



Everyday Encounters with Colonial Heritage in Brussels: Personal Experiences, Perceptions, and Proposals for Interventions

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*"Only in that present can we be true or false
to the past we choose to acknowledge."*

— Trouillot, 1995

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Abstract

Most mainstream debates, particularly in media and policy, treat colonial-era monuments and buildings as isolated objects, asking whether to remove, reinterpret, or preserve them. In Brussels, such decisions are often top-down, excluding the everyday users who regularly inhabit these spaces. This thesis addresses two key gaps in current decolonization discourse. First, it centers the perspectives of ordinary users, whose voices are rarely included in official processes. Second, it shifts the analytical focus from the monument itself to also consider its spatial context.

This research asks: How are colonial heritage spaces with varying degrees of visibility into the colonial past experienced in everyday life, and how do people who frequent these spaces feel about what should be done with them? Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's triadic theory of space, Andrew Shanken's work on the everyday visibility of memorials, and critical heritage studies, the thesis examines three colonial heritage sites in Brussels: a prominent national monument (Triumphal Arch of Cinquantaire), a hidden commemorative memorial sculpture (Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles), and a privatized former administrative building (Chalet Norvégien).

Using qualitative fieldwork combining small-scale ethnographies and 30 in-situ interviews (10 for each site), findings show, first, that colonial history visibility is not embedded in the monument but constructed through spatial configuration and individual perceptions and previous knowledge. Even monuments with overt colonial iconography are often misread or emotionally bypassed, while more ambiguous sites may prompt spontaneous reinterpretation. Secondly, most people were not affected by having a site of colonial heritage in their daily lives, which could be one of the reasons why most respondents proposed minimal interventions.

The thesis contributes to critical heritage and urban studies by foregrounding how spatial design and everyday use shape public memory, offering new insights for more inclusive decolonization policies. It argues that any meaningful decolonization effort must go beyond symbolic correction to reshape how space is used, accessed, and inhabited, highlighting the importance of lived spatial experience to rethinking how colonial memory is dealt with in the public space.

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Introduction

In the decade since #RhodesMustFall reverberated from Cape Town to Oxford and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests redrew the symbolic map of many Western cities, colonial heritage, such as monuments, buildings and street names have become flash-points in a wider struggle over racism, historical injustice and the right to the city. From the United States to the UK, from Latin America to Europe, the remnants of the empire in modern global cities have been toppled, spray-painted, re-labelled, relocated and also fiercely defended. Yet while the global debate has grown louder, it continues to revolve around a small subset of highly visible statues and memorials. Far less attention has been given to unintentional colonial heritage or to intentional heritage that lacks visual prominence. Moreover, there is limited research on how such sites are experienced in everyday life, such as how they are used, whether people recognize their colonial ties, and how they believe they should be addressed. Public debates tend to center institutional, academic, or activist perspectives, leaving little room to understand how ordinary citizens engage with these spaces or envision possible interventions.

Brussels embodies this dilemma with particular intensity. The Belgian capital hosts the largest population of migrants and people with african backgrounds, specially from Congo (Denmart et. al, 2017). Yet, its landscape is still dominated by colonial landmarks. The city contains at least 78 officially recognised items of colonial heritage and more than 38 streets that still bear imperial names (Jacobs, 2018; Goddeeris, 2015; Leu et al., 2020), yet public reckoning has unfolded unevenly across the city as decision-making process varies depending on the commune that the heritage is located at.

Since the “spatial turn,” scholars such as Henri Lefebvre have insisted that space is socially produced, but made, used and contested through everyday practice, not merely filled by it. Post- and de-colonial critics extend this insight, showing how imperial projects inscribed racial hierarchies into urban form and how those inscriptions continue to condition who feels visible, welcome or safe in the city today. Yet policy responses to decolonization often overlook the spatial dimension, not by ignoring space entirely, but by failing to consider how it actively shapes and constrains possible interventions. From Brussels’ 2022 Action Plan on Decolonising Public Space to various museum initiatives, the lived, relational character of space tends to be absent from the conversation, despite being central to how heritage is experienced and co-produced.

This thesis, therefore, starts from the premise that decolonisation of public space is also, and fundamentally, a spatial practice. It asks: How are colonial heritage spaces with varying degrees of visibility into the colonial past experienced in everyday life, and how do people who frequent these spaces feel about what should be done with them?

To ground the analysis, the research compares three sites that sit on a continuum from explicitly commemorative to largely invisible colonial legacies. The Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux d'Ixelles, an intentional monument whose iconography overtly glorifies Belgium's Congo venture. The Triumphal Arches of Cinquantenaire, a monumental gateway financed by colonial extraction but narratively tied to Belgian nation-building. Finally, the Chalet Norvégien, the former administrative hub of the Congo Free State, now a private office whose imperial history is legible only to those who possess previous knowledge.

The study uses a qualitative approach, combining small-scale ethnographic observation with 30 in-situ interviews (10 per site) conducted between November 2024 and March 2025. It explores how passers-by notice or overlook colonial cues, describe their feelings about the site, and imagine possible responses such as removal, contextualisation, or non-intervention. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to re-centre the decolonial debate within the realm of everyday practice by bridging the gap between policy discourse and lived experience. It seeks to incorporate the perspectives of ordinary citizens into the conversation, offering a clearer understanding of how they perceive, use, and relate to colonial heritage in public space. By examining how individuals experience these sites and the kinds of interventions they propose, whether or not grounded in their own spatial practices and beliefs, the study aims to illuminate the disjunctions and alignments between official narratives and popular engagement with decolonisation.

This thesis is structured according to a classic four-part format. The **first chapter** presents a comprehensive literature review, engaging with spatial theory, postcolonial critiques, and current debates in heritage studies to situate the research problem. It explores how memory, heritage, and colonialism have been addressed in academic literature, drawing on international examples to provide comparative context. The chapter also introduces key theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, particularly focusing on the production of space and the spatial politics of memory. The **second chapter** offers an in-depth contextual analysis of Belgium, with a focus on Brussels. It outlines the country's imperial history and examines the politics of colonial memory, mapping recent decolonisation efforts at both governmental and grassroots levels. This chapter pays particular attention to the proposals put forward in Brussels, highlighting tensions between institutional initiatives and activist demands. The **third chapter** outlines the methodology, explaining the rationale for selecting specific case studies and introducing each of the chosen sites. It also discusses the qualitative methods used, including interviews and ethnographic observations, and reflects on key methodological constraints and limitations encountered during the research process. The **final chapter** presents the empirical analysis. It investigates how spatial configurations shape the visibility and engagement of each site, analyzes interviewees' emotional and cognitive responses, and examines the types of

interventions participants envision. Rather than being a final claim on how decolonization should work, this thesis aims to bring back the element of space and everyday into the debate of decolonization.

Literature Review

Spatial Theory, Everyday Life, and Colonial Heritage

Contemporary spatial theory challenges the notion that space is a neutral container or a static background to social life. The so-called “spatial turn” of the late twentieth century marked a shift in the social sciences and humanities, where scholars began to understand space as socially constructed and actively shaping power, identity, and experience (Warf & Arias, 2009). Space, in this sense, is not merely a physical setting but a relational product, both shaped by and shaping the social world.

Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974/1992) was instrumental in initiating this conceptual shift. He introduced a triadic model to understand the social production of space, which includes: representations of space (the conceived space, how space is planned and designed by experts), spatial practices (the perceived space, activities and routines that shape our experience of space), and representational spaces (the lived space, with symbolic and emotional meanings people attach to places). For Lefebvre, space is a product of all three elements and also a medium through which those relations are contested and reproduced. Yet, while this framework is central to understanding how meaning is constructed in space, it has been critiqued for overlooking the specific historical conditions, such as colonialism, that shaped how these spaces came to be lived in the first place.

Postcolonial critiques, therefore, have pointed out that the foundational spatial theorists have neglected the role of empire and colonization in shaping space, thereby universalizing Western experiences and leaving colonial spatialities under-theorized (Kipfer & Goonewardena, 2013). In response, they have emphasized how space has historically been structured by colonial logics, arguing that spatial configurations not only reflect racial hierarchies but also actively reproduce them (Fanon, 1961; La Fleur, 2021). Fanon, in particular, describes the colonial city as a space violently divided between colonizer and colonized, where movement and visibility are policed along racial lines. These spatial forms serve not only as tools of domination but also as mechanisms for capital accumulation (Conroy, 2023), reinforcing control over who can move, where, and under what conditions.

This conceptual framing has been supported by empirical research in formal colonies, especially in Africa, where the spatialisation of racial hierarchies was made explicit through planning tools and urban design. Domination was not only exercised through policy but also embedded in the built environment. Scholars have shown how colonial authorities used mechanisms such as racial zoning, the construction of imposing architecture for psychological control, land commodification, and restricted mobility through pass laws and employer-provided housing to inscribe imperial power onto space (Njoh, 2009; Home, 2014; Beebejau, 2021).

Therefore, the architectural design of buildings, their stylistic programs, public monuments, and wider urban-planning schemes were never neutral; they actively inscribed imperial power into the visual and spatial order of the colonial city, producing sharp binaries of otherness and belonging. Scholarship shows that these built legacies continue to structure inequality: inherited planning systems across Africa still follow segregatory logics of the colonial period, hindering the goals for an inclusive and sustainable urban development (Chigudu & Chavunduka, 2021; Baruah, Henderson, & Peng, 2021). A closer look at East African cities shows how this wider pattern translates into everyday space, with colonial, car-oriented street grids and rigid zoning regulations continuing to limit walkability and reinforce spatial exclusion (van Oostrum, 2023). By contrast, scholarship that systematically traces the imprint of imperial planning on the urban fabric of European capitals and how they shape exclusion, is still comparatively recent and less extensive than work on the former colonies.

These spatial legacies, therefore, are not merely historical residues; they continue to structure patterns of movement and shape everyday relationships with the built environment. In doing so, they also influence what people remember, ignore, or contest. Shanken (2022), in his study of memorials in the United States, highlights how memory is shaped not only by the meaning of a monument itself, but also by the space around it. He argues that memory is spatially mediated, being structured by where a monument is located, how people come across it, and what kinds of behaviors the surrounding environment encourages or limits.

If memory is mediated by space, as Shanken suggests, then it becomes important to consider how spatial environments might also serve as platforms for reinterpreting heritage. In this context, Soja's (1996) concept of *Thirdspace* is particularly relevant, offering a way to understand how contested spaces, such as colonial monuments, can be reimagined as sites of political negotiation, resistance, and alternative memory-making. Soja conceptualized the thirdspace as a space where political imagination and contradiction can happen, allowing for different meanings to collide and new spatial narratives emerge, emphasizing marginalized voices in the transformation of space.

Viewed through this lens, colonial heritage sites are not static relics but spaces that can be "reactivated" (Shanken, 2022) through protest, reinterpretation, and everyday use. Once activated, they provide arenas in which dominant narratives are challenged, historical violence is exposed, and ongoing inequalities are made visible. By opening up debate about what is remembered and who gets to tell the story, these sites challenge the legacies of colonial power, they turn the urban landscape into a space of ongoing struggle over meaning, memory, and justice.

This transformation has played out in several cases around the world. In the UK, protesters defaced and toppled the Edward Colston statue, turning the empty plinth into a point

for debating justice and teaching history (Cole, 2023). Similar dynamics have unfolded around the Leopold II statue at Place du Trône in Brussels (Rannard & Webster, 2020), the Raffles statue in Singapore (Lee, 2021), the Columbus monuments in Mexico City (Crouch & Venga, 2021), and the Borba Gato statue in São Paulo (Fonseca, 2023). In each case, the monument became a place for re-signification and resistance.

Not every colonial site must become a space of contestation. However, when contestation is possible, or even necessary, it is essential to consider how spatial conditions either enable or limit that activation. The examples mentioned took place in highly visible locations, where public access, visual prominence, and physical openness made protest and performance possible. By contrast, many colonial sites are tucked away in less visible spaces, where the spatial layout limits opportunities for public engagement. These sites often go unnoticed and uncontested, not because they are less important, but because their physical setting might make contestation less feasible. Therefore, recognizing how visibility and spatial configuration influence the very possibility of contestation is therefore vital, especially given that the spatial logic of these sites was itself shaped by colonialism.

Recognizing that space shapes memory and contestation possibilities, leads directly into the importance of seeing the everyday practice at the centre of spatial meaning-making. In the context of colonial heritage, it is where they are ignored or challenged, and where their meaning is shaped by behaviors and memory. It's also through these everyday interactions that the right to the city emerges, through the demand of people to reshape the city they inhabit through social engagement and spatial appropriation (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2003). Beyond, it is also where the right to memory emerges, raising the question of who has the authority to narrate the past and shape its public presence (Trouillot, 1995).

Therefore, questions of heritage, memory, and colonial legacies in urban contexts are fundamentally intertwined with the ways in which space is conceptualized, organized, and experienced. Discussing material leftovers of the empire without situating them spatially, considering how they interact with the urban fabric, reproduce socio-spatial patterns, and are co-produced through human engagement, risks overlooking critical dimensions of their meaning and impact in the public space. As such, any meaningful project of transformation or resistance regarding colonial heritage must be analyzed with attention to its spatial dynamics and everyday life.

Colonial Heritage and the Politics of Memory

Collective memory studies remind us that the past is not remembered through a single perspective, as memories often diverge and collide (Halbwachs, 1925/1992). When those divergent memories gather around the same object, the result is what Tunbridge & Ashworth

(1996) call dissonant heritage: a site who possesses more than a single meaning and whose meanings are inherently contested. Subsequent work reframes the issue less of a pluralism of ideas and more as moral difficulty: certain places confront societies with legacies of slavery, genocide, or colonialism that cannot be easily celebrated or ignored, known as difficult heritage (Macdonald, 2009). These insights align with a broader shift in heritage studies away from treating heritage as having an inherent meaning and seeing them as social and political practices, where meaning is constantly being produced by people's interpretations, contestation, and also authority (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013). Colonial heritage frequently occupies both categories at once, being simultaneously dissonant and difficult, making them flashpoints in contemporary struggles over public representation, belonging, and historical justice.

Heritage has also been a central element to nation-building. Classic theorists show that one of the ways that modern states established cohesion was through selective histories that materialised in space through the form of heritage (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983). More specifically, around 1880-1920, a wave of *statuomania* swept Europe and North America as governments renamed streets and erected monuments, fixing approved narratives in stone (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, such top-down commemorative procedures often promote a sanitized version of history, glorifying colonial actors and imperial achievements while downplaying histories of oppression, resistance, and structural violence (Said, 2003; Trouillot, 1995).

This selective remembering aligns with what Said (2003) describes as the process of othering: monuments often depict white European figures as named, heroic, and dignified, while representing Black African subjects as anonymous, exoticized, and subordinate (Jacobs, 2018). The same logic extends to colonial-era heritage buildings, whose monumental scale and classical architecture were meant to assert power and legitimacy. Their imposing forms glorify the empire, while erasing the labour and violence that made them possible. Together, these aesthetic choices embed colonial hierarchies into the urban landscape, naturalizing dominance through form.

More recently, the visibility and meaning of colonial heritage have been transformed by transnational movements such as #RhodesMustFall and Black Lives Matter. These movements have circulated new vocabularies of protest, connecting localized struggles over statues or place names to global demands for decolonization, racial justice, and historical accountability. As Capdepón & Dornhof (2022) argue, cities function as dense nodes in global memory networks, where symbols become contested through cross-border flows of activism, media coverage, and public discourse. But more than that, these acts of contestation unsettle what heritage is meant to be. Through protest, reinterpretation, or removal, heritage is no longer tied to official narratives but becomes something relational, shaped through conflict, reappropriation, and lived experience. In reclaiming these sites, activists and communities re-signify space itself,

transforming places of imperial dominance into platforms for critique, mourning, or refusal. Whereas Thirdspace theory foregrounds spatial contradiction and everyday practice, memory scholars such as Capdepón & Dornhof highlight how transnational activism and political discourse reconfigure the boundaries of heritage itself.

Nonetheless, not everything that is colonial is necessarily contested. Many colonial-era buildings, or toponyms remain “invisible” because their origins are obscured, aestheticized, or normalized in everyday life. As Shanken (2022) argues, memorials often fade into the background of everyday life as “unread texts,” only to be reinterpreted, or politicized, when cultural conditions shift. Still, the growing visibility of these sites, fueled by protests, has led to an expanding range of interventions, as communities and governments grapple with what should be done with the remains of the colonial period.

This reactivation of meaning raises a deeper question: who gets to decide what counts as colonial heritage, and what should be done with it? Critical heritage scholars emphasize that meaning is not only negotiated, but also claimed often unequally. For example, Smith (2006) critiques the “authorized heritage discourse” for privileging institutional voices while marginalizing community perspectives on such definitions. In response, scholars have called for more participatory models of heritage governance, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Neal (2015) highlights the need to move beyond mere consultation, while Zuljevic (2023) proposes participatory design approaches that centre social and political values in reimagining urban heritage. Transnational initiatives, such as those linking Bremen and Windhoek, also show how decolonisation efforts can also involve communities in both former colonies and colonial powers (Assmann, 2022). Across these cases, the emphasis is on shaping interventions with affected communities.

In discussions of colonial heritage, efforts to reclaim public spaces are seen as part of a broader, ongoing decolonization project. Decolonization has evolved from describing the end of colonial rule to a broader conceptual process of dismantling colonial legacies in knowledge, culture, and space (ICCROM, 2019; Kølvrå & Knudsen, 2021). This expanded understanding has not only inspired academic engagement, but has also translated into interventions in public space, both in formerly colonized nations and in metropolitan centers. This shift has sparked diverse interventions in public space, from formerly colonized regions to former empire metropolises.

One of the most direct actions is monument removal, aimed at halting the glorification of oppressive figures or healing marginalized communities. High-profile cases include the toppling of Cecil Rhodes’s statue in Cape Town (Nyamnjoh, 2016) and the removal of Confederate statues during the 2020 BLM protests (Evans, 2021). A more moderate version is relocation, moving statues to museums or parks for contextual display. An example is the UK, Edward

Colston statue that after toppling was relocated to a museum where it is now exhibited with protest graffiti intact (Figure 1) (Cole, 2023). Reinterpretation, through plaques, QR codes, or artistic overlays, offers a less confrontational approach, reframing contested symbols without removing them (Hagen & Diener, 2013; Grierson & Gayle, 2021). Some cities go further by creating counter-monuments or replacing colonial symbols with new ones, such as Mexico City's replacement of Columbus statue with an Indigenous woman (Agreen, 2021). Another approach is to re-inscribe sites of oppression by turning them into spaces of memory and reflection. South Africa offers powerful examples: Constitution Hill in Johannesburg and the re-curated Slave Lodge in Cape Town (King & Flynn, 2021). Similar initiatives include the Liverpool Slavery Museum, located where slave ships were once repaired (National Museums Liverpool, 2025). Therefore, there has not been a one size fits all approach to contested colonial heritage as each site and country has their own particularities and realms of possibilities.

Figure 1

Toppled statue of Edward Colston on display, surrounded by protest signs at the Bristol museum.



Note. From *Toppled Colston statue goes on display at Bristol museum*, by BBC News, 2024, April 23, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-68569148>.

Brussels: Between Imperial Legacy and Decolonial Demands

Much has been written on Belgium's presence in Central Africa (Van Reybrouck, 2010; Stanard, 2011; Vanthemsche, 2012; Ewans, 2017; Lauro et al., 2020; Stanard, 2023). Belgium entered the European imperialist expansion unusually late. When it gained independence in 1830, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and the Netherlands had already spent centuries building global empires, so Belgium is often described as a *latecomer*, both to colonial practice and to the scholarly debate that surrounds it (Verbeeck 2020). Nonetheless, early schemes for acquisition did surface under Leopold I. Ewans (2003) lists more than fifty proposals but effective control over territory began only with his son. During the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, King Leopold II secured personal sovereignty over the vast Congo Free State, a realm roughly eighty times the size of Belgium (Stanard 2023; Verbeeck 2020).

Leopold II presented his venture as a humanitarian crusade against the “Arab slave trade,” yet the regime he created relied on terror: forced labour, hostage-taking, village burnings, mutilations, and the chicotte whip became routine tools of extraction, first for ivory and soon after, rubber. Responsibility for these atrocities lay not only with the Free State's administration but also with concessionary companies, many headquartered in Brussels, that operated under royal charter (Stanard, 2023). Estimates of the human toll during Leopold II reign (between 1885 and 1908) range from one to as many as fifteen million deaths, a figure that remains contested (Dhada, 2025). However, International outrage finally compelled Leopold to sell the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908, transforming it from a private territory into a formal Belgian colony. A condition that would endure until Congo's independence in 1960 (Stanard, 2023).

Belgians did not develop a broad emotional stake in the empire until 1908, when Congo became a state-run colony. Before that, involvement was largely confined to a francophone elite, though propaganda was already laying the groundwork for wider appeal. This was particularly stronger after the World Wars, when Belgium itself was cast as a victim of German aggression, making the earlier atrocities in Congo fade from public view. The switch during this period was so large that, by the eve of Congo's independence, most citizens regarded the colonial enterprise positively, felt pride in it, and believed in the legitimacy of Belgium's control of Congo (Stanard, 2023).

Yet the vast majority of Belgians, like Leopold II, never set foot in Central Africa. So most of their ideas about what Congo was and the type of work Belgium was doing there came from European perspectives, especially the ones shared by missionaries, private companies, colonial veterans and state information offices. The colony had also a strong presence in culture, being shown in currency, stamps, films, and in literature, such as the famous Tintin in the Congo, and colonial expositions. Still, the Tervuren Museum of Congo remained the primary institution for educating the Belgian public about Congo, actively targeting school children through

organized visits and youth outreach programs (Stanard, 2023). Therefore, the urban fabric of Belgian cities, through their colonial museums, monuments, street names, circulation of ideas, and propaganda, functioned as a daily stage on which Belgians learned about Congo and their country's role in Africa in a biased and detached perspective.

The driving force behind many colonial monuments came largely from the ground up: not only from local groups and colonial veterans seeking to honor fallen comrades and Leopold II, but also from ordinary Belgians who embraced the colonial mission, attended inaugurations, and expressed pride in Belgium's work in Central Africa (Stanard, 2011). It is also important to note that after Congo achieved independence in 1960, decolonization still didn't happen culturally in Belgium as pro-empire commemorations continued with colonial and military veterans still holding annual celebrations of the empire across the numerous colonialist monuments spreaded throughout the country. And over time only a handful of colonial markers had been removed (Stanard, 2023). And people kept an overwhelmingly positive narrative on Belgium doing good work in central Africa (Stanard, 2023).

Because of this, Flemish, Walloon, and Congolese migrants have distinct and sometimes conflicting memories of the colonial experience. In Belgium, schools, museums and popular media long pushed a developmentalist narrative: colonial rule brought infrastructure, schools and Christianity to Central Africa and, in doing so, helped forge a Belgian identity otherwise split between Flemings and Walloons (Stanard 2023; Vanthemsche & De Peuter, 2023). Following what Smith (2006) has termed Authorized Heritage Discourse, the story and positive narrative of belgium imperialism also increased its presence on the classroom education, with educators using this as an opportunity to root national identity in a young country marked by many internal divisions (Stanard, 2023; Vanthemsche & De Peuter, 2023). As these regional identities hardened over time, colonialism paradoxically offered a space where both groups could participate in a shared national project (Stanard, 2023). For Flemings, colonialism even supplied a path to "ideological whiteness," elevating them above Africans and equalling them to the French-speaking community (Kanobana, 2022). Finally, Congo's independence in 1960 briefly united both communities in a shared sense of imperial loss, reinforcing pride in "what Belgium had built" in Congo (Stanard, 2023).

Despite the magnitude of colonial atrocities, it wasn't until the 1990s that dominant historical narratives in Belgium began to be publicly challenged (Verbeeck, 2020). Compared to longer-lasting empires like Portugal, France, or Spain, Belgium's relatively brief colonial period made it easier to suppress negative collective memory of its imperial past. Additionally, Belgium's fragmented national identity and linguistic divisions hinder the development of a shared colonial memory (Verbeeck, 2020). Within these, there was a considerable nostalgia for the colonial period in both Flanders and Wallonia, with Flanders sometimes even being more

nostalgic for the colonial era than the French speaking communities, which indicates some fluctuation on how the past was remembered in both groups (Goddeeris, 2015). However, after 2010, the narratives of both groups began to homogenize according to (Goddeeris, 2015), and both began recognizing the Belgians' failures as political debates around the colonial past began to rise. Therefore, walloons and flemish colonial experiences are one of the dividing lines along which the perception of the colonial past differs, but there's also an age component with old Belgians denying negative aspects and young Belgians being more willing to acknowledge the bad sides of colonialism (Figueiredo et al., 2018).

Congolese interpretations offer vital counterpoints that challenge and expand dominant colonial narratives. For years Congolese scholars have been absent from the colonial debate in Belgium because their work had not been translated, their avoidance of controversy, and not being taken seriously by Western academia (Goddeeris, 2015). Among Congolese migrants in Belgium, both positive and negative memories of colonialism are recognized, although negative memories, such as abuse, violence, and exploitation, are more common. Alongside, migrants who maintain their Congolese culture are more critical of colonialism, while those who adopt more of the Belgian culture mention its negative sides less often, though they do not view colonialism positively (Figueiredo et al., 2018). This could suggest that criticizing colonialism and identifying with Belgian culture are still seen as opposing positions. older Congolese migrants echo some of the positive appraisals heard in older Belgian circles, while younger migrants focus on exploitation and its lingering consequences (Figueiredo et al., 2018).

Contesting the Empire's Remains

The materialization of colonialism in the public sphere asserted Belgium's claim over Congo and reinforced postwar nationalism (Stanard, 2023). Beyond the colonial markers in monuments, the city of Brussels bears the visible and invisible imprints of colonialism, with its urban fabric shaped by the wealth extracted from Central Africa and the symbolic assertion of imperial power. As elsewhere in Europe, colonial profits funded conspicuous projects in the metropolis. In Brussels alone they financed the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, the renovation of the Royal Palace, the African Museum pavilion at Tervuren, the Parc du Cinquanteaire, and numerous monuments celebrating the imperial enterprise (Verschaffel 2007; Dhada 2025). In this way, the wealth extracted from Central Africa was materially built into Brussel's urban landscape.

In recent years, academics, government initiatives, and popular projects have sought to map these colonial traces across Brussels. Overall, 78 sites of intentional colonial heritage have been identified, including statues portraying Black individuals in savage or exotic ways, monuments to King Leopold II, and references to Belgian missionaries, military figures,

diplomats, industrialists, and explorers linked to the Congo Free State (Jacobs, 2018). At least 38 streets also bear colonial references, often accompanied by plaques from the interwar period that frame colonialism in a celebratory tone, describing colonizers as "heroes" who died for the cause of civilization (Goddeeris, 2015; Leu et al., 2020). Beyond these more explicit symbols, colonial imprints in Brussels also include administrative buildings, private residences of colonial traders, and sites linked to key political events, which have been identified and classified by Urban.brussels (the regional administration for urban planning and heritage).

Brussels concentrates many of the tensions surrounding colonial memory in Belgium. As both the federal capital of Belgium and the symbolic heart of the European Union, the city embodies Belgium-and-Europe in miniature. It has undergone profound transformations in its ethnographic profile and its role on the continental stage, shaped by both internal and external migration. Today, Brussels advertises itself as a "city of 180 nationalities," hosting the country's largest community of Afro-descendant residents. Nationwide, people of Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian origin number roughly 110 000 and close to 40 % of this population live in the Brussels-Capital Region (Denmart et. al, 2017). This diversity positions Brussels as a crucial site where the visibility and interpretation of colonial heritage are increasingly questioned, and where authorities are compelled to respond to rising demands for historical reckoning in the urban landscape.

Recent scholarship has explored how colonial memory in Europe circulates through a multidirectional memory field, where national narratives intersect with other histories of violence, displacement, and resistance (Capdepón & Dornhof, 2022). In the case of Brussels, this field is shaped by two overlapping dynamics identified across the literature. First, demographic transformation, particularly postcolonial migration and the presence of Afro-descendant communities, has generated new claims to space and visibility in the city.

As a result, there have been many grassroots movements to decolonize the public space. As early as the 1990s, Afro-descendant residents, particularly from the Congolese diaspora, began to both denounce colonial legacies and assert their cultural presence in the city. This period saw the emergence of the first decolonial walking tours in Matongé and public artworks such as Chéri Samba's mural *Matonge-Ixelles. Porte de Namur! Porte de l'amour*, which celebrated African identity in urban space (Gatugu, 2022). By the 2000s, grassroots activism intensified: artists and activists covered colonial statues in red cloth, defaced monuments to Leopold II, and pushed for the removal or recontextualization of commemorative plaques (Boffey, 2019; Gatugu, 2022). Counter-movements and alternative guides sought to reframe Brussels' colonial heritage through the lens of its victims and resisters. In 2015, protestors gathered around the equestrian statue of Leopold II at Place du Trône to denounce Belgium's violent colonial history (Detaille, 2015), and by 2018, many Leopold statues were marked with

red paint (Elst & Clette-Gakuba, 2018). That same year, the Brussels-based BAMKO group created a “traveling” statue of Patrice Lumumba, symbolically inserting an African hero into spaces traditionally dominated by colonial imagery (The Brussels Times, 2018).

The second element that has shaped public debate on colonial heritage in Brussels has been transnational movements such as #RhodesMustFall and Black Lives Matter, which circulated new vocabularies of protest, connecting local struggles to broader demands for decolonization and racial justice. The global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020, following the killing of George Floyd in the U.S., ignited an unprecedented wave of decolonization activism in Belgium, with Brussels at the epicenter. In late May and June 2020, tens of thousands of people across Belgium signed petitions and took to the streets to demand the removal of colonial-era statues. This momentum translated into direct action in public space: activists defaced colonial monuments with red paint, symbolizing bloodshed and violence. In the Brussels suburb of Auderghem, a bust of Leopold II was physically removed and replaced with an image of Patrice Lumumba (The Brussels Times, 2020). In the city center, the equestrian statue of Leopold II at Place du Trône was repeatedly covered in red paint and graffiti, including messages such as “Assassin” (Rannard & Webster, 2020). Similar actions occurred in cities like Ghent, Ostend, and Antwerp (Chini, 2020; Galindo, 2020; Chini, 2020).

Institutional Approaches to Colonial Reckoning

The Belgium government has not remained untouched by these dynamics. In recent years, Leopold II statues have been taken down at the University of Mons (Galindo, 2020), being moved to the Town Hall basement at Leuven (The Brussels Times, 2020), being fully removed from public space in Ghent (The Brussels times 2020) or receiving critical interpretation in Halle (Walker, 2023). While such actions may appear modest in comparison to broader restitution debates or statue removals elsewhere, they indicate a growing institutional response to public pressure and an evolving memory politics at the national level.

Government-led responses to Brussels’ colonial legacy unfold across three levels, each with distinct responsibilities. The federal government, responsible for nationwide policy and diplomacy, has addressed symbolic and historical issues through official apologies and nation-wide coordination. The Brussels-Capital Region, as the intermediate urban authority, oversees spatial planning and regional coordination. Meanwhile, Brussels’ communes manage implementation on the ground, removing statues, renaming streets, or installing plaques, making local governments key actors in how decolonization is actually enacted, although unevenly.

From a top-down institutional perspective, Belgium and Brussels’ efforts to decolonize public space have primarily taken shape through two key initiatives: the creation of a Special

parliamentary Commission on Colonialism in 2020 by the Belgian parliament and the implementation of the Urban Brussels Action Plan.

In July 2020, Belgium became the first European country to set up a commission to investigate its colonial past and its lasting impacts in the present (Mathys & Beurden, 2023). Tasked with proposing ways to address colonial memory and improve archival access, the commission issued 128 recommendations but was ultimately shelved due to political deadlock (Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 2024). The process faced heavy criticism for excluding diaspora voices, relying on a contested transitional justice framework, and lacking expertise on African contexts and histories (Destrooper, 2023; Palli-Asperó, 2024). Epistemological disagreements, unrealistic timelines, and political resistance further undermined its legitimacy. Still, its failure reinforces both Belgium's growing recognition of its colonial legacy and the need for bottom-up, transnational truth-seeking efforts, led jointly by historians, activists, and affected communities. Drawing on models like Wiriyaamu, scholars advocate approaches centred on lived experience and supported by institutions built on colonial wealth (Dhada, 2025).

Besides the commission, Belgium at the state level has also engaged in the politics of apologies through other initiatives, such as Belgium's apologies in 2002 for its role in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, Metis apology in 2019, King Philippe's 2020 letter addressed to President Félix Tshisekedi expressing regret over Belgian cruelties in Congo (Rankin & Burke, 2020). While some viewed this as a good first step, others criticized it for not constituting an official apology. This gesture was later followed by his 2022 speech during a visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he reaffirmed his deep regrets but once again stopped short of issuing an official apology (Nyemba, 2022).

Within the Brussels scenario, the government has coined an official definition for the decolonization of the public space as "building an inclusive Brussels-Capital Region, which every inhabitant of Brussels can identify with and in which everyone feels recognised (Urban.brussels, 2022)." The challenge of decolonisation lies in revising how colonial memory is officially represented in public space, while also promoting awareness of colonial history and its lasting effects, recognizing that many commemorative symbols reflect outdated values rather than shared memories today (Urban.brussels, 2022).

Urban.brussels' 2022 action plan outlines a broad toolkit for the capital, such as a city-wide inventory of colonial traces; contextualisation or reinterpretation (with only the most contentious pieces relocated to museums); the creation of a dedicated decolonial museum; artistic interventions and celebratory events in public space; targeted education programmes; and, above all, sustained community participation in every decision. Implementation has begun with the Heritage Days 2022 focused entirely on "colonial traces." While a year-long series of

performances and debates launched in March 2024 around the Monument to the Belgian Pioneers in Congo at Cinquantenaire, inviting public reflection on the empire and its after-lives (Figure 2). Nonetheless, communes have also taken action on their own: Koekelberg renamed a lane Rue Gemba (May 2024) after a Congolese woman who died in the 1897 Tervuren exhibition, and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode unveiled a memorial (October 2024) to Congolese soldiers and resistance fighters from the World Wars. To analyze such choices, Vaesen et al. (2024) have proposed a typology that matches degrees of public protest and visibility to direct or indirect interventions, offering a practical decision-making matrix for contested heritage.

Figure 2.

The Grand Opening by Traumnovelle at the Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux d'Ixelles.



Note. Retrieved from Brussels Urban Heritage – IRISbox: <https://collections.heritage.brussels/fr/objects/98614>. © Urban.brussels.

Still, while existing research has richly explored colonial heritage as a political and symbolic issue, especially in moments of protest, removal, or top-down reinterpretation, there is

still limited understanding of how these sites are experienced in the flow of everyday urban life. Most studies focus on visible monuments and formal interventions, overlooking how users themselves interpret (or fail to interpret) these sites as colonial, and what kinds of changes they believe should occur. Moreover, attention tends to concentrate on prominent symbols, leaving less visible colonial legacies, such as colonial administrative buildings, unexamined. If decolonisation efforts are to move from policy to practice, it is crucial to understand how the broader public actually perceives and experiences colonial sites and what kinds of interventions they are likely to support. While academic research and activist voices have outlined what decolonisation should look like, these visions risk falling flat and even facing backlash, if they fail to resonate with everyday users. Mapping public knowledge and sentiment helps identify not only points of resistance but also the groundwork needed to make more transformative change possible. This study responds to that gap by asking how colonial heritage spaces with varying degrees of visibility are encountered by those who move through them daily and what they think should be done with them.

Methodology

To answer the research question “*How are colonial heritage spaces with varying degrees of visibility into the colonial past experienced in everyday life, and how do people who frequent these spaces feel about what should be done with them?*,” I adopted a qualitative approach combining in-situ interviews with passers-by and small-scale ethnographic observations. These methods were chosen because they allow me to understand how people feel about and behave at colonial sites in Brussels on a day-to-day basis and how these sites are embedded in the urban fabric and daily routines.

After deciding to carry out in-situ interviews, I identified which sites to include. This selection was informed by a document analysis of two key sources: the Urban Brussels study on decolonizing public space and the colonial heritage catalogue compiled by Patrimoine Bruxelles. I focused specifically on sites that were formally considered as colonial heritage because they allow for a better comparative lens as they fall within the same heritage-listing framework. Also, because they are identified by the government as colonial heritage they all have been part of the recent debates on decolonizing public space to some extent.

Based on these sources, I identified three distinct sites that reflect the typology proposed in the Urban Brussels report (Urban.brussels, 2022). This typology categorizes colonial heritage into two main forms: *Intentional colonial heritage*, which includes monuments, statues, buildings, and street names that were deliberately created to celebrate, commemorate, or glorify colonial power. These are typically explicit symbols of colonial propaganda. *Unintentional colonial heritage*, which refers to elements of the built environment not originally designed to promote colonialism, but which are nonetheless entangled in colonial histories and functions, such as former administrative buildings, infrastructure funded by colonial wealth, or urban designs shaped by colonial ideologies.

Each of these two categories can also be understood in terms of visible and invisible traces of colonialism. *Visible traces* are physical markers, such as plaques, statues, or recognizable architectural symbols that are generally legible and widely recognized as colonial. *Invisible traces*, by contrast, require contextual or historical knowledge to be identified as colonial, which include buildings or spaces whose colonial associations are embedded in institutional or social histories rather than in explicit visual cues.

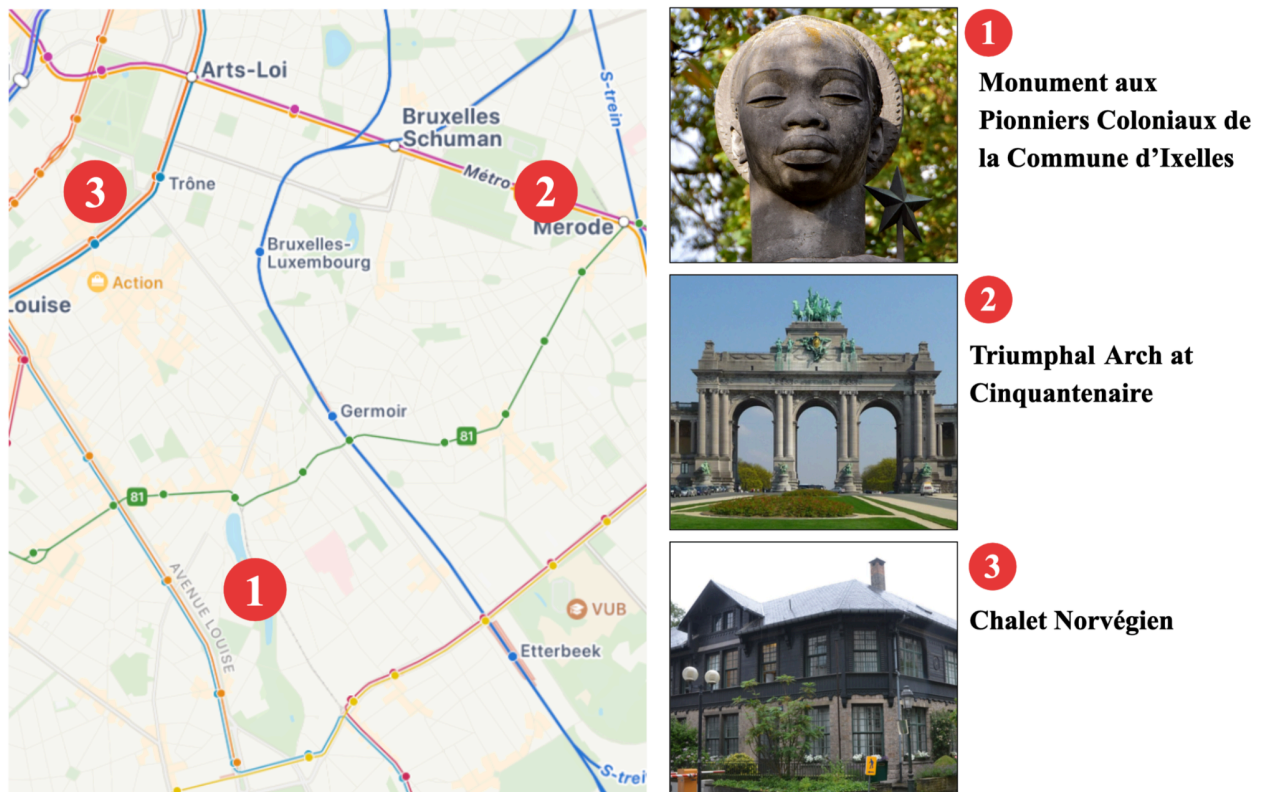
Case Study Selection

As a result, I selected three publicly accessible, open spaces in Brussels, which here are understood as spaces where anyone can theoretically move freely (Figure 3). All of them are also officially listed as colonial heritage by Urban.brussels. These sites differ in two main aspects.

The first one refers to their colonial visibility. One is an intentional monument with explicit colonial symbolism (Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux de la Commune d'Ixelles), while the other two are unintentional heritage sites, one whose colonial connections are moderately legible (Triumphal Arch at Cinquantenaire) and another that demands deeper historical awareness as the colonial connection is not as legible (Chalet Norvégien). The second aspect is how they are integrated in the urban fabric. The Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux de la Commune d'Ixelles is part of a smaller urban planning like the zone around it was not planned for the monument, the Triumphal Arch at Cinquantenaire is part of a large-scale planning where it is a central element, and the Chalet Norvégien is part of a medium-scale planning on the royal quarters. By comparing sites that share official recognition but differ in visibility and urban embeddedness, I aim to uncover how these “layers” of colonial heritage shape people’s day-to-day encounters and attitudes in public space.

Figure 3

Map of Case Study Sites in Brussels



Note. Locations of the three heritage sites analyzed: (1) Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux, (2) Triumphal Arch at Cinquantenaire, and (3) Chalet Norvégien.

Case Study 1: Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux de la Commune d'Ixelles

This site represents a case of intentional and visible colonial heritage (Figure 4). This monument, located at av. Géo Bernier at the square de la Croix-Rouge in Ixelles, was erected in 1933 by the sculptor Marcel Rau and the architect Alphonse Boelens to honour the memory of the pioneers from Ixelles that died in Congo from 1876 to 1908. Made out of *pierre bleue de sprimont*, the sculpture depicts a Mangbetu woman's head, whose elongated head was frequently exoticized and became a motif in Belgian colonial imagery (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d), with closed eyes and lips in a meditative kind of way. She holds the congo star, symbol of CFs flag.

Figure 4

Monument to the Colonial Pioneers of Ixelles (1933), by Marcel Rau and Alphonse Boelens.



Note. The sculpture depicts a stylized Mangbetu woman's head holding the Congo star, surrounded by colonial iconography. Photograph by Camila Vanacor Lima (2024).

The woman remains unnamed even though the column where she lays has the carved names of the 32 Ixelles residents honored on their Congo endeavours. The inscription "Ixelles a ses pionniers coloniaux" is engraved beneath the head. The column also depicts elements related to the African colony (carvings of a mask, an elephant, huts, a tree, a crocodile, a rhinoceros, and a slit drum). Finally, the monument was funded by the commune of Ixelles, reflecting its desire to take part in the broader movement of recognizing those involved in the colonial project. Its inauguration was widely publicized, covered by most major newspapers, and marked by a ceremony featuring marching bands and official representatives of the King (Stanard, 2023). Despite its stereotypical depiction, it is the only monumental representation of a black woman as such in a Brussels public space (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d).

The Square de la Croix-Rouge (formerly the Esplanade de la Cambre), where the monument stands, was never intended as a gathering place. It was designed in the late 19th century as a transitional hub, an infrastructural node that channeled traffic between Avenue Louise (itself funded by profits from Congo ventures (Stanard, 2023)), the Chaussée de Boondael, Place Sainte-Croix, and the former Abbaye de la Cambre. Built over a drained pond at the convergence of several new roads (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2011), the square was always designed to prioritize movement over pause, and today it resembles a busy traffic junction more than a landscaped public space. Yet this site was chosen for the sculpture "*to perpetuate their names if we were to one day allow their work to perish. On this site of greenery and flowers, so suitable for reflection, we will come often to think of them* (Stanard, 2023, p. 249)." Over the decades, changes in traffic patterns, the decline of landscaping, and minimal monument upkeep have made the sculpture difficult to notice, despite its placement in a high foot-traffic area.

This site was chosen because its location, nestled between two popular leisure areas, places the monument on populated pedestrian routes. Also because, despite its unmistakably colonial imagery, it goes almost entirely unnoticed in the media, unlike the statues of Leopold II or the *Monument aux pionniers du Congo Belge*. Its colonial imagery and text are also very overt, making a clear reference to the colonial past. This combination of clear symbolism, lack of media awareness and location made the site a compelling case for analyzing people's interactions and proposals.

Case Study 2: Triumphal Arch at Cinquantenaire

This site was selected as an example of unintentional heritage whose colonial connections are legible. The *Arc du Cinquantenaire* (Figure 5), located in the *Parc du Cinquantenaire*, is one of Brussels' most iconic monuments. The arches are sixty meters wide and over forty meters high, built of bluestone on concrete foundations, and designed by French architect Charles

Girault (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, nd). Although the structure was inaugurated in 1905 to mark the 75th anniversary of Belgian independence and the 40th year of Leopold II's reign, the original goal was to complete it in time for Belgium's 50th anniversary, hence the name. Public and political backlash, alongside logistical challenges, delayed its completion (Lewis, 2022).

Figure 5

Vue de l'arcade et de l'hémicycle du Cinquantenaire (2010).



Note. Photograph of the Cinquantenaire arcade. Retrieved from Monument.heritage.brussels. <https://monument.heritage.brussels/fr/buildings/18722#&gid=null&pid=1>

The arches were also part of a broader urban development plan led by Leopold II, who aimed to transform Brussels into a capital on par with other major European cities. While the arch does not depict colonial imagery or commemorate colonial actors, its link to colonialism lies in how it was funded. Leopold II financed the monument indirectly using wealth extracted from the Congo Free State. This source of funding was deliberately concealed, Leopold relied on financial intermediaries who appeared to be independent donors, masking his role in the project. This allowed him to continue shaping Brussels' public spaces while distancing these developments from growing international criticism over his rule in Congo (Stanard, 2023).

The arches are also filled with symbolism. The figures facing the old city center represent heritage and the arts, while those facing the opposite direction symbolize the future such as science, industry, commerce, the navy, and so forth, which are arguably linked to colonial ambitions, though not directly. On the inside walls are Leopold II's insignia and a vague

dedication to “the dynasty, to Belgium and the Congo,” along with portrayals of Belgium’s first five kings. The absence of an explicit mention of colonialism is thought to be intentional, as Leopold was already facing international criticism for his actions in Congo (Stanard, 2023). While its colonial links are not immediately visible, those familiar with Belgian history can recognize the relationship between this monumental structure and the wealth derived from colonial extraction, especially when considering its scale and style.

Today, the symbolic link the arches were meant to create between Brussels and Tervuren is no longer as evident. The much-loved green space remains an expression of national pride and is now adjacent to the EU quarter, making it an even more international location. Still, for representatives of the Congolese diaspora, the arch continues to serve as a powerful reminder of Congo’s exploitation (Rankin, 2023). There are many other sites within the Parc du Cinquantenaire that hold links to Belgium’s colonial past. However, this site was chosen precisely because it lacks explicit colonial iconography, making its connections to imperialism less visible but nonetheless significant. Its grandeur and symbolic weight, combined with its origin as part of a large-scale, state-sponsored urban project funded by colonial wealth, make it an important case study as it invites reflection on how societies should engage with monumental structures that were not built to honor colonialism but are clearly a byproduct of it and that still hold architectural and aesthetic value.

Case Study 3: Chalet Norvégien

This is an example of indirect, non-visible colonial heritage (Figure 6). Located at *Rue du Brederode* 10, the building now blends into its urban surroundings, but it once held major symbolic and administrative importance. There isn’t much publicly available information about the history of the chalet, but we know it was constructed in 1905 by the Norwegian architect Finn Knudsen under the direction of Leopold II, originally located within the grounds of the Royal Palace, accessible directly from the palace’s interior gardens (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d.). It was here that Leopold II established his Congo offices, making it the administrative heart of his private rule over Central Africa. It was where major decisions were made and where press conferences on Congolese affairs were held (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d.). Today, the chalet is no longer within the palace grounds and functions as a regular office building. From 1981 to 1992, the building briefly served as the Dynasty Museum, before the museum was moved to Hôtel Bellevue just a few blocks away (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d.). There is limited information on what happened to the chalet between 1992 and now, but it currently houses the Benelux Hermès offices.

Figure 6

Chalet Norvégien at Rue Brederode 10.



Note. Photograph of the former headquarters of the Congo Free State, designed by Finn Knudsen. Retrieved from Monument.heritage.brussels.

<https://monument.heritage.brussels/fr/buildings/30027#&gid=null&pid=1>

The building's architectural features include an irregular rubble base, a carved wood façade on the upper floor, dormer windows in an overhanging slate roof supported by consoles, and corner cuts (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d.), making the building stand out from its surroundings. It also has muntins and overmantels with oval medallions decorated with the Congo star on the upper floor, the only reference to the colonial past that is easy to overlook. Despite being located in public space, public interactions with the site are limited to its exterior.

This site is a compelling example of colonial heritage because its past is largely invisible today. Still, this building has kept its original function as office space, making its colonial ties less obvious. What makes this case distinct is that the building is still in active use and is fully integrated into the urban fabric. It is not a commemorative monument or a preserved ruin, it is a functional, privately leased space that blends into its surroundings. Because of this, it invites different kinds of interactions (or lack thereof) compared to statues or museums. As such, it raises important questions about how people perceive or propose interventions for these types of

buildings, and whether their strategies differ from those aimed at more symbolic or explicitly commemorative sites.

Data Collection Overview and Limitations

To guide the interviews, which were conducted primarily in French and English, I used a semi-structured questionnaire organized into four thematic sections: (1) basic demographics, (2) general familiarity with the site, (3) perceptions of the site's meaning and historical significance, and (4) attitudes toward colonial heritage in everyday life. Questions were open-ended to allow for a range of responses and follow-up questions depending on the participant's engagement. Participants were asked, for example, whether they had noticed the site before, what stood out to them, whether they associated it with colonial history, and how (if at all) they felt its presence affected their experience of the space (see Appendix B and C).

Participants were randomly approached as they passed by or crossed in front of the building or monument being studied. Before beginning each interview, they were given a short trilingual information leaflet (in French, Dutch, and English) explaining the purpose of the research, ensuring anonymity, and outlining that the data would be used solely for academic purposes (see Appendix A) and before the interviews were conducted, oral consent for conducting them was asked and given. Fieldwork was conducted in November 2024 and later in February 2025- March 2025 across the three selected sites. Seasonality may shape who is present and how spaces are experienced with public spaces given that people tend to be more out in the summer-spring months.

I began with a preliminary one-hour observation at each location, during which I took notes on the general atmosphere, use of space, and presence of people. This was followed by a series of site visits for interviews. For each site, I spent an average of three to four days, staying approximately two hours per visit. I intentionally varied the times and days, visiting on both weekdays and weekends, sunny and cloudy days, in the morning and afternoon to ensure a more diverse range of encounters. During each visit, I split my time between observing the space and its users (typically 30–45 minutes) and conducting short, informal interviews with passers-by. Out of the observations I focused on seeing the pedestrian flow, lingering, interaction with the site, photo-taking, languages spoken, types of visitors.

In total, 30 individuals participated in the interviews and around interview 8-10 thematic saturation was reached, specially on proposed interventions, knowledge of colonial history and influence on day to day life. Interviews were around 15 minutes each. Of these, 18 were women and 12 were men. Age-wise, 14 respondents were under 30, 8 were between 30 and 50, and 9 were over 50. The vast majority (28) reported living in Brussels, while 3 were visiting from elsewhere, all of whom were interviewed at the Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux. In terms of

nationality, 13 participants identified as Belgian, 5 as French, 3 as British, and 5 as having other nationalities. Also, 5 respondents did not specify their nationality.

It is important to also acknowledge the limitations of this sample, related to methodological issues. During the initial round of interviews, many respondents expressed discomfort when asked directly about personal demographic information such as age, education level, gender, or professional background. As a result, I decided to stop asking these questions altogether. The age groups and gender breakdown presented above are therefore based on my own perception, rather than self-reported data, and should be interpreted with that in mind.

The second one, an overwhelming majority of respondents were white, with only two being non-white and none reported being from outside Europe (with one exception). This partly reflects the demographic makeup of the people present in the spaces I studied, but also points to broader issues of accessibility and belonging. Many of the sites, whether through their history, spatial layout, or surrounding infrastructures, may not feel equally welcoming to everyone. In particular, racialized individuals, especially Black people, may feel excluded or uncomfortable in these environments, whether due to historical associations, gentrification, or more subtle spatial cues. Therefore, certain perspectives on colonial heritage may be missing not because they are indifferent, but because the people most affected by this history are less likely to be present in these spaces. This is a limitation of spontaneous in-situ data collection, which tends to reflect the experiences of those already occupying public space, and not necessarily those who feel alienated from it.

To counteract this, I had intended on conducting long-format interviews with Congolese community organizations to balance perspectives, but I did not receive responses back from the organizations I reached out to and due to time constraints decided to cut it back. Data was analyzed by converting the qualitative notes from the interviews into categorizing them into main categories to extract patterns and quantify them as much as possible.

Analysis

“I Walk Here Daily, but Never Saw it:” Spatial Configurations of Colonial Heritage

The Urban.brussels report analyses colonial heritage almost exclusively at the level of the object-people relationship, without asking how the heritage's setting, circulation patterns, landscape, or adjacent land-uses affect what passersby actually notice and experience. From an urban perspective, space is not neutral but is produced through social practices and design, shaping what can be seen, felt, and known (Lefebvre, 1992), and that memory is co-produced by object and space (Shanken, 2022). Therefore, the report privileges the colonial layer in the artefact, but overlooks how the colonial layer's visibility or invisibility is also produced by space. A comparison between the Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux, the Chalet Norvégien, and the arches of Cinquantenaire reveals how different spatial configurations shape public engagement in distinct ways.

At Cinquantenaire, the arches are an unquestioned landmark: all ten interviewees had noticed them before, and visitors routinely stop to photograph the monument. This visibility is no accident. The park was designed during Leopold II's reign to showcase imperial grandeur, and its wide boulevards, open lawns, and direct sightlines still monumentalize the arches today. In Lefebvre's terms, this is the conceived space, a space planned to impress, which continues to shape how people move through and interact with it. Not because people come to reflect on its colonial meaning and appreciate the grandeur of the empire, but because the park's layout supports everyday activities. Nine participants reported passing through the arches at least once a week, mostly for commuting, jogging, or relaxing. Their presence there has little to do with the monument's symbolism as it has to do with how the space is designed to be used.

People's engagement with the arches is not ideological or historical, but emotional and based on routine. Several respondents emphasized their aesthetic and sensory experience of the space: one woman said that she runs at the park every week and that seeing the arches and passing under them always motivates her, while another one emphasized how she loves how she “can see them from so far away,” as they are noticeable even before you enter the park. These examples show how colonial symbols can be normalized through habit. The arches become part of people's visual landscape, and daily rhythm, making them be admired, but not interrogated. The geometry of the park, its openness, sightlines, and ease of movement, encourages flow and perspective rather than reflection. In this way, the space softens the presence of the empire, guiding people through a monument tied to the wealth acquired from colonial exploitation without requiring them to consciously acknowledge it.

Given that memory is also co-produced by both the object and its setting (Shanken, 2022), at Cinquantenaire, such visions are also emphasized by how the arches are promoted. The

setting invites entertainment and casual use: seasonal pop-up bars animate the arcades in summer, children play and climb on the statues, and sport climbers sometimes scale the arches' walls. One participant noted how much she enjoyed the summer bar at the arcades. These layered, informal uses further detach the monument from its colonial meaning. Unless specifically prompted, people are unlikely to reflect on its historical context. The arches function more as a scenic backdrop than a site of reckoning. The imperial past remains highly visible, yet largely unquestioned.

This stands in sharp contrast to the *Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux d'Ixelles*, where the surrounding spatial design does not elevate the monument but rather obscures it, redirecting movement and attention away from it entirely. The *Monument aux Pionniers* is located in an extremely busy area with substantial pedestrian traffic on weekends, especially on nice weekend weather days where I counted over 50 people in the timespan of an hour (but during weekdays traffic is almost nonexistent). Still, only 2-3 visitors actually passed in front of the statue, likely because of current pedestrian routes and their end-goal when they were visiting the site. Primary pedestrian movement occurs between the Ixelles ponds area and Abbaye park, making direct engagement with the statue uncommon as people use the square de la croix rouge as a movement hub to reach one of the two green areas. No one stops to sit or rest at this site. Most pass through quickly, and those who linger usually do so because their dogs pause, rather than by their own intention. Originally, there was only one crosswalk, which likely encouraged more people to walk directly in front of the statue as people had to pass in front of the statue to safely cross to the otherside. However, the addition of a second crosswalk now allows pedestrians coming from both sides of the ponds and the park entrances to bypass the statue entirely. Meanwhile, the bushes on the Abbaye Park side and the fences around the ponds act as subtle barriers of movement, further limiting alternative routes and reinforcing a flow of movement that guides people around the statue rather than toward it (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7.

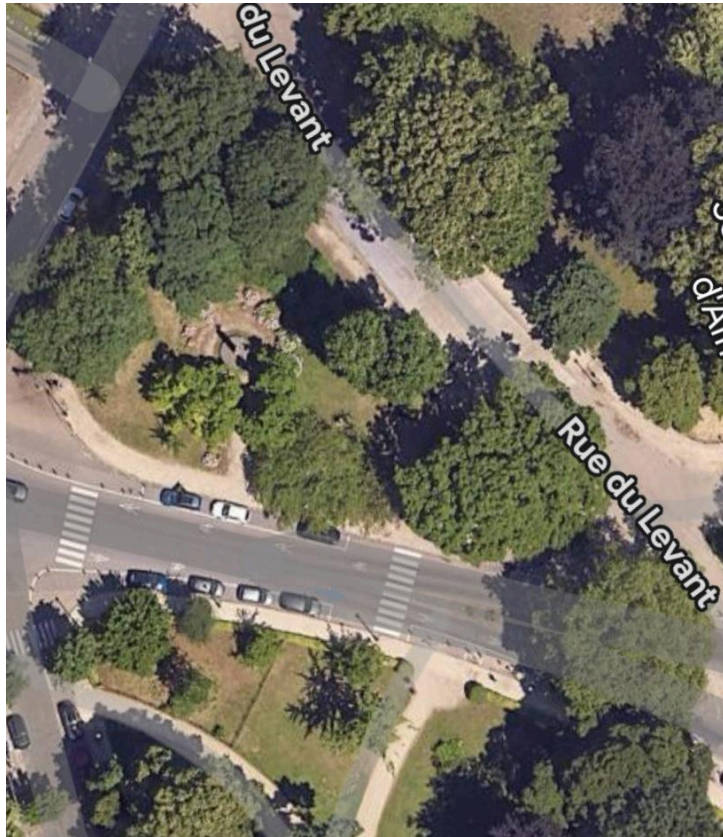
Pedestrian Circulation and Spatial Barriers at the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles.



Note. Diagram shows surrounding vegetation, walkways, and altered circulation patterns around the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles. The crosswalk in black was added after the monument's installation and now enables most passersby to bypass the statue entirely. Map created by the author.

Figure 8

Aerial View Highlighting Vegetation Coverage at the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles Site.

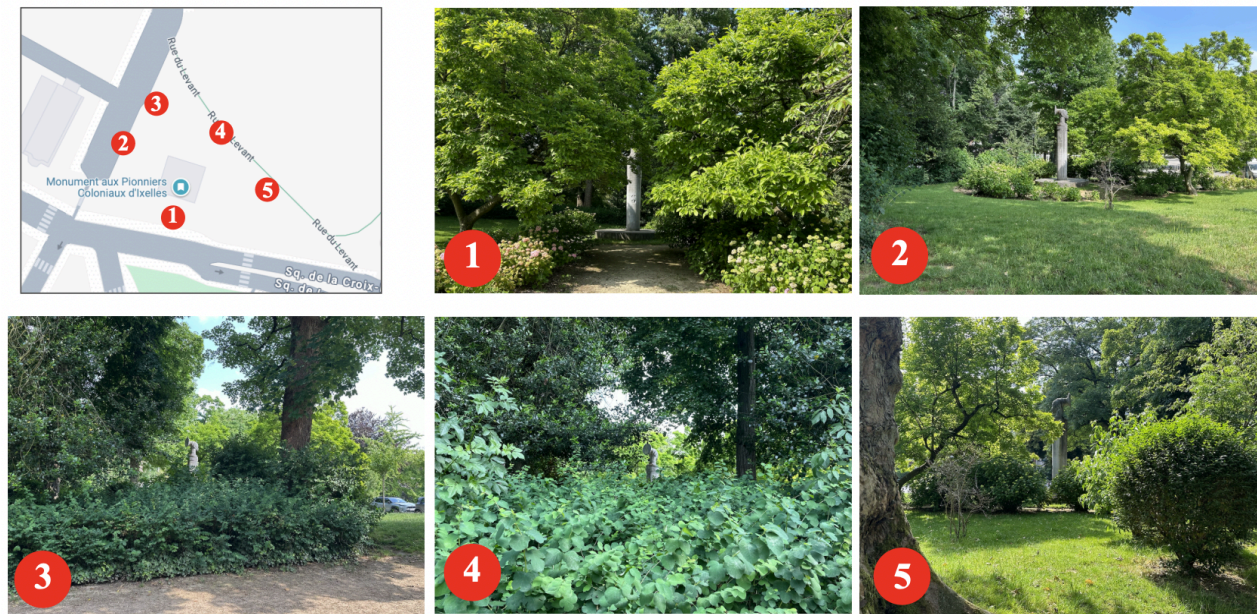


Note. Source, Google Maps (2025).

In addition to rerouting movement, vegetation and spatial layout further obscure the monument's presence. Thick bushes and mature trees block sightlines, and today there are only a few fragmented vantage points from which the statue is even partially visible (Figure 9). Archival images suggest that when the monument was inaugurated, its surroundings were more open. Elements such as the bushes around the trees and the landscaping near the Abbaye park had not yet been added, and the trees had not grown to their current height, making the monument a more prominent visual feature in the landscape (Figure 10).

Figure 9

Viewpoints and Visual Obstructions at the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles.



Note. Photos taken from five different locations illustrate the limited visibility of the monument due to surrounding vegetation and spatial layout. While the statue is technically visible from multiple angles, dense foliage and lack of direct pathways significantly restrict visual access. Images and map created by the author.

Figure 10

Archival Image of the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles Showing Its Original Visibility Within an Open Landscape.



Note. Reproduced from *Inventaire du patrimoine architectural*, by Direction des Monuments et des Sites, n.d. (<https://monument.heritage.brussels>). © Région de Bruxelles-Capitale.

The visitors interviewed confirmed the visual erasure that the statue faces today: half said they had never noticed the statue before, and several described it as “very hidden” or “behind the bushes.” Even for those who do locate the *Monument aux Pionniers*, its legibility is severely compromised by the physical decay of the monument. Corrosion, darkening, and weathering have rendered many of the engravings difficult, if not impossible, to read. This deterioration was noted by one visitor in particular, a tourist following an Art Nouveau walking route, who described struggling to locate the statue. Although it was clearly marked on her map, she could not initially identify it in the physical space. When she finally found it, she attempted to read the inscriptions to understand what the statue was about, but the engravings were so faded and worn that she was ultimately unable to grasp its meaning. Such neglect, while seemingly unintentional, arguably functions as a passive strategy of forgetting, allowing difficult histories to fade from view without the need for overt removal (Wilson, 2015).

Shanken (2022) points out that monuments and memorials are often placed in urban spaces left over from street planning, areas with little commercial value or development pressure, and overall the “urban leftovers.” These are sites where capitalist claims are weaker, and as a result, memory is inserted into places that rarely, if ever, served commemorative purposes. This is the case of the *Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux d’Ixelles*, located in a space originally designed as a transitional hub to channel movement between Avenue Louise, the Chaussée de Boondael, Place Sainte-Croix, and the former Abbaye de la Cambre. Over time, this infrastructural node was transformed into a symbolic site of memory for Belgium’s colonial past and for those who died in the so-called civilizing mission. In this sense, the monument site represents an overlay of functions: a place of memory layered onto a space of circulation.

It is possible that, at the time of its inauguration, the monument did play a more visible and active role in public life. Contemporary newspapers described the event as a major occasion, attracting a large number of visitors (La Dernière Heure, 1933; L’Indépendance Belge, 1933). Given that colonialism remained central to Belgium’s political imagination and collective memory, and was often viewed nostalgically (Stanard, 2023), the monument likely held greater meaning and visibility at that time. However, as colonial memory lost prominence in the public sphere, the monument gradually faded into the background. As its commemorative function weakened, the space reverted to its original use as a transit corridor.

Fieldwork confirms this ongoing pattern. Although the monument is located in one of Ixelles’ busiest pedestrian areas, it remains peripheral to people’s everyday routines. Nine out of ten interviewees who stopped to speak said they use the space regularly, typically as a shortcut between the ponds and Abbaye Park or while running errands, not out of interest in the monument itself. In other words, the statue now sits within a movement corridor where patterns of circulation dominate, relegating its commemorative purpose to the background. This case

reinforces Lefebvre's insight that spatial practice ultimately overrides design intent (Lefebvre, 1992). In this case, the square was redefined as a site of memory through the addition of a statue, but over time, people's spatial practices have reasserted the site's original use as a transit hub. The commemorative layer faded as circulation patterns took over once again. This shows that for transformation to be sustained, it must alter lived space itself, something the monument alone, without changing how the space is used, was unable to achieve.

When it comes to the colonial meaning of the monument, its symbolism is neither openly rejected, embraced, nor actively contested. Instead, it is fully bypassed as daily circulation patterns define the square as a space of transit and landscape obscures the monument, ultimately filtering it out of public attention. By spatially erasing the statue, this configuration limits recognition and reduces the likelihood of protest or critical engagement as the site is unlikely to become a space of contestation. This stands in sharp contrast to other highly visible sites such as the Leopold II statue at Place du Trône, where the design and location makes it a perfect target to become a focal point for contestation, which was mentioned by multiple interviewees as an example of interventions in colonial heritage.

This has important implications for how the site might be reimagined. It raises the question of whether such a marginalised space can realistically become a site of public debate or critical reflection. The comparison underscores how spatial design plays a central role in determining whether colonial heritage sites are encountered as objects of memory, controversy, or are simply absorbed into the background of everyday urban life.

For example, the Urban.brussels report on decolonization has recommended that the Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles should be replaced by a monument depicting a Black woman or women in a celebratory way. However, as seen before, because the square is laid out as a hurried shortcut, almost no one notices the monument that is already there. Therefore, simply replacing the statue with a new figure without rethinking the space is unlikely to change how the site is used in the long term. The new monument may face the same fate as the current one: a brief moment of increased attention followed by a gradual return to routine patterns shaped by the space's original function. If pedestrians continue to cut across the square, avoid the centre, and rarely linger, they are likely to treat the new statue just as they did the old one.

If the goal is lasting impact, the plan must go beyond symbolic replacement and reconfigure the space to actively support memory. Without this, there's a risk of simply reproducing what Shanken (2022) critiques: inserting monuments into "urban leftovers," where meaning struggles to take root." This means redesigning how people move through the site, such as opening sight-lines, rerouting paths so that pedestrians naturally pass the statue when crossing from the ponds to the park, and creating places to stop and reflect. Without such changes, any

intervention, whether a plaque, counter-monument, or symbolic replacement, risks fading into the background and having its message absorbed by the flow of everyday life in the medium to long-term.

Where the Monument aux Pionniers is overlooked due to poor maintenance and a design that steers people away from it, the Chalet Norvégien illustrates a different form of disconnection: at the Chalet, people are drawn to the building's striking façade, but the privatization of the site, combined with its location in a surveilled royal-administrative zone, reduces public interaction to a visual encounter with the façade only.

Just like the monument, the Chalet Norvégien is also relatively hidden, as it is located in a small street in between the busier areas of Rue de Namur and Place du Trône. The flow of visitors occurs in waves, with noticeable periods of pedestrian activity followed by stretches of little to no foot traffic, patterns likely shaped by the rhythms of public transportation. Passerbys include individuals, pairs, and groups across all age ranges, with a higher presence of elderly people. The range of languages spoken also suggests the presence of tourists, which makes sense given the location. According to the interviews, only two respondents were visiting the site for the first time. Most people passed through the area while commuting (7) or during leisure walks (3). Only one person reported visiting the site frequently or on a weekly basis, while the others said they either rarely came or had never been before.

While visitors did not engage with the site beyond occasional pass-throughs, all were drawn to its architectural features. The building's design was highly praised for its blend of stone and wood, green window frames, and overall contrast with its surroundings, making it a consistent point of interest. From an architectural perspective, the Chalet notably stands out due to its distinct style, in contrast to the more uniform buildings nearby. Its recessed position from the street further sets it apart, creating a spatial separation that amplifies its visual prominence (Figure 11). As a result, the building frequently captures attention: many passersby look up, take photos, point it out to companions, or stop to analyze the details.

Figure 11.

Architectural Views of the Chalet Norvégien and Surrounding Built Environment.



Note. Visibility of the former Compagnie du Congo building from four key pedestrian viewpoints along Rue Brederode. Images and map created by the author.

Although the Chalet Norvégien still draws attention, unlike the Monument aux Pionniers, this attention rarely leads to deeper engagement. As mentioned, its distinct façade, set apart from the surrounding architecture, often prompts passers-by to pause, take photos, or discuss its design. That moment of curiosity is stronger here than at other colonial sites, yet it remains fleeting, because the building's current function prevents visitors from lingering or exploring further. The Chalet now serves as a private office for a luxury brand within the surveilled royal-administrative zone, sharply limiting public interaction. People can look, but they cannot enter, linger, or reclaim the site in any meaningful way.

The building formerly housed the Dynasty Museum (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, n.d.), functioning as a semi-public space that, while perhaps its exposition did not critically engage with the colonial past, at least invited some form of entry and interaction. This accessibility allowed for the possibility, however limited, of revisiting and reinterpreting its historical layers in the present day. In contrast, its current status as a fully privatized office space forecloses such opportunities entirely. The building no longer provides any platform for engaging with its colonial associations or embedding them into everyday urban life.

Contestation, therefore, also struggles to take root here. The site is not conducive to protest or collective performance, and while the building does occasionally attract attention from passersby due to its distinctive architecture, its hidden location makes such moments of curiosity sporadic and fully dependent on passersby or decolonial walking tours. Long-term interventions are limited to the façade and while adding explanatory plaques or panels might inform and people may be more likely to read it as they are intrigued by the site, they are unlikely to provoke meaningful engagement. They risk functioning as symbolic add-ons rather than transformative gestures, especially when the interior space itself remains inaccessible and surveilled. As a result, the site's potential to become a thirdspace of contestation is severely limited to the current usage of the building and its location in the city. This is particularly striking given the building's symbolic weight. Once considered the "heartbeat of Congo" during colonial times, it holds deep historical resonance.

Equally telling of how the space is experienced and the role of colonial heritage in shaping it is who is and who is not present at the studied sites. During fieldwork, fewer than ten visitors appeared to be of African descent, despite Brussels hosting the country's largest Congolese heritage population (Demart et al., 2017). Out of the 30 respondents of the interviews, none self-identified as black, only two people self-identified as having Moroccan heritage, and none self-identified as being part of the Central African diaspora. These absences highlight a kind of racial exclusion that doesn't rely on obvious barriers for entry, but may result from a mix of factors, such as these heritage sites being located in wealthier regions, security presence, and limited activities that speak to diverse groups.

Plus, the presence of colonial heritage is especially important because communities more directly affected by Belgian colonialism, like Afro-descendant or Congolese groups, might see these spaces very differently. What seems unremarkable or easy to ignore for some might stand out as a painful or dominating reminder of the colonial past for others. As one representative of the congolese diaspora has mentioned in an interview, when questioned about the Arches of Cinquanteaire, was that the arches continues to serve as a powerful reminder of Congo's exploitation (Rankin, 2023). Therefore, while for regular users of the space the colonial layer fades in the background, for congolese migrants that is not necessarily true and can be the very reason why they do not frequent spaces linked to the colonial past. This dynamic also echoes what scholars describe as the after-life of colonial planning: spatial layouts that do more than mirror historic hierarchies, they actively keep them in place by steering certain people toward or away from specific streets and squares (La Fleur, 2021; Beebeejaun, 2024).

Finally, a comparison between the Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux, the Chalet Norvégien, and the Arches of Cinquanteaire illustrates how spatial configurations shape public engagement in distinct ways. These sites demonstrate that visibility and accessibility are not

neutral attributes but are actively produced through spatial design. Such configurations can either enable or restrict claims on the colonial past, influencing what forms of decolonial engagement are possible. In this sense, spatial design does not merely reflect colonial memory, it plays an active role in producing, concealing, or containing it. Therefore, understanding the spatial dynamics of each site is a necessary precursor to proposing meaningful interventions. Equally critical is recognizing who is excluded from these spaces. The absence of certain publics, particularly those most directly impacted by colonial histories, must inform both the diagnosis and design of any decolonising project. If the aim is to generate inclusive debate and foster diverse perspectives, it is essential to assess not only how the space is encountered, but also who is or who is not encountering it.

“It’s about Belgium, not Colonialism:” Public Perceptions of Colonial Heritage

The Urban.brussels report on decolonizing public space outlines two general categories of colonial traces: intentional, such as colonial memorials and instruments of colonial propaganda, and unintentional colonial heritage, referring to elements not explicitly created to celebrate colonialism but which emerged as a consequence of it. These categories are further subdivided into visible/readable and invisible/unreadable traces (Urban.brussels, 2022).

While the report openly acknowledges that visibility is not fixed and depends on individuals’ historical awareness, it still organizes colonial traces into categories such as “visible/readable” and “invisible/unreadable” based on the Working Group’s interpretation of existing literature. However, this reliance on expert typologies risks reproducing the logic of the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006), which positions interpretation as something the public must catch up to rather than co-produce. As a result, such division on the report risks limiting the potential for everyday meaning-making, particularly around why certain colonial elements feel offensive or elicit divergent reactions, and narrows the space for community-led reinterpretation that decolonisation must invite.

In the context of policy-making, this approach risks pre-determining which sites are deemed most important based on academic or institutional priorities, rather than on how heritage is actually experienced, felt, or contested by the public. If decolonisation is ultimately about fostering belonging and recognition in public space, then the question of what matters should emerge from the ground up.

As the fieldwork findings show, even monuments with overt colonial imagery, such as the *Monument aux Pionniers d’Ixelles*, are often misunderstood or misread, while sites with less straightforward colonial imagery, like the Cinquantenaire arches, are seen as linked to Belgium’s imperial history. This reinforces the idea already well accepted in critical heritage studies that visibility is not embedded in the object, but constructed through individual beliefs, memory, and

daily use (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). Therefore, classifying visibility in advance, even provisionally, risks reinstating the very epistemic hierarchies that decolonisation seeks to dismantle. These tensions between expert categorization and lived experience come into sharper focus when we look at how people actually engage with the Arches at Cinquantenaire and with the Monument aux Pionniers d'Ixelles.

At Cinquantenaire, six out of ten respondents said they were aware of the site's connection to Belgium's colonial past, particularly that the monument was financed by Leopold II. However, this only came up after they were directly asked about colonial links. When asked more generally about the arches' history or meaning, none spontaneously mentioned colonialism. Instead, most associated the monument with Belgian national history, with five respondents specifically saying it celebrated Belgian independence or the 50th anniversary of the nation, often pointing to the name Cinquantenaire as evidence. The colonial connection only emerged when explicitly prompted.

One respondent, who had acquired detailed knowledge of the site through personal research, demonstrated extensive awareness of both Leopold II's actions in Congo and the history behind the construction of the arches. He was well informed about Belgian independence and could explain the symbolism of the monument in depth. Still, he explicitly stated that, despite his awareness of its colonial origins, he did not associate the arches with colonialism. For him, the monument symbolised Belgian national history and independence, not colonial violence or colonial history.

This response highlights a broader dynamic: people's interpretations of colonial heritage are not necessarily shaped by the historical knowledge they possess, but by the frameworks through which they organise that knowledge. The issue in seeing the arches as also symbolizing colonialism is not simply steaming from ignorance of colonial history, but rather the difficulty that some have in recognising that Belgian national history and Belgian colonialism are deeply entangled. In this case, the aforementioned respondent maintained a separation between the two, viewing them as distinct rather than fundamentally connected.

This also raises important questions about the limits of awareness-based interventions. Adding historical plaques may not be as effective if people are already aware of the history but do not link, on their own mental frameworks of memory, the arches to colonialism. The problem, therefore, is not on making people aware of the connection but thinking of how to make people see Belgian history and colonialism as intertwined phenomena.

It is also interesting to note that the arches are regularly "reactivated," but not through the contestation that might turn them into a space of debate over inclusion, diversity and questioning Belgian history. Instead, they are overlaid by what Shanken (2022) calls temporary roofs, short-lived structures and events that shift attention without changing the monument's fabric.

These could be effective, if the narrative surrounding such activations was on inclusion or historical awareness, but that is not the case. For example, on Belgian National Day, concert stages and flag displays recast the arches as a patriotic backdrop, highlighting Belgium's independence and achievements, while potentially minimizing the colonial aspects of the site's history. Also, during the summer, pop-up bars, sports events, and outdoor films fold the monument into everyday leisure, without critica engagement or programming that might cater to diverse audiences or critically engage people with the remains of the colonial past. These programmed overlays, therefore, help to stabilise national and recreational readings of the site, so even visitors who know about Leopold II's activities in Congo rarely interpret the arches through a colonial lens. Effective decolonisation must therefore tackle not only informational content but also the spatial programming that continually resets the monument's meaning.

When it comes to how people became aware of the colonial connection, interviewees said they “just knew” about the arches’ connection to colonialism, others had learned it through friends, family, or social media. Only two pointed to the “LL” monogram, which they interpreted as a reference to Leopold II, as a clue that had informed their understanding. This suggests that most individuals were not interpreting the monument primarily based on its visual cues, but rather through the lens of prior knowledge, underscoring the challenge of definitively categorizing monuments as either “visible” or “invisible” traces of colonialism. Instead, it is the viewer's existing awareness of colonial histories that plays a more significant role than whether the monument explicitly conveys such associations. A similar dynamic is evident among Congolese migrants; as one representative of the Congolese diaspora noted in an interview, the arches serve as a powerful reminder of Congo's exploitation (Rankin, 2023), despite the absence of overt colonial symbolism.

At Cinquantenaire, responses to the site varied in ways typical of dissonant heritage: some visitors expressed disapproval once the colonial link was mentioned, others dismissed it as “just history,” and several simply admired the arches as “classical” or “a testament of time.” These reactions suggest that even when colonial meanings are acknowledged, they don't necessarily shape how the site is perceived.

The Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux in Ixelles, however, triggered a qualitatively different response. 5 out of 10 respondents fully misidentified its central message, seeing the monument as a celebratory portrayal of a Black woman and, by extension, reading the monument as progressive rather than imperial. Paradoxically, a monument originally intended to honor the pioneers from Ixelles who died during Belgian colonial campaigns in Congo, and thus glorifying the colonial mission, is legible today through an inverted, seemingly emancipatory lens.

When asked which elements of the monument most captured their attention, the majority of respondents identified the head of the black woman (7 out of 10 respondents), followed by the

star (3 respondents), the word *pioneers* (2), and the names or smaller iconography on the column (2) (Figure 12). These responses suggest that the visual elements most explicitly tied to colonial iconography are indeed noticed by passers-by who take a moment to look at the monument. However, it is important to note that most of these observations were made quickly and without much sustained attention. With the exception of two respondents who spent time walking around the monument and examining its details, the majority offered immediate, surface-level impressions, mentioning what stood out visually before stating what they believed the monument represented. Still, even when colonial imagery was noticed, it was rarely identified as such. What emerges here is not a lack of visual recognition, but rather a disconnect between seeing and interpreting. While these features are visually striking, they are not consistently read or understood as references to colonial history.

Figure 12

Elements of the *Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles* that captured visitors' attention.



Note. Images retrieved from *Brussels Urban Heritage – IRISbox* (<https://collections.heritage.brussels/fr/objects/44739>). Urban.brussels.

Only two respondents correctly identified the site as being linked to Belgium's colonial past and explicitly recognised it as a monument honouring colonial pioneers. One additional participant speculated that it "might be colonial," reasoning that "every monument in Belgium is about colonialism" and pointing to the depiction of a Black woman as a possible clue. Despite the presence of explicit colonial imagery, the majority of respondents did not recognise the monument as such. Even when participants acknowledged the stereotypical portrayal of a Black woman, they did not connect it to Belgium's colonial history, even in cases where they demonstrated some broader awareness of that history. This suggests that recognising visual cues does not necessarily translate into understanding a site's historical or political meaning and, in some cases, it can lead to misreadings that invert the intended message.

This was especially evident in the case of five male respondents, who interpreted the monument as a tribute to the Black female community in Brussels based solely on the prominent figure of a Black woman holding a star. No other elements of the monument were mentioned in these interpretations. One participant even expressed that more monuments like this should be installed in public space, praising what he believed was a message of inclusion and representation. In contrast, all women who commented on the same figure recognised it as a stereotypical depiction, pointing to a clear gender disparity in how female representations were perceived and understood at this site. In these cases of misinterpretation, interviewees strongly opposed colonialism and supported greater representation of women and Black citizens in public space. Still, they failed to perceive this monument as colonial and, as a consequence, inherently against those values. This led them to support the monument, even when they noticed the colonial imagery, because they interpreted it in ways that aligned with their own values, without realizing that the monument was originally intended to honor colonial actors.

Taken together, these two sites show that dissonance around colonial heritage does not only arise from disagreements over whether colonialism should be condemned or celebrated, or from diverging views on the extent of its violence. Rather, it can stem from more fundamental tensions around what is recognised as colonial in the first place. At the Arches, multiple narratives coexist, for example visitors may recognize the colonial layer and choose to emphasize other aspects when building what the monument means to them. However, at the *Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles*, the colonial meaning was entirely replaced by an imagined progressive one in half the cases. Here, dissonance precedes contestation: the tension is between a misreading and the monument's historical purpose, rather than among consciously competing narratives. The conclusion, therefore, is that a monument's "visibility" as colonial doesn't depend on how clearly colonial it looks as visibility isn't fixed, but dependable on how people engage with the site. For decolonial work to be effective, it needs to account for this

difference: making hidden colonial meanings clearer in some cases, and helping people navigate competing interpretations in others.

“I Feel Sad When I See It... Then I Forget:” Feelings Arising from Colonial Heritage

Shanken (2022) observes that monuments often “fade into the background” until a controversy or temporary event thrusts them back into public view. In Brussels’ colonial heritage, that fading rarely erases the object itself, rather, it erases the object’s ties to the colonial past. The three sites analyzed in this research illustrate different patterns of forgetting.

At the *Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d’Ixelles*, both the statue and its colonial symbolism tend to go unnoticed by the public, as most passersby failed to register its presence, let alone identify its connection to Congo, the monument remains a dominant and iconic structure within the cityscape, yet its colonial origins, rooted in Leopold II’s imperial legacy, is not the first thing that comes to visitors’ minds, even among those who are aware of them. The visual grandeur of the site is foregrounded, while its colonial significance fades into the background. At the Chalet Norvégien, the building is widely appreciated for its picturesque façade, but the vast majority of respondents were entirely unaware of its link to Belgium’s colonial enterprise. In this case, the colonial layer is not only backgrounded but entirely absent from public perception.

Interview data reinforce this pattern. Out of 30 participants, only nine reported that having that colonial heritage site in their daily life impacted them in any way. The remaining 21 stated that the site had no effect on their routines or emotional experience, despite many of them expressing moral opposition to colonialism or supporting some form of intervention. These findings indicate that normalisation may arise not only from outright ignorance but also from partial awareness combined with emotional distance. However, because the data comprises only those who were present at the sites, it is therefore possible that the sample disproportionately reflects individuals who are either indifferent to, or unbothered by, the presence of such symbols.

Among the interviewees who reported feeling impacted by these sites, their responses varied. Five individuals described the impact as positive, while four described it as negative. Between those who responded that it impacted them positively, three were located at Cinquantenaire Arches and two were located at the *Monument aux Pionniers d’Ixelles*. At the Arches, the three participants said that having the arches impacted them positively because they really enjoyed having “architecture from the imperial period” in their daily lives because of its architectural style and, therefore, aesthetic properties. In these responses, the colonial layer, particularly the violence and exploitation behind the monument’s construction, was not absent due to a lack of knowledge but was simply not foregrounded in their interpretation. Therefore, the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of the monument took precedence over its historical context.

At the Monument aux Pionniers, the two participants who described a positive impact had misread the statue as a tribute to Black women. Their positive feelings stemmed from this misinterpretation and their desire for greater representation in public space, rather than any meaningful engagement with the monument's actual historical meaning. Notably, both participants admitted they had never noticed the statue before, which suggests that their response was less about the object itself and more about a general idea of inclusive representation in the public space.

In contrast, those who reported negative emotional responses were primarily located at the *Monument aux Pionniers* and, in one case, at the Cinquantenaire Arches. These respondents expressed feelings of guilt or sadness once the colonial meaning of the monument was explained to them, again, often despite having never noticed the object before. One participant at the Arches, for instance, stated that learning about the site's link to colonialism made him feel guilty and overwhelmed by the visibility of colonial traces being "everywhere in the city." Similarly, two women at the monument site described the monument as "sad" or "wrong," stating that it was troubling to still have statues celebrating colonisers in public space. However, both women also admitted it was the first time they had noticed the statue, despite using the space frequently. This raises questions about the nature of their emotional response, which seems to be shaped more by general attitudes toward colonial heritage than by a specific, lived relationship to the colonial heritage site in question. In other words, the feeling of being bothered may be more about the symbolic weight of colonialism in public space than about the particular site they were engaging with at the moment.

At the Chalet Norvégien, the lack of perceived impact was even more pronounced. Only one respondent was aware of the building's colonial past, and she was also the only person who said the site affected her. This interviewee passed by the Chalet frequently on her way to work and had a friend employed at the office now housed in the building. She expressed frustration that the site, once used to manage colonial operations, now functions as the headquarters for a luxury brand, with no visible acknowledgment of its history. For her, the sadness that she felt stemmed both from the building's past and from the perceived erasure of that history in its current use. However, all other respondents at the Chalet indicated that the site had no influence on their daily lives. This aligns with their lack of prior knowledge, because they were unaware of the building's historical context, the colonial layer did not register as significant in their everyday experience.

Finally, interventions on colonial heritage sites can shift not only public awareness but also emotional responses, supporting Shanken's (2022) observation that monuments can be "reactivated" through public disruption. One interviewee at the Chalet Norvégien, who otherwise felt unaffected by the building, described a contrasting experience with the Leopold II statue at

Trône. He explained that when the statue had been graffitied or painted, it briefly made him reflect, thinking “what we did was awful” each time he walked past it. Although the feeling quickly faded as he said that “after you pass it, it goes away,” the contrast is telling: the marked statue provoked a moment of reflection, while the unmarked colonial building did not register at all. While based on a single account, this example suggests that public interventions, whether artistic, activist, or institutional, can momentarily reactivate both memory and feeling. The challenge for heritage practice lies in finding ways to sustain such engagement, rather than allowing the colonial layer to retreat once again into the background of everyday urban life.

“We Should Do Something:” Public Proposals for Interventions

Brussels’ colonial-era sites are filtered through three intertwined factors: spatial configuration (what can be seen or not), prior knowledge (what visitors bring to the encounter), and everyday routines (how they actually use the space). Visibility, therefore, is not an intrinsic feature of the monument but an outcome of practice. Moreover, the vast majority of respondents indicated that the colonial dimension of these sites had little, if any, bearing on their everyday routines or emotional experience.

When asked about the Brussels government's decolonization efforts, only 14 out of 30 respondents reported being aware of them. This relatively low level of public awareness, less than half, suggests a limited diffusion of official initiatives beyond institutional or activist circles, which may hinder the formation of an informed public sphere capable of engaging critically and constructively with processes of decolonization. Of those, 8 supported the initiatives led by the government, 3 were neutral, and 3 were opposed. In terms of how they became aware, one respondent cited personal research, three (all opponents) mentioned social media, one learned through the AfrikaMuseum, and the remaining nine pointed to the red paint on the Leopold II statue at Trône, suggesting that visible public interventions are shaping awareness and sparking debate.

When asked what should be done with colonial heritage sites, respondents' answers fell into three broad categories: contextualization, no intervention, and other alternatives. These included removing the monuments, changing the function of the site, or stating they couldn't offer an opinion, arguing that only the Congolese diaspora should decide. Accordingly, the following section does not assess proposed interventions as definitive solutions, but rather analyzes how individuals reconcile memory and spatial experience, which often happens in ways that are internally inconsistent or detached from their own practices.

Contextualization

When asked what interviewees believed should be done to the heritage site they were located at given the link to the colonial past, the most popular response was different versions of contextualization through direct addition. Vaesen et al. (2024) identify a couple of different ways that direct addition could take place: (1) adding an explanatory plaque, (2) add QR code, (3) add a new object or (4) an addition through a performance. In the field work, 14 out of 30 respondents expressed desire to add contextualization information, such as plaques, to the site to explain its colonial connection through direct addition. These respondents were evenly spread across locations: 5 at the Arches of Cinquantenaire, 4 at the Monument aux Pionniers, and 5 at the Chalet Norvégien.

When it comes to direct interventions, only one interviewee at the Arches of Cinquantenaire proposed a substantial addition that would alter the use of the space to some extent. He suggested installing “very large infographics” throughout the Parc du Cinquantenaire to explain the colonial connections along the pathways people commonly use to cross the park. This form of contextualization was explicitly tied to his experience of space, as he noted that such additions would make people stop, pay attention, and reflect—potentially even disrupting the ease of circulation through the park. Following Lefebvre’s theory, this type of intervention, though it does not alter the monument itself or its symbolic meaning, can be understood as a modification of spatial practice. By inserting interpretive elements into the routes people habitually take, the intervention would change how the space is lived and navigated, thereby increasing the likelihood of prompting critical engagement with its colonial history.

Still, the majority of interviewees who supported direct additions favored minimal intervention, often describing their proposal explicitly as “small” or “at the corner” or suggesting such sizes and placements through hand gestures. These proposals typically involve the addition of discrete plaques, with only one interviewee addressing accessibility by recommending the use of multiple languages (French, Dutch, and English). Overall, these minimal forms of contextualization are unlikely to provoke significant disruption or reflection, as they do not meaningfully alter spatial practices or the lived environment. As discussed in previous sections, such additions would likely go unnoticed at the Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux, a site already overlooked by many passersby. At the Chalet Norvégien, they might momentarily attract attention due to the building’s aesthetic appeal, but are unlikely to encourage deeper engagement with the colonial past. At the Arches of Cinquantenaire, the preference for a small plaque appears especially disproportionate given the monument’s monumental scale and would also likely go unnoticed, as most visitors also tend to look up at the arches rather than downwards. Also, when we take into account that colonial heritage, specially monuments and memorials, generally have a strong symbolic weight that communicate authority, admiration and

downplay oppression. Therefore, a small explanatory plaque rarely has the power to neutralize the visual rhetoric that this type of colonial heritage produces, leaving the main narrative alive (Hattori, 2023).

Another notable aspect of the responses in favor of contextualization, particularly at the *Monument aux Pionniers Coloniaux d'Ixelles* and the Arches of Cinquenaire, is the disconnect between the interventions proposed and how respondents actually experienced these sites. Many of these responses appeared to stem from a general moral stance against colonialism rather than from a personal engagement with the space (from their spatial practices) or a perceived need to alter it because of the colonial past. For instance, at the *Monument aux Pionniers*, several participants suggested the addition of an explanatory plaque, yet admitted they had never noticed the statue before the interview. This indicates a misalignment between their proposed intervention and their own spatial practices. Moreover, many of these suggestions were framed in terms of minimal disruption, reflecting a desire to preserve the existing use of space while still acknowledging the colonial past. This suggests that while participants supported symbolic gestures of condemnation, they were hesitant to endorse changes that might meaningfully alter their interaction with the site or disrupt its everyday functionality.

The findings reveal a persistent gap between awareness and practice. Interviewees readily acknowledged Belgium's colonial past and voiced moral unease, yet the remedies they favoured, small plaques, text on the corners, and overall minimal signage, stopped at symbolic recognition. Contextualization as a solution, then, became less about generating critical reflection or transforming the space into something else that would allow for debate to take place and new forms of memory to emerge and more about justifying the respondent's desire to acknowledge colonialism. This type of behavior aligns with critiques of post-democratic governance, in which participatory or symbolic gestures persist but are ultimately used to reinforce existing arrangements (Blühdorn, 2013). Furthermore, seven respondents mentioned contextualization not out of strong support for the intervention itself, but as a way to justify their primary position that the monument should remain in place. In these cases, the emphasis on choosing contextualization as the ideal type of intervention was less on the value of adding historical context and more on legitimizing opposition to removal. Together, these patterns suggest that support for contextualization often functions as a symbolic gesture rather than a call for spatial transformation.

In Lefebvre's terms, the response amounts to transposition rather than transformation: colonialism is denounced at the level of discourse, but the spatial and social structures that carry its legacy remain intact. However, such palliative measures merely push away the problem. Here, contextualisation functions as exactly that palliative, allowing citizens to register dissent while leaving the material city, and its colonial residues, essentially unchanged.

However, this pattern was not consistent across all sites. At the Chalet Norvégien, for instance, respondents were more visibly engaged with the building's appearance and more likely to stop and look at it. While they also suggested contextualisation, in this case the suggestion seemed to emerge more organically from their actual curiosity and spatial interaction. Whether or not they would ultimately read an explanatory plaque on the building's colonial history is a separate question, but their proposal at least reflected a form of attention and engagement that was largely absent at the other sites.

This contrast underscores the importance of aligning interventions with how people already engage with a space. When contextualisation responds to existing curiosity or spatial attention, as at the Chalet Norvégien, it carries more interpretive potential. In other cases, however, even large-scale or well-intentioned interventions may go unnoticed if they are not meaningfully integrated into people's lived experience of the space. A relevant example is Urban.brussels' installation "The Grand Opening" at the *Monument aux Pionniers du Congo Belge* at Cinquantenaire.

"The Grand Opening" is an example of direct addition on-site intervention. The year-long installation consisted of a monumental silver curtain, a platform hosting several performances and explanatory bases with the goal of creating a space for debates and reflections, and to invite passersby to take another look at the monument and to rethink Belgian collective history (Urban.brussels, 2024). Although interviewees were not specifically asked about The Grand Opening installation or other monuments across the city that had received interventions, none of those interviewed at Cinquantenaire mentioned the Grand Opening. By contrast, three respondents spontaneously cited the much more visible actions around the Leopold II statue at Place du Trône, and the interviewee who was most knowledgeable about Congo mentioned the Pionniers monument only for its violent imagery, not for the installation. The absence of any reference to "The Grand Opening" suggests that, despite its scale and year-long duration, the intervention failed to register in everyday perception, either because passers-by did not notice it or because it left no lasting imprint on their memory.

No intervention

The second most common response in terms of proposed interventions was no intervention at all, with 10 out of 30 respondents expressing a desire to leave the site as it is. These respondents were evenly spread across locations: 4 at the Arches of Cinquantenaire, 3 at the Monument aux Pionniers, and 3 at the Chalet Norvégien.

Vaesen et al. (2024) identifies four common arguments for opposing intervention: (1) to avoid presentism, (2) to avoid reviving painful histories, (3) to avoid scapegoating one site over

broader colonial legacies, and (4) to argue that the government should focus on material support for Black communities rather than symbolic gestures. However, among the field work interviewees, only the first argument, avoiding presentism, was explicitly mentioned, and only by two respondents at the Cinquantenaire. These individuals argued that the arches should remain untouched because “times have changed”, and “you can’t judge the past by today’s standards.” For them, the monument was a testament to its historical moment, regardless of its colonial origins. In addition to this, two other recurring justifications emerged: (1) misinterpretation of the site's original intended meaning and (2) aesthetic attachment.

An important reason for preserving the status quo was misinterpretation of the site’s meaning. As mentioned previously, at the Monument aux Pionniers, 5 respondents believed the sculpture was meant to honor Black women, with 3 still believed that after the explanation and thus viewed it as a positive symbol to include in the public landscape. While this interpretation was incorrect, it underscores the fact that support for preservation can stem not from denial or apathy, but from limited knowledge of colonial symbols, even when accompanied by moral opposition to colonialism more broadly.

A third and more prevalent argument, at the Chalet and Cinquantenaire, was grounded in aesthetic appreciation. All three respondents at the Chalet justified their stance based on the building’s visual appeal. One remarked that it was “much prettier and cleaner than most buildings in Brussels” and should therefore be preserved “exactly as it is.” A similar dynamic emerged at the Cinquantenaire, where all four respondents who opposed any form of intervention framed their resistance around the aesthetic value of the arches. One participant described the idea of altering the site as “a terrible thing to do to something so beautiful.” In three cases, even before being asked specifically about the arches, participants referenced interventions on the Leopold II statue at Trône, which they described as “awful” and “disfiguring.” These references point to a broader perception: colonial interventions are imagined not as acts of reinterpretation or education, but as destructive and aesthetically damaging. This belief appears to shape public imaginaries of decolonial practice as something inherently aggressive or extreme.

Importantly, these participants were not unaware of the colonial history of the arches. On the contrary, three of the four respondents acknowledged the site’s colonial connections (the same ones that commented on the Leopold II statue’s intervention). However, their arguments against intervention were grounded less in a refusal to engage with history and more in a strong attachment to the monument’s aesthetic and experiential qualities. The Chalet followed a similar pattern, though respondents there were not aware of its colonial origins. Still, they expressed a strong attachment to its visual appeal and architectural value. Across both cases, the preference for non-intervention seems to stem from a belief that the heritage would be damaged if interventions related to colonialism were done.

This tension between aesthetic attachment and historical colonial reckoning is particularly well illustrated by one participant at the Cinquantenaire: a woman who regularly visits the park with her grandchildren. Before any mention of colonialism, she enthusiastically proposed interventions to make the site more educational, suggesting workshops and guided tours with the Museum of Arts to explain the symbolism and history of the arches. Her ideas were clearly rooted in her spatial practice: she frequently visited the site, was engaged by the arches' aesthetic and cultural dimensions, and had been asked by her grandchildren what the monument meant, questions she admitted she could not answer. This personal engagement generated a strong motivation for interpretive interventions.

However, when the conversation shifted explicitly to colonialism and King Leopold II, her tone shifted. Although she acknowledged the site's colonial connection, she firmly rejected any intervention that might alter or challenge the monument's current form. She expressed discomfort with the idea of change, and insisted that "things were different back then" and that the arches were "too beautiful to be touched." This shift illustrates precisely the tension between people being open to enhancing understanding of heritage but struggling to see a reinterpretation that focuses on the colonial layer as something that can coexist with aesthetic preservation.

This reveals a key pattern in the "no intervention" responses: they were not necessarily driven by denial, people were not ignoring the history or claiming it didn't happen, but by how the site fits into their everyday routines and experiences and a fear of having that changed. In Lefebvre's terms, their stance is shaped by their spatial practice so when people engage with these spaces primarily for their aesthetic or personal value, it is natural that they want to preserve these properties. Plus, if they also believe that colonial interventions are inherently damaging or disfiguring, resistance to change becomes not just understandable, but expected. The challenge for decolonial heritage efforts, then, is not only to raise awareness but to shift how interventions are imagined, away from being something solemnly associated with destruction.

Interestingly, at the Chalet, when I explained to people that the interior had been repurposed into a private office for a luxury company, most expressed little concern, only one interviewee showed any emotional reaction. However, when it came to the façade, which is the only part they interact with, three interviewees strongly opposed any changes. They were comfortable with the interior being transformed, but resisted altering the exterior, which is the element woven into their experience of the space.

Other Proposals for Interventions

Vaesen et al. (2024) outline additional strategies such as indirect additions elsewhere in the city or online, direct visual protest on the monument itself, and guided "counter-tours" that reinterpret the site. Because their typology is geared toward more intentional heritage, however,

it offers little guidance for other colonial remnants that are not intentional, such as administrative buildings like the Chalet, should be managed. Also, they do not focus on how a space might be redesigned after a removal, if that is the solution opted, which is something some respondents have emphasized. Not surprisingly, interviewees' alternative proposals varied by location, each site presenting a different set of practical and imaginative possibilities.

Exceptionally, two respondents, interviewed at the arches and the monument, were notably hesitant to offer an opinion on what should be done with the site given its colonial history. Both emphasized, on multiple occasions, that they did not feel entitled to speak on the matter. One argued that only Belgians who had lived in Congo and members of the Congolese diaspora should have a say in such decisions. The other expressed that colonial monuments should not exist, but stated it was not her place to determine what should happen to them. For both, the authority to decide rests with those directly impacted by colonialism, particularly formerly colonized communities. This reflects a minority position in the sample: some individuals consciously withdrew from the decision-making process, acknowledging the limits of their positionality. However, in doing so, they also excluded themselves from the possibility of shaping the space or co-creating solutions alongside affected communities, even if only to amplify those communities' voices or support their demands.

Nonetheless, the other responses were more grounded in the spatial characteristics of the site itself. Notably, no interviewees at the Arches of Cinquantenaire proposed interventions beyond contextualization or preserving the status quo. This may reflect the site's monumental scale and symbolic weight, which make it more difficult to reimagine as something fundamentally different.

At the statue site, only one participant explicitly called for its removal, arguing that the monument should be replaced by a memorial that honors the victims of colonialism. In her view, this would shift the site's meaning, from glorifying colonial perpetrators to commemorating those who suffered under colonial rule. This suggestion echoes the intervention proposed in the Urban.brussels report on decolonization, which advocates for transforming the space into a site of memory by replacing the current monument with one honoring Black women from the diaspora (Urban.brussels, 2022). However, as mentioned before, unless accompanied by a change in the site itself to increase visibility and engagement, this solution could fall flat. Notably, the interviewee also mentioned that it was the first time she had noticed the monument. While her suggestion went beyond contextualization and leaned toward a more transformative intervention, the fact that she had not previously registered the statue suggests that limited visibility may have constrained her ability to envision more extensive changes to the site itself.

Nonetheless, another interviewee did not call for removal but focused on the site of the *Monument aux Pionniers* visibility. He expressed frustration that the statue was difficult to see

due to overgrown landscaping and suggested pruning the trees or redesigning the area entirely to make the monument visible again. Interestingly, he believed the statue was meant to honor Black women, which further motivated his desire to increase its visibility. These two responses were the only ones at this site that proposed changes beyond contextualization or maintaining the status quo, and they highlight how both interpretation and landscape design shape people's sense of what is possible.

Vaesen et al. (2024) mention an argument against removal which lies in removing them and placing them into museums under contextualization, the argument then revolves around the idea that museums are very different from public space because the access is not free, there is less diversity in the public and people are more inclined to take time to reflect. Meanwhile in public space there is more diversity of passersby and it is free. However, the results show that diversity is not that high and engagement with the colonial layer is actually extremely low, when it is even noticed.

At the Chalet, interviewees did not propose replacing the building or altering its surrounding landscape. Instead, the two interviewees' responses focused on repurposing the building itself and opting for a more transformative type of intervention. One woman suggested transferring the building to the Congolese embassy, acknowledging uncertainty about whether it would be accepted, but emphasizing that Congolese communities should have decision-making power over its future use. Another interviewee proposed converting the building into a public museum, not to acknowledge its colonial history or foster reflection, but out of architectural interest, as she was mainly curious to see the interior and thought others should have the same opportunity. The fact that this number was so low, of alternative solutions, could be due in part to the site's spatial constraints: as previously noted, the Chalet is a private structure with limited public access, which restricts interaction to the façade and may inhibit imaginative engagement with the space even on the realm of what they think is possible to do.

Finally, Following Lefebvre's theory, spatial transformation that alters how people engage with and move through a site can produce more meaningful change than symbolic gestures alone, such as plaques or signage that address only representational space. As Hattori (2023) showcases through her study from São Paulo, transformative, space-altering strategies are far more likely to activate critical memory and social justice than the mere placement of additional commemorative texts. Contrary to my expectation that frequent users would embody Lefebvre's notion of the *city as play*, where everyday familiarity encourages inventive re-readings and new designs of space, only three interviewees envisioned interventions that would materially reconfigure the sites. The vast majority confined their suggestions to symbolic gestures, detached from their own spatial routines. Public engagement, therefore, operated primarily at a discursive level, condemning colonialism in principle while leaving the spatial

practices that reproduce its legacy intact. The result is neither rupture nor re-imagination, but a cognitive acknowledgment of past injustice unaccompanied by any transformation in how these spaces are lived and, therefore, transformed.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to ask how colonial heritage sites with different levels of “visibility” are encountered in the flow of everyday life in Brussels, and what kinds of interventions their habitual users deem appropriate. Drawing on Lefebvre’s triadic theory of space, Shanken’s work on memorial visibility and everyday life, and the wider field of critical heritage studies, it compared three contrasting cases: the Triumphal Arch of Cinquantenaire, the *Monument aux Pionniers coloniaux d’Ixelles*, and the Chalet Norvégien.

Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, small ethnographic observations and thirty in-situ interviews, this study demonstrates that public encounters with colonial heritage are often muted or ambivalent. Even monuments bearing overt colonial iconography are frequently misread or emotionally bypassed, whereas less explicit sites sometimes invite spontaneous reinterpretation. Because most interviewees felt that these places exert little influence on their daily routines, they generally favoured minimal, low-disruption interventions. These findings reveal a persistent gap between official decolonisation discourse and lived spatial practice. By foregrounding the perspectives of ordinary city-dwellers, the thesis recentres the decolonial debate in the realm of everyday experience, illuminating where popular engagements align with, or diverge from, policy narratives. In so doing, it offers a clearer basis for designing interventions that resonate with daily uses, feelings, and beliefs, and points toward a more grounded, practice-oriented approach to decolonising public space.

Future research might extend this study’s spatial ethnography to other types of colonial traces (such as street names or infrastructural works) and analyze different forms of decolonisation efforts. For instance, it could look into the impact of actions that have already been implemented, like adding new memorials, installing explanatory plaques, creating new spaces such as Square Lumumba, or interventions in heritage sites like the one by Traumnouvelle at the Monument aux Pionniers. How effective are these initiatives? How much do they actually change the experience of current users of these sites, and what impact do they have on affected communities? Another interesting avenue would be to explore the role that heritage itself plays in keeping affected communities away from these spaces, as opposed to other social or structural factors, and to understand their own voices and perspectives on the presence of colonial heritage and how they would like it to be addressed, always thinking beyond merely symbolic interventions.

Ultimately, the argument returns to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) insight: “Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge.” Decolonising Brussels’ colonial heritage is therefore less about correcting yesterday’s stone than about transforming today’s public space. If we choose to acknowledge a past where historical violence was committed, and where the decisions made then have produced a present marked by exclusion in

public space, with urban forms still reinforcing stereotypes rooted in that period, then being faithful to that past means asking how, in the present, we deconstruct it. How, in the present, the memories we stage, the routes we walk, and the futures we imagine can no longer be dictated by imperial residue, but by a collective, contested, and inclusive present.

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Appendix A

Explanation of Research and Assurance of Anonymity Flyer



Understanding Colonial Heritage in Daily Life

Master Thesis in Urban Studies 2024-2025

Objectif de recherche (FR): Cette étude vise à explorer les ressentis et les interactions quotidiennes des personnes avec les sites du patrimoine colonial à Bruxelles. Nous souhaitons comprendre comment ces sites, avec différents niveaux de visibilité du passé colonial, s'intègrent dans le paysage urbain et le quotidien des gens. Les entretiens visent à comprendre les perceptions des sites liés à l'histoire coloniale de la Belgique et comment ces sites peuvent influencer ou s'intégrer dans votre vie quotidienne. **Votre identité restera confidentielle**, et toutes les données seront utilisées uniquement à des fins académiques.

Doel van het onderzoek (NL): Deze studie wil onderzoeken hoe mensen zich voelen en dagelijks omgaan met koloniale erfgoedsites in Brussel. We willen begrijpen hoe deze sites, met verschillende niveaus van zichtbaarheid van het koloniale verleden, passen in het stadslandschap en het dagelijks leven van mensen. De interviews hebben tot doel de percepties van locaties die verband houden met het koloniale verleden van België te begrijpen en hoe deze sites uw dagelijks leven kunnen beïnvloeden of erin opgaan. **Uw identiteit blijft vertrouwelijk** en alle gegevens worden uitsluitend voor academische doeleinden gebruikt.

Research Purpose (EN): This study aims to explore how people feel and interact daily with colonial heritage sites in Brussels. We want to understand how these sites, with different levels of visibility of the colonial past, fit into the city's landscape and people's routines. The interviews aim to understand perceptions of sites linked to Belgium's colonial history and how these sites might influence or blend into your everyday life. **Your identity will be kept confidential**, and all data will be used solely for academic purposes.

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Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews (English)

SITE:

Demographics

Age:

Place of Residence:

Education Level:

Gender:

Place of Birth:

Job:

Introductory Questions

Have you been to this area before?

- How often do you come here?
- What usually brings you to this area?
- Do you have any special memories associated with this site?

Questions about the Site:

Have you ever noticed this [building/statue/monument] before?

- If **yes**: "What about it caught your attention?"
- If **no**: Now that you see it, what stands out to you?
- What do you think of it?

What do you think this site refers to?

- Are there any specific features or symbols that make you think that?

Do you think there is any historical significance to this site?

- If **yes**: What kind of history do you think it might have?
- If **talks about colonialism**: How did you become aware of this connection?

Awareness of Colonial History (if not mentioned in the previous question):

Are you aware of any connection this site might have to Belgium's colonial history?

- If **yes**: How did you become aware of this connection?
- If **no**: Does it change your view about this site and its current use if you think about it in the context of colonial history?

Are you familiar with the current discussions or debates about colonial monuments and buildings in Brussels or Belgium?

- If **yes**: What are your thoughts on these debates?
- Do you think anything should be changed on this site?
 - If **yes**: Do you have any propositions?

Questions on Everyday Experience (if they frequent the area):

How do you feel about having a site with colonial connections as part of your everyday environment?

- Is it something you think about when passing by, or does it fade into the background?
- Does the presence of colonial monuments or buildings impact your daily experience of this area?
 - If **yes**: In what way?

Appendix C

Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews (French)

SITE:

Démographie

Âge:

Genre :

Lieu de résidence :

Lieu de naissance :

Niveau d'éducation :

Profession :

Questions Introductives:

Êtes-vous déjà venu dans cette zone auparavant ?

- À quelle fréquence venez-vous ici ?
 - Qu'est-ce qui vous amène habituellement dans cette zone ?
 - Avez-vous des mémoires particuliers associés à ce site ?
-

Questions sur le Site:

Avez-vous déjà remarqué ce [bâtiment/statue/monument] auparavant ?

- If **yes**: Qu'est-ce qui a attiré votre attention ?
- If **no**: Maintenant que vous le voyez, qu'est-ce qui attire votre attention?
- Que pensez-vous de ce site ?

Que pensez-vous que ce site représente?

- Y a-t-il des caractéristiques ou des symboles spécifiques qui vous font penser cela ?

Pensez-vous que ce site a une signification historique ?

- If **yes**: Quel type d'histoire pensez-vous qu'il pourrait avoir?
 - If **talks about colonialism**: Comment avez-vous pris conscience de la connexion avec le colonialisme?
-

Connaissance de l'Histoire Coloniale:

Êtes-vous conscient d'une éventuelle connexion de ce site avec l'histoire coloniale de la Belgique?

- If **yes**: Comment avez-vous pris conscience de cette connexion?
- If **yes**: Cela change-t-il votre perception de ce site et de son utilisation actuelle si vous le considérez dans le contexte de l'histoire coloniale ?

Êtes-vous familier avec les discussions ou débats actuels autour des monuments et bâtiments coloniaux à Bruxelles ou en Belgique?

- If **yes**: Quelles sont vos pensées sur ces débats ?

Pensez-vous que quelque chose devrait être changé sur ce site ?

- If **yes**: Avez-vous des propositions ?
-

Questions sur l'Expérience Quotidienne (s'ils fréquentent la zone):

Comment vous sentez-vous d'avoir un site avec des liens coloniaux dans votre environnement quotidien ?

- Est-ce quelque chose auquel vous pensez en passant, ou cela passe-t-il inaperçu?
- La présence de monuments ou bâtiments coloniaux influence-t-elle votre expérience quotidienne de cette zone?
 - If **yes**: De quelle manière?