

# Urban Traces

## Brussels, the Center of Europe



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In 1996, Belgium's five car plants (Ford Genk, GM-Opel Antwerp, Renault Haren-Vilvoorde, Volvo Ghent, and VW Brussels), produced 1.23 million vehicles and employed 34,000 workers. By 2016, the nation's two remaining auto factories (Audi Brussels and Volvo Ghent) produced just 353,957 cars. In my nine-chapter fourth book, the in progress, Jacobs, A. J. (2019). *Foreign Automakers in Western Europe and EU (Dis) Integration: The Divergent Paths of the Belgian, British, and Spanish Car Industries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, I draw upon on-site field research, interviews, and firm and Eurostat data to compare the impacts of foreign automakers in Belgium, Great Britain, and Spain during the European Union (EU) era.

For example, I delve into how European integration, high wages, and the demise of GM and Ford led to plant closings in Belgium. Meanwhile, lower wages and foreign acquisitions/ expansions have stimulated expansion in the Spanish auto industry, and trade protectionism against Asian imports has led to the savior of the British car industry by Japanese carmakers. Brexit and European disintegration of course potentially threatens these gains in the future. The bulk of the foundation research for this book was conducted between March and June 2017, when I had the honor of serving as a Visiting Research fellow at Vrije Universiteit Brussel's (VUB) Brussels Centre for Urban Studies.



**Renault Haren-Vilvoorde**  
(Waffelman & Quackels, 1983)

Highway R0/E19/E40  
runs over it



I began my stay in Brussels by contacting faculty and industry representatives in an effort to collect population, employment, and production data for areas surrounding the former Renault Vilvoorde, GM-Opel Antwerp, and Ford Genk plants, as well as the still active Audi Brussels in Forest and Volvo Ghent factories.

Opel  
Norderlaan-II in Antwerp  
(AJ 2017)



Audi Brussels  
(Audi 2017)



I then conducted interviews with current and former company officials associated with these facilities. These representatives provided me with historical accounts of the events leading up to either the closing or downsizing of Belgium's five foreign car assembly facilities. In the meantime, I also met with government officials from the communities



Volvo Ghent  
(Aerial from Web 2017)

and/or regions hosting these factories, who informed me on the present conditions in those areas and regarding the impacts felt by communities from the related job losses at these facilities. Among others, this included the Antwerp Port Authority and the Flanders Regional Agency for Innovation & Enterprise, which presently control the former GM-Opel Antwerp and Ford Genk Assembly Plants, respectively. In one case, I was even allowed to enter an abandoned car factory in order to gauge the potential sale of the site for industrial redevelopment.

It was during my fellowship that I also truly came to realize that Brussels is not only the home of the EU Commission, but also the geographic center of Europe for a researcher. First, the faculties affiliated with VUB's Urban Studies Center, particularly in Management and Geography, were excellent resources and interested collaborators in my research. Second, being in Brussels afforded me access to numerous foreign embassies. The staff at these embassies proved not only knowledgeable about their nation, but also helpful in providing me an entryway into data sources and government and industry officials in the countries I was conducting research on. Third, Brussels close geographic proximity to Great Britain, Spain, Germany, France, and Central-Eastern Europe supplied me with great quick access to the heart and soul of the EU's automotive supply chain. This included quick connections via rail, car, and/or air to almost all of the final assembly factories and headquarters of the world's largest auto-makers operating in the EU, as well as to their components suppliers.

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As a result of Brussels location, I was also able to visit existing competing car factories in Spain, Germany, and Great Britain. In Spain, this included: VW Seat Martorell near Barcelona, which also builds Audi Q3; Ford Valencia, which gained production of the Ford Mondeo, Galaxy, and C-Max following the closure of Ford Genk; Opel Zaragoza, which similar to Opel Antwerp produced small cars for GM Europe; and Renault Palencia, which was awarded assembly of the Renault Megane following the shuttering of Renault Vilvoorde. In Germany, I visited VW Wolfsburg, which expanded output of VW Golf after the downsizing and transformation of VW Brussels to Audi Brussels; the redevelopment site formerly hosting Opel Bochum, which like Opel Antwerp built the Opel Astra, and which closed two years after the Belgian factory; and Ford Cologne, the European

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headquarters of Ford of America, and where the decision was made to shutter Ford Genk, rather than Ford Valencia. Overall, in Belgium and its neighboring countries, I visited the sites and/or attended factory tours of 19 current and former automobile assembly plants during my three-month fellowship with the Brussels Centre for Urban Studies.

As mentioned earlier, my findings suggest that a variety of factors besides pure labor costs, prompted the closings of Renault Vilvoorde in 1997, Opel Antwerp in 2012, and Ford Genk in 2014, and the major downsizing of VW Brussels to Audi Brussels beginning in 2007.

Prominent among these factors were variations in government-management relations and in management-labor power among European nations. Just as important were expanding international competition from Japanese and Korean automakers who also built plants in Europe, and the EU's continued eastward expansion following the Fall of Socialism in Central-Eastern Europe. The latter was further spurred by the policies and incentive programs of the EU Commission, which have sought to promote economic development in developing and declining regions in the EU, particularly, Central-Eastern Europe and Spain.

Finally, I must add that the terrific faculty, staff, city, nation, and its geographic location greatly stimulated my interest in carrying out additional comparative research studies on urban development issues and foreign automakers situated in Belgium, Western Europe and Central-Eastern Europe. As a result, I expect to remain in touch with Brussels Centre professors in hopes of collaborating on a variety new projects over the next few years.