

## UPON #3/2023 (EN)

Talk with Geneviève Kinet, Leila Bensalem from les Fé.e.s du Marais (Brussels)

# Resurging bodies of water in urban spaces

The **Marais Wiels** (Wiels Swamp) is an accidental body of water that emerged in 2007 due to the breakthrough of a phreatic table on a construction site located in a flood-prone area. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the site was abandoned, transforming into a pond. Despite its location in a densely populated working-class area susceptible to flooding, the swamp has developed a remarkably abundant biodiversity, creating a captivating natural landscape. Located at the lowest point of a valley that was once home to a brewery industry, the Wiels Swamp also serves as a water storage basin. Since 2015, a group of citizens known as Les Fé.e.s du Marais (the fairies of the swamp) has been safeguarding the site. In 2021, the local administrative division (the Région) acquired the property with intentions to construct new infrastructure. This poses a significant threat to the body of water and its ecosystem, putting them in jeopardy.

**Lorene:** Welcome, Geneviève and Leila, co-founders of Fé.e.s. du arais. Let's start by discussing the layout of the body of water. Could you provide an overview, and perhaps share your thoughts on the progress made in your ongoing efforts?

**Geneviève:** The water that surfaced following the piercing of the clay layer beneath the rubble was remarkably clean as it came from the water table. It was already oxygenated due to several accidental holes allowing water to circulate. The ground consisted of rubble here and concrete there, and marshy soil elsewhere. Ten years later, in 2017, the developer returned with a housing project, disregarding the presence of the nearby body of water. For both the developer and the Brussels Région along with public authorities, it was considered an accidental flood, so they do not recognize the biodiversity that had established itself. This marked the beginning of a determined citizen-led opposition for various reasons: originally, Brussels was constructed on water, and it featured marshes, groundwater, small streams and the Senne River was not covered. As it is mostly covered now, it is consistently contaminated by sewage. Currently, there is no separation between this sewage and rainwater. Prioritising integrated rainwater management and the separation of clean and dirty water has become crucial. Polluted water not only harms and diminishes biodiversity in the stream but it also contributes to the contamination of the sea. We have the same issue with sewage treatment plants. When there's heavy rain, they can't handle all the water, so the polluted water goes back into the rivers and ends up in the sea. The Marais Wiels neighbourhood lies at the bottom of the valley. It's a working-class area where homes are mainly occupied by lower-income families and basements often get flooded. Additionally, there's a lack of green spaces and a significant mobility problem with a lot of traffic.

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In 2019, we started organising "Dirty Parties" (community cleaning sessions), and over time, the owner got tired of it. The Région ended up buying the land for 8 million



euros. According to a political agreement at the time of the purchase, the plan is to build around 80 apartments by draining a significant part of the water and creating a 1000 m<sup>2</sup> playground. The Swamp area is about one hectare, not huge, but it's crucial as a habitat for a balanced ecosystem. So despite the purchase, we continued our fight, this time against the public authorities represented by the regional government. Currently, it's still not

officially recognized as a body of water, and it remains a construction zone. However, in reality, it's undeniably a body of water. That's our current struggle.

**Lorene:** The water that came up is ancient groundwater, giving immense ecological value to the site because clean waters are becoming increasingly rare. In our previous conversation, you mentioned that the swamp site was relatively hidden for several years, hence not well-known to the Brussels public. How did the Fé.e.s du Marais and the Marais Wiels Moeras association form, and how did the citizens involved in these initiatives mobilise and organise?

**Geneviève:** In 2013, before discovering the Swamp, residents of the neighbourhood had already formed an informal association as a neighbourhood committee to promote urban walking and create a sense of well-being in a somewhat lifeless area. Our actions gained a lot of sympathy. When we found this body of water during a walk, we immediately shared it on the neighbourhood's Facebook page. It caught the attention of many curious people. Soon after, we met a naturalist who had conducted a survey of the fauna and flora on the site in 2015. He shared his knowledge and passion with us. We started organising guided tours around the fauna and flora. Knowing about an upcoming construction project, we began lobbying local and regional authorities to find out what was happening and if the body of water would be protected. The naturalist named his report 'le Marais du Wiels' because the biodiversity of this place resembled that of a swamp. That's how we quickly started calling this place "Marais Wiels," with "Wiels" from the nearby Wiels Contemporary Art Center (and Wiels is also the name of a Pils beer brewed by the Wielemans brewery).

**Naming the pond helped give it an identity and increasingly assert that this place existed, not just as a puddle or a flood.** We created the Marais Wiels Facebook group, where we communicate a lot. We started organising citizen exhibitions, we distributed

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postcards as if the place had an official existence. We played with the concept of "the place that doesn't exist but actually does." We created a logo, started merchandising, and spread it everywhere. Then came the cleaning sessions. This place had been abandoned for ten years but was also inhabited by homeless individuals. They had a lot of waste, and no one was taking care of it, leading to groundwater pollution. Every Sunday in 2019, we organised "Dirty Parties" where people came to clean the Swamp. It was a remarkable collective activist effort that gained press coverage. The Wiels Swamp became more known, and the owner got tired of it, seeing it as a kind of territorial occupation. We talk about a ZAD (Zone À Défendre): Zone To Defend. **Well, our way to defend it wasn't by living in it but by cleaning, cherishing, and maintaining it.** After that, we created the non-profit association Marais Wiels Moeras, which is a legal entity that can be covered by insurance, apply for subsidies, etc.



**Lorene:** In our previous conversation, you mentioned that the Marais is a place that hasn't been widely discovered yet, with areas sealed in concrete and others left open.

**Geneviève:** Yes, the ground in the Marais is completely uneven. Some parts may be paved with concrete, while others are covered in rubble, and there's a

section of the water feature that resembles more of a swamp. There, the ground consists more of soil and humus, meaning there are still many natural or reclaimed natural areas. The government seems to only recognize the deep part of the water feature as a "pond," which actually corresponds to the planned underground parking. Looking at construction images from 2007/2008, you can see a part where concrete is mixed with rubble. It's pretty messy. We've never had access to analyses or a thorough study; we rely on the information we've gathered. It would have been interesting to know how much of the surface is rubble, whether there are really concrete areas given the decontamination. During construction, real estate developers might have had to dig and remove some rubble from part of the space, but we don't know the details. There are a lot of macroinvertebrates, indicating very good water quality (perhaps the best among Brussels water features). Then, animals feed on them, settle, and nest, such as the great crested grebe. There are also quite a few fish, attracting birds like cormorants and grey herons.

**Lorene:** We discussed the need to protect clean water spaces, which are becoming increasingly rare, and the resurgence of bodies of water in cities. What are the challenges surrounding the role of water in urban spaces and flood prevention?

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**Leila:** When it comes to water, it's a bit of a paradox, isn't it? Planning to build on water while in all European cities the focus is on having more water in the city. In Brussels, the Senne is being reopened meanwhile right here in the Marais there is better quality water than the Senne or any other one in Brussels. And still, the plans to build on it persist. There are so many more reasons to fight for the resurgent waters in urban areas than to build on them. The area around the Marais is completely waterproof, as more than 85% of the surface is sealed. So obviously, this place needs open spaces and water, amongst others for the cooling effect against the heating of sealed areas. The marsh allows the development and recurrence of an ecosystem and biodiversity. It absorbs carbon. It is positive for mental health, in general for health. It brings in contextual pedagogy, we can learn from it and develop further on ecosystems, water cycle, fauna and flora, climate etc. It has an impact on the water cycle, as it acts as a retention basin like at Floating University: it prevents the overflow of polluted waters into the rivers. As Geneviève said, it is a bit less than one hectare but it has a high potential as a retention basin.

**Lorene:** This urban wetland was not planned by humans. It emerged, claiming space and legacy to exist there, in that particular space without destroying anything that isn't replaceable. Instead of understanding the land as capital, the resurgent ecosystem could be recognized as an entity that has a right to live and thrive there. Water always travels up finding its way back to the surface, if not on site there, then somewhere else. How do the members of Les Fé.e.s approach the issues of urban flooding and the preservation of living soils in the context of Brussels?

**Leila:** It has been pumped formerly and the water always goes up so you can pump out and pump out and it will keep coming up. When it rains, the water level rises and then recedes. It is never overflowed. In times of droughts, it recedes. But that's all. It's still there. It's always there. So it's very difficult for us to see that the local authorities might want to build on it. There are lots of empty buildings and spaces in Brussels. And of course, the rents are going up, increasing all the time. We're not at the levels of some European capitals, but still it's becoming harder and harder for standard citizens here in Brussels to find affordable housing. We participate in certain public events like the "Brussels Water Days". We do guided tours and exploratory walks with specific local associations that work with water. We maintain a presence in the neighbourhood to stay updated on water related issues such as floodings in



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residential areas. It seems that we have more awareness than the local authorities. We also initiate and organise certain events ourselves. All of this is aimed at making it a recognized issue and raising awareness. Some people believed that the floods were only occurring in their area and not realising that it affected their neighbours just one street over. As we receive more updates, we come to realise that flooded housing is a widespread problem. Our perspective is to view water as an opportunity, and encourage people to see it differently as well. Water will be there, whatever we do. So it's preferable to keep it an area where it is ought to be rather than having flooding basements. **Simultaneously, we advocate for the preservation of living soils and have co-founded the association We Are Nature.brussels.**

We might take legal action against the Brussels government because we have requested adherence to a moratorium on building on living soil, but this request has clearly been overlooked. Neither individuals nor local authorities should construct on living soils, but rather safeguard and protect them.

**Lorene:** The Fé.e.s du Marais organise themselves informally. What are the activities of the Fé.e.s and regular collaborations with other agents that take place?

**Geneviève:** For the past year, we've been maintaining the reed bed which naturally dries up. **When a swamp disappears naturally, it turns into a forest and another swamp is born somewhere else. The problem is, there's no room for another swamp to emerge since everything is paved over. That's one of the reasons we want to keep this place as a wetland.** For reed bed management, we adapt to the seasons. It's only during winter that we maintain the reed bed, meaning we cut it. This winter, we'll continue, maybe with the help of a draft horse since we also need to remove tree stumps. After maintaining the reed bed, some of us harvested the reeds and made prototype insulation panels using reeds and clay. Ideally, we'd like to work with what's already on-site; there's clay in the soil and an abandoned building that could be transformed. Our dream would be to work in circular renovation. Then, once every two weeks, informal meetings "Cafés Marais" take place outside, on-site, or in cafes during winter. Anyone is welcome to join to get updates, discuss Marais-related matters, strategies, upcoming events, progress...With two artist brothers who also happen to be amateur biologists, we conduct a monthly participatory workshop on the living world in the water called "Le Monde sous-Marais," focusing on



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macroinvertebrates. Authorities planning to build on water should ideally do these kinds of surveys, but they either don't do them or not in-depth. These artists also collaborate with academics. All these moments are moments of meetings and they occur very regularly. As Leila just mentioned, we collaborate with other associations defending nature or working on water-related themes in Brussels. In 2022, we teamed up with an association defending Brussels' living soils, and every month, we organised a walk around the sites. This led to a delightful and festive parade of 1000 people who came to walk and expressed their desire to preserve the entirety of Marais Wiels. Meanwhile, the site is gradually managed bit by bit by the environmental administration, with whom we try to engage in dialogue because even their small actions result in a loss of biodiversity and wild nature. Urbanisation is slowly creeping into the site whereas the Marais should be the one spreading into the urban areas especially since the Région aims to green the streets.

**Lorene:** What are your plans for alliances with other emerging water sites on an international scale and what is your vision for these alliances?

**Geneviève:** As we've been meeting people and discussing the Marais, we heard about Lago Bullicante in Rome, an abandoned industrial site. Back in the 1950s or 1960s, a developer wanted to build a shopping centre and accidentally pierced the water table during construction. They too had heard about the Marais Wiels, and we decided to collaborate, combining our knowledge, experiences and strategies to offer an international dimension to the effort of safeguarding and even enhancing these bodies of water emerging amid urban areas. Over time, we realised there are many more similar locations, and we started reaching out to them: there is Laguna de Ambroz in Madrid, a former sandpit that has been rewilding since 2007. This is a case of groundwater seepage due to mining activity near the city centre. There are others in Bucharest, Krakow, Kiev, Marseille, Canada... So we started a twinning last year with Lago Bullicante. This coming Sunday, on September 17, Lago Bullicante from Rome will come to Brussels for an alliance ritual. Madrid might also join us online. With such initiatives, we aim to establish a kind of federation of resurgent waters in urban areas for which we are still seeking a name. The thing is, **there has to be a community that feels connected to the place, in a working-class area, there has to be a strong water dynamic – the power of water returning and contributing to the emergence of ecological and social dynamics that shape an ecosystem.**

Perhaps together, we will find ways of managing it. Once we defend it, we also need to consider how we will manage it because having the administration manage the site may not be ideal. We envision a Commons, a haven for both humans and non-humans.

We would like this federation to be the initiation of something collective, by and for the common. In Brussels, there are politicians who want to defend the Marais, and they rely on us. Politics needs citizens to speak up. It's crucial to do that, whether it's us

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or others, but citizens need to take matters into their own hands. Otherwise, there are already other lobbies, like the construction industry, that are there and wield much more power, backed by substantial budgets.

Lorene: Thank you Geneviève and Leila!

Hybrid Talk with Geneviève Kinet, Leila Bensalem from les Fé.e.s du Marais Wiels Moeras (Bruxelles) and Lorene Blanche Goesele. The talk took place on September 6th at Floating University (Berlin).

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UPON is a series of talks that reflects on urban practices from an inclusive, multilingual, context bound and feminist perspective. As a platform for reciprocal exchange and collective research about urban practices in an international context, UPON connects artists, urbanists and activists around the world.

UPON is curated and organised by Lorene Blanche Goesele (transformation architect and transdisciplinary artist) and Valeria Schwarz (artist, curator, art mediator and mother).

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