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PUBLIC SPACES IN WORLD HERITAGE CITIES

**“The Florence network of public spaces
and the public spaces network of the
Louvain-la-Neuve new university town”**

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Abstract

"In 1969 the French-speaking Catholic University of Louvain had to leave its original location (from 1425) because of French language teaching restrictions. It decided to create a new university town (not a campus) on a new site of 920 ha farmland south of Brussels, and appointed the "Groupe Urbanisme-Architecture" to make master plan of the new town and ensure its architectural coordination. The directors were R. Lemaire, architecture historian (later co-founder of ICOMOS), J-P Blondel, architect planner and P. Laconte, economist planner. The master plan was indirectly inspired by the renaissance university towns, including Florence. The comparison between the Old Florence public spaces network and the new university town urban design was first pointed out in architectural magazines articles by P. Lombaerde in 1977. The paper will elaborate on this comparison between a WH city public spaces network and the pedestrian public spaces designed for the new university."

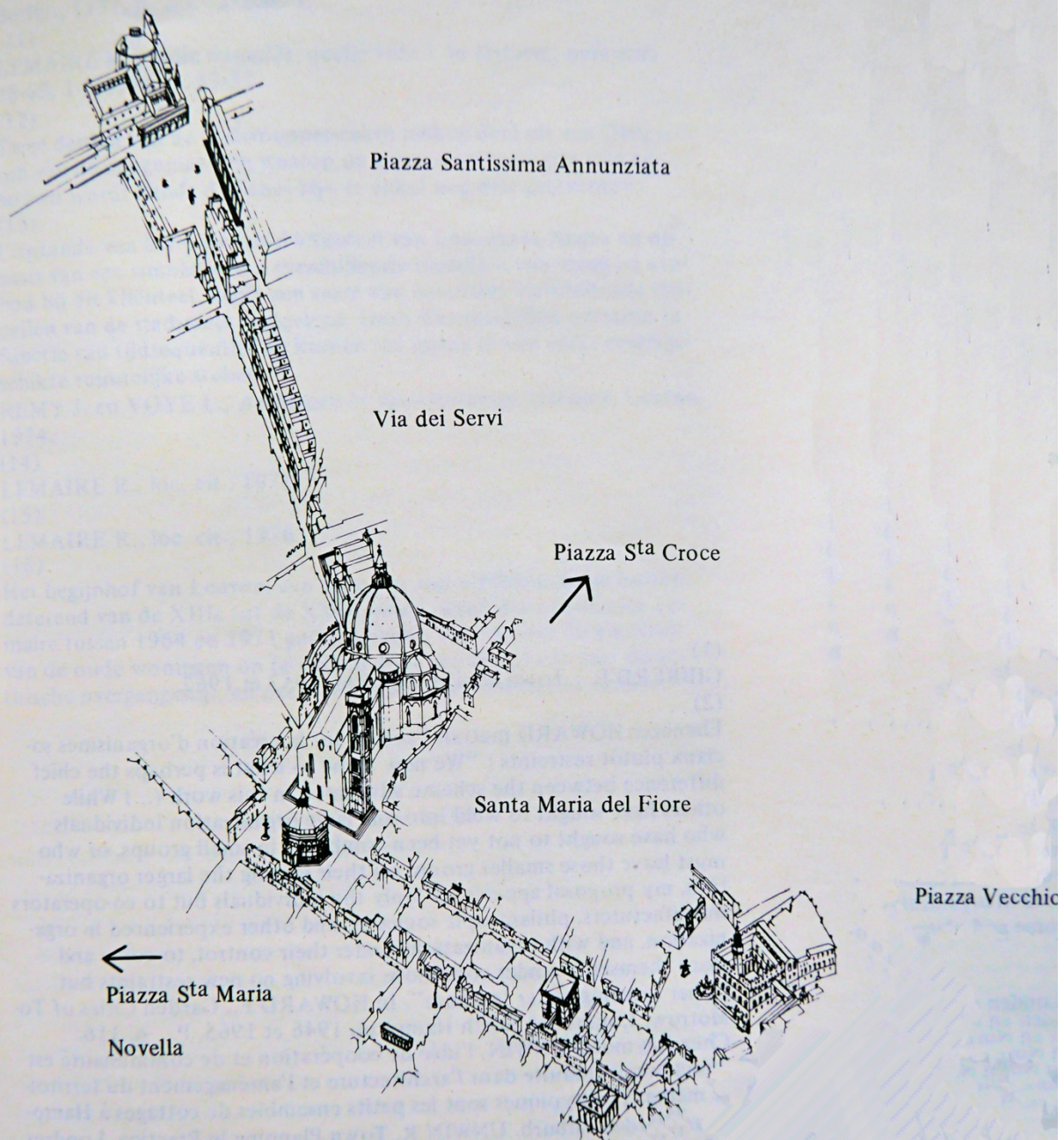
“Sequence of public spaces Florence from Piazza Santissima to Piazza Vecchio”

In Florence there is a clear linear continuity between Piazza Santissima Annunziata and Giardini Boboli, though Via dei Servi, Santa Maria del Fiore and Piazza Vecchio. This line extends through the Uffizi and Ponte Vecchio towards Palazzo Pitti and Giardini Boboli.

In Louvain – as explained in the second part – one can recognize a similar continuity from Place du Levant, Auditorios Ste Barbe, Place des Sciences, its iconic Bibliothèque des Sciences, the Place des Wallons, the iconic central administration building, the Place la gare (i.e. the market place adjacent to the station, and later to the entrance of the shopping mall), the kinky Grand-rue and the Grand-Place, heart of urban public activities.

The scale is also comparable: around 1 km, easily accessible on foot.

(Sketch by P. Lombaerde)



Piazza Santissima Annunziata

Via dei Servi

Piazza Sta Croce

Santa Maria del Fiore

Piazza Vecchio

←
Piazza Sta Maria

Novella

The central part of Florence
Renaissance

Urban design is the iconic
complex made of
The Duomo, the Battistero
and the Campanile.

The figure shows the heavily
used public Space in front
of the complex , by
pedestrians, as in the
Renaissance time
(photo by P. Laconte).

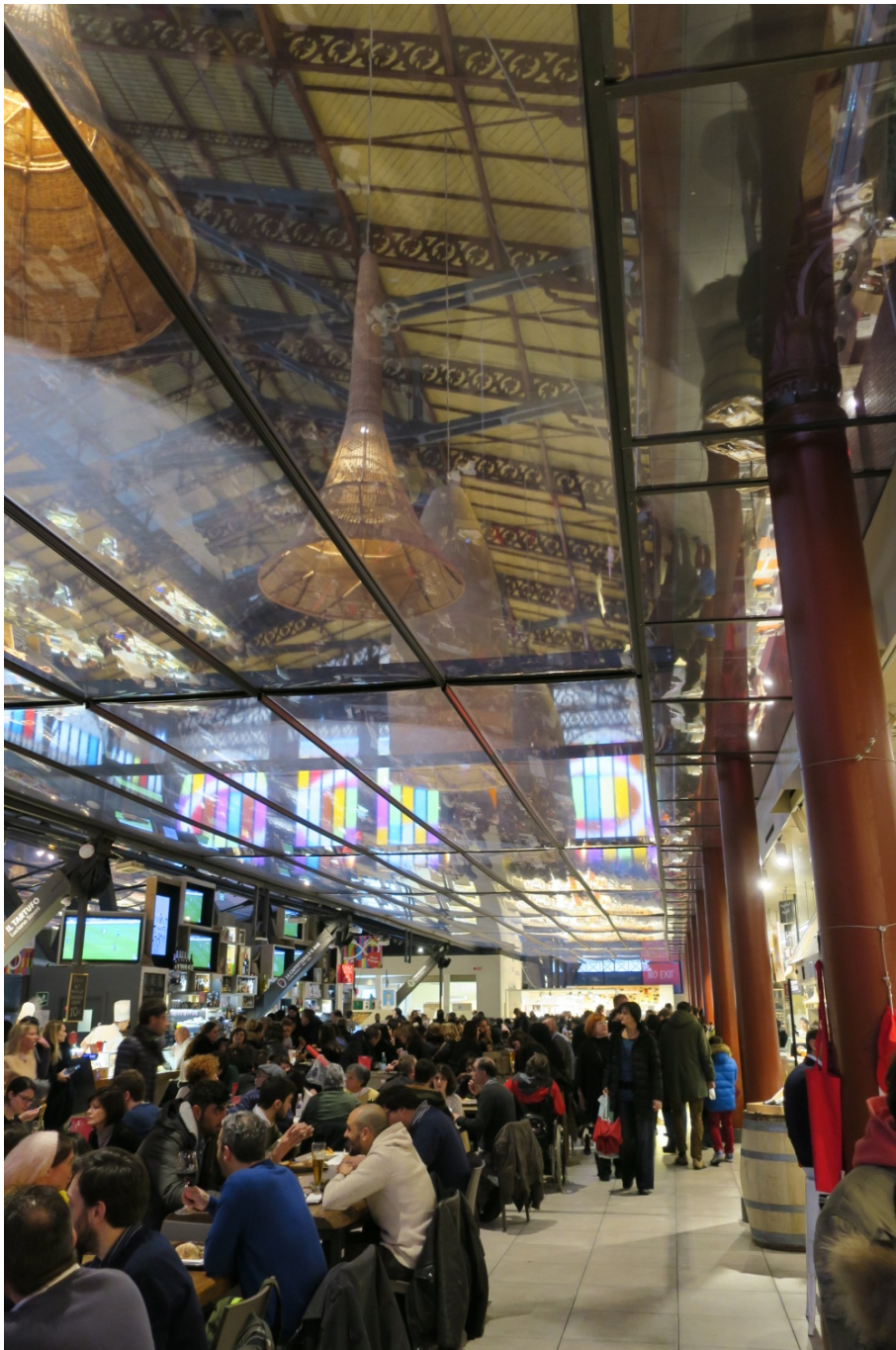




The second illustration shows the « back » of the complex. It is also heavily used, by pedestrian and automobile traffic (photo P. Laconte).



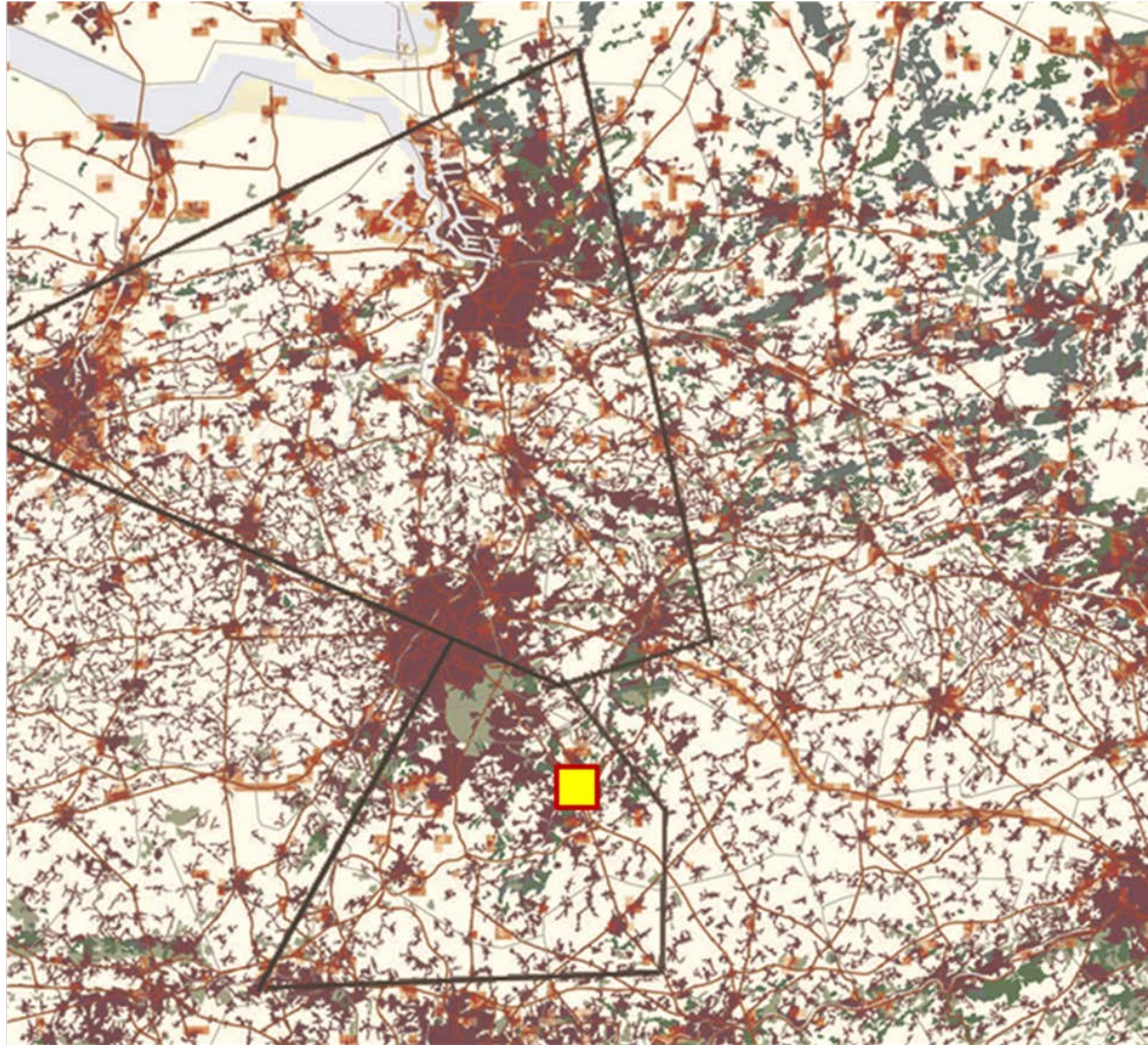
The third illustration shows the side way public space around the Campanile, used partly by pedestrian traffic and partly by automobile traffic (photo P. Laconte).



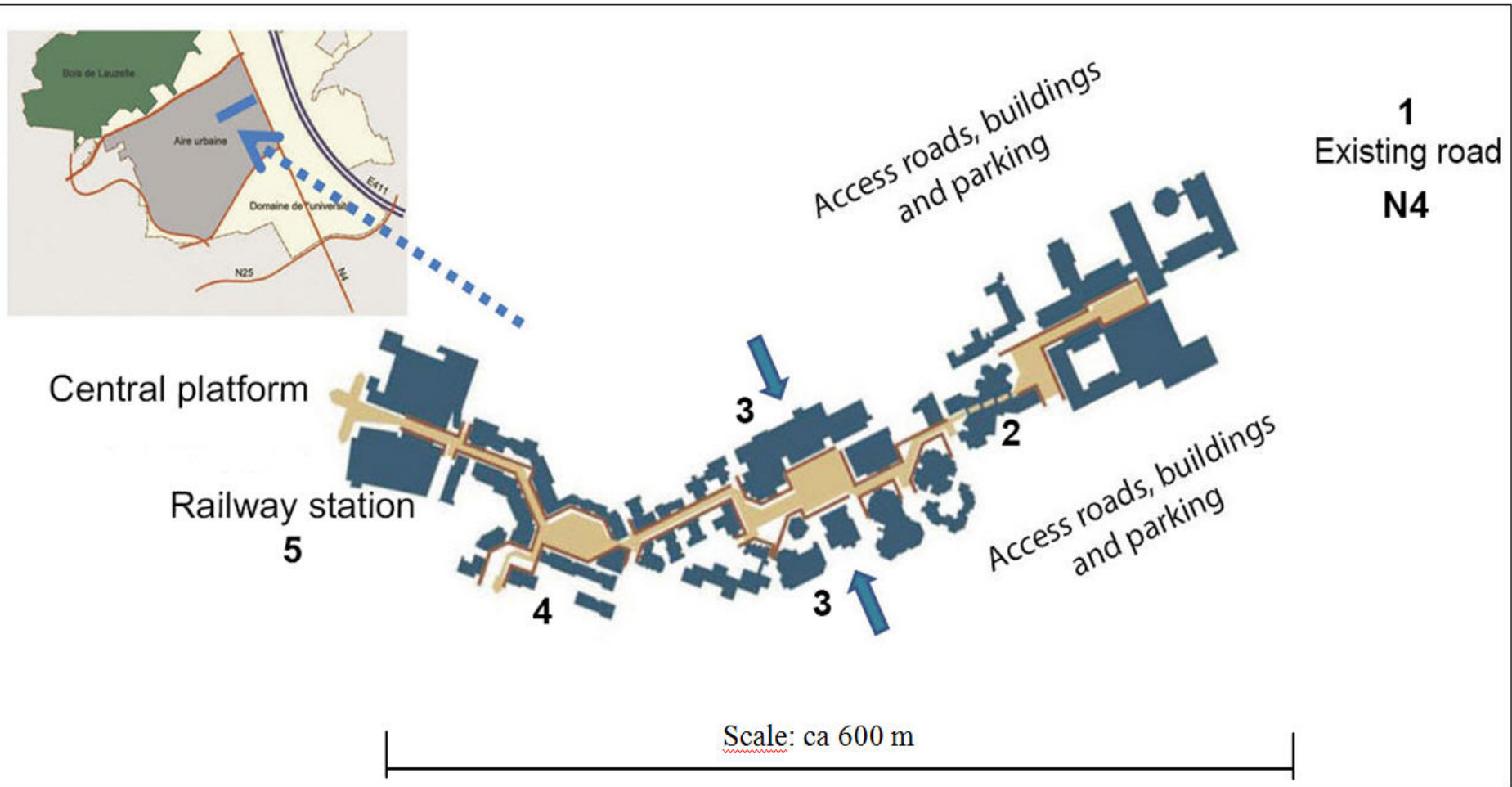
In other parts of the historic Florence adaptation to new demands for public space were met through adaptive reuse of « industrial space ». The illustration shows how the huge space occupied by the market hall has been vertically divided between the existing market level and a newly built huge Food court. This is a most lively public space, accessible from the market level by escalators. The spectacular roof remains part of the urban design (photo: P. Laconte).

Let us now turn to the Louvain urban design, culturally linked to the Historic cities, including Louvain, its immediate model but also WH central Florence.

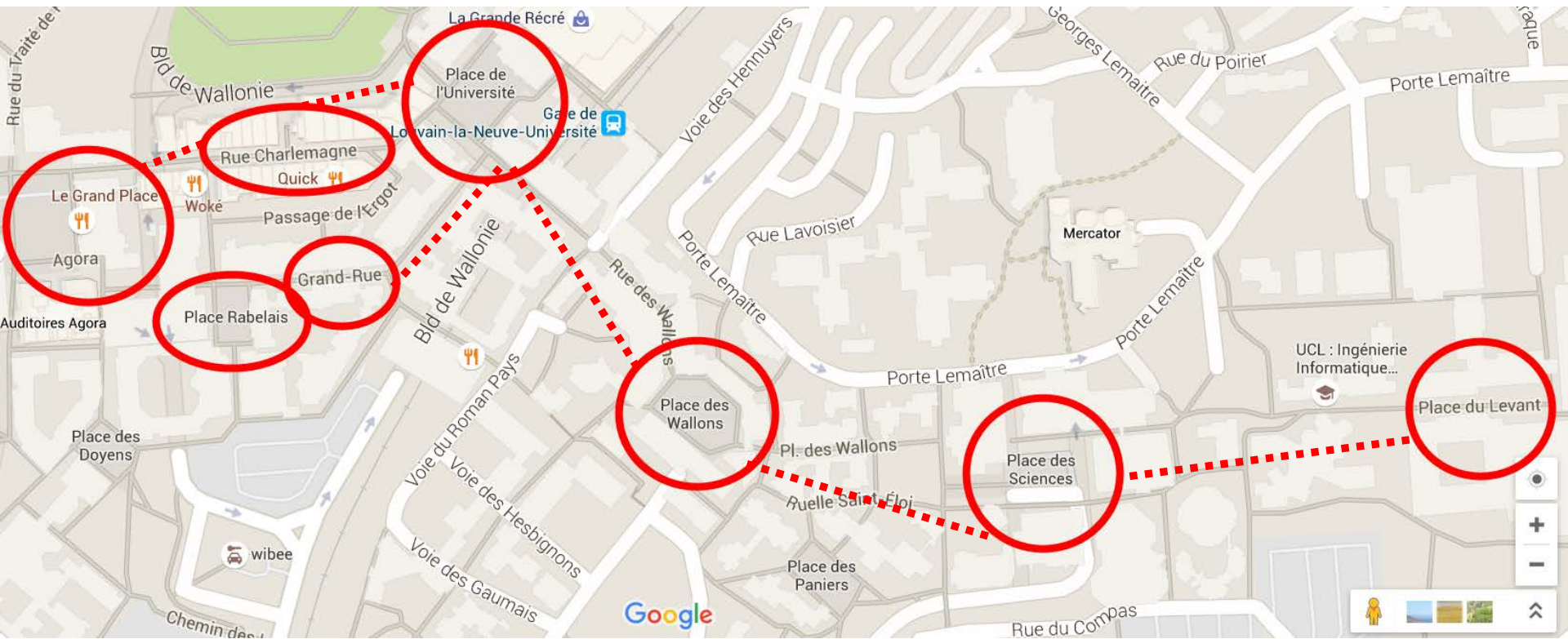
LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE



The satellite map shows the urbanised area of central Belgium, around Brussels. Antwerp lies 50 km to the north, Ghent 60 km to the west and Louvain/Leuven 25 km to the East of central Brussels, in the Flemish region and form a kind of diamond. The loose conurbation south of Brussels forms a kind of triangle. The Louvain new town has been located (see yellow dot) in that part of the Walloon region, at some 30 km south of central Brussels. The university bought 920 ha farm land in view of building on it a complete town.



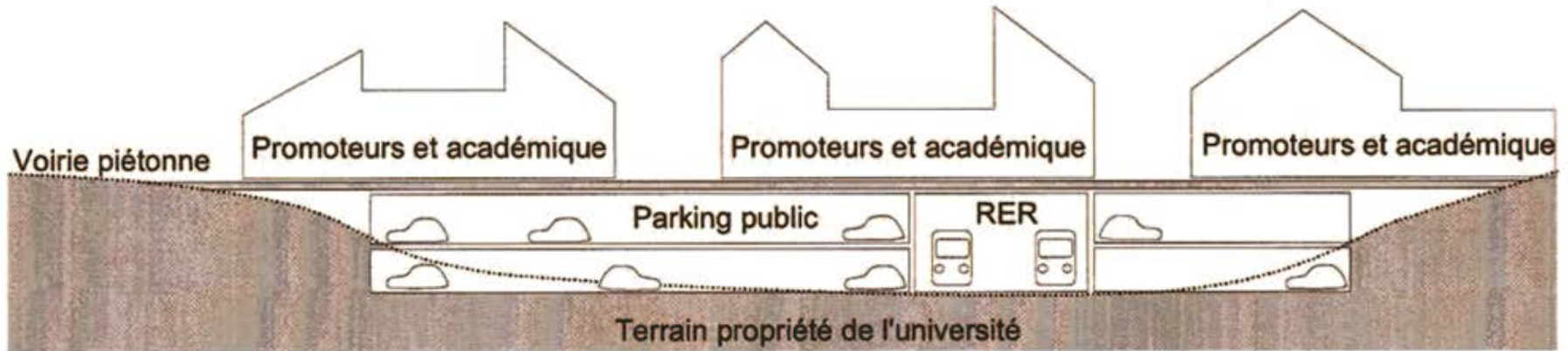
The land bought by the university had only one road access (see box). It became the starting point of the first phase pedestrian spine. The eastern starting point is thus the existing N4 road (1), followed by a string of public spaces and passages through buildings, indicated by dashes (2). The diagram shows the location of access roads and car parks. The arrows indicate the vehicle underpass and parking below the “Place des Sciences” (3). The public spaces have various shapes and the alignment of their street access is either perpendicular or tangential to that of the spine (4). The sub-surface railway station (5) marks the beginning of the subterranean platform.



The new town urban design is focusing on a pedestrian main street, all automobile traffic and parking being planned on both sides. The red dots indicate the sequence of pedestrian public spaces embodying the schematic land use map showed on the previous illustration, starting on the Est from the existing road, continuing through the Place des Sciences, the Place des Wallons, the new subterranean railway station and Place de l'Université towards the West.



A string a public spaces for movement or leisure. The centre of the first phase – 1972 - was the Place des Sciences, dominated by the Science Library, a huge concrete building seen as the cathedral of a university town, with its dedicated public space (“parvis”), above an automobile underpass. It is a social gathering place with university buildings, shops and restaurants, by arch. A. Jacquain (photo by P. Laconte, taken in 2015). The pedestrian spine further extended westwards towards the Place des Wallons and the station.



The subterranean rail station, opportunity for underground road access and parking functioning covered by the pedestrian streets network. The diagram shows that the underground space remains property of the university while the infrastructure and buildings are leased (leases of up to 99 years) to public and private investors.



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



Upper entrance of railway station building along the pedestrian spine (rue des Wallons) and starting point of the platform.



The pedestrian street network was designed around the continuation of the pedestrian spine, on artificial ground. The illustration shows the work in progress (1976).



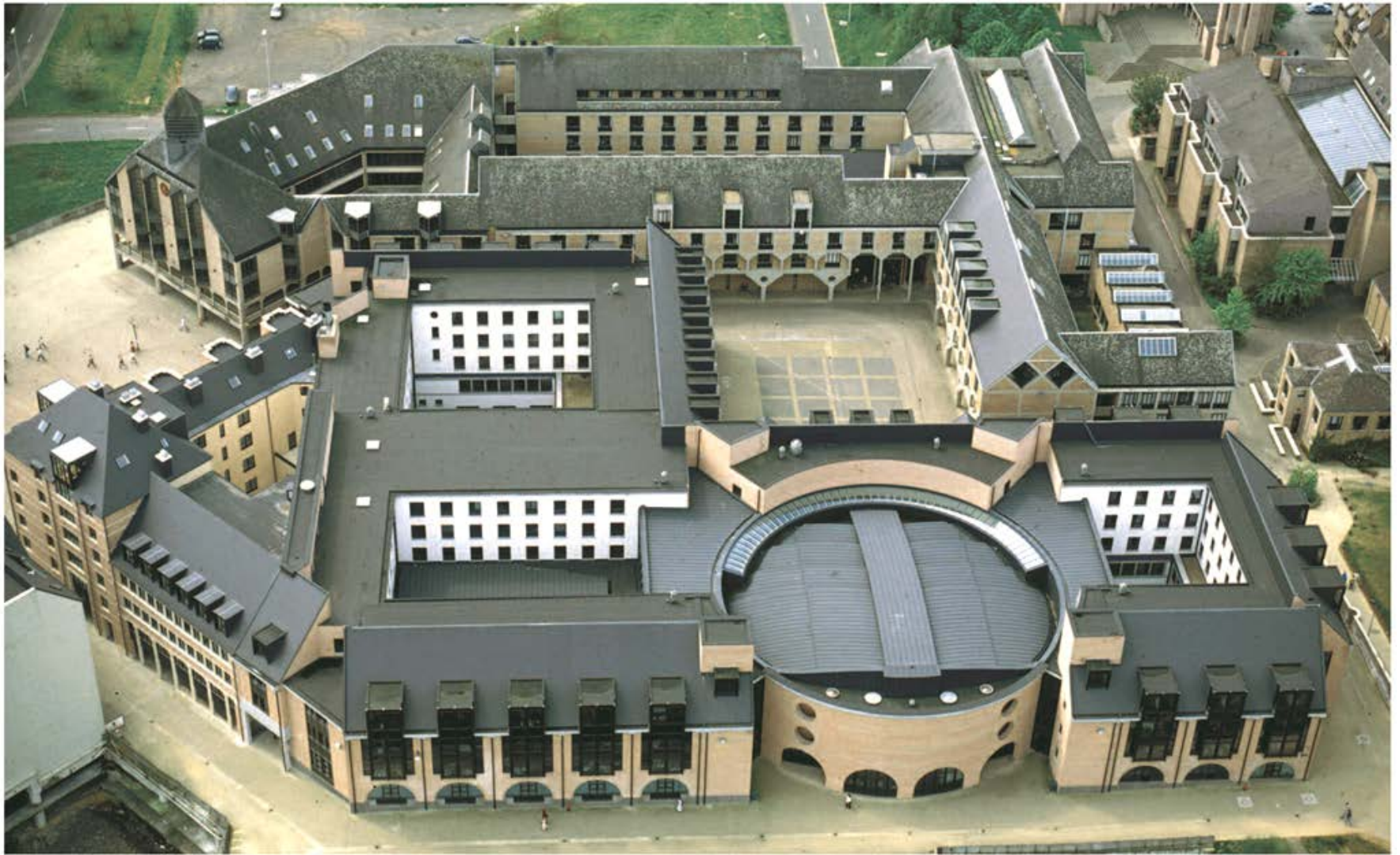
The same place is seen here around 1980.

The public spaces, shops, cafés and a first theater (Théâtre Jean Vilar) are now in use.

Vegetation is gaining ground (later to become trees (photo P. Laconte 1980)).



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



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



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

An artist's view.

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



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