial past.

Description action

The aim is to encourage associations to integrate remembrance education and awareness-raising on our colonial past into their activities. Three actions are planned in this framework:

- A joint project call between urban.brussels and equal.brussels will be provided in 2025, related to the more general issues of representation, valorisation or stigmatisation of peoples in Brussels public space.
- The decolonisation action plan will be added to the 6 plans referred to in the project calls of equal.brussels, as a source of information for applicants to encourage projects that complement or improve the actions of these plans.
- A representative from urban.brussels will participate in the information sessions on the project calls of equal.brussels to draw attention to the need to work on the issue of representations of public space, by addressing different themes.

In addition to the planned cooperation with equal.brussels, the decolonisation theme will also be explicitly included in the project calls of Brussels International.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Equal Opportunities, International Relations

Coordinators: equal.brussels, Brussels International

Partners: civil society

Budget estimation

Within the existing 2023, 2024 and 2025 budgets of equal.brussels and Brussels International

Implementation periods

2023-2024

Follow-up indicators

Explicit inclusion of a focus on projects valorising decolonisation in the project calls of equal.brussels and Brussels International.

Explanation

The goal is to combine the review of the official representation of colonial remembrance in public space with the dissemination of knowledge about colonial history and a reflection on its ongoing impact in Belgium and in the countries of the former colony.

Action 7: Explore feasibility of establishing a memorial to the victims of colonialism

Description action

As part of the feasibility study on the creation of a centre for the interpretation and documentation of our colonial past, the possibility of creating a monument commemorating the victims of the Belgian colonisation of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi will also be explored.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Equal Opportunities, Mobility and Public Works, Environment

Coordinators: Urban.Brussels

Budget estimation

As part of the budget feasibility study (Beliris)

Implementation periods

2023

Follow-up indicators

Acceptance of the feasibility study

Action 8: Explore feasibility of creating a depository for statues glorifying colonisation

Description action

In the context of the feasibility study on the creation a centre for the interpretation and documentation of our colonial past, the critical success factors for creating a central depository for the Region, in which (also large) colonial statues and other commemorative monuments removed from the public space can be stored, will also be analysed as one of the possible purposes (e.g. some statues do end up in a museum). Such place is not a mere logistical infrastructure, but a symbolic public space and one of the components that will mark the decolonial transformation of the urban monument landscape.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Equal Opportunities
Coordinator: Urban.Brussels
Partners: Beliris (FPS Mobility and Transport), FWB, H2B

Budget estimation

As part of the budget feasibility study (Beliris)

Implementation periods

2023-2024

Follow-up indicators

Completion of a report with recommendations

Action 9: Continue reflection on one or more annual official remembrance days related to our colonial past

Description action

In addition to the remembrance days scheduled in the Action Plan against Racism of the Brussels Government, it is proposed to continue the reflection on an annual official remembrance day within the guidance committee, and in close cooperation with the Brussels Council Against Racism. It is proposed to analyse, in consultation with the representatives of the communities involved, with the federal level and other federated entities, whether 30 June, the anniversary of Congo's independence and the commemoration of Patrice Lumumba's speech, and 1 July, the anniversary of the independence of Burundi and Rwanda, are suitable dates.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Equal Opportunities, International Relations
Coordinators: Urban.brussels, equal.brussels, Brussels International
Partners: Brussels Council Against Racism

Budget estimation

€ 10.000

Implementation periods

2023-2024

Follow-up indicators

Validation of the promotion of one or more annual remembrance day(s) by the government of the Brussels-Capital Region.

Explanation

Memories can be marked not only in space but also in time by organising annual remembrance days on colonial history that

- pay sufficient attention to the role of the colonial regime in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi between 1885 and 1962;
- commemorate victims of colonisation;
- honour the resilience and resistance of colonial subjects;
- encourage reflection on the role Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians played in Belgian history.

Action 10: Train and raise awareness among regional officials of urban planning departments

Description action

The officials of urban.brussels, of the Bouwmeester/Maître Architecte (chief architect) and of Bruxelles Pouvoir Locaux will be trained and made aware on decolonisation and its challenges, to ensure effective decolonisation of public space. Brussels Mobility and Bruxelles Environnement officials involved in the organisation of public space will also be able to attend the training.

Parties responsible for the action

Urban.brussels, Bouwmeester/Maître Architecte, Bruxelles Pouvoir Locaux

Budget estimation

€ 30.000

Implementation periods

2024

Follow-up indicators

Organisation of training for the officials of urban.brussels, the Bouwmeester/Maître Architecte, Bruxelles Pouvoirs Locaux, Brussels Mobility and Bruxelles Environnement

Explanation

Officials in charge of implementing a decolonisation policy should be made aware at all levels, through decolonisation walks, reading, lectures, the organisation of conferences, workshops, exhibitions, etc., of the exact meaning of decolonisation.

Action 11: Organise various actions to raise awareness about our

colonial and postcolonial past, including in the context of the Heritage Days

Description action

The Heritage Days 2022 theme was specifically about traces of colonisation in Brussels. This year's theme is related to Art Nouveau: art for all?

- The 2023 Art Nouveau theme will reveal the many links to colonisation. This art movement grew in popularity in 1897, as part of the Brussels International Exhibition. Several Art Nouveau architects were commissioned to show the wealth of Congo, in the very special context of colonial propaganda. The colonial section was designed with a remarkable unity of style, combining African materials with the decorative Art Nouveau language.
- On 15 May 2023, Hôtel van Eetvelde was opened to the general public as part of the Art Nouveau Year. Designed by Victor Horta for the general administrator of the Congo Free State, Hôtel van Eetvelde is an Art Nouveau masterpiece and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the context of the mediation and interpretation centre under construction, the colonial links will be shown.
- Alongside this, various artistic interventions will be developed. For example, the committee of the Art Nouveau Year within Urban is exploring the possible design of a discussion forum in the Cinquantenaire Park, more specifically in front of the "Monument to the Belgian Pioneers in Congo".

Parties responsible for the action

Urban.brussels

Budget estimation

Within the existing limits

Implementation periods

2023

Follow-up indicators

Organisation of the Heritage Days in 2023

PART 2: Initiatives of the Brussels-Capital Region, in consultation with the 19 municipalities

Action 12: Develop a participatory process with municipalities focusing on dealing with various traces of our colonial history, such as adapting and/or contextualising toponyms and contested monuments, among others, and developing a clear and coherent signage for colonial and postcolonial heritage.

Description action

The Region and the 19 municipalities will launch a process in close consultation to define a methodology and guidelines for the dissemination and treatment of colonial traces within the BCR. This process will involve local authorities and Brussels organisations directly involved in the decolonisation of public space. In this context, it will be important to ensure a good balance between coordination within the Brussels Region and local policies. This will ensure the input and involvement of the municipalities and allow local actions to contribute to a common vision. The good practices and experiences of municipalities that have already introduced processes in this regard will provide useful input.

The following aspects will be addressed:

- Developing a methodology that allows municipalities to adapt and/or contextualise colonial toponyms;
- Relocating, adapting or contextualising contested statues and/or monuments;
- Developing a clear and coherent signage for colonial and postcolonial heritage in all its forms.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage, Mobility and Public Works, Environment, Equal Opportunities, the 19 municipalities

Coordinators: Urban.brussels, Bruxelles Pouvoirs Locaux

Partners: Brulocalis, Brussels Mobility, Bruxelles Environnement

Budget estimation

€ 50.000

Implementation periods

2023-2024

Follow-up indicators

Acceptance of:

- A methodology that allows municipalities and the Region to adapt and/or contextualise colonial toponyms;

- Three concrete and feasible proposals for relocating, adapting or contextualising contested statues and/or monuments;

A methodology that can be used at the level of the Region and the 19 municipalities, for signage of colonial and postcolonial heritage.

Explanation

The decolonisation working group recommends establishing a chronology of street names to be changed with priority. In the meantime, it makes sense to provide explanations for all colonial toponyms.

With regard to signage, the aim is to develop a clear and coherent working method, taking into account a specific approach for individual plaques, an overview of buildings and sites by neighbourhood, and sufficient communication and awareness-raising in line with the future change of intentional memorials.

PART 3: Initiatives of the Brussels-Capital Region with regard to the federal authorities

Action 13: Support the Federal Buildings Authority in its process of decolonising public space and contextualising the monuments for which it is responsible

Description action

The Federal Buildings Authority will be contacted in order to analyse how to cooperate with the federal level about decolonisation of public space, monuments and sites. For example, a first step could be to inventory all colonial monuments and statues, and then determine adjusted strategies to adapt or contextualise them. The Federal Buildings Authority will also be invited to participate in the meetings of the guidance committee of this action plan.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage
Coordinators: urban.brussels

Budget estimation

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Implementation periods

2023

Action 14: Strengthen the cooperation between the Region and scientific institutions that depend on BELSPO

Description action

BELSPO will be contacted in order to strengthen cooperation, including with a view to exploring the creation of an interpretation and documentation centre.

The Region will also register in the federal dynamics regarding refunds, more specifically in the case of municipal collections.

Parties responsible for the action

Competences: Urbanism and Heritage
Coordinators: Urban.Brussels
Partners: BELSPO

Budget estimation

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Implementation periods

2023