

## RUE DE LAEKEN - RUE DU PONT NEUF



Joanna Alimanestianu

## Rue de Laeken: Building on Conviction

By Joanna Alimanestianu

The rue de Laeken project sits on a major street traversing central Brussels, the rue de Laeken, in the heart of an office and nightlife district. By the late 1980s, the owners had been working for over 20 years on what to do with this site, what to build that would make sense.

A.G. Insurance (now Fortis A.G.) owned this partially vacant, muddy piece of land primarily used as a car park. Occupying the site were decaying buildings and A.G.'s infamous metal-and-glass "Blue Tower," built in the 1960s. This 12-story building aged poorly and within years manifested serious egress problems. Nevertheless A.G. still occupied it – yes, insurance employees! Interestingly, the tower was intended as mixed use, with offices as well as apartments, and had parking on its platform base. All the apartments had been transformed into offices long before I started working on the redevelopment of the site.

Christian Lasserre was the head of the real estate department at A.G. Insurance. With his guidance A.G. acquired numerous properties and buildings, becoming the largest private real estate owner in Belgium. Over the years, even before Lasserre's time, A.G. had repeatedly tried to come up with a viable solution for this site. Scheme after scheme was developed, all with mega-structures "à la '60s-'70s": one huge apartment building, one massive office building. During those years many skyscrapers were being built in Brussels with the idea of ultimately connecting all the second floors for pedestrians and keeping vehicular traffic and parking on the ground floor hidden beneath.

The company was never convinced, and Lasserre even less so. "We just don't feel comfortable with it," they said. Luckily Lasserre relied on his instincts. He scrambled, did research – making it his mission to find a real solution. At this point he asked me if I would like to come help. So, though they had an architect, I became their consultant, first to design the master plan, then to lead the design process and represent the client.

Lasserre was also talking with The Foundation for Architecture, with its director, Caroline Mierop, and Maurice Culot, its administrator. They were notorious fighters for the protection of Brussels' heritage, to put a stop to its systematic demolition. Though they met with stiff resistance from the establishment – architects, developers and even the municipality – they were determined and outspoken, and were clearly making headway. It became obvious to Lasserre that the Foundation would be our perfect partner in this unusual venture.

## Program

To build office space, A.G. was obligated by city law to also build housing. We were convinced that if

designed properly, the housing could only be an asset to the block.

The company essentially told me, "We want as much office space with large floor plates, as much parking as possible – and just do whatever is necessary for the housing along the rue de Laeken. Now run with it!" I created a small team and did just that.

We rather quickly realized that the Blue Tower had to come down. Convinced, Lasserre had already ordered its demolition when he asked me to announce it to A.G.! We would replace it with a continuous, five-story, L-shaped building bordering the streets, put a park in the middle of the block, and put over 500 parking spaces underground.

Along the more commercial, lively street of the block, the rue de Laeken, the city required retail on the ground floor. They did not specify more. To us the typology was obvious: townhouses like those in the surviving wonderful old neighborhoods. To assure a "real" city street we realized that these houses had to be designed by different architects.

## Design

A competition to select several architects became the obvious solution. The challenge was not only to find the best architects but also to open doors to a new generation whose training and professional choices had guided them towards the reconstruction of the traditional city.

We addressed the invitations to young European architects under 40. Close to 300 responded from all over Europe. We winnowed these down to 24 entrants, all small teams of two and four, few of whom actually had built in name!

We divided the land along the rue de Laeken into parcels almost identical to what had been there for centuries. We allocated two to each architectural team, offering them financial support, and invited them to submit a project that would respect precise architectural and planning rules. These rules were drawn up by a working team consisting of Brussels' architectural authorities, resident associations and of course us, the organizers. Not only did all the entrants accept, but they also produced the most incredible work. We could have made many wonderful streets with all the projects we received.

Our team then invited an international jury of European professionals and laymen, all avid supporters of traditional planning and architecture.

The jury chose seven teams. Their choice was not only based on the quality of their individual projects but also on how their designs harmonized with each other. Once selected, we assembled their designs like a puzzle,

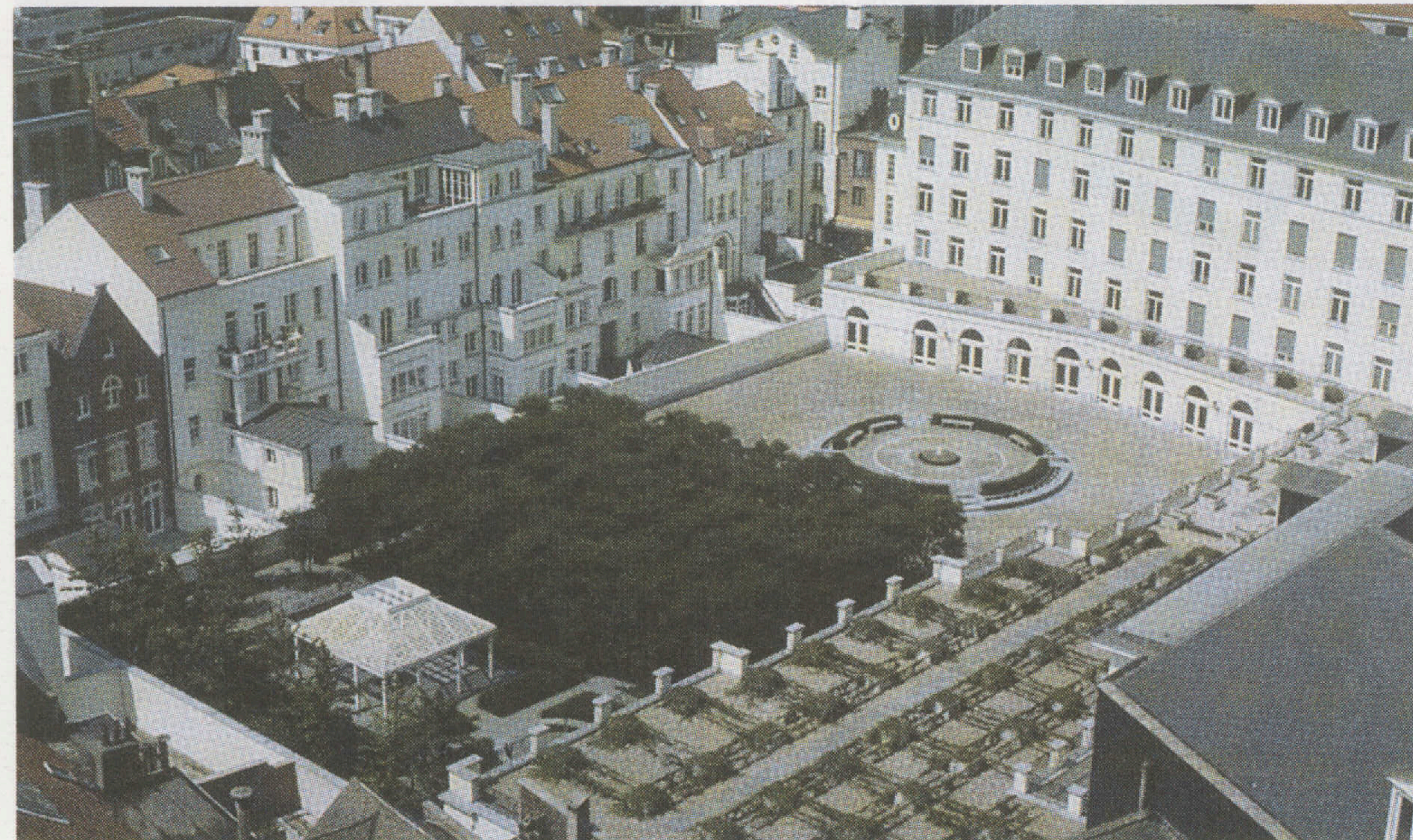
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Entrance to underground residential garage. Photo: Sylvie Desauw



Along the rue de Laeken at night. Photo: Sylvie Desauw



Above: Aerial view of residences and wing of office building. Courtesy Fortis A.G. Right: Courtyard facades of a house (lot 2B, right) and apartment building (lot 3, left). Photo: Sylvie Desauw

