



# EUROPEAN WEEK: USQUARE.BRUSSELS: THE CONVERSION OF A FORMER BARRACKS INTO AN OPEN, MULTIFUNCTIONAL DISTRICT

## Context

The 3.85-hectare site of the former Fritz Toussaint barracks in Ixelles, which has 22 buildings with a total floor space of 56,500 m<sup>2</sup>, belongs to the Brussels-Capital Region, which purchased it from the federal state in early 2018. It was originally a residential school where mounted gendarmes were trained. The site is part of a series of barracks built at the start of the 20th century on what are known as the 'military boulevards'. Following police reforms and the disappearance of the gendarmerie, the buildings were occupied by the federal police, which has gradually vacated them.

In 2017, the Brussels Regional Government granted a subsidy of 11.8 million EUR from the Brussels European Regional Development Fund Programme (ERDF) to finance several operations related to the project. In 2018, it has tasked the Urban Development Corporation (SAU) to manage the reconversion of the former barracks.

## *The reconversion of the site*

The aim of this project, called Usquare.brussels, is to transform a site that has historically been enclosed and surrounded by a perimeter wall, into an open, diverse and dynamic district that is urban and welcoming, university-centred and international, sustainable and innovative. The new district will meet the needs of the city's inhabitants, and particularly local residents, while hosting an ambitious project of international significance run jointly by ULB and VUB and focusing on sustainable development. Alongside the two universities, truly associated in this common project, the engagement of the Region is carried out through the SAU and the ERDF program (via Brussels International).

The SAU is the regional public body responsible for carrying out major urban development projects in Brussels and constructing public facilities of regional significance.





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**Its role in connection with this former military complex includes:**

- opening up the site to the city and restoring its links with neighbouring districts;
- developing family homes (around 170 units representing approx. 20,000 m2) and student accommodation (around 570 units representing approx. 18,000 m2);
- developing 20,000 m2 of pleasant public space, including an area of greenery;
- accommodating a pioneering ULB and VUB project focusing on sustainable development (7,000 m2 of university facilities);
- introducing facilities accessible to local residents, including a sustainable food court in the former riding school (1,400 m2);
- promoting the site’s architectural heritage;
- developing an optimal energy strategy and a site-wide circular economy approach;
- coordinating all the necessary stakeholders to complete the project successfully.



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*Inauguration*

In February 2024, was inaugurated the impressive main building of the former Fritz Toussaint barracks. Six buildings along Generaal Jacqueslaan have been transformed into an academic centre jointly managed by VUB and ULB. The centre focuses on research into sustainable development, education, dissemination of knowledge, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Both universities see this initiative as a means of reinforcing their urban commitment and of building a bridge between the academic world and the city and its residents.

This renovation by the universities and SAU-MSI was in part made possible by a sizeable EU subsidy, supplemented with contributions from the two universities and the Brussels-Capital Region.



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## Sustainability and circular economy

During renovations, the principles of sustainability and circular economy were central. Buildings were restored to their original state, with due regard for their new purpose. This required meticulous management of the materials, which meant that buildings were only demolished if they were deemed unstable and that new constructions were designed in a flexible manner to cater for evolving needs. Dismantled materials were recovered in situ in as much as possible and, where necessary, alternative locations and recycling methods were examined. The same approach was also used when it came to the lighting contract which took the form of a “Lighting as a Service” arrangement, and to the purchase of re-use or upcycled furniture.

In doing so, the Usquare.brussels project helps to enhance the environmental quality of urban spaces, with a focus on energy efficiency, reduction of emissions, and the upgrade of public infrastructure.

The development of the Usquare.brussels site is still in full swing. By the end of 2030, the former gendarmerie site will be transformed into an **open, diverse, and vibrant university quarter**, connected to the city.



## A temporary occupation

- From spring 2019 to the end of summer 2022, the SAU carried out a large-scale transitional management on the site of the former Barracks. At the time, the largest temporary occupation project in Belgium (called See U), hosted more than 200 project leaders, programmed more than 1500 events and activities and welcomed several hundred thousand visitors.

- A new period of transitional management of the Usquare project was the subject of a new call for expressions of interest (initiated by the SAU), in June 2024. The non-profit organization **Wondermei** has been selected. This organization arrange transitional activities that have been set up in spaces spread over 4 buildings. These spaces will be available to occupants until 31.12.2026.



© Wondermei

### contact:

#### Temporary occupation

Wondermei asbl

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## Support from the European Regional Development Fund: ERDF

The role of the ERDF (and Brussels International, which coordinates the ERDF Program in Brussels) in this project is to ensure the financing (by the European Union and the Region) of the first phase of the redeployment of the entire site, starting with the buildings (of undeniable heritage value) that will be used for university, shared and collective facilities.

With regard to the innovative university pole that it supports, this part of the overall project requires significant resources since it aims to offer:

- an International Research Center: the first Institute for Advanced Studies in Belgium (intended for international researchers)
- a Citizen and participative Science space
- an international host house
- an inter-university research center for "Urban Research".

In addition to the interest linked to the use of the buildings concerned, it should also be noted that 3,000 tons of CO2 will be saved per year thanks to the work financed by the ERDF Program.

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