

## Chapter 2

# Artists as Pioneers or Tools for Urban Redevelopment? Inside the ‘Village of Artists’ of Saint-Gilles, Brussels

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### Introduction

Wandering through the streets of the municipality of Saint-Gilles (Brussels) on a May weekend, one might be surprised to run into people studying a map of the neighbourhood in a colourful booklet, and young couples with strollers entering open doors marked by a bright flag or a sticker shaped as a painting mark. They are participants and visitors in a popular event organised every two years by the local authorities, and the houses they are going into host one or sometimes several visual artists. Following the route of the artists’ studios, they are not only discovering artworks or the working place of their creator. Visitors also discover the space around the studios, the streets of a municipality which attracts a growing number of inhabitants and consumers every year—members of a so-called urban ‘new middle class’ (Butler 1999; Ley 1994).

Are the presence of a great number of artists and the transformation of the population and the urban setting of the municipality linked phenomena? Since the 1980s, literature has been an echo chamber for describing of urban redevelopments that have started with the presence of artists. After early case studies involving SoHo in Manhattan, New York City, and the description of the gentrification processes that developed in a former industrial district colonised by artists (Simpson 1981; Zukin 1982), many other scholars have ventured into reporting similar processes occurring in Western cities: in New York and its surrounding towns (Cole 1987), in Chicago (Lloyd 2002), in Canadian cities (Vincent 1997; Ley 1996, 2003; Bain 2003; Mathews 2008), in London (Pratt 2009; Ambrosino 2013), in Paris or Berlin (Grésillon 1999; Vivant and Charmes 2008; Vivant 2010; Boichot 2012, 2014), to name a few.

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The multiplication of fieldwork and analyses of the role that artists play in the renewal of neglected urban centres has shown that one must surpass the simplistic image of the pioneer gradually reclaiming of historic zones of the city centre (as described for instance in the ‘stage model’ popularised by Laska and Spain 1980). If the role of artists is interesting to question, it is because their potential influence on larger and wealthier populations is rooted within more powerful urban dynamics that go beyond the symbolic work artists can perform on the urban fabric. Already in the 1980s and early 1990s, authors insisted on the need to consider the coalition of interests hidden behind the naturalistic explanations of urban renewal implemented by artists (Deutsche and Ryan 1984; Bowler and McBurney 1991).

More than twenty years later, it is worth remembering: not only because gentrification processes are now operating on a much larger scale, involving global capital investments (Lees et al. 2007), but also because since the 2000s a powerful discourse linking urban redevelopment and neighbourhood renewal with creativity and vivid arts scenes has emerged (Landry 2000; Silver et al. 2010). Because culture is said to ‘put [cities] on the map’ (Montgomery 2003: 3) and foster their economic development, local authorities may tend to develop or to promote artistic activity on their territory.

This chapter questions the different processes linking artists and gentrification based on the case of a small municipality of the Brussels Capital Region, long known as a home to many artists. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive overview of the renewal dynamics happening in this specific European city, nor to draw definitive conclusions about the role artists can or cannot play in the gentrification processes. Several questions will nevertheless be addressed: Why and how this municipality is regarded as an ‘artists’ village’? Who benefits from the label? How can the presence of visual artists be perceived from the streets and therefore potentially influence location choices of middle class households? Is the biennial organised in local artists’ studios only a promotional and social event for artists, or is it more a showcase for the municipality itself? Can we speak of instrumentalisation of artists’ presence in the area, when artists are not supported in their daily life and work while artistic activities are used to pursue other interests? Finally, what are the consequences of the renewal processes happening in and encouraged by Saint-Gilles on artistic activities and their future permanence? To answer these questions, empirical quantitative data was gathered and qualitative research was conducted. After describing the data and methodology used, the body of the chapter deals with the presentation of Saint-Gilles as a Brussels municipality that has attracted artists since the end of the 19th century, one that currently experiences processes of gentrification with the vigorous support of the local authorities. It is followed by an in-depth analysis of the flagship event ‘Parcours d’artistes’ (Artists’ Route) which seems to reflect the issue of the use of the artists’ presence in local policies.

## Looking at the ‘Artists’ Village’: Data and Methods

My interest in the cultural dynamics taking place in the municipality of Saint-Gilles is rooted in earlier research conducted on the level of the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). Collecting and working on quantitative data and illustrating the data with maps revealed strong spatial patterns in the places of art production (artists’ houses and studios, Debroux 2012, 2013a) and art consumption (cultural facilities and art galleries, Debroux 2013b) within the nineteen municipalities forming the BCR. Not only does the small locality of Saint-Gilles occupy a singular position on the Brussels’ cultural scene today. It has been the case for several decades, and on some levels, for even longer.

In this chapter, several maps illustrate the presence of artistic activity in the municipality by drawing on different kinds of data. First, regarding the current location of artist housing (2008), I had the opportunity to gain access to the members’ database of SMart, a growing professional association the main goal of which is to support artistic creation by helping artists with short term employment contracts, as well as the offer of legal advice. To corroborate the long-lasting reputation of Saint-Gilles as a haven for artists, I compared the current geography with the situation of 1901. The historical data came from trade almanacs (‘Almanachs du Commerce et de l’Industrie’, also known as ‘Mertens et Rosez’) that inventoried most of the occupations and trade activities including artists, which benefitted from the visibility offered by the almanac. Second, regarding the places of visual art consumption, an inventory of art galleries was produced for 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011. They were collected in the weekly cultural section of the French speaking newspaper *Le Soir* under the heading ‘Art galleries’. Third, in addition to these data gathered for the entire BCR, I took part as a visitor to several editions of *Parcours d’artistes* and I consulted the printed archive of this event that has been taking place in Saint-Gilles since 1988. It offered an alternative view on the distribution of artists and galleries throughout the district. Furthermore, the story of the *Parcours*’ development and its organisation offers also an interesting perspective on the fertile cultural ground in the locality, and its links with local cultural policies. Finally, in order to document the latter and in addition to earlier studies of the event, I conducted two interviews: one with an employee in the Cultural Department of Saint-Gilles, and with its director in August and September 2014.

## Saint-Gilles as an Urban ‘Village’ and a ‘Petit Montmartre’

Saint-Gilles is the second smallest and at the same time the second most densely populated municipality of the Brussels Region, with almost 20,000 inhabitants per square kilometer (in 2014, 50,460 inhabitants on 2.5 km<sup>2</sup>—IBSA 2015). The area was urbanised at the end of the 19th century around the core of a historic village. Different kinds of buildings formed its urban fabric: middle-class terraced houses in

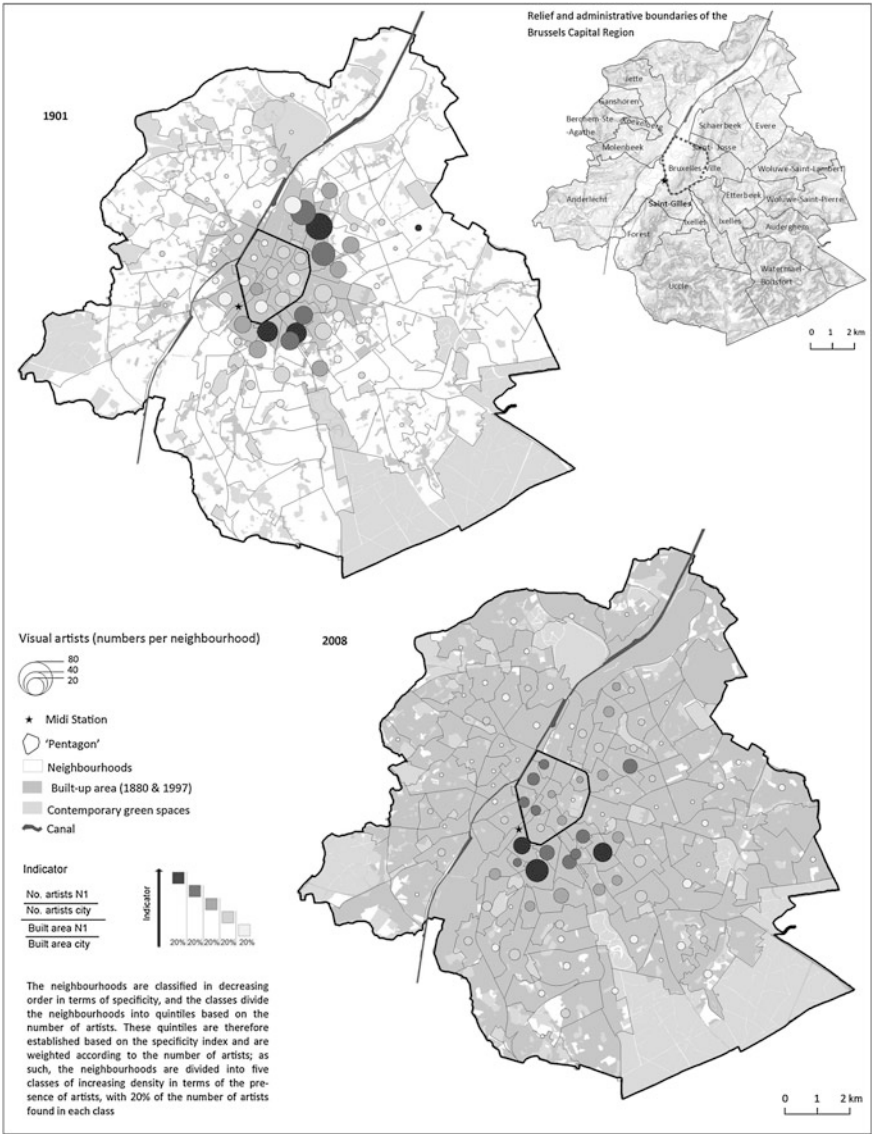
the East (which is also at a higher altitude) and more working-class housing in the West (i.e. the lower side of Saint-Gilles). Located south of the city centre—traditionally delimited by the traces of Brussels' second wall, also known as the 'Pentagon'—Saint-Gilles shares with the centre its contrasted topography (Fig. 2.1). The river Senne (covered in the 1860s) shaped an asymmetric valley, which was critical in the historical development of the city, its economy and its social dynamics (Vandermotten 2014). At the bottom of the valley the trade activities settled, then the industry. The seats of power, the nobility and the bourgeoisie were located on the slope and in the upper side of the city (Debroux et al. 2011). When Brussels started to expand outside the limits of the former second defense wall during the industrial revolution, its development followed the long-settled dichotomy between the Western and the Eastern sides of the valley, now marked by the canal. The industrial neighbourhoods were gathered around the factories and close to the transportation means (canal, train), while the wealthy industrial bourgeoisie built its houses and leisure spaces in the greener areas of the city. This situation is also reflected in the small territory of Saint-Gilles.

Another important feature of the municipality regarding its socio-spatial structure is that it is home to Belgium's principal train station (Midi Station). As a consequence, Saint-Gilles has experienced several waves of immigration since the beginning of the 20th century. These foreign populations settled first in the working-class part of the municipality, close to the station, before moving to the upper side during the 1960s when the middle-class households left the municipality and took part in the sub-urbanisation processes. Today, the daily departures of high-speed trains connecting Brussels to surrounding major European cities (Paris, London, Amsterdam, Cologne) attract another foreign and highly mobile population. These two phenomena explain a high ethnic and social diversity in Saint-Gilles with 48% of foreign nationalities (compared to 33% for the BCR), however mainly composed of European citizens (for the main population figures, see <http://www.statistics.irisnet.be/>).

The social mix of the municipality—translated into many kinds of activities, daily markets, small shops and cultural associations—offers a very specific atmosphere that is highly valued in the discourse of new incoming population. Indeed, located near to the city centre, the labour market and cultural venues, Saint-Gilles has been attracting new kind of inhabitants since the 1980s. Lower rents resulting from the state of repair of the old buildings were a valuable asset for the incomers, firstly for the foreign and poor population, and later for young adults starting their careers or who wished to live in a diverse environment.

Local authorities insisted on these dimensions too, echoing the preoccupations of the new middle class (Ley 1996) in their promotion strategies, in addition to active policies aiming at renewing the built environment. On the website of the municipality, one can read 'A few words on Saint-Gilles':

Located in the heart of the European capital, *Saint-Gilles is often called 'a village within the city'* ... It is above all a village where 130 different nationalities coexist. ... Small and densely built municipality, Saint-Gilles lives through its neighbourhoods that have each their own identity ... The 'Parvis' (square), the historic heart of the municipality that holds



**Fig. 2.1** Visual artists at their residence, 1901 and 2008. *Source* Own elaboration based on Almanach du Commerce et de l'Industrie, 1901; database SMartBe, 2008

pace with is daily markets and its typical Brussels cafés. In addition, this neighbourhood houses high places of Saint-Gilles' cultural life ... symbols of a *locality regarded for long as a haven for all kinds of artists...*

Multifaceted municipality, it overflows with other treasures, big inclusive events as the multicultural festival ... or the 'Parcours d'artistes'; with trendy restaurants and posh

boutiques...; with the Midi market; with the flea markets on Van Meenen's Square or with the remarkable buildings such as Hôtel Hannon or Horta Museum ... Contrasted elements from a municipality open to the world that perfectly personifies the pleasure of living in the city. (Translated from <http://www.stgilles.irisnet.be/fr/decouvrir-st-gilles/un-petit-mot-sur-saint-gilles/>—my emphasis)

Favorable economic conditions, good accessibility, proximity to the city centre coupled with a great variety of buildings suited for craft or artistic activity explained that artists were prone to move into the locality, which benefitted also from an 'artistic label' inherited from the past. Their presence became part of the new image that the authorities of Saint-Gilles wanted to impose instead of a bad image these poor neighbourhoods had long suffered.

The reputation of Saint-Gilles as an 'artists' village' in particular relies on a long tradition of hosting artists' studios and houses. Figure 2.1 shows the residential geography of visual artists at two different moments, 1901 and 2008. The first map shows two major poles: the oldest and most important was North of the city centre (Saint-Josse and Schaerbeek), the second being located South, in two other fast developing municipalities (Ixelles and Saint-Gilles). The main factors explaining this spatial pattern were economic—being close to the clients but in developing neighbourhoods offering cheap land to build studios—as well as symbolic—located in the extension of the wealthier area, painters and sculptors could assert themselves as a new elite (Debroux, forthcoming).

A century later, the presence of visual artists has changed, as has the overall morphology of the city. Nevertheless, it is striking to note the historic permanence occurring south of the city centre, precisely in Ixelles and Saint-Gilles. Throughout the 20th century, artists have remained in this part of the BCR, even if their numbers have varied over the decades (Debroux 2013a). At the beginning of the twenty-first century however, their importance cannot be denied.<sup>1</sup> Because of the advantages found in these old neighbourhoods related to big workspaces, cheap accommodation, bohemian environment resulting from decayed 19th century middle-class buildings and a certain artistic label contributing to social and professional recognition, a growing number of artists has begun to settle in Saint-Gilles since the 1980s.

Another element of this permanent presence was the establishment of art schools in the first decades of the last century. Apart from the old Fine Arts Academy located in the city centre, new schools opened near the major artist's concentrations: in the Eastern part of Saint-Gilles, an Academy of Fine Arts opened in 1891, followed in 1902 by the painting school Van der Kelen-Logelain and in 1904 by a professional art school, the Saint-Luc school. Nearby, in Ixelles, La Cambre opened in 1926. These schools played a part in the reproduction of artistic geography

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<sup>1</sup>Another important aspect on the map of 2008 is the presence of artists in the Western part of the Pentagon. This location is new regarding the historical geography of these occupations in Brussels; it can be linked with the renewal processes that are occurring since the early 1980s around Rue Dansaert.

throughout the century, and they are still important today in attracting young artists, even if their teachings have evolved and diversified.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, just as local artists contributed to the opening of the Academy of Fine Arts in Saint-Gilles at the end of the 19th century, contemporary artists are often responsible for new initiatives that contribute to the reinforcement of artists' presence. The creation of the association SMart in Saint-Gilles is a good example. Launched nineteen years ago by two musicians, the association counts more than 60,000 members in Belgium today (<http://smartbe.be/fr/a-propos/>), most of them living in Brussels. Outside of its main business (helping artists with short-term contracts), SMart also supports the development of artistic projects and facilities. In 2011, the association helped with the opening of the Brussels Art Factory (BAF) close to SMart offices, in the lower part of Saint-Gilles (Rue Coenraets). The site offers workspaces for 50 artists and large spaces dedicated to exhibitions or performances.

Yet, in walking through the streets the presence of artists may not be immediately visible, until one gradually remarks upon specific signs such as the glass roof of an old studio, a converted shop window, an invitation to visit a private exhibition, posters or marks of recent events. Cultural activities and the places of cultural consumption may also strongly influence the perception and the reputation of a neighbourhood, which can be recognised as a creative cluster, an art quarter, or a cultural neighbourhood. Although Saint-Gilles hosts dynamic institutions (such as the French cultural centre *Centre Culturel Jacques Franck* or the Flemish *Pianofabriek*, the *Maison des Cultures*, etc.), both public and private, the municipality is not located in the main concentration area of art consumption, but rather at its side (Debroux 2013b).<sup>3</sup>

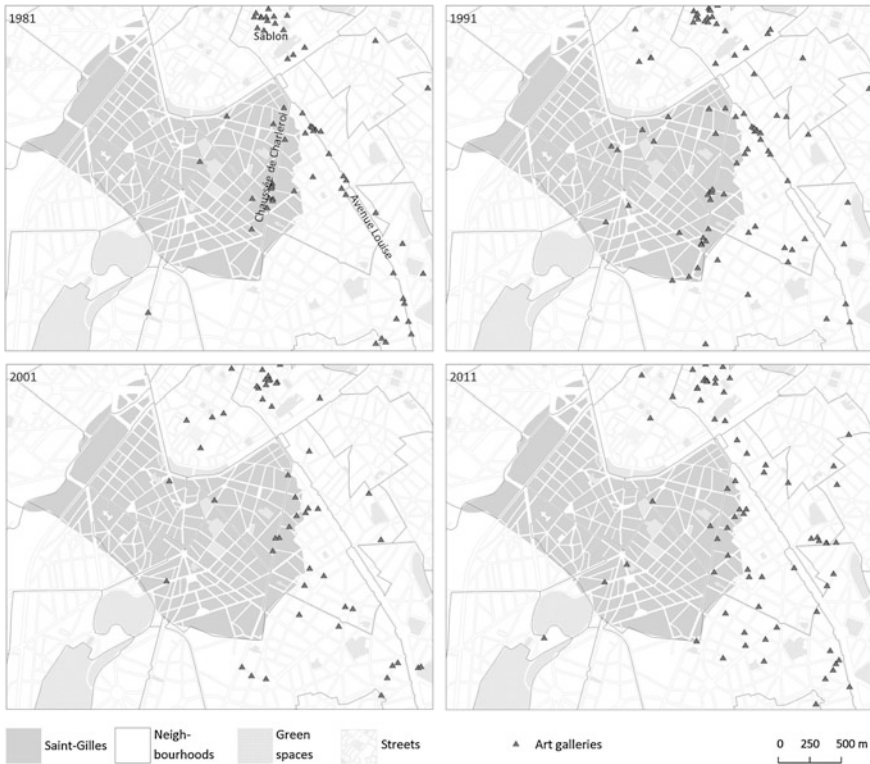
Perhaps the most visible presence is that of art galleries. If their distribution within the city is not directly linked with that of visual artists (the activities correspond to different economic logics), the geographic distribution of galleries is nevertheless a consequence of the duration of the artists' presence (and the associated art merchants and galleries), as well as implied by the location of the municipality in the wealthier part of the BCR (proximity of wealthier customers). In Saint-Gilles, many art galleries can be discovered by chance walking in the streets or during the exhibitions' opening nights, when guests use public spaces in front of the gallery. Most of these places are located in the upper (Eastern) side of the locality (Fig. 2.2).

Except for well-established galleries linked with the international art market, exhibition spaces in Brussels often have a very short lifetime. Their profiles are also

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<sup>2</sup>In addition to these schools that are intended for (young) adults, Saint-Gilles has two secondary schools well-known for their fine arts sections (Saint-Luc and Sainte-Marie).

<sup>3</sup>Therefore I focus here on the reputation of Saint-Gilles as an artists' neighbourhood, which is very specific to the locality, and on the location of art galleries, which is partly linked.



**Fig. 2.2** Art galleries in Saint-Gilles (1981–2011). *Source* Own elaboration based on M.A.D. (Cultural agenda of *Le Soir*); UrbIS

very diverse and, according to their status, so seems to be their location within the city. Looking at the overall location pattern of galleries in Saint-Gilles and its surroundings between 1981 and 2011, the dichotomy between the upper and the lower parts of the municipality (East/West) is obvious, due to the commercial dimension of the activity together with the need to attract a wealthy clientele. A quite remarkable feature is the concentration occurring along the Chaussée de Charleroi in the 1980s and even more the 1990s (9 galleries in 1991) leading to its nicknaming by the press as ‘the Small Montmartre of Brussels’ (quotation of *Le Soir*, 17 January 1991). Starting at avenue Louise, this axis seemed to be an extension of the historic pole of galleries on the prestigious Avenue Louise (12 galleries in 1991). Ten years later, however, almost all of these sites have disappeared. What happened during the 1990s?



## **Facing the Challenges of Urban Redevelopment: Gentrification in Saint-Gilles**

To understand this, we have to go back to 1989 when Brussels became a region according to one of the stages of the federalisation of the Belgian state. The new Brussels Capital Region was given the responsibility for several fields such as land-use planning and urban development, environment, transportation or public works. However, due to labor market structure and Belgian taxation policy, the new region was (and still is) chronically lacking resources to carry out its tasks. In response, the main strategy adopted by the BCR was to attract more affluent residents and therefore, local authorities launched many projects aiming at the improvement of public space and the building of new housing for middle-class households (De Lannoy and Geets 1994). Doing so, they reinforced and encouraged processes of marginal gentrification that were already happening in central areas (Van Criecken and Decroly 2003). The translation of these policies in the municipality of Saint-Gilles was all the more obvious that its mayor (Charles Picqué, a member of the Socialist party holding the post from 1985 until today) was also designated in 1989 as the Prime Minister of the BCR. Leading urban development policies at both administrative levels, in Saint-Gilles he started what he called ‘an ambitious policy to redevelop neighbourhoods’ centered on public space improvement, renovation allowances and services to inhabitants, with a clear ambition to change the socio-economic composition of the local population (Breës 2009).

The results of the residential dynamics encouraged by the local policies have been striking on the profile of inhabitants. Many households leaving Saint-Gilles went to poorer areas in the municipalities nearby and crossed the canal towards old and very dense working-class neighbourhoods (Molenbeek notably). Meanwhile, incoming population to Saint-Gilles came from the south-eastern part of the BCR, known to be wealthier or in some places to experience more advanced stages of gentrification (Marissal 1994; Van Criecken 2006). These changes reflect and are accompanied by the increase of rents and real estate prices in the municipality, in particular in its eastern half where gentrification processes started earlier, and where real estate had greater value. It influenced not only the former inhabitants but also the other functions depending on relatively cheap space to develop. As regarding artistic activities and as observed in Fig. 2.2, while Saint-Gilles became more attractive for new kinds of shops and small economic activities, the latter competed with art galleries, which are a hazardous activity when they start and in need of large spaces at affordable prices. The reduction of the comparative advantage offered by a location in Saint-Gilles together with the turbulent art market of the 1990s explain the relative shrinking of the number of art galleries in the municipality.

The ‘revitalisation’ programme supported by local authorities was much publicised and was accompanied by other initiatives that involved the local cultural scene. In the official municipal journal, Picqué wrote:

When we started 20 years ago an ambitious policy to redevelop the neighbourhoods ... we didn't forget to offer new spaces and services to the population ... We would like to enhance the cultural offer for our inhabitants ... Finally, the municipality has always intended to lend its support, would it be modest, to the artists ... [They] contribute to the cultural wealth of our municipality, which reputation spreads widely outside our boundaries (Administration of Saint-Gilles 2014: 3—translated).

The cultural argument is interesting. Indeed, more than a simple asset ensuring an urban atmosphere and the possibility of making artistic discoveries, it has also been long associated by the mayor of the municipality with neighbourhood renewal. Culture is seen as an important factor for social cohesion in a municipality that hosts very different populations on a small territory. What's more, in the 'creative era', cultural activities must also generate jobs and they are said to play an economic role worth to consider, if not in Saint-Gilles then in Brussels more generally. But it is also a matter of improving the image of the municipality, as the last sentence of the above quotation suggests.

It is in this specific context of urban renewal that a new cultural event developed in Saint-Gilles with the help of local authorities. This event, known as 'Parcours d'artistes', has strongly reinforced the artistic aura of the municipality, and has been copied by many other neighbourhoods in Brussels.<sup>4</sup>

## **'Parcours d'Artistes': Making Artistic Activities Visible**

In 1988, a local association 'Rencontres Saint-Gilloises' (Saint-Gilles' Encounters), composed of inhabitants and people close to the local administration, decided to highlight local artistic creation by organising visits to artists' studios. The objective was to demystify what it means to be an artist and to bring the public into the workspaces during an event that would increase local artists' visibility.

For three weekends every two years in May, each artist living or working in Saint-Gilles (or each artist who finds an exhibition space in the municipality) can put his/her name in the programme for free. The list is printed in a booklet containing a map of the event that visitors buy for 7 euros in order to enter the studios or the collective exhibition places located in public or private buildings.

Intensely advertised with posters and stickers indicating the places to visit (which are generally visible year-round), the event has always been very successful, attracting many participants (Fig. 2.3). For instance, in the second edition, more than 200 artists took part in the *Parcours d'artistes* while some 10,000 visitors visited their studios. Ten years later, 200 sites could be discovered in which some

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<sup>4</sup>Today, several municipalities in Brussels and beyond organise similar events, often referring to Saint-Gilles as a model (without using the name 'Parcours d'artistes' however, as it is a registered copyright). Schaerbeek initiated its own in 1995, so did Watermael-Boitsfort, then Berchem-Sainte-Agathe (1998), Evere (2000), Jette (2006), Ixelles (2008), Bruxelles-Ville (2009) and Molenbeek (2010).



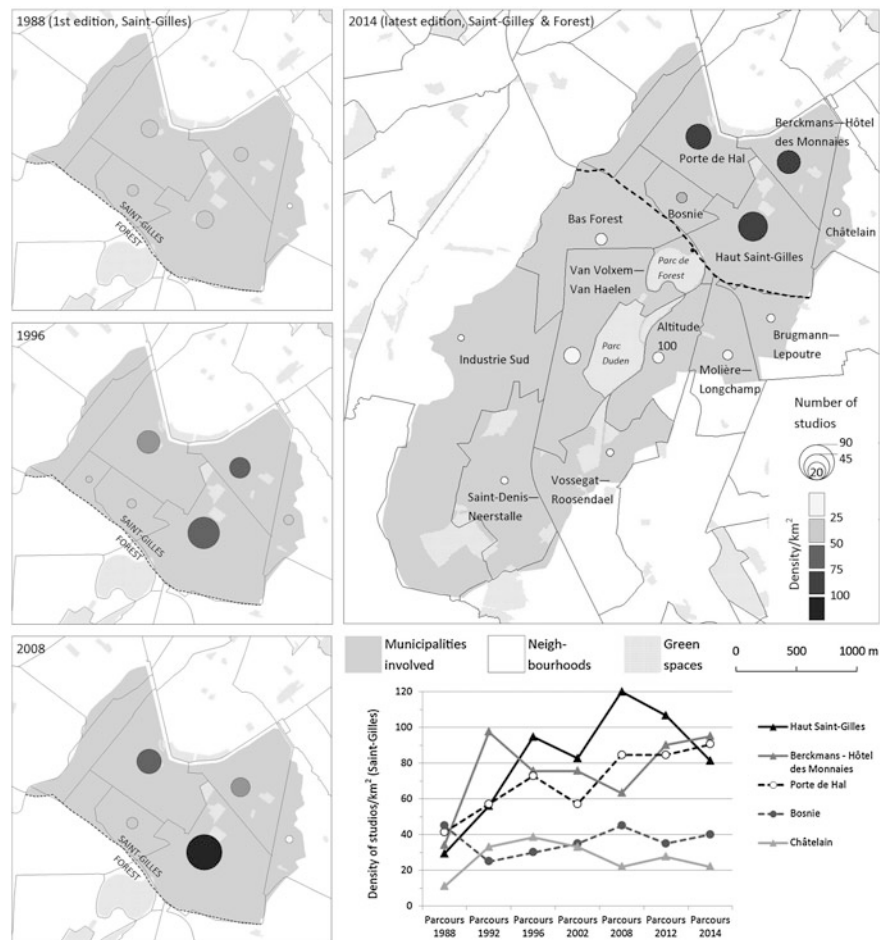
**Fig. 2.3** Advertising for the *Parcours d'artistes*: color marks on the studios' doors and posters in public space. *Source* Tatiana Debroux (May 2014 and May 2012)

400 artists showed their work. During three weekends of the event, 25,000 people bought the badge and programme.

Looking at the location of studios and other places opened to visitors during different editions of *Parcours* (Fig. 2.4), the geography of the event is obviously concentrated in the upper half of the locality. Almost each year, the biggest concentrations of studios to visit are located in the spatial entities 'Haut Saint-Gilles' and 'Berckmans-Hôtel des Monnaies'. More precisely, some streets concentrate the artists' studios: the surroundings of the City Hall, Rue de la Victoire and Rue du Métal seem to operate as magnets for visual artists (Fig. 2.5). In these streets actually, the situation is even more significant, because several dots represent collective workplaces where more than one artist works and shows his/her works.

As the programme has developed, the neighbourhood of 'Porte de Hal' has begun to gain importance notably due to the number of art studios located in its eastern part (close to the Parvis and Rue du Fort/Rue Dethy). There are fewer places to visit in the western part of the neighbourhood, and in the lower part of the municipality more generally. How can this be understood, particularly given that the urban infrastructure in this lower area offers larger spaces<sup>5</sup> (warehouses,

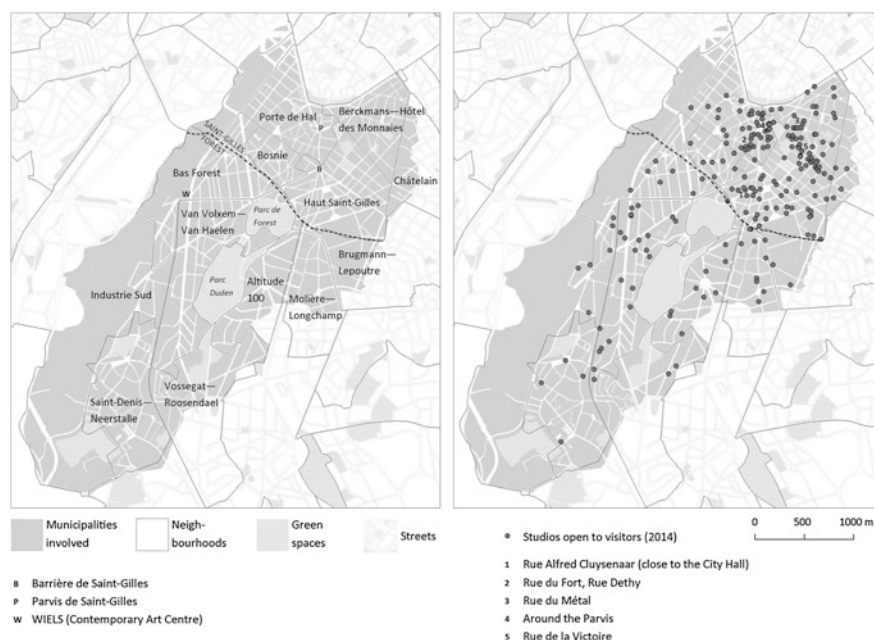
<sup>5</sup>Therefore, the maps might conceal an important number of artists working at a same address. Furthermore, between the upper and lower parts of the municipality, there is maybe a functional difference—artists living (and working) in the first, when they mostly work in the latter.



**Fig. 2.4** Location of the artists' studios and the collective exhibition spaces open during several editions of the event *Parcours d'artistes* (1988–2014, the latest edition when the text was being written). *Source* Own elaboration based on catalogues of the biennials *Parcours d'artistes*

buildings of former light industry inside interior courtyards), and at lower prices than in the upper neighbourhood?

On one hand, it is possible that there is no 'accumulation effect' as the collective workplaces existing in this part of the locality are sometimes defined by nomadic behavior (e.g. *Bouillon Kube*, whose address changed regularly in the catalogues) and are often fragile (unless they are supported by another structure as the BAF is by SMart). They may cease their activities rapidly (e.g. *De la Charge* gathered 19 artists at Rue Verhaegen but closed in April 2015 after three years of existence). On the other hand, artists showing their works in the lower part of Saint-Gilles may be less prone to open their studio as the number of visitors is significantly lower. The



**Fig. 2.5** Detailed location of studios and exhibition spaces open during the double Parours in Saint-Gilles and Forest in 2014. *Source* Own elaboration based on the Catalogue of the biennial Parours d'artistes, 2014; UrbIS

public seems still reluctant to explore those neighbourhoods and to go beyond the 'psychological barrier' established between the two halves of Saint-Gilles, as the director of the local Cultural Department defines it.

If it is not easy to have information on the visitors' profiles, some surveys indicated that the public is coming not only from Saint-Gilles but from the all BCR and beyond, Belgium and foreign countries. Parours d'artistes has become a popular art biennial: visiting the municipality when it is happening adds some artistic experience to the visit of the local heritage and trendy cafés located in Saint-Gilles. The fame of the biennial is also linked to its twinning with similar events organised in neighbouring countries, allowing some artists to show their work abroad and the public to discover other artists' neighbourhoods outside their own city. In 2012, the guest neighbourhood was Belleville in Paris, long known for its creative dynamism and which is very similar to Saint-Gilles regarding the development of gentrification processes (Gravereau 2008).

However, new formula was implemented during the edition of 2014. The twinning was made with another municipality of Brussels named Forest, which is located south of Saint-Gilles. This is very interesting because it is the result of a political agreement between the two municipalities. Even though Forest does not have a proper department for culture (but a proactive Department of Flemish Affairs), some active arts institutions are located there, such as Wiels—the Centre

for Contemporary Art in Brussels—and the cultural centre BRASS. For several years, these institutions expressed the wish to organise joint events between municipalities only separated by administrative boundaries, but sharing similar populations. The administrations of Saint-Gilles and Forest responded to the request of local cultural institutions by signing a collaboration agreement that was mainly expressed in a double *Parcours d'artistes*.

This new formula seemed to be a success, with many artists from Forest taking part in the new event. The public however restricted its visits to the studios located closest to Saint-Gilles. And what authorities of Saint-Gilles discovered during this year's *Parcours*, is that some studios that were formerly located in their municipality moved to adjacent neighbourhoods in Forest, where urban environment is alike but real estate prices are lower.<sup>6</sup>

Since the early beginnings of these 'open studios days', the authorities have supported *Parcours d'artistes*. In fact, they even co-organised the event with the association 'Rencontres Saint-Gilloises', and with the help of professional curators who were supposed to give some coherence to collective exhibitions (individual artists were free to show whatever they wanted in their studios). Authorities wanted the event to be festive and open to participation of both professional and non-professional artists. The main idea was to generate encounters between people rather than high quality artistic discoveries. However, this freedom left to participants is one of the main criticisms expressed by artists or even by some of the people in charge of the organisation.

The first sort of complaints is related to the very open format of the event. Rather than an opportunity for cultural democratisation where visitors and inhabitants can access contemporary creation through quality works exhibited in good conditions, it is a cultural democracy that anyone can introduce themselves as a painter, sculptor or photographer. Therefore, for some professional artists, taking part in *Parcours d'artistes* is seen as something that could discredit their career, as their works would be mixed with those of non-professional artists. Due to the philosophy of the event, the quality of the works is always uneven, and not many gallery owners do visit the studios (or take part in the programme). Outside of the voyeuristic side of the *Parcours* (letting people inside one's home or studio), the event is not directly beneficial to the careers of professional artists, and for some, this is a reason for not being involved.

As someone no longer taking part in the *Parcours* pointed:

I took part twice in the biennial in Saint-Gilles. [...] I welcomed 300 people in one weekend, but most of them were voyeurs, people who came to see the space where the artist works, not the studios. We're lacking artists' studios in Brussels; a lot of artists work in a kitchen, a dining room, a bedroom, a cellar. This is the reason why I didn't participate [in

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<sup>6</sup>It was also the main information selected by a journalist who gave coverage to the event for the local TV channel *Télé Bruxelles*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cT71XLKG9wE>. Unless following the addresses of each participant in the *Parcours* since its beginning, this shift towards the municipality of Forest—however interesting and meaningful—cannot be proved on the maps presented in this paper.

the Parours] anymore, because people aren't respectful of the places where they are welcomed. The general public I mean, parents who brought in strollers, children eating ice cream ... (Interview with a visual artist, April 2006, quoted in Debroux 2006—translated).

Another criticism concerns the political 'hijacking' that some of the participants noticed or felt. More than an artistic event organised to offer more visibility and recognition to local artists, Parours d'artistes is one of the tools that the municipality developed in parallel with a broader policy for urban revitalisation. The point is not the art itself, but the social encounters and, more importantly, the reputation and positive image that Saint-Gilles could obtain from such artistic event.

I coordinated the project in 1988 (first edition) and also in 1996 and 1998. [...] One of the reasons I didn't want to take part in the event in 2000 is that [Mayor] Picqué is returning to St-Gilles after being minister at the French Community. It doesn't suit me because *for me he is trying to use this event for electoral purposes*, in a negative sense. [...] I refuse that one uses *art as propaganda instead of trying to serve and help the artists*. (Interview with A. de Wasseige, invited as artistic director of three editions, in Saenz 2001: Appendix 11—translated—my emphasis).

Another participant echoed:

In a way, political authorities try to use artists, and the artists are trying in turn to use political power. [...] Obviously one of the two sides will get more benefits than the other. *Here, Parours d'artistes is more of benefit to political power than to artists*. (Interview with L. Gutierrez quoted in Saenz 2001: Appendix 35—translated—my emphasis).

## Conclusions: 'A Little Soul' for Great Urban Expectations

Several aspects of Saint-Gilles' cultural dynamism and reputation make it a unique municipality in the BCR when it comes to art. Because of the presence of many cultural actors and institutions in a small area, some of them present for a very long time, highly dense networks exist between artists and associations. Aside from the visibility that artistic creation can have in public spaces (which is more often mediated through other actors, such as art galleries or art institutions), these networks can translate into specific initiatives that reinforce the arts scene. Initiated by a cultural association, Parours d'artistes is one of these initiatives that ensue from local dynamism. However, it was always financed and co-organised by the municipal authorities. Its underlying objectives were not only to support and encourage local artistic creation but also to make Saint-Gilles visible and improve its image. Doing so, the mayor used the cultural event as a tool in his urban redevelopment policies in order to attract wealthier inhabitants. Alain Hutchinson, another well-known figure in the municipality and in the BCR, alderman and cofounder of the association 'Rencontres Saint-Gilloises', stated:

In the early 1980s, Saint-Gilles was an abandoned municipality. [...] Since his arrival, Charles Picqué started a vast initiative of urban renewal and financial recovery. [...] As for me, I wanted to add a little soul in order to complete the 'Picqué effect' (Alain Hutchinson, quoted in *Le Soir*, 22 February 1999—translated).



Speaking of instrumentalisation would imply that culture is developed and supported not for its own sake but to pursue other goals. In this case, however, it is not such a black or white question. Although many artists enjoy taking part in *Parcours d'artistes* and can even sometimes benefit from it (by selling works or meeting interested people), it is clear that the extent of its organisation and its political support reflect broader interests placed in culture. Other initiatives exist to support artistic activity within the municipality, such as a weekly legal advice service for artists (<http://stgillesculture.irisnet.be/PERMANENCE-JURIDIQUE-ET-FISCALE-1796>) and the usual cultural programming (<http://stgillesculture.irisnet.be>). However, the only initiative that was directly dedicated to local artists and not towards the public or to improve the cultural image of the municipality rapidly failed. Aware of the challenges that artists meet in finding affordable housing and working spaces, an original initiative was announced in the 1990s on the initiative of the same Hutchinson, who was also cultural councillor in 1989. The idea was to develop a survey of the studios in use by the artists in Saint-Gilles as well as an inventory of all empty spaces suitable for artistic creation. The project never really succeeded though and was rapidly abandoned, showing that it was not really a priority for the local administration. The initiative is forgotten now, even if the people in charge of the local Cultural Department admitted during the interviews that such a tool would be very useful to answer the needs expressed by local artists.

As it appears with the failure of this initiative or in the goals pursued by the authorities in the organisation of *Parcours d'artistes*, culture here is merely used as a convenient 'varnish' in political campaigns or in order to influence the image of the locality beyond its boundaries. Capitalising on the old reputation of Saint-Gilles as a haven for artists, since the end of the 1980s, local authorities supported the local scene as one of the tools of their urban renewal policy. Doing so, they intended to impose a new image for a territory that was considered a derelict area, combining economic incentives for new inhabitants with (much less expensive) promotion of an artistic atmosphere valued by the incoming households.

Twenty years later, Saint-Gilles is seen as one of the trendiest places to live in Brussels for young educated adults, with its always-increasing offer of cafés and markets, its proximity to the city centre, its art schools and cultural institutions.

Far from the simplistic approach of artists as pioneers of urban redevelopment, this case study (emblematic for Brussels) shows that the gentrification of a historic artists' district does not rely directly on artists. More than just the 'artistic aura' of such a place needs to be encouraged and promoted, in order to be perceived by others than the arts amateurs. There is also need for much stronger incentives than a creative atmosphere to attract more privileged households in a part of the city that they were neglecting for decades. The transformation of Saint-Gilles relies on a combination of interests and initiatives, both public and private, which are part of what Zukin (1982) referred to as the 'artistic mode of production' of places. These include the decisive action of a multitasking political leader regarding public space and housing renewal (local political factor), the current investment of private capital within residential real-estate in the city centre (global economic factor), the location



of the municipality adjacent to the centre and which is part of the mental map of the middle classes (geographical factor), as well as the additional asset of a long-lasting reputation of Saint-Gilles as an artists' district (symbolic factor).

The consequences of renewal policies and of gentrification processes are obvious today in Saint-Gilles, notably on the much praised cultural dynamism of the municipality. In 2001 in the upper side of the locality, art galleries had left the Chaussée de Charleroi that was already too expensive (even if it was not in the centre of Brussels art market). Since then and more importantly, artists have also begun to react to the rise of real-estate prices and competition with residential function (see the example on Fig. 2.6—a real-estate advertisement announced all at once an artist's studio for rent, an apartment/loft for rent (including a private hammam), and a real-estate project where six lofts were to be built, a 'private museum' for exhibition of a private art collection, offices for creative activities and a hanging garden!). As a consequence, artists are moving more and more towards the lower part of the municipality. Some of them have already moved to Forest.

If artists have been concentrated in Saint-Gilles for many decades, it is thanks to the municipality's long lasting reputation as an artists' district (and the symbolic asset of asserting oneself as a professional artist) as well as favorable opportunities regarding spaces to work and live (economic advantage). It was not because artists received incentives from the local authorities, which have, to the contrary, used

**ATELIER Artistes À LOUER**  
 POUR ARTISTES, ARCHITECTES, CREATEUR (pas logement)  
 Concernant le bâtiment situé au 32,34,36 rue du métal à 1060 et gilles. Dans grande FACTORY de 2000 M2  
 Les ateliers doivent être loués pour un minimum de 3 mois au prix ci dessous, dans le cas contraire ( location ponctuelle) les prix ci dessous sont majorés de 20%. Les ateliers peuvent être partagés par deux personnes donc prix divisé en 2 même si vous l'occupez seul dans l'attente d'une autre personne. Les charges restent à par personne - Atelier allant de 30, 40, 50, 100 M2. Possibilité groupe pour étage complet suivant projet. Certains sont fermés, d'autres pas. Prix allant de 160€ à 350€/mois  
 (1) un atelier-logement mais qui peut être habitable - idéal pour architecte et/ou bricoleur - rez de chaussée arrière avec jardin, 60 m2, état brut ( mais isolé, avec gaz et électricité, eau). Très original. 600 €

**APPARTEMENT-LOFT -à louer: 34 rue métal 1060**  
 Rue au croisement rue Hôtel des monnaies/ Rue victoire remonte vers la rue de Bordeaux. 0 50 mètres de la Ch de Charleroi, au dessus du pavé de et gilles ( belle partie vers rue st Bernard)  
 1) Au 34 : grand loft habitable : un grand hall, une très grande pièce ( avec bureau-chambre en mezzanine), un autre grande pièce, et une petite pièce avec mezzanine en plus, une cuisine, une sdb. ( 130 m2) il y a 3 chambres ( 2 chambres + 1 mezzanine), une terrasse. Restauré. Prix 1490/mois  
 2) un flat meublé 2 pièces, cuisine, sdb, full equipment 65 m2 : 850 €/mois mais aussi location courte durée une semaine, un mois, 2 mois, etc...  
 3) Triplex ( partie de maison) avec jardin, 4 chambres + 2 pièces bureau, grand living, 2sdb, hammam, sur 3 étages, cuisine, véranda, etc. 1980 €

**PROJET IMMOBILIER À VENDRE suivant amateurs**  
 Le projet porte uniquement sur la partie arrière située au 32 RUE METAL avec l'entrée de parking et l'accès par le 34 pour la « belle » entrée, soit 1200 M2  
 1) réalisation d'un grand loft d'habitation dans la partie supérieure du bâtiment avec jardin suspendu sur les toits +- 200 m2 (logement, réception, chambre) et avec en dessous la structure pour un musée privé pour exposer une collection d'art privée. Création de lofts (Réhabilitation en logement + musée ou bureau en rez). Création d'un atrium central. Reconversion des caves voûtées ( Gares de caves) pour lieu de fitness, piscine, jacuzzi, etc...  
 Une partie au niveau du rez ou premier peut être réhabilité en pool de bureaux orientés vers le graphisme, l'architecture,  
 Pour contact : envoyé email [pp@immoliv.be](mailto:pp@immoliv.be)  
 Contact : tél: 32/2/5378136 gsm: 32/477/252692

Fig. 2.6 Example of competing functions in a street that hosts many artists' studios in Saint-Gilles, Rue du Métal. Source Tatiana Debroux (May 2013)

their presence to achieve other development goals. The policies developed by local authorities are now lessening the ability for artists to stay in the municipality. In that regard, the story of Saint-Gilles echoes the lifecycle of many artists' districts. This illustrates the complexity of linking cultural initiatives with stronger urban development policies that could benefit from a vivid artistic scene, but that will also quite inevitably make large concentrations of artists disappear if they are not supported by determined actions regarding rent control or providing space for precarious economic activities within the city centre. If not, high might be the risk that the artistic aura so often pointed out (and used) by the authorities and urban developers will transform into nothing more than a convenient memory.

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**Tatiana Debroux** is a geographer, working at Université Libre de Bruxelles. Following the work developed in her Ph.D. on ‘Artists in the city. A retrospective geography of visual artists in Brussels (1833-2008)’, she is interested in the spatial patterns of art creation and consumption (visual artists and artists’ studios, exhibition venues, art galleries, etc.), and more broadly in the links between art, culture and urban renewal processes. She has also worked on representations of the city in literary texts and narrative cartography.

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