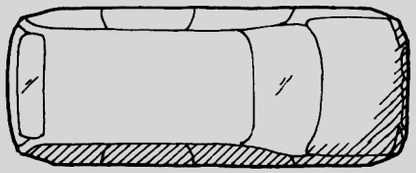
unfolding
rue
heyvaert

the life of a car



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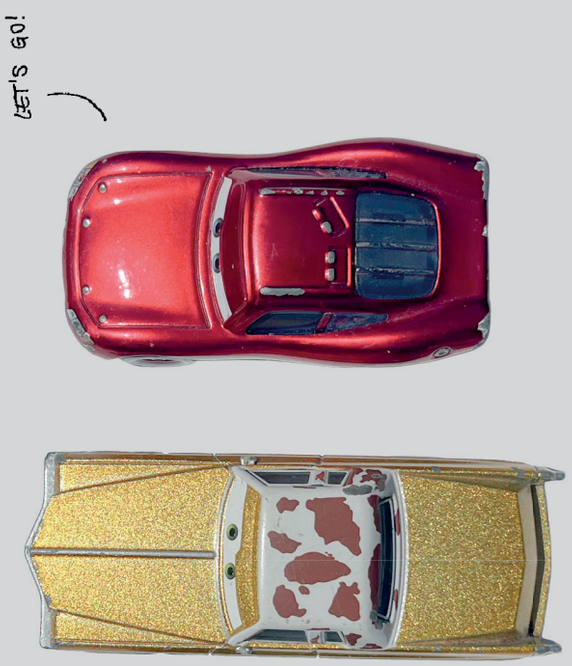
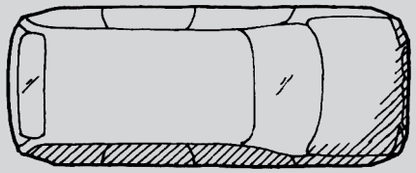
mare hogenelst
merel garritsen

research report 25-26


LET'S GO!
READY?



TU Delft

DAAN STEKETEE
MARE HOGENELST
MEREL GARRITSEN

research report

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Msc. Architecture

2025 - 2026

All images, figures and diagrams in this report are produced by the author, unless stated otherwise. Every attempt has been made to correctly refer to material that is not made by author.

This series of drawings has been produced as part of the field research within the Urban Architecture graduation studio.

The abundance of vehicles within the Heyvaert district in Brussels thematically inspired the storyline of this sequence. It aims to explain the intricate details of the second-hand vehicle trade within the Heyvaert neighbourhood, following its complex structures across the globe. The central image of the car symbolises a constant factor, while its social and physical environment continuously change. It is both an object and a catalyst within larger economic, spatial and social systems, addressing both opportunities and vulnerabilities. This type of product allowed the combination of statistics, historical research and field observation, generating a very complete image of this trading process within this particular area.

A CAR IS BORN

OVER 95% OF THE ASSEMBLY PROCESS OF A NEW CAR IS DONE BY ROBOTS

NO HUMANS ALLOWED

WOOOOSHH

24/7 PRODUCTION

60.000 SEPARATE PART SUPPLIERS ALL COLLABORATE TO EVENTUALLY CREATE A SINGLE VEHICLE

AFTER THE MAIN PARTS ARE ASSEMBLED THEY ARE SPRAY-PAINTED BY A PAIR OF ADVANCED ROBOTS

THE LIFECYCLE OF A CAR STARTS IN A FACTORY. AUTOMATED ROBOTIC ARMS WILL PRECISELY ASSEMBLE THE DIFFERENT PARTS, SHAPING THE VEHICLE PIECE BY PIECE. THE COLOUR, INTERIOR, AND ENGINE TYPE DEFINE ITS FINAL IDENTITY.

DON'T YOU GET SICK OF DOING THE SAME TASK EVERY DAY?

ASSEMBLYLINEASSEMBLYLINEASSEMBLYLINE

BIG GLASS WALLS LET LIGHT IN

15°

AIRCONDITIONING TO COMPENSATE THE LARGE AMOUNT OF GLASS.

IT'S PERFECT FOR A BABY SEAT

THIS ONE IS A BIT EXPENSIVE FOR OUR SMALL FAMILY

SPINNING SPINNING SPINNING

RUSH HOUR RITUAL

BRUSSELS POSESSES ONE OF THE MOST CONGESTED ROAD NETWORKS GLOBALLY, A CONDITION ATTRIBUTABLE TO HIGH LEVELS OF PRIVATE CAR OWNERSHIP, PERSISTENT ROAD CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES, AND SUBSTANTIAL FREIGHT TRAFFIC ASSOCIATED WITH THE PORT OF ANTWERP

LOW EMISSION ZONE SINCE 2018

261.000.000 TONNES OF GOODS ARE TRANSPORTED BY TRUCK IN BELGIUM ON A YEARLY BASIS. BRUSSELS IS A MAJOR TRANSPORT HUB FOR GOODS, IT MOSTLY RELIES ON TRUCKS.

BRUSSELS IS THE 30TH MOST CONGESTED CITY IN THE WORLD

BEEEEEEEEEP

BEEEEEEEEEP

BANG!

AAAAAAHH!

GOOD FOR 24% OF TOTAL EMISSIONS

IN EUROPE, THERE IS ONE CAR FOR EVERY TWO PEOPLE

MOST CARS ONLY CONTAIN ONE PERSON

POLITICIANS HAVE TO BE ESCORTED TO AND FROM THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

OFTEN WITH A PRIVATE CHAUFFEUR

PER 100 KM OF ROAD IN BRUSSELS THERE WILL BE AN AVERAGE OF 122 ACCIDENTS, WITH 5.8 VICTIMS ANNUALLY.

WHO WILL CLEAN UP THIS MESS?

HI MUM, EHH, I JUST CRASHED THE CAR...

THIS AMBULANCE IS SAVING LIVES

VRRRRRRRRRRRR

VRRRRRRRRRRR

BEEEEEEEEEP

WHEN USING THE BRUSSELS ROAD NETWORK DAILY, ONE WOULD EXPERIENCE 110 HOURS OF CONGESTION ANNUALLY

HOTEL

STREETS ARE PREDOMINANTLY OCCUPIED BY MEN. THIS CAN COME ACROSS AS INTIMIDATING.

RESIDENTS WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE BUSINESSES THAT CATER TO A BROADER AUDIENCE.

3200.

2700?

EXPLOITATIVE LANDLORDS DIVIDE THEIR DWELLINGS INTO MULTIPLE UNITS TO HOUSE MORE TENANTS.

ARE YOU PAID ENOUGH FOR BELGIAN STANDARDS?

CLOSELY INSPECTING THE VEHICLE

HEYVAERT HASSLE

THE ABSENCE OF AUTHORITIES AND OFFICIALS RESULTS IN TAX EVASION, FENCING AND A LOT OF BLACK WORK FOR NEWCOMERS.

I USE THIS INFORMAL ECONOMY OUT OF NECESSITY, AS I DO NOT HAVE ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS.

VULNERABLE NEWCOMERS CAN BE EXPLOITED FOR THEIR LABOUR

A POLICE INTERVENTION IN 2025 RESULTED IN 45 STOLEN VEHICLES IMPOUNDED, €200.000,- IN CASH CEIZED, 10 BUSINESSES CLOSED.

I HAVE NO INCENTIVE TO LEARN FRENCH OR DUTCH.

STRICT RULES MAKE IT HARDER FOR BUSINESSES TO CORRECTLY WORK WITHIN THE SYSTEM, AS CASH PAYMENTS ARE LIMITED TO €3000,-

NEGATIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE AUTHORITIES EMPHASISE MISTRUST IN OFFICIALS.

GARAGE

HEYVAERT HUSTLE

ANYONE CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS INFORMAL MARKET, GENERATING STEPPING STONES FOR NEWCOMERS TOWARDS THE FORMAL ECONOMY.

HOTEL

MALE COMMISSION WORKERS LINE THE STREETS AND ARE IMPORTANT FOR THE SOCIAL SECURITY OF THE AREA.

BUSINESSES ARE CATERED TOWARDS AFRICAN CAR IMPORTERS WHO VISIT THE AREA TO BUY VEHICLES.

3200.

2700?

HOUSING IS AFFORDABLE HERE; NEWCOMERS CAN RENT SMALL APARTMENTS QUICKLY.

YOU DO NOT NEED ANY OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION, MY FRIEND.

CLOSELY INSPECTING THE VEHICLE

NEWCOMERS CAN FIND WORK AND GET PAID WITHOUT DOCUMENTATION.

I USE THIS INFORMAL ECONOMY AS A TEMPORARY SOLUTION BEFORE MOVING ON TO BETTER OPPORTUNITIES.

A POLICE INTERVENTION IN 2025 RESULTED IN 45 STOLEN VEHICLES IMPOUNDED, €200.000,- IN CASH CEIZED, 10 BUSINESSES CLOSED.

I AM GLAD WE ALREADY SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE!

STRICT RULES MAKE IT HARDER FOR ILLEGITIMATE BUSINESSES TO ABUSE THE SYSTEM, AS CASH PAYMENTS ARE LIMITED TO €3000,-

TOP-DOWN AUTHORITIES ENFORCE VERY STRICT REGULATIONS IN THE VEHICLE TRADE.

GARAGE

MORPHO-LOGIES OF MOTION

MOVEMENT IS A CONSTANT IN THE HEYVAERT QUARTIER. NEW ARRIVALS MOVE INTO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AS OTHERS LEAVE. A STEADY FLOW OF VEHICLES IS BOUGHT AND SOLD. THERE IS NO ROOM FOR NATURAL FLOWS HERE.

THE STREET FUNCTIONS AS AN EXTENSION OF THE WORKPLACE

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE.

THIS SIDE IS LOCATED IN MOLENBEEK, THEY JUST PICKED UP THE TRASH

THIS SIDE IS LOCATED IN ANDERLECHT, THEY WILL COLLECT THE TRASH LATER THIS WEEK.

THERE ARE SO MANY RESTAURANTS THAT SERVE THE BEST FOOD FROM BACK HOME

YOU CAN PARK INSIDE

MY VEHICLE DID NOT PASS THE LATEST REGULATION CHECK, SO I WOULD LIKE TO SELL IT TO YOU

THESE CAR EXPORT BUSINESSES REACH DEEP INTO THE URBAN BLOCK. WITHIN THIS DEEP SPACE, HUNDREDS OF VEHICLES ARE STORED, AWAITING TO BE EXPORTED.

WHERE CAN I PARK MY CAR?

THE CAR TRADE CAUSES A LOT OF CONGESTION PROBLEMS

THE BRANCHES ON THIS SIDE HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE AMOUNT OF HEAVY CARGO TRAFFIC.

SOME EVEN LIVE ON THE STREETS!

MANY SOCIAL AGENCIES PROVIDE HELP TO THE VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN THIS NEIGHBOURHOOD.

TENT?!?!

KARIM EXPORT

BUTCHER'S BOULEVARD

OWNERS OF FACTORIES LIVED IN CLOSE PROXIMITY OF THEIR WAREHOUSES

BUTCHERS WORKED ON THE STREET AS WELL.

CONCRETE FLOORS MADE CLEANING EASIER.

WORKERS DISPOSE OF THE BLOOD AND WASTE ON THE PUBLIC STREETS

IT MUST SMELL VERY NICE THERE...

HIDES ARE TURNED INTO LEATHER

TO THE ABATTOIR

THE HEYVAERT QUARTIER DEVELOPED ALONG THE RIVER ZENNE DURING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION. AFTER THE ABATTOIR RELOCATED THERE IN 1970, A LOT OF INDUSTRIAL WERE TRANSFORMED TO SUIT THE MEAT INDUSTRY, HOUSING BUTCHERS, LEATHERWORKERS AND CANDLEMAKERS.

HENRY FORD'S ASSEMBLY LINE WAS INSPIRED BY THE EFFICIENCY OF THE SLAUGHTER LINE

HYGIENE PROBLEMS LEAD TO STRICTER LAWS IN 1970. THIS CAUSED THE MEAT INDUSTRY TO DISAPPEAR AND MAKE WAY FOR THE CAR INDUSTRY.

THE BUTCHERS CARRY PIECES OF MEAT ON THEIR BACKS.

OF COURSE!

CAN I GET SOME CHOESLES?

HOW MUCH DOES ONE COW COST?

ANIMAL FATS ARE USED FOR CANDLE MAKING

SALE AND STORAGE

TWO TYPES OF PRACTICES CAN BE DISTINGUISHED IN THE HEYVAERT QUARTIER. ONE ROOTED IN TRUST AND REPUTATION, ANOTHER BASED ON INDIVIDUALITY AND CONTROL. BOTH DIRECTLY AFFECT THE CAR EXPORT BUSINESS ON A GLOBAL LEVEL.

THESE COMMISSION WORKERS ARE THE EYES ON THE STREETS

GARAGE HOLDERS IN HEYVAERT MAINLY SELL THEIR VEHICLES TO AFRICAN AND LEBANESE CAR IMPORTERS WHO REDISTRIBUTE THEM LOCALLY.

READY TO BE SHIPPED OFF!

NEW BELGIAN LAWS LIMIT CASH TRANSACTIONS AT €3000,-

LEBANESE MIGRANTS STILL DOMINATE THE TRADE

CAN I PAY IN CASH?

HOW DO YOU FIT SO MANY CARS IN HERE?

I DO NOT HAVE A BELGIAN BANK ACCOUNT

HOW DID THIS CAR EVEN GET HERE?!?

NO KEY!

VRRRRRRRRR

THIS 1M² WILL COST ALI €12,- IN ANNUAL TAXES

SHIPPING TO TOGO

BROKEN WINDOWS

SHIPPING TO LEBANON

THIS AMBULANCE WON'T SAVE ANY MORE LIVES

THE HEYVAERT CAR TRADE INDUSTRY HOSTS AROUND 1200 JOBS

12K

I WOULD LIKE TO BUY 14 CARS THIS TRIP.

I TRAVELLED FROM BENIN TO HEYVAERT TO INSPECT AND PURCHASE VEHICLES. I WILL STAY 3 TO 6 WEEKS.

450K

KRRRR

BRABUS

IT HAS BEEN PURCHASED BY THE LEADER OF AN AFRICAN COUNTRY

PARKING SKILLS 10/10

DOES NOT WORK!

FLAT TIRE

SHIPPING TO BENIN

COMMISSION WORKERS COME TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD EVERYDAY TO LOOK FOR TASKS LIKE CLEANING, MOVING VEHICLES AND FULFILLING AN INTERMEDIARY ROLE BETWEEN BUYER AND SELLER.

PERMANENT WATER DAMAGE

SHIPPING TO LEBANON

PING!

THE OFFICE

LEBANESE GARAGE HOLDERS RELY ON A TRADE DIASPORA BASED ON TRUST, ENFORCED THROUGH REPUTATION AND FAMILY HONOUR.

GOOD AFTERNOON ALI, MY FRIEND. I AM LOOKING FOR A SECOND-HAND TOYOTA HIGHLANDER FROM 2009-2012. THE COLOUR DOES NOT MATTER TO ME. I NEED THE 4-WHEEL DRIVE FOR THE MUDDY ROADS IN MY HOME COUNTRY.

PING!!

BUMPERS

PORT OF ANTWERP - BELGIUM

PORT OF COTONOU - BENIN

THE PORT OF ANTWERP HANDLES 3.3 MILLION CARS IN ONE YEAR.

THE SHIPPING COST PER VEHICLE IS ESTIMATED AROUND €900,-/€1000,-

1.000.000 VEHICLES ARE SHIPPED FROM BELGIUM TO THE AFRICAN CONTINENT EACH YEAR.

THIS NUMBER IS DECREASING

THE VEHICLES ARE USUALLY STUFFED WITH A LOT OF RANDOM ITEMS TO MAKE USE OF THE SHIPPING COSTS.

KARIM EXPORT

COUGH

A LACK OF COORDINATED IMPORT RESTRICTIONS ALLOWS CAR IMPORTERS TO BYPASS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS BY TRADING THROUGH BENIN.

ABOU ZEID

THE VEHICLES SPEND AROUND 3-4 WEEKS AT SEA

THE AVERAGE 'RORO-SHIP' CONTAINS 4000-5000 VEHICLES.

NO KEY

THIS CAR HAS NO KEYS!

BENIN HAS NO IMPORT RESTRICTIONS ON BAD QUALITY VEHICLES.

THESE VEHICLES WILL BE SOLD FOR PARTS

A FORKLIFT IS USED TO MOVE VEHICLES THAT HAVE BROKEN DOWN

MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT GET SEASICK

FOR BENIN

40% OF EMISSIONS IN BENIN ARE A RESULT FROM THE VEHICLE TRADE.

80-90% OF THESE EUROPEAN CARS ARE EXPORTED TO OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES AFTER ARRIVING IN BENIN.

THERE IS 974 HECTARES OF TERMINAL SPACE IN ANTWERP DEDICATED TO THE TRANS-PORT OF VEHICLES.

THE PORT OF BENIN HANDLES AROUND 300.000 VEHICLES EACH YEAR

EUROPE'S CAR GRAVEYARD

SECOND-HAND CAR IMPORTERS ARE A MAJOR PART OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY IN THESE AFRICAN PORT CITIES. CHILDREN WORK AS MECHANICS WHEN THEIR PARENTS CANNOT AFFORD THEIR EDUCATION. THEY START TRADING AND DISMANTLING VEHICLES AS APPRENTICES. THE FUMES HAVE LARGE IMPACTS ON THEIR HEALTH.

IT IS THE BUSINESS CAPITAL OF BENIN.

COTONOU IS A MAJOR THOROUGHFARE FOR SECOND-HAND CARS TO WEST AFRICA.

NEEDS FIXING

7-YEAR OLDS ARE FORCED TO WORK AS A MECHANIC.

FLAT TIRE

DOES NOT START!

WANT TO BUY SOME CAR PARTS?

AFRICA HAS A LARGE MARKET FOR SINGLE CAR PARTS COMING FROM DISASSEMBLED USED CARS

THESE PARTS ARE USED TO FIX UP OTHER SECOND-HAND CARS

NOT EVEN THE ACTUAL CAPITAL!

BUYING USED VEHICLES IS OFTEN THE ONLY VIABLE OPTION IN AFRICA.

THERE IS ONLY ONE CAR FOR EVERY 22 PEOPLE IN AFRICA.

1000 CFA PER BUNCH

TIRES ARE BURNED TO HARVEST AND EXTRACT THE METAL COILS THAT ARE INSIDE. THESE ARE USED TO MAKE HOUSEHOLD ITEMS SUCH AS PANS.

70% OF THE IMPORTED CARS ARE SECOND-HAND.

SOME IMPORTED CARS ARE MISSING THEIR CATALYTIC CONVERTERS, WHICH FICTERS TOXIC GASSES AND CONTROL THE EXHAUST EMISSIONS. THE RARE MINERALS CAN FETCH UP TO $100 ON THE BLACK MARKET.

HOUSEHOLD ITE

HOSPITAL

COUGH

POLLUTED AIR IS CAUSING RISING CASES OF SINUSITIS, AND 30% OF HOSPITAL VISITS ARE RELATED

COUGH

COUGH

AAAAAH!

LONG LINES

CAR CRASHES ARE MORE PROMINENT IN AFRICA, AS WELL AS MORE LETHAL, WITH THREE TIMES AS MANY DEATHS AS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES.

FIRE

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With a special thanks to all the lovely people we spoke to in the Heyvaert neighbourhood.
To Karim, to Ali, to Mohammed.

